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Was Occupational Health and Safety a Strike Issue? Workers, Unions and the Body in Twentieth-Century Scotland

In February 1949, 5,000 or so asbestos miners downed tools and went on strike in a dispute which centred on excessively dusty working conditions which were considered inimical to the health of those breathing this toxic mineral into their lungs. This occurred in the mining town called Asbestos in Quebec, Canada, where Irish migrants were amongst the strike's participants. The Catholic Church was drawn into the conflict, with the nearby Archbishop of Montreal supporting the strikers and organising fund-raising which quickly accumulated over \$500,000. After a long, bitter and violent five-month struggle the strike was defeated and the men returned to working in the dust. Two decades or so later, in the 1970s, the legacy was evident in uncontroversial medical evidence of spikes in asbestos-related disease deaths amongst Canadian asbestos miners.¹

This episode is revealing because it appears to be such a rare occurrence: a workers' strike explicitly over occupational health where a substantial number of employees were responding directly to the threat towards their bodies of the labour process, the work environment and the materials on which they worked. How many other such examples can we think of? Such strikes appear to be outliers; few and far between on both sides of the Atlantic, despite the heavy toll on the body that came with industrialisation. The big industrial struggles in

¹ See Jessica van Horssen, "À faire un peu de poussière": Environmental Health and the Asbestos Strike of 1949', *Labour/LeTravail*, 70 (2012) in Pierre Elliot Trudeau (ed.), *The Asbestos Strike* (Toronto: James, Lewis and Samuel, 1974), 101-132.

Britain and North America have been over wages and the protection of jobs, with working conditions playing a supplementary role and occupational health hardly evident – at least explicitly. In the United States of America one survey in 1980, at a high point in trade union power and strike proneness, calculated that a miniscule 0.7 per cent of all strikes were deemed to have been caused by health and safety issues.² In Britain, strikes caused by grievances over ‘work conditions’ accounted for between 5-8 per cent of all strikes in the 1960s and 1970s: health and safety strikes would have only been a proportion of this number.³ The key legislative changes in preventative legislation and compensation in Britain, such as the Workmen’s Compensation Acts (1897, 1906 and extended periodically thereafter), the Industrial Injuries Act (1946) and the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) were the products of wide party ‘alliance’ campaigns to which trade union campaigning contributed significantly, though to varying degrees.

However, they were not the result of sustained and targeted industry-wide strikes, or other collective action, such as work to rules. Historically, evolution of the UK workplace regulatory code in the Factory and Mines Acts and the scheduling of new industrial diseases also tended to correlate closely to industrial disasters, to breakthroughs in medical knowledge, or they were the product of multi-stakeholder political campaigning. These were important arenas of trade union action, as work on the ‘healthy factory’, byssinosis, silicosis and ‘miners lung’

² US Bureau of Labour Statistics data cited in Dorothy Nelkin and Michael Brown, *Workers at Risk: Voices from the Workplace* (Chicago, 1984), 121.

³ Philip B. Beaumont, *Safety at Work and the Unions* (London, 1983), 50.

have shown.⁴ However, this was through bargaining, advocacy, political and pressure group activity within a legislative framework, rather than deploying the deterrent use of threats of direct action of labour withdrawal.

If it was the case that health and safety strikes were rare, why was this? Why did workers not more readily down tools, as at Asbestos, Quebec, to protect their bodies from the carnage of industrial accidents, disasters and chronic occupational ill-health? What does this tell us about structures of power, prevailing attitudes towards risk and work-health cultures? Does this evident inaction represent a prioritisation of job security and protection of earnings and a concomitant failure on the part of workers and their trade unions to prioritise protection of the body at work? If so, why were bodies not valued more? Moreover, where direct action did take place, why was this and in what circumstances? This essay explores these questions, aiming to extend the conversation about resistance and agency on occupational health and safety on which there is now a growing literature. It will offer explanations for health not

⁴ Vicky Long, *The Rise and Fall of the Healthy Factory* (Basingstoke, 2011); Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, *Miners' Lung* (Aldershot, 2007); Geoffrey Tweedale, *Magic Mineral to Killer Dust: Turner and Newall and the Asbestos Hazard* (Oxford, 2000); Sue Bowden and Geoffrey Tweedale, 'Mondays without Dread: The Trade Union Response to Byssinosis in the Lancashire Cotton Industry in the Twentieth Century', *Social History of Medicine*, 16, 1 (2003), 79-95; Mark Bufton and Joseph Melling, "'A Mere Matter of Rock': Organized Labour, Scientific Evidence and British Government Schemes for Compensation of Silicosis and Pneumoconiosis among Coalminers, 1926-1940', *Medical History*, 49 (2005), 155-78; Catherine Mills, *Regulating Health and Safety in the British Mining Industries, 1800-1914* (Aldershot, 2010).

being visible in industrial conflict nationally and historically whilst arguing that there has been a long if uneven history of protest and resistance centred around the body. This has been particularly apparent in local and unofficial strike action, especially in the so-called ‘dangerous trades’. Fragmentary though it is, this evidence suggests that there is potential for further research in a refocused history of direct action in relation to the body at work and that in the light of this we need to revise any concept that the trade unions somehow ‘failed’ their members in relation to protecting bodies from trauma, overstrain and long-term chronic disease. This article focuses on developments in Scotland in the twentieth century and, amongst other sources, draws upon oral interview evidence.

Workers and Campaigning around the Body

Historically, and compared to others in the UK, Scottish workers were both more militant and strike-prone in the twentieth century *and* faced relatively high levels of injury and ill-health at work.⁵ This has been referred to as ‘the Scottish anomaly’ by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Various explanations have been offered for more dangerous workplaces and higher levels of working days lost from industrial accidents and chronic occupational diseases, such as pneumoconiosis and asbestos-related disease in Scotland, linked to a range of structural and cultural factors. The main problems occurred in the Clydeside industrial conurbation where more dangerous ‘heavy’ industries such as coal

⁵ See Gregor Gall and Mike Jackson, ‘Strike Activity in Scotland’, *Scottish Labour History*, 33 (1998), 97-112; Roy Church and Quentin Outram, *Strikes and Solidarity: Coalfield Conflict in Britain, 1889-1966* (Cambridge, 1998).

mining, iron and steel manufacture and shipbuilding were clustered. Irish workers also appear to have faced inordinately high levels of danger in the workplace. Up to the 1980s they were more than twice as likely as English workers to be killed at work and International Labour Organisation data suggests there still remained in the 2000s around a 30 per cent additional risk in Ireland compared to the British average.⁶ Given this relatively high risk workplace environment, it is surprising that occupational health and safety has attracted so little attention in Irish labour historiography. Francis Devine has also made the point that occupational health and safety has hardly featured historically in trade union campaigns and agendas in Ireland, being ‘sidelined’, as he put it, at least until very recently.⁷ There is much scope for further research here.

In Britain, campaigning on health and safety at work was widespread and has long historical antecedents. Fatigue and overstrain, for example, lay behind concerted trade union attempts to control working hours which included the shorter working hours campaigns of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which the cotton textile unions played a prominent part. The discourse of ‘overwork’ was also influential in the anti-‘sweating’ movements of the 1900s. Beatrice and Sidney Webb attested in their monumental *Industrial Democracy* in 1902 that:

⁶ See Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2013), 183.

⁷ Francis Devine, ‘Safety, Health and Welfare at Work in the Irish Free State and the Republic of Ireland, 1922-1990: Measuring the Problem’, *Saothar*, 21 (2006), 65-74.

In the trade union world of today, there is no subject on which workmen of all shades of opinion, and all varieties of occupation, are so unanimous, *and so ready to take combined action*, as the prevention of accidents and the provision of healthy workplaces.⁸

Nonetheless, actual occupational health and safety strikes to protect the body, as opposed to jobs and wages, are elusive. This appears to have not been an explicit cause of any major industry-wide or national strikes in the UK. If one thinks of the great strike waves of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, health, the body and safety issues are not fore-grounded as causes or issues, or at least as *primary* causes. This was even the case with the 1968-74 strike-waves when unions were at the peak of their power in the UK and Ireland. As issues causing strikes, health and safety simply do not register as significant. This does not merit a mention, for example, in Durcan, McCarthy and Redman's comprehensive survey of strikes over 1946-74, or in Church and Outram's quantitative analysis of strikes and militancy in coal mining during 1889-1966.⁹ Drilling down and disaggregating the official UK strike statistics further than undertaken in these studies might, however, reveal a pattern of occupational health and safety strikes. This would be a worthwhile exercise. However, as with the USA, it is likely to demonstrate the small number of such incidences. That said, such issues may well have been more prevalent as underlying grievances, with wages and jobs more

⁸ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Industrial Democracy* (London, 1902), 357.

⁹ J. W. Durcan, W. E. J. McCarthy and G.P. Redman, *Strikes in Post-War Britain, 1946-73* (1983); Church and Outram, *Miners and Militancy*.

evident as primary causes because these were areas where workers were most liable to be more readily mobilised. Discourses of health, fatigue and entitlement to well-being were sometimes evident, but muted in the major strikes. The apparent invisibility of health and safety strikes may hide a more complex reality.

Some commentators have developed the argument that trade unions neglected occupational health and safety – or at least prioritised wages, job security and compensation over protecting the body, addressing threats to health and championing prevention through improving work environments and developing really effective regulatory regimes.¹⁰ By not providing an effective ‘countervailing force’, it is argued, this enabled problems generated by profit-maximising corporate enterprises to persist.¹¹ The argument here is that much more could have been done, earlier and more aggressively by the unions, to protect workers bodies. John Williams in *Accidents and Ill Health at Work*, published in 1960, criticised the trade unions in Britain for lacking a clear accident prevention policy, declaring: ‘Within what limits can the community tolerate the introduction of safety standards by negotiation in slow motion’.¹² Whilst noting the importance of trade union activities on compensation, the Factory Acts and the campaign to get joint safety committees, Williams criticised

¹⁰ See Beaumont, *Safety at Work*, 42; *Mass Observation, People in Production* (1942), 203.

¹¹ As Tweedale has argued in relation to trade unions and asbestos in his study of the UK’s main asbestos multi-national: Tweedale, *Magic Mineral*.

¹² John L. Williams, *Accidents and Ill Health at Work* (London, 1960), 341.

what he saw as ‘a narrow approach’ which did not focus on prevention.¹³ In his 500 page book there is not a single reference to an occupational health and safety strike. Graham Wilson also commented in *The Politics of Safety and Health* in 1985: ‘Health and safety at work have mattered comparatively little to unions in Britain, as in the USA ... Only a minority of union officers and officials have shown passionate concern for safety and health at work’.¹⁴

In relation to Scotland, trade union inertia and inaction on health and safety has been identified in studies of the health and safety of dockers before the Second World War and in relation to the asbestos tragedy.¹⁵ William Kenefick has argued that before the Second World War, Glasgow dockers were more likely to strike for a wage premium (‘dirty’ or ‘danger’ money) than to down tools refusing to handle toxic products. He argues: ‘For the dockers, trade unionism was more closely linked to gaining preference in employment, and to protecting jobs from outsiders, than concerns over safety ... Safety was a non-issue along the Glasgow waterfront’.¹⁶ There are also fragments of oral evidence that corroborate such a negative view of trade union inaction in Scotland right up to the last quarter of the twentieth century. For example, a Scottish occupational health consultant Robin Howie postulated in an oral interview in 2001:

¹³ Ibid., 343-4.

¹⁴ Graham Wilson, *The Politics of Safety and Health* (1985), 114.

¹⁵ See Ronald Johnston and Arthur McIvor, *Lethal Work* (East Linton, 2000).

¹⁶ William Kenefick, *Rebellious and Contrary: The Glasgow Dockers, 1853-1932* (East Linton, 2000), 150-1.

There are unions which are the exception to the rule, but in my own experience trade unions have not been as concerned about things like health and safety as they are about the fact the job is still there and what the wage rates are ...

I blame the trade unions to a large extent ... During the 1970s we had a series of wage freezes, that's when the unions should have been going for better conditions. They couldn't go for money, they could have gone for better conditions, for better safety in the workplace and they chose not to.¹⁷

Similarly, a communist Ayrshire coal miner and union activist, Alec Mills, declared in an interview in June 2000: 'Angry. Angry ... We never went on strike for masks. But we should have went on strike for masks. A lot of men would be alive today if they had been provided with masks'.¹⁸

The current President of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) - Nicky Wilson - lamented recently that whilst the miners' union in Scotland had focused on prevention and compensation relating to physical ill-health, historically they had neglected the psychological impacts of disability and work-related deaths which he equated as forms of post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁹

¹⁷ Robin Howie, interviewed by Neil Rafeek, 20 September 2001 (SOHC Archive 017/C45).

¹⁸ Alec Mills, b 1933, interviewed by Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, 19 June 2000 (SOHC 017/C1).

¹⁹ Nicky Wilson at the Mining Disability Witness Seminar, SOHC, University of Strathclyde, 28 April 2014 (SOHC Archive).

The unions have thus had a bit of a bad press when it comes to occupational health and safety, being regarded as having failed members, of trading jobs and wages for health, of not devoting enough resources to campaigning on health and the body. To this we might add, at least at first sight, that the trade unions failed to make full and effective use of the strike weapon (at least at industry and national level) as a deterrent or as leverage to minimise the damage to the body through trauma or chronic occupational disease. A key point here is that occupational health and safety was framed early on in the nineteenth century in a statutory setting with ‘preventative’ legislation (Factory Acts; Mines Acts), and, importantly, with the passage of ‘no fault’ Workmen’s Compensation legislation from the 1890s. Strategically, trade union activity became focussed on this level – campaigning and lobbying to extend statutory protection and legal rights, with its responsibilities expanding as time went on – for example with the appointment of its Medical Advisers, Thomas Legge from 1931, then Hyacinth Morgan.²⁰

That said, strikes against increased workloads (for example at Singer, Clydebank in 1911), the anti-Bedaux strikes in the 1920s and 1930s and the ‘more looms’ strikes of the early 1930s, were directed explicitly against work intensification and resultant fatigue and overstrain. The sustained campaigns and strike action to reduce working hours and increase holidays with pay might also be seen in this light. They were articulated within a discourse that incorporated the alienation of bodies under closer supervision and surveillance (including medical

²⁰ See Long, *The Rise and Fall of the Healthy Factory*.

monitoring), the need for the body to recuperate, the concept of fatigue and the idea of a 'healthy' work-life balance: necessary for mental as well as physical health. The trade unions were central to campaigns against unhealthy work conditions, from the National Federation of Women Workers campaigning on lead poisoning to the coal mining union's challenge to orthodox medical discourses on dust disease in the 1930s which led to the scheduling of coal workers' pneumoconiosis in 1942. Moreover, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and Scottish Trades Union Congress campaigns on tuberculosis (as part of a wider medical-political 'progressive alliance') resulted ultimately in it being officially recognised as an occupational disease (in 1951).²¹ Strikes, however, did not feature at all in these campaigns.

By the 1960s and 1970s, however, we do begin to see evidence of strike activity on health and safety issues. This was in part a product of a more health-oriented society as the environmental movement gathered momentum and in part a consequence of the shifting balance of power and assertiveness of trade unions. As plant level bargaining proliferated, health and safety became greater priorities for the growing numbers of shop stewards who worked in industry – as the Donovan Commission in 1968 reported. Unfortunately we know little about the role of shop stewards in health and safety during this period – a subject that merits further investigation, which would be facilitated by a systematic oral history project. As Philip Beaumont has shown, however, union pressure led to the

²¹ See Arthur McIvor, 'Germs at work: Establishing tuberculosis as an *occupational* disease in Britain, c1900-1951', *Social History of Medicine*, 25 (2012), 812-29.

establishment of joint health and safety committees across many industries in the 1960s and these played a significant role in raising occupational health and safety standards.²² Precursors flourished briefly during Second World War when the Joint Production Committees frequently embraced health and safety functions. By the 1970s these joint health and safety committees were shored up by an extension of such provision in the Health and Safety at Work Act. This increased focus on the reform of statutory provision for health and safety in the 1970s appears to have been paralleled by a surge in direct action. Beaumont surveyed 225 trade union health and safety officers across different industries in Glasgow in 1979 and around twenty per cent reported they had witnessed industrial action on health and safety in the previous year.²³

Oral Labour History, Strikes and the Body at Work

Oral evidence provides a lens through which lived experience can be reconstructed, acting as a barometer of prevailing discourses, attitudes and emotions relating to the body at work, as well as elucidating the agency of workers regarding threats to health in the workplace. One period when occupational health risks were significantly heightened in Scotland was the Second World War, especially during the period of crisis following Dunkirk.²⁴ However, this does not appear to have resulted in significant strike action to

²² Beaumont, *Safety at Work*, 59-60.

²³ *Ibid.*, 101-2.

²⁴ See Ronald Johnston and Arthur McIvor, 'The War at Work: Occupational Health and Safety in Scottish Industry, 1939-1945', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 2 (2005), 113-36.

protect workers' bodies. Scottish docker and union activist Tom Murray scathingly criticised the unwillingness of the TGWU to support strike action to protect dockers exposed to dangerous chemicals at Leith docks in 1941-2.²⁵ In wartime strikes were technically illegal, under Order 1305, but that did not stop them happening and with some frequency, especially in the mines and shipyards.²⁶ These strikes pivoted around challenges to skilled status with 'dilution' and pay differentials and injustices, as with the 1943 equal pay strike led by Agnes Maclean at Rolls Royce in Hillington, Glasgow.²⁷ Despite relatively high levels of strike activity compared to the 1930s, few wartime Reserved Occupation workers interviewed for a recent AHRC oral history research project could recall any strikes, never mind ones that were linked to health and safety.²⁸ Fairly typical was this response in an interview from Scottish railwayman William Mcnaul:

Q. Was there any trade union action during the war, or strikes?

²⁵ Tom Murray's interview testimony in Ian MacDougall (ed.), *Voices from Work and Home* (Edinburgh, 2000), 287.

²⁶ See Keith Gildart, 'Coal Strikes on the Home Front: Miners' Militancy and Socialist Politics in the Second World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20 (2009), 121-51.

²⁷ Peter Bain, "'Is you is or is you ain't my baby': Women's Pay and the Clydeside Strikes of 1943", *Scottish Labour History*, 30 (1995), 35-60.

²⁸ See Juliette Pattinson, Arthur McIvor and Linsey Robb, *Men in Reserve: British Civilian Masculinity in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2017); Alison Chand, *Masculinities on Clydeside: Men in Reserved Occupations During the Second World War* (Edinburgh, 2016).

A. No. No, nothing like that. Wasn't allowed ... No, no, no you daren't do anything like that.²⁹

The lack of strike activity in 1940s Scotland on health and safety issues should perhaps not surprise us, given that in wartime many Home Front workers were tolerating higher levels of risk in a context where they saw themselves as supporting combatants (family and friends) facing much greater dangers in uniform. Such hegemonic military masculinities needed to be matched with a patriotic commitment to maximising wartime production. Moreover, workers were assuaged by a wartime government that was markedly pro-labour and keen to directly address workplace health and safety issues through state welfarist initiatives, such as the compulsory employment of company doctors, welfare officers, canteens and other provisions, whilst playing down actual health risks (to maintain wartime morale) and prioritising production. At the centre of this was Ernest Bevin, Minister of Labour, who famously told asbestos insulation workers on Clydeside that he did not want any nonsense and rejected a call by the local Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) branch for an investigation into dusty conditions in asbestos insulation.³⁰ In part, the erasure in oral testimonies regarding strikes in wartime might be connected to a sense on the part of such wartime home front narrators that striking was subversive to the national war effort and clashed with the ways they were composing their memories (and sense of self) in light of efforts to present a narrative that emphasised their contribution

²⁹ William Mcnaul interviewed by Linsey Robb, 27th March 2013 (SOHC Archive).

³⁰ Alan Dalton, *Asbestos: Killer Dust* (London, 1979), 98.

to war in a similar way to combatants: that is to place themselves within wartime hierarchies of masculinities that were headed by hegemonic military masculinity associated with combatants. The ‘composure’ of memories, inter-subjectivity, the cultural circuit, silences and misremembering are all key issues in oral history. Much has been done over recent years to develop the theory of oral history in these areas.³¹

Oral history is a methodology which enables strikes generally and occupational health and safety strikes specifically to be explored through the lens of those who actually directly participated in them. This leads us closer to an emotional history of strikes and the everyday, lived experience of strikers and those who opposed them for that matter. They also tell us much about what trade unionism meant to workers at a personal level. In Scotland, there has been a long tradition in labour history of collecting such oral testimonies and blending these personal narratives into studies of industrial action and community struggles. Ian MacDougall’s work stands out as the pioneering oral historian in labour history.³² The *Oil Lives* project in Aberdeen (headed by Terry Brotherstone and Hugo Manson) and Jim Phillips’ nuanced recent monograph (2012) on the miners’ strike in Scotland which draws upon a series of oral interviews are other pertinent

³¹ The best introductions to this are Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London, 2010) and Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (2nd ed., London, 2006). For the Second World War see also Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives* (Manchester, 1998).

³² See, for example, Ian MacDougall, *Voices from Work and Home* (Edinburgh, 2000).

examples.³³ Other Scottish labour historians have used oral history methodology to elucidate industrial action, to write biographies of labour activists and, increasingly, to interrogate strike activity (or the lack thereof) and other resistance, such as sit-ins.³⁴ An outstanding example would be Andrew Perchard's work on the Scottish aluminium communities in Kinlochleven, Invergorden and Lochaber in *Aluminiumville*. Strikes were virtually unheard of in the tightly controlled paternalistic company communities in the Highlands, despite a cluster of worker grievances, including on health and safety issues. Alexander Walker, former Electrical TU shop steward who worked at the Lochaber power station between 1964 and 2001 commented:

During my period in the power station in Lochaber, British Aluminium Works, I was a very strong trade union man... We had disputes with management and we always resolved them, because there was never any danger of us going too far, which I don't think management at the time appreciated, because it wasn't a job it was a community.

³³ Terry Brotherstone and Hugo Manson, 'North Sea Oil, its Narratives and its History', *Northern Scotland*, 27 (2007), 15-41; Jim Phillips, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland, 1984-85* (Manchester, 2012).

³⁴ For a recent example see Andrew Clark, "'And the next thing, the chairs barricaded the door": The Lee Jeans Factory Occupation, Trade Unionism and Gender in Scotland in the 1980s', *Scottish Labour History*, 48 (2013), 116-34.

He continued: ‘the aluminium industry was a saviour to the Highlands’.³⁵

Another strand of the oral labour history literature in Scotland has explored health and safety cultures on the job, focusing on the body in the workplace and how workers and their trade unions navigated threats to health and well-being.³⁶ Again, health and safety strikes rarely, if ever, feature. This work to date has predominantly concentrated on male workers in the ‘heavy industries’. There remains much scope for research in the same vein for female workers.

An oral history methodology has the potential then to add other dimensions to analyses of strikes – not least facilitating a re-focused emotional history and the exploration of intersecting identities such as gender, race and class. It is almost axiomatic that labour history projects on the post-1950 period must incorporate interviewing. Oral history approaches can take us right to the point of production through the eyes of workers rather than reconstructing experience through the lens of written institutional sources. The methodology allows us to question and probe particular areas; to engage in a dialogue with the past. This enables the activities of work groups and trade unions to be elucidated,

³⁵ Andrew Perchard, ‘Sculpting the “Garden of Eden”: Patronage, Community and the British Aluminium Company in the Scottish Highlands, 1895-1982’, *Scottish Labour History*, 42 (2007), 64; *Aluminiumville* (Lancaster, 2012).

³⁶ See Ronald Johnston and Arthur McIvor, *Lethal Work* (East Linton, 2000); McIvor and Johnston, *Miners’ Lung*; David Bradley, ‘Oral History, Occupational Health and Safety in Scottish Steel, c1930-1988’, *Scottish Labour History*, 46 (2011), 86-101; David Walker, “‘Danger was something you were brought up with’: Workers’ Narratives on Occupational Health and Safety in the Workplace, *Scottish Labour History*, 46 (2011), 54-70.

agency and structure to be evaluated, and, relating to the specific issue under scrutiny here, to shed light into occupational health and safety, as well as helping us to understand work-health cultures in the past. Oral history has its limitations of course and has to be utilised sensitively. New oral history interviewing projects can only go back as far as living memory, though in some cases previously undertaken and archived interviews are of considerable value.³⁷ Whilst strong in Scotland, oral history is relatively insignificant in the labour history of Ireland, as Emmet O'Connor's work has shown.³⁸ The Irish Oral History Network was only established in 2010 and there remains some residual scepticism towards oral history in Irish academic history circles. Where oral history research methodologies have been most evident in Ireland has been in studies of the Troubles and nationalist politics.³⁹ Exceptions include the work of Liam Cullinane

³⁷ Here it is important to highlight the collections at the School of Scottish Studies Archive, University of Edinburgh, the Scottish Oral History Centre, University of Strathclyde and Glasgow Museums.

³⁸ Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011); Emmet O'Connor, 'The Irish Labour History Society: An Outline History', *Labour History Review Fiftieth Anniversary Supplement*, Special Supplement (2010), 147-59. For the most comprehensive survey of oral history in Scotland, see Angela Bartie and Arthur McIvor, 'Oral History in Scotland', *Scottish Historical Review*, 92, Supplement 234 (2013), 108-36.

³⁹ It appears that none of the sixty-four texts of recommended reading on the Irish Oral History Network website, <http://www.oralhistorynetworkireland.ie/advice/reading/> relate directly to labour history.

on working lives in Cork (which incorporates discussion about health and safety issues) and Sean O’Connell on the Sailortown community in Belfast.⁴⁰

Undercurrents of Resistance: Occupational Health and Safety Walkouts and ‘Wildcats’

Oral evidence for Scotland reveals a subterranean matrix of resistance and direct action on health and safety, co-existing, sometimes uneasily, with consent, apathy and conformity to managerial authority and traditional forms of masculinity expressed in risk-taking. This is evident, for example, in relation to asbestos.

Given the significance of asbestos as a work-related hazard its reception by the trade unions and the extent to which direct action was utilised is significant.

Historian Geoffrey Tweedale has argued that the trade union movement failed to act as an effective countervailing force and activists such as Alan Dalton have been critical of trade union inertia at the top level.⁴¹ In Johnston and McIvor’s book *Lethal Work*, the example of some STUC delegates contemptuously ripping up asbestos campaigners’ pamphlets in 1976 has been cited.⁴² The TUC was also very influenced by their incumbent Medical Adviser (1962-74), Robert Murray, who quelled workers’ fears by declaring asbestos safe to work with under certain conditions and assuaged their growing anxieties as medical knowledge of a cancer

⁴⁰ Liam Cullinane: ‘Work, Class and Conflict: Three Cork Factories’ (University of Cork, unpublished PhD thesis, 2015); Sean O’Connell, ‘The ‘troubles’ with a Lower Case T: Deindustrialisation and Social Change in Belfast Since the 1960s’, unpublished paper to the ‘Deindustrialisation and Oral History Workshop’, Newcastle University, 5 October 2016.

⁴¹ Tweedale, *Magic Mineral*; Dalton, *Asbestos: Killer Dust*.

⁴² Johnston and McIvor, *Lethal Work*, 166.

risk developed in the 1960s. These 'expert' assurances undoubtedly played a role in nipping some nascent industrial action on asbestos in the bud. Murray had a very condescending attitude towards workers exposed to such risks, famously commenting on one occasion that 'workers would pick up asbestos with their teeth if they were paid enough'.⁴³ By the 1970s there was also a strong pro-asbestos group within the trade unions, headed by the TGWU, representing the interests of workers in asbestos manufacturing who wanted to protect their jobs.⁴⁴ This could leave workers ill-informed, confused and vulnerable. On Clydeside a number of oral interviews referred to this difficult environment from the 1960s through to the 1980s where the capacity of the trade unions to resist was limited or they lacked support from the union for local action. A Scottish asbestos insulation lagger recalled:

Anytime you had a dispute or anything I found that if you tried to call them [TGWU officials] out they wouldnae come. So, what was going on was eh, just basically the guys on the job had to work it out for themselves whether they were going to do it or whether they wernae going to do it, you know. But, union help? Very disappointed with it.⁴⁵

⁴³ Cited in *Morning Star*, 15 November 1974, 4; see also Dalton, *Asbestos: Killer Dust*, 90-1.

⁴⁴ H. Chappell, 'Fighting Each Other Over Asbestos', *New Society*, 29 September 1983, 471-3.

⁴⁵ Interview (anon.), Glasgow insulation engineer b 1943 with Ronald Johnston, 15 March 1999, SOHC Archive 016/A16.

Similarly, a heating engineer who was a member of the Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning Workers' Union, recalled that his small union did not have the strength to do much to improve worker health and safety in this period:

To my knowledge there has only been one strike in the heating trade, and they couldnae afford ... They termed it a catch strike ... They only could take out so many firms or so many jobs. Say for talking sake there was eh, say six jobs involved in heating in the town. Well, they'd take three of thae jobs out and the rest had to put a levy in to keep their wages up. The union hadnae enough money and the backing to support a full strike, you know, an all-out strike. So we had to work it on catch strikes, you know. And it only lasted, to my memory, I think it was three weeks, then we couldnae afford it after that. Packed it in. So the strike was just a no-go area.⁴⁶

This testimony speaks to the realities of disempowerment in a fragmented trade dominated by small sub-contracting insulation firms and the constraints on strike activity in this context. Another Clydeside asbestos lagger commented that health and safety disputes when they did arise could be settled by wage concessions or the agreement to pay extra bonuses as an incentive:

It always seemed to be that you wanted a bit of extra cash and better conditions. But they sometimes gave you the extra cash and the conditions were back-heeled 'cause they didnae want to know about them ... That was a lever used by the trade unions to get extra cash. Instead of pushing

⁴⁶ Interview (anon.), heating engineer b 1940 with Ronald Johnston, 22 December 1998, SOHC 016/A6.

for better safety conditions ... At that time everybody knew asbestos caused all kinds of illnesses.⁴⁷

Here we see reference to the use of health and safety as a bargaining tool in informal trade-offs where risk would be absorbed in return for financial compensation. 'Danger money' or 'dirt money' collective agreements were negotiated by the unions and were condoned by the workmen affected to varying degrees. In heavy industry workplaces and in mines and construction sites a deeply acculturated macho work culture policed this behaviour for the immediate post-war generation of industrial workers.

That said, there co-existed a significant and growing level of resistance to this idea of an 'acceptable level of risk'. Certainly many local activists and shop stewards were critical of national union leaderships and the STUC / TUC for what they perceived as a failure to support local health and safety disputes by making them official and providing strike pay. Rank and file activity spurned the constraints of official trade union policy and cultural indifference on the job and mobilised to expose the high death and disability toll of industrial work and to protect the body at work utilising a range of tactics, including direct strike action. Examples on Clydeside would be activists such as Hugh Cairney and John Todd and the campaigns of the local Glasgow branch of the insulation workers (ladders) affiliated to the TGWU (local 7/162) from the 1940s to the 1970s on asbestos. In two oral interviews in 1999 and in 2005 former local 7/162 branch secretary Hugh

⁴⁷ Interview (anon.), Clydeside insulation engineer b 1930 with Ronald Johnston, 26 January 1999, SOHC 016/A14.

Cairney reflected on how the Glasgow asbestos ladders got organised by the mid-1950s and, with 100 per cent membership and a closed shop, initiated a series of health and conditions strikes to raise environmental standards. They initially faced employer intransigence, typical of the more entrenched managerial authoritarianism and residual anti-unionism that characterised Clydeside. As Cairney recalled: ‘When I first started the bosses didnae want to know anything about us or talk to us.’⁴⁸ Another TGWU activist recalled how the Glasgow ladders’ branch had to fight even for basic amenities:

There were no overalls. No boots. And you were swallowing it [asbestos] all the time, and so was all the people that were working near you. But they had a hut where they made [asbestos] mats only in it. Nae extractor fan or nothing ... At one time we didnae have any huts. We had to sit between decks on the ships. We had to go and fight for tae get a hut. You know, an ordinary hut. And in that hut was a’ the material. And you were taking your tea during the meal breaks, and a’ that material. And every part of the material had asbestos in it, a percentage.⁴⁹

Cairney stressed how the main ‘fighting strength’ of the trade union was at local branch level:

⁴⁸ Hugh Cairney, insulation worker b 1934 interviewed by Neil Rafeek, 26 March 2005, SOHC Archive 016/35.

⁴⁹ Interview (anon.), Glasgow insulation engineer b 1918 by Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, 1 December 1999, SOHC 016/A23.

Well, if you're talking about the unions. I always think the union is a mythical body. This branch done a lot. We happened to belong to a trade union. We fought ... I mean, we walked the streets for twenty-six weeks to get conditions. We were the ones that forced them to give us tables and chairs to sit down to have a meal with. Made them give us a changing room to hang our clothes up.⁵⁰

When asked 'Was it hard bringing in health and safety into the job?' Cairney replied: 'It was at the start, *yes*. We always nearly had to hit the gates to get any health and safety, not *noo* we *dae*, but then, *aye*'. Cairney spoke eloquently in the language of solidarity and social justice about protecting his members' bodies:

When we came, when we took action it was every *lagger*. We *didnae* just say we worked for a firm called Millers, we had a dispute in Grangemouth with Millers, we called out *everybody that worked in Millers*, didn't matter whether they were in Grangemouth whether they were working in Saltcoats or – you hit the company, right? Everybody. So companies had to come doon and talk to you. I mean we *werena*e actually bully boys, we just wanted what we thought we were entitled to. We're entitled to be able to wash our hands, we're entitled to take *overalls that are covered with asbestos off* and go and sit doon, have something to eat without wearing these dirty boiler suits. So we brought they things in. In Grangemouth *noo*

⁵⁰ Hugh Cairney, interviewed by Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, 1 December 1999, SOHC 016/A22.

*everybody has changing rooms now and that. So we caused an awful lot of it and it was all through health and safety.*⁵¹

At another point in the interview he returned to the issue of 'entitlement':

I mean we went on to a job, if the toilets were frozen, *that was it*. You'd give them until ten o'clock, if they weren't unblocked and cleaned out, *out the gate and away*. And see when we come back the next day? They were fixed but we wouldn't start work until we were *paid for that day*, things like that. We were quite right. I mean if somebody's got to go to the toilet *you're entitled to go to the toilet* and it's their job to maintain it and make sure the toilets were clean and working and that.⁵²

Cairney's narrative is interesting at a number of levels, apart from what he reveals about rank and file activism, including strikes, on health and safety issues. This is an archetypal emotive activist narrative, transposing the heroic role of the union branch in the struggle to protect bodies against the 'villains' – both complicit (the employers and managers) and implicit (the union hierarchy in the TGWU). Later the Glasgow TGWU 7/162 branch supported an unofficial month-long strike at Newalls Insulation in 1966 for masks, protective clothing and medical exams.⁵³ The TGWU and STUC offered no support and the STUC eventually banned local activist John Todd from its Health and Safety training schools because of his outspoken criticism of TGWU inaction on asbestos. Other unofficial action

⁵¹ Hugh Cairney interviewed by Neil Rafeek, 26 March 2005, SOHC Archive 016/A35.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Dalton, *Asbestos: Killer Dust*, 99.

followed, as with London dockers blacking asbestos handling in 1967 and building workers' strikes against asbestos and asbestos substitutes in the 1970s (for example, the Isle of Grain power station strike for nine months in 1976 against the use of glass fibre). This 'prairie fire' of health strikes spread to the oil refineries, including Grangemouth, in the later 1970s.

The 1970s appear to be a watershed with a cluster of significant occupational health and safety strikes. In relation to asbestos in Scotland, the Glasgow ladders branch of the TGWU led the way, with a series of strikes which achieved reforms in health and safety, craft status and wage rates which English areas were struggling to achieve parity with in the 1970s.⁵⁴ Here were ripples of a long tradition of rank and file radicalism on 'Red Clydeside' which undoubtedly shaped this more assertive phase of direct action on health and safety. This was also a quite unique mobilisation which drew strength from the close kinship and ethnic links of Irish Catholics amongst the asbestos lagging workers in Glasgow. Activists in the 7/162 Glasgow branch also went on to form the community advocacy and pressure group Clydeside Action on Asbestos (CAA) in 1986, a voluntary organisation that represented victims and campaigned for legislative reform, with much success in the new Scottish devolved parliament from 1999. CAA was representative of diseased and injured workers' movements that

⁵⁴ Hugh Cairney interviewed by Neil Rafeek, 26 March 2005, SOHC Archive 016/A35.

emerged across developed economies in the later twentieth century to challenge economic violence in the workplace and environmental pollution.⁵⁵

Where trade union levels were relatively high and labour markets buoyant in ‘dangerous trades’, there was a pattern of ‘wildcat’ strikes and walkouts on occupational health issues at a local level in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, on closer scrutiny it was not that workers’ failed to go out on strike on health and safety issues, rather that these strikes were short and often unofficial, hence less visible, slipping under the radar. Oral interviews reveal this hidden world of subterranean conflict and resistance around the body and its exploitation at the point of production. Witness, for example, the testimony of Scottish shipbuilding worker John Keggie recalling the 1960s and 1970s:

By and large most o’ the disputes in Robb’s [shipyard] were about health and safety issues. They were not really about arguments about money or wages, terms and conditions. They were about health and safety issues, where management under pressure to complete orders would try and put people into environments that were unsafe. And the workers would refuse and the management would then suspend an individual and one individual bein’ suspended ... Ah mean, ah remember once three - maself and two others - were asked tae go intae a tank that was unsafe and didn’t have

⁵⁵ See Robert Storey, ‘Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will: Engaging with the ‘Testimony’ of Injured Workers’, in Steven High (ed.), *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence* (Vancouver, 2015).

ventilation. We refused and were suspended. The entire shipyard workforce walked out and a thirteen-week dispute took place.⁵⁶

This strike was followed by a long ban on overtime because, as Keggie recalled: ‘management insisted that when we went back we had tae go back intae that unsafe environment.’ This ‘insider’ witness testimony may be interpreted as directly contradicting the narratives of some ‘outsider’ academics, professionals and the ‘official’ strike statistics where health and safety do not feature. However, both have meaning and credibility in that one was recounting workplace struggle, agency and activism and the other a relative failure of trade union bureaucracies to support such radicalism and direct action. That is not to say the trade union hierarchy was indifferent to economic violence meted out against the body at work, rather that tactics diverged. At the national union level and at the STUC and TUC, campaigns were directed towards influencing policy and legislation, as the work of Vicky Long has shown.⁵⁷ The injured and diseased workers’ movement was multi-layered, demonstrating that workers and their unions were also agents in this process at the point of production and not just passive victims. At the workplace and local level, workers and their unions mobilised and could and did resort to the strike weapon and other forms of direct action to protect their bodies.

Health Walkouts in Coal Mining

⁵⁶ John Keggie, interviewed by Ian MacDougall, 6 May 1997 (SWPHT collection; SOHC Archive).

⁵⁷ Long, *The Rise and Fall of the Healthy Factory*.

This pattern of local activism on health and safety was also evident in the Scottish coal mines, characterised as they were by very high incidences of injury, accident mortality and chronic industrial disease – most importantly associated with inhalation of dust, causing pneumoconiosis, bronchitis and emphysema. Miners downed tools and walked out if safety was compromised or environmental conditions were deemed too risky and hazardous to health. These protests were limited, however, to seam or pit level strikes. They could occur at even the most inauspicious times and places – as with the 1932 ‘dust strike’ at the Fife Coal Company’s Mary Pit. Here in a modern anthracite colliery (a ‘welfarist’ company with a relatively good safety policy) employing 1,300 men new coal cutting technology threw up large clouds of dust at the coalface. In response, the men affected walked out on strike in spite of unprecedented high levels of regional unemployment in the Fife coalfield at this high point of the interwar Depression. In an interview one of the 1932 strike participants recalled:

Ye couldnae see one another ... It wis bad. It wis bad. You couldnae see if the coal came over on the loaders ... And, ah mean, the dust wis so bad you couldnae get it oot your eyes. We used tae pit margarine roond oor eyes, ye ken. The best thing ye could do wis if ye fell asleep, ye ken. Once ye wakened up and it wisnae sae bad. The coal dust used tae form in your eyes here. It wis bad, it really wis bad.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ John Taylor, interviewed by Ian McDougall, 16 May 1997 (SWPHT Collection; SOHC Archive).

Interestingly, in this case this miner – John Taylor – commented that direct action may not have been the best tactic to address the issue, reflecting: ‘But, ah mean, it wis a wrong fight, ye ken. It could have been negotiated, ah think, better than what we did - what the older boys did’.⁵⁹ Welsh miners, in a coalfield where pneumoconiosis was particularly prevalent, recalled similar ‘dust strikes’: ‘One or two boys would go on strike as it were. They wouldn’t touch the coal because it was too dusty, and the whole face stopped.’⁶⁰ Another said: ‘Well very often we’d come up the road [strike]. Very often I had to phone Tom and they’d come up the road because of the dust. They got more educated towards the end like. Years ago the colliers just got on with it.’⁶¹ Nati Thomas suggested in this last comment that the risk acceptance threshold and strike propensity on health issues differed markedly across generations and over time in mining. Older workers were socialised into living with poor environmental conditions underground. As an alternative to striking there was the work to rule option, as Scots miner Tommy Coulter explained:

By that time the dust suppression awareness was there and, see prior to that if we knew, we knew the rules but if when we operated the rules we didnae get any dough [money]. But when the management were acting the goat we

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ John Jones, b 1934, interviewed by Susan Morrison, 15 September 2002, SOHC Archive 017/C27.

⁶¹ Colin (Nati) Thomas, b 1940, interviewed by Arthur McIvor and Ronnie Johnston, 12 May 2004, SOHC 017/C26.

responded wi' a go slow or a cacanny. What they call in factories, work to rule and it just didn't go.⁶²

Capacities, political cultures and the will to resist varied considerably across the coalfields and even from pit to pit – as the work of Roy Church and Quentin Outram has shown.⁶³ Place was significant. Whereas Scottish and Welsh miners might initiate direct action on health and safety issues, those in the Midlands were as likely to tolerate unhealthy work environments. Work-health cultures varied widely across different places, as this following dialogue between two Scottish miners and interviewer, Neil Rafeek reveals:

GB: I think it's fair to say this. In Scotland, we had a different approach from the NUM to safety and health and the rest of it. See down South, down South, (*gasp*), unbelievable ... *Much worse*. I mean there were men cutting without water ... I worked in Stoke-on-Trent, it was bloody awful ... the men were on their own and men are very fearless on their own. Me, I worked in a stone mine with the blast borers for the drills – *no water*. Mining with dust often with a low boring machine – 'Keep going Jock, you know, *come on, come on keep going Jock*', *shocking stuff*. Through a middle cut machine, no water. You imagine a machine up there [motioned to head height] throwing all the dust out.

⁶² Tommy Coulter, b 1928, interviewed by Neil Rafeek and Hilary Young, 12 Jan 2005 SOHC 017/C21.

⁶³ Church and Outram, *Strikes and Solidarity*.

NR: Just what you said there about keeping on working, why was that part of the culture do you think?

GB: It was just the lack of good trade union, how things developed.

DC: I would say money at the end of the day.

GB: There was money but there was also a bad culture. In Stoke-on-Trent, the men weren't, *they were not union conscious*. I remember working on a road, went out on strike one day, see when the place turned – other men doing the job for us (*laughs*) ... that wouldn't happen in Scotland but it happened in Stoke on Trent and elsewhere in England. Different approach to trade unionism. That applies to Yorkshire too apparently, they're not as clever as they thought they were. They're very clever in Scotland and I think also in South Wales to some extent, from what I know of it, union conscious, safety conscious, dust conscious – *really, really conscious*. So that difference applied.⁶⁴

Whilst this 'heroic' story-telling might have exaggerated the differences between Scots and English miners, the narratives of George Bolton and Derek Carruthers on health and safety do resonate with what we know about deep differences between work and political cultures across coalfields in the UK. Scots were amongst those more likely to resort to the strike weapon to defend workplace environmental standards. Workplace and community solidarity in Scotland

⁶⁴ George Bolton and David Carruthers, both b 1934, interviewed by Neil Rafeek and Hilary Young, 12 January 2005, SOHC 017/C23.

underpinned such action, in contrast to elsewhere (eg the English Midlands coalfield).

The 1984-5 miners' strike marked a watershed in many ways. It left the NUM shackled with all kinds of new 'code of conduct' rules restricting industrial action. Excluded from this pernicious attack on trade union rights though was health and safety. Strikes on that issue proliferated over the following decade, as a North East England NUM activist Alan Napier recalled.⁶⁵ Oral testimony is insightful at many levels but not least in demonstrating that when and where trade unions were powerful – as in post-Second World War coal mining in Scotland – they were capable of initiating and supporting health and safety strikes, albeit at the local level. Miners may have been inured to high levels of danger and worked in an environment where manliness was equated with risk acceptance, but when this became apparent and excessive they became intolerant of exposure to risk, more 'safety conscious' and more willing to walk out to protect their bodies. Over time, this risk threshold shifted and workers became less willing to accept that high levels of death and disability were an intrinsic part of the work.

On the other hand the NUM continued to support historic 'dust money' bonus payments as an incentive to work in unhealthy environments and were sensitive to threats of pit closures and the need to weigh job losses against health and safety concerns. Industrial work could and did damage bodies, but so too did unemployment and in the context of deindustrialisation and sharply diminishing job opportunities trade-offs were made that sacrificed miners' health and safety.

⁶⁵ Alan Napier, interviewed by Neil Rafeek, 31 March 2004, SOHC 017/C43.

Hence, on occasions the NUM lived with non-compliance of dust standards where pit closure was threatened and officially at least wildcat strike action was censured – as, for example, in the decade or so following nationalisation. As the NUM President Will Lawther stated in 1947: ‘It is a crime against our own people that unofficial strikes should take place.’⁶⁶ Clearly there were tensions between rank and file workplace protest – including strikes – and the wider strategies of union leaders and bureaucracies. This was also expressed in the South Wales miners’ abhorrence towards Miners’ Federation of Great Britain and NUM support for ‘dust’ and ‘dirt’ money collectively bargained agreements – which one local official described as ‘organised murder’.⁶⁷

Putting this in Perspective

Oral evidence enables us to better understand the cultural and emotional landscape navigated by workers, and the resources that could be deployed in the mobilisation of workers on occupational health and safety issues. This suggests, at least in the 1960s, 1970s and into the 1980s, the existence of a significant, organic, subterranean rank and file movement to protect bodies at work. In this, strikes (and the threat of strikes) were part of the arsenal of weapons used as

⁶⁶ Cited in Andrew Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics vol 1, 1944-1968* (Aldershot, 2003), 82-3.

⁶⁷ NUM (South Wales Area), Minutes of Area Executive Council Meeting, 15 August 1961, 659. See also *The Miner* (September/October 1961), 10. Negotiating for extra payments for working in dangerous and unhealthy conditions was official TUC policy before the passage of the HSWA in 1974. There was a clear rationale to this, in that this monetary penalty was designed to incentivise managerial improvements in work conditions.

leverage on managers and employers to make concessions and to re-envision workers' bodies as worthy of protection. Worker responses and agency regarding the body at work – including strike action - was dependent, however, upon a number of variables. Legislation, such as the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act, heightened awareness and legitimised industrial action. On the other hand deindustrialisation undermined the capacity to mobilise in defence of bodies at work and diverted trade union's attention towards what were almost universally regarded in working class communities to be more important priorities – maintaining wages and jobs in the face of factory and mine closures and neo-liberal policies designed to neuter trade unionism. David Gee, a General and Municipal Workers' Union Health and Safety officer noted in 1982 'Asbestos workers could choose to settle for a one in 1000 risk, but that would mean closing down the asbestos industry tomorrow.'⁶⁸ In 1979 the Scottish Secretary of the TGWU indicated that rather than implementing the TUC's proposals for phasing out the use of asbestos, the Scottish TGWU was committed to maintaining employment of asbestos workers, but 'would look after the families of those members who suffer from asbestos disease as a result.'⁶⁹

Privatisation and the accelerated shift to the market in the 1980s and 1990s brought more pressures – manifest, for example, in rising levels of work-related

⁶⁸ Cited in Tweedale, *Magic Mineral*, 249.

⁶⁹ Letter from Nancy Tait to Raymond MacDonald, Scottish Secretary TGWU, 6 February 1979 (John Todd Papers, Clydeside Action on Asbestos Archive, Glasgow).

injuries and disease, including the epidemic of work-related stress.⁷⁰ In this context only major disasters such as Piper Alpha in 1988 (with the deaths of 167 workers caused by lax safety regimes under largely US management in North Sea Oil) could mobilise workers to refocus on directly protecting bodies. As Gregor Gall has noted there were nineteen successful brief rolling strikes and sit-ins organised in the North Sea oilfield by the new industrial union (OILC) after the explosion, including a major strike involving around 4,000 workers on the first anniversary of Piper Alpha. Industrial action continued into 1990. The disaster was an epiphany. ‘Piper fundamentally changed the consciousness of workers’, Gall has asserted, ‘not only had ‘enough become enough’ but readiness to confront the employers with widespread strike action emerged.’⁷¹

Still, occupational health and safety strikes were localised and even in the most dangerous and heavily unionised industries such as coal mining, oil extraction and shipbuilding tended to be confined to workplace level disputes. How can these relatively low levels of industrial action be explained? Why was there a reluctance to ramp health and safety issues up from the workplace / local level to regional, industry-wide and national strikes? For many unions this was a question of strategic choice. State intervention in the nineteenth century created a pattern of campaigning and lobbying for legislative reform to enforce preventative

⁷⁰ The deleterious impact of privatisation on health and safety in coal mining is examined in Emma Wallis, *Industrial Relations in the Privatised Coal Industry* (Aldershot, 2000).

⁷¹ Gregor Gall, ‘Union Organising in the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry’, *Scottish Labour History*, 41 (2006), 58. See also Charles Woolfson, John Foster and Matthias Beck, *Paying for the Piper: Capital and Labour in Britain’s Offshore Oil Industry* (London, 1996).

action – for example through Factory Acts, Mines Acts and Home Office Special Regulations, such as those pertaining to ‘dangerous trades’ such as lead poisoning. This became a key role of the TUC and the STUC and its importance was recognised with the appointment of the Medical Advisers to the TUC. The first, Thomas Legge in 1931, was followed by Hyacinth Morgan who played an important role in getting TB scheduled as an occupational disease in 1951.⁷² Dave Lyddon has made the point that:

A strike is very important in drawing attention to, and can be successful in resolving, an immediate occupational health problem - but its necessarily temporary nature is no substitute for the eventual implementation and continuous enforcement of legal regulations to control a particular hazard.⁷³

However, the failure to deploy strikes more widely on occupational health and safety was also a reflection of a macho work-health culture where maximising earnings and taking risks was exalted and overly ‘protective’ forms of behaviour pilloried as effeminate. The hegemonic ‘hard man’ masculinity that permeated the relatively dangerous ‘heavy industries’ where men were socialised into high levels of danger and risk and inured to injury and death on the job was implicated here.

As mentioned elsewhere, men had to be seen as acting as men and peer pressure

⁷² See Long, *Rise and Fall of the Healthy Factory* and Arthur McIvor, ‘Germ at Work:

Establishing Tuberculosis as an Occupational Disease in Britain, c1900-1951’, *Social History of Medicine*, 25, (2012), 812-29.

⁷³ Dave Lyddon, ‘Health and Safety, 1945-1995’, online publication:

<http://www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork/narrativedisplay.php?type=healthandsafety>.

to conform could be brutal in working class communities like Clydeside.⁷⁴ John L.

Williams observed in his detailed (500 page) study of accidents in 1960:

Fundamentally, the old attitude that the risk of the job must be accepted remains; although, as in other groups exposed to danger, the individual hopes and assumes he will not be involved. Even if some would want to object to certain dangers they may be influenced by concern that colleagues may take a critical view of their 'weakness'. These factors explain, for example, the reluctance of many workers to wear or demand goggles in processes obviously risky to their eyes.⁷⁵

A concerned Safety Officer in Scott Lithgows shipyard on the Clyde reflected in 1977: 'Somehow we have to persuade people to take a safe attitude to their work. It is easier said than done ... in a traditional industry like shipbuilding where *men are set in their ways*.'⁷⁶ The question and the response from Ayrshire miner Alec Mills in an interview in 2000 is also revealing:

AMcI: Why do you think there wasn't a strike on that issue [referring to masks and dust]?

⁷⁴ Ronald Johnston and Arthur McIvor, 'Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries, c1930-1970s' in Eileen Yeo (ed.), *Working Class Masculinities in Britain, 1850 to the Present*, special edition, *Labour History Review*, 69, (2004), 135-52.

⁷⁵ Williams, *Accidents and Ill-Health*, 51-2.

⁷⁶ J.P.K. Garthwaite, Safety Officer, Scott Lithgows, cited in Martin Bellamy, *The Shipbuilders* (Edinburgh, 2001), 74.

AM: Well, the men as I say, if they had all been like myself, and had refused to work when they were firing shots on the return side. But the men weren't all built the same. They weren't all built the same. There was unity within the coal mining industry and each individual pit if conditions were difficult, difficult, without the dust being brought into it. But there was never any argument about the dust.⁷⁷

When the same respondent talked about mechanisation generating more dust he reflected: 'No, there were no strikes, once more for obvious reasons. There were increased and enhanced payments.'⁷⁸ In Mills narrative we see an explicit assertion that occupational health strikes were rare because workers were assuaged with compensatory wage payments.

We need to understand the politics of the body within the labour movement in the context of prevailing workplace culture, power and the realities of lived, daily life. The latter is especially important. In an insecure, declining industry (mining employment peaked around 1920) located in communities where alternative employment opportunities were often limited the opportunity to earn extra wages for working in an unhealthy or hazardous environment was difficult to spurn. This applied also to the use of asbestos in the shipyards. Workers had low expectations regarding their own health because of the wider context of widespread poverty, overcrowding, morbidity and mortality that characterised cities such as Glasgow and deprived Scottish coal mining communities. In this context, the risks of industrial injury and chronic disease – such as lead poisoning,

⁷⁷ Alec Mills, interviewed by Arthur McIvor and Ronnie Johnston, 19 June, 2000, SOHC 017/C1.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

asbestos, silicosis and the like – paled into insignificance. Work conditions might seem more tolerable when contrasted to teeming, overcrowded tenements; the risk of pneumoconiosis so distant in the future that the possibility of a job and decent wages clearly trumped such concerns. The room for manoeuvre was constrained by the realities of lived experience, the prevailing conditions in the labour market and the power of the bosses. This might be especially apposite in Scotland and the industrial heartland of West Scotland where a particularly entrenched anti-union, authoritarian managerial style prevailed. This was both endogenous and imported – a good example of the latter which had catastrophic effects on workers’ bodies was North Sea Oil where a largely American ‘gung-ho’ style of management prevailed which resulted in the Piper Alpha disaster in 1988. Charles Woolfson, John Foster and Matthias Beck, along with Terry Brotherstone and Hugo Manson have analysed such developments, and oral history interviews in the Oil Lives project have elucidated both the high risk productionist managerial culture and the persistent militancy of the men in trying to neutralise these threats to their health and well-being.⁷⁹ Deindustrialisation, plant and pit closures and declining union membership in the more hostile economic and neo-liberal political climate of the 1980s and 1990s only made matters worse. Strike levels declined to all-time lows and there was little stomach for walkouts over health and safety amongst blue collar workers in a period when livelihoods were so directly under threat. The

⁷⁹ See Woolfson, Foster and Beck, *Paying for the Piper*; Terry Brotherstone and Hugo Manson, ‘Voices of Piper Alpha: Enduring Injury in Private Memory, Oral Representation and Labour History’, *Scottish Labour History*, 46 (2011), 71-85.

strike of 4,000 workers over high stress levels in the Civil Service in November 1999, half a century after the conflagration at Asbestos in Nova Scotia, was both an unusual outlier and a portent that the initiative in industrial action on the body at work was shifting from the traditional sectors of blue collar manual labour, and from physical damage to psycho-social aspects as Britain lurched towards a long-hours and overwork culture in a predominantly service based economy.⁸⁰

Conclusion

This paper has explored the evident invisibility of occupational health and safety strikes, offered tentative explanations as to why this was so and challenged the idea of worker quiescence and trade union inertia on the body at work through some reflections on the subterranean pattern of largely unofficial ‘wildcat’ walkouts on health and safety in Scotland’s ‘dangerous trades’. It is hoped that this will form the basis of further reflection, research and an on-going conversation on strikes and the body in the workplace.

In Scotland, the relative lack of strike activity directly on health and safety issues for much of the twentieth century was connected both to fear of the consequences in a region where heavy industry employers were notoriously authoritarian and to the prevailing machismo working environment in which workers were socialised into taking high risks and tolerated high levels of danger. Historically, a high level of risk was accepted and regarded as compensated for in a higher wage and extra ‘danger money’ payments that prevailed up to the early

⁸⁰ Philip Taylor and Peter Bain, ‘Trade Unions, Workers' Rights and the Frontier of Control in UK Call Centres’, *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 22 (2001), 39-66.

1970s. Consent and inertia were also the product of the wider context of deindustrialisation and job shedding (and concomitant labour disempowerment) and in part the result of a strategic prioritisation of campaigning and lobbying on occupational health and safety issues by national trade unions and the STUC and TUC. Occupational health and safety were framed by union leaderships as issues most appropriately and effectively pursued through legislation and state intervention. The latter were the main ways trade unions protected workers' bodies, though an important part was played by localised walkouts, which are probably more frequent than we might imagine, obscured by their poor visibility in aggregated metrics. Attitudes and capacities to mobilise were frequently in flux and identities mutating over time. Hegemonic 'hard man' styles of masculinity were being superseded by a range of masculinities, if somewhat belatedly in the traditional working-class communities in Scotland's industrial heartlands. Work-health cultures, nonetheless, were changing. Dave Lyddon has made the important point that the later 1970s marked a watershed with the mass training by the TUC of health and safety representatives - around 80,000 attended trade union ten-day health and safety courses over 1974-82.⁸¹ Still, in the heavy industry manufacturing and mining workplaces that characterised Scotland until the last quarter of the twentieth century, workmen and their unions invariably continued to put jobs and wages before the direct protection of their bodies. This was perfectly logical in the circumstances. Jobs and wages were the key determinants

⁸¹ Dave Lyddon, 'Health and Safety, 1945-1995', online publication:

[http://www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork/narrativedisplay.php?type=healthandsafety.](http://www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork/narrativedisplay.php?type=healthandsafety)

of individual and family health and well-being – and the deleterious impact of unemployment upon physical and mental health is well documented.⁸² In part at least this was connected to ‘doing masculinity’ and being a ‘real man’ within what was still an intensely patriarchal and work-centred society into the 1970s and 1980s. Understandably where livelihoods and ‘breadwinner’ status were threatened this was considered more important than occupational health and safety, and peer pressure to conform in such environments was powerful. Whether a more aggressive strike policy on health and safety would have achieved greater results and influenced the pattern of occupational health epidemics like asbestos and pneumoconiosis is debateable. What is evident is that this would have been going against the grain of an entrenched machismo work culture, where pragmatism, fatalism, conformity and a high risk threshold prevailed.

That said, there was significant protest, resistance and advocacy around the body in the workplace environment, including through strikes, albeit at the local level. This rank and file direct action appears to have been growing and most prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s and is an aspect of the wider injured and diseased workers’ movement that merits more attention. The argument in this essay is that workers’ individual and collective responses on occupational health, safety and risk were complex and contingent, ranging across a spectrum depending upon a number of variables, influenced by prevailing power relations

⁸² See Arthur McIvor, ‘Deindustrialization Embodied: Work, Health and Disability in the United Kingdom since c1950’, in Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon and Andrew Perchard (eds), *Deindustrialization and its Aftermath* (Vancouver, 2017).

and the wider social, economic and cultural context. It has been argued elsewhere that trade unions could be key interlocutors capable of acting, as one trade unionist asserted, as ‘custodians of workers’ health’. It is apparent that there was also more resistance through direct action, including withdrawal of labour, on health and safety than appears at first sight. An oral history approach can elucidate this, enabling exploration of the individual and collective responses of workers to risks of damage to their bodies – their feelings, emotions, identities and lived experiences – albeit often expressed in conflicting and multi-layered narratives that are difficult to interpret. Such personal testimonies can be especially revealing in exposing patterns of consent, mutating identities, as well as resistance through ‘wildcat’ strikes, spontaneous ‘walkouts’ and other means to address threats to bodies at the point of production.