

STRIKING FOR FAIR RENTS

Ben Morton

In 1939 the largest rent strike ever seen in Britain took place in Birmingham. It lasted over three months and involved over 10,000 municipal tenants. Its success was due to the actions of working-class women who felt their families were under attack by the Unionist council.

In the early twentieth century the role of women in working-class society was defined by dominant notions of home and family. The female role was fixed around the family and the household sphere, where women were responsible for the housekeeping budget and all matters relating to the home, while the male earned the money to support them. As Donald Pigott observed in his autobiography of growing up on a 1930s Birmingham estate, 'the sexes were complementary not equal. Fathers were the breadwinners, mothers the homemakers and rearers of children'.

But when Birmingham Council increased rents for all tenants by between 10 and 20 percent in May 1939, women throughout the new council estates rallied to the newly formed Birmingham Municipal Tenants Association (BMTA).

Women took an active part in the rent strike because they saw the rent proposals as an assault on their families. As one striker put it, 'it means the food out of our children's mouths. We can't sit by and let that happen...we must do what we can'. Another resolution from the Weoley Castle Tenants' Association expressed the nature of the strike clearly: 'there has never been a matter so closely affecting the domestic life of Birmingham as this iniquitous scheme'.

'We Won't Pay'

When the rent strike began on 1 May 1939, women turned out in force to defend their families' living standards. Council rent



On the march from Allens Cross, Northfield. Women saw the rent rises as an attack on their families.

collectors found themselves accompanied by organised groups of women and children. The *Birmingham Mail* reported that 'the collector...was embarrassed by the appearance of more than a score of women...beating on trays, saucepans and other utensils and chanting in unison, "we won't pay"'.

In Kingstanding the *Evening Despatch* reported that 'crowds of women rang bells [and] blew whistles...as they followed the rent collector from house to house'. Where rent was paid, 'the women rang the bells even louder and joined in the chorus of booing'.

In Perry Common 'crowds of women and children joined in shouting "last week's rent" and "windy" to the tenants who paid'.

In Warstock the *Evening Despatch* reported that women, 'laid siege to "the blacklegs" with jeers, cat-calls and jibes. It took courage in some places to pay the rent. It wasn't easy with 200 be-bannered determined women on the other side of the garden fence'.

One of the features of the dispute was that demonstrations during the rent strike were overwhelmingly composed of women. The first major march in January from the Weoley Castle estate was composed of 300 women and a few unemployed men. Other demonstrations included that of 6 June 1939, when the *Birmingham Post* reported 4,000 demonstrators, 'pushing perambulators' and 'shrieking denunciations' at councillors.

Women Strikers and Family Responsibilities

Women taking part in strike activities had to defend themselves against accusations that they were neglecting their household duties. Children would be taken on demonstrations and they accompanied women as they followed rent collectors and bailiffs.

On one bus trip the *Evening Despatch* reporter found 'Mrs Swain, like half the others on the bus, had a little boy on her knee who...[she]...wouldn't leave alone at home, in case the non-strikers said she was neglecting him'. From the charabanc the strikers 'let the non-strikers all over Birmingham know just what they thought of them. Then they rushed home at half-past four to get food for their men-folk'.

Reaction of the Council

In June 1939 the council decided to try to send bailiffs to serve eviction notices. Opposition once again depended on female supporters, who were able to watch for bailiffs while at home. At one house the neighbours 'informed the bailiffs that the tenant was away at Blackpool for the weekend. But all the time she was in the back washing'. 'Passports' were issued to other men, such as journalists, which stated that the bearers were not bailiffs and were permitted to enter the estate.

With the council facing serious financial loss, they suspended the rent increase on 4 July. This was a clear victory for the strikers and the victory celebration took the form of a family picnic outside the country home of the Estates chairman.



Feeding the family.

Importance

The rent strike was an example of a deep thread of gendered working-class culture, which came into conflict with the policy of Birmingham City Council. This culture was conservative and the strike was in defence of a status quo that was felt to be under threat.

It was a struggle which engaged with 'women's affairs' and in which women came out victorious. Throughout the rent strike it was the women who led and formed the overwhelming majority of active demonstrators and participants at every stage. One meeting of the BMTA even concluded that 'the men-folk are considered the weaker sex in the strike'.

At the same time the formal organisation of the strike was run by a majority of men, while women were generally found in supporting roles. Of the 11 members of the BMTA

committee, 8 were men and only 3 were women. This was without protest from women, because this was in line with their cultural expectations.

The Birmingham rent strikes show that working-class women would participate in social and political struggle provided they could also remain within the boundaries set by working-class culture. The essentially defensive and traditional nature of the strike also meant that once it achieved its goals, the great majority of women returned to their family lives. They had mobilised to repulse an attack on their household sphere, but once their protest was successful, they fell back into the roles which they had been fighting to defend. ●

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Further Reading

Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (Routledge, 1994).

Carl Chinn, *Homes For People: Council Housing and Urban Renewal in Birmingham 1849-1999* (Brewin, 1999).

Catherine Hall, 'Married Women at Home in Birmingham in the 1920's and 1930's', *Oral History*, Vol 5, No 2, Autumn 1977, p 66.

Donald Pigott, *Birmingham: Not a Place to Promise Much* (Brewin, 1997).