

Trades Unions and Banners

Most of the families who worked in the mines and factories of the industrial revolution were extremely poor. As changes in farming methods led to many fewer jobs in the countryside, people were forced to leave the farms and had to find what work they could in the new mines and factories. In their new way of life, work was usually hard, dirty and dangerous, and the working hours were very long. Later generations, born in the industrial towns and villages, never experienced any other way of life.

This is not to say that working conditions on farms had been that much better. Poverty, hard work and long hours had also been normal for people working in the countryside. However, a big difference was how much control they had over the work they did and when they did it. In the new factories and mines they had little or no say over the hours they worked or the work they had to do to stay alive.

For the ordinary person in the new town, cities and mining villages, life was very unpleasant. Early in the industrial revolution many people lived in very cramped and crowded conditions, often with very little furniture – sometimes not even a proper bed to sleep in. It was not uncommon for a whole family to cook, wash, live and sleep all together in just one room. In what we think was quite typical, we know of two families that lived together in Manchester in the early 1800s and had for their home a single-roomed cellar underneath a house, with only earth for the floor. The small window they had for light had been boarded over, having been

broken and their not being able to afford glass to replace it. As well as parents and children, they also kept a pig in the cellar with them.

As the years passed living and working conditions for industrial workers during the nineteenth century gradually got a little better. In fact, some mine owners and factory owners took good care of their workers. They built their workers villages with nice houses and a little land where they could grow some vegetables. One such family in County Durham was the Pease family who built villages around their collieries to house the people who worked in their mines at Waterhouses and Esh Winning. Most mine and factory owners, however, were not so kind to their workers, because building decent homes for their employees and their families cost them money.

Many factory and mine workers (and some agricultural workers) realised that if they were to improve their conditions and hours of work, their pay and their housing conditions they could not bring this about as individuals. So they joined together and formed societies where they would have more influence acting together. Union means joining, so these societies were called Unions. Because workers in each type of employment, trade or job formed their own unions, these became known as Trades Unions. An example is the National Union of Mineworkers – the miners' main trade union.

For a long time the employers tried to stop trades unions from existing. Employers dominated Parliament and were able to make trades unions illegal. They made it against the law for people to hold meetings without permission of some authority such as a magistrate. But many people

ignored this law, and many who did were sent to prison. Some were transported to Australia where they were forced to do hard work for no pay for many years.

Gradually, however, the trades union movement became so large that the Government was forced to allow the unions to exist.

The unions today continue to do more for their members than campaign for better pay and working hours. They look after the health needs of their members and make sure that they are looked after if they are injured and cannot work. They make sure people have a decent pension when they retire, and much more.

Each colliery union branch, or 'lodge' as they are known, has its own decorated banner. There are some examples of colliery lodge banners on the next page. Many collieries had a band in which the miners played, practising in their spare time. Although the collieries in County Durham have all closed, the Union (in a new form) still exists to look after the former miners. Many colliery bands also continue to flourish. In many places the unions have a big gathering, like a fair, once a year. They get together and have a parade with bands and big banners. In County Durham this happens on the first Saturday each July. It is known as Durham Miners' Gala, although it is also often unofficially known locally just as 'The Big Meeting'. The people from each colliery, and many from other kinds of work, parade behind their banners and bands through Durham City to the racecourse, where there are stalls and entertainments of different kinds for amusement while, more formally, speeches are given by well known people.

Some Examples of Colliery Lodge Banners



Chopwell Lodge Banner



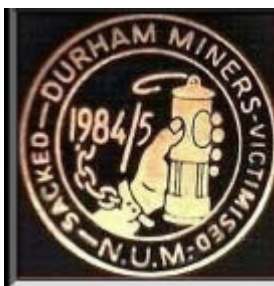
Dean and Chapter Lodge Banner



Greenside Colliery Lodge Banner



Ramshaw Lodge Banner



Trade Union Badge
Produced by the Durham Miners'
During a Strike in 1984-5