



Cleaners' Organizing in Britain from the 1970s: A Personal Account

Sheila Rowbotham

Discipline of Sociology, University of Manchester, Manchester UK;
sheila.rowbotham@man.ac.uk

In the early 1970s the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain set out to unionize night cleaners. A long and intensive campaign resulted in two strikes and a greater awareness in the trade union movement about this neglected group of workers. But though the publicity generated by newspaper articles, meetings, and the making of two documentary films on cleaners focused attention on their conditions, organization proved very difficult. This was compounded by the economic and political climate from the late 1970s and the impact of privatization, which contributed to the growth in inequality in British society. This article outlines a disregarded history of attempts to organize cleaners, a history which is gaining a new-found relevance in the wake of the "Justice for Janitors" campaign in the US and the awareness that low-paid service work plays a key part in the global economy.

In March 1970, *Newsweek* announced the birth of a new feminist movement in Britain after a conference of 500 gathered in Oxford (Anon in *Newsweek* 1970a:49). Many of the women who travelled to Oxford had been radicalized by the movements of the previous decade: the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Anti-Apartheid, opposition to the war in Vietnam, the radical student movement, and the American Civil Rights movement. Determined to raise our grievances as women, and inspired by the emergence of a Women's Liberation Movement in the US, we were also concerned about injustice and inequality in general. Our rebellion coincided with an upsurge of trade union militancy in Britain. A strike of Ford's sewing machinists for equal pay in 1968 signalled a new spirit among working women and, as a result, in 1970 the Labour MP Barbara Castle introduced her bill for equal pay. This bill was planned to come into effect by 1975.

Shortly after the Equal Pay Act was passed, the Tories came into power, led by Edward Heath. That August, the Conservative paper, *The Daily Telegraph*, reported that the government was worried about "the continuing wages 'explosion'" (Hughes in *The Daily Telegraph* 1970:1), whilst at the Conservative Party conference in October 1970 the new Prime Minister Heath declared a crackdown on welfare "scroungers" (Anon in *The Evening News* 1970b:13). To a confident generation of trade unionists determined to improve working class

living conditions, this was akin to a declaration of war. The response was clear and angry. The 1970s were to be a period of turbulent industrial unrest in which thousands of people became drawn into militant activity (Kelly 1988:104–114). Though this is all well documented, it is less known that this decade was also a period of hope for low-paid workers, many of whom were women and immigrants. Significantly, the composition of the work force, and to some extent the trade union movement, was imperceptibly beginning to change in low-paid manufacturing jobs and in the public sector, and this would have an effect upon the decade's events.

Strikes by women workers combined with Barbara Castle's Equal Pay Act to highlight the issue of women's low pay. Not only did it quickly become evident that employers were ingeniously getting around the law on equal pay by regrading jobs and ensuring that the things women did were not marked up as "skilled", but the Act simply did not apply to many women whose work was not regarded as comparable to men's (Hanna in *The Sunday Times* 1971:65). In 1971 women's average earnings were £12 a week. This was less than 60% of the male rate for a 40-hour week (Bruegel in *Socialist Worker* 1971:7). However, there were swathes of women workers who actually earned less, including the invisible night cleaners who moved into the streets of the big cities after dark. Part of a growing host of casual workers who were outside the regulated economy and the trade unions, such women suffered unsocial hours and bad working conditions, earning around £9 or £10 a week, and considered themselves lucky if they had one week's paid holiday a year.

The Cleaners' Action Group

During 1970 and 1971, the Women's Liberation Movement mushroomed. In March 1971, 5000 people marched for "women's liberation" through the London sleet and snow. Among them was a night cleaner, May Hobbs, who carried a placard that read "The Cleaners' Action Group" (Bruegel in *Socialist Worker* 1971:7). May Hobbs was a fighter. Indignant at the conditions she knew as a night cleaner, she had made contact with members of the International Socialists (IS) (now the Socialist Workers' Party), a Trotskyist group. Friends of mine in IS had asked me to put a note round in the Women's Liberation Workshop Newsletter and, in the autumn of 1970, a crowd of women and one man packed into my bedroom in Hackney, East London, to hear May Hobbs tell us about her efforts to organize cleaners. The Night Cleaners' Campaign had begun.

Every Tuesday night at around 10pm I headed off into London's financial area with my friend and co-leafleter Liz Waugh. We prowled the streets on the look out for cleaners. They were not hard to detect

among the few city workers left in the area; tired, walking heavily, and carrying plastic bags. "Excuse me", we said. "Would you like to join a union?" Then we would produce the blue and yellow printed leaflets from the Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G). We were met with blank looks, especially from the Afro-Caribbean women, many of whom, it dawned on us, had not come across unions before. I started to supplement the T&G material with hand-written efforts produced on a duplicator (ancestor of the photocopier) which was at the school where I worked part-time, asking: "Why do night cleaners get less than day cleaners? Do night work for such low pay? Why don't cleaners get full cover money? Work on understaffed buildings? Get no Sunday bonus? Often no holiday pay? Have no security? Can be sacked without notice?" (Cleaners' Action Group 1971, unpublished leaflet). The answer at the bottom of the page to these questions was, of course, because they were not unionized. Most women regarded us prestidigitators as we stuffed our T&G leaflets into their hands. A few, however, did join.

Inspired by May Hobbs and evangelical in our desire to improve things, we had tumbled into the Cleaners' Action Group with little understanding of the conditions the women were forced to accept so that they might work in this bargain basement of capitalism. We learned by meeting them on the streets, but most of all through the friendships we formed in the course of the campaign. The cleaners taught us how the gloss of the swinging sixties concealed a grim, subterranean poverty in British society. In 1970 the Child Poverty Action Group revealed that three million children were living in poverty in Britain (Jackson in *The Times* 1970:7). The women who went into cleaning were likely to be their mothers. Some were from the unskilled working class which had known poverty for generations and others were Irish, Afro-Caribbean, Asian, Greek or Spanish immigrants. Though a few were in their twenties and a few over 60, most were in their thirties and forties with husbands who were low-waged workers, ill or disabled. The women looked older than their age, for they hardly slept at all, snatching a few hours after the children went to school. The accumulative exhaustion was etched on their faces. They had no time for the meetings and demonstrations which for we young activists in Women's Liberation had become a way of life. Nonetheless, a few of them came on that first march in 1971 to hear May Hobbs call for "the self-organization of women at their workplace". A *Socialist Worker* report, written by Irene Bruegel, records how May emphasized the need to fight employers and "press for greater democracy within their unions" (Bruegel in *Socialist Worker* 1971:7).

We leafleters soon found this was a tall order for the women we were trying to recruit. Even joining a union was a major step. Many

were too afraid because they were claiming Social Security, had immigration problems or were simply terrified of the contractors. Sally Alexander described in an account for the socialist feminist magazine *Red Rag* how at first we had simply imagined we would leaflet all buildings in London. Then we tried concentrating on one contractor and, when this proved difficult, focused on big buildings (Alexander 1994:259–260). Sally began to leaflet two enormous Shell buildings in West London where a cleaner, Jean Mormont, emerged as the shop steward. From a large family of 18 and the mother of seven herself, she remembered being in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) in the war as a kind of holiday (McCrindle and Rowbotham 1979:42). Despite her demanding life, she became one of the most steadfast supporters of the campaign. The women at Shell complained not only about their pay but about the inadequate staffing which forced them to cover ever more offices, working without proper equipment and in stifling air due to the air conditioning being turned off (Alexander 1994:260). We would hear similar objections from other women. In East London, Liz Waugh and I were on a fast learning curve about the contract system. We would laboriously unionize a building and come back to find the women scattered by the cleaning agency. Slowly we began to piece together a picture of the industry, partly from Jean Wright, who had been a cleaner for many years. She was solely responsible for a medium-sized block in the City and her teenage son and husband used to come in to help, assisted on leafleting nights by Liz and myself. As we all cleaned, Jean Wright would talk about the bizarre informal hierarchies in the business and explain how a good supervisor on a big building needed real planning skills. In the rackety cleaning business, however, merit did not always decide who was made a supervisor. Each firm operated in differing and apparently random ways.

The contracting of labour had been common during the 19th century in agriculture, the building trades and in government services. From the late 19th century reformers had campaigned against the system and pushed for direct, regulated employment, including equal pay for “char-ladies” in government buildings (Paul 1986:11; Rowbotham 1999:133–134). However, in the 1930s the growth of large offices had led to the first modern cleaning firms being formed. In the post-war era these had expanded and had received a recent boost in 1968, when the Labour government, keen to show they were making Civil Service cuts, had sacked 4000 directly employed cleaners (Alexander 1994:263). By the 1970s a few cleaning contractors had become big companies, but new firms were constantly appearing because it required very little capital investment to start up. The main cost was labour. The businesses on these lower rungs were

often unstable. Indeed, we found some were extensions of criminal gangs who used overt intimidation.

The contract cleaning industry appeared marginal to the trade union movement in the early 1970s. Though the T&G had its roots in the late 19th century unionization of the unskilled and unorganized, those days were long gone. They were a big bureaucratic outfit and, though the leader Jack Jones was on the left of the Labour Party, the union officials saw recruiting cleaners as a waste of resources. The Cleaners' Action Group was on the outside looking in when it came to the world of trade unionism. Neither May Hobbs, Jean Mormont nor Jean Wright had experience in negotiating trade union structures. Sally Alexander had been an actress and in Equity, and I was in the National Union of Teachers, but the byzantine rules of the T&G were double Dutch to us. Liz Waugh's mother Lucy, an East London working class woman who got involved in women's liberation along with her daughter, was equally perplexed. On being told the cleaners had to be in the window cleaners' branch she spent ages looking for their elusive branch meetings.

Exasperated by confusion and muddle, May Hobbs began to insist that the cleaners should have their own branch. The trouble was that we did not have enough women signed up for that, even though we found some cleaners were mysteriously already in the T&G. By the summer of 1971 we were at an impasse with the union. Some of the Women's Liberation Workshop leafleters were attracted by a proposal to create a women's union on the lines of the old Women's Trade Union League. Others of us argued the cleaners were too vulnerable as it was. An alternative idea was for a cleaning co-operative, but this was rejected because it would have meant setting ourselves up in business (Alexander 1994:259–260). Leafleters began drifting away, including the International Socialist women who went looking for the revolution elsewhere. By the autumn only a handful of us were left to produce an issue of the Women's Liberation Workshop magazine *Shrew* on the night cleaners. Liz and Lucy Waugh, Sally Alexander and the artist Mary Kelly, whose work with the night cleaners inspired her art work, took up this task. Mary was helping a left film group, the Berwick Street Film Collective (later called Lusitania), to make a film of the campaign.

The truth was that the grand sounding "Night Cleaners' Campaign" was somewhat overblown and we were rather better known on the left than our actual numbers warranted. Our Night Cleaners' *Shrew* carried a report of a speech by the Irish socialist Bernadette Devlin (now McAliskey), elected MP in the wake of the Civil Rights movement in Ireland (Anon in *Shrew* 1971:6). She sat with her legs dangling from a table and addressed her rather scanty audience of night cleaners with her customary eloquence and passion. Assembling

even these cleaners had been a Herculean task. May Hobbs's husband Chris brought some in his ancient car. Others were perched in relays on the back of Liz Waugh's somewhat alarming motor bike. Our campaign might be strong on speakers and writers, but it was weak on foot soldiers.

After *Shrew* came out, more leafleters appeared, including a woman from the International Marxist Group, another trotskyst group. She would quickly produce a pamphlet ("The Nightcleaners' Campaign, c 1972") through the "Socialist Woman" group linked to her organization, saying what should be done; an act which we fiercely democratic Women's Liberation types resented as high handed. However, any problems of internal democracy were nothing in relation to the continuing problems of engaging with the T&G. May Hobbs, who was a natural-born direct actionist, had taken to ringing Jack Jones at home and complaining to his wife. She was also on good terms with the liberal media who happily reported the plight of exploited night cleaners ignored by the union bureaucracy. This did not endear us to the union. Even when we did manage to get the T&G to meet with the cleaners, the communication gap was marked. The film-makers from Lusitania, Marc Karlin, Humphrey Trevelyan and James Scott, caught a revealing moment at a meeting in a pub with Jean Mormont, the Shell women and Mary Kelly. As the official drones away in that peculiar language used by trade unionists which is so impenetrable to outsiders, Jean Mormont, black rings of tiredness beneath her eyes, slowly drifts away into the music of the juke box in the background.

Cleaners' Strikes

May Hobbs decided we should focus on the Civil Service Union (CSU), which had some cleaners as members. One obvious advantage was that the CSU could draw on the support of their members inside government buildings. Moreover, this was a markedly different style of trade unionism. The union official, who was young and zippy and drove a red sports car, was willing to come down to buildings and talk to the cleaners during their break at 1am, a prospect which had always freaked out the T&G men, who were nine-to-fivers. The CSU journal, called *The Whip*, gave the campaign publicity. Our morale soared. In the summer of 1972 cleaners on two Ministry of Defence buildings—the Empress State and the Old Admiralty—went on strike (Anon in *The Whip* 1972:1). They were in high spirits on the picket line, partly because the CSU strike pay was £10 a week, which was more or less what the women could earn whilst cleaning. The International Socialists and the International Marxist Group came back to help the leafleters from the Women's Liberation Workshop and the picket

grew. I can still remember a nagging guilt if I missed a day's picketing to work on the book I was writing, *Hidden from History*.

These were militant times and the striking cleaners received instant trade union support. The T&G lorry drivers refused to cross our picket lines and supplies began to dry up in the Ministry of Defence, most crucially the beer for the bar. Inside information from sympathizers in the Empress State Building was that lack of beer was having a terrible effect on morale. Post Office workers refused to deliver mail; printers, railway workers and clothing workers sent donations. The local Trades Council came along with good practical advice about whom to contact in the area. One odd encounter was with some men at the Admiralty building one night who insisted we had to let them in because they looked after the tunnels. The tunnels, they explained, had to be kept in good order because the Queen and other important people would escape down them in the event of a nuclear attack. The Cleaners' Action Group was clearly threatening the very defence of the realm!

At the Empress State building in Fulham, the picket began to assume a carnival atmosphere. A nearby Italian restaurant allowed Lusia Films to use their electricity. The film makers rigged up a screen and began to show films, most notably *Salt of the Earth*, Herbert J. Biberman's wonderful 1953 film of a strike in a New Mexico mining community in which the women played a key role. Passionate, sensitive, humourous, *Salt of the Earth* resulted in him being blacklisted during the McCarthy era, whilst the Mexican actress, Rosaura Revueltas, was repatriated to Mexico (Pym 2000:959–960). The cleaners, several of whom were from the Caribbean and Ireland, loved this drama in which class, race and gender interacted in ways that related closely with their own experience. Lusia Films had been inspired by the activist film making of the May events in Paris during 1968 and by early Russian revolutionary films. They were part of a creative new wave of documentary film makers who were just beginning to take off in Britain at that time. They raised money by doing advertisements and showed their films at meetings. Whilst some took a straightforward newsreel style, Lusia was experimenting with new forms of communicating (Dickinson 1999:126–136; Rowbotham and Beynon 2001:143–158).

Cleaners and feminists picketing, singing and dancing at the Ministry of Defence made a good story and the strike was covered widely in the media. Our targeting of high-profile government buildings brought results. The CSU was able to get the contractors to recognize the union. The strikers obtained a raise of £2.50 per week and a 50 pence night allowance. The women were joyous and at Empress State remained so confident that they were able to push their wages up to £21 a week, well above the average women's wage of

£12 (Anon in *The Whip* 1972:1; Alexander 1994:262). The CSU, however, clearly found negotiating with contractors a nightmare and realized that all their efforts would be invalidated when the time came for the contract to be renewed. Whilst everyone else in the campaign rejoiced at the cleaners' victory, the Assistant General Secretary of the CSU, Les Moody, was mopping his brow. He told Martin Walker from *The Guardian*: "It's a labour of love. In time and effort it costs us a lot more than the membership fees we get from them" (Walker in *The Guardian* 1972:63). Regardless of this begrudging comment, a radical wing in the union was delighted. The CSU began to press for the cleaning of government buildings to be taken back in-house. The contractors, meanwhile, spoke gloomily of the dangers of bankruptcy.

Loss of Impetus

Victory extended the fame of the Cleaners' Action Group. May Hobbs, who had a gut understanding of spin long before the Blairites discovered it, was increasingly away speaking around the country, explaining how cleaners were flocking to join the union. No one knew precisely how many cleaners there were because women were working without cards; the numbers in the union were equally confusing because membership fluctuated. However, we were certainly not recruiting these supposed hordes of cleaners. The reality of the leafleters on the ground was far more mundane. In the summer of 1972, Liz Waugh and I started to recruit a group of four women into the CSU on a building May and her husband Chris Hobbs had decided we should target. It was Companies House at 207 Old Street, where the records of registered companies were kept. My notebook recording the receipt of dues describes them being paid £14 for a five-day week. Their hours were 10pm to 6am, with one week's holiday pay. I went there every week collecting between 5 p and 24 p a week from the women until just before Christmas, when it was discovered that they could not be recruited into the CSU after all. Hanging my head in shame, I refunded the dues from my own pocket, feeling like a fraudster. To my amazement the women treated me like a heroine. They might be unfamiliar with the purpose of trade unions, but they knew all about informal savings systems. It was customary for people to pay for their turkeys at the butcher slowly over time; the small sums I handed over to them seemed like Christmas bonuses—the turkey money coming home to roost.

The leafleting stopped during 1973. This was partly because of our exhaustion, but also because of internal tensions within the campaign. Not only was there the yawning class gulf between the leafleters and the cleaners but there was anger and unease among the women cleaners themselves. Several women who had become involved distrusted May Hobbs's leadership, and this was made worse as

she became, understandably, interested in other causes. She and her husband Chris were great stirrers and rousers, but they were not meticulous about details or good at building up a core of people to work together. Jean Mormont and Jean Wright could do this locally, but would defer to May Hobbs in relation to the Cleaners' Action Group. During the strike at the Empress State building two women, one Irish and one from the Caribbean, developed into an organic leadership. But we were never able to foster this process in the Cleaners' Action Group as an organization. The working class women in the group who had no previous experience of working in any organizational structures found it difficult to operate in a context which was not a purely personal network of women. Our ideology of sisterhood did not wash with the cleaners, whose relations with other women were complex and often conflictual—though, interestingly, these conflicts were not articulated in terms of race and ethnicity but, rather, in personal grievances that cut across these differing identities. Equally, because they were used to male leadership in daily life, these women were probably *more* suspicious of May Hobbs as a leader than they would have been of a man. We leafleters in Women's Liberation, however, were keen not to impose decisions on working class women. Those of us who had leafleted for a while had learned from the experience but we had a libertarian politics that deplored any inequality of knowledge. Consequently, we kept being steamrolled by women in the left groups who had no such reservations.

We blamed ourselves for failing the cleaners, though we were dimly aware that the contract system presented serious problems for unionizing. We had, of course, no idea that this form of work was going to be extended by a Conservatism that made Heath look benign. It was inconceivable that contracting out services could become the prevailing pattern for whole chunks of the British economy. But this was, of course, what happened in the 1980s when reducing regulated labour conditions by any means came to be seen as legitimate by the Thatcher government. More and more, vulnerable workers, including many women, were employed through the contract system and some of the big players in the industry transmogrified into service multinationals. Workers who had regarded themselves as the backbone of the labour movement found themselves in the company of women they had considered to be marginal. The shock was palpable and a generation of trade union militants never recovered.

Impact

Ironically, by the time Lusia films finished their long, experimental documentary *Night Cleaners* in 1975, there was no campaign operating but there was a great deal of interest in night cleaners, owing to May

Hobbs's speeches to meetings and rallies, along with our middle-class knack for publicity. But when the film was shown at meetings, it provoked extreme reactions. Left audiences were used to the format of TV newsreels and were bewildered by Marc Karlin's efforts to create space for viewers to think, imagine, probe and question with blank screens and long, slow shots of the women's faces. In refusing cinematic conventions he wanted to get beyond the externalities of "struggle" into the lives and feelings of the women. He took some people with him, including some of the cleaners, but he left others furious, including an irate May Hobbs, who had always wanted a quick, short, propaganda film. Seen in retrospect, *Night Cleaners* provides fascinating footage of the mass demonstrations against Heath's policies, with one magical moment in which two young miners dance together. It also chronicles a group who were rarely portrayed with sympathy, the 1970s London poor, living on the edge, the strata the Tories called "scroungers". It documents the people who, by and large, go undocumented through history. Romantic and conceptual at the same time, it explores the unseen; the city at night, the invisibility of women's labour and the exhaustion permeating their lives outside work. It was indeed about the hidden injuries of class (Dickinson 1999:149–152; Rowbotham and Beynon 2001:152–153). *Night Cleaners* became a classic work, recognized by film makers as pioneering and stored in the British Film Institute archive. However, the night cleaners, still largely ununionized, continued to go to work at 10pm each night carrying their plastic bags of belongings, though cameras and leafleters no longer pursued them through the deserted streets.

There were some spasmodic attempts to organize cleaners in other places over the course of the 1970s. In Oxford, during the early 1970s, the Women's Action Group, whilst leafleting the working class housing estate of Blackbird Leys about nursery provision, made contact with a group of women cleaners at the Cowley car plant. Hilary Wainwright, who was in the Women's Liberation Movement and the International Marxist Group, told them about May Hobbs and contact was made with the local T&G. However, the T&G would not allow the Women's Action Group or May Hobbs into their meeting with the cleaners and so they stood angrily outside. Nevertheless, the Oxford cleaners did become unionized and won some improvements in wages and conditions.¹ Several attempts were made to organize on college campuses. At Durham University, inspired by May Hobbs's account of the "successful struggle to unionize London cleaners", a student, Lynda Finn, and Gavin Williams, a lecturer, decided to try to organize the college cleaners in 1973. It proved far more difficult than they had envisaged owing to resistance from the University and inter-union disputes (Finn and Williams c 1976:5).

Whilst organizing cleaners presented enormous problems, the publicity generated did contribute to a shift in attitudes in the labour movement towards low-paid women workers, including cleaners. During the 1970s feminists were extremely active in trade unions on pay and conditions, as well as lobbying union branches, trades councils and the Trades Union Congress on social issues such as abortion and nurseries. Women with expertise in the law and in the trade unions helped to link the two movements. The solicitor Tess Gill, together with an official in the white collar union AUEW-TASS (Linda Smith), began to explore how low-paid women workers could use existing legislation to strengthen their bargaining power (Anon in *Morning Star* 1976a). In contrast to the tendency which prevailed in the libertarian and trotskyist left to regard the state with suspicion, they represented an opposing tradition in the British labour movement of turning towards the state to counter capital. Socialist feminists were now insisting that women needed the state. A debate ensued within the women's movement on the welfare state which led some feminists to ask how to gain access to the resources controlled by the state in ways that helped the most vulnerable working class women (The London to Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1980; Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright 1979). Little did we know that this was the welfare state's eleventh hour.

Changing Circumstances

It was evident, however, that the economic context was undergoing a change. By the mid-1970s pressure from the IMF forced the Labour government to make cuts in public services. According to time-honoured practice these were directed at the most vulnerable. Initially the cuts were met by a confident and staunch resistance, which meant that the state itself increasingly became a site of conflict. In 1976, when the Area Health Authority in Birmingham decided they could no longer afford to employ extra staff, the cleaners at Mosley Hall Hospital refused to do more work and went on strike. Instant support came from male porters and hospital drivers in the South Birmingham Hospital District who refused to handle dirty linen from the hospital. Within 24 hours the Health Authority found that they could, after all, employ more cleaners (Anon in *Spare Rib* 1976b:21–22).

In the late 1970s, when low-paid workers rebelled against wage restraint, an extraordinarily powerful media myth took shape which conveniently happened to bolster the interests of both the Labour and Conservative Parties. According to the new script, workers like those Mosley Hall cleaners were portrayed as greedy and lazy. The rest, of course, is history; Thatcherism rode to power on the myth which has

never been dislodged. After Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979, not only did inequality increase in British society but it became inadmissible to argue for the redistribution of wealth. The Tory tactic of privatizing public services had not been part of the original plan; it was developed *ad hoc* after an experiment devised by a Conservative Councillor, Christopher Chope, in the South London borough of Wandsworth proved popular. In 1983 the council targeted the dustbinmen, a group of workers who were not loved by the public because of a long and smelly strike and a productivity scheme which meant that they often left debris in their wake as they rushed to empty the bins. Rubbish collection was privatized.

Privatization was accompanied by changes in legislation nationally which affected trade union action and the position of low-paid workers. In 1983, the 1946 Fair Wages Resolution, which required central government contracts to employ workers on wages and conditions which were not less favourable than those agreed by the unions in the trade or by the general level of pay in the type of work, was scrapped (Pearson 1985:85–99). Thatcher was not able to abolish the Wages Councils which fixed rates in low-paid industry but the next Tory Prime Minister, John Major, got rid of them. An all-party consensus that the state had an obligation to protect low-paid and vulnerable workers—a consensus which owed much to reformers, including feminists, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and which had crystallized after World War Two—was shattered by Thatcher and Major.

The U-turn in state policy, the adoption of privatization on a large scale and the collapse of manufacturing industry during the 1980s meant that cleaners who ten years before had seemed so peripheral in the labour movement started to come to the fore. A group in the private sector working for a large West End London store consciously developed the link between the community and the workplace which had arisen accidentally in Oxford. A workforce of Latin American immigrants, some of whom were highly educated and in flight from repressive regimes, built up confidence by dealing with individual grievances, helped by the North Kensington Law Centre. They then unionized successfully through the T&G, which was becoming more open in its approach. They produced a newsletter called *El Mopo* (*The Mop*) and were able to raise their wages (Pearson 1985:42–51).

It was, however, the public sector which saw the most intense contests. Cleaners who were employed in the public sector did not necessarily have higher wages than those who were contract workers. They were, however, more likely to be covered for sickness, holiday pay and pensions. There were several battles against privatization and Asian women workers, a new force in the British trade union movement, played a prominent part in these. Organized by the National

Union of Public Employees, South Asian cleaners at Hillingdon Hospital in West London protested against privatization (Paul 1986:67). They were not successful. However, in Hackney, East London, in 1984, after all the health workers in the borough went on strike for one day, the Area Health Authority decided that it would be a bad idea to put domestic services out to competitive tender (Paul 1986:70). Despite this success, the problem remained that the unchanging, unflinching resolve of central government made it difficult to sustain resistance against privatization.

Women cleaners who were already working for contractors found that the introduction of competitive tendering resulted in a further decline in pay and conditions. Barking Hospital in northeast London saw a long and bitter dispute which arose in 1984 when the cleaning company Crothalls underbid the contract they had formerly held by cutting pay and holiday provision and putting cleaners on flexible shifts. The shifts played havoc with the women's lives and were particularly resented by those who were single mothers with children because they could not plan their time. A long-standing cause of exasperation on the part of the cleaners was their claim that they were given inadequate cleaning materials. By highlighting the negative impacts of scabs' lack of knowledge of the patients, in a roundabout sort of way the Barking cleaners who went on strike were able to show the importance in their own work of the tacit knowledge and skills learned through doing the job over time, caring skills which were not included in how their work was evaluated. Indeed, the negative consequences of the short-term policy of cost cutting on cleaning quickly became evident as the Environmental Health Officer's Report in April 1984, one month after the strike began, found the cleanliness of Barking Hospital to be unsatisfactory (Paul 1986:45–47).

During the 1980s, the combination of publicity generated by campaigners and strikers, along with the government's resolve to endorse the contract system, resulted in more research being done on cleaning. A comprehensive ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) report in 1981 on contract cleaning recorded a deterioration in pay and conditions during the 1970s. A joint CSU/Low Pay Unit Report on cleaners who were directly employed showed that whilst their wage levels were similar to contract cleaners, their sickness, holiday and pension provision was better. In 1983 a useful report produced by the Incomes Data Services (IDS) noted how paid holidays in some large, private firms such as British Leyland and Ford for directly employed cleaners included in general wage negotiations were between 20 and 25 days, much longer than those of contract cleaners (IDS 1983:1–9). Radical community projects such as Community Action and Public Service Action began to document privatization nationally and to provide advice for campaigners. In

1984 the magazine *Community Action* recorded support for cleaners from Inland Revenue workers in Llanishen, Wales, and Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge. It also described how the T&G had ensured that contract cleaners would be included in the general bargaining structures of a factory called Hickson and Welch Ltd in Castleford in the North of England (Anon in *Community Action* 1984:69).

Left-wing local authorities began to put their weight into researching labour conditions. The pioneer was the Greater London Council (GLC), led by Ken Livingstone, which set up an Industry and Employment Unit in 1983 to produce a participatory industrial strategy for London. I went to work for the Unit at the end of 1983 and in 1984, determined that the cleaners would not be forgotten, produced the committee paper on cleaning which brought them into the strategy. Rejecting the bland style customary in committee papers, I confused the Tories with quotes from John Ruskin and Harold Macmillan on the value of cleaners and the iniquities of mean-minded contractors. Irene Bruegel and other women at the GLC went on to develop an innovatory programme of reform in pay and benefits for the Council's own cleaners, including the "Basic Skills Project". This allowed the cleaners access to flexible education and training whilst at work. Anything from illiteracy to vocational needs could be catered for. Many were supporting families and keen to get out of the trap of low-paid work. A few decided they wanted to go on to study further. The time to think and discuss also led some women to speak up in union meetings (Paul 1986:38).

The Industry and Employment Unit was able to compensate for the lack of resources of low-paid London workers, including cleaners, in many small ways. The GLC librarian disseminated information about cleaning companies which was available to investors but was too expensive for cleaners to obtain. In 1985 I was able to commission a report into cleaning by a Law Centre worker, Jane Paul. *Where There's Muck There's Money* appeared in 1986, just before the GLC was abolished by central government. Nonetheless, it circulated widely in London, documenting the destructive implications of competitive tendering in hospitals, schools and even on the London Underground. It also showed how the contract system was an international phenomenon, citing two reports—"Government for Sale" (1977) and "Passing the Buck" (1983)—concerning contracting out in the US written by the former *Washington Post* journalist John D. Hanrahan and produced by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSME). Jane also drew on the work of the British medical sociologist Geoff Rayner and Gina Glover from the Wandsworth Photo Co-op who had gone to investigate the North American experience in 1983 and had been impressed by the fact that the public sector unions in the US had the legal right to

consultation and negotiation when services were contracted out to private firms, which was not the case in Britain. Significantly, they had observed that many contracts in the US were in the hands of Crothalls, the company with which the Barking cleaners had conflicted (Paul 1986:78–81).

The daunting fact that cleaning was a multi-national industry was beginning to dawn. One of the trade union research groups funded by the Industry and Employment Unit at the GLC began to develop international links with trade unions and cleaners groups. In 1987 an International Cleaners' Conference entitled "Invisible Workers" was held in London, bringing together cleaners from across Europe. It revealed how big multi-national companies were operating in Europe and how the labour force, too, was international. Among those attending were migrant workers from many lands, including North Africa, Latin America and Turkey. They voiced familiar complaints about the companies who employed them: of having to cover more rooms than was agreed upon; of inadequate, even unsafe, cleaning materials; of unhygienic conditions in hospitals; and, of course, of low pay (Gowen 1988:20–22). Though the trade unions were beginning to look towards their counterparts in Europe, well-organized skilled workers still looked glazed at the suggestion that cleaners might be included. The prospects for international links between workers at the bottom of the pile were not high on the agenda of an increasingly battered trade union movement.

Nonetheless, a memory of resistance survived with surprising tenacity. In the autumn of 1995, low-paid ancillary workers at Hillingdon Hospital in West London went on strike after their contract cleaning employers, Pall Mall, cut their already-low wages. Some of the strikers were the same women who had protested against privatization a decade before. The mainly South Asian workforce was driven by a deep sense of injustice and refused to stop picketing. They took their cases to the Industrial Tribunal and, eventually, after four years, won compensation.² During their long dispute they went around speaking in many countries, as well as in Britain, and close links developed between them and other workers, for by the mid-1990s the casualization of work had reached groups who had previously been part of the well-organized workforce. In 1995 the Hillingdon women marched alongside Liverpool dockers and their families striking against casualization, with the dockers donating money out of their own strike fund to the Hillingdon women. For Britain's cleaners, in the 1990s new solidarities came out of shared adversity. However, the dockers who were resisting the global grain were defeated and by the early twenty-first century casualization had spread steadily up the social hierarchy to reach professional workers. Originating in the fringes of the hidden economy, it had now come to characterize society as a whole.

A New Phase of Organizing?

The North American "Justice for Janitors" campaign and the 1998 Ken Loach film about it ("Bread and Roses") has recently stimulated new attempts to organize cleaners on the big Canary Wharf building in London's transformed docklands area. Researcher Hsiao-Hung Pai reported in *Feminist Review* (2004) that undocumented contract workers were being employed there without fixed holidays and sick pay entitlements. She was told by other workers that they had observed some undocumented migrant workers being dismissed without verbal or written warnings (Pai 2004:165–172). Working in combination with the East London Communities Organisation (TELCO), supporters have persuaded the cleaning company ISS, which is a leading multi-national firm, to recognize the union. In October 2004 Tania Branigan reported in *The Guardian* newspaper that the workers with legal contracts were earning £5.20 an hour and had 12 days of holiday time and 8 public holidays a year, though they had no sick pay or pensions. The T&G, however, considered £6.70 to be the minimum wage for workers in London and argued that they should receive sick pay, pensions and longer holidays. Mayor Ken Livingstone supported the union's case. Nevertheless, the T&G had to call off a demonstration scheduled to coincide with the European Social Forum in London after the owners of Canary Wharf had an injunction taken out on the grounds that there were no public access rights to the building (Branigan 2004:14). Despite this failing, Colin Cottell noted the focus on the financial companies at Canary Wharf has subsequently produced several successful wage increases and paid holidays, a result which indicates that companies are accepting some degree of responsibility for the contracted out cleaning jobs (Cottell 2005: 12). The danger, however, is as it always has been that these modest gains might be offset by companies reducing the staff and thus intensifying the work load. Thus, as Ken Loach has observed: "This will be a long war with many battles ... the buck stops with those who hand out the contracts" (*The Guardian* 2004:14).

Thirty years ago, the Cleaners' Action Group could never have foreseen that cleaners were going to become part of the global economy. Yet those huddles of women we leafleters approached in the London night were indicative of an exploitative and short-sighted system of employment which would be massively extended worldwide. In the 1980s and 1990s the Barking and Hillingdon women had tried to warn of the wider consequences of cheap labour and their voices went unheeded. By 2005, however, Helen Carter would report in *The Guardian* that 100,000 patients a year were getting hospital-acquired infections resulting in around 5000

deaths due, in part, to inadequate cleanliness. Unfortunately, this macabre reality has not led to a greater appreciation of skills and value of cleaners. It has, however, resulted in a technological innovation. The Airedale NHS Trust Hospitals in Yorkshire have introduced new, more efficient microfibre mops to fight the rise of the bacteriological “super bugs” (Carter 2004:10). Microfibre mops in a hi-tech age may seem a small advance, but change comes slowly in the cleaning labour process. Just how slowly would have been inconceivable to those of us who eagerly set up the Cleaners’ Action Group in 1970. In an odd way, our ignorance and inexperience gave us the courage to fight against a system, the power of which we did not comprehend. In our naivety and outrage we stumbled upon something that was far, far bigger than anyone at the time envisaged.

Endnotes

¹ I am grateful to Hilary Wainwright for information on the Oxford Cleaners’ Campaign.

² I am grateful to Francis Reynolds, former Hillingdon cleaner, for information on the dispute in the 1990s.

References

- Alexander S (1994) *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*. London: Virago
- Anon (1970a) Tory plan to crackdown on the scroungers. *Evening News* 8 October
- Anon (1970b) Britain: The worm is not for turning. *Newsweek* 23 March
- Anon (1971) Bernadette Devlin speaks to cleaners. *Night Cleaners’ Special Issue*, Shrew, December
- Anon (1972) Something to smile about ... as the union sweeps to “double” victory for contract cleaners. *The Whip: The Civil Service Union Journal* September
- Anon (1976a) How Elsie Bucket and Iris Moppit won 20p. *Morning Star* 4 October
- Anon (1976b) Changing their tune. *Spare Rib* 45
- Anon (1984) Cleaners issues. *Community Action* 67
- Branigan T (2004) Loach pitches in for low-paid cleaners. *The Guardian* 9 October
- Bruegel I (1971) Women marchers stress need for union action over equal pay. *Socialist Worker* 13 March
- Carter H (2004) Hospital mop and bucket become history. *The Guardian* 26 November
- Cottell C (2005) It’s time rich city firms cleaned up their act. *The Guardian* 7 May
- Dickinson M (ed) (1999) *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain 1945–9*. London: British Film Institute
- Finn L and Williams G (c 1976) *The Durham Experience: Bureaucrats and Women Cleaners*. London: A Solidarity Pamphlet
- Gowen S (1988) Invisible workers: An international cleaners’ conference. *Spare Rib* January
- Hanna V (1971) Equal pay: Industrial apartheid as firms evade the Act. *The Sunday Times* 21 November
- Hughes A (1970) Pay demands worry government. *The Daily Telegraph* 3 August
- IDS (1983) *Cleaners’ Pay*. Study 290, May. London: Incomes Data Services
- Jackson S (1970) Women in poverty. *The Times* 2 September

- Kelly J (1988) *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*. London: Verso
- McCrindle J and Rowbotham S (eds) (1979) *Dutiful Daughters: Women Talk about their Lives*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Pai H-H (2004) The invisibles—migrant cleaners at Canary Wharf. *Feminist Review* 78(1):164–174
- Paul J (1986) *Where There's Muck There's Money: A Report on Cleaning in London*. London: Industry and Employment Branch, Greater London Council
- Pearson P (1985) *Twilight Robbery: Trade Unions and Low Paid Workers*. London: Pluto Press
- Pym J (ed) (2000) *Time Out Film Guide*. London: Penguin Books
- Rowbotham S (1999) *A Century of Women*. London: Penguin Books
- Rowbotham S and Beynon H (2001) *Looking at Class: Film, Television and the Working Class*. London: Rivers Oram
- Rowbotham S, Segal L and Wainwright H (1979) *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*. London: Merlin Press
- The London to Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (1980) *In and Against the State*. London: Pluto Press
- Walker M (1972) Office cleaners face an uphill struggle. *The Guardian* 18 August

Sheila Rowbotham is Professor of Gender and Labour History in the Social Science Faculty, Manchester University. She helped to found the women's liberation movement in Britain and has written extensively on women's and labour history.