

# **The Matchgirls' Strike of 1888**

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Bachelor's Thesis  
2025



**Tomas Bata University in Zlín**  
Faculty of Humanities

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Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně

Fakulta humanitních studií

Ústav moderních jazyků a literatur

Akademický rok: 2024/2025

# ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

|                   |                                                   |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Jméno a příjmení: | Kateřina Hajnyšová                                |
| Osobní číslo:     | H22499                                            |
| Studijní program: | B0231P090005 Anglický jazyk pro manažerskou praxi |
| Forma studia:     | Prezenční                                         |
| Téma práce:       | Stávka sirkařek v roce 1888                       |

## Zásady pro vypracování

Shromáždění materiálů k tématu  
Studium odborné literatury  
Formulace cílů práce  
Analýza stávky sirkařek v roce 1888 v souladu s cíli práce  
Vyvození a formulace závěru práce

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**  
Jazyk zpracování: **Angličtina**

**Seznam doporučené literatury:**

Fraser, W. Hamish. *A History of British Trade Unionism, 1700-1998*. London: Macmillan Press, 1999.  
Holloway, Gerry. *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*. London: Routledge, 2005.  
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Steinbach, Susie L. *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2023.

Vedoucí bakalářské práce: **Mgr. Helena Kaňková, Ph.D.**  
Ústav moderních jazyků a literatur

Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **2. ledna 2025**  
Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **6. května 2025**

L.S.

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá historický význam stávky sirkařek z roku 1888 a zdůrazňuje její roli jako klíčového bodu obratu v dějinách britského dělnického hnutí a ženského aktivismu. Práce se zaměřuje na ekonomické a sociální podmínky, které ke stávce vedly, včetně vykořisťujících průmyslových praktik, špatných pracovních podmínek a genderové nerovnosti. Práce dále poskytuje vhled do příčin stávky, jejího průběhu a hlavních aktérek. V závěru se věnuje následkům stávky a zvažuje její dlouhodobý dopad na britské dělnické hnutí.

Klíčová slova: stávka sirkařek, sirkařky, odbory, socialismus, bílý fosfor, stávky, továrny.

## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor thesis explores the historical significance of the Matchgirls' Strike in 1888, emphasising its role as a turning point in British labour history and women's activism. It examines the economic and social conditions that led to the strike, including exploitative industrial practices, bad working conditions, and gender inequality. This thesis offers insights into the catalysts of the strike, the course of the strike and the leading roles involved. It further discusses the aftermath of the strike and considers the long-term effects on the British labour movement.

Keywords: Matchgirls' Strike, matchgirls, trade unions, socialism, white phosphorus, strikes, factories.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Mgr. Helena Kaňková, Ph.D., for her support, guidance, and encouragement throughout the process of writing this bachelor's thesis. Her patience, expertise, and constructive feedback were important to the successful completion of my work. I would also like to thank my family for their support, understanding, and belief in me during my university studies.

I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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## INTRODUCTION

This bachelor thesis explores the historical significance of the Matchgirls' Strike of 1888. The aim of this thesis is to show that the Matchgirls' Strike was not an isolated protest but rather an essential milestone in the evolution of British labour history and women's activism.

This thesis examines the circumstances and events that led to the strike, as well as the developments that followed and were influenced by its impact. The structure of this thesis moves from the bigger historical picture to the specific event of the strike and its long-term effects.

The first chapter provides the historical context, outlining the rise of industrial capitalism and the liberal economic policies that fostered the emergence of large, profit-driven companies like Bryant & May, where the Matchgirls' Strike took place. It also examines the early development of trade unions and the societal views on women's work. These factors are essential to understanding the environment in which the strike occurred. Chapter two shifts the focus to the match-making industry itself. It describes the production of Lucifer matches, the health hazards of white phosphorus, and the widespread exploitation through sweated labour. This chapter also explains why the East End of London was an ideal location for exploitative factory practices. Chapter three introduces Bryant & May and investigates the working conditions that led to repeated but unsuccessful labour protests. This chapter also considers how the company shaped its image to avoid attention from the government and public criticism, which makes the 1888 strike even more significant. Chapter four presents the Matchgirls' Strike in detail, including the events that sparked it, the leading figures who led it and the media coverage that brought it to wider attention. Finally, chapter five explores the aftermath of the strike. It connects the matchgirls' success to the wider mobilisation of workers in other strikes, the rise of New Unionism, increased female participation in trade unions, and the eventual regulation of sweated labour and a ban on white phosphorus.

Through this structure, the thesis aims to provide a thorough understanding of how the Matchgirls' Strike emerged, unfolded, and left a lasting legacy. This thesis shows the importance of community-led activism and the role of working-class women in shaping British labour history.

## 1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Matchgirls' Strike occurred during a period characterised by widespread mechanisation and technological progress. The Matchgirls' Strike occurred in the limited liability company Bryant & May.<sup>1</sup> Industrial capitalism fundamentally reshaped the labour process and worsened conditions for many workers.<sup>2</sup> This chapter provides an overview of the key principles behind limited liability companies, and it explains the impact of the contemporary government on the operations of businesses.

As a reaction to the exploitation of workers, trade unions began to emerge as a way for workers to defend their rights. Later unions were influenced by socialist ideas.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this chapter also describes how trade unions functioned before and during the Matchgirls' Strike and how socialist ideas entered these unions.

Industrialisation generated a high demand for labour, which led to a significant increase in the number of women entering the workforce.<sup>4</sup> Matchmaking factories employed many women.<sup>5</sup> This chapter explores women's employment opportunities and describes societal attitudes toward working females.

This chapter provides a general overview of the political, economic and social context in which the Matchgirls' Strike occurred.

### 1.1 Market Capitalism and the Rise of Monopolies

The prevailing ideology in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain was Liberalism, which was holding political dominance from the 1840s. Liberals strongly supported laissez-faire economics, characterised by limited government regulations. They also supported economic growth driven by industry, free trade, and democratic values. The liberal party consisted of supporters of free trade, middle-class industrialists and working-class activists.<sup>6</sup> These liberal economic principles and rapid industrialisation contributed to favourable circumstances for the emergence of limited liability companies. By the late 1850s, these

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Raw, *Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and Their Place in History* (London: Continuum, 2011), 41.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Pelz, "The Rise of the Working Classes: Trade Unions and Socialism, 1871–1914," in *A People's History of Modern Europe* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 84.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c2crfj.11>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840* (London: Routledge, 2005), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Elise Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910: The Dangers of White Phosphorus in Lucifer Match Production," *University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal* 3, no. 2 (April 2017): 4 <https://doi.org/10.32396/usrj.v3i2.231>.

<sup>6</sup> Susie L. Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2023), 43–44.

entities gradually gained legal recognition. The principle of limited liability companies was that shareholders were only responsible for the amount they have invested in the company, meaning that their own personal assets remained protected, even if the company declared bankruptcy. Therefore, investors were motivated to become shareholders. As a result, raising the capital of companies became facilitated. Companies secured more funding for expansion, increased production and job creation. As a result, economic growth accelerated.<sup>7</sup>

Mass economic expansion in Britain was also enabled by several other aspects that favoured powerful companies. For example, the stable banking system was crucial to Victorian industrialisation, as it enabled firms to access short-term loans that supported long-term capital projects.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the building of railways and urbanisation were also driving factors for economic growth. The expansion of businesses was also supported by the reintroduction of flat-rate income tax in 1842, which remained in place throughout the second half of the 19th century. Although it was adjusted over time, it provided a stable source of government revenue, which was not hindering industrial expansion. This income tax ensured that all income levels were taxed equally. Thus, this system enabled companies to allocate more money for expansion.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1860s, factories in England adopted mass production techniques, allowing the simultaneous manufacturing of large quantities of identical items. Mass production was a successful strategy in terms of reducing costs and keeping prices of products low. Small companies struggled to compete with large ones. This resulted in the development of imperfect competition, including monopolies.<sup>10</sup>

From 1873, the British economy entered a period of depression, which lasted for 20 years. Despite continued industrial expansion, Britain experienced a relative decline in economic growth compared to its foreign economic rivals, such as the United States and Germany. Profits declined, and living standards improved slowly. At the same time, Britain experienced a sharp increase in population, which contributed to changes in urbanisation and labour conditions. However, exports from the manufacturing sector remained central to Britain's economic strength. The most successful industries in 19th century Britain primarily included the textile companies or metals industry. Despite the high unemployment and frequent occurrence of many bankruptcies, some companies were able to maintain their

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<sup>7</sup> Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians*, 118-119.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 119-120.

<sup>10</sup> H. Stanley Jevons, "The Second Industrial Revolution," *The Economic Journal* 41, no. 161 (March 1931): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2224131>.

market position.<sup>11</sup> From 1886, Britain was predominantly governed by the Conservative Party, which also pursued a laissez-faire approach.<sup>12</sup>

As industrial capitalism transformed working conditions, often characterised by low wages and precarious employment, many workers found that individual effort was no longer enough to ensure security. In response, trade unions emerged as a collective defence to help workers resist worsening economic conditions.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2 Socialism and Trade Unions 1850s – 1880s

The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century marked a significant phase in the development of British trade unions. Industrialisation created more job opportunities, and there was a rise of membership in trade unions. The labour movement was predominantly male-dominated, and early trade unions were primarily composed of skilled male workers. In 1851, unions of skilled workers created an amalgamation known as The Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE). Many other unions for skilled workers emerged during the following years. The ASE served as a structural and ideological example for other unions. Membership in such an organisation required the completion of an apprenticeship.<sup>14</sup> Apprenticeship, which was regulated by these unions, was a form of technical training that allowed individuals to acquire the skills necessary to attain the status of a skilled worker. This status was mainly held by male workers as unions supported the belief that women's proper place was in the home rather than in the workforce. Hence, women primarily performed unskilled work.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, joining a union required paying membership fees.<sup>16</sup>

In 1868, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was founded and set up a Parliamentary Committee to promote workers' interests in Parliament.<sup>17</sup> Alongside it, the London Trades Council (LTC) functioned as an organisation that supported mainly skilled workers. Despite this, LTC agreed to support the Matchgirls' strike.<sup>18</sup>

Female membership in traditional trade unions was uncommon. In 1859, an organisation called the Society for the Promotion of the Employment of Women was established. This organisation aimed to widen employment opportunities, for example, by

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<sup>11</sup> Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians*, 120-123.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 64-65.

<sup>13</sup> Pelz, "The Rise of the Working Classes," 84.

<sup>14</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 156-157.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 57-58.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 38.

<sup>17</sup> Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians*, 57.

<sup>18</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 138-139.

providing apprenticeships. However, this organisation aimed only at middle-class and educated working-class women.<sup>19</sup>

Another effort to organise women came in 1874 when Emma Paterson and other feminist supporters and social activists established the Women's Protective and Provident League (WPPL). The organisation aimed to form new unions and promote membership in those already established. Another major goal was to unite unskilled women in the East End of London.<sup>20</sup> Paterson sought to create unions with women's participation only, as she argued that women were treated unequally in unions that included both men and women since they were excluded from having a say in union matters. In the same year, WPPL organised a strike, which resulted in the formation of small female unions among various occupations. Paterson also advocated for the appointment of female factory inspectors, but she opposed the push for protective labour laws due to economic concerns. Although she opposed long working hours, she argued that reducing them would harm women's earning power. Her position created divisions within the league. Even though WPPL managed to establish unions, the league was usually hesitant to engage in confrontational labour struggles. Its involvement in the Matchgirls' strike was minimal. Some activists from the league argued that the complete emancipation of women was not possible under capitalism.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1880s, the Liberals were losing strength due to foreign policy disputes and tensions over Ireland.<sup>22</sup> Socialism began to gain strength with the emergence of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and Fabian Society. Both organisations were established after 1880.<sup>23</sup> The members of the SDF were influenced by Marxist ideas that emphasised collective ownership. The SDF advocated for radical revolutionary change.<sup>24</sup> The Fabian Society often made alliances with radicals from the working class. However, members of Fabian society believed in gradual social change rather than revolution. They helped to shape the social democratic movement that promoted a state that acted based on the insights of specialists.<sup>25</sup>

The influence of socialism grew significantly after the wave of strikes in the 1880s when many socialists began actively participating in strikes against the exploitation of workers. The success of the strikes led to the emergence of New Unionism. Many socialists

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<sup>19</sup> Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, 43-45.

<sup>20</sup> W. Hamish Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism, 1700-1998* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), 51.

<sup>21</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 61-63.

<sup>22</sup> Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 72-73.

<sup>24</sup> Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, 107, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 41-42.

became leaders of newly emerged Unions.<sup>26</sup> More about New Unionism is discussed in Chapter 5.2.

### 1.3 The Perception of Factory-Working Women

As industrialisation progressed, the number of women and children in the factory workforce increased. The employment of children was not uncommon or illegal in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Children and women were frequently exposed to exploitation.<sup>27</sup> A turning point in child labour came in 1864 and 1870 with the introduction of the Factory Act and the Education Act. These reforms imposed stricter regulations on child labour. Since then, the number of children in the workforce significantly declined.<sup>28</sup>

Factory-working women were a relatively new phenomenon in society, which sometimes created tension between the patriarchal social order and the demands of capitalist employers. In an effort to appease both sides, the British government introduced legislation in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that limited the number of hours women could work. Additionally, these laws effectively prevented women from entering skilled professions. This had negative consequences for women, as it gave employers a legitimate reason to pay them low wages. Victorian society viewed women as the caretakers of the households, yet many of them were forced to work to support their families financially. This was another reason for keeping women's wages low. Since women were a cheaper labour force, employers often prioritised hiring them over men. Additionally, employers considered women as more obedient than male workers. This again resulted in the fact that unskilled male workers often felt threatened by women due to the fear of being replaced by female workers.<sup>29</sup> Women earned lower wages than men, even when performing the same work.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Victorian employers viewed women as a backup workforce, hired or dismissed based on demand.<sup>31</sup> As a result, women probably constantly faced the fear of being dismissed.

The patriarchal society reinforced traditional gender roles that encouraged female obedience. In poor areas such as the East End of London, where unemployment was high, many people, especially women, accepted poor working conditions out of necessity. The

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<sup>26</sup> Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, 27-29.

<sup>28</sup> Lowell J. Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike: Bryant and May in the 1890s," *Victorian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1982): 9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3827491>.

<sup>29</sup> Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, 28-30.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Ittmann, *Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 53.

<sup>31</sup> Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, 7.

loss of male employment put additional pressure on women.<sup>32</sup> Some large employers, including Bryant & May Company, often used threats and intimidation to maintain worker obedience.<sup>33</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British women were primarily employed in textile factories. Outside of factory work, women often worked as domestic servants. Despite unfair factory working conditions, factory work was quite popular among women. Factory work gave them a sense of independence and a feeling of belonging to a community.<sup>34</sup> Unskilled workers frequently sought employment in matchmaking factories, as this job required no specific skills. It was a viable option for many women.<sup>35</sup> The matchmaking industry is discussed further in the following chapter.

Gender inequality was a significant issue in Victorian England. A step towards improving women's working conditions came with the emergence of the WPPL (mentioned in the previous chapter). Further changes came after the Matchgirls' Strike.

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<sup>32</sup> W. J. Fishman, *East End 1888: Life in a London Borough Among the Laboring Poor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 116-117.

<sup>33</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 61.

<sup>34</sup> Lydia Murdoch. *Daily Life of Victorian Women* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014), chapter 6, Kindle.

<sup>35</sup> Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910," 3-4.

## 2 THE MATCH-MAKING INDUSTRY

In the 19th century, match-making factories in Britain primarily produced strike-anywhere matches, commonly known as “Lucifer matches”. These matches were a revolutionary product. Lucifer matches could be ignited by striking them against any solid surface. Therefore, they provided a simple and reliable means of creating fire. However, the downside of these revolutionary matches was the serious health risks posed by white phosphorus, a substance essential to the production of Lucifer matches.<sup>36</sup>

This chapter describes the match-making process of Lucifer matches, and it provides an understanding of the issues associated with white phosphorus. Additionally, the chapter highlights where most match-making factories were located and why these locations were advantageous for factory owners.

### 2.1 Lucifer Matches

Lucifer matches were invented by a French chemist in 1831. This invention was groundbreaking for Victorians because it facilitated lives in many ways – for example, matches enabled the fast production of flame to heat water, which simplified cooking processes. The fact that matches had become part of every home and an essential part of the production of industries also raised the importance of matches to the British economy.<sup>37</sup>

The rapid increase in match factories across Britain can be linked to the fact that setting them up required little funding, and the production process itself was relatively easy. Wood was first sliced into small, thin pieces and then dried using heat. These dried splits were placed in frames, each of which could contain thousands of matches. The next step involved submerging the splits in a phosphorus paste, a stage in a process referred to as dipping. After drying, the matches were removed, cut in size, and packed for distribution. Matches gained popularity due to their low cost. By 1850, most match-making factories had been modernised. New machinery accelerated several stages of the production process, which resulted in faster and higher output. However, the dipping process, where workers were exposed to the most dangerous contact with white phosphorus, was still done by hand. A successful invention that mechanised the manual dipping process occurred several years after the strike.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 91–92.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 89–92.

<sup>38</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 8–10.

White phosphorus, which was a necessary component of strike-everywhere matches, was highly toxic. In the mid-19th century, red phosphorus, which was less toxic and less dangerous than white phosphorus, was discovered. To ignite, safety matches had to be struck against a strip on the matchbox, which contained red phosphorus.<sup>39</sup> In the 1870s, some European countries banned white phosphorus due to the discovery of red phosphorus. However, match factories in England continued to produce lucifers mainly due to their widespread popularity and reputation for convenience and efficiency.<sup>40</sup>

## 2.2 Phosphorus Necrosis

White phosphorus was a threat due to its toxicity. Working with white phosphorus was associated with the disease called phosphorus necrosis of the jaw, abbreviated as “phossy jaw“. This disease was characterised by several unpleasant symptoms, including high temperature, nausea, facial inflammation, jaw deformity, toothache and loss of teeth. As the condition progressed, the infection irritated the gums, causing swelling, which eventually led to the formation of an abscess. Later, the cheek area began to decay visibly. Without proper treatment, the disease progressively damaged the facial tissue, which resulted in the death of the patient. The symptoms of the disease usually developed after three years of working in match factories.<sup>41</sup>

Treatment at the time primarily involved mouth disinfection and tooth removal. In the most severe cases, part of the jaw was surgically removed. Any form of treatment was extremely painful. This disease had a relatively high mortality rate. More recent studies suggest that antibiotics could have helped treat the condition. However, they were not yet available at the time. Unfortunately, early attempts to develop medications for phossy jaw were ineffective.<sup>42</sup>

Match factories were aware of phossy jaw as the disease had already been identified in 1838 in Vienna.<sup>43</sup> In the 1860s, research confirmed that the disease was caused by fumes released from white phosphorus.<sup>44</sup> Lack of proper ventilation and cramped conditions in

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<sup>39</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 10-11.

<sup>40</sup> Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910," 2-3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>42</sup> C. Jacobsen et al., "The Phosphorous Necrosis of the Jaws and What Can We Learn from the Past: A Comparison of 'Phossy' and 'Bisphossy' Jaw," *Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery* 18, no. 1 (2014): 34–36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10006-012-0376-z>.

<sup>43</sup> John Emsley, *The Shocking History of Phosphorus: A Biography of the Devil's Element* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 105.

<sup>44</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 9.

many factories increased the risk of developing phossy jaw. In the 1850s, the press began to write about the cases of phossy jaw. Experts introduced several safety measures that aimed at preventing the disease. For instance, it was recommended that the mixing and application of the flammable compound should be carried out in an isolated room. It was also suggested that the drying room should be operated during the night or that every room should be properly ventilated. There were multiple other recommendations, but many factories chose not to follow them. They justified their actions with excuses. Moreover, many factories had small and tight rooms, which hindered the implementation of these recommendations. In 1864 the British government introduced the Factory Acts Extension Bill. This legislation implemented strict measures. For example, these regulations included a rule stating that employees were only allowed to eat in designated areas, separate from production spaces. Following the implementation of these regulations, the number of reported cases of phossy jaw began to decline. The government probably assumed that factories were following the measures. Therefore, the government did not pay much attention to the match-making industry until the Matchgirls' Strike. White phosphorus was also dangerous due to its high flammability, which led to the high frequency of fires in match-making factories. Bryant and May suffered a fire in 1881.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.3 Sweated Labour

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sweated labour became one of the most persistent and exploitative forms of industrial employment. Sweated labour was typically defined by extremely low wages, unhealthy working environments, and irregular or inconsistent employment.<sup>46</sup>

The defining feature of sweated labour was that workers performed it in their own homes, often in tight spaces. Sweated labour, also referred to as piecework or outwork, often involved women and children. The British government introduced several regulations to improve working conditions. In an attempt to avoid these restrictions, some companies expanded the use of sweated labour. The piecework ensured that workers were usually paid based on the number of products that they made.<sup>47</sup> Besides matchbox making, sweated

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<sup>45</sup> Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910," 3-5.

<sup>46</sup> Sheila C. Blackburn, "No Necessary Connection with Homework": Gender and Sweated Labour, 1840–1909, *Social History* 22, no. 3 (1997): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071029708568009>.

<sup>47</sup> Murdoch. *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, chapter 6, Kindle.

labour was widely used in various trades such as garment manufacturing, sack and umbrella manufacturing, box production and the creation of artificial flowers.<sup>48</sup>

## 2.4 The Match-making Factories in the East End of London

The East End of London was affected by a massive wave of migrants, most of whom were poor and unskilled. There were many Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe who were escaping persecution.<sup>49</sup> Irish emigration, particularly during the Great Famine, contributed to population growth in England because whole households left Ireland in search of a better life.<sup>50</sup>

East London was flooded with poor individuals with little education or job training. These individuals were considered suitable for factory work that required no specialised skills, such as in the match-making factories.<sup>51</sup> The East End was home to several huge matchmaking factories: “R. Letchford and Co. at Three Colt Lane in Bethnal Green; Bell and Black’s at Bow Bridge in Stratford; and Bryant and May at Fairfield in Bow.”<sup>52</sup> Outside the East End, match-making factories were also located in cities such as Liverpool and Birmingham, which were important industrial centres.<sup>53</sup>

The dominant employers in the East End were match-making factories and the docks - matchmaking factories were major employers of unskilled women and docks of untrained men.<sup>54</sup> The East End was extremely overcrowded. Employment opportunities were limited, and many people struggled to find a job. East End was also known for high criminality and low wages. The fear of losing the job was probably one of the reasons employees initially did not pay much attention to the health hazards and harsh conditions in factories, including low wages and long working hours.<sup>55</sup> Their acceptance of this treatment was probably also influenced by the oppressive mindset imposed on women by the patriarchal society (discussed in the previous chapter).

The unfortunate situation in the East End was probably very convenient for match manufacturers. The area was ideal for large factories, including Bryant & May, where horrific working conditions eventually resulted in the Matchgirls’ strike.

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<sup>48</sup> Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, 26-27.

<sup>49</sup> Emsley, *The Shocking History of Phosphorus*, 87.

<sup>50</sup> Pauline Jackson, “Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration,” *International Migration Review* 18, no. 4 (1984): 1005–1006, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2546070>.

<sup>51</sup> Lehmann, “Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910,” 3.

<sup>52</sup> Satre, “After the Match Girls’ Strike,” 10.

<sup>53</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 92.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>55</sup> Lehmann, “Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910,” 3.

### 3 BRYANT AND MAY FACTORY

In the 1880s, the Bryant & May company held the position of the largest manufacturer of Lucifer matches.<sup>56</sup> This chapter begins by describing the history of the company and highlights the steps that the company took to achieve its near-monopoly position.

The previous chapter described the health risks commonly faced by workers in match-making factories. This chapter explores in greater detail the working conditions and exploitative practices that led the employees of Bryant and May to organise the strike. Additionally, this chapter examines whether the working conditions at Bryant and May attracted any attention from the government before the Matchgirls' Strike. Towards the end, the chapter also discusses the prior strikes, which took place before the major 1888 strike.

#### 3.1 The History of the Company

William Bryant and Francis May established a partnership in London in 1839. Their business was focused on everyday goods.<sup>57</sup> The official company under the name Bryant and May was founded in 1852.<sup>58</sup> They were Quakers, like many other 19<sup>th</sup>-century employers. Companies run by Quakers were often associated with fairness towards customers and respect for workers.<sup>59</sup>

Bryant and May entered the match trade in the 1850s. Initially, they imported Lucifer matches from Swedish manufacturers.<sup>60</sup> This decision quickly proved highly profitable as the sales of these matches increased rapidly – "...from 231,000 boxes in 1850 to 10.8 million boxes in 1855."<sup>61</sup> In 1860, Bryant and May sold more than 27 million boxes, which secured them a dominant position within the rapidly growing East London match industry. Bryant had purchased the British patent for the production of safety matches (matches made from red phosphorus). In 1861, the company began manufacturing these matches at its factory in the Fairfield Works in Bow. In 1863, the government's Commission on the Employment of Children in Industry visited the Fairfield factory. The inspection evaluated the factory very positively. However, shortly after this inspection, the company began to reduce imports and production of safety matches, and they started manufacturing Lucifer matches. This

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<sup>56</sup> Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910," 3.

<sup>57</sup> A. J. Arnold, "'Out of Light a Little Profit'? Returns to Capital at Bryant and May, 1884–1927," *Business History* 53, no. 4 (2011): 618, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2011.578129>.

<sup>58</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 10.

<sup>59</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 96.

<sup>60</sup> Arnold, "'Out of Light a Little Profit'?", 618.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

expansion and transformation of the business also led to tensions between the two founders. Francis May left the partnership in 1864.<sup>62</sup> The driving factor behind the decision to focus primarily on the production of Lucifer matches was their popularity among consumers. Bryant's sons Wilberforce Bryant and Frederick Bryant became the managers of the factory when their father died in 1874. The other two sons of William Bryant, Arthur and Theodore also became involved in the company. Frederick and Wilberforce were highly ambitious and fiercely driven by profit. They showed no hesitation in employing dishonest practices. By the end of the 1880s, the Bryant & May company held the position of the largest employer in the match industry. They employed approximately 5,000 people. In 1884, the company was turned into a limited company. Over the years, Bryant and May expanded by acquiring several smaller matchmaking businesses. The most significant was the acquisition of the company Bell and Black in 1885, which had been a significant competitor to Bryant and May. Eliminating the competition allowed the company to reduce employee wage costs, which led to high profits.<sup>63</sup>

The company owned factories at Fairfield Works and Bow Common. Through the acquisition of Bell and Black and other companies, it expanded its operations to Stratford, York, Manchester, and Glasgow.<sup>64</sup>

The firm also made several significant investments that improved its operations. These investments included advertising, which aimed at increasing customer interest. Additionally, the firm invested in installing new machinery, which increased production speed and output. The company also started actively engaging with the press. Gradually, Bryant and May also expanded its presence in international markets by exporting its products overseas. By the time of the Matchgirls' Strike, the firm had achieved a dominant position.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.2 Working Conditions

Most of the employees of Bryant and May were of Irish origin and were typically no older than 20.<sup>66</sup> Bryant and May employed numerous exploitative practices. One of Bryant and

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<sup>62</sup> Arnold, "Out of Light a Little Profit?," 618-619.

<sup>63</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 96-98.

<sup>64</sup> Arnold, "Out of Light a Little Profit?," 619-620.

<sup>65</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 98.

<sup>66</sup> Sherwood, Harriet. "Blue Plaque to Honour 1888 Strike by 1,400 East End Matchgirls." *The Guardian*, (February 17, 2022). <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/blue-plaque-honour-1888-strike-1-400-east-end/docview/2629379859/se-2>.

May's strategies to silence their workers was to offer medical care only in exchange for their silence about health issues and dangerous working conditions.<sup>67</sup>

The silent suffering was finally broken by the publication of an article called "White Slavery in London", which provided the most significant insight into working conditions in Bryant and May. It was written by social activist Annie Besant, who interviewed the workers. The article was published in 1888 on June 23, the same year when the strike occurred. In the article, Besant exposed a wide range of harsh working conditions at Bryant and May.<sup>68</sup> Reactions to the article and Annie Besant's influence on the strike are discussed in Chapter 4.

Each factory floor or department in Bryant and May was supervised by the male foreman, who had the authority to recruit, penalise and dismiss workers without requiring approval from company management.<sup>69</sup> One of the most significant issues in this factory was the imposition of fines. Besant's investigation revealed that Bryant and May imposed a large spectrum of fines. For example, workers were subjected to fines when they had unclean feet or when they produced faulty items. Sometimes, they even had to pay a fine for talking in the workplace. Some women informed Besant that they frequently suffered beatings at the hands of foremen. Her article also emphasised that in the summer, the working day started early in the morning, and fines were also imposed for being late. Employees worked 12 hours daily, standing on their feet the whole time. Long working days must have caused exhaustion among the workers. Additionally, Bryant and May's management failed to provide a designated area for employees to eat. These conditions significantly exacerbated the risk of developing phosphorus necrosis among the employees.<sup>70</sup> Thus, it is evident that the company did not follow the laws passed in 1864 (discussed in Chapter 2.2). Additionally, employees were forced to make financial contributions to a statue of William Ewart Gladstone, the Liberal Prime Minister. The company's leaders were outspoken admirers and supporters of the government in power at the time.<sup>71</sup>

Bryant and May also relied on sweated labour. The company expected that the homeworkers would be less visible to factory inspectors, which was perfect for avoiding the Factory Acts. Moreover, box-makers were protected from phosphorus necrosis as they did not work in the factory. Sweated workers who were making boxes were at the bottom of the

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<sup>67</sup> Seth Koven, *The Match Girl and the Heiress* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 85.

<sup>68</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Arnold, "'Out of Light a Little Profit?'," 619.

<sup>70</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 119-120.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 150.

matchmaking hierarchy. Numerous people from the East End took on badly paid box-making within their homes.<sup>72</sup> Pieceworkers who worked for Bryant and May even had to pay for glue that they were using for box making. One newspaper published in 1888 mentioned that Bryant and May made boxes in the factory in Fairfield. However, Annie Besant, in her article, disputed this by stating that the boxes were made by pieceworkers in their homes.<sup>73</sup>

In summary, the main issues at Bryant and May included exposure to white phosphorus, long working hours, and low wages, which were often further reduced by fines and exploitative sweated labour. It was these conditions, and above all the low wages, that prompted the matchgirls to go on strike.<sup>74</sup>

### 3.3 Government Interventions

As mentioned in Chapter 2.2, after the implementation of the Factory Acts Extension Bill in 1865, the government did not pay much attention to the matchmaking industry until 1888, when “White Slavery in London” was published. There were several factors hidden behind the reasons for the government's lack of intervention. One of the general reasons was probably the previously mentioned laissez-faire approach.

By the time of the strike, Bryant and May had almost a monopolistic position as a matchmaking company. England and its colonies, such as Australia and India, heavily relied on their supply.<sup>75</sup> Bryant and May held an important role in international trade as this company was a significant exporter of matches, which could have been another reason why the government did not intervene much in improving working conditions.<sup>76</sup>

Annie Besant's article also highlighted the exceptionally high dividends of Bryant and May company shareholders.<sup>77</sup> This probably maintained the popularity of this company among the shareholders, and it could have ensured that financial motivations were probably perceived as more important than ethical concerns.

Bryant and May were skilled at covering up harsh working conditions. In 1876, the Factory Commission officially recognised the company as an exemplary employer. The company did not admit any cases of phossy jaw to the factory inspectors.<sup>78</sup> However, it is also important to note that the number of factory inspectors was very limited, and

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<sup>72</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 95.

<sup>73</sup> Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910," 3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 102.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>77</sup> Emsley, *The Shocking History of Phosphorus*, 92.

<sup>78</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 100.

inspections were often only seen as a formality. Additionally, at the time, the British government did not regulate wages and, therefore, did not intervene in cases of sweated labour either.<sup>79</sup>

In 1887, *The Cassell's Saturday Journal* released a favourable review of the factory, which overlooked any issues with its labour practices. During the visit of *Cassell's* journalist, Wilberforce Bryant managed to mislead the journalist by hiding all signs of hazardous conditions. Bryant's ability to manipulate the press and his valuable political connections may have strongly influenced the company's positive reputation.<sup>80</sup>

### 3.4 Previous Strikes

The earliest labour unrest in the matchmaking industry occurred in 1871 when matchworkers walked out to demonstrate against the Match tax. This tax would have had a negative impact on the wages of match factory workers. Most of the protesters were employees of Bryant & May, as the company chose to offset the potential losses by deducting the tax directly from their workers' wages. The protest began on Bow Road and progressed to Trafalgar Square, where demonstrators faced violent police repression.<sup>81</sup> As the police began to push protesters into the River Thames, the demonstrators tried to defend themselves by throwing stones. Despite this, the protest was successful, and the tax was abolished. *The Times* reported on the police brutality. The abolition of the tax was also supported by Queen Victoria, who had earlier expressed her support in a letter to Prime Minister Gladstone.<sup>82</sup>

The workers themselves organised the protest without any significant support from factory owners. Bryant & May had close links to the Liberals and probably did not want to risk tensions with the government by speaking out against the tax.<sup>83</sup> This protest was a collective action that demonstrated workers' dissatisfaction within the match industry. Additionally, this incident further highlights the influence of contemporary politics on the operation of businesses.

Further collective resistance against poor conditions arose after 1880. Other strikes took place at Bryant and May in 1881, 1885, and 1886. Participants in these strikes were mainly protesting against low earnings and against the work with white phosphorus. Unfortunately,

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<sup>79</sup> Sheila Blackburn, *A Fair Day's Wage for a Fair Day's Work? Sweated Labour and the Origins of Minimum Wage Legislation in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 64-65.

<sup>80</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 100-102.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 144-145.

<sup>82</sup> Emsley, *The Shocking History of Phosphorus*, 86.

<sup>83</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 144-145.

these strikes were unsuccessful due to several factors, such as a lack of external backing or financial support.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 151.

## 4 THE MATCHGIRLS' STRIKE

Success in the fight against poor conditions finally came in 1888. This chapter begins by exploring the immediate factors that triggered the strike, then describes its development, and finally identifies those leading roles in the movement.

The press played an important role in raising the awareness of the strike. At the time, investigative journalists, especially those from *The Star*, documented the course of the strike. The contemporary newspapers first coined the term “matchgirls” to describe the women working in match factories.<sup>85</sup>

### 4.1 Catalysts of the Strike

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the growing dissatisfaction of Bryant & May's workers escalated significantly after 1880, when several strikes took place. However, these strikes failed to bring any crucial changes in working conditions.<sup>86</sup>

The breaking point came in 1888 after the publication of “White Slavery in London”. Yet, while this article exposed the harsh working conditions at Bryant & May and attracted public attention, it was not Annie Besant who directly prompted the matchgirls to strike. The leaders and initiators of the Matchgirls' strike were primarily the matchgirls themselves. Among them, several individuals played key roles in organising actions.<sup>87</sup> More about the leading roles of the strike is discussed in Chapter 4.4.

This article forced the management to take defensive action. Following the article's publication, Bryant & May threatened legal action against Besant for making false accusations about their labour practices. Despite this, Besant stood by her claims. She took further action and sent letters about the fired girls to the editors of other newspapers.<sup>88</sup>

During the strike, a journalist from *The Star* discovered that the main catalyst for the protest was pressure from foremen who forced employees to sign a statement discrediting the claims mentioned in the article. If they refused to sign the statement, they were dismissed.<sup>89</sup> This was also confirmed by Annie Besant a few years later in her autobiography, where she recounted that three workers from Bryant and May had told her

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<sup>85</sup> Koven, *The Match Girl and the Heiress*, 88.

<sup>86</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 151.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 193-195.

<sup>88</sup> Emsley, *The Shocking History of Phosphorus*, 93-94.

<sup>89</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 130.

that “they had been asked to sign a paper certifying that they were well treated and contented and that my statements were untrue; they refused.”<sup>90</sup>

## 4.2 The course of the Strike

The exact date when the strike began remains uncertain, as contemporary newspaper reports provide conflicting information. *The Star* indicated that the strike probably started on 2 July.<sup>91</sup> The number of workers who joined the protest was also uncertain. Contemporary newspapers reported varying figures, ranging between 1,100 and 1,500.<sup>92</sup> Annie Besant, in her autobiography, stated that approximately 1,400 workers took part in the strike.<sup>93</sup>

The strike began at the Victoria factory (part of the Fairfield Works’ factory) and later spread to other factories owned by Bryant and May. Matchgirls swiftly organised themselves and began holding local meetings. By July 6, they had begun seeking outside support. They approached Besant, who was initially reluctant, but later agreed to help. Between July 7 and July 18, the strike evolved into a powerful demonstration of collective action. *The Star* played a crucial role in observing and documenting turning points in the development of events.<sup>94</sup>

The strike received strong public support from the very beginning. A fund was established to provide financial assistance to the women involved, and a significant amount of money was raised shortly after its creation. The strike even received support from the TUC, which was perceived as a great surprise since the organisation was composed solely of men and had rarely intervened in actions against poor working conditions.<sup>95</sup>

On July 7, over 300 workers gathered at Mile End Waste (an open space in East End London used for public meetings) for a mass meeting that aimed at publicising the strike. On July 9, another meeting in the same place was organised. The number of participants increased from 300 to approximately 1,000. This rapid increase demonstrates how quickly the strike gained visibility. The matchgirls delivered multiple detailed speeches. They described the factory conditions and further explained their motivations for the strike. These meetings remained relatively peaceful, so the police did not intervene during these days.

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<sup>90</sup> Annie Wood Besant, *Annie Besant: An Autobiography* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), 335.

<sup>91</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 129-130.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>93</sup> Besant, *Annie Besant: An Autobiography*, 335.

<sup>94</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 133-137.

<sup>95</sup> Emsley, *The Shocking History of Phosphorus*, 93.

Reporters from *The Star* attended these meetings and subsequently published articles that provided valuable information about this cause.<sup>96</sup>

On July 11, the strike finally gained attention in Parliament. The issue of Bryant & May's labour practices was raised by Charles Bradlaugh, who was a Member of Parliament. The same day, a delegation of 56 women met with three members of parliament. These women confidently answered the questions regarding the poverty in the East End and harsh working conditions in factories. On July 13, two days later, the London Trades Council (LTC), which had previously avoided supporting unskilled workers, agreed to back the strike. On the same day, *The Star* revealed that Bryant & May's shareholders were exerting pressure on the company. By this point, they were probably concerned about the strike's potential negative outcome as negative publicity continued to grow. July 13 was marked as a breaking point as a strike committee of matchwomen was officially formed. This committee began to cooperate with LTC. Gradually, it was becoming harder for the company to ignore their demands. During the following days, the strike became more organised. Moreover, an important meeting was held, during which it was decided that the strike committee would go to the House of Commons to discuss a petition aimed at preventing the company from bringing in workers from Glasgow to replace the striking employees – a common tactic used to suppress strikes. The meeting was successful – the petition was signed.<sup>97</sup> The company faced mounting pressure from all sides – the press, LTC, Fabian Society, and the striking workers themselves. The strike was gradually approaching a successful outcome.<sup>98</sup>

### 4.3 The Result of the Strike

By mid-July, the strike was gradually coming to an end. On July 16, the company's management held a meeting with members of the LTC and a group of matchgirls, who came to speak on behalf of the strikers. After the negotiation, Bryant & May agreed to several demands, including the most significant ones: abolishing all fines and ensuring that all complaints would be handled directly by company management rather than by the foremen. The company also agreed to provide a separate space, away from the workplace, where employees could eat their meals without exposure to white phosphorus. Moreover, they promised to support employees' unionisation. Bryant & May also agreed to rehire the

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<sup>96</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 137.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 138-140.

<sup>98</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 11.

dismissed women.<sup>99</sup> The press enthusiastically published articles about the matchwomen's significant victory. On July 18, the workers returned to work.<sup>100</sup>

Shortly after the Matchgirls' strike, the Union of Women Matchworkers was founded. The union was one of the largest women's trade unions in Britain. It was established with the support of Annie Besant.<sup>101</sup> Other labour activists and organisations also played an important role in the formation of the union. The Matchgirls also sought support from the WPPL to expand their organising efforts. WPPL officially expressed solidarity during the strike by promoting a boycott of Bryant & May's products. Yet, it refrained from actively assisting in the strike's organisation or broader unionisation efforts.<sup>102</sup>

#### 4.4 The Leading Figures

Leadership in the strike was held by several women employed within the Bryant & May factory. Unfortunately, very little information about the strike leaders is available, as historical records provide limited biographical details. The leading roles were primarily held by Mary Driscoll, Sarah Chapman, and Eliza Martin. Mary Driscoll, of Irish descent, had already been labelled as a troublemaker by the Bryant & May company before the strike began. Therefore, it can be assumed that Bryant & May saw her as a potential threat to their authority. Probably, Mary ignited the desire for a strike among the matchgirls. Later research confirmed that she had a key role in the strike. She was also a member of the union committee. Her sister, Margaret Driscoll, was also heavily involved in the strike.<sup>103</sup> Mary was a hardworking woman with a strong will who was not easily manipulated. Despite an unhappy marriage and the loss of many of her children, she became a successful businesswoman a few years after the Matchgirls' Strike. Mary worked alongside Sarah Chapman in the same department in the Bryant & May factory. Sarah also played a role in organising the strike. After the strike, she represented the Union of Women Matchworkers at the Trades Union Congress.<sup>104</sup> It is reported that Eliza Martin was also among the key leaders of the strike. She was a member of the committee. She came from a working-class family in East London. She raised nine children.<sup>105</sup> These three names were among the key

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<sup>99</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 141.

<sup>100</sup> Emsley, *The Shocking History of Phosphorus*, 95-96.

<sup>101</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 142.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 193-195.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 204-207.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 210-211.

initiators and leaders of the Matchgirls' Strike; without their courage and determination, the strike might never have taken place.

As mentioned previously, Annie Besant was an essential figure in the strike. She was a middle-class journalist, political activist and Fabian socialist. She was born in the East End of London in 1847.<sup>106</sup> This background could have fostered a personal connection to the exploitation of workers in the East End's factories.

Annie Besant is associated with the strike due to her article "White Slavery in London", which primarily highlighted the very low wages of employers in Bryant and May. Her campaign was based more on a strong sense of fairness and reflected the moral foundation of her socialist convictions.<sup>107</sup> It became clear that she was not directly involved in initiating the strike. Initially, she was hesitant when matchgirls approached her for help when the strike progressed, as her first instinct was to seek the reinstatement of a dismissed worker through official channels rather than supporting strike action. When the strike began, Besant even wanted to distance herself from the matchgirls' actions. Yet, over time, when the strike gained momentum, her attitude shifted, and later, she played a crucial role in supporting the strike. She leveraged her political connections. It was she who persuaded Charles Bradlaugh to speak in Parliament.<sup>108</sup> During the strike, Annie also established a fund that financially supported the protest. She also actively wrote articles for newspapers and attended several meetings.<sup>109</sup> Annie was elected as the secretary of the newly formed Matchmakers' Union. Herbert Burrows, another socialist, was elected treasurer.<sup>110</sup>

Unfortunately, just five years after the Matchgirls' Strike, Annie Besant left the Matchgirls' Union and moved to India, where she continued her journalistic career. She became deeply involved in political and social activism, focusing on women's rights, education, and political involvement. She founded the Women's Indian Association and helped to establish numerous schools in India. Her activism led to multiple imprisonments. Yet, she continued to advocate for the Indian rights of Indian women. Annie Besant was a determined and intelligent woman whose activism significantly improved the lives of many

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<sup>106</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light* 105.

<sup>107</sup> Stéphane Guy, "From Industrial Change to Historical Inevitability: Annie Besant's Socialism and the Philosophies of History," *Intellectual History Review* 29, no. 3 (2018): 524.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2018.1526914>.

<sup>108</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 136-138.

<sup>109</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 11.

<sup>110</sup> Koven, *The Match Girl and the Heiress*, 90.

women by persistently advocating for their rights and social empowerment. Despite pressure from individuals, institutions, and the government, her resilience remained unbroken.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Sudha Hegde, “Much Ahead of Her Times: Annie Besant’s Life and Journalism as a Framework for Sustainable Women Empowerment Model,” *Journal of Humanities and Applied Social Sciences* 5, no. 5 (2023): 486–487, 484. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHASS-04-2023-0039>.

## 5 AFTERMATH OF THE STRIKE

The Matchgirls' Strike of 1888 did not simply end with improved conditions at Bryant & May. This strike served as a powerful catalyst for broader labour mobilisation.<sup>112</sup> This chapter begins by exploring the wave of industrial action among unskilled workers inspired by matchgirls' success.

The legacy of the Matchgirls was also reflected in the rise of New Unionism.<sup>113</sup> Raw (2011) refers to matchgirls as "mothers of modern trade unionism."<sup>114</sup> This chapter describes New Unionism and the increasing recognition of women as active participants in the labour movement. It also explores how the strike contributed to the regulatory reforms.

### 5.1 Following Strikes

The success of the matchgirls inspired many other unskilled workers to fight against bad working conditions. In 1889, the Great Dock Strike took place. This was one of the most significant labour actions in late Victorian Britain. By the 1880s, the docks were the largest employer of unskilled male labour in the East End of London.<sup>115</sup> Many dockers had family connections to the matchgirls or were their neighbours.<sup>116</sup> One notable example is one of the leaders of the Matchgirls' Strike, Mary Driscoll, who married a dock worker a few years after the strike.<sup>117</sup>

As with the Matchgirls' Strike, the press played a significant role in the documentation of the events. The strike lasted five weeks. It began on August 14 when workers in the South-West India Docks refused to continue working after being denied extra money they were owed. This served as the main catalyst for the strike that took place just two days later. On August 16, 2,500 people joined the strike. In the following days, participation grew significantly. On August 25, media reports stated that 130,000 people had taken part. Not only dock workers but also individuals from various other unskilled professions joined the strike. Unfortunately, the strikers suffered from severe hunger. Although a fund was established, it did not provide enough money to support such a large number of strikers. Victory finally came in September 1889 when the dock company finally

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<sup>112</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 171.

<sup>113</sup> Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, 38.

<sup>114</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 5.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 163-165.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 191.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 206.

accepted the majority of the demands of the dock workers. Another victory came with the Tailors' Strike, which led to the unification of sweated workers in the East End.<sup>118</sup>

Another significant action was the Beckton Gas Works Dispute in 1889. Will Thorne, who was a member of SDF, observed that the harsh treatment by management had nearly driven employees to strike action despite the absence of any formal union support. He began organised efforts with William Byford, which resulted in a mass meeting where a resolution to establish a union was passed. The very next day, the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers of Great Britain and Ireland was formed. Thorne was appointed as General Secretary. People were very interested, and reports said that East End was full of talk about the union, even before any official demands were made. News of the union's activities spread rapidly across newspapers and factories. The rapid growth of the movement was striking. The Matchgirls' strike probably made it easier for the gasworkers to get noticed by the press.<sup>119</sup>

Matchgirls organised another major strike in 1893 in a factory called Bell's. Unfortunately, this strike was unsuccessful. The company refused to negotiate with the union and fired strike leaders. The matchgirls were also seen as less disciplined than those in the Bryant & May strike. Some strikers even threw rocks and acted violently. Moreover, the strike failed to capture the attention of the press. Only a few radical newspapers briefly wrote about the strike, but the major ones ignored it. Herbert Burrows tried to support the strike by using usual tactics like moral appeals and boycott campaigns. Unfortunately, his tactics, like moral appeals to shareholders, were ineffective. The strike was suppressed by strict police interventions. All these factors led to the failure of the strikers.<sup>120</sup>

Although the founding of the Matchmakers' Union after the matchgirls' strike was seen as a major victory, it resulted in no significant further action in the fight against poor working conditions. The reasons probably stemmed from weak leadership or the limited organisational abilities of the women within the union.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 164-169.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 162-163.

<sup>120</sup> Koven, *The Match Girl and the Heiress*, 95-99.

<sup>121</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 26-27.

## 5.2 New Unionism

The rise of New Unionism shifted the labour movement's strategy as it moved beyond exclusive craft groups and aimed to unite a wider industrial workforce. These new unions became more assertive in defending workers' rights through collective action.<sup>122</sup>

The number of trade unions and their membership continued to grow. The Matchgirls' Strike is considered a milestone which started this movement. One of the key movements associated with New Unionism was the founding of the General Labourers' Union, which was established after the Great Dock Strike. Ben Tillett and Tom Mann became leaders of this union. These two socialists were also directly involved in leading the dock strike.<sup>123</sup>

Independent unions were formed or strengthened among groups such as miners, electrical operatives, and agricultural workers.<sup>124</sup> However, despite the early momentum, the movement soon faced major challenges. Many of the newly established unions lacked stable financial resources. Because these unions focused on short-term problems and worked in jobs with irregular or casual work, they found it hard to keep members once the first successes were over or when employers pushed back. Unlike the older unions, which mainly represented skilled workers and required high membership fees, the new unions kept fees low to attract unskilled labourers. Despite that, some unions collapsed entirely. However, many unions in important and expanding sectors like gas or chemicals survived, as these jobs offered more stability and required some skill.<sup>125</sup>

Many employers responded harshly to the rise of New Unionism. They tried to break the unions of unskilled workers by locking them out of work and working together to shut them down. Major companies like the South Metropolitan Gas Company and the Shipping Federation took action to suppress these unions, which caused a sharp decline in membership, particularly among dockworkers. In response, a new system of industrial relations emerged, promoting negotiation over militancy. However, legal decisions further weakened union power by restricting workers from gathering outside workplaces and allowing companies to sue unions for strike-related losses. Despite these setbacks, the ideas of New Unionism survived and helped start the growth of larger unions after 1909.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Pelz, "The Rise of the Working Classes", 86.

<sup>123</sup> Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, 38.

<sup>124</sup> Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism, 1700-1998*, 75-76.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 89-90.

<sup>126</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 169.

The rise of New Unionism in the late 1880s opened new opportunities for women's involvement in trade unionism. The Matchgirls' Strike successfully demonstrated that unskilled women could be successfully organised.<sup>127</sup> New women's trade unions emerged. A notable example is the Amalgamated Society of Laundresses in 1891.<sup>128</sup>

The WPPL sought to re-establish its role in organising women. It was renamed the Women's Trade Union and Provident League. With the rise of New Unionism, the organisation became notably more politically active than it had been in its earlier years. Shortly after the Matchgirls' Strike, two additional organisations were founded - the Women's Industrial Council (WIC) and the Women's Trade Union Association (WTUA). These two organisations later began to collaborate closely.<sup>129</sup> The WTUA aimed to empower women by forming self-reliant unions and supporting advocacy for laws focused on improving labour protections. WIC focused on researching women's working conditions. Though feminist in aim, the WIC's middle-class leadership and reliance on unpaid investigators often limited its connection to working-class women.<sup>130</sup> Over time, both organisations came to view women's lower status in the workforce because of widespread beliefs about the inadequacy of their work.<sup>131</sup>

The significant organisational development came in 1906 when WTUL formed the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW). It aimed to organise unskilled and low-paid women workers, especially those excluded from traditional unions. It prioritised accessibility through low fees and inclusivity regardless of skill level, actively supporting strikes and unionisation efforts across various sectors.<sup>132</sup>

New Unionism is linked to the formation of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), established in 1893. The ILP sought to bring together trade unionists and various strands of socialists to form an independent political force. In 1899, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) passed a resolution calling for a conference to secure more direct labour representation in Parliament. This initiative led to the formation of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), which was the direct predecessor of the Labour Party. The LRC brought together socialists and trade unions, forming a political organisation capable of representing labour interests on a national scale.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 171.

<sup>128</sup> Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, 98-99.

<sup>129</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 170.

<sup>130</sup> Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, 63-70.

<sup>131</sup> Raw, *Striking a Light*, 170.

<sup>132</sup> Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*, 70-72.

<sup>133</sup> Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, 302-308.

### 5.3 The Regulation of Sweated Labour

In the same year, when the Matchgirls' Strike took place, the Select Committee on the Sweating System (SCSS) was created. While the committee initially perceived sweating as a problem confined to East London, it quickly acknowledged that the issue was national in scope, affecting various trades across Britain.<sup>134</sup> However, SCSS had allowed low wages and harsh working conditions to continue without control.<sup>135</sup>

A major change came with the National Anti-Sweating League (NASL), which was established in 1906. This non-political body united activists from diverse political and religious backgrounds. Many of the members were also part of the WTUL. NASL played an important role in lobbying for legislative action.<sup>136</sup> The Trade Boards Act of 1909 marked a turning point by establishing legally enforceable minimum wages in highly exploited trades.<sup>137</sup>

### 5.4 Ban on White Phosphorus

Although the Matchgirls' Strike was successful, the persistent use of white phosphorus remained a major health hazard. The Matchgirls' Strike attracted widespread media attention to Bryant and May's practices. *The Star* quickly gained recognition as a strong voice for the working class. Journalists continued to follow the company's activities even a long time after the strike. Once again, the press played a central role in exposing the ongoing cover-ups of phosphorus necrosis.<sup>138</sup>

In the 1890s, Bryant & May finally transitioned to machine production, replacing hand-dipping - the process that had exposed workers most directly to white phosphorus.<sup>139</sup> After 1890, employment at Bryant & May was depicted as highly desirable. The company had the most modern technology. Many journalists at the time also praised its exemplary treatment of employees.<sup>140</sup> Bryant & May was often highlighted for encouraging its workers to join trade unions. Additionally, the company offered its employees the right to take holidays.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Blackburn, *A Fair Day's Wage for a Fair Day's Work?*, 11.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>138</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 15-16.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>141</sup> Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910," 6.

Some companies that placed the manufacturing on the roof successfully eliminated cases of phosphorus necrosis. Unfortunately, in older factories like Bryant & May, machines were placed on the lower floors. As a result, the fumes rose to the upper floors, exposing workers to harmful inhalation. Modern technologies may have helped reduce cases of phosphorus necrosis. For example, The Diamond Match Corporation could boast of this achievement.<sup>142</sup> The Diamond Match Company emerged as a major competitor to Bryant & May. It was an American firm which entered the British market through a strategic acquisition. The Diamond Match Corporation was technologically advanced. It adopted cutting-edge machinery that delivered exceptionally high levels of production.<sup>143</sup>

In 1892, *The Star* published an article featuring an interview with a victim of phosphorus necrosis. Gradually, *The Star* uncovered more cases of individuals affected by the disease, all of whom worked for Bryant & May. Interviewing the afflicted was probably challenging, as many of them avoided speaking out for fear of losing their jobs. The ongoing investigation by journalists gradually exposed a series of cover-ups by Bryant & May, designed to hide the cases of phosphorus necrosis among their workers. Probably the main reason why many affected workers avoided speaking to investigative journalists was because the company continued to pay these employees when they were sent home due to their illness. They feared that speaking out could lead to losing this financial support. Unfortunately, some infected workers were so disfigured that Bryant & May refused to take them back, claiming their appearance might disturb others. However, keeping those afflicted out of sight also served as a perfect cover-up in case of inspections. Bryant & May officially denied any cases of the phossy jaw among their workers.<sup>144</sup>

In the same year, the Home Office conducted an inspection at Bryant & May. The report stated that the illness was not spread widely. In 1892, *The Star* published a list of the company's shareholders, which included the names of several politicians, and even the Prime Minister.<sup>145</sup> Satre (1982) noted, "Conflicts of interest between government officials and industry can certainly inhibit the proper development and application of regulations, but in this case no clear connection can be drawn."<sup>146</sup>

The Home Office introduced new regulations in the following three years. The new regulations stated that all processes involving white phosphorus must be separated from the

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<sup>142</sup> Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910, 7.

<sup>143</sup> Emsley, *The Shocking History of Phosphorus*, 99-100.

<sup>144</sup> Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910, 6.

<sup>145</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 17-18.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 17.

rest of the factory operations and that match manufacturers would be obligated to provide workers with adequate hygiene facilities for hand cleansing. Additionally, these regulations mandated that any case of phossy jaw be immediately reported to the Chief Inspector of Factories. The Home Office announced that the match industry and Bryant & May would be closely monitored. In the following years, very few cases of illness were recorded. Therefore, Bryant & May maintained a good reputation until the events of 1898.<sup>147</sup>

In 1898, *The Star* began publishing articles about unreported cases of phossy jaw. The Home Office sent an inspector who uncovered 47 cases that had gone unreported over the past 20 years, several of which resulted in death. The victims of phossy jaw finally received some justice when Bryant & May were found guilty in court in 1898. The firm was prosecuted for three distinct breaches.<sup>148</sup> These included: “failure to report to the factory inspector, failure to report to the certifying physician, and failure to comply with the special factory rules from 1892 and 1895.”<sup>149</sup>

Cover-ups were also discovered in another match company, Moreland & Sons. Moreover, white phosphorus was used in other industries, such as pottery. Thus, the Home Office faced continued pressure to ban white phosphorus completely. The press and the Women's Trade Union League continued to push for the ban. Additionally, some politicians sought to support the ban. The Home Office convened several doctors who thoroughly examined the effects of white phosphorus. Based on their conclusions, additional regulations were passed. These regulations came into effect in 1899. The match-making industry was not the most critical sector for Great Britain, but it still held significant importance. It was important not only domestically but also relied on strong overseas demand. The British government was concerned that a strict ban on white phosphorus would negatively impact the British economy. A decline in match sales would lead to financial losses for matchmaking companies, resulting in widespread layoffs, which would further exacerbate the already severe poverty in East End London.<sup>150</sup>

In 1898, French scientists developed a safer alternative to white phosphorus for making strike-anywhere matches. The new compound, phosphorus sesquisulfide, was non-toxic. Additionally, it offered the advantage of reducing accidental fires, as this compound was significantly more stable than white phosphorus. Thus, this compound represented a

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<sup>147</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 19-20.

<sup>148</sup> Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910, 6-7.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>150</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 27-28.

revolution in the matchmaking industry. In 1902, Bryant & May announced that they had purchased the patent and would begin using this compound in production. The leaders of the company even announced that they would support the ban since this safer alternative to white phosphorus had been developed.<sup>151</sup>

Despite this groundbreaking invention and the fact that more cases of phossy jaw had been reported, the British government continued to avoid a complete ban on white phosphorus. In 1906, several European countries signed a treaty confirming the white phosphorus ban in match production. The British government did not join the agreement that year. One of the reasons for this decision was the argument that the ban would not benefit the British economy, as many other nations did not sign this agreement. The government at the time was composed of Liberals and Unionists. In 1908, Great Britain finally agreed to sign the treaty. The final downfall of white phosphorus came when the act came into effect in 1910, banning the manufacture, distribution, and importation of matches made with white phosphorus.<sup>152</sup> This fortunate turn of events should be primarily attributed to French scientists, as without their discovery, the ban might never have been implemented, and white phosphorus could have caused many more casualties.

The company invested in new technology and generated solid profits for several years. However, in 1924, easing import regulations opened the market to foreign competitors, which resulted in a decline in sales. Therefore, Bryant & May merged with other companies to form the British Match Corporation. This secured the company's place in the evolving industry, but with this decision, the company's independent journey came to an end.<sup>153</sup> Bryant & May was finally closed in 1979, ninety-one years after the Matchgirls' Strike.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Lehmann, "Match-Making in Britain from 1827 to 1910," 8.

<sup>152</sup> Satre, "After the Match Girls' Strike," 29-30.

<sup>153</sup> Arnold, "'Out of Light a Little Profit?'," 636.

<sup>154</sup> Emsley, *The Shocking History of Phosphorus*, 101.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis reveals that The Matchgirls' Strike of 1888 stands as a powerful symbol of the collective strength and resilience of working-class women in Victorian Britain. This thesis shows that the strike was far more than an isolated protest; it was a ground-breaking event in British labour history, and it served as a catalyst for broader social and political change. This thesis illustrates how the combination of exploitative industrial practices and restrictive gender norms created the conditions for one of the most significant early acts of organised female resistance.

By situating the strike within the larger framework of industrial capitalism, gender inequality, and emerging trade unionism, this study demonstrates the importance of historical context in understanding the motivations and consequences of the matchgirls' actions. Despite facing economic challenges, bad working conditions, and limited political power, the matchgirls challenged a powerful employer and captured public attention through strategic protest and media engagement. Their courage and determination inspired public figures and shifted public opinion, leading to meaningful workplace safety reforms in the Bryant & May.

This thesis showed that the legacy of the strike extended well beyond the gates of Bryant & May factory. It inspired workers in other factories or industries to take similar action. The Matchgirls' Strike also contributed to the growth of New Unionism, the increased involvement of women in trade unions, and the eventual banning of white phosphorus. It also helped reshape perceptions of female labour activism, proving that young, working-class women could be powerful agents of social change. The strike showed that poverty and gender did not stop people from standing up for themselves and making a difference. It also challenged common ideas about who can bring change in society.

In conclusion, this thesis examines the conditions that gave rise to the strike, describes the strike itself, and highlights its broader impact. The Matchgirls' Strike is an inspiring story that shows that even the most marginalised voices can spark powerful change. Matchgirls showed that when people work together, they can improve their lives and the lives of others.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

|      |                                             |
|------|---------------------------------------------|
| ASE  | The Amalgamated Society of Engineers        |
| ILP  | The Independent Labour Party                |
| LRC  | The Labour Representation Committee         |
| LTC  | The London Trades Council                   |
| NASL | The National Anti-Sweating League           |
| NFWW | The National Federation of Women Workers    |
| SCSS | The Select Committee on the Sweating System |
| SDF  | The Social Democratic Federation            |
| TUC  | Trades Union Congress                       |
| WIC  | The Women's Industrial Council              |
| WPPL | The Women's Protective and Provident League |
| WTUA | The Women's Trade Union Association         |
| WTUL | The Women's Trade Union League              |