

Seth Sagar's Memoirs: Part II

Seth Sagar (1875-1972)

Introduction

Seth Sagar left a manuscript of reminiscences of his political and industrial activities together with a brief chronology of his life. The first part of this memoir was published in *North West Labour History* No. 33, 2008-9, and covers his life up till the Great War.

He seems to have written these memoirs in 1957. Though the manuscript ends in 1928 he continued to be active in the Unemployed Workers' Movement, the Communist Party and increasingly in the Co-operative Movement. His activity in the Nelson Weavers' Association effectively ceased by 1930 when he became unemployed. There are probably two reasons why he did not go on to write about the 1930s. Sagar describes how in 1928 he opposed reaching agreement with employers over rewound weft. Committee members reported back having heard him speak on the issue at a Communist Party meeting at Chapel Street. He was suspended from the committee for 'publicly criticising the Nelson Weavers' Association' and was never as influential again within the union.

The second incident followed on from the Nelson Weavers' lockout of 1928. Industrial action having failed to rid the industry of the hated system of fining weavers the Amalgamation went to the courts. The case was against the firm of Ridehalgh based on a fine of Seth Sagar's son, Tom. This became the major legal case on fining. The Amalgamation won the original case in the Court of Chancery but lost it on appeal. Tom Sagar gave crucial evidence in the case and in particular was cross-examined by the employers' barrister over his father, described as a Communist representative on the Nelson Weavers' Committee. The strain of the court case took its toll on Tom Sagar and he effectively had a nervous breakdown. Tom later emigrated to Canada.¹

The second half of the memoir provides a unique insight into what it was like to be a lay trade union official in the 1920s during a time of industrial conflict.²

Alan Fowler

I arrived home July 1919 having been in the army three years. We got a month's returns and pay when demobilized. With having such an easy time since the War finished I did not feel like starting work immediately. There were times during the war when you could not draw money and when my pay book came through I had about £50 to draw. When I had settled down at home and had a few out(ing)s with Alice, my wife, in the country, I decided to go down to the mill, Ridehalgh,³ and see the manager about starting work, as we were all promised our work back when we finished. After a general talk with the manager he said I could start now and gave me 602 number. There were six looms, one Jacquard, but only 3 warps in and there was a weaver on them. I went and had a look at them. I came back and told the manager I would start on Monday.

I had not been there long when the tackler, Joe Buxton, wanted to put another warp in. I refused for the time being until I got my bearings. Finally, I got made up to five. The manager sent for me and said he would put me new har-

ness up in the Jacquard loom. I agreed if he would get for me a tenter. Now when I had got going the weavers were pressing me to be their representative again. At this juncture I did not feel like being put up to be on the Weavers' committee. So I got a collector's book and this entitled me to be a representative.⁴ I was now getting a paper. I think it was the SLP (Socialist Labour Party) Shop Stewards' paper. Willie Gallacher was prominent in Glasgow. In the meantime I had received a letter from JW Hudson. He was a conscientious objector and had had his windows broken when he was at Padiham. He was let out of prison and was working for Cadbury's and the letter was asking me if I (could) get him a house in Nelson as he had no wish to return to Padiham. I got him a house at Primrose Street and also work in the same mill as I.

Alfred Barker was active at this period and a meeting was called in the Nelson Weavers (Institute). There was a full house and it was agreed we form a shop committee in the mill. Nearly every mill in Nelson formed a shop committee. At our mill we elected a shop committee of 12 including women weavers. Any grievance or complaints about bad material, weft, unfair distribution of warps, the shop committee would then hold a meeting during the working hours. Our decisions were posted on the inside door entering the mill. The shop committees met every week inside the Nelson Weavers' lecture room. About 100 attended and each gave reports about activities inside the mill. I along with Harry Greenwood (and) Johnson was elected as their representative to sit on the local Textile Federation.⁵ We attended these meetings.

At about this time an appeal came through appealing for assistance and help financially for the famine in Russia. The shop committees for twenty-six weeks took up collections inside the mills; each week different members took up collections on pay day. The money was taken in(to) the office and sent to the Weavers' Association and each week a notice was placed on the notice board of the amount collected. While I am on about shop committees there is one instance I will refer to. It came as a report to the shop committee as one of the shop committee men and a weavers' representative was not paying his tenter the recognised wage of 22 shillings. He was only paying him 14 shillings. The committee took this matter up and decided he should pay and also back pay. They authorised me to report him to the Weavers' Union. I reported the matter and finally he paid up. Coming in the mill I had to pass his loom with a decision taken against him. He sees me and says he is of good mind to take me off by the kneecaps. He was much bigger than me. I told him two could play at that game. The same day after dinner he had to come to me and said he got sacked, and would I see the manager. I saw the manager and at this period the weft was in short supply with the result that the manager gave out each morning so many rows each to each weaver on this particular weave. It appears that this representative had gone again and asked for more weft. The manager sent to his looms to see whether he had woven up. The manager found a tin full under his looms. At this the manager took all his shuttles from his looms. This meant that he had finished. When I went to the manger he laughed and said he was one of

our bright socialists. I said he was like you a Tory but take them shuttles back to his looms. It was not long afterwards this representative left and went into business at Burnley.

There is so much to write about that it will take me a while to chronicle what had happened in Nelson from 1920 to 1956. It was now I was not attached to any particular party. I decided to join the SLP. I found CLC⁶ was being held in the Building Trades Club. Along with others I joined the SLP. There was J. Hudson, Herbert Throup, William Rennie ... and others. We started CLC classes and gave out *Plebs* book in town (with) outstanding items for discussion.⁷ Further *The Communist* had appeared and we were taking this. The SLP had a meeting and discussed our situation if they (the CLC) decided to expel us. We were now well acquainted with the revolution in Russia. The Second International having failed the workers, the Third International was formed. Lenin's name was now before the people of the world, but according to the capitalist press he died every weekend.

It was at this period I was asked by the comrades to write (to) London how we could form a Communist Party in Nelson. I am not certain of the date – somewhere about the beginning of 1920 or 1921. I wrote (to) the editor of *The Communist*. I got a letter from Arthur Inkpin, first secretary of the Communist Party. The reply and instructions I got from Arthur Inkpin was to write to Jim Crossley at Manchester. I received word from Jim informing me to book a room and he would come to Nelson. The meeting was held and Jack Hudson was present also Herbert Throup. About 14 were present. Herbert Throup was made the secretary of the Nelson Branch. Jack Hudson did not come with us. He went back to the ILP. Our meeting was held at Herbert Throup's House, Victoria Street. We continued to hold our meetings in houses, sometimes in 12 Terry Street⁸ (or) June Street and later we engaged the Twisters' Room. By 1922-23 we were having large meetings. Harry Webb was our speaker. He had been to Russia, sent by our Headquarters (in) London⁹ ... Harry was a powerful speaker. He stayed on many occasions at 12 Terry Street.

I was now attending District meetings at Manchester. Margaret Street, Ashton-under-Lyne: large rooms. Tremendous activity going on. I stayed on occasion with the Crossleys. What a grand family – musicians. Jim a real good comrade. I have in my possession a minute book dated 1924-28 and so much party work and trade union work – difficult to write about. We were now carrying on propaganda work. Harry Webb our main speaker was even going down to Market Place, Burnley. Fairly good meetings. Strutt was always present at these meetings. Difficult person to deal with.

We were now ordering four and five quires of the *Workers Weekly*. It was at Nelson (Weavers') half yearly meeting ... I was elected members' delegate to attend the Trades Union Congress in September 1923 held at Plymouth. The year before I was elected on to the Weavers' Committee. I informed headquarters, London, I was elected the delegate for the Nelson Weaver's Association to attend the Trades Union Congress. I received a letter from Harry Pollitt asking me to meet him outside the Congress Hall and he would be walking about in front of the Congress Hall before the Congress commenced and he would have under his arm the *Workers Weekly*. I had no difficulty in spotting Harry. The other delegate with me was

Jim Helm. At this Congress the Communist delegates were myself, Harry Pollitt, Helen Wilkinson, Helen Crawford, Jagger, Tommy Clark. The big shots at this Congress were Jimmy Thomas and Emmanuel Shinwell. The Communist delegates met inside the Congress Hall in a small room to discuss procedure and who was to speak. I was struck with Pollitt, (a) smart young man, efficient, in command of complete attention from all delegates. Meeting these delegates made a deep impression on me and gave me confidence in my work in the trade union movement. Every night in the centre of Plymouth, Harry Pollitt (and) Tommy Clark from Glasgow – a very able speaker – gave a review for Congress proceedings on that day. I took the chair for Helen Crawford down on the docks.

Coming back to Nelson I was now on the paper board of the *Power Loom*.¹⁰ I wrote the history of the trade unions 1666-1926. I got most of the material from Sidney and Beatrice Webb *The History of Trade Unionism*. Anyone looking through the back issues of *The Power Loom* (will see) I made many contributions from 1922 to 1925 signed SS.

I have mentioned that I got Jack Hudson work at the same mill as I worked. He approached me and asked me if I was going to put up for the Weavers' committee and he said he would not put up if I was going forward. This was in 1923. I said would not put up and allow his nomination to go forward on condition that he would raise the matter of the CLC classes to be financed by the Weavers' Association. This he promised but it was not carried out. Jack had many good points, but he was no leader in the workshop and never won the confidence of the weavers. It was in this situation I was pressed to put up for the Weavers. This meant that if I went forward and was elected there would be two committee men from the same mill. I was elected the same time I was attending CLC classes in the Building Trades Club on Stanley Street. It was here I met Arthur Riley. He was the tutor and later joined the Communist Party.

Now it was here I was elected delegate to attend the area meeting of the CLC. Mrs Taylor was the area secretary of the CLC. I attended these meetings at Preston and it was over a cup of tea and light refreshments that I raised the question with her as secretary to write to Nelson Weavers' Union secretary asking them to consider receiving Horrabin, secretary of the Plebs League to come down and discuss with the Nelson Weavers Committee how to promote classes in connection with the Central Labour College.

The letter was sent by Mrs Taylor to the Nelson Weavers, with me being on the Weavers' committee when the letter was read. The Weavers' committee agreed to Mrs Taylor's letter appealing to (them) to consider an approach in asking Mr. Horrabin to come and discuss with the committee the advisability and schemes that could be put by Mr Horrabin. Mr Horrabin came to Nelson. A frank discussion took place. The Weavers' committee agreed to the scheme put forth by Mr Horrabin in 1924-25. Since the Weavers' committee, CLC classes are now held and any member of the Weavers' Association can take a correspondence course in any subject and all is financed by the Weavers' Association.¹¹

There is so much to write about and what is important I have in my possession a minute book of the Nelson Communist Party group meetings held from November 25, 1924 – October 25, 1928. At this period we were meeting

in the 'Twisters' room, Every Street. Later we took rooms over the Co-op shop on Elizabeth Street. Group meeting March 24, 1924, April 1st, April 8th-29th in Twisters. The minutes agreed that we order extra quires of *Workers Weekly* for the coming week. Moved that 'Comrade Sagar be in charge of industrial sphere'. Group meeting 8 April 1924 - Moved that 'we held an aggregate meeting in Sunday April 20 at 10.30 am. To be held in the Twisters Room'. Moved that 'we advertise a public meeting, also the aggregate in the *Nelson Leader*'. Group meeting 29th April 1924 moved 'that we are not represented at Party Congress'. Moved that 'we order 8 quires of *The Workers Weekly* for the weekend for Literature Secretary and telegram for same'. Moved 'we meet at 2.30pm Sunday on Cargo Bridge for selling of *Workers Weekly* at workers' demonstration'.

From 1924 to 1927 tremendous activity by Nelson CP and the Nelson Weavers' Association. We got the *Workers Weekly* in the public library. Also at Co-operative Members Meeting a resolution was moved that the *Workers Weekly* and *Communist Review* be placed in the Operative Society Reading Room. This was moved by Harry Garner and seconded by S. Sagar. These continued and were replaced by the *Daily Worker* and *Labour Monthly* until the Co-op Reading Room closed down.

We were now carrying out public meetings and our main speakers then were Harry Welsh, ... - later Frank Bright and Arthur Riley. We had a general election then. It was 1924 ... Arthur Greenwood¹² spoke to a full house at Salem. We were denied here from going inside the meeting by Andrew (Smith) and Willie John (Throup) to sell the *Workers Weekly*. Abe Williamson was a live wire and very active member at this period. When he found we were denied going inside, he took 2 quires and waved them aside, went in before the meeting commenced and sold the lot.

Lenin died in 1924 and we held meetings and did much propaganda in reviewing what had happened in Russia under Lenin's leadership. At this period we were having tremendous discussions with the Weavers' collectors in the Rabbit Room. JS Helm and the members of the SDF were very bitter against the Bolsheviks; Harry Garner and myself - members of the Party - defending the Russian Revolution.

In 1925 Andrew Smith and Willie John Troup asked to come before the Weavers' committee for the purpose of discussing with the committee financial support for the *Nelson Gazette*.¹³ They came before us and asked to consider giving financial support. They said the *Gazette* was not paying its way, etc. After they had gone some members expressed themselves against giving support. I supported giving assistance and gave my reason. No decision was taken at this meeting.

The same night I, along with other members of the committee, went to the SDF club at Ann Street and over a few drinks discussed the appeal for financial support for the *Gazette*. When Andrew and WJ Throup came before the Weavers' committee again, they were told the committee was prepared to give financial support on condition we were allowed two representatives on the paper's board. They agreed to this. I was elected the representative by the Committee to sit on the *Gazette* paper board. We never got any communication for me to attend. ...

The committee's first financial payment to the *Gazette* was £200. (In 1931) I was elected at a members' meeting

along with Carey Hargreaves, secretary, James Spedding, Eddie Lee, CW Parrot, Jack Williams and Leonard Sula to investigate all financial commitments of payment made by the committee and to revise such commitments and to report same back to the members' meeting. I have in my possession a (report) that the Nelson Weavers' Association had paid substantial sums of money to the *Nelson Gazette*. I am convinced there would have been no miracle in Lyon Street had there been no support from the weavers. The Weavers' Union at that period was a great power in the Weavers' Amalgamation.¹⁴

1926 November. Went to Reedyford Hospital for appendix. It was early in 1927 that I came in contact with Harold Bradley who led an unofficial strike at Cornes. He fought the committee for official recognition and payment. I got Bradley to apply for a Collectors' Book. He became an official, got a collectors' book. I advised him to go into the calculation class.¹⁵ This he did and he joined the Communist Party and also got elected to the Weavers' Committee.

It was about this time I won a prize in calculation. Tremendous activity was being carried out by the Party. Frank Bright was constantly in Nelson holding meetings. April 25 1927. A party meeting was held at the Weavers (Institute) for the purpose of getting in touch with all sympathisers. 27 turned up to hear Comrade Riley outline Party policy. A good discussion followed. At the close of the meeting 5 members joined the local group. May Ainsworth, a member of the party, is now on the Weavers' Committee, the first woman communist to be elected on the Weavers' committee. She was on 12 months, left the district and went to Haworth. I have learnt ... that she is now in Australia and still an active member of the party.

At a group meeting held May 9th 1927 I moved that Comrade Bradley be nominated for a seat on the Weavers' committee. Bradley was elected and was now a member of the Party. From the Minute book, Bradley was the group chairman. June 14-21, 1927. We were busy with the Sunday work during this period. We were now facing industrial struggles fighting against cuts in wages. We were now having fraternal speakers in the district. We now took rooms over Elizabeth Street Co-op shop. Jim Rushton was now active in the district. It was at a social in Elizabeth Street Co-op that the party contacted Harry Kershaw. I am now in touch with Harold and Bessie Dickinson. They live in Blackburn - and another good comrade James. I remember on one occasion I was distributing leaflets at Hindley's who should be there but Rose Smith. This would be about 1925-26.

It was early in 1927 and a question was raised at the Amalgamation meetings at Belittle Street Memorial Hall, Manchester ... of acquiring a convalescent home. This was referred to the districts for discussion. There was a division of opinion on the question in the Nelson Weavers' committee. One or two of the committee, including Jack Hudson, took the view that the Lloyd George scheme provided for convalescent homes. I along with other members took the view we could not wait and should be the same as the miners. Have one of our own. At the next Amalgamation meeting where the (Nelson) Weavers were well represented - Mr Parker then secretary (of the Amalgamation) ... JW Ogden J. Bell (secretary, I think from Bolton¹⁶) and Jim Hindle (secretary from Burnley), were given power to seek a site or buildings suitable for a convalescent home and to report back at a further Amalgamation meeting. In

their report they had been sent to St. Anne's and reviewed buildings which could be made with alterations into a convalescent home. The money was out of all reason, so it was turned down. They were given further instructions and to report back. It was at the next Amalgamation meeting that they reported and recommended that we buy the old manor house and grounds which were empty at Poulton. This was agreed to.

It was the same year Mrs Sagar and I went to Blackpool. We went down to Poulton to look at the place and just inside the grounds a huge board displayed the fact that the place had been taken over by the Weavers' Amalgamation for a future convalescent home. I must mention another fact when I was at Blackpool. We went down after dinner to Fleetwood. There was a meeting being held outside a hotel, a fairly good crowd present. We went up to see and hear what the speaker was talking about. I learned he was Mr Eastwood, the Labour agent from Bolton. He was on holiday. He was saying awful things about Russia and making slanderous statements. He then went on to speak about the communists and said they were now barred and excluded from Labour Party Congress. I asked if he would allow me to say a few words. He allowed me to speak. I said I was on holiday and that I was on the Nelson Weavers' Executive Committee. I said the speaker had much to say about Russia and nothing good. I said to the people present that when the workers are in difficulties, locally, nationally or internationally, they get to know their friends and their enemies. I said the miners in 1926 were out on strike for 26 weeks. The Russian miners sent 1,000,000 roubles to the British miners. This proved that the Russians were real friends to the British miners. The audience responded with 'hear hear' and a good clap. I made reference to the speaker when he said no communists would be allowed to speak at a Labour Party Conference. I said I had been elected by the Nelson Weavers' Committee to attend the Labour Party Conference, which would be held in Blackpool September this year and I a communist shall be there. And as this Mr. Eastwood is the Labour Agent for Bolton I shall see him at Blackpool. I attended the Labour Party Conference which was held at Blackpool. I did not meet Eastwood but I met Harry Pollitt.

From 1928 to 1932 the Nelson Communist Party was very active in giving leads in all strikes and lockouts. We had in this period a very able communist speaker, Bill Brain and he came to Nelson at that period from Birmingham. He stayed at comrades' homes, including the Bradley's speaking in Chapel (Street). He could command an audience of 500-600 people. He was very smart in appearance. It was while he was at Nelson, Mrs Bury and (her) son, E. Bury, were very active. It was at the Atherton's house – along with Brain – that the Nelson Communist banner was made. On the banner a Lancashire lass weaver was displayed pricking a cop. On top of the banner the Nelson Communist Party. The Burys played a prominent part in the design and the making of the banner. In the hunger march to London the banner was taken and paraded along with other contingents to Hyde Park. It was at this period that we had a Communist Party stand made – it cost thirty-five shillings and was really a good one. The stand was left with Ida Yates who lived facing the Railway Hotel. The Conservative thugs were here and many of them at times tried to break up the meetings. Our meetings were so large and well supported that they got no support. We always

considered it was they who took our stand out of the Ida Yates' yard and destroyed it.

It was about this period that the Nelson Weavers' Committee had a lot of trouble with David Tattersall's mill, Grange Street. This firm was not in the Masters' Association. Hence he would always underpay. We had a live wire representative – Joe Hawkward – at this mill. Jim Helm was sent down on numerous occasions on Saturday mornings and informed the employer the mill would be stopped if he did not pay up. He always agreed and paid up.

It was about 1928 that Harvey Crowther, a weavers' representative, was sacked at Rigg's. The firm then was in Leeds Road facing the Prince of Wales Hotel. Yorkiss was manager. He was quite young. The Committee sent Jim Helm and myself to see the piece and get him reinstated. We were shown the piece which was silk and one or two faulty pieces ... but we argued it did not warrant a dismissal. Young Yorkess would not hearken to Crowther being reinstated. When we reported back the Committee agreed to having a joint meeting with the employers. We met the employers in Carr Road. The piece was there for anyone to look through it. We got no nearer with meeting the local employers and then demanded a county meeting. I, along with Jim Helm, secretary, attended this meeting. When Yorkess was called upon to speak he was out of depth and was helped out by another employer. We failed to get Harry Crowther reinstated but he paid him full compensation, when finally he got work at Walter Pollards.

Soon after this I moved a resolution that we open the Weavers' Institute on Sundays – reading room and billiards. This was seconded by Willie Gresty. The committee turned it down. The following week I asked the committee if they would allow me to go to the quarterly members meeting with the resolution. They gave me permission to move this and freedom to speak at the members meeting and this motion was on the agenda in my name. I moved the resolution and it was passed unanimously. There was some difficulty with the two caretakers as they would not allow the Sunday caretaker to use the bar. We set up a skeleton bar in the billiard room on a Sunday to get over the difficulty. As time went along the two caretakers agreed to occupy the bar. Why did members of the committee not agree to support my resolution? The only conclusion that WJ Gresty and myself came to was that some members of the committee were afraid to lose their seats if they supported the resolution from the religious section of our members.

About this time Lancashire cotton trade unions were receiving circulars appealing to them to consider the sending of delegates to the Soviet Union. I asked the committee and the secretary, J. Helm, if he had received the circular inviting us to send delegates to the Soviet Union. His reply was 'no'. I wrote to the district in Manchester informing them that we had not received a circular invitation and would they see that Nelson received one. I was informed that all textile unions had been sent a circular and that a further one had been sent to the Nelson Weavers. At our next committee meeting when correspondence had been read, I asked the secretary again if he had received the circular inviting us to consider sending a delegate to the Soviet Union. As I understood it all other cotton trade unions had received one. His reply was 'yes, I have put it in the waste paper bin'. It was immediately moved and seconded that the secretary be sacked. This only missed being carried by one vote. It was finally moved that the

secretary in the future bring all correspondence before the committee. This was carried with no opposition. It was not long after that the Amalgamation assistant secretary's position of the Weavers' Amalgamation became vacant and Jim Helm, secretary (of Nelson Weavers), made an application for the position and got it. When this became known to our committee at one of the committee meetings, Harry Benn got up and voiced a word of appreciation and said how sorry he was leaving us. Jim Helm said 'sit you down, it is all damn hypocrisy'. Jim Helm left the Nelson Weavers with no word of appreciation from the committee.

However, there were a group of members in 1928 of the FoSR¹⁷ of this period. We got a circular asking us to campaign for the sending of textile delegates to the Soviet Union. I have in my possession a draft which was sent out and I will quote from it:

Friends of Soviet Russia Nelson Branch
61 Belgrave Street,
Nelson

Delegate to the USSR

Dear Comrade

You will probably have heard from other sources that the Friends of the Soviet Union are organising a delegation of workers from English factories to be in Russia for the twelfth anniversary celebrations in November next. It is to be a workers' delegation elected by the workers and we are confident that money can be raised and a delegate or delegates be sent from Nelson. We are therefore meeting to extend the local committee of the FofSR into a fully representative body capable of carrying through this important task. To do this we require the co-operation of a number of class conscious workers and we are holding a preliminary meeting of such workers on Tuesday September 12 7.30 pm in the Co-op rooms over butcher shop, Elizabeth Street entrance back. At this meeting there will be a full discussion of all details of the proposed delegation and the necessary plans made for carrying out the campaign in Nelson. Will you come and help in this work of choosing and sending a Nelson worker to go and see Russia and bring back a truthful and reliable report. We count on your help.

E. Ellison, Secretary.

I was put in to make this draft. The meeting was held in the Co-op Rooms, Elizabeth Street. At this meeting it was decided that we make an appeal to all in Bradley Ward to assist in sending a cotton worker of Nelson to the 12th anniversary celebration in November. We delivered small envelopes with a duplicate statement asking for cash support. A fair amount of money was collected. Jim Rushton at Barnoldswick was making a similar appeal. At our final meeting in Elizabeth Street I was elected the delegate. In the meantime we had received a letter from Ida Yates and Frank Bright asking us to recommend a woman cotton worker, as this was important. They had made arrangements for a meeting in Burnley and other districts would be present. At a further meeting this request was discussed and we decided to recommend Mary Auden as our delegate at the conference to be held in Burnley. Mary Auden had participated in the campaign and in Bradley Ward. Along with Mary Auden I went to this conference and Mary Auden was elected. She got her passport and went to Russia. While in Russia she spoke to cotton workers inside the mills. She was presented by the workers with a lovely banner. Mary Auden gave a report to a crowded meeting of weavers. The banner was a gift from the Russian cotton workers to the Lancashire textile workers. The banner was large silk and plush, etc. Mary Auden gave a report to a crowded weavers' meeting displaying the banner. She went

into several cotton towns and gave a report on her visit to Russia. Now, a word about the banner. It was kept for a brief period in the party room, Elizabeth Street, Nelson. The comrades from Burnley asked for the loan of the banner. We let them have it. It was never returned. We continuously asked for its return.

In 1928 we had the strike at Mather's – the dismissal of John Husband who was vice president of the (Nelson) Weavers. John was dismissed they alleged for a faulty piece. We sent a deputation to the firm but failed to get John reinstated. We, of the Nelson Weavers' committee, called for a joint meeting with the employers. This was held at the Employers' Association, Carr Road. All the Weavers' committee attended this meeting and as many employers, including Mr. Mather, the employer. The piece was there for any one to go through. We failed to get John reinstated. After a full discussion at our next meeting, when all of us had seen the piece, we were unanimous that he did not warrant the sack. We decided to strike the firm and ask the Textile Federation for support. We stopped the firm and the employers replied with a (town) lock-out. The local Textile Trades Federation did not support the Nelson Weavers, neither did the Weavers' Amalgamation. This was one of the bitterest strikes, waged in Nelson for 7 weeks. All the other sections of the trade, overlookers, clothlookers, etc. were drawing unemployment and strike pay. They were not partners in the dispute. Some of us went to other districts speaking. It was Nelson's holiday and the strike was entering its seventh week. The committee was notified that if they were going away for a few days they had to give the secretary their address, so they could be called upon if wanted immediately. Mrs Sagar and I decided to have a few days at Blackpool. On Tuesday I got a letter from Carey Hargreaves, secretary, asking me to return immediately; so did the other members of the committee. On Thursday a meeting had been arranged to meet Sir Amos Nelson¹⁸ in the Town Hall. Of course, Sir Amos was nice and polite. To get a pleasant atmosphere he handed round a box of cigars. After talking around the six weeks' struggle, Sir Amos put forward an offer – that he was prepared to find John Husband, at his Valley mill, 6 looms. The meeting concluded with the committee agreeing to consider the proposal put forward by Sir Amos. We met in the Weavers' committee room. John Husband was present and after prolonged deliberation the committee accepted the offer. I might say that John was found work immediately and after, John said that the change was very satisfactory. The strike cost the Nelson Weavers £60,000. The strike brought some of the (small) weaving unions into financial difficulties. We had to loan the clothworkers about £3,000. This money I understand has been paid back. Many changes took place soon after this.

Harold Bradley won the position of assistant in the Weavers' office. He made application for the position of secretary at Darwen. I might say that when Harold Bradley got the position of assistant in the Weavers' office, he left the Communist Party. Soon after Jack Hudson got the assistantship in the office. He later left and got to be secretary of the Great Harwood Weavers' Union. He held the position for 12 months and then died.

When I attended the Trade Union congress held in Plymouth in 1923 I became friendly with a Mr. Taylor. He was a delegate from Bacup. Mr and Mrs Taylor came to Nelson to visit us and, of course, we often visited them.

Mr. Taylor was on the Bacup Weavers' committee. When the secretary of the Bacup Weavers died, Mr. Taylor then came over to let me know. He told me he had consulted the committee on a future secretary and he had mentioned me. He told me if I would accept the situation it would be passed by the committee. Before the secretary died Mr. Taylor had raised the question with me about the future secretary as he was in very poor health. In discussing with him I learned there was a poor membership and the income just covered the expenses of the secretary's wage and that the committee had very little money in hand. Although I had won a prize calculation, Bacup was more hard waste and shoddy¹⁹ and after a long talk now with Mrs Sagar, her points were that she did not care for the place, she was very content and happy. The heavy goods in Bacup were different to the class of goods in Nelson so I did not accept the offer. The position was advertised and J. Hudson and Zeph Hutchinson, both of them on the Nelson Weavers' committee, sent in an application. Both sat for the examination. The two were left in the final. Mr. Taylor sent for me to come to Bacup. When I arrived he said the committee had put him to see me. The question put to me by Mr. Taylor was 'which is the best man I would recommend of these two?' I said I had sat on the committee with these members and my reply was that any of the two would fulfil the position. I said that if I gave out that Mr. Hudson was the best man, it would probably leak out whom I had recommended and leave me in a bad situation with one of these colleagues. Zeph got the situation but I learnt later that he could not calculate and he had had long hours in lessons with Walter Greenwood, the assistant secretary of the Nelson Weavers before the nomination. If I had known this I would probably have altered my opinion.

It was soon after the Mather's strike that the Weavers' Committee received a large deputation of weavers from Parker's Mill, led by Willie McCulloch – 'bad work'. We decided to send two committee men to see and inspect those bad warps. I was one of the elected and went up on a Saturday morning. When we arrived at the office we were received fairly well by Mr. Parker. We had not been there very long when Rubin Burton arrived and he handed his pouch around. When we raised the question of the weavers' deputation we had had from the mill and the bad warps, we had come up to see those warps. Neither Parker nor Burton had allowed us to go into the mill. We reported back to the committee. The committee decided to have a joint inspection.²⁰ This was arranged and the committee elected me and Carey (Hargreaves), the secretary, to visit the mill. The employer was Jim Helliwell, secretary of the Masters' Association and Mayers Hartley from Hindley's. We met at the office of Parker Mill. We were given certain numbers of looms to inspect. I was with Mr. Helliwell and Carey was with Meyers Hartley. We found the situation awful. Some weaves had had nothing to draw. For instance one loom we went to a big bunch of ends were down. Young Helliwell said this weaver knew we were coming and made them come down purposely. I pulled the lap off for several yards and we found bunch after bunch of ends down. We found by the loom card that he had delivered no piece that week from this loom. We now came into contact with Carey and Meyers Hartley at a loom that they were inspecting and the manager of the mill was there too. The position of the warp in this loom was so bad that Meyers Harley took out his pipe cut across the warp, 'not fit to

weave'. All agreed the warps were unweaveable.

We reported back to our committee. Committee decided an average wage to be paid to these weavers while the average warp to be paid to those weavers where the warp was in. We met the employers and put our demands for compensation for the weavers at Parker Mill. We failed to agree. The Weavers' committee then demanded a county inspection. This was agreed upon. For the employers, one from Accrington and one, I think, from Darwen or Haslingden. Trade union representative was secretary for Padiham, David Russell and secretary for Bolton Weavers' Union. Before the county inspection took place all the weavers got a letter from the local employers' association informing us that Mr Helliwell would be present at the arranged county inspection. The Weavers' committee was well aware that no local representative either from the employers or the Weavers was allowed to be present at a county inspection. The Weavers' committee decided that under the circumstances I was to go to this when the county inspection took place. I went up to the mill on the arranged day. We all met in the office, including Mr. Helliwell and myself. So I raised the question of the local employers' secretary being present and from the Nelson Weavers' Association and said if Mr Helliwell went in the mill with the county inspection I should be allowed to go in. They took a decision that neither side should be allowed to go in. The inspection took place when the firm had ample time to prepare for a more favourable situation as some of the worst warps and been out, as our representatives informed the Weavers' committee. After the county inspection, the county employers and two trade union secretaries agreed that Parker the employer pay the weavers £250 as compensation for their loss of wage due to bad material. This sum was paid.

Soon after this joint inspection at Parker's Mill, the Weavers' committee received a further deputation on bad materials – poplins from Mather's Mill. From the report of these weavers their representative had called on all the weavers weaving their poplins in the weft place to raise the matter with the manager. When the representative made the complaint to the manager, he ordered the representative back to his work. The rest of the weavers followed. In the meantime the manager sent for two of the weavers to come to the office. The manager said he would do his best with these warps. The weavers said they could do nothing without their representative. It was after hearing this that the committee decided to make an application for a joint inspection. The committee took a serious view as the firm Mather's had refused to recognise our representative. The joint inspection was arranged. The delegation authorised by the committee (was) Carey (Hargreaves), S. Sagar and J. Gillett. Joe Gillett had just come on the committee. We arrived at this mill on a very cold morning. We were invited into a very cosy room, a good fire burning and Mr. Mather stood with his back to the fire while young Helliwell, and Mr. Meyers Hartley sat near the fire. The employers' representative Helliwell was the first to speak. He said he could not understand why we had not sent up a deputation to visit and see Mr. Mather. He felt sure a settlement could be reached and appealed to Carey to throw up this joint inspection and send a deputation and let bygones be bygones. Mr. Hartley appealed on similar lines to Carey. Carey said we should have to discuss this in another room. I got up and explained why the committee had not sent up

a deputation. The reason why our committee had arranged for this joint inspection was because the Manager, Mr Smith had refused and ignored (our representative) and sent him back to work refusing to recognise the representative. Mr. Mather said he knew nothing about this. I said you cannot blame our committee it was your responsibility. We then left the room to discuss throwing off the joint inspection. Carey was in favour of going back to the committee and to abandon the joint inspection. He asked Gillett if he was in favour. Carey then asked me. I said 'no' if we went back to the committee, and Carey knew what a serious view they took as this firm refused to recognise the representative, I would give him the best slating he had had for some time. Carey agreed we should continue with the joint inspection. Carey then informed them we had agreed to go forward with the joint inspection. A number of looms were given to us and we went into the mill. I was as usual with J. Helliwell and Carey and Gillett were with Meyers Hartley. There were forty looms with these poplins in. To cut a long story short it cost the Mather's firm £50 in compensation to be paid to those weavers. It was not long after this that this firm left Nelson and went to Hapton.

In 1929 I was elected to attend two Communist Party Congresses – February 1929 at Bermondsey Town Hall, London and at Leeds in November 1929. At the party congress held at Bermondsey after a long discussion, the Party's decision and the line of the Party was 'To Treat the Labour Party as the third capitalist party'. While I was in London I stayed at Edgware ... and occupied the room of Eric Burn who was at that time in Russia translating NK Krupskaya's memories of Lenin (Part 1 translated by Eric Burn in 1930 – Part II in 1932).

The same year I attended the Party Congress held in Leeds in the Workingmen's Hall on November 28, 29, 30, 1929. After a full day's discussion a decision was taken November 30th 1929 to launch a daily paper – *The Daily Worker* – and the first issue had to be out by January 1 1930. This decision was taken with the knowledge that we had neither premises nor printing machines for a daily paper. *The Daily Worker* appeared on January 1 1930 and today has the most modern building premises and the most modern printing machinery.

I have just come across some old scraps of notes and it appears that we had a Back to the Union campaign here in Nelson. This was supported by the local Textile Trades Federation, 1924. There was a meeting billed to be held in Market Street, the spare ground next to the Town Hall, Education Dept. The speakers were Tom Shaw, MP and Purcell of Manchester. Frank Williamson was the Chairman of the Textile Trades Federation. As Harry Webb was in Nelson, I approached Frank Williamson if he would allow Harry Webb to speak at the meeting along with Tom Shaw and Purcell. Harry was allowed and given permission to speak.

It was in 1929 when the Weavers' Amalgamation was sending out to the district unions proposals to consider a reduction on rewind weft. These proposals sent out for discussion to the district unions were vigorously opposed by Nelson; it was continuously turned down at the monthly Amalgamation meetings. Finally further proposals were again sent out to the districts. This time for the districts to send in suggestions and resolutions on rewind weft. When this circular was read out from the Amalgamation asking for suggestions or resolutions a new member had

been elected on the Nelson Weavers' committee who had been chairman of the Collectors' Executive Committee, C Chapman. When we came to discuss the question for suggestions on rewind weft, Dick Martin moved a resolution that the bobbins be of such length as to take two cops rewound on the bobbin. This was seconded by Chapman and supported by C. Parrott. This meant a (wage) reduction if carried. This was opposed strongly by Harold Bradley who was still a member of the Communist Party and myself and other members – when the vote was taken it was carried by one vote.

Bradley sat at the bottom of the table. He got hold of an empty cigarette packet and threw it to the top of the room and said: Ogden, Jim Bell and others will throw up their hands in glee when they get to know that they had now agreed to the principal of a reduction on rewind weft. The resolution was sent up to the Weavers' Amalgamation. We got our notification as usual to attend the monthly meeting and the agenda with our resolution and other resolutions from other districts. We received the agenda notification to attend the Weavers' Amalgamation meeting with the Nelson Resolution and one similar from Darwen 'that there had to be a special amount of weft to be rewound on the bobbin'. As I was one of the six delegates to attend the meeting, I asked our Chairman J. Spedding if I would be allowed to speak against the resolution proposed by the Nelson Weavers. Reply 'No!'

At the Amalgamation meeting when the Nelson resolution came up for discussion I asked Ogden, the Chairman, if he would allow me to speak against the Nelson resolution. Ogden replied it was a question for our Chairman. Spedding replied 'No!'. As Darwen had a similar resolution which would mean a reduction on rewind weft that the Amalgamation was supporting, I got up and spoke against Darwen. I said there was a resolution if passed which would mean a reduction in wages on already low standard of 35 shillings to £2. I pointed to the platform – Jim Bell – some of them receiving from £14 to £16 a week. If this resolution passed, the wages of those on the platform would go up while the weavers' wages would go down. I pointed out that the other sections – overlookers, loomers and twisters – were getting improvements. But that they had more oil in their can they do not recommend a reduction when they got improvement on their working conditions. I appealed to the meeting to turn it down. I was asked by one member of the executive on the platform 'How do I make out that if this resolution was passed their wages would go up?' My reply was 'you on the platform are doing the bosses' job and a reduction in wages on rewind weft while you on the executive committee with no reduction in wages will be able to buy cheaper cloth at the expense of the reduction in weavers' wages'. The resolutions from Darwen and Nelson were carried. The resolution agreed upon was reported in the press.

Bill Brain was in Nelson at this period and the Party decided to arrange a meeting at Chapel Street. I spoke at this meeting on this resolution passed at the Amalgamation meeting on rewind weft which would mean a reduction in weavers' wages. I made an appeal to the weavers of Lancashire to resist and fight against this resolution which would mean a reduction if allowed to operate. At this meeting two members of the Weavers' committee who had supported the resolution on rewind weft were present.²¹

Notes

- 1 A tape of an interview with Tom Sagar is available at Working Class Movement Library. For background information on fining see Alan Fowler, *Lancashire cotton Operatives & Work 1900-1950* (Ashgate) 2003 pp 169-174.
- 2 Further background on the period can be found in Alan and Lesley Fowler, *The History of the Nelson Weavers Association (Burnley, Nelson, Rossendale & District Textile Workers Union)* 1984 which also contains biographical information on some of the individuals Sagar mentions. Further material on Nelson in the 1920s can be found in Jill Liddington, *Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel* (Virago) 1984 and Jeffrey Hill, *Nelson Politics, Economy and Community* (Keele, UP) 1997.
- 3 Henry Ridehalgh & Son operated approximately 1,000 looms at the Edward Street Mills in Nelson. Henry the founder died in 1916 and his son James continued until 1936 as the principal member of the company. The mill closed 1931-37 later re-opening.
- 4 The first stage in becoming a trade union representative was often for members to take on a collector's book. The Weavers collected subscriptions from members' homes not at the workplace. Collectors received payment of a specified percentage from the amount collected.
- 5 The Nelson Federation was an organisation of trade unions within the town mirroring the industry-wide Northern Counties Textile Trades Federation founded in 1906.
- 6 Central Labour College.
- 7 Here Sagar may be referring to the magazine *Plebs*.
- 8 The Sagar's home.
- 9 The manuscript is unclear but it appears Harry Webb

- was sent to Nelson by the London HQ of the CPGB.
- 10 *The Power Loom*, founded in 1916, was a quarterly paper of the Nelson Weavers' Association and replaced the union's quarterly report to members.
- 11 Uniquely the Nelson Weavers' Association funded Esperanto classes for members run by Richard Bland, assistant secretary in Nelson.
- 12 Labour MP for Nelson & Colne 1922-1931.
- 13 The *Nelson Gazette* was a weekly newspaper published by the Nelson Labour Party between the 1920s and 1950s. Its main editor was Andrew Smith, later Sir Andrew Smith, Labour leader of the Lancashire County Council in the 1950s.
- 14 Sagar is referring to the miracle of a local labour party newspaper's apparent success.
- 15 A considerable part of a paid official's time was spent checking that the correct prices were paid by employers for the various types of weaves produced. These wage lists were extremely complicated. It was usual for a written mathematical examination to be administered to applicants for full-time posts. The results would be made known before an election of the official and usually the candidate who came top in the examination was appointed. Calculation classes were important in preparing candidates for full-time positions. Seth Sagar clearly recognised Harold Bradley's abilities and during the 1930s Harold Bradley went on to become secretary of the Darwen Weavers and became President of the Amalgamation in the 1950s.
- 16 Actually Oldham.
- 17 Friends of Soviet Russia.
- 18 Sir Amos Nelson was the most significant employer in Nelson during the inter-war years. A progressive employer who had invested in new technology he was clearly keen to bring an end to the dispute.
- 19 Nelson had a reputation for fine cloths produced from the best yarn with resultant high wages for weavers. In contrast shoddy was yarn produced from waste or recycled materials and was both harder to work and led to lower wages.
- 20 Part of the dispute procedure the weaving unions had with the employers' organisation. It was a tripartite system. Firstly the union meet with the employer and if the issue could not be resolved it would be referred to a joint employer/union meeting at town level. If this meeting could not resolve the matter it would be referred up to a meeting between the Amalgamated Weavers' Association and the Cotton Spinners' and Manufacturers' Association.
- 21 The incident which led to Sagar's suspension from the Nelson Weavers' committee.

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