

# WE NEED UNIONS



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## Lesson Summary

The London Matchgirls' Strike of 1888 forms the central case study in this session. The students are encouraged to think about how and why the young strikers' agency was played down in history, and the links which can be drawn between historic and contemporary protest methods.

## Learning Objectives

- To learn about the Matchgirls' strike, the conditions which provoked it, and the different types of protests, which went alongside it.
- To think about the ways that the Matchgirls' strike was presented as a victory for journalists, rather than a victory of organised workers, and reflect on why this might be.
- Ask why using different types of historical sources might lead people to have different interpretations of events.
- Discuss the ways that young people can make change in their communities and workplaces today.

### British Council Core Skills

- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Collaboration and Communication
- Citizenship

### Curriculum Links

Citizenship    English  
History        Media Studies  
Drama

### United Nations Sustainable Development Links

- No Poverty
- Gender Equality
- Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
- Responsible Consumption and Production



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## Activity One: The Matchgirls Strike

**Requires:** Slide 1-5

**Preparation:** Ensure that enough copies of the worksheet are printed for the whole group, and read through the preparatory notes below.

Using the notes and slides, outline the events of the London Matchgirls Strike of 1888 and the role of Annie Besant.

- Split the students into small groups of 3-4.
- Ask them to read the extract contained in source 1.
- As they read, put the questions from slide 5 on the board.
- Ask them discuss these in the small groups and then draw the whole group back together to compare answers.

## Activity One Notes.

### Slide 2

- Annie Besant was a journalist, writer, and activist born to a middle-class Irish family living in London. At a socialist meeting in 1888, she heard that the Bryant & May company, which produced matches, had made huge profits from their London factory from working their employees very hard and paying them very little.
- She decided to go and speak with some of the young women who worked there, and produced an article based on their experiences. She discovered that the use of phosphorous in the factory had led many workers to develop a condition known as 'phossy jaw'- a form of bone cancer that caused facial deformities and even death. As well as this health hazard, she found out that the young women who worked at the factory worked very long shifts for very low wages, and were regularly fined by their managers (an illegal practice). She published the story in The Link, a cheap newspaper which she had set up the previous year to publicise the poor living and working conditions of people in Britain.



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## Slide 3

- Bryant & May were furious about the article, and threatened to sue Annie Besant for libel. They attempted to make their employees sign a statement that she had lied about the conditions they worked in, and when a group of girls refused to sign, their ringleaders were sacked. In response, 1400 employees, mainly girls and young women, went out on strike. They soon sent a delegation of 100 women to Annie Besant's office to ask for her support and advice, as well as a group to parliament to draw attention to their conditions, and met with leading figures of other trade unions to win further allies. The striking workers formed a Matchgirls' Union, and other London-based trade unions gave them funds to help the striking women while they were out of work.

## Slide 4

- Some very prominent journalists, authors, trade union leaders, heads of charities, and politicians offered their support to the matchgirls and condemned the conditions in the factory, making the strike a famous protest across the country.
- After three weeks, Bryant & May agreed to rehire the sacked women, end the system of fines, and bring in separate eating areas so that food would not be contaminated with phosphorous. The strike became very well-known, with many other activists claiming it had inspired them. Below is an extract from Annie Besant's article about the matchgirls

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## Activity Two: The Women who went on Strike

**Requires:** Sources 2 and 3, Slides 6 and 7

**Preparation:** Ensure that enough copies of the worksheet are printed.

Ask the students to read the contemporary descriptions of the striking women contained in source 2, before posing the questions on slide 7 to the group.

- Once they have answered, ask two students to read aloud the quotes from the newspapers.
- Show the group the questions on slide 7, and ask them to discuss these.
- Discuss the ways that people publicise attempts to make change in their communities and workplaces today. Are newspapers still effective? What methods of communication do they think would be most productive today?

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## Activity Three: Script Writing and Performance

**Requires:** Pens and Paper

**No Preparation** Required in Advance

- Ask students to get into groups of 3-4.
- Encourage them to imagine that they are young people working at the Bryant & May factory in 1888, and that they are preparing to launch a strike after their colleague has been unfairly sacked. However, in this version of reality, the internet and social media exists.
- They should work together to produce a script for a viral video about the factory and the strike, before performing it for the rest of the group. Each person in the group should try to contribute to the performance. Get them to think about the following aspects of their script before writing it.
  - What facts do they think the public should know about their working conditions and their lives?
  - Why are they intending to go on strike?
  - What can different groups of people do to help them?
  - How can they make their video emotive while still being factual?
- Is there a way they can use a hashtag to bring attention to their strike? What should it be?

## Partner School Activities

If you are working with a partner school you could:

- Exchange copies of the scripts for their viral videos about the Matchgirls Strike.



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## Source 1

### *Extracts from Annie Besant's article 'White Slavery in London.'*

"The hour for commencing work is 6.30 in summer and 8 in winter; work concludes at 6 p.m. Half-an-hour is allowed for breakfast and an hour for dinner. This long day of work is performed by young girls, who have to stand the whole of the time. A typical case is that of a girl of 16, a piece-worker; she earns 4s. a week, and lives with a sister, employed by the same firm, who "earns good money, as much as 8s. or 9s. per week". Out of the earnings 2s. is paid for the rent of one room; the child lives on only bread-and-butter and tea, alike for breakfast and dinner, but related with dancing eyes that once a month she went to a meal where "you get coffee, and bread and butter, and jam, and marmalade, and lots of it"; now and then she goes to the Paragon [a music hall], someone "stands treat, you know", and that appeared to be the solitary bit of colour in her life.

The splendid salary of 4s. is subject to deductions in the shape of fines; if the feet are dirty, or the ground under the bench is left untidy, a fine of 3d. is inflicted; for putting "burnts" - matches that have caught fire during the work - on the bench 1s. has been forfeited, and one unhappy girl was once fined 2s. 6d for some unknown crime. If a girl leaves four or five matches on her bench when she goes for a fresh "frame" she is fined 3d., and in some departments a fine of 3d. is inflicted for talking. If a girl is late she is shut out for "half the day", that is for the morning six hours, and 5d. is deducted out of her day's 8d. One girl was fined 1s. for letting the web twist round a machine in the endeavour to save her fingers from being cut, and was sharply told to take care of the machine, "never mind your fingers". Another, who carried out the instructions and lost a finger thereby, was left unsupported while she was helpless. The wage covers the duty of submitting to an occasional blow from a foreman; one, who appears to be a gentleman of variable temper, "clouts" them "when he is mad"...

Such is a bald account of one form of white slavery as it exists in London... Born in slums, driven to work while still children, undersized because underfed, oppressed because helpless, flung aside as soon as worked out, who cares if they die or go on the streets, provided only that the Bryant and May shareholders get their 23 per cent...

Let us strive to touch their consciences, i.e. their pockets, and let us at least avoid being "partakers of their sins", by abstaining from using their commodities."

**NB. Abstaining from using their commodities means to not buy or use the things they make – in this case matches.**

<http://www.mernick.org.uk/thhol/thelink.html>



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## Source 2

The following sources are taken from Louise Raw's *Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and their Place in Labour History*. Dr Raw is a historian who challenges the idea that the victory of the matchgirls' strike was due to Annie Besant's leadership.

### (From an anonymously-written book entitled *Toilers in London*)

Few people could fail to be touched by the way in which the girls were determined to stand together at all costs. 'I can pawn this for you', 'I'll lend you that', in every direction girls might be seen plotting how they could help one another on until Bryant and May gave them back their pennies [the money from the fines].

### (From an interview with Samuel Webber, who was 14 years old when the strike occurred)

When [the matchgirls] went on strike, they walked from Bow Road all the way up [to] Trafalgar Square, and on the way ... they used to sing ...

We'll hang Old Bryant on the sour apple tree

We'll hang Old Bryant on the sour apple tree

We'll hang Old Bryant on the sour apple tree, as we go marching on.

Glory glory hallelujah . . .

And so on. And while they were walking along the people in the offices overhead would throw coppers down and then there'd be a scramble among the girls to get these coppers up... When they picked up all the coppers on they'd go, singing and marching."

Coppers - coins



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## Source 3

### Extracts from the press after the conclusion of the strike

*William Stead, Pall Mall Gazette (July, 1888) (William Stead owned several newspapers which often printed stories of the poverty and hardships faced by working-class people, women, and migrants in Britain. He died aboard the Titanic in 1912)*

The story is full of hope for the future, illustrating as it does the immense power that lies in mere publicity. It was the publication of the simple story of the grievances of the match girls in an obscure little halfpenny weekly paper called *The Link* which did the work.

*The Times (June, 1888)*

The pity is that the matchgirls have not been suffered to take their own course but have been egged on to strike by irresponsible advisers. No effort has been spared by those pests of the modern industrialized world to bring this quarrel to a head.

<https://spartacus-educational.com/TUmatchgirls.htm>

- Why might William Stead have claimed that this was a victory for the press rather than the victory of the strikers?
- The Times was a middle-class conservative newspaper at the time of the strike. Who are they blaming for the strike? Why do you think this is?
- Why might historians have claimed that Annie Besant led the strikes, rather than the young women themselves?



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Written and compiled by Dr Daniel Edmonds: [danieledmonds237@gmail.com](mailto:danieledmonds237@gmail.com)

