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SPECIAL FEATURE

Racialized Obsolescence: Multinational Corporations, Labor Conflict, and the Closure of the Imperial Typewriter Company in Britain, 1974–1975

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Abstract

This article will explore one of the most significant strikes by migrant workers in Britain during the 1970s and the subsequent company closure the year after their victory. In May 1974, a predominantly South Asian workforce at the Imperial Typewriter Company in Leicester went on strike over unequal bonus payments and discrimination in promotion. The shop stewards committee and Transport & General Workers Union branch refused their support and the workforce split partly on racial lines. The strikers stayed on strike for almost 14 weeks until they emerged victorious. Though it appears as a central reference point in histories of migrant experience in Britain, the strike and closure has garnered little systematic, primary research. This article will fill this gap through the use of published sources and extensive unused archival deposits. During the strike part of the largely South Asian workforce sought to break with the racialized division of the workforce between different groups, skill levels, and work-types. Almost immediately after the strike ended in victory the company announced its intention to close down the vast majority of its British production. In Hull 1400 jobs were lost and in Leicester over 1600 were to go. This article shows that whilst the strike might have been the start of a politically, culturally, and intellectually significant period of significant protagonism by Britain's first-generation black and racialized working class, it also marked the beginning of the end of an industrial model dependent on the hyper-exploitation and racialized subordination of their labor. The closure was framed by contemporaries and subsequent historical accounts as a dispute marked more by the end of empire than worker obsolescence. As an article in the *Guardian* on the closure of the plants was put in January 1975, it was 'The day that Imperial&s empire fell'. Yet it might be more accurate to understand the strike as an early premonition of the globalisation of manufacturing production which was to emerge strongly in the 1980s and 1990s. The experience of Imperial Typewriters highlights the central importance of racialized labour hierarchies and immigrant counter-militancy in post-war Britain. The Imperial Typewriter Company provides a case study of how worker resistance to labour intensive modes of capital accumulation, in relatively low capital intensive industries, during a global crisis of capitalist profitability, was followed by the decision of a multinational corporation to immediately transfer its production overseas. The closure of Imperial Typewriters therefore offers a means to reconceptualize how we

understand the 1970s as a period of interlocking crises, as well as the major shift of power from labour to multinational capital which emerged in its wake. The findings of this article indicate that British workers were significantly disempowered before the electoral victory of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Recentering labor conflict in the history of technological obsolescence can offer alternative perspectives on why the British left and trade unions were unable to resist the rise of neoliberalism.

Keywords: Labor; Racism; Capitalism; Trade Unions; Immigration

Introduction

The strike at the Leicester factory of the Imperial Typewriter Company was one of the most significant in late twentieth century Britain. In May 1974, part of the predominantly South Asian workforce walked out over unequal bonus payments and discrimination in promotion. The white shop stewards committee and the local union branch refused to support the strikers and the workforce partially split on racial lines. The strikers returned to work claiming victory after almost fourteen weeks. It was a Pyrrhic victory: Imperial's US multinational owner, Litton Industries, announced the closure of its two British plants six months later. In the industrial West Midlands city of Leicester there was little sign of collective resistance. Imperial's white and predominantly female workforce in the East Yorkshire port city of Hull responded by occupying their factory, campaigning for nationalization, and creating a workers' self-managed cooperative. Imperial management justified their decision by the "pending obsolescence" of an uncompetitive product and outmoded technology. Litton then transferred their British production to other sites in its multinational corporation. Historians of Britain's early industrial labor movement noted how workers' resistance to exploitation also spurred employers to restructure production and to introduce a higher organic composition of capital in the production process.¹ This article argues that the tendency of capitalists to substitute capital for labor when machinery becomes more productive is not sufficient to explain the closure of the last British typewriter brand. The term "deindustrialization" is also unable to fully explain a process where a foreign multinational shifted production from its factories in one country to others.² At Imperial, the information technologies that would soon make the typewriter industry obsolete figured surprisingly little during the anticlosure struggle. Labor conflict structured by the international migration of workers and capital was more important in how the social and political dynamics of obsolescence were experienced during the mid-1970s.

The findings of this article indicate that British workers were significantly disempowered before the electoral victory of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Recentering labor conflict in the history of technological obsolescence can offer alternative perspectives on why the British Left and trade unions were unable to resist neoliberalism. The absence of solidarity and active hostility of white male-dominated unions to women workers and workers of color has been a recurrent element in labor history that has yet to be fully explored. The strike and anticlosure campaign at Imperial has generated little previous research, despite being a central to histories of antiracism in Britain. Comparing for the first time the experiences at Imperial's Leicester plant to

its Hull sister facility can offer new perspectives on the racialization of workers' resistance to technological obsolescence. The Leicester workforce was constituted predominantly from the recent arrival of South Asian British citizens from three Commonwealth countries in East Africa: Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Imperial's Hull factory recruited instead among women from the surrounding area and possessed a confident local trade union and an established culture of labor politics. Contrasting the response by workers in both factories offers an ideal case study on how racialization conditioned their experiences. The existing historiography has viewed the Leicester plant solely through the 1974 strike or has avoided accounting for the company's subsequent closure.³ This article uses novel archival material from national and local archives to incorporate the perspectives of the workers, company, trade unions, state, and politicians to rethink a number of assumptions. The collapse of Imperial symbolized the end of the "Trente Glorieuses" (1945–1975), a faltering momentum for the West European labor movement, and the unwillingness of the British elite to maintain the country's postwar model of nation-centric political economy in the face of a global crisis of capitalism and an international restructuring of industrial production. The Imperial shut down also implies that racial divisions within the British working class weakened its associational and structural power and contributed to the victory of a major employer offensive.

The shutdown of Imperial should encourage historians to take class struggle more seriously as a catalyst of globalization. The closure suggests that the interaction between workers, managers, trade unions, and the state within and outside the workplace is best understood within its global context. Workers' resistance to "planned obsolescence" had to confront divisions in the workforce influenced by wider ideologies of racial inequality. New technologies can threaten the livelihoods of organized sections of the workforce, as well as their gender, class, and racial identities.⁴ The strategies employed by different groups of workers to resist the obsolescence of the British typewriter industry also appears to correlate in interesting and unexpected ways with how their labor was structured by local labor processes, national political economy, and global value chains. The workers' campaign to save Imperial was undermined most clearly by the preference of some white workers to defend their relative privileges at the expense of their racialized colleagues. However, anticlosure campaigns—even those based on interracial solidarity—face formidable odds against centralized and mobile capital intent on restructuring production.⁵ As this article shows, the multinational owner of Imperial had entered the British typewriter industry to take advantage of cheaper and weaker labor power, tax incentives, and "transfer pricing"—an accounting practice where one division in a company charges another division for goods and services provided, often leading to tax savings for corporations.⁶ At the first sign of resistance to their global production apparatus, Imperial's multinational owner retooled production across its overseas affiliates rather than invest in new technologies in Britain.

Imperial, Multinational Corporations, and the Warfare State

This paper seeks to understand Imperial's downfall as part of a transition between two phases of capitalist globalization. The strikes and occupations at Imperial

Typewriters between 1974 and 1975 might not have occurred at all without the global projection of US military power during the Cold War.⁷ The Imperial Typewriter Company was saved from almost certain bankruptcy in 1966 when it was bought by the US conglomerate Litton Industries. From a small electron tube manufacturer based in California's Bay Area, Imperial's new owner Charles "Tex" Thornton had built a multibillion-dollar defense contractor whose voracious acquisitions of undervalued assets had placed it amongst the largest fifty firms in the United States.⁸ Thornton joined the US military just before Pearl Harbor in 1941 on the advice of future secretary of defense and banker, Robert Lovett. Thornton swiftly rose through the ranks at the department of war and supervised the Air Force systems management program and statistical control division that military planners relied on to wage global war. He used his contacts in the military to launch a career in private business, along with a group of his fellow officers: first in the Ford Motor Company (developing its first organizational manual, and planning and financial controls systems), then Hughes Aircraft (another defense contractor, which profited from contracts with the Air Force during the Korean War), and finally Litton Industries.⁹ Roy Ash—Thornton's number two at Litton—would rise to become director of the office of management and budget under President Nixon between February 1973 and February 1975. Litton developed its distinctive "systems engineering" approach and advanced technology after winning lucrative state military contracts.¹⁰ Litton's major break came with a contract to provide the guidance systems of seven hundred Lockheed F-104 Starfighter jets ordered by the Federal Republic of Germany for its reconstituted Luftwaffe. Much like Litton's entry into the typewriter industry through the targeted acquisition of European competitors, Thornton bought two German companies to help produce the planes. After eighty-three crashed and forty-two pilots were killed, the Litton-produced jet was given the nickname "the Widowmaker."¹¹ The career trajectory of Thornton and Ash was emblematic of the cooperation between private enterprise and the US military that had bolstered Western Capitalism's temporary economic stability in the 1950s and 1960s.¹²

The confidence of the financial sector in the Litton's highly-valued shares catalyzed further agglomeration into new areas. The company's mercurial rise to global status was made possible by state subsidization of research and development, focused in particular on military and defense technologies, rather than management performance and product innovation. By the 1960s, around 95 percent of all research and development in the United States was paid for by the federal government; 90 percent of this funding was given to facilities within the country.¹³ Litton was a major beneficiary of this state munificence. By the late 1960s, the conglomerate manufactured as many as nine thousand separate products, from refrigerated display cases to ships, typewriters, and space probes.¹⁴ A single top management team oversaw 135 major divisions, 220 manufacturing facilities, and 1,342 wholly owned marketing, sales, and service centers, based in twenty-seven different countries. Litton ran "War on Poverty" programs in the United States, offered management consultancy and public relations support to the Greek military junta (including economically developing the Western Peloponnesus and Crete), and conducted a thirty-nine-month survey of Algeria's sovereign natural resources.¹⁵ By 1973, the company had emerged as one of the world's leading industrial conglomerates, employing just under 106,000 workers

and reporting £1.016BN in global sales.¹⁶ Litton's purchase of Imperial indicates the importance of foreign "warfare states" in providing the conditions for sustaining and undermining "national" industries outside the confines of military-linked production.¹⁷

The typewriter industry was only a fraction of Litton's portfolio. As well as its British, German, Dutch, and Japanese typewriter subsidiaries, Litton had been experimenting with outsourcing production to low labor cost countries such as the "Estado Novo" dictatorship in Portugal. Stephen Hymer pioneered the economic theory of the multinational enterprise in the same period. Hymer showed how these companies were beginning to outsource many of its activities to subcontractors it could direct at arms-length.¹⁸ The increasing salience of trade deficits for national states in the 1960s reflected the qualitatively distinct challenge posed by the corporate planning of a new type of multinational producer. If Imperial's output was added to the Italian Olivetti conglomerate in Glasgow and the American company Smith-Corona (SCM) in West Bromwich, Britain imported £15M of typewriters and exported £10M in 1972 (£6M to the United States and £1M to Canada), in addition to imports of £4.5M typewriter parts and exports of £2M.¹⁹ Hymer argued that multinationals like Litton could plan production to achieve both favorable production costs, product differentiation, and most significantly, transaction costs. The capacity of multinationals to artificially plan transaction costs would be one of the major points of contention for the Imperial workers' anticlosure campaign. As Hymer argued in 1968, the two-way advantage of combined horizontal and vertical integration allowed multinational firms to be "better institutions than international markets for stimulating business, transmitting information and fixing prices."²⁰ Investment in foreign processing industry, Hymer continued, would be likely to happen even if the firm did not possess any form of advantage. Increased profits from a "more perfect collusion" could be sufficient to spur horizontal international integration through multinational enterprises.

Hymers's highly original thesis exposed how corporations like Litton could take advantage of internalized efficiency savings in transaction costs, dividing and ruling labor power using global production chains, colluding in oligopolistic interactions with other producers (including the segregation of markets), and increasing its bargaining power vis-à-vis states. The benefits of foreign direct investment for such corporations—unlike simple portfolio investment—resided in the benefits of increased control, reduced competition, and the ability to better exploit existing advantages.²¹ Multinational cross-investment in rivals' home markets was a problem conventional economics either ignored or understood through interest rate variations. Hymer argued that Western capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s was experiencing an interpenetration of capitals that would impel the majority of major firms to operate as multinationals.²² The monopolistic competition between major typewriting firms in Britain like IBM, Olivetti, Olympia, and SCM—and the projection of their rivalry on a world scale through overseas expansion—had been a prerequisite for Litton's purchase of Imperial Typewriters and set the stage for its eventual closure.

The takeover of the last British typewriter brand by a US multinational was of political as well as economic significance. The buy-out was part of a series of major industrial mergers promoted by the Labour government between 1964 and 1970 in a brief period of optimism in the British state's modernizing potential.

The Wilson administration was particularly keen to welcome inward investment by the United States and other allied countries to improve Britain's balance of payments deficit.²³ The risks of future victimization by multinational capital were secondary concerns compared to Britain's comparatively low postwar growth, the challenge to the international standing of sterling (realized in the 1967 devaluation of sterling), and the demotion in 1959 of industrial employment to second place relative to services and agriculture for the first time since 1821.²⁴ Litton had its own motivations for entering the British market. The company was tempted by Britain's cheaper and skilled-labor power, weak currency, exit of rival Olympia from manual typewriters, and favorable tax incentives.²⁵ The purchase of Imperial also offered the conglomerate additional overseas production capacity and access to British markets. It also provided the means to integrated European and US production after its disastrous 1966 purchase of the faulty electric portable typewriter technology of the German company, Willy Feiler, and the more successful purchase in 1969 of a major potential German competitor who had been set to sell its new electric models on the US market, Triumph-Adler.²⁶

Litton claimed that its US company Royal Typewriter, purchased in 1965, was unable to compete with these lower cost imports from Europe.²⁷ The most important short-term motivation for transferring production from the United States to Leicester and Hull was not, however, price competition or technological backwardness. The decision to scale back production in the United States only came after a strike in February 1969 at Royal's portable typewriter plant in Springfield over the company's refusal to renegotiate an expiring contract.²⁸ Royal at first argued it could not bargain with the Allied Industrial Workers union local until a claim to decertify the union, submitted to the National Labor Relations Board by dissident employees, was heard. The proposed decertification failed and the month-long strike ended after Royal announced the shutdown of the plant sixty days after the expiry of the contract. The day before the closure was announced the union membership had unanimously rejected the offer of maintained membership, modest wage increase, the abolishment of the union shop, and the removal of job security or fringe benefits.²⁹ The plant was closed on March 27, 1969 after a shooting incident involving a picket captain; no termination agreement was signed and twenty-five hundred unionized workers lost their jobs, severance payments, and other benefits. Production was transferred later that year to Royal's office typewriter plant in Hartford and then outsourced to a Portuguese firm working under the Salazar dictatorship (who bought the Springfield plant's machinery).³⁰ In August 1970, office electric typewriter production was moved from Hartford to Imperial's Hull and Triumph Adler's FRG factories (office electric lines produced in the FRG were in turn shifted to the Royal plants in Holland). The company was encumbered by \$55 million in debt from its purchase of Triumph-Adler and the consolidation and relocation costs of \$2.3M at Springfield, Missouri, and \$17.2M in Hartford, Connecticut.³¹ Despite these costs, Litton calculated that its ability to produce in Britain, FRG, Holland, and Japan gave it critical new capacity to circumvent stoppages.

The remaining US production was fully transferred to Imperial between January 1972 and 1973. This came eight months after Litton officials had argued Royal was profitable and the company "will continue to assemble . . . medium-priced office

electricians and a manual typewriter" in Hartford.³² The president of Royal also sent a letter to all members of the union bargaining unit in Hartford six weeks before transferring the remaining production to Britain. The company promised "an exciting era of new and better opportunities for the future" where "our plans see Hartford continuing as our principal United States manufacturing facility and as our world-wide head-quarters for technical, marketing and administrative support to our expanding product lines and our growing operations around the world."³³ The shutdown of Royal Typewriters had devastating effects on the strong collective bargaining developed by workers in Connecticut and Missouri. US unions claimed that conglomerates like Litton allowed a centralized senior executive team to cross-subsidize unrelated and decentralized divisions of the company (a business management system developed notably at Ford), leave local managers and workers uninformed as to the company's true health or intentions, and curtail trade union bargaining strength by exploiting wage differentials between national operations.³⁴

Documents from British government archives allow insights into the debate on whether US foreign direct investment posed a threat to the country's economic sovereignty and national interest. Some government ministers feared offshoring by foreign companies in future economic downturns if British equity was absent (US firms had switched production from British subsidiaries in the 1930s). Government minister Peter Shore deeply disapproved "of the way this American bid for an important British firm, in an industry for which we are the sponsoring Ministry, has been handled."³⁵ As a quixotic left-wing economic nationalist, Shore was particularly concerned with the insufficiencies of the Monopolies and Mergers Act (1965) and Exchange Control Act (1947) to provide "defences against takeover bids from abroad to which we may object."³⁶ The government's Minister of Technology, Tony Benn, was reported in the to be "publicly deploring the take-over."³⁷ Other Labour MPs like Edmund Dell wrote to Shore condemning Litton's denial of British equity—a normal practice of the company internationally—as a threat to the national interest.³⁸ Rather than planned nationalization or developing a significant government stake in the company, Labour's left-wing MPs proposed that the government should ensure a potential veto by British shareholders over the investment decisions about the US parent company. Such proposals were part of the Left's wider fears that the moderate and Atlanticist tendencies of the Labour government would be exacerbated without sufficient checks and balances. The failure of economic nationalist arguments to gain traction with either Wilson, Callaghan, or senior civil servants may indicate the limits to the "economic nationalist" consensus in postwar Britain, particularly after the Labour government came to face Britain's relative economic decline in the mid-1960s.³⁹

Even so, such dissent did reflect a wider economic nationalism shared by nearly all of Britain's postwar political class until the 1970s.⁴⁰ Chancellor James Callaghan replied to private criticisms by Tony Benn and placed "stress on our general welcome of inward investment, especially where it brings in useful technology."⁴¹ There is little evidence that either Callaghan or Wilson took seriously the warnings of Benn, Shore, and Dell on Litton's ulterior motives. Ministers at the Board of Trade, the Treasury, and the Ministry of Technology agreed at consultative meetings that Litton's takeover could stop Imperial floundering in the face of "foreign" competition (ironically

against other foreign subsidiaries like Olivetti, Smith-Corona, and Remington Rand), low unit profits and rising costs, and scarce financial resources to research and develop new electronic models.⁴² Access to new designs from the United States, the use of Royal's overseas sales agents and representatives, assurances given by Litton that it would manufacture both Royal and Imperial models, economies of scale to the company and import savings for the government's balance of payments, were seen by civil servants as reasons for the long-term viability of the takeover.⁴³ Activist minority shareholders resisted such arguments in letters to ministers and an Early Day Motion tabled in the House of Commons on February 10, 1967 asking for an inquiry.⁴⁴

The fears that Britain's comparative advantages would prove ephemeral were realized much sooner than even the Labour Left expected. The uptick in workers' struggles in the late 1960s enabled British workers to make major gains in their salaries and terms and conditions at the same time as declining profitability challenged the redistributive model of social democratic compromise.⁴⁵ Corporations began to restructure production, speed-up labor processes, and introduce automative machinery in an effort to cut costs and bolster competitiveness. Litton usually enacted minimal changes to its new acquisitions on account of its business philosophy: "we manage by not managing." Imperial's ageing factories were an exception. The president of Royal Typewriter had ascribed Imperial's difficulties to the increasing costs of its outmoded technology.⁴⁶ The company was keen to have American production engineers reorganize the labor process to produce new electric and portable models.⁴⁷ Imperial aimed to capture the £4m a year typewriter market with a new office electric model to challenge UK market leader IBM in Leicester (such models accounted for 60 percent of sales in the United States but only 20 percent in Britain), though it would continue to produce the increasingly obsolete office manual typewriter (which made up a quarter of total UK sales).⁴⁸ However, Litton's promised investment in cutting-edge technology never materialized. Despite its image as a British brand, Imperial under Litton would produce only a relatively low volume of its finished products for the UK market (which ranked only half of its US sales).⁴⁹ Litton executives had responded to the challenge of new typewriter technology through acquisition rather than fundamentally reorganizing production or its product line.

The reorganization exacerbated existing differences between the two factories. Litton set aside a special area of its Leicester factory for the new assembly line for a new electric model, reduced its staff by one hundred, and introduced a classically Fordist wage structure ("measured day work") and production bonus scheme to ensure greater managerial control at factory level.⁵⁰ The Hull plant was reorganized to assemble an estimated four thousand of a different model of electric lightweight typewriter per week, primarily aimed at the US export market, sold under the Royal label, using recycled capital equipment repurposed from the shutdown of Royal's factory in Hartford, Connecticut.⁵¹ The two plants were mutually dependent in complex and not easily understandable ways. Hull workers, for example, produced spare parts used on production lines in Leicester. Being connected through factors of production and the labor process was not, however, matched by organizational coherency or a common sense of purpose or identity. Leicester and Hull workers were

members of the same union but had their working conditions and wages set by separate agreements negotiated by their local union on a plant-by-plant basis.⁵² A strike of two thousand Hull workers in 1972 was avoided after the signing of a two year settlement where workers gained a 29.5 percent pay increase (£4 a week for women workers).⁵³ The lack of a strong relationship between the Leicester and Hull workers' organizations predates the 1974 strike and reflected the different products, fixed capital and machinery, workforce composition, and local labor history.

There is little sign that either the Wilson administration or the trade unions were concerned about Litton's oligopolistic behavior or its failure break decisively from the increasingly obsolete manual typewriter models like its competitors. From the mid-1960s the innovative Italian company Olivetti transformed itself into a global player in the typewriter industry after inauspiciously selling its electronics division to General Electric in 1964.⁵⁴ The company—founded by a liberal socialist and directed by the founder of the progressivist Community Movement—revolutionized its production process, product development, work culture, business structure, and forms of investment.⁵⁵ Olivetti introduced new integrated assembly units and production islands (*isole di produzione*) and embraced the switch from mechanical to electronic labor processes, reduced life cycles of products, and the discipline of international competition. In contrast to the rigid separation between mental and manual labor of the Taylorist and Fordist mass production model, groups of fifteen to twenty Olivetti workers were responsible for the quality and testing of its product.⁵⁶ This new production model stood in contrast to Imperial's labor process and was introduced as part of a 1971 agreement with the Italian trade unions to implement and reorganize its main plants.⁵⁷ Prefiguring what would become known as the "Toyota model" or "Japanization," Olivetti's typewriters were reassembled by retrained managers, technicians, and workers through more complex tasks requiring greater degrees of skill, participation, and responsibility.⁵⁸ Litton's less ambitious reorganization of the Leicester and Hull factories and the lack of comparable investment suggests it was unwilling to fully commit to the British market.

Litton took an altogether different approach to Olivetti in Britain. Harold Wilson was reported as proposing a "New Britain" built upon new technological advances at the 1963 Labour Party conference and Litton promised a "scientific revolution" during its buyout of Imperial. After purchase, Litton instead doubled-down on a Fordist model of repetitive and hierarchical assembly-lines. Litton's British business model was built not on comparable investment but on relatively cheap and marginalized labor discharged by Britain's former colonies and the increasing prevalence of women in the industrial workforce. Important sectors of postwar British manufacturing industry had long depended on migrant labor from Europe, inward migration of Empire and Commonwealth citizens, and a new generation of women workers to work cheap old-fashioned machines in low-status, labor-intensive jobs.⁵⁹ Before 1968, Imperial's Leicester factory had been monocultural, overwhelmingly white, with no racial tensions or history of serious labor militancy: "the largest and most modern in the British Empire" according to one advertisement from 1953.⁶⁰

By 1974, Litton had transformed the factory into a racially-structured workplace. Of its 1,650 manual workers, 1,100 were of East African Asian origin and 550 were white. Harold Wilson's Labour government had unsuccessfully attempted to

prevent some of these workers reaching the country in 1968.⁶¹ South Asians from East Africa played a role in expanding the city's total industrial employment to 82,458 in 1970 (an increase of 1,335 on 1947).⁶² Almost all of Imperial's new generation of workers had no previous experience of industrial employment when they arrived in Leicester—an important industrial city with strong engineering and hosiery sectors.⁶³ Some had migrated to Britain in anticipation of the UK government's restriction on migration, though many emigrated after their property and businesses were redistributed without compensation during the “Africanization” policies of the Kenyan, Ugandan, and Malawian governments.⁶⁴ Of the fifty thousand Indians who permanently left Kenya between 1962 and 1969, most were British citizens.⁶⁵ The often overqualified migrants had little choice but to begin working at firms like Imperial who actively recruited through family and community networks.⁶⁶ These workers entered the industrial workforce as workers' struggle reached unprecedented peaks in the main years of their arrival between 1968 and 1972. Workers in the wider South Asian community had already led important strikes at Mansfield Hosiery Mills, Harwood Cash & Co, E. Jaffe, Standard Telephones and Cables, Artid Plastics, Perivale-Gutermann, and Art Die Castings.⁶⁷

Neither Curry nor Yorkshire Pudding but Workers' Rights

On Wednesday May 1, 1974, Imperial experienced its first major strike since the Litton takeover. A union contract signed in 1972 by the Leicester factory's TGWU 5/221 branch had set the hours, wages, holidays, seniority, leaves of absences, and grievance procedure for all workers in the factory, and established the union as the sole recognized bargaining unit.⁶⁸ Thirty-eight migrant workers petitioned for a significant improvement in the bonus fallback rate (including backdating) set by the agreement. The strikers alleged that work study departments would retime an individual job if exceeded the set target time (and therefore the level of bonus).⁶⁹ The dissenting workers began to leaflet outside the factory for a strike on Friday May 3 after rejecting the solution proposed by the shop stewards' committee, the workers drafted four demands: the backdating of bonus payments to January 1973 at the rate of 125 percent and from May 1974 at 140 percent; equality of promotion in the factory, equal rights to become foremen, supervisors, charge-hands, utility workers; special attention be paid to exploitation of women workers; and no victimization of those participating in the strike.⁷⁰ The twenty-two-year-old Ugandan Asian spokesperson for the strike committee, Hasmukh Khetani, wrote to the TGWU regional secretary, Brian Mathers, to outline their consolidated demands: more transparent and democratic elections of shop stewards (without manipulation by incumbents), a properly regulated wages system without overwork and bonus cheating, and the equality of opportunity for all workers.⁷¹

The company warned the strikers of the threat of closure. Imperial management warned the Leicester strike was “threatening the viability of the Company and endangering the jobs of approximately 2,000 employees.”⁷² Michael Stamper, director of the East Midlands Engineering Employers Association, argued two courses of action were available if the dispute failed to end on the employer's terms: “Litton Industries, the American parent company, could cut back the number employed in Leicester, or

close the site altogether.”⁷³ The threats only partly worked in splitting the workforce. By early June, the strike committee estimated that out of a workforce of seventeen hundred, eleven hundred were Black or South Asian (one hundred of whom were staff represented by the salaried and staff union who were not striking). Of the 1,000 workers of color, 50 had left the factory, 50 were West Indian and were mostly not striking, 150 had presented sick notes (refusing to either strike or attend work), and an estimated 450–500 were on strike.⁷⁴ Around two hundred Asian workers were still working alongside the overwhelming majority of the white workers.⁷⁵

Khetani appealed to the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU) general secretary and veteran of the Saklatvala Battalion of the International Brigades, Jack Jones, to support the strikers (of whom at least two hundred were union members and half were women).⁷⁶ However, before the letter could arrive, Jones had written to Mathers of a decision by the General Executive Council of the TGWU not to offer official support on account of divisions amongst the workforce.⁷⁷ The TGWU had been the only union to attend a conference on the problems faced by Black workers and had a reputation for being one of the most open to recruiting nonwhite members.⁷⁸ However, the response of Imperial’s white workers and the local union leadership was part of a longer history of absent or imperfect solidarity or active hostility.⁷⁹ This was particular apparent in the “Black Country” firms in England’s West Midlands where white workers had regularly crossed picket lines and disputes by Asian workers were unlikely to be made “official” by the union.⁸⁰ One of the most famous of these strikes saw the union officials at Courtaulds’ Red Scar rayon-producing plant in Preston refuse official support on account of the racial (even “tribal”) nature of the dispute and its instigation by “hot-heads” and “outsiders.”⁸¹ Utilizing a discourse similar to the 1974 Leicester dispute, the “hot-head” in question was the strikers’ spokesperson, Mr. A.A. Chaudhry: a “low-skilled” Courtaulds worker, graduate of technical colleges in the United States and Britain (and president of the Blackburn Technical College student union), former officer in the Indian police, captain in the Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery during the Second World War (decorated for gallantry in the defense of Singapore), executive in a large US firm, qualified technician in textiles, and landlord.

The ethnic origins of the Imperial strikers also became their ubiquitous reference for the union and in the press, rather than poor working conditions or illegitimate workplace democracy. The district secretary of the Leicester TGWU, active member of the Leicester Labour Party, and local justice of the peace George Bromley told the factory’s TGWU 5/221 union branch that the dispute was “racial – but not white v. coloured, but coloured v. coloured. The bulk of our membership, who are from the sub-continent of India, have given us very little trouble. However, the recent influx of Ugandans etc., obviously used to a much higher standard of living than they can get here, are bitter about their whole way of life, and this is manifesting itself within industry.”⁸² Bromley said the branch that “the majority [of the factory’s 1200 ‘coloured workers’] . . . are Asians from the sub-continent of India, but there has been an influx of 200/300 arrivals mainly from Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa.”⁸³ The strike committee contested this claim in a letter to Bromley, arguing 90 percent of the South Asian workers came from East Africa.⁸⁴ The Leicester Works’ Convenor, Reg Weaver, was more explicit. He told BBC Radio Leicester that his co-workers were

ungrateful, obstinate, and communalist: “after many, many years of trying to get Asian shop stewards they don’t want to co-operate, they want to elect their own people, they don’t want the trade union movement, they want to elect their own people and go their own sweet way.”⁸⁵

Local media coverage also racialized the dispute. A provocative headline in the local *Leicester Mercury* newspaper alleged the National Secretary of the Indian Workers Association (IWA) —an association founded in the 1930s to support Asian workers in Britain and provide solidarity for struggles in India—had predicted “race riots” in a speech to the Leicester branch. The neo-Nazi National Front (NF) party had recently won nine thousand votes in the city and was mobilizing to support (white) “British workers” through its local branch in Leicester and national publications.⁸⁶ The state was concerned by potential race-related disturbances spurred by recent fascist marches through “immigrant areas.”⁸⁷ One community relations officer warned the government in a confidential memo “that for too long the strike has been kept as a headline or front page item” and “attempts should be made to turn the heat off”: the tone of the paper mellowed after a civil servant contacted local aristocrat Lord Lanesborough, who then contacted Mr. Thompson, Chairman of the *Leicester Mercury*, who, according to Lanesborough, “agreed to discuss the matter with his editor.”⁸⁸ According to a confidential letter, “The Department of Employment has seen no evidence of there being any discrimination” by either the union or the employer, nor did it acknowledge legitimate grievances concerning poor working conditions, but “take the view, rather that this is largely a politically motivated strike . . . [and] feel that in view of all that has happened the less that is now said the better.”⁸⁹ The search for “further political propaganda” by a single prominent strike supporter and South African pan-Africanist Benny Bunsee and the implicit assumption that he had co-opted and misled the strikers, meant “the less that is now said the better . . . the TGWU would be justified to do their best to crush it!”⁹⁰

Despite the efforts to starve the strikers of publicity, the *Leicester Mercury* published a series of racist letters from its readers.⁹¹ Ugandan Asians were accused of being an “elite” intent on “racial revolution,” an ungrateful minority (which “bites the hands that feeds him and lead a revolutionary section to put the name Imperial into disrepute”), for having little to nothing to complain about (“if they were in India possibly half of them here now would not be alive because of famine, floods, and disease”), and a group unaware of its subordinate place in Britain’s social and economic hierarchy (unlike their white working class counterparts). As one letter argued,

...The reason coloured immigrants are not getting promotion in their jobs is that they are just not good enough for the next step up the ladder – the same as a lot of Englishmen. But we recognise this fact and unfortunately the Race Relations Act does not allow us to use it as an instrument of blackmail against our employers.⁹²

The key concern of the new Labour government was the potential for the dispute to unsettle “race relations” and its “Social Contract” wage restraint policy.⁹³ The Race Relations Act had been passed by the second Wilson administration as part of a

range of reforms that helped induce trade union officials to accept the government's wider policy agenda. Using its new powers under Section 17 of the recently passed act, the Race Relations Board authorized the East Midlands Conciliation Committee to investigate claims of unlawful discrimination rather than industrial relations.⁹⁴ The committee looked for similar instances of discrimination to those experienced by Asian and Black workers in the industrial West Midlands town of Smethwick (where the Midland Cylinder Company had attempted to create segregated toilet facilities for Asian and white workers), the R. Woolf rubber factory in Southall (where striking Sikh workers were unsupported by the union and the company attempted to hire Pakistani workers to replace the them), and Sikh bus workers in Wolverhampton who successfully won the right to wear turbans and beards through a mass campaign.⁹⁵ Albrecht Turk, Leicester's Community Relations Officer, and a key point of information for the government, had sent a message early on in the dispute that the "Indian' workers were split on supporting the strike and management won't negotiate direct with the [striking] workers, so as not to offend the Union'.⁹⁶ The state took the view that the reasons for the strike was not discrimination by the employer or the union: "The Department of Employment has seen no evidence of there being any discrimination but take the view, rather that this is largely a politically motivated strike. . . [and] feel that in view of all that has happened the less that is now said the better."⁹⁷ The department felt justified in their view that "unlike the Mansfield strike, this one has not provided Bunsee with the legitimate grievances he needs if he is going to use it for political ends" and that this may well explain why the TGWU would be justified to "do their best to crush it!"⁹⁸ This attitude was confirmed when the report by the East Midlands Conciliation Committee—authorized by the government's Race Relations Board to investigate the dispute—was published on July 30. While regretting the refusal of the strikers to cooperate with the committee, it found no evidence of "unlawful discrimination" over earnings and promotion of Asian workers in supervisory and managerial grades, and blamed the strong feelings of Asians on the failure to institute "formal equal opportunity policy" which could "facilitate the adaption of Asians to the work-place."⁹⁹ The report was undermined by the refusal of the strikers to supply evidence to the board during the inquiry—particularly over whether application for the position of charge hands had been rejected—due to their concerns regarding the report's speed, impartiality, and lack of powers.¹⁰⁰ Imperial management rejected all claims of discrimination against non-white employees. A company press statement claimed 57 percent of the male workforce in the factory was non-white and 60.4 percent of the four top grade jobs were held by nonwhite employees; 71% of the female workforce were said to be nonwhite and 73.8 percent of the female employees in the two top grade jobs were also nonwhite; 63 percent of the apprentices training for future jobs were also claimed to be nonwhite.¹⁰¹ The strikers strongly contested these figures.

The strike committee rejected racialized readings of the dispute and the state's focus on South Asian representation in the higher workplace grades. The strikers believed the conflict was between labor and capital and identified simultaneously as a Black and working class. The self-identification of South Asians in Britain as "Black" was part of a wider response by arrivals from colonies and migrants from

ex-colonies to being racialized as nonwhite in Britain's particular political economy of immigration.¹⁰² The fact that the nonwhite workers appeared to be split—prefiguring the dynamic at the Grunwick strike two years later—did not figure heavily in the strikers' communiques or appear to challenge the concept of “political blackness.”¹⁰³ Only the successful mobilization of the local South Asian community (notably the Sikh temple) and IWA had allowed the strikers to survive for nearly eleven weeks whilst excluded from the union strike fund and state social security. The strikers argued that the lack of solidarity from other white workers in Leicester was not primarily a problem of racist attitudes fostered by outside far-right agitators like the NF, despite claims to the contrary in some parts of the historiography.¹⁰⁴ What is often left out of existing narratives is how Bromley was not a member or sympathizer of the NF, but an active member of the Labour Party who even wrote a letter to the house journal of the Labour Party left, *Tribune*, to contest its coverage of the strike.¹⁰⁵ A resolution passed at the 5/221 union branch meeting—later reproduced in the strike bulletin—instead blamed their factory's racially-structured workplace regime and the inability of white workers to expunge their lingering colonialist attitudes:

This dispute has been presented differently by different people. Certainly the mass media has not refrained from presenting its own interpretation. The BBC, etc. have called it a racial dispute. We have always repudiated this. We have called it a workers' dispute with the management—and that is the key to it all—of which discrimination is an aspect. An individual in any factory or work situation is approached by the management first as a worker who produces, through his labour, profits for him—profits that give him power and privilege. He does not approach him as a human being whose human interests must be given priority. Because the Company wishes to maximise his profits he will try to screw a worker as much as he can. He will do everything also to keep the workforce divided amongst itself so that they do not unite against him. Consequently he will pay some more to keep them relatively satisfied and make them feel relatively superior to the other workers. Above all he welcomes cheap labour and always amongst the immigrant community he finds a God-given boon. Because they suffer from initial disadvantages in contrast to the native inhabitants he is so much more exploitable. A disadvantage like language difficulties places terrible hardships for most Asian immigrants. Therefore a semi-skilled firm needing cheap labour welcomes them. For this reason about 90% of the Asians at Imperial Typewriter are to be found in the lowest grade. The higher grades are mostly for whites. The management finds this very convenient. He keeps one section happy at the expense of another and unfortunately the one section that is treated in a privileged manner falls prey to this, not realising that in the long run its greater interests are not served. This factor, together with the whole way in which the British worker has been made to relate to people from other parts of the world in terms of its colonial past, creates the sort of situation that exists at Imperial Typewriters.¹⁰⁶

In Hull, the almost wholly white and majority female workforce of fourteen hundred did not strike in support of their colleagues in Leicester, nor was there visible signs of

explicit solidarity short of a strike. The absence of support from Hull also played little discernable role in the strike committee's agitational literature. Leaflets written during the strike instead developed a complex analysis of Imperial's factory regime in Leicester and its contradictory material interests and ideological incentives. The failure of the union and white workers in Leicester to support the strike was explained not by an essentialized white culture but a historical process that reproduced a racialized production model. The strikers first bulletin sought to reactivate a temporarily forgotten sense of class solidarity and consciousness of shared material interests amongst their white coworkers:

There is one thing we wish to make clear. We do not see our strike as only for the benefit of Black workers. What we fight for is to the general interests of the whole working class in Britain. The Black working class is part of the working class of Britain. We believe that the white workers in Imperial who do not see this at the moment will one day realise this. For this reason we will NEVER regard them as the enemy. Our hand of friendship will always be stretched out towards them. The white worker must realise that if the employers kick Black workers in the teeth today and exploit them so much more, tomorrow when it becomes necessary they will equally kick the white worker in the teeth. Because we realise this, and because we realise that we have a common destiny as workers, we call upon the white workers to join us in the battle against our common enemy—the bosses—who are only interested in making profits out of us. The boss does not care whether a worker is black or white. He is only interested in squeezing them. He will give the one more so that he can better control the both of them. That is why we say that the Black workers struggle is part of the general struggle of all workers in Britain. . . . So when we enumerate our grievances (based mainly on discrimination) we take into account how the minds of the white worker has been poisoned by the bosses.¹⁰⁷

The right to freely elect shop stewards was the strikers' most prized demand. Khetami complained in a letter to Mathers that a national union rule requiring two years of membership and three months of training before holding office effectively barred Asian shop stewards.¹⁰⁸ Claims the strike "demonstrated clearly the conflict between the trade union bureaucracy and black workers" may underestimate how strongly the Imperial workers believed the whole union apparatus could be transformed by their actions.¹⁰⁹ Khetani wrote to Mathers on July 22 that he was "only too eager to get matters done through the normal union procedures."¹¹⁰ The possibility of "colored only" trade unions was a possibility proposed from outside Imperial.¹¹¹ A strike committee bulletin argued "there is of course absolutely no question of Asian workers representing only Asians. There is just the question of shop stewards representing workers."¹¹² The Imperial strike bulletin argued strongly for Black worker participation in trade union structures rather than reliance on progressive nongovernmental organizations. It advocated "removing corrupt officials" and that the Asian worker "must and can only work through the existing trade union structure" to make it "live up to [the] principle" of "working class unity":

Many of our so-called sympathisers would like us to forget this aspect of the struggle. It embarrasses them. . . . Some of these people (and organisations) are like the rest of the race relations industry (Runnymede Trust, Catholic Committee for Racial Justice, Institute of Race Relations, Community Relations Councils, etc.). They set themselves up to fight discrimination but their actual task is to quieten things when they begin to hot up. They talk of backlashes, provoking the National Front—i.e. those who are racially abused must kowtow to this very abuse otherwise things will become worse. These colonial type organisations do not deter us whatever socialist garb they wear.¹¹³

The strikers returned to work at the end of July claiming victory. The four hundred Asian strikers who had stayed the course were taken back in phases over two weeks after an agreement was negotiated between the management, TGWU, and conciliators from the Department of Employment.¹¹⁴ The government-brokered deal included promises of gains in the rate of pay, the right to promotion, the retiming of labor processes, and ensured that the strikers would face no victimization, return to their same grades (though not always the same jobs), and be able to collectively negotiate with the union for the election of new shop stewards.¹¹⁵

In response the factory's union leadership organized a mass meeting at the local Spinney Hill Park to call for a one day stoppage against the "troublemaker" leaders who Weaver accused of "receiving funds from Peking."¹¹⁶ Following the outdoor meeting around five hundred predominantly white workers held what they considered to be an "official branch meeting" which decided not to cooperate with the returning strike leaders.¹¹⁷ The main grievance of the stoppage was that the "the ring leaders who perpetrated vicious attacks on their own kind . . . and the minority of Asian strikers who "don't want the trade union movement" but "to elect their own people and go their own sweet way" had been allowed back.¹¹⁸ Bromley and other union officials who attended the meeting decided a policy of noncooperation with the twenty-five "troublemakers."¹¹⁹ After the walkout had dissipated, Khetani wrote to Bromley to "remind you that the dispute at Imperial Typewriters is not about eating curry or Yorkshire pudding but about workers' rights."¹²⁰ Khetani also wrote to Mathers that the strikers—and not the white workers who refused to work with the returning "trouble-makers"—were "better upholders of trade union principles than Bromley and Weaver themselves. In the coming months you will see our allegiance to these principles and to the basic interests of the working class."¹²¹ The South Asian workforce had sought to explicitly break with the racialized forms of domination embedded in Imperial's labor regime and popularized in the discourse of the trade union, state, and press. Some historians have understood the 1970s as a moment when malleable and self-fashioning identities replaced the politics of class.¹²² However, the Imperial strike indicates that first-generation migrants in mid-1970s Britain often found the language of class politics more suitable to explain their social conditions and mobilize others for collective action against exploitation and discrimination.

The Typewriting on the Wall

The speed with which the striker's unlikely victory was followed by Litton's decision to close the factory—and therefore erase the gains for both migrant and white workers—should lead historians to see the dispute, rather than technological obsolescence, as the most plausible short-term reason why “Imperial’s empire fell.”¹²³ The strikers did not expect the impending closure of Litton's plants. Khetami wrote to Mathers at the end of the strike that “the strikers . . . are quite prepared to see how the management's promises work out in practice.”¹²⁴ This belief rested on the promise that the Leicester and Hull factories were essential to Litton's future plans. Shop stewards in Hull had been told before the 1974 strike that there was no cause for panic.¹²⁵ Imperial management, like its counterparts at Royal in the United States, had encouraged expectations that the company would be expanding its production and not managing its decline. Imperial's house journal argued the company was not being held back by technological backwardness or absent demand, but “lost ground” caused by the strike.¹²⁶ A 16 percent rise in sales in the first quarter of 1974, the strengths of Litton's multinational status, and the company's “good marketable products” were cited as reasons for a stable future, despite the inflationary pressures of the 1973 oil crisis.¹²⁷ Another company spokesperson explained that “in a growth market of around 15 per cent per annum, future production plans are geared to a gradual but steady expansion . . . the company will begin recruiting personnel to its workforce during the course of the next week or so.”¹²⁸

The announcement of closure just under six months after the Leicester strike came as if “bolts from the blue.”¹²⁹ If the timing of the announcement on the afternoon of Friday January 17, 1975, was chosen to maximize demoralization over the weekend, workers in Hull had different ideas. They believed the closure was economically unnecessary and contrary to the new 1974 Labour government's promises of greater employer consultation and worker participation in industry. Furthermore, a strong union in the factory and sympathetic local MPs, union workers, and socialist academics provided the conditions for an ambitious anticlosure campaign. According to the union, Litton had taken “a purely company-orientated decision bearing no relation to British national economic interest” following the onset of a domestic US recession.¹³⁰ The Leicester strikers had already been threatened with the shutdown of the factory during the strike and were less shocked by the news. The company blamed the closure on imminent technological obsolescence rather than the previous year's workers' militancy. The senior vice president of Litton, Mr. Crosby Kelly, said the closure was inevitable given the “pending obsolescence” of an uncompetitive product. Kelly argued that Imperial's typewriters could not compete with new electric machines produced to a higher quality elsewhere and rising costs: “there is no realistic way to become viable. It has gone beyond the point of no return.”¹³¹ A 20 percent drop in demand for typewriters by the end of 1974, and the subsequent glut of global stocks, was the last straw for an operation Litton now claimed had never been profitable, despite its promises to the Wilson government.¹³² The middle to low end of the typewriter industry in Britain had relied on migrant and women's labor to make it viable. The parallels between Litton's closure of Imperial and Royal plants in the immediate aftermath

of strikes in both countries suggests that workers' militancy was a critical element in making the British labor force seem expendable.

The closure exposed divisions within and between Imperial workers in Leicester and Hull. Minister of Industry Tony Benn ordered an enquiry into the British typewriter industry, and all three unions represented in Hull joined forces to save the factories. The response of the Leicester workforce was distinguished by desperate sectionalism and resignation. National and regional union officials attempted to avoid a "dogfight" between the two factories after a consultative report on the company's future intimated that only one plant might be saved.¹³³ The union in Leicester tried to save its factory at the expense of Hull.¹³⁴ The Leicester TGWU branch had given its initial support for the Hull proposal over the weekend. However, this united front was undermined when a "task force" of middle management and senior shop-floor workers met to discuss ways in which at least some production in Leicester might be saved with a reduced workforce.¹³⁵ A local union report drafted on February 7, by the chief time-study engineers claimed a £50,000 investment, concentration on a single electric typewriter model, and a reduction of the workforce by eight hundred—seen as a call to cull the South Asian workers—could make the Leicester factory viable.¹³⁶ Where the union branch led, the local Labour MP followed. The Leicester South MP, Jim Marshall, argued "if the worst does come to the worst, and it is shown that only one factory is needed, then I am saying on behalf of my constituents that it should be Leicester."¹³⁷ Such proposals were unlikely to succeed. The two plants were interdependent: Hull produced essential components for the electric typewriter produced in Leicester and it was there, not in the East Midlands, that the most plausible claim for going it alone could be made. Unfortunately, Hull's self-sufficiency in manufacture, assembly, packaging, and dispatching was wholly dependent on an outdated and increasingly unwanted typewriter model. Despite their material interdependence, workers in both factories had little history of united action.

In Hull, the announcement of closure on Friday did not stop the local union, its research workers, and a hastily convened "Action Committee," working through the weekend on their response. The campaign to keep Imperial open passed a motion at a mass meeting with the Hull workers on Monday, and by the evening it had been passed to Tony Benn at the Department of Industry by sympathetic local Labour MP John Prescott. Only after Litton refused to consider maintaining either the Leicester or Hull plants did workers in the latter organize the work-in occupation. Around three hundred workers—two hundred women and one hundred men—scaled the gates, secured the buildings, conducted a full inventory of its stocks, produced spare typewriter parts, and started designing a new model prototype. A minority was temporarily against the occupation on account of a delay to their outstanding pay; around half the plant's workers were looking, or had found, other jobs before the occupation.¹³⁸ Despite not having a complete consensus on the occupation strategy, the Hull campaign could call upon a wide range of experience within and outside of the plant. Production workers in Hull quickly convinced foremen that the latter's role should be changed and the plant put under workers' control. Rather than acting as guardians of discipline and supervision, foremen in the new Imperial would deal with technical issues and workgroups would elect their own team leaders. Visits from

the wave of new workers' cooperatives set up during the closure or restructuring of companies like Fisher-Bendix, Triumph Meriden, and Scottish Daily News were planned. An inventory of "every nut and bolt in the place" had been conducted and failed attempts were made to access Litton's accounts to complete the study of possible transfer-pricing effects on its British typewriter production. The union claimed that Litton's alleged losses in its British factories could be explained by artificially low import costs of its typewriters into America and the imposition of a narrow range of declining products on its English operations.¹³⁹ The Hull occupiers were also strengthened by a relatively unified and strong union with strong local autonomy, a self-confident and skilled group of shop stewards who had benefited from training courses in university extra-mural departments, and organic labor movement intellectuals such as Tony Topham (Institute for Workers' Control convenor, academic at the University of Hull, and seconded researcher for the local TGWU).¹⁴⁰

Differences in workplace culture, politics, and conditions between the Leicester and Hull plants were further obstacles to unity between the plants. The white workforce in Hull tended to be more comfortable speaking in the name of a popular "national interest" (including the demand for import controls) and using national symbols (like the Union Jack). These symbols had important cultural connotations when used in the context of a struggle to save the British "Imperial" brand against an American multinational. In Leicester, the Union Jack had been a ubiquitous symbol on demonstrations by the far-right NF and was present during the stoppage by white workers. The Hull occupiers understood the symbol in a different light. "Union Jack and Imperial banners" were hung around their factory when it was occupied on February 21.¹⁴¹ When the Hull occupation ended after five months on July 16, 1975, seventy-six occupiers left the factory carrying a mock coffin draped in a Union flag.¹⁴² As a further sign of confidence in using national symbolism to bolster claims to class-based economic rights, Hull workers noted with pride that they had won the "Queen's Award to Industry for Export Performance."¹⁴³ A woman shop steward told the press that "the Yanks are useless" and notices were hung outside the Hull factory to say "We are British and proud of it. . . . Support us. We are British now."¹⁴⁴ The ease of appeal to the language of popular nationalism by white workers in Hull was altogether absent in Leicester.

The Hull occupiers at first believed their most serious problem was a short-term drop in global demand for typewriters. "We assume that the recession, however severe, is temporary," the TGWU campaign argued, and demand could be generated by developing new products for the public sector and welfare, health, citizens, cultural, and sports groups lacking in "elementary equipment for typing and producing circulars, communications, etc."¹⁴⁵ However, insufficient information rather than demand became the most pressing problem as the occupation progressed. The Hull occupiers also called for a detailed study of the world typewriter trade, the viability of diversification into other electronic office-machine products, and the opportunity to examine and report on the management structure and efficiency of its English operations.¹⁴⁶ Litton executives poured cold water on these proposals. Imperial's Director of European Services, Fred St. Clair, argued such plans "makes neither economic nor production sense. . . . It's a totally different field—electronics—and would need large amounts of finance which are just not

available. . . . We have as many people in the same boat throughout the rest of the world too.”¹⁴⁷

The fate of the Imperial Typewriter Company was decided at the political level. The Department of Industry announced its purpose to retain a British typewriter industry and Labour minister Tony Benn rejected the “cold bath” of redundancies.¹⁴⁸ The closure would disproportionately affect Black, Asian, and women workers who had been key in many of the important workers’ struggles of the 1970s.¹⁴⁹ Yet further government support stalled before the government-commissioned report was published. Benn wrote to one of the key supporters of the occupation, Tony Topham, to warn that “the whole official machine is 100% against you as you probably realize, and I am doing my best to prevent disastrous recommendations from going in so as to give you time to reorganise.”¹⁵⁰ Though the union campaign demanded import controls, this was never seriously considered by the government because of possible objections from the EEC over the GATT General Agreement.¹⁵¹ Nationalization was effectively ruled-out after the feasibility report drafted by Urwick, Orr, and Partners suggested any enterprise in Hull alone would make a profit only in the sixth year. The major problem of the TGWU union plan, noted the Hull workers’ MP in private, was the isolation of the Hull factory from its Leicester sister plant. A handwritten note on House of Commons notepaper, held in John Prescott’s personal archive on the dispute, reads: “Issue: Only one plant.”¹⁵² The campaign was left with little option but to build a workers’ cooperative: New Harmony Enterprises.¹⁵³ Benn wrote to Topham on the day the report was published to advise “in your investigations it would be best to concentrate on existing market structures and prospects. . . .”¹⁵⁴ Even if they were to restart production, the new cooperative would have to market their typewriters outside Litton’s network of agencies. Increasingly desperate, the occupiers hoped to produce typewriters for the Comecon market after the planned expansion of UK trade with the USSR.¹⁵⁵ Alternative keyboard lists were made in order to sell to Russia, Cuba, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and other centrally-planned economies.¹⁵⁶ A Labour-left MP whose private business provided extensive business contacts in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Ian Mikardo, wrote to Topham that there was no Comecon market for Imperial typewriters.¹⁵⁷ These unsuccessful overtures reflected a workforce desperate to save their jobs rather than Communist politics. The only explicit commitment to potential insourcing came from the association of Labour Party-run county councils.¹⁵⁸

Technology, Capitalist Development, and the “National Interest”

The Imperial workers had been unable to overcome objective constraints. The technological obsolescence of portable typewriters, prohibitive costs of retooling production without massive state support, inaccessibility of information, and Litton’s monopoly over intellectual property rights in branding and marketing, all proved insurmountable. The absence of solidarity between the Hull and Leicester indicates a general problem faced by British workers in the 1970s economic crisis. The source of racialized divisions both *within* and *between* factories undermined potential worker-led alternatives to a global process of industrial restructuring on the terms

of a multinational employer. Racialized minorities and women had been employed in low-wage, repetitive, and boring manual jobs left by male, white, workers in the post-war era. The Hull factory, dependent on the labor of white women, did not support the Asian Leicester workers in their 1974 strike, nor did the latter seek to actively join the former in a united campaign when Linton closed its operation. The closure of Imperial Typewriters is therefore an important example of the failure of solidarity not only by white workers and the trade unions toward racialized workers, but also between two marginalized sections of the British working class at a critical historical juncture for the Western workers' movement. The strike at Leicester and the failure of the anticlosure campaign suggests internal divisions were perceived to be primarily structural and not cultural in character, and were conditioned most clearly by the division of labor and remuneration within and between the two Imperial factories.

Resisting technological obsolescence was not the most obvious problem facing Imperial workers, despite the differences between the Leicester and Hull plants. Only by attempting to resist closure by managing production themselves did British typewriter workers in Hull begin to recognize the problems involved in building an island of workers' planning in an ocean of unconscious market forces. Though unknown or unacknowledged by many workers at the time, major technological breakthroughs were raising ominous implications for the whole industry. The Diablo Data Systems company (a division of Xerox) was replacing the typewriter typeball mechanism from the early to mid 1970s. The new revolutionary plastic or metal daisy wheel mechanism, marketed by Olivetti from 1976 (in the Tes 501, ET101, and then TES 401 models), beckoned a further technological breakthrough. The Olivetti typewriter went on to include text display and floppy disk memory storage. The Triumph-Adler "TA 10" office computer, released in 1971 and termed the first "people's computer," could do invoicing, accounting, book entry, and basic text editing and word processing. In 1979, Triumph-Adler—recently bought by Volkswagen—produced the "alphatronic" personal computer, which dominated the German personal computer market in the 1980s. The Imperial workforce had little sense of the scale of this approaching technological revolution.

The correlation between technological change and industrial obsolescence does not necessarily entail causation. Litton Industries had closed plants and consolidated its diverse manufacturing portfolio from the early 1970s. Britain had been a major beneficiary of the transfer of the corporation's production from plants in Springfield, Missouri, and Hartford, Connecticut, between 1969–1973. By early 1975, the country appeared less inviting after labor militancy amongst marginalized workers in Leicester. Litton moved the work once done in Hull and Leicester to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the same year Britain voted to remain in European Community (EEC). Litton had also just overturned a Federal Trades Commission ruling that it was a monopoly after its purchase of Triumph-Adler in 1969.¹⁵⁹ Smaller parts of Imperial's output went to Portugal and the Japanese-based firm Royal Silver Company (a joint-venture organized by Litton with the Japanese company Silver Seiko). Litton had not lost its dependence on migrant labor. The FRG government had decided to ban the recruitment of migrants from outside the EEC in November 1973 in an effort to protect domestic employment. This policy instead provided a new component of structural unemployment after

migrants were reluctant to return home after being laid off. Over 179,000 foreign workers were already registered as unemployed in Germany by March 1975 (16 percent of the total unemployed), up from 20,000 in 1973, and were reluctant to leave to their countries of origin without firm guarantees of employment.¹⁶⁰ A vulnerable reserve army of Gastarbeiter (“guestworker”) labor from Italy, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Spain, and other Mediterranean countries gave new life to typewriter production on the European continent.

The failure of Litton’s German workers to join the anticlosure campaign, despite union overtures, was perhaps unsurprising.¹⁶¹ The Hull factory had accepted the work once done by workers sacked at Litton’s factories without any international protest.¹⁶² All typewriters built in Hull were exported to the American and Canadian markets by 1970.¹⁶³ Over half of Imperial’s British production had been sold to other Litton companies abroad.¹⁶⁴ This fact did not stop the spike in imports from Litton’s German subsidiary following its British closure becoming a cause célèbre for politicians on the Labour Party Left like Tony Benn and Michael Meacher critical of “the evils of American-owned multinationals.”¹⁶⁵ Rather than explaining the closure by capitalism’s globalizing tendencies when faced by workers’ militancy, financial journalists also chose to use the language of national sovereignty to explain and contest the decision. One *Financial Times* journalist explained the Imperial shutdown primarily by the “mismanagement by Imperial’s U.S. parent.”¹⁶⁶ Even the Leicester branch of the NF issued leaflets to white workers blaming Imperial’s US owners for forcing its management to “back down” during the 1974 strike.¹⁶⁷ The TGWU blamed Litton’s transfer pricing, which artificially lowered the price of British-made typewriters (in order to reduce the company tax burden when traded within to its US based subsidiaries), failure to invest in fixed capital, and ban on selling Imperial products to European markets (monopolized by other Litton-owned brands).¹⁶⁸ Litton’s own explicit motivations for closure do not tell the whole story.

Conclusion

The findings of this article imply that the failure of British workers to resist the rise of neoliberalism can be traced in part to a process of structural and associational disempowerment before the 1980s. Multinational firms in the 1970s reordered the existing circulation of capital on a global scale. Centralization of management authority and the direction of isolated, globally-structured production units, enabled Litton executives to discourage appraisals of company information by unions. The structure of the company allowed it to use a series of multinational locations to disguise the performance of its subsidiaries and locate its profits in lower-tax states using intercorporate transfer pricing. These proved to be crucial defenses against the encroachment of workers’ control and self-management of production during the 1970s. The restructuring of industrial production was not an automatic response to the global economic crisis, technological change, or absence of effective demand, but was motivated in the short term by an effort to circumvent a recently empowered labor movement. As in the shutdown of the Royal Typewriter factory in Springfield, Missouri, the closure followed a strike by workers over their conditions of work. Litton had displaced production within the firm from one subsidiary to another

and was not comparable to a domestic firm driven out of business by direct price competition from foreign competitors. The timing of the closure indicates that the militancy of South Asian workers in the Leicester strike may have contributed to speeding-up Litton's decision to scale-back its presence in Britain and to transfer production abroad. The 1974 strike at Imperial had exposed the racialized labor regime, which had facilitated Western Capitalism's post-war boom and the multinational nature of capital and labour during the "economic nationalist" postwar social democratic consensus. Management intransigence was matched by the inability of white workers in Leicester and Hull to unite to support their colleagues. The strike was successful only after a settlement was facilitated by the national union and the state. The Imperial case suggests the failure of a minority of white workers to challenge racialized forms of exploitation and domination was one overlooked factor in catalyzing the global shift in the balance of power from labor to capital during the mid 1970s.

However, even if Imperial workers had been able to supersede their internal divisions the balance of power with a multinational like Litton would have remained asymmetric. The British Labour movement did not envisage two alternative strategies to match Litton's multinational organizational centralization and operational mobility: transforming a localized union bargaining structure into an integrated global trade union "combine committee" across Litton's plants and/or imposing stricter government regulations on the conglomerate before they entered the British market. A critical mass of British workers' at firms like Imperial were unable to maintain their growing associational and structural power in the face of financially mobile multinational capital whose production apparatus meant it had little need to bargain on equal terms with their unions. One indirect consequence of this process of disempowerment was the declining plausibility of labor's "forward march" and the imminent, or even protracted, transition from capitalism to socialism.

Notes

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3. Jonathan Moss, *Women, Workplace Protest and Political Identity in England, 1968–85* (Manchester, 2019), 46–7; Amrit Wilson, *Finding a Voice* (London, 1978), 56–9; Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot, 2017 [1987]), 271–80; Evan Smith, *British Communism and the Politics of Race* (Leiden, 2017), 147–56; Alan Tuckman and Herman Knudsen, "The Success and Failings of UK Work-Ins and Sit-Ins in the 1970s: Briant Colour Printing and Imperial Typewriters," *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 37 (2016): 113–39.
4. For the implications of new technology on gender relations within the workplace, see Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London, 1983).
5. For examples from the United States, see Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-year Quest for Cheap Labor* (New York, 2001).
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13. Peter Dicken, *Global Shift: Industrial Change in a Turbulent World* (London, 1986), 199.
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17. David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge, 2011).
18. Stephen Hymer, "The United States Multinational Corporation and Japanese competition in the Pacific," [1972] in Robert B. Cohen et al., eds., *The Multinational Corporation: A Radical Approach—Papers by Stephen Herbert Hymer* (Cambridge, 1979), 239–55.
19. Transport General Workers' Union, *Why Imperial Typewriters Must Not Close: A Preliminary Social Audit* (Nottingham, 1975), 5–6.
20. Stephen Hymer, "The Multinational Corporation: An Analysis of Some Motives for the International Integration of Business," *Revue Economique* 14/6 (1968), 949–73. Reprinted in Mark Casson, ed., *Multinational Corporations* (Aldershot, 1990), 17.
21. Stephen Hymer, *The International Operations of National Firms: A Study of Direct Foreign Investment* (Cambridge, MA, 1960/1976), 23–25, 46–49.
22. Stephen Hymer and Robert Rowthorn, "Multinational Corporations and International Oligopoly: The Non-American Challenge," in Charles P. Kindleberger, *The International Corporation: A Symposium 1970* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), 25–26.
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24. Göran Therborn, "Modernità sociale in Europa (1950–1992)," in Perry Anderson, Maurice Aymard, Paul Bairoch, Walter Barberis, and Carlo Ginzburg, eds., *Storia d'Europa, vol. I: L'Europa oggi* (Turin, 1993), 496.
25. Roy Levine, "Battle of the Multinationals," *Financial Times*, February 3, 1975, 6.
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27. Federal Trade Commission, Initial Decision, *Litton Industries, In the Matter of Litton Industries, Inc.*, 8778, February 3, 1972.
28. Charles Craypo, "Collective Bargaining in the Conglomerate, Multinational Firm: Litton's Shutdown of Royal Typewriter," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 29/1 (October 1975): 3–25.
29. Craypo, "Collective Bargaining in the Conglomerate."
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33. *The Hartford (Conn.) Times*, June 21, 1970, 18.
34. See the testimony and legal reports in National Labor Relations Board, *Hearing, In the Matter of Royal Typewriter Company, and Allied Industrial Workers of America, Local 469; Litton Business Systems, Inc., and Allied Industrial Workers of America, AFL-CIO*, Consolidated Cases Nos. 17-CA-3788, 17-CA-2992, 17-CA-4023.
35. National Archives, Kew (hereafter NA), United Kingdom, FV 11/1, 24 June 1966.

36. NA, FV 11/1, 24 June 1966. The combination of Imperial (27.5 percent of the market) and Royal (4 percent of the market) would put the new company under the limit for monopoly status (one third of market share).
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48. Thorneycroft, “How Imperial became Royal”; Philip Clarke, “Imperial bets £1m on new typewriters,” *Sunday Times*, February 26, 1967, 21.
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