

BRITAIN AT WORK 1945-1995 ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

JOHN GALLAGHER and REG ELKINS

John Gallagher and Reg Elkins are members of the West London Trades Union Club in Acton. The club was acquired by local Trades Council members from the Co-operative Movement and opened in 1983. Reg Elkins is the current president of the West London Trades Union Club. He worked at Firestone's tyre factory on the Great West Road in Brentford, Guinness and Beecham's, and as a long-distance lorry driver for the Gas Company. He established a union at Beecham's factory in Brentford and became a shop steward convenor. As a lorry driver he was in the United Road Transport union. John Gallagher also worked at Firestone's, as a teacher and for the T&G union.

Interview by Dave Welsh and Jan Pollock at the club on a busy night when there was a game on. Transcription by Tom Vague.

Dave Welsh: This is a Britain at Work interview, a sort of round table discussion with John Gallagher and Reg Elkins, who are both members of Unite on July 25 2012 in the Acton Trades club.

Reg Elkins: West London Trade Union club.

Dave Welsh: West London Trade Union club, I stand corrected. So would you like to talk about that, about setting up that or how that occurred?

Reg Elkins: Well, I wasn't involved in the setting up but John was I think, or at least he was a member just after it was set up.

John Gallagher: I joined when they opened in 1983 because I'd been involved in two or three other attempts to set up fairly similar clubs in west London, based in the Labour and trade union movement. This establishment came about because in 1982 the London Co-operative Society merged with the Co-operative Retail Society, the national retail side of the Co-operative movement, and they put the club, well, they put all Co-op halls on the market, which was a very good opportunity for people who were in the general west London area, that is Ealing, Brent, Hammersmith, Hounslow, Twickenham. We were talking about setting up the club specifically for the trades unions, the Labour movement, independent of the National Union of Labour clubs, and the clubs and institutes of unions *CORRECTLY "Clubs & Institute Union"*, so that they could be free of political affiliation or of what a lot of us regarded as less than progressive rules about women, black members and, let's be honest, gay members. And a group of people, when they knew this was on the market and mainly based on Ealing Trades Council, led by Andy Lilly *with* Lou Kenton, Terry Brown, and *Ann Pavett* who was then Terry Brown's wife, and Paul Woods? and others, I apologise if I've left anyone out, I have left about 5 or 6 out, mainly members of the Trades Council, Ealing Trades Council, Brent Trades Council, Hounslow Trades Council, Hammersmith and Kensington, which was one Trades Council of both boroughs at the time.

Reg Elkins: Weren't some of them members of the Co-op.

John Gallagher: Well, I was just going to say, most of them were also members of the Co-op movement, in one way or another, and also they were members of the Labour party, the Communist party, the dominant, I think there was some members of the Socialist Workers Party involved as well. And they managed by raising subscriptions from interested people that they knew and trade union branches affiliated to the Trades Council, and put down a deposit and managed to buy this from the Co-op, which was a big site. Behind us was the Co-op ice-cream factory and dairy. And they put together a business plan, very amateurish, nobody was an expert, other than the man who designed the building, Jerry Spring, who I think he's an architect,

he's certainly something in the academic side of the building, construction industry. He designed the building and they managed then to open, which when I joined, and then I think about a year or two later they raised another huge sum of money, about £50,000, which in 1983 was a considerable amount of money for ordinary working people, and we bought the freehold of the building and the Co-op gave us £10,000 as a grant towards it as well, and the GLC, the Labour GLC, gave us a one-off grant of £30,000 to do the necessary health and safety adaptations.

Dave Welsh: Well spent GLC money.

John Gallagher: Yes, and now we will be celebrating our 30th anniversary next year. So, it's a tremendous achievement, not only to have set it up but to get it and to keep it going. About 10 years ago we went through a very rough patch, particularly after redundancies and members becoming much more elderly and retiring, or we have a big number of members who belonged to the construction workers and Irish and a lot of them went back when they retired, to Ireland, including two of our key members, the treasurer, Johnny Hourigan and his wife Annie. And so we did go through a dip but we managed to pull ourselves together and accumulate in that 10 years 50 or 60 thousand pounds. So for the last three years we've been doing substantial internal and external renovations. Again, with a one-off grant from Ealing Council of £3,000 to do the frontage up, that was part of a major regeneration project. So it wasn't quite the act of charity perhaps that the GLC grant was. We fitted in with several councillors on to the club, although they're all Labour councillors, it was a Conservative Council at the time but it fitted in very well with trying to tidy up the frontages on the high street. We've still got 15, 16,000 in the bank. We keep going, we must admit because the committee is entirely volunteers, most of the bar staff are volunteers, we have two young students that we pay the London living wage, not the minimum wage, the London living wage, to set an example to other publicans. And so we have, apart from paying for the heating, lighting, cleaning, our outgoings are fairly minimal, and we do get fairly good rental money from hiring the room upstairs for meetings, including daytimes and we're always willing to consider for rental upstairs.

Reg Elkins: One of the other things that did happen was we had a good line from Ken Livingstone.

John Gallagher: yes, I said that, the GLC.

Reg Elkins: yes, I got involved, I was in this ? for years and we had a letter from these people when, just as they were about to open, asking us for a donation. So we sent a donation and then a little while later we got another letter saying we're still suffering? And I believe they actually owned it by then. So we sent another donation, and around about a year or so went by and I think they asked us again. So who ever was part of that, worked very, very hard to set it up, and then after I retired, well, I joined the club then but I didn't use it very much because I was doing long-distance driving and in any case I couldn't drink much because obviously if you have a drink today you can't drive the next day. So my coming in here, I turned up for AGMs and things like that, the occasional drink and so on. I popped in here for a quick one when I'd gone swimming, and then when I retired I went to an AGM and I felt a bit embarrassed that I wasn't involved you know, because I'd suddenly gone from having a diary that's packed solid and having to look every you know like you go halfway through the year to find some gaps in it, the next thing all I've got is me branch meeting, Labour party meeting and branch committee meeting. And so I thought well, it's not really right for a person like me who's been involved in the trade union movement to sit on his haunches. So I decided to volunteer and come on the committee.

Dave Welsh: So what do you both think is the purpose, what is the purpose of it? It may sound like a silly question but what lies behind the club?

John Gallagher: To paraphrase the rules, it is a meeting place for trades unionists and members of the wider Labour movement, there to provide a social drinking club but also to

provide a meeting place for political and trade union meetings and to try and also educate our neighbours in the principles and history of the trade union movement.

Reg Elkins: We also support trade unionists when they're having problems like when they're on strike you know, not little short strikes because we couldn't afford to do that. When you get a large strike, like you had the one at the airport with the caterers and that, obviously we were involved in that and we also made arrangements for them to use our premises free of charge.

John Gallagher: Yes, and also as we have quite a few members who are experienced, not simply in the Labour movement but also in the local Council, and as a voluntary organisation we can provide advice and counselling for members who might be experiencing difficulties in their employment, to join a union, difficulties with the Council, and we can put people on to agencies and voluntary organisations who can assist them with immigration problems, health problems, pensions and that sort of thing.

Reg Elkins: We recruit whenever we can.

John Gallagher: That was for the unions.

Reg Elkins: We actually get a youngster here that was maybe a bit to the right, we've been successful in advancing the trade unions and making them walk away from here in two or three years time with a better grasp of what they should be thinking about, some of them, and we often had people that were very right-wing that have gone away and make a point of coming back and ?

Dave Welsh: An educational job you've done there.

Reg Elkins: yes, actually the other thing though is that we, I forget what I was about to say now. But we don't do as much recruiting as we would like, do we?

John Gallagher: No, but then we also have to face the fact that our members are getting older and the average age of a trade union and political parties, from, well, from the Conservative party and UKIP going left, is rising in age profile as well.

Reg Elkins: Our heyday was when the miners' strike was on.

John Gallagher: Yes.

Reg Elkins: You know, at this place it was massive because this was a centre for Kent miners, and a lot of the membership here made room for them in their homes to stay and this place was packed solid all the time. But we also got the majority of the Labour MPs past and present to be members here, including one from the House of Lords didn't we. We've had some quite distinguished people involved you know. We had Jack Jones here.

John Gallagher: His last engagement before he died.

Reg Elkins: His last engagement, about six months before he died he came to celebrate the centenary of one of our members.

John Gallagher: Lou Kenton, one of the founder members, served in the International Brigade with Jack and I used to work with him and we knew each other quite well.

Reg Elkins: So Jack and his son, sorry, brother.

John Gallagher: No, it was his son.

Reg Elkins: Oh yes, that's right, it was, and we found out then that he had two sons, but we didn't know he even had one son at that time, because we were saying who's that fellow that's standing next to Jack and it turned out that it was his son, and he was here and he enjoyed himself and he was walking about on a stick and he was quite jovial and when he went I said you know you're welcome here anytime, and I said even if we're closed, because when places like this are closed that's when the best negotiations are done, and he made a good speech didn't he, and everyone loved it. Well, I never got involved on the committee at all until around about 99. I got involved in the club from 95, when I retired when I was 65, because I had time then, and then I ended up going on the committee and then the fellow we had who was our president died and I was asked if I would become vice-president and the vice-president took over from him, and then a little while later he asked me if I would take his place, and I've been the president ever since, about 98, 99, innit? Something like that.

John Gallagher: 99.

Reg Elkins: And carried on ever since that you know.

Dave Welsh: You know in other boroughs, I mean I don't know in London where there are trades clubs like this?

John Gallagher: We are the only one we thought in the country but we found out at Tolpuddle about two or three years ago, there might be a similar club in Bristol or Gloucester, but we've never actually checked it out.

Reg Elkins: We have people going out to the trade union club in Croydon and they come here.

John Gallagher: Another trade union club, if it's still going in Brent, in fact some original founder members came from the Brent Trades Council.

Dave Welsh: yes, because you've got a building there, but the last time I went there it was pretty you know knocked about.

John Gallagher: Well, I'm afraid that's the way things go these days.

Reg Elkins: Well, I don't know you remember Tom Durkin?

John Gallagher: He was one of them.

Reg Elkins: He come in here a few times and when his branch had a celebration for I don't know what it was, he received some sort of medal and that, and they done all that here and you know, and we done pretty well really all in all.

Dave Welsh: What I wanted to ask both of you about, going away from the club a bit but your own work, you know the fact that west London was the hub of manufacturing wasn't it.

John Gallagher: Well, yes.

Dave Welsh: What was that, that's gone.

Reg Elkins: yes.

John Gallagher: Largely. There still is quite a bit of manufacturing in Park Royal and in parts of Southall there is still very light industry, not the sort of light industry that you had along the Great West Road, which was a bit heavier but light industry, very, very light industry manufacturing in Southall. But a lot of places now aren't unionised, the unions are finding it very difficult to recruit because the younger people have practically been brainwashed by the media, and that is the

biggest problem that the unions round here encounter. Both of us for instance years ago worked at one stage for Firestone's, a big factory which is long gone. Before that I was a teacher, after that I went to work for the T&G. But Reg as he said worked for Guinness, he's also worked for Beecham's as well as Firestone's.

Dave Welsh: Could you talk a bit about Firestone's? What was it like?

John Gallagher: Well at Firestone's, I was there three times. I left it and went back three times. What I used to do, before I was married I used to accumulate a lot of money, pay my mother about four or five weeks rent or whatever it was and then I'd go gambling. I'd go horse racing, dog racing, everything, all sorts of gambling, ?, cards, all sorts, dogs, whatever. And then as long as I was winning I didn't bother? When I lost, which always happens obviously, I went and found a job that paid lots of money. Well, Firestone's, there were three companies here that paid massive wages, one was Firestone's and there was the bath company in Greenford, that produced the baths, and one was called Glasgow? Metal, that actually done the bearings and that you have in the crankshaft of a vehicle, and they were all places where they had high temperatures purposefully. But the worst one of the lot was Firestone's and it was really, really hard, and they had mostly people that had been ? and mostly 6 footers, if you weren't 6 foot they were a bit wary about taking you on. And well, I worked there for a couple of months and then, actually the bloke who was the secretary has not long passed away, I forget his name. He ended up working for the T&G as a district officer for Smithfield market.

John Gallagher: Jack Preston?

Reg Elkins: Jack Preston? He was the branch secretary at Firestone's.

Dave Welsh: And would that be AEUW or AEU? No, T&G. Explain that a bit?

Reg Elkins: T&G. Well, what used to happen at a lot of the factories round here was that the management, particularly with companies like Firestone's, they would so tie the unions up that they would have a structure of employment. So that you, if you did a certain job you were in the T&G, if you did another one you were in the GMB, if you did another one you were in the AEU, if you did another one you were in ASTMS, if you did another one you were in PERTESSA? union. So one of the tricks, if there was a good worker who was a bit uppity, they'd put him on a grade so they'd have to join a different union. And if they were shop stewards, a good way of getting rid of shop stewards by just re-grading them, and Kath?, who Reg was talking about, my wife was actually secretary to the Industrial Relations manager at Firestone's, not that I got the job through her, she got the job after me, but she used to work for Jack and can't remember the convenor of the AEU's name but he was a Labour councillor in ?, and so my wife was the secretary to the Industrial Relations committee, and the sports and social club was one job.

Reg Elkins: The wages at Firestone's, I mean I remember on one occasion when it closed down for the holidays, and when a lorry driver, heavy goods type which as I was at that time in 56, 57, was earning around about £9.18 a week for 48 hours. And they were paying out over a hundred pound, people was running round and saying well, how is it I've only got a £110? I should have more than that, because that was the sort of money you could earn at places like Firestone's because they couldn't get anybody. And you would lose a stone in weeks because of the temperature. You'd have a pair of Wellingtons on and you could tip them out and tip all the sweat out, it poured out of them. It was diabolical. The smell was enough an' all.

John Gallagher: Firestone's is also interesting because like another company, the Wolfram? company in Southall.

Reg Elkins: yes.

John Gallagher: Now that company was actually run by, I think he was actually an officer in the Indian army, and because of the high temperatures he recruited his mates, who he'd served with, particularly from the towns of Jallalaba and Campbellapore and come over here, and that's actually working in the rather steamy conditions of a rubber factory, why we originally got a large number of Indian immigrants, largely from the area that they all live, even today older people in Southall many of them know one another and came from the same two or three villages, and then the more middle-class or younger ones came in, the teachers and accountants.

Reg Elkins: My father-in-law was actually the foreman at Wolfram?, and he was telling me they had a person there, an Indian man and he would, if they wanted a job doing, they could go to him. He was like the leader amongst that little group and he recruited 'em, and if he wasn't happy with 'em they didn't last long, and he told the other person and they'd come in the next day and they'd offer him a job?

John Gallagher: That's because some, a lot of the Indians found it difficult to be accepted in trade unions I'm afraid. That's how the Indian Workers Association of Southall was founded. It was founded by people who became associated with the Labour party. ? But they were originally largely members of the Indian Communist party and had been associated, grown up with trades unions in India, and so they didn't get the consideration of the 40s, 50s and indeed even 60s with the trade unions over here thought up the IWA.

Reg Elkins: When I started the union at Beecham's in the 60s, and I was the first one to start it and it was really great? and I found that there was an Indian there, there were quite a lot of Indian people working there and if I had a branch meeting at all and I wanted to find out what was going on, if I convinced him, then all the rest would follow suit. When we had a show of hands I looked at him? but he shook his head and ?, and he was more or less their unofficial leader, and what he said was final. So I made sure that I kept in with him to make sure that things went the way I wanted them to.

Dave Welsh: You did successfully set up a union at Beecham's.

Reg Elkins: Well, that was quite interesting because if they found out anyone was trying to start a union then they would sack us immediately but they wouldn't say well, you started a union, they would find an excuse, like all sorts of things. And we tried many, many times and we were unsuccessful, but they were so blatant that when we went to places like Covent Garden to collect food for some of their products, ? or Sainsburys, and they'd say have you got a union card? We'd say no and they'd say well, we won't unload you, and they knew I was a member of the union but they didn't worry about that, and they used to ask if they could borrow my card for a driver to go to one of those sites, so as he could get unloaded and I used to say no, if he wants the card he'll have to join, go and join the union, you know. And so they had a tendency to send me to all those places, so what I used to do, I used to go there and refuse to show them me card, so that the governor didn't get the benefit of my union membership.

And then when the time comes, when I begun to start the union, what triggered it off, the main thing, the don't knows? They brought out these, they brought out the HGV license and the plaintiff? regulations and all of a sudden we went from handling lorries of 24 ton, 30 ton, and they were instead of going 30 foot they were 40 odd foot. So you went away one day and you came in and you got a bloody great big long articulator, half as long again as what you had, so they just expected us to drive them through the night and so on, and we said well, we want more money. And they said we're not going to pay you no more, so we said well, we won't take 'em out, and eventually they decided to give us half a crown a week. So anyway, eventually the majority of the blokes accepted it because they went round the factory? And there was still a lot of rumbling and discontent going on behind the scenes because of the half a crown. So I thought right, this is a good time, so I had another three of my mates who were involved in the union, they were keen, and we went round and we were hiding behind the pallets and that, recruiting people.

And then one day they said to me we don't want you to do that because you might get the sack. I said well, so will you. And they said yes, but you're the one we want to go and see the governor? when we get enough membership, and so we'd rather you not get the sack, you know. Anyway, when we did get around 50%, one day, what they used to do when they give you a wage rise, you had a card, your clock card, and you had your usual amount of hours and you signed it and when you opened the card there would be a little packet saying you'll be pleased to know that you've had an improvement in your pay this week, we've agreed to grant you X amount and that was the end of our negotiations, the beginning and end. So when the blokes started looking at the increases?, they come over to me because they more or less taken it along that I'm going to be the bloke that is going to do it? And they said well, we want you to go and sort it out, so I said well, the first thing to do is don't sign the cards.

So then of course the next thing you know, why won't they sign their cards? Have 'em up, so we all went up to his office and it was about this big, and there was a crowd of us in the office. They said what are we going to do? I said do the same as me. So when he said, he started shouting at us, hollering at us, you know, a bit of a bully, I said we're not satisfied with this pay rise you've given us, I remember his name, Mr Clifford? I said ?, like that and I slung it on the table. And all the rest slung it, slung them on the table and we all walked out, with no money, and that was a big thing in those days because people didn't have spare money, and when you went home and said to your wife I got no money, you know, most of 'em never had bank accounts or nothing like that, and few of them had some bother. Anyway, eventually they said that they'd meet us, but they weren't going to recognise the union.

During that period of time, I said that we've all joined a union and we're going to get, we're joined up and as far as we're concerned we're going to have a union here, and they said we won't recognise it. So eventually they turned around and said okay we want, oh, then we stopped work for half a day, all of a sudden and there was a queue of traffic all lining up right along the Western Avenue where the contractors were trying to get in, because we stuck two lorries across the front door. And eventually they said they wanted to meet us, so we went up and we met 'em, and what they'd done, they got me, and that was the room like that, and they stuck, they were there and there was the manager and the managing director and so on was sitting there, about four of 'em, they put me there and all the blokes were there.

Jan Pollock: Way behind you.

Reg Elkins: Sorry? yes, it was done to demoralise you.

Dave Welsh: You're out in the front there.

Reg Elkins: And anyway, in the meantime we'd all met down the pub in Southall? Road and made a list of what we wanted and we had a big long list and we got, out of about 14 of 'em we got 10 of 'em straight away.

And then eventually when we got the union going, I got elected as shop steward and we then went in pay negotiations and then eventually they said they would recognise the union. Well, I got elected and eventually they recognised the union. And we ended up, we had a meeting in the Howard? Hotel, Charing Cross, and it was a national ? meeting, all over the country, and we got the highest pay rise we've ever had. And then subsequent to that the union said well, we want to amalgamate all of these groups, and have 'em all under one roof, you know, instead of being split ? Little branches in Millwall, little branches in Chiswick, and they all come under the same group and they all split up in little branches and the reason was like as I said they want 'em all under one. So they said we're going to lay on coaches, we'll meet in the Southall Labour Club and whoever gets elected will be the convenor of the lot? So when we had the meeting I ended up getting elected as the convenor, ? out of 200 members and more members hung around. But it ended up with ?, Beecham's in Brentford, Beecham's in Northolt, and so on, you

know. So anyway, I hadn't had a lot of experience at that point you know, although I'd been in the union all my life. So they sent me away to a couple of courses straight away, sent me up to the airport for their branch meetings, to a place in Birmingham ? and went from there, and I'm hoping they're still going you know.

Dave Welsh: I wanted to ask both of you, I know it may seem a silly question but why did you both, what got you into the trade union movement in the first place? What was the cause?

Reg Elkins: My father was a secretary and my elder brother was, and he was also tied up with the Labour party, and my father was tied up with them.

Dave Welsh: That would be in the 1950s?

Jan Pollock: 60s?

Reg Elkins: Well, my father was involved with the union in the 20s and 30s, me older brother he was involved in the union probably late 30s and 40s.

Dave Welsh: Did your father, there's this thing about in the trade unions everything was like standards of living were going up in the 50s and 60s and everyone had a secure job but I don't think that's true because I think a lot of people look back to the 30s and thought, were always aware that things might go back, would you say that?

John Gallagher: Yes, well, in my case my father was in the Transport and General, and I was about 11 when he told me about transport and trade unionism, so I promptly rebelled and then joined the union as soon as I went to teacher training college nevertheless, because not only the defence at work as it were at that time the unions were insurance?, particularly important for teachers resources? trouble smacking kids particularly? But also my grandfather, that's my mother's father, John Frederick Stewart, although he was a Conservative, he was a founder member of the OEU? **Reg Elkins:** My brother was, my father was a stonemason, my brother was a stonemason, I could've been a stonemason but I didn't. And then me brother, he got wounded in the war, so he couldn't work after that, so he finished up in the Royal British Legion poppy factory in Richmond, and he was a convenor there and treasurer of the local Labour party.

Dave Welsh: So both of you then there was a history of trade unionism in your families.

John Gallagher: Well, you'll find that with many families that are still attached to the trade union movement, but we do come from, probably we do? You're talking about religion, we were brought up in a certain faith and also in the case of my family, my family come from Ireland, I've got more Irish ancestors than I have English ancestors. Everybody joined going back three generations in our family, particularly the females were members of the Co-op, like going back to Victorian times, all the females were members of the Co-op.

Reg Elkins: Well, in the case of my ancestors, I mean my mother was brought up in Lambeth House and she was an orphan. She was born in a greengrocer's and her grandmother run the greengrocer's shop, and on me father's side, his father he was ever so well to do, don't know what his politics were because I got a feeling he might have been right wing? because he had a business and he had several pawn shops plus sweet shops plus a lot of houses, and was pretty well off, and he got a summons for charging over the rate of interest for people pawning goods, he got fined very heavily for that, and he also got fined, you know when they brought out the stamps, for not being ?, there was a stamp that they used to have and he was stopping their money? I never met him, I only know, the only thing I know about him is what me older brother told me, ?, and the rest of the family, I had a lot of brothers and uncles and everything but I only met one or two of 'em.

But most of them were stonemasons, but me elder brother was treasurer of the local Labour party, he was fired up all the time you know, very enthusiastic. You're going back now to just after the war, he was probably in the Labour party before he went in the army. And I joined the Labour party, I joined the T&G. I joined the Labour party round about the late 50s, early 60s, and I joined the T&G in 1951, 52, something like that. Then I came out of the T&G, I worked for the Gas Company, driving a coke lorry and then I left that and I was working for the ? company when they only had three lorries, and they used to load these lorries up 50% over the weight, and it wasn't maintained very well, and I had a load on that was supposed to be going all round Scotland and northern England and the brakes were faulty and I had trouble stopping it. So I said I want the brakes done before I go. He said I'll do it when you get back. I said I won't, I'm not going out until I get 'em done. And he said well, you better get your cards, so I give him me cards. I went down to the union office in Lime Grove, I saw the fella there, Willet his name was, the district officer, and explained what had happened to me, expecting him to do something about it and he didn't bother. So I got me union card and tore it up in pieces and threw it at him.

Jan Pollock: Throwing union cards back at people seems to have been a bit of a habit.

Reg Elkins: Well, I was only, I was in me 20s then and then I wasn't in the union, and around about a fortnight, two or three weeks later, I pulled into a café in the Cotswolds and I got talking to this, at that time was an older fella than me, he was about 40 odd, and I told him what had happened and he said to me you can't be a lorry driver and not be in the union, but he said you've got to bear with it, because if a tyre went or something like that, he said you're bound to get in trouble, it might be a fine or a police accident, anything.

John Gallagher: Insurance.

Reg Elkins: He said you must be in it, he said join my union, so I joined the GMB. No, at that time it was not the GMB, it was United.

John Gallagher: Road Transport union, by any chance.

Reg Elkins: United Road Transport union, and I was in that for quite a while. But then when I started the union at Beecham's, it turned out that I was in the Ealing branch of the transport union and they wouldn't take anyone who weren't drivers. So I had to move out of that and rejoin the T&G in order to recruit in the warehouse, the warehouse workers and the forklift drivers, and from that time onwards I've been in the T&G.

Dave Welsh: So just to take you back, what about things like the Heath government, with the Heath government Industrial Relations bill?

John Gallagher: That did bring some recruitment into the unions because people were just getting annoyed. The big problem came with Thatcher's government and the determination to go after what she regarded and Keith Joseph regarded as Heath's failure to curb the unions, the all out war on the trades unions. But of course that gave this place the impetus to start, as I said in 1983, and as Reg said a year later was the miners' strike. We also got people involved in the seamen's strike, which was about two years afterwards. Like with the miners' strike, we don't have seamen or miners now, we were putting them up, they stayed with families, and then there was the Post Office strike, which was very much on our doorstep here.

Jan Pollock: Was that the man with the moustache?

John Gallagher: No, that was before, Tom Jackson had retired by then. I can't remember what set that post strike off, but then of course we didn't need to put people up because the postmen lived round here. But we did recruit members of the club quite heavily from that.

Reg Elkins: When you were talking about the 1950s and employment, you could pack a job up and get another job in the afternoon, especially if you had some skills, even small skills, you know. I never had no trouble getting work at all. I mean I worked for the asphalt? road company and I had a bust up with a bloke there. I got a job on the buses but I only lasted about a week, and he wrote to 'em and told 'em what they thought of me? So they got rid of me on misconduct in the industrial sense for treating a customer improperly? and I went to the ?, and I don't think I would have settled down as a bus driver anyway. Because after being used to being on heavy goods vehicles, the money was a lot lower and so on. But with the Heath government the thing I remember about that was as a result of the Heath government we had the biggest pay rise we ever had for years. Because he brought out this so called pay policy and the legislation stated that you could get X amount plus 1% flexibility. I think it was about 4 or 5% plus 1% flexibility, and we were trying to negotiate for a figure higher than that, and eventually the company said well, we can't go against government legislation, but we'll make an excuse for the 1% flexibility. The 1% was only payable if you could prove that you'd been improving your productivity somehow, in order to create incentive. So they cooked up some phrase, a few sentences that we all agreed to this, that and the other, and nothing really changed. So we got I think it was 4% plus, plus ? Then we got contained within that legislation was the cost of living allowance, and if the cost of living went to a certain amount you got so and so, and after that it went up 1% for every percent above the cost of living, and when it went, the cost of living went so sky high that we ended up getting more out of the cost of living index than we did from the actual pay deal. We come away with a massive pay rise because of that legislation.

John Gallagher: When unemployment in west London begins to kick in, for instance unemployment in Hounslow, because my mother came from Hounslow and I was born in Hounslow, but going back to Northern Ireland because my father came from Belfast, I came back in 1963. Hounslow the London borough was set up the year after that. Hounslow had a population of 190,000, something like that, and 400 unemployed, and then from then onwards it goes up almost inexorably.

Dave Welsh: So what's that, from about early 60s you're talking about? So the jobs are going, unemployment is starting to hit in west London, as well as nationally.

John Gallagher: Yes, and then containerisation comes in, which kills off a lot of industries. The factories shut down and turn into warehouses, and that's what happened in parts of Park Royal and in Great West Road by 1980, mid-1980s, Thatcher's effectively destroyed the manufacturing, the light industry, and on the Great West Road, Feltham? and Southall, and added to that of course is the ceasing to use the canals, which then had an incredibly bad effect on Brentford in particular and to some extent Acton, which at Southall is the same the canal network, you've got the Grand Union and the Grand Junction coming off it.

Dave Welsh: I want to take you back to two of the big disputes in the 70s, which was Trico and Grunwick.

John Gallagher: Ah, Grunwick, yes indeed, that was well supported round here. At the time the Labour party and the Trades Council at Acton were the same organisation, as they were in several parts of the country, so I was the treasurer of both. And we were quite heavily involved in all sorts of escapades, like protesting outside chemists who developed Grunwick film.

Dave Welsh: Photo Grunwick film.

John Gallagher: Yes, and all that sort of thing, and we were in quite close contact with Brent Trades Council.

Dave Welsh: Did you go down to the mass picket? Was that not easy?

John Gallagher: I'm a lazy so and so, I did it at chemists round here. There were a lot of people that did go on the mass pickets and of course Jack Dromey was secretary of Brent Trades Council and he subsequently became a district officer in Southall for the Transport and General, and I knew Jack and Harriet anyway through the National Council for Civil Liberties. And Grunwick was very similar round here to the miners' strike, we were doing collections and demonstrating, several times we were threatened with arrest by the police but we used to use, what is now Cooper's Court up the road was a Co-op, a big Co-op store, which closed in about 1987. The staff there were sympathetic to us and of course we did a lot of the collecting on their forecourt, and the police would turn up to arrest us and then there'd be an outraged manager threatening to phone the commissioner because the police were trespassing on Co-op property while members of the Co-op and the Labour party and the trade unions were going about their legitimate protest.

Reg Elkins: I was on the Brent Trades Council for the ? when Jack Dromey and ? was secretary and chairman, but I've got an idea because I spent a lot of time away and the attendances were on Sundays, well very often I done Sunday work as well as night work and everything else and my attendance level was poor really, and I attended the ballot and so and so on, I done it a few times, in fact a mate of mine when he was with me got one of the ? But Roy done the same and we did the other one? Trico, I don't know too much about that because at that time.

John Gallagher: My mother was involved because she was working there then, but only as somebody on strike.

Reg Elkins: Phyllis Green worked there.

John Gallagher: Yes, of course.

Reg Elkins: She was one of our members?

John Gallagher: We did know a few people who worked there.

Dave Welsh: They won, obviously they won the equal pay.

John Gallagher: They won the equal pay but then of course like all the other firms, Lucozade's about the only that is even recognised now on the Great West Road. And of course Beecham's is still there with their changed name GKA. No, it's not GKA, oh you know the one.

Reg Elkins: Well, I spent 9 years at Beecham's, and then I went on the petrol lorries at Langley and then after that I finished up working at Guinness for 25 years.

Dave Welsh: And what was Guinness like compared with?

Reg Elkins: Guinness was you were away from home a lot but it was the best firm I ever worked for, and best wages, best company, everything, couldn't have it better really. I mean it was difficult to find something to moan about, you know it was very paternalistic.

John Gallagher: He used to drive Lord Ealing? from time to time.

Dave Welsh: And there was a union there?

Reg Elkins: Oh yes, yes, they had a union and very, very strong union. How the union came about there was, at one time Guinness didn't have its own transport, and they hired from Thomas Allen in Wapping, and they used to pick up the beer from Bristol and places like that when it come across on the boat from Dublin, and then when they built the Guinness Brewery, they still gave all the work to the Thomas Allen company and, but Guinness owned the tanks that were fitted on to the chassis and Thomas Allen owned the chassis.

And then eventually, for some reason or the other, there was some tax savings in it, Guinness decided to start their own transport, so they put all the trucks? and drivers under the Guinness contract, so they could come and work for Guinness and their service for Thomas Allen would be counted. Some of them had been working for Thomas Allen since the 1930s, and they all came over. And then what happened then you see they were travelling over to Wapping for their union meeting, most of them were related to dockers, most of them had mothers and fathers that worked or come from the dockland area and worked there. So a lot of 'em, I think they were actually amalgamated with the dockyards union, the GMT, and then when they got to the stage where they were obviously didn't want to keep travelling over, they joined a union at Alperton bottling company, Alperton, because they used to bottle Guinness, and when that closed down they said okay we'll start our own union up, so in 1950 they had a meeting in the local pub, forget what it was called now, it's just on the corner.

John Gallagher: This is where I say the reason I'm not saying anything is because I'm going outside for a cigarette.

Reg Elkins: Anyway, they started the union in 1950 and that's the union now that I'm involved in, and it was, bearing in mind that they were mostly all either ex-dockers or related to dockers, a very, very strong, very, very militant union and it remained so right up till Guinness closed. And I didn't allow it to get too militant? But when I started the ? branch in the early 70s, around about 72 I think it was, a lot of the people that were there had been through the war in the army, and they'd made up their minds they weren't going to be pushed around. So they was, if anything went wrong they were raring to go, and I spent my time calming them down, you know, to give me some time to sort it out, and then as time went on and they went, when they retired or died, no one ever left there, I got a younger element in and there was a distinct change in attitude. They weren't anywhere near as.

Jan Pollock: Was this the 60s?

Dave Welsh: 60s or later?

Reg Elkins: No, in the 80s, lot of, there was no, the militancy wasn't quite so much, if the subject was right they'd go on for hours? But generally speaking the things that the others would have kicked up about they wouldn't, because hey hadn't been in the army or navy or anything like that.

Dave Welsh: You think that was the reason then that they hadn't come from wartime?

Reg Elkins: I think it's the background, they got the hard background and all that, it was a part of it and even some of the ones who hadn't been in the army, that had come from the East End, there was that militancy with them, it was in the dockyard area you know among them at least and they all suffered.

Jan Pollock: Way back to the great dock strike.

John Gallagher: Possibly, yes.

Reg Elkins: I noticed it anyway, of course I put it down to, some of it, the drivers were generally quite militant in any case, you'll find that... it would then spread to the factories like that you know. There was a tendency for the drivers to become unionised for protection as well as everything else. But the thing I could never understand was there was a lot of really experienced people there in the union. I mean I was the senior steward, apart from being the chairman I was the senior steward, because the chairman was automatically senior steward. Well, there were blokes there you know who had been shop stewards for 30 odd years, you know they had far more experience than I had, and they still wanted me to do the bloody job. Whether they couldn't

be bothered or whether they wanted a younger person and I was like the young blood you know but at that time I was only 40 odd, and most of them were older than that, you know.

Dave Welsh: So can you say again, why do you think those drivers were more militant? Why were they? What was it?

Reg Elkins: I think it's not always but generally, quite a lot of times, put it that way, if not always, that might be an exaggeration but I think one is that a driver obviously you need protection from police, whatever, you know, from the company, because if you're a driver you're getting told by your company you could quite easily have accidents and violations of the law and not come in on time, all sorts of things, using the vehicle and what have you, upsetting customers. So you've got far more chance of crossing of swords with the governor as a driver than a lot of other jobs. But the other thing also is that if they were upset about something, if they were on a long journey, they'd sit down thinking about it and they'd brood and by the time they'd got back they'd got the hump, you know. And I've known drivers to come in, give me my cards, sod yer, I'm off, that sort of thing you know.

Jan Pollock: They had the skill to get another job presumably?

Reg Elkins: Well, I never had any trouble getting a job as a HGV driver, and I had good wages all the time and I could have left? But after I retired when I was 65, I worked right up to 65, I went to an agency up there and I said to them, this was in 1997 or so, I said to them you got any vacancies for me? I'm 66 now or 67, got an HGV 1. Well, he said, I can fix you up now between 9 and 16 quid an hour, which is not a bad wage then they paid at that time you know, whatever you want. He said you can have local work, journey work, day work, any work as long as you've got an HGV 1. Once you got that HGV 1 you were laughing, but the other ones, other than that, not so much, because it wasn't easy to get an HGV license, because you had a two hour test and it took you a while to get trained up and so on, and if you hadn't done it before it would be very difficult to get.

Me, I was lucky, I more or less grew up with it if you know what I mean, started off on smaller lorries and I worked me way up, by the time 1956 come I was driving heavy goods, by, just by gradually moving up one after another to the higher levels. And even now I see there's plenty of vacancies for HGV 1 drivers, I would think so. I was getting £30,000 a year in 1992, it was a lot of money. That was a guaranteed 30 grand a year. Well, that's not, that wouldn't be much good now I suppose but it was then. And most lorry drivers, HGV 1 drivers in those days got between 20, 23, 24, 25, ?, about that?, a bit higher, it was good money on that job. But I don't know, most of the firms I visited at the time were fairly militant you know, the same as dockers are, the same as miners were, you know, steel workers, people like that, I don't know what it is, put it down to the fact that they get upset fairly easily sometimes.

Dave Welsh: yes, you need to stand together.

Reg Elkins: That's right, yes, I mean, I can remember on one occasion when they wanted to sack a bloke and they all stopped work straight away without even talking about it, they just stopped work. Oh yes, ? I mean we had, we always had someone on the ? delegates conference. I went on that a lot of times. We always had someone on the executive council of the T&G, and were a very, very active branch, you know. We had a JP who ? JP, and we had another one who went on the Industrial Tribunal, things like that you know. It was a branch that was progressive you know, and one of our blokes was advocate? for ?, Danny Everett? I don't know whether you've ever come across him? He would spend some time up at the Labour party, he was on Hammersmith Trades Council and he was a JP in Hammersmith, he done the children's court. He was involved in the trade union movement for donkey's years. He died about 6 or 7 years ago, but he was my branch secretary.

John Gallagher: Yes.

Dave Welsh: And were your branch meetings well attended?

Reg Elkins: yes, up until the last few years they were, especially when everything was upstanding? But the last, when they closed, Guinness decided to offer them redundancy and those of us who would take redundancy would go to this new company, and they gave them the franchise to do the work, and those who stayed, that included me because I wouldn't accept redundancy on principle, we the same pay and conditions as we would have done if we would have stayed there. Whereas the other lads who joined that company got the basic they got, so we had a two tier pay system which wasn't a good idea, because that caused trouble eventually. We were on 7 or 8 grand more than they were and that caused a bit of upset. But those branch meetings weren't well attended as they were when they were at Guinness.

John Gallagher: I transferred from the central office branch of the T&G to Reg's branch, because I thought it would be the best place to be for taking early retirement, and the two of us were there just as the branch lost most of its members basically.

Dave Welsh: And so you done some teaching and then you decided to leave that?

John Gallagher: And worked for Firestone's and then went to the T&G.

Dave Welsh: What was the teaching work, what were you doing when you were teaching?

John Gallagher: Well, the school, like many schools now is closed, it was in Hayes, at that time, this was the late 60s, early 70s, we had a terrific haemorrhaging of young people from west London, horrific, boroughs all over west London were closing schools, and in 1975 I went on the education committee in Ealing, it was then Labour controlled, so we were very reluctant to close the school but we lost the following council election in 1978 to the Conservatives, and they closed I think 6 primary schools and 3 secondary schools. By the 80s we were building schools again, and then recently there's been such an expansion in the population of Ealing for example, because from the 2001 census to 2002? we got 40,000 kids that we've got to build new classrooms for, and that includes building a new high school. There's a community centre down the road which was closed by the Conservatives as a primary school, as an infant school in 1980, and turned it into a community centre, we've just had to tell the users of the community centre to turn it back into a school, and we're building a new Roman Catholic school, Holy Family church in West Acton and we're building a new Church of England school in Greenford.

Jan Pollock: Would a lot of these be with PFI, rather than funded direct?

John Gallagher: No, we built a lot of schools from their foundations, which of course is one to consult? for the future, but the whole point in the 1930s involved building council houses and building schools then, and there was a great building of schools from 1945 onwards. What started it off borrowing and that was financed by taxation and the rates as Council Tax was called at the time. When we come to, if we're building something for the future then it has to be mortgaged in the future as well, because why should people who are alive today bear all the cost of building for the future.

Dave Welsh: Well, in a way it's a question for both of you because given you've both many decades of experience as trade unionists and workers, I just wondered what you're main fear and main hope for the future is, based on all that experience and understanding of what's gone on so far?

John Gallagher: My fear, speaking as a local politician I think, is that young people are now put in a position where they rarely understand the history, they rarely understand the history of their locality, they rarely understand the history of their great-grandparents, a lot of them won't vote and they seem to forget that their great-grandmothers were either Suffragettes and they fought

for the vote or were in virtual slavery in various Commonwealth countries, and this just seems to have been wiped out of their history and they forget about it. They think that the bosses of the corporations or the multi-national corporations can dictate their earnings, their environment, their everything, and they don't have the knowledge of what their ancestors have done through the trade unions or the Labour movement or the Co-operative movement. The Co-op movement is a great antidote to multi-national capitalism. We should be bringing that back to them and giving them some hope that there was at least in the past the way that whether they were people from the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland, or the wider Commonwealth or indeed other European countries, probably worse than the United Kingdom in Victorian times but they formed that and that's how they got a better standard of living. It is important that they do not forget that, or rather that they learn it.

Reg Elkins: I mean, I agree with everything that John said, and I also feel that you have to support co-operatives, I mean my wife has a go at me because I got to the Co-op and I try and justify to her why it costs more. I say they pay better wages than Tesco's, they give a dividend and so on, Tesco's don't give you points coupons or Oyster card or whatever they call it. But the other, my main concern is that you got the European Union on one hand ? which is none elected and they're encroaching into our affairs in a big way and they're going in with far more authority than any of our governments. You take for example this business about workers having to go from all over the country, all over Europe, and their existing pay, wage where they're working would not be, we wouldn't be allowed to go out on strike, the system getting our wages so, I forget what you call it now, there's an argument going on about that.

But the other thing that I'm concerned about is there isn't anyone at the moment and I don't think there's going to be at the moment, unless people wake up, to actually, truly represent the working class, because the Labour party we've got at the moment, people are not going out to vote because they've got no confidence in any of the parties. I don't think they've got any confidence in the people they've got now in the higher echelons of the Labour party, they chop and change every 5 minutes. They change their tack according to what they think is going to be acceptable to get their selves enhanced. They're more concerned about their own political career than anything else, and I mean how could you trust Ed Balls? He's changed his mind about the economy 5 or 6 bloody times, and when you ask him something, he'll answer but in other words he patronises you.

People are not satisfied with any of the political parties that we've got, that's why they're not going out to vote. And if that doesn't change then people will become so switched off that the oligarchs in the European Union will run rough shod over us, and they'll sit back and let it happen instead of sitting at the table, and I can't see it changing. I mean you can't say you've had a Labour party in the last 20 years. It's been a watered-down Tory party and I can't understand why they're turning around and saying if they get back in that they'll carry on with the cuts and make 'em last longer, so we will suffer longer. And the first thing they should do, immediately, I mean if I got into debt and you two owed me some money the first thing I'd do is collect that money off of you to sort my debt out. Now the first thing we should be doing is collecting the debt off some of the bosses who are dodging the taxes, and there's no incentive for that to happen because a lot of 'em are doing it their selves.

John Gallagher: Another problem that we've got is the consumerisation to encourage the general public to become massively indebted, and that does all add up to the balance sheet of the country. Nobody in their right mind should make people live in this world of unreality, where you can just go out with a credit card and keep multinationals going, because at the end of the day you're piling up all sorts of problems for your children's future. Another thing I would like to say because I don't think we make it clear at the beginning, this club is a Co-op, we are an Industrial and Provident Society, what you missed earlier I'm afraid was our half-yearly meeting where it's very rarely quorate, 25 members to a meeting out of 71, but it's done democratically, we are an elected committee, as I said earlier, a voluntary committee as well.

We belong to, we very recently joined Co-ops UK, the umbrella organisation for co-operatives and we're very proud to be a member and as I said we're also affiliated to CAMRA, the campaign for real ale and we welcome their members in here with their membership cards, and we are doing our best locally. We have several other co-ops, we have a huge list of services which does the backroom work for a lot of the voluntary organisations in Ealing. We have the Q? credit union Brent and Ealing which started off with about 200 people 10 or so years ago, as a small credit union on Southampton? estate, set up by the Catholic church with support from the Methodist churches as well, that's now taken over the whole of Ealing and Brent, and we've got the councils and several of the housing associations and other bodies ? and we are trying to set an example round here of co-operative living, where it is the alternative to multinational corporate capitalism.

Reg Elkins: yes, a lot of our people here, when they die they have a Co-op funeral. The last one we had had a Co-op funeral, I shall probably have one as well.

John Gallagher: I'm signed up as well.

Reg Elkins: My brother had one, but I've got a Co-op phone and a Co-op computer, whatever you call it, Internet thing, and I've got a Co-op mobile and I've got a Co-op bank, and I'm happy with the Co-op and I don't care about paying extra, because I'd much rather give it to something like the Co-op. I mean, I'll give you an example, I went to a place in Devon?, and it was taken over by the Co-op, the multinational grocery company, and I said to one of the girls there, have you noticed any difference since you've been taken over by the Co-op. She said yes, one big difference, your wages are better, and I've got a feeling that's why most went? There's one or two hiccups now again that we get from them, I mean, they decided to go against the GMB? the funeral ? people, but generally speaking I'm happy. My brother was the same, he was a Co-op man, but he's dead now, but he was Co-op.