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Collectivism and the Self-Representation of Building Workers in  
Stevenage New Town**

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## **‘Through Trade Unionism you felt a belonging—you belonged’: Collectivism and the Self-Representation of Building Workers in Stevenage New Town**

When it comes to self-representation of building workers, books are relatively thin on the ground. Of those that have been published, perhaps one of the most colourful was Brian Behan’s 1964 memoir, which included an account of a major strike on Robert MacAlpine’s Shell-Mex site on the South Bank in London in 1958 that resulted in him being jailed and expelled from the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers (AUBTW).<sup>1</sup> Another reasonably well-known memoir was published four years earlier by Donall MacAmlaigh.<sup>2</sup> Based on his diaries, MacAmlaigh’s book was an account of his experiences on various civil engineering and building sites in the Midlands and London during the 1950s. Like Behan’s autobiography, the picture painted by MacAmlaigh was of a casualised industry, where employment rights were at best precarious and often non-existent.

Famous fictional accounts of construction workers lives written by workers have of course been published both by Robert Tressell and Patrick MacGill. Tressell—the pen name of Irish socialist Robert Noonan—worked for much of his relatively short life as a house painter and drew on this to produce in the *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* one of the most famous novels in British literary history. Donegal-born MacGill experienced the harshness of life as a navvy working in Scotland on sites such as the Kinlochleven hydro-electric scheme in the first decade of the

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Behan, *With Breast Expanded*, (London, 1964), 152-157 This dispute was also covered in the *Daily Worker*, 9, 15, and 31 October 1958 and *The Times* 8 November, 21 November 1958.

<sup>2</sup> Donall MacAmlaigh, *An Irish Navvy: Diary of an Exile*, (London, 1964) the book was originally published in Irish in 1960, under the title *Diolann Deorai*.

twentieth century, and, like Tressell, brought these experiences into his autobiographical novel *Children of the Dead End* and two other related works, *The Rat Pit* and *Moleskin Joe*.<sup>3</sup>

One theme that runs throughout these various accounts is that of the building worker as an individualistic figure—part of a fragmented workforce living in a world where collectivism does not really exist, beyond perhaps the small group or the gang of which the worker is part. This portrayal is also evident in the self-representations of Irish building workers, which have been collected and mediated for publication by Ultan Cowley. Cowley's works, based largely on written correspondence and some oral interviews, are sympathetic to Irish workers and he is keen to recognise their importance to the post-war reconstruction of Britain. But a questionable aspect of Cowley's analysis is his failure to focus more centrally on the dynamic of exploitation and collective resistance that informs an important part of the story of construction workers in Britain, the Irish included. Irish workers were employed in large numbers in the British construction industry. They often endured appalling living and working conditions. But while aspects of this are highlighted, Cowley did not confront its implications or the manner in which it was resisted. For example, when he quoted Robert McAlpine saying that the Scots made the best gangers, the English the best clients and the Irish the best labourers<sup>4</sup> this was presented as evidence of the importance of Irish workers to McAlpine, rather than a sign that McAlpine saw Irish workers as a resource to be super-exploited. In his defence of Irish workers Cowley also contrasted them to British workers, indicating that they worked harder and were

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick MacGill *Children of the Dead End* (Dublin: 2001 edition); *The Rat Pit* (Dublin: 2001 edition) and *Moleskin Joe* (Dublin: 2005 edition). The books were originally published in 1914, 1915 and 1923 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Ultan Cowley, *The Men who Built Britain*, (Dublin, 2001), 10.

‘unhindered by trade unions and restrictive practices’.<sup>5</sup> In reality, and as can be seen with reference to some of the more notable strikes that took place in the post-war building industry, Irish workers played an important role in building worker trade unionism and struggle.<sup>6</sup>

An even more negative depiction of building workers has been offered by academics such as Freeman<sup>7</sup>, and Hayes. Of particular interest is the work of the latter, which focused on British building workers. Hayes argued that it was an ‘almost exclusively male world’ comprised of a largely casualised workforce, whose immediate loyalty was to the small group or gang. This of course is similar to the accounts in the memoirs of building workers themselves. However, Hayes went further and attempted to make a case for this being in line with the interests and outlook of the workers. He argued that inherent within this ‘world’ was a ‘philosophy that placed little productive value on improving working conditions and instead stressed worker self-reliance’.<sup>8</sup> Hayes insisted that what he termed ‘welfarism’—the reforms advocated by construction trade unions—‘frequently worked against the operatives cultural understanding of what site life meant’.<sup>9</sup> He drew a distinction between building workers and trade unionists, even though they were obviously often one and the same thing, and questioned whether building employers ‘in not seeking to

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<sup>5</sup> Ultan Cowley, *MacAlpine’s Men*, (London, 2010) 16.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the major dispute on the South Bank, mentioned above, Irish workers were also heavily involved in a series of strikes on the Barbican re-development in London during 1965-67, including one strike that lasted 13 months, and the 1972 national building workers’ strike. For more on the Barbican dispute, and its long-term consequences for building worker trade unionism, see Charlie McGuire et al ‘Battles on the Barbican: the struggle for trade unionism in the British Building Industry, 1965-67’, *History Workshop Journal*, Spring 2013, 33-57.

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Freeman, ‘Hardhats: Construction Workers, Manliness and the 1970 Pro-War demonstrations’ *Journal of Social History*, 26, 4, (1993).

<sup>8</sup> Nick Hayes, ‘Did Manual Workers Want Industrial Welfare? Canteens, Latrines, and Masculinity on British Building Sites, 1918-1970’, *Journal of Social History*, 35, 3, (2002), 637.

<sup>9</sup> Hayes, ‘Manual Workers’, 638

“molly-coddle” operatives had a greater clarity of understanding of worker attitudes and priorities than did the building unions’.<sup>10</sup>

Hayes arguments were undermined by his misrepresentation of debates that took place at building union conferences in the 1950s. Particularly problematic was his understanding of the criticisms of the Holidays with Pay scheme<sup>11</sup>, which he maintained were made by workers uninterested in such benefits, partly because they preferred the pay to the holiday and partly because it conflicted with the ‘masculine site culture’.<sup>12</sup> In fact, and as could be seen from a fuller examination of the conference debate on the matter, the real reason for the criticism lay in the limitations of the scheme, the accusation that some members were submitting cards but not receiving the pay they were entitled to, and also the decree by employers that the two-week holiday be taken in its entirety during the Christmas period, as opposed to one week being held over to the summer.<sup>13</sup> In short, the criticisms had nothing to do with indifference over site conditions, or particular notions of masculinity.

Notwithstanding this, the negative image that Hayes conjured up still prevails—that of construction workers as a group who are concerned solely with their own individual economic circumstances, and who are uninterested in, or perhaps incapable of, pursuing collectivist demands such as improved health and safety, enhanced working conditions and better pay arrangements for all.

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<sup>10</sup> Hayes, ‘Manual Workers’, 651.

<sup>11</sup> The holidays with pay scheme was introduced to the construction industry in 1943. For more, see WS Hilton, *Industrial Relations in Construction*, (Oxford: Pergamon, 1968), pp 165-169.

<sup>12</sup> Hayes, ‘Manual Workers’, 642-643.

<sup>13</sup> For more on this see the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives, (NFBTO) *Annual Conference Report, 1954*, (London, 1954), 54-56; and *Annual Conference Report, 1955*, (London: 1955), 77-79. The NFBTO was the central body to which most construction unions were affiliated, prior to the establishment of the Union of Construction and Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT).

However, a recent oral history project which examined in depth the lives of over 50 building workers<sup>14</sup> challenges some of these popular assertions about building worker identity. These workers were employed on some of the highest profile construction sites of the post-war era, including the Barbican re-development, and the South Bank arts centre. Many of them certainly highlighted the brutal and chaotic nature of the industry, but they also recalled collective efforts to change it for the better. In relation to the case study which this article focuses on, Stevenage New Town, it will be seen that not only did some building workers display a very clear commitment to collectivism and utilise this to great effect on the sites themselves, winning good pay and superior conditions as a result, but they also emerged as the predominant social and political actor in the new town, wielding influence over its development in the process.<sup>15</sup> Seeing the new towns project as an exciting and new experiment, aimed at improving the conditions of working class people, the Stevenage building workers invested hugely in its development. They provided the leadership of many community organisations in the fledgling town, and also saw several of their members elected to the local council.

Given the fragmented nature of the industry and trade union organisation therein, there were of course tensions at times between different groups of workers and their unions. However, on the whole, a strong collectivist mind-set prevailed. It will be argued that the key means by which this all of this was achieved was through their

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<sup>14</sup> The author was the sole full-time research fellow at Westminster University on this Leverhulme Trust funded project, 'Constructing Post-War Britain: Building Workers' Stories, 1950-1970'. The PI for the project was Christine Wall. Michaela Brockmann, Linda Clarke, and Olivia Munoz-Rojas also contributed to the project.

<sup>15</sup> This article draws upon seven interviews conducted by the author with retired Stevenage building workers during 2010-11. The seven are: Fred Udell, ex bricklayer and clerk of works, interviewed in Stevenage 2 November 2010; Ted Oswick, ex bricklayer, interviewed in Stevenage, 23 November 2010; Dave Ansell, ex bricklayer interviewed in Datchworth, 30 November 2010; Harry Whitfield, ex painter, interviewed in Stevenage 15 December 2010; Luke Donovan; ex-forklift driver interviewed in Stevenage, 1 February 2011; Bob Hooper, ex bricklayer interviewed in Stevenage, 6 April 2011; Fred Whiting, ex bricklayer's labourer, interviewed in Stevenage, 18 May 2011.

commitment to trade unionism, and that trade unionism was, and continues to be today for those now long-retired workers, the central means by which their identity was constructed.

### **Stevenage New Town**

Stevenage was the first of the state-funded new towns to be constructed in the post-war period and was built in successive stages from 1950 onwards. Initially, the plan was to build a town of 60,000 people, split equally into six neighbourhoods, each with its own local shops, schools, churches pubs, community centres and clinics etc.<sup>16</sup> The six neighbourhoods were Stevenage old town; Bedwell; Broadwater; Shephall; Chells; and Pin Green. This was further developed, through the addition of Symonds Green, and by the late 1970s Stevenage had a population of around 72,000. The first two housing estates to be built in Stevenage were Monks Wood and Bedwell. The construction firm Tersons completed this and many of the other early contracts.<sup>17</sup> Stevenage house-building contracts were normally split into smaller sites, or phases. For example, the first Monks Wood contract was split into two sites, East and West, and contained a total of 248 houses. Later, the £5 million Pin Green contract, completed by Mowlem, for over 2000 houses, was split into three phases, each containing over 700 houses.<sup>18</sup> This in turn was further divided into sites, some of which were over 200 houses in size, and which could employ around 200 workers.

Many of the men who worked on the early Stevenage contracts were from in and around London, and came to Stevenage in order to get a house. Fred Udell's story is

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<sup>16</sup> Jack Balchin, *First New Town, an autobiography of Stevenage Development Corporation*, (Stevenage 1980), 69.

<sup>17</sup> Tersons was a major construction company in the early post-war period, running 140 sites and employing over 5000 workers. The company was owned by Power Securities, which was later taken over by British Insulated Callender's Cables. Tersons was losing several millions of pounds by the end of the 1960s and was later wound up.

<sup>18</sup> Hertfordshire Archives (HALS) CNT/ST/5/2/18/Volume 25, Negotiated contract between John Mowlem and Co. and Stevenage Development Corporation, 15 December 1961.

typical of these early Stevenage pioneers. Born in London in 1925, Udell was like most of the men interviewed in this project: young and married, and in his case living with his wife, Vi, and young daughter, with Vi's parents in a small flat in Dagenham. Any hopes they had of gaining a council house in that particular area were quickly dispelled following a visit to Romford council offices in 1950, where they were informed that they could be on a waiting list for over ten years.<sup>19</sup> The policy of Stevenage Development Corporation (SDC) was to give building workers who were employed on a house-building contract in Stevenage a house after around six months, providing they were on a London County Council waiting list. This was seen as the best way of encouraging workers to travel the 30 miles or so from London. In the period between gaining the job and getting the houses, the workers either travelled to and from London every day, in coaches laid on by the contractors, or they stayed in purpose-built hostels in Stevenage.

The fact that workers had to wait for at least six months before getting a house made them wary of being sacked and less likely to challenge management. Some spoke of the pressure they felt to 'keep their mouths shut'.<sup>20</sup> Udell recalled that he had been hired by Tersons, but was surprised to find out that he was actually employed by a labour-only sub-contractor, who presided over terrible conditions on site:

The toilet was an Anderson air-raid shelter, with two doors at an angle, over a pit, and a wooden pole that you sat on, and you couldn't reach the pole because the sides of the pit had fell in, so you walked into the [Love's Wood] down there and went to the toilet, best you could, and then come back again. I hadn't been there long and I needed to go, and I said to him, before I realised what the situation is, I said, "George, where's the toilet?" ...You know what he said? "You shit in your own time, not mine!" That was the atmosphere... and you were treated as if you didn't exist.<sup>21</sup>

But once this early influx of Stevenage building workers had received their houses, the situation began to change. In several of the interviews, and in the written

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Fred Udell.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid



memoir of Stevenage bricklayer and ex-Communist Bert Lowe, the same incident was recalled as the catalyst for this change. The incident was the sacking of an Irish labourer, Kevin Murphy, in 1951. Murphy had left the site in order to see the house that he had just been allocated and was fired by Tersons. His sacking was the first show-down between workers and employers in Stevenage. According to Lowe, the solidarity it generated proved vital for the period ahead.

The general feeling was that if this was allowed to happen to Kevin, whose turn would it be next? A meeting of trade union members was held in my house and an agreement was reached to call for a mass stoppage the following morning to demand the re-instatement of Kevin. We had a 100% response to the strike call and Kevin was re-instated. The lads now knew that if they acted together in unity most of our aims could be achieved. This feeling of solidarity was great.<sup>22</sup>

The related themes of struggle and solidarity constitute the hallmark of the testimonies of the Stevenage building workers. In many of the life-stories, these workers have constructed themselves as pioneers who began their new lives in Stevenage with nothing, living in an empty, undeveloped space that was bereft of civic and social organisation, and basic amenities. But nearly all of them had been trade union members before moving to Stevenage, and it was this attachment and commitment to collective struggle that runs through their testimonies. Woven into their accounts is the conviction that every improvement had to be fought for and that success could be gained only through sticking together and acting collectively, through the agency of the union.

Harry Whitfield is a good example of the way in which this developing trade union culture impacted upon and was engaged with by workers in Stevenage. Born in London in 1924, Whitfield was a painter and had been an occasional member of the Amalgamated Society of Painter and Decorators (ASPD). But after arriving in Stevenage, this particular aspect of his identity was developed and came much more

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<sup>22</sup> Bert Lowe, *Anchorman*, (Stevenage, 1996), 55.

to the fore. He not only ended up as shop steward, with responsibilities such as negotiating the bonus payments that often constituted a significant portion of a building workers' wage, but also was involved in numerous strikes. These were normally unofficial, short-lived disputes, which occurred as a result of the employers cutting the target times per house at the start of a new site, and the workers determination to resist.

Every time you thought you were satisfied...they cut [the times]... 'why are you going on strike', [the employers would ask]? Well, because we want the same pay for this site as we had last site'<sup>23</sup>

Whitfield also recalled occasions when secondary strikes would take place in support of other workers. After leaving construction, he became a maintenance painter in the BA plant, where he was also the shop steward and at the time of his interview in December 2010 was still active as the treasurer of the local Union of Construction and Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT) branch.

Another example is Luke Donovan, who was born in Wexford, Ireland in 1939 and came to Stevenage in the early 1960s to work on the sites as a forklift driver. There were considerable numbers of Irish workers on the Stevenage sites, most of whom appear to have been employed in ground-works squads.<sup>24</sup> Many, like Donovan, had little or no prior experience of trade unionism. In a comment that speaks volumes for the power of trade unionism on the Stevenage sites, Donovan recalled how he was effectively given a site job by the union convenor, but that he first had to join the union to get this start. Donovan would go onto become a trade union shop steward, site convenor, and at the time of his interview in February 2011, was still the chair of the local UCATT branch. In short, as a result of coming to Stevenage, trade unionism became a key, permanent component of Donovan's identity.

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<sup>23</sup>Interview with Harry Whitfield.

<sup>24</sup> This point was made in interviews with Dave Ansell; Luke Donovan; and Ted Oswick.

You couldn't get on the job, so he [Tommy Lawlor, the union convenor] said to me, "Have you got a union card?" I said, "I haven't got a union card....so he said, "Alright, you'll have to go to your branch and be proposed and seconded and get a union card," and, ever since, I've been involved in the union....I've been a Branch Secretary now for 30 years.<sup>25</sup>

Following their success in re-instating Kevin Murphy, the Stevenage building workers turned next to what most building trade unionists regarded as one of the most pernicious developments in the post-war building industry—the rise of labour-only sub-contracting, or the 'lump'. This was a form of wage contract, where a contractor would hire, on a labour-only basis, workers who were nominally self-employed and pay them an agreed lump sum for an agreed amount of work. In reality, these self-employed workers performed the same tasks on site as directly employed workers, but their different legal and tax status contained negative implications for trade union organisation. The contractor hiring the lump labour had no responsibilities, in terms of income tax deduction, or regarding the payment of National Insurance contributions, holiday pay, sick pay, training subsidy or pensions.<sup>26</sup> As a result, lump workers often received a higher rate of pay than their directly-employed counterparts. They also had an incentive in getting the work finished as quickly as possible, and often had little interest in health and safety considerations, site conditions or the training of apprentices. Given that the basic role of building trade unions was to bargain for better pay and conditions, gain control over the length of the working day, as well as the training of the next generation of workers and members, it is clear that lump workers had little reason to join a union.

The background to the rise of the lump was the combination of labour shortages; growing demand for buildings; the general economic expansion of this period; and the

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Luke Donovan.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the factors behind the building employers' support for labour-only sub contracting, see the 2-page feature on the issue in *Construction News*, 20 July 1967.

sweeping technological changes that allowed for a substantial increase in building output from the early 1950s onwards. At a time when particular categories of skilled trades-people were often in short supply, it allowed building employers to pay higher wages and recruit workers, but in such a way that cut the trade unions out of this process altogether. During the 1960s, the numbers of self-employed in building rose from 212,000 to 494,000<sup>27</sup>, the overwhelming majority of whom were labour-only. By 1968, it was estimated that 63% of the biggest construction companies in Britain—those that employed over 1200 workers—were using lump labour.<sup>28</sup> London and the South East generally were the worst affected at this time, and it was particularly prevalent in the traditional trades, such as bricklaying, carpentry, plastering, roofing and floor-laying.<sup>29</sup>

Austrin has argued, quite convincingly, that the rise of lump labour in the building industry helps solve the basic conundrum of why, at a point when objective conditions should have been favourable to trade union growth, the main building unions—and, we might add, the collectivism that trade unionism both generated and drew strength from—were actually in a process of clear national decline.<sup>30</sup> Undoubtedly, it is this development more than any other which underpins many of the representations of building workers as an atomised, collection of individuals, concerned only with their own economic circumstances. However, and as can be seen with an examination of

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<sup>27</sup> Ellen Leopold, 'Where have all the Workers Gone?', *Building*, 22 October 1982.

<sup>28</sup> *Construction News*, 13 November 1968.

<sup>29</sup> Building Research Station, *Building Operatives Work...including a Review of Training: a first report of the operatives' skills enquiry*, Ronald E Jeanes, HMSO, London, Vol. 2, appendices, 1966.

<sup>30</sup> Terry Austrin, *Industrial Relations in the Construction Industry: some sociological considerations on wage contracts and trade unionism, 1919-1973*, University of Bristol, PhD thesis, 1978, 112-113. According to Austrin, the number of unionised bricklayers fell from 90, 550 in 1947 to 59, 224 by 1974. Unionised carpenters levels fell from 198, 365 to 125, 467 during the same period. The numbers of apprentices also fell sharply. According to Hilton, trade unions at this stage represented just 28% of the industry workforce nationally. W.S. Hilton, *Industrial Relations*, 73.

many of the strikes that affected construction in this era, missing from this depiction is the resistance that many building workers mounted against lump labour and its negative consequences.<sup>31</sup> It was a resistance that would prove particularly strong in Stevenage New Town.

The development corporation housing sites in Stevenage were said to be ‘riddled’ with labour-only sub-contractors in the early days.<sup>32</sup> This led to criticism by tenants over the poor quality of the workmanship.<sup>33</sup> In the aftermath of the Kevin Murphy strike, the practice was also challenged strongly by the building workers. As we can see in the following extract, by ex-bricklayer Ted Oswick, the removal of lump labour was an important demand of the Stevenage trade unionists and is recalled as central to the eventual creation of good working conditions and pay on the Stevenage sites

We just wouldn’t tolerate it, [labour-only sub contracting]. The minute we got wind of it, we would demonstrate...we had a stoppage of work. We just would not tolerate subcontract labour in Stevenage, not amongst bricklayers or carpenters. The majority of sites after ’52, I should say were 100% trade union labour, all trades. It was really, really good, probably the only town in the country. It was excellent.<sup>34</sup>

An example of a dispute over lump labour is hinted at in the record of a meeting between SDC and Tersons in April 1952, where it was noted that the ‘labour troubles’ of recent weeks hadn’t been fully resolved, but that the firm planned to meet with ‘card stewards’ to sort out the problem.<sup>35</sup> With labour-only workers barred from trade union membership at this stage, regular union card checks was one method used by

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<sup>31</sup> Resistance to lump labour was among the main factors behind the emergence of three key rank-and-file movements of this era: the London Joint Sites Committee; the Merseyside Building Workers Movement and the Manchester Building Workers Forum. These three bodies would go onto play a crucial role in the Building Workers’ Charter movement of the 1970s.

<sup>32</sup>Interview with Fred Udell.

<sup>33</sup> HALS, CNT/ST/5/2/1/AP/M14/ 55ab, Notes of Meeting between Residents Association and Stevenage Development Corporation officials 7 November 1951.

<sup>34</sup>Interview with Ted Oswick. Born in Peterborough in 1925, Oswick moved to Stevenage with his wife, June, in 1951. Stevenage Borough Council replaced SDC in 1980, and it is the latter organisation that Ted Oswick is referring to here.

<sup>35</sup>HALS, CNT/ST/5/2/1/AP/M14/55ab, site meeting with Tersons and SDC at Monks Wood, 10 April 1952.

shop stewards to prevent their entry onto sites. After a series of similar short and unofficial strikes, by the early 1950s all of the workers on development corporation house-building sites were directly employed.

As Ted Oswick indicates, this allowed for the sites to be fully organised and for the workers to insist that all who were employed on them be trade union members. There were still attempts by the contractors to introduce lump labour and this did lead to some protracted strikes, most notably on a development in the old town area of Albert Street in the early 1960s, which only ended after hundreds of workers surrounded the site forcing out the labour-only sub contractors.<sup>36</sup> But eventually, in 1967, Stevenage Development Corporation formally agreed that in the future, no contracts would be awarded in the town to firms using labour-only sub-contractors, without consultations with the unions. Given the unions' position, this meant an effective ban in Stevenage. James Mills, the President of the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives, (NFBTO) an umbrella body for the unions, later revealed that they had been contacted by SDC, with a view to negotiating such an agreement, following what were described as 'labour troubles on two large housing contracts'. In some ways, this was little more than recognition of a long-standing reality, but was nonetheless important; according to Mills, it was the first time that a major housing authority had ever approached the NFBTO for such an agreement.<sup>37</sup>

This ability of the Stevenage building workers to resist the lump was also connected to other developments that had taken place in the industry's wage structures. Bonus, or incentive payments had been incorporated into the National Working Rule Agreement during the war and were made permanent in 1947. The building unions had opposed this development, but were forced to accept it, following

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<sup>36</sup>Interviews with Bob Hooper; and Dave Ansell.

<sup>37</sup> *Building*, 12 May 1967.

pressure from employers and government alike.<sup>38</sup> The unions later argued that the measure opened the door to piece-rates and labour only sub-contracting.<sup>39</sup> But while this was true with regards to the industry overall, on well organised sites like Stevenage it had the potential, ironically, to strengthen the position of the shop stewards, as it was they who often negotiated the bonus payments. In Stevenage, depending on the trade, bonus payments could often double or even triple the basic pay of a worker. Some of the bonus systems also worked in an egalitarian manner. For example, several bricklayers pointed out how their bonuses were divided up equally with the labourers who were part of their squads, and how the union branch had been behind this policy.<sup>40</sup> All of this served to re-inforce the connection between strong trade unionism and decent pay among building workers on the Stevenage sites— and sharpen their awareness that it was something that could well have been brought to an end if lump labour had been introduced.

At this stage, building trade workers in Britain were split into over twenty different trade unions, mainly in the form of separate craft unions for the trades and general unions for those designated as non-craft workers. For example, carpenters and joiners were in the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, (ASW) painters were in the ASPD and bricklayers were in the AUBTW. In a period of considerable technical change in the industry, which had generated dozens of new occupations, it was in many respects an outdated structure, based on an increasingly meaningless divide between so-called ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ workers and one which did not accommodate many employed in the industry. In Stevenage, the most significant

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<sup>38</sup> For more on this, see W.S. Hilton, *Foes to Tyranny: The History of the AUBTW*, (London: 1964), pp266-269; and L.Clarke, C.McGuire and C. Wall, ‘the development of building labour in Britain: is it distinct from elsewhere in Europe?’ in A. Dainty and M. Loosemore, *Human Resource Management in Construction: Critical Perspectives*, pp52-70.

<sup>39</sup> W.S. Hilton, *Foes to Tyranny*, p273.

<sup>40</sup> Interviews with Fred Udell; Ted Owsick; Dave Ansell and also bricklayer’s labourer, Fred Whiting.

union, in terms of impact, quality of leadership and ability to organise and defend workers interests was the AUBTW. Although a craft union and one that was completely dominated by bricklayers, the AUBTW had once aspired to being a union for all building workers. It recruited some labourers, following its takeover of the national building labourers union in 1952, and small numbers of other workers such as scaffolders and roofers.<sup>41</sup> In the period after this amalgamation, it remained common practice for bricklayers to continue to meet in separate branches, but in Stevenage the local branch combined both bricklayer and non-bricklayer alike. Reflecting the large influx of building workers into the town, the AUBTW grew substantially and overcame opposition from the building employers to become a powerful social actor in the fledgling new town.

The main organising trade...was the bricklayers. Now, of course then, as one contract was running, they were letting other contracts and the idea was to try and get your members on those contracts to start some form of union organisation if you could. It wasn't very long when a blacklist was operated by some of the contractors to stop you from getting on the site and getting the chaps organised, but we dealt with that anyway, in our customary manner. It wasn't easy. It was a series of stoppages. I think the branch built up to a total membership of about 900.<sup>42</sup>

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) had a significant influence in this branch. Leading AUBTW figures in Stevenage, who were also party members, included Jimmy Collman, who in his youth had founded the Notting Hill branch of the Young Communist League and who is recalled by most of the Stevenage interviewees as the outstanding figure in the local trade union movement<sup>43</sup>; Bert Lowe, who was active in trade union and political struggles in North London before moving to Stevenage in 1951; Arthur Utting, who in the 1980s would become the

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the decline of the AUBTW and the amalgamation with the labourers union, see WS Hilton, *Foes to Tyranny* 273.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Fred Udell, Stevenage.

<sup>43</sup> Interviews with Fred Udell; Ted Oswick; Dave Ansell; Harry Whitfield; Bob Hooper; and Fred Whiting. Collman later became a UCATT organiser in Milton Keynes and died in October 1993, shortly before his 76<sup>th</sup> birthday.



national Chair of UCATT, Kevin Murphy, whose sacking stimulated the early trade union activity, and Jimmy Cunningham. Many other prominent figures within the branch were members and supporters of the Labour Party, including Fred Udell, Michael Cotter and Fred Newberry. John Callaghan has pointed out how in the early 1960s, following the debacle of the electricians' ballot-rigging scandal, the industrial strategy of the CPGB changed from one of clandestine efforts to build up a secure communist bloc within the unions, to a more open strategy of broad alliances with non-party left-wingers.<sup>44</sup> But in Stevenage it would seem that this latter approach was in evidence all through the post-war era and was one of the reasons behind the strength of construction trade unionism. Certainly, it does seem that although certain communists were more influential, in terms of devising strategy, the AUBTW branch in Stevenage did not divide along party lines. Some interviewees spoke of the close friendships and strong political associations that existed between members of these different parties, and, conversely, the friction that could occasionally affect personal and political relations between some members of the same party.<sup>45</sup>

In the interviews, former AUBTW activists tended to recall the close relations that existed between the different unions and the commitment to joint action and struggle. However, some activists from other unions occasionally offered more nuanced reflections on the past. Harry Whitfield, while speaking of the collectivism that existed, also pointed out that painters were paid much less than bricklayers or carpenters, and that the latter two unions showed little interest in improving their situation. He recalled that the bricklayers in particular tended to organise strikes at the

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<sup>44</sup> John Callaghan, 'Industrial Militancy 1945-1979: The Failure of the British Road to Socialism?' *Twentieth Century British History*, 15, 4, (2004) 393-395.

<sup>45</sup> For example, Collman and Udell were recalled as very close friends and staunch political allies, despite being in different political organisations. On the other hand, Collman was said to have had a very poor and at times hostile relationship with his fellow CPGB member, Bert Lowe.

start of a site, in order to maintain good bonuses, and that all other trades would join in on these strikes.<sup>46</sup> However, by the time painters reached the sites, ‘the big money had gone’ along with the carpenters and bricklayers. Whitfield recalled an occasion at some point in the late 1950s when a carpenter, and neighbour of his, showed him his pay packet, revealing a bonus of £20 per week. This was an exceptionally high figure for that time and dwarfed the £5 bonus that Whitfield earned.

Moreover, elsewhere in their testimonies, some AUBTW members were a touch dismissive of unions such as the ASPD<sup>47</sup>— without really considering the structural difficulties that painters faced, given their reduced bargaining power on sites—and also hinted at a difficult relationship with the carpenters’ trade union, the ASW. This organisation was by some distance the biggest trade union in the construction industry, but also regarded as the most right-wing, in terms of leadership. The union was certainly less democratic in structure than the AUBTW. For example, its full-time officers were appointed and it had a full-time executive council, unlike the AUBTW, which had elected full-time organisers and a lay executive. Although some of the bricklayers, like Ted Oswick, spoke warmly of the comradeship that existed between all the trade unions, others recalled the tensions that could sometimes exist between the AUBTW and the ASW:

I never liked [the ASW]— not the blokes, they was alright--I’m talking about the union itself...We were the first on the site, after the groundworkers, so we had to establish what the rates are going to be. And the employers would already have what they’re willing to pay, and then it would be a battle between you and them. You might have to have a go-slow to up the rates or whatever – there’d be a battle. And the ASW used to come in when it was all done. And we’ve established a good rate, or an acceptable rate, for us, and they’d come in and start that as their basic. And they’d usually get more.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Bonus appears to have to been a common cause of dispute on Stevenage sites. Mowlem claimed that it had suffered 5 weeks of strikes and 30 weeks of go-slows, between April 1963 and early months of 1964 as a result of bonus disputes on the Pin Green site. HALS, CNT/ST/5/2/18/Volume 29, letter from Mowlem to SDC, 22 January 1965.

<sup>47</sup> For example, interview with Fred Udell, where he pointed out how the painters would allow the contractors to play one group of painters of another, leading to lower wages for all.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Bob Hooper.

As a result of the failure of the building unions to effectively fight the lump, the ASW, ASPD and AUBTW were eventually forced to combine during 1969-71, and form a new union, UCATT. Of the three unions, the AUBTW was the last to agree to a merger and the one that had the deepest reservations<sup>49</sup>. This was reflected in the testimonies of the Stevenage AUBTW members. None of them spoke with any warmth about the creation of UCATT and most considered it a negative development. Without exception, they considered the AUBTW to be superior to the ASW, but that because of the difference in size, the amalgamation had resulted in an ASW takeover. Among the testimonies, there was little focus on the problems the union faced in terms of its membership decline, or the reasons behind this. Neither was there recognition that it was arguably only in the unusual circumstances that prevailed in Stevenage, of large house-building contracts carried out by a settled workforce, led by a politicised layer of union activists, could a small and still fairly specialised building union such as the AUBTW thrive.

The formation of UCATT did not resolve the deeper problems facing building trade unionism. Bob Hooper revealed that he left the organisation following what he described as its 'betrayal' of a strike in nearby Welwyn Garden City, fought over the issue of lump labour. According to Hooper, this took place sometime after the 1972 national building workers' strike and the outcome—which appeared to be a defeat for the union after a lengthy dispute and an acceptance of some lump labour on the site—was something that simply 'wouldn't have happened' with the old AUBTW.<sup>50</sup> Hooper accused UCATT officials of preventing him and a few other workers who had also left, from joining the TGWU, by citing the Bridlington Agreement, a move that

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<sup>49</sup> For more on this see Wood, pp101-112.

<sup>50</sup> Luke Donovan also recalled this dispute, but did not apportion any blame to UCATT for its outcome. According to him, this dispute lasted for two years and only came to an end when the UCATT leadership was threatened with legal action.

left him out of the union movement altogether. He told of how after he eventually got a job, UCATT officials visited the site and instructed its members not to work with him, This instruction was ignored by the workforce, most of whom had known Hooper for several years and were aware of his trade union activism. For Hooper this attitude of the rank-and-file UCATT members was evidence of the comradeship of ordinary building worker trade unionists, but his story also reveals the serious problems faced by building trade unions in the years following the 1972 strike, when lump labour was growing exponentially, as well as the gulf that existed between ordinary members and building trade union full-time officials.<sup>51</sup>

### **The wider role of building workers in Stevenage**

Most of the literature that has examined the development of Stevenage has viewed it as a top-down process, conducted by planners, engineers and politicians, and one in which the tenants, and certainly the workers themselves played no real role.<sup>52</sup> This of course is in keeping generally with the way in which wider post-war urban re-development and planning has been understood and represented. However, as applied to Stevenage, this approach has marginalised the role of the trade union movement,

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<sup>51</sup> A gulf that could be viewed with reference to other key strikes such as the Barbican dispute of 1966-67, when both the AUBTW and ASW leaderships suspended several members and the 1972 national strike, which was very much an activist-led strike, and one that the leadership of the newly-formed UCATT was forced to declare official.

<sup>52</sup> See Stevenage Development Corporation, *The Building of the New Town of Stevenage*, (Stevenage, 1954); Jack Balchin, *First New Town*; Harold Orlans *Stevenage: A Sociological Study of a New Town*, (London, 1952); Bob Mullan, *Stevenage Ltd*; Eric Claxton, *Hidden Stevenage*, (Stevenage, 1992); Margaret Ashby and Don Hills, *Stevenage: A History from Roman Times to the Present Day*, (Lancaster, 2010). These books do not focus on the role played construction workers in the building of Stevenage. Little attention has been paid in these books to the ordinary building workers who played such an important role in its creation. The only two exceptions, which were both written by activists themselves, are: Huw and Connie Rees, (Eds) *History Makers: The story of the early days of Stevenage New Town*, (Stevenage, 1991), which contains some short accounts by building workers, and *Anchorman*, the self-published memoir of Stevenage bricklayer and communist party member, Bert Lowe.

particularly the building trade unions. It is clear that many of the building workers in Stevenage saw themselves as part of a great social experiment that was aimed at creating a better society for working class people. Noting what they saw as hostility to the whole New Town project by the political Right, some of these workers clearly regarded the concept as progressive, even socialistic, and one that was designed to eradicate the squalor that many had experienced in London.<sup>53</sup> The prospect of gaining a house was the main reason they had come to Stevenage and by the middle of 1954 over 25% of the new houses in Stevenage had gone to building workers.<sup>54</sup> Once there, these workers clearly felt that they had a stake in the new society and a strong interest in its development. The building workers also clearly believed that the New Town residents were denied local democracy. SDC was not elected and, as such, not accountable to the local population. In addition, the relationship between SDC, Stevenage Urban Council and Hertfordshire County Council was complex, with each being responsible for different aspects of town planning and development. Residents complaining to one of these bodies about the lack of amenities would invariably be told that it was the responsibility of one of the other agencies. This created the need for vibrant community organisations that were able to exert pressure on the various bodies, in order that the manifold residents' concerns be articulated and addressed.

The AUBTW, in particular, responded to this. Its members not only helped, along with the other building trade workers, to build the first community hall in Stevenage, the Homestead Hut, through their own labour, free of charge, but also went on to play a major role in the various different community and residents' bodies that were established.

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<sup>53</sup> Huw and Connie Rees, (Eds) *History Makers*, 22-23.

<sup>54</sup> By this stage, nearly 2000 houses had been built, with 532 allocated to building workers. For more, see Balchin, *First New Town*, 156.

Whatever happened, we [the AUBTW] got involved in it. ... Life was more than just paying your rent, going to work, and living in a house. There were other things and the good thing about it was we organised a tenants' association. Again, that was through the unions. That represented the tenants for their little things that they wanted done or couldn't get done. And they played a major part, again, our people. Our Chairman of the [AUBTW] Branch [Bert Lowe] was the Chairman of the Tenants' Association.<sup>55</sup>

Most of the campaigns related to the development of the town. One example was the campaign for the A1 by-pass. In Stevenage industry and housing was separated by the Great North Road, which meant that the workers had to cross it twice a day. The road was busy and dangerous, especially in the winter-time, where the lack of decent lighting made it a death trap. Demands had been made for a by-pass, but very little had been done, leading inevitably to a fatality. In response, Stevenage building workers helped organise a mass protest, which resulted in the erection of a temporary bailey bridge over the road, and eventually the by-pass itself.

The death of a young boy, who was knocked down on his way to school at a particularly dangerous road, Six Hills Way, was the catalyst for another campaign involving Stevenage building workers. On this occasion, the building workers maintained a daily picket at Six Hills Way, in order to allow parents to take their children to school. This campaign also eventually succeeded and a temporary bailey bridge was set up pending the building of an underpass.

Well, a child had come out of school, run across Six Hills Way; he's been hit by a car and killed. Word went round and every man, jack, on the building stopped work, went down to Six Hills Way, on the next day where the accident had happened and they stopped all traffic going backwards and forwards. The police come down and there were masses of us, and the police...must have looked at it and thought, well, there's no chance we're going to do it [laughing], so they stood on the sidelines and just...kept some sort of order. But they couldn't stop us in the road – there were too many of us.<sup>56</sup>

Building workers also played a key role in the organising of a lobby of Parliament in October 1956. The aim of this lobby was to meet with the local MP, Conservative Martin Maddan, and all other interested MPs, and put before them a

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<sup>55</sup>Interview with Fred Udell.

<sup>56</sup>Interview with Bob Hooper.

whole series of grievances of Stevenage residents. The main points raised were: the harmful effects on family life of the ‘abnormally’ high rents<sup>57</sup>; an inquiry into the high maintenance costs of the housing; for the publication of all tenders submitted and the publication of more detailed accounts of Stevenage Development Corporation; an assurance that the new town would eventually be handed over to the urban council, as opposed to ‘private investors who are interested only in the profit motive and not the well-being of residents’; for direct democratic representation on Stevenage Development Corporation ‘in equal numbers to those appointed by the Minister’; and for continuity of work for all building trade workers in the town.’<sup>58</sup> The meeting was addressed by several building workers, including Bert Lowe, Kevin Murphy and Roy Aspland.<sup>59</sup>

The issue of continuity of work raised by the deputation in 1956 would remain crucial for construction workers throughout the building of Stevenage. Workers were often laid off if there were delays between the end of one contract and the start of another. Trade unionists believed that this was deliberate ploy by SDC to weaken trade union organisation<sup>60</sup>. In February 1962, this led to building workers planning a demonstration and march to the SDC town centre office. This was to co-incide with a meeting between SDC and regional trade union officials, at which the workers’ concerns regarding continuity of employment were to be raised. Seven days before the march, SDC cancelled the meeting, stating that they could not afford to lose the

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<sup>57</sup> Rent levels were higher in Stevenage than London. In March 1963, the rent of an SDC 2 bedroom house ranged from £1 1s to £1 9s. 6d per week. The equivalent local authority rate in London was 15s to £1 2s 6d per week. For more see Balchin, *First New Town*, 159-160.

<sup>58</sup> *Stevenage Echo*, November 1956.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Huw and Connie Rees, (Eds) *History Makers*, 22.

services of their building workers for such a march<sup>61</sup>. But on the scheduled day, the march went ahead and ended up in a mass protest outside the development corporation offices. Following SDC's refusal to receive a deputation from the protest, the workers decided to ban all bonus and over-time work. SDC were forced to back down, and did meet with local trade union activists and regional officials, to discuss the concerns of the men regarding continuity of employment. It is a good example both of the unwillingness of SDC to legitimise actions carried out by rank-and-file trade unionists, and of the determination of those trade unionists to ensure that they would not be ignored.

In addition to these campaigns was a one-hour strike in April 1959 against the building of the De Havilland factory that was supposed to manufacture the ill-fated Blue Streak nuclear missile. This strike was organised by the AUBTW, following a visit to the town by CND leader, Pat Arrowsmith, and was all the more remarkable, given that some of the union's own members were employed on these sites. Mass meetings were held on various sites to build support for the action, and in the event over 1000 construction workers in the town took part in the action. It remains one of the very few—if not the only—example of industrial action against the production of nuclear weapons in Britain.<sup>62</sup>

Two prominent building workers in the area of Stevenage community activity were Michael Cotter and Fred Millard. Born in Youghal, County Cork in 1920, Cotter had been working on building sites in England since the late 1930s. He began working in Stevenage in June 1951, and moved into the new town around eight months later. In 1954, Cotter was elected as chair of the Stevenage Residents Federation, the central

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<sup>61</sup> Bob Mullan, *Stevenage Ltd*, 66.

<sup>62</sup> *The Times*, 6 April 1959. Bert Lowe, *Anchorman*, also contains details on this strike.



body to which all of the local residents' groups were affiliated.<sup>63</sup> This body campaigned strongly for improved amenities in Stevenage, criticising strongly what it saw as a lack of foresight in the planning process by SDC. According to Cotter, its main long-term aim was an elected corporation board, in order to make it democratically accountable. In the short term, it argued that the Residents' federation should have representatives on that board.<sup>64</sup> Cotter would eventually become a member of the SDC board, in 1965. In addition, he was a Labour Party councillor for over 30 years, being chairman of the council on 2 occasions, as well as a county councillor for a short period. In 1991, Cotter penned a brief memoir, which made clear the importance of collective struggle to his life.

I was an active member of the Labour Party, interested in all the legislation at that time of great expectancy, when a lot was happening in the transitional period after the war. [In Stevenage] the meetings were held down at the old town. The tenants' association was in full swing and I joined the Monks Wood Association and eventually became delegate to the residents federation and later I became Chairman... This town was built to provide rented housing initially and indeed I think it has become one of the finest towns in Britain... considering that somebody said that 'we are to pull ourselves up by our boots' we have achieved this and it is a marvellous place to live in and a marvellous community to belong to<sup>65</sup>.

Millard was a member of the AUBTW and a councillor on Stevenage Urban Council. As this extract from an interview with former bricklayer's labourer Fred Whiting suggests, he is still remembered by Stevenage building workers for the role he played in the campaign against the development of Fairlands Valley. The valley was regarded as one of the town's 'lungs' and an important social amenity. SDC had made commitments that no building or development would take place on it. However, a leaked document suggested that the corporation was now considering high-density developments in the valley, which, because of the location, would fetch higher rents. A 'Save the Valley' campaign was started, involving Fred Millard and the local

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<sup>63</sup> All background information on Michael Cotter is in *Stevenage Echo*,

<sup>64</sup> *Stevenage Echo*, March 1956.

<sup>65</sup> Huw and Connie Rees, (Eds) *The History Makers*, 40-44.

AUBTW branch. Whiting, who was aged 92 at the time of his 2011 interview, takes up the story:

Valley Park is the pride and joy of Stevenage... You know why Fred Millard is famous in Stevenage, do you? Well, that's the reason why! The Corporation—this was after [Harold] MacMillan---planned to build houses on that valley. Fred had got wind of it, I think through his friend in the office who'd told him about it and he got this friend to photocopy the records, so that he had a copy of it. The Corporation couldn't deny it, and nor could the Government...so the Government had to backtrack on it. So Fred Millard, and his pal, saved the valley for Stevenage...When I think of the valley, that's Fred Millard's legacy.<sup>66</sup>

In fact, SDC did deny any such plans existed but as, Whiting points out, a sympathetic corporation employee had provided Millard with an SDC paper for the development of the area which was copied and presented to the press by a hooded Millard shortly afterwards. The paper may have been a discussion document, but in response to the hostile public reaction that it provoked, SDC was forced to make clear there would be no building on the valley.<sup>67</sup> Fred Millard died in 1974, and, in recognition of the significant role he played in the community, a small sheltered housing complex for the elderly was named after him.

One important way in which the Stevenage building workers were able to influence the decision-making processes was through their involvement on the local urban council. In 1953, carpenter, Alf Luhman was elected to the body, the first building worker to do so. Feeling that they needed to build on this and believing they could use it to promote the interests of Stevenage residents, the AUBTW branch encouraged members to stand for election, normally under the banner of the Labour Party. The prime mover behind this strategy was AUBTW district organiser, Collman.

The [AUBTW] branch was active in every fight...and [Collman] said, "We want representation on the council, and we can do it through branch members...So he said to me, "Join the Labour Party and then you can put your name forward, or we'll put the name forward from the branch," because they needed nominations from the branch, for governors for schools and all that sort of thing. I did and eventually, they asked me to attend a selection thing in the pub in the Old Town. They questioned me and asked me

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<sup>66</sup>Interview with Fred Whiting.

<sup>67</sup> Huw and Connie Rees, *The History Makers*, 126-127.

what I was, bearing in mind they were suspicious of me because of the activity on the building sites and they turned me down, didn't accept me at first. Anyway, I tried again, later, and took part in the various meetings in the local Labour Party, and then put myself up in an election – I think it was 1956.

Udell was one of six building workers who would eventually be elected onto Stevenage Urban Council, and remained a councillor for ten years. Most of those elected were AUBTW members, and although standing under the banner of Labour, they were also accountable to the local branch of the union for their actions as councillors. As Udell pointed out, AUBTW branch meetings could be very much a case of 'questions and answers' as branch members quizzed the councillors closely, in order to find out what they had been doing or arguing for at council meetings.<sup>68</sup>

For Bob Hooper, secretary of the local AUBTW branch in the early 1960s, this sustained involvement by building workers in the political structure of the new town was derived from their desire to build a new and better society, but was also based on their collectivism, which itself had been developed through their involvement in trade unionism.

I think, for the early ones they were...politically alive, through trade unionism, and I think they wanted a town – if they were going to bring their kids up in a town, they wanted the right people in charge of the town, for education and everything else... And...you could see a future – this is the point: you could see with all that was going on, you felt part of a big thing...Through trade unionism, you felt part, you felt a belonging, you belonged, and that's right.<sup>69</sup>

Hooper's point is worth considering. It shows again the centrality of trade unionism to the identity of the Stevenage building workers. It reveals the scope of their vision and how the aims of building worker trade unionism in Stevenage went beyond a struggle for better wages and conditions on the sites. His comment about belonging suggests that trade unionism was an important resource by which building workers in Stevenage navigated their engagement with the social and cultural structures around them. Bricklayer Hooper came from a long line of trade unionists and when

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<sup>68</sup>Interview with Fred Udell.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Bob Hooper.

interviewed spoke with pride about his grandfather, who had been in the AUBTW for over 50 years and received a certificate and badge to mark this. Hooper had joined the AUBTW as an apprentice in North London but had never been a shop steward until he moved to Stevenage. He eventually became secretary of the branch and played a leading role in organising local activities during the 1972 national building workers' strike. Stevenage did not make Hooper a union activist, but arguably the social structures that were in place, which were affected by the struggles that were ongoing on and off the sites and which were led by the people that he worked with, did have an impact on his life and constituted part of the framework that he as an individual had to engage with.

Concerns were also raised by building workers over the apparent deterioration in the quality of the houses being built. From the mid-1950s, there had been greater financial constraints on house-building in New Towns, and efforts to build more for less money had been made. Conservative Housing Minister, Harold MacMillan spoke of the need to build ten houses for the price of nine and called for the 'people's home', which was smaller, less adequately equipped and cheaper in external finish.<sup>70</sup> As a result, in Stevenage, housing 'densities were increased, terraces became longer and gardens shorter and elevational treatments plainer to the point of drabness'.<sup>71</sup>

A building worker working party was set up to investigate the matter. Comprised of Councillors Fred Udell, Alf Luhman, Con Carey, Mick Cotter, John Morris and David Newman, this body produced a report outlining its concerns regarding the quality and design of the houses. The report argued that the newer houses were indeed smaller than those completed in the initial period of house-building up to 1955. Whereas a

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<sup>70</sup> Jack Balchin, *First New Town*, 152.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

three-bedroom terrace was over 1000 square feet in 1952, after 1955 this had declined by around 200 square feet. But the findings of the report were never acted upon.

Each year, the Stevenage Development Corporation had to prepare what they called the Blue Book, which was presented to every Member in the House of Commons. So...we prepared a draft on what we thought was going wrong with the Stevenage new town, and that, again, was presented to every Member of the House of Commons. Nothing came of it.<sup>72</sup>

Stevenage Development Corporation was eventually wound up in 1980, with its property, duties and responsibilities being transferred to the newly-formed Stevenage Borough Council. This was also the year of the Council Housing Act, which in Stevenage resulted in the eventual removal of most of the corporation houses from the rented sector.<sup>73</sup> With local authorities barred from using housing stock sales revenue to fund the building of more houses, it was a policy which brought to an end the vision of those post-war planners that the state should be the agency for the eradication and replacement of slum housing, and a force for building new, healthier communities for working class people. Trade unions were also weakened generally in the 1980s and in Stevenage, it was a period when building trade unionism declined and the lump got stronger. By the end of the decade, sub-contracting was commonplace and the main building union, UCATT, badly depleted in strength and influence.<sup>74</sup>

Many of these early Stevenage pioneers are now dead. And the organisations to which they belonged are weak. A union branch that could once attract hundreds to its meetings, now has only a handful of activists, most of whom have been long retired from the sites. In fact, they are the same people who both moved to and then built the new town over 50 years ago. Among the ex-workers interviewed, there is a sense of

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<sup>72</sup>Interview with Fred Udell. Udell eventually became a Clerk of Works on the Stevenage sites

<sup>73</sup> Around 35% of the stock had already been sold prior to 1974, before the Labour government stopped the right-to-buy scheme.

<sup>74</sup>Interview with Luke Donovan, Stevenage.

loss, a feeling that the collectivism and the solidarity so vital to their successes in struggles on and off the building sites has been rolled back and that people today are the poorer for it. There is a view that in today's world, the ability of young people to fight has been dulled by consumerism and debt. This depiction of the past as a 'reverse image of the present' is of course common in personal autobiography, and has been identified as being among the 'myths that we live by' by Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson.<sup>75</sup> There is a clear pride among the Stevenage interviewees. When asked about the contribution of building workers to the development of the new town, one replied 'How can you measure it—they laid the foundations of Stevenage as we know it today'<sup>76</sup> and a feeling that this would not have been possible without the agency of trade unionism.

I'm proud to say that I think Stevenage New Town was built by 90% trade union labour and very successfully as well...The whole of Stevenage building force was togetherness. We knew all the carpenters. We knew all the painters – everybody knew everybody...mainly I think through trade unionism.<sup>77</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Some theories of self-identity have focused in different ways on the interplays between identity and social structure in the creation of self. It has been understood as an ongoing process, and one which is generated through interweaves of individual identity with social interaction and social structure. Self identity is not simply the product of external forces but, as Elliot has pointed out, something which is developed and crafted by individuals through their own creative engagement with cultural resources and socio-symbolic materials.<sup>78</sup> Some of this theory helps us

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<sup>75</sup> Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *Myths that we live by*, Routledge, (1990), pp8-9; see also Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: 2001), p275.

<sup>76</sup>Interview with Fred Udell.

<sup>77</sup>Interview with Ted Oswick.

<sup>78</sup> Anthony Elliott, *Concepts of the Self*, (Oxford, 2001), 22-45. Another text that is very useful in this respect to historians is James Hinton's *Nine War Lives: Mass Observation and the making of the*

understand the process by which identity was created by the workers in Stevenage. Most of the early Stevenage building workers were trade union members before they moved to the new town. In a harsh and casualised industry, they saw it as important to the betterment of their conditions of existence. But although trade unionism was already part of their lives and part of their identity, for many it did not play the same role that it would do in Stevenage. By the time they moved to Stevenage, the war had ended, a Labour government had been elected, a welfare state was being constructed and the building industry of which they were part was moving slowly and hesitantly towards what would be a sustained and unprecedented boom. In these changing circumstances, and in the disorientating environment of a fledgling new town, which was totally undeveloped, where they hoped to build new lives, but where private building contractors were running the sites with little regard to the interests of the workers, and where the small and newly-transplanted local population was bereft of civil society organisations that could impress their views upon an unelected development corporation, this commitment to trade unionism took on a new level of importance. By the early 1950s, building workers had been allocated a quarter of the housing in Stevenage New Town. The basis was being laid for them to become much stronger socially, industrially and politically than they could ever hoped to have been in their native London. But trade unionism in Stevenage was not solely about improving pay and conditions on the sites, as important as that may have been,

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*modern self*, (Oxford, 2010). Here, Hinton uses Mass Observation war-time diaries as the basis of an investigation into the processes of self-identity construction in mid-twentieth century Britain. Oral history testimonies of course lack the immediacy of the diary, and are overlain with decades of interaction and reflection between self and a constantly changing society. But I would argue that the Stevenage testimonies offer us a way of understanding how a section of working class people constructed their identities and their sense of self in a historical era of widespread social, cultural economic and political change, and a particular set of circumstances in Stevenage itself.

particularly in the early days. It was also about building a community and a better society in Stevenage, one that would radically improve the prospects of those succeeding generations who would live in it. In the changing conditions that these workers found themselves in, trade unionism became more critical to the development and construction of their identities and their senses of self.

When you add to this the fact that these building workers not only worked together, but lived next to each other, often in the same street, occasionally a door or two away and were part of the same small community, with regular social contact, then you get an even sharper insight into how their identities were formed. Building trade unions in Stevenage played a central role in the multitude of struggles that took place. In this scenario, where building union activists lived near each other and were regularly involved in campaigning and activism on and off the sites, it can perhaps be assumed that these workers were through language and activity continuously reproducing narratives about their lives which reinforced the importance of their trade unionism as a shaper of their identity. This can perhaps be evidenced by the way in which certain events—all of which involve trade unions and struggle-- appear to be remembered as highly significant to the life-stories of most of the workers that were interviewed. These include the sacking of Kevin Murphy, the campaign against lump labour, and some of the community campaigns.

The different ways in which the Stevenage building workers experienced, understood, reflected upon, and acted in response to a variety of social, economic, cultural and political developments in Stevenage contributes to what Hinton described as the ‘molecular processes of historical change’.<sup>79</sup> Their stories provide insights into the impact of a rapidly changing post-war labour process in the construction industry,

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<sup>79</sup> James Hinton, ‘Self Reflections in the Mass’, *History Workshop Journal*, Vol 75, Spring 2013, p257.



and the challenges posed by life in an early post-war new town. They contain valuable detail concerning the response that these changes and challenges elicited from local labour movement organisations. The testimonies are rich and embody complex, and at times, conflicting recollections and memories. In the last analysis, they provide a valuable understanding of the potential that trade unionism possessed, and the role that it played in response to these manifold challenges, as well as the manner in which this impacted upon, and helped shape, the identity of those workers who took part in the struggles.