

BENNY ROTHMAN –

a fighter for the right to roam,
workers' rights and socialism

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Unite the union
Unite House, 128 Theobalds Road
Holborn, London WC1X 8TN

www.unitetheunion.org

 Unitetheunion1

 @unitetheunion


UNITE EDUCATION

[illegible]

Jubilee House, 51 The Crescent.
Salford M5 4WX.
0161 736 3601
enquiries@wcml.org.uk
www.wcml.org.uk

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 @markmetcalf07

FOREWORD BY JIM MOWATT

Welcome to number five (*) in a series of short books on great men and women who feature prominently in the history of UNITE and its predecessor unions. Our hope is that publishing these histories will provide not only fascinating reading but inspire the current and future generations of trade unionists to take up the struggle on behalf of working people. There is certainly a lot to fight for. We are facing a difficult future in which the division between rich and poor is growing ever wider. The constant attacks on trade unionists, both in Britain, Ireland and abroad are expected to intensify. Education has therefore to be viewed in the context of equipping members to understand and fight back.

Additionally as part of UNITE the union's three pillars strategy of organising, international solidarity and politics the education department is enthusing our members to write their own stories and explore their own family and local histories. To that end we have established on our website REBEL ROAD – an inventory of trade union and labour movement heroes who are publicly recognised in the form of a plaque, mural or statue or even a pub named after them. Please have a look at it and consider contributing. <http://www.unitetheunion.org/growing-our-union/education/rebelroad/>

It is in this context that we are producing these booklets and it's a delight to feature a man who was a determined life-long fighter for the right to roam, workers' rights and socialism.

Benny Rothman is, of course, best known for the major part he played in the historic mass trespass over Kinder Scout in April 1932. It is universally accepted that this paved the way for the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act and ultimately the "Right to Roam" Countryside and Rights of Way Act of 2000.

So many articles, books, radio and television programmes have appeared on Kinder Scout that you could end up thinking that Benny did little else with his life! But, as his son, Harry, makes clear in this book he rarely spoke for many years about 1932. That is because he was so busy fighting for his class. And what a fight he put up!

He was forced by poverty to leave school and find work at an early age. His bicycle then took him out into the countryside in his spare time and following which he later became secretary of the Lancashire branch of the British Workers' Sports Federation and began organising outdoor activities amongst local young people. In an era where the replacement of the Tsar in Russia by a new system based on the common ownership of the means of production appeared to offer the working class the opportunity to rule and an end to exploitation, Benny then joined the Communist Party of Great Britain.

Benny's release from prison following the trespass saw him pitched into the battle around Manchester against Mosley's fascist Blackshirts. As secretary of the Cheetham branch of the Young Communist League he organised hundreds of local youngsters, including many from the Jewish community in which he grew up, to physically oppose Mosley whenever he appeared locally. It was a struggle the antifascists won handsomely.

On finally being able to find employment as a fitter at "Metro-Vicks", Benny soon found himself elected as an Amalgamated Engineering Union shop steward and during the Second World War he found himself representing nearly 2,000 workers on the Works Committee. Benny managed to increase the pay rates and fully supported women who found they were being paid below the rate for the job. Any incidents of racism were also successfully tackled.

However, in 1951, Benny was victimised by management for his trade union activities and although the section in which he worked took eight days of supportive strike action he found himself again out of work. He began work at Kearns-Richards in 1956 and worked there until he retired in 1976. He performed nearly every trade union role possible and also became secretary of the area wide Broadheath Shop Stewards' Forum that provided leadership in struggles against rising levels of unemployment and attacks on trade union activities.

In retirement, Benny, despite his obvious knowledge that capitalism was not going to be replaced in his lifetime, remained a pocket sized dynamo. He was involved with support groups on behalf of the mainly immigrant Grunwick strikers in the 70s and the miners' when they attempted to save their jobs and communities in 1984/85. He backed many environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace.

I personally knew and worked with Benny in the mid-70s when he was the Secretary of the Altrincham Trades Council in Manchester and I led for the T&G on Liverpool Trades Council. He – with Jack Askins – was inspirational and he was a lovely man.

Benny continued to go rambling and media work became important to Benny in finding the widest possible audience for the cause of access to the countryside. Even after he became confined to a wheelchair he responded to requests for interviews and it was a sad day when he died in January 2002.

CHAPTER 1

Jewish working class upbringing

Bernard (Benny) Rothman was born on 1 June 1911 in Granton Street, Hightown, Manchester. His parents, Isaac and Fanny, were forced to leave their home country of Romania because Jews were the target of religious persecution, anti-semitism and racism.

Isaac initially emigrated to New York but, after working as a sea steward, he settled in Manchester in 1908. Its Jewish community was expanding significantly at the time. In 1875 it was estimated at between seven and ten thousand, around a third of which were from Eastern Europe. By 1929 there were 33,000 Jews in Manchester and Salford; by 1939 this had increased to 37,500.

Isaac worked as a stall holder at Glossop and Shaw markets where he sold ironmongery such as clothes pegs, knives, forks and candles. He was agnostic but was active in Manchester's Jewish societies. More religiously minded than her husband, Fanny Solomon was very literate and could read and write in English, Yiddish and Romanian. These skills meant that she was often asked to read and write letters by members of the large Jewish emigrant community where she lived with her parents in the Cheetham area of Manchester. After she married, Fanny would sometimes assist on the stalls but was reluctant to do so on the Sabbath.

Fanny had two sisters, Laura, a machinist and dressmaker whose husband was an amateur religious scholar, and Ettie, a tailoress, painter and great reader who later introduced Benny to the works of Upton Sinclair and Robert Tressell's working class classic *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, which he found of great interest. Her brother, Arthur (Jack) Solomon, was for a few years the National Treasurer of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and a friend of Jimmy Maxton. He had lived in Ireland and, as a clothing worker there, had been involved in a big clothing workers' strike with revolutionary socialist James Connolly, one of the martyred leaders of the 1916 Easter Uprising against Britain's rule of the country.

CHAPTER 2

The great outdoors

For the first couple of years at Garner's the youngster was an errand boy collecting spare parts from the motor factories. Going to work on the tram was expensive and it also took a long time. Benny asked his grandmother if she would pay for a bike and he was given £4. A sympathetic contact at one of the shops that he called on during his errands agreed to build him a bike out of spare parts whilst a wheel builder made him a pair of everlasting wheels.

The bike was heavy and unwieldy and on his first outing, Benny fell off several times. In addition, his family felt that using a bike wasn't respectable. Notwithstanding this, he continued to ride it to work.



© Harry Rothman

Benny as a youngster with his bicycle.

Hightown was all cobbled streets and Benny reminisced that the only grass he knew as a boy was that growing between the cobbled stones. The small local park on Elizabeth Street was packed with children running about. At weekends Benny, often with his sisters and/or some friends, would frequently walk three miles to Heaton Park where he could enjoy roaming through the parkland. Benny was the third of five children the others being Phyllis, Leah, Rose and Gershon, in that order.

His father died when Benny was twelve. The loss of his income meant Phyllis and Leah left school immediately and, whilst the former worked from home, Leah worked for a Strangeways drapers firm for many years. The sisters assisted on the stalls and Benny's uncle looked after the youngest children on Fridays and Saturdays while his mother and sisters were at the two Glossop stalls, the Shaw stall having been given up. The income was poor and Benny's mother's inexperience in buying plus her refusal to seek outside help meant this was a difficult period for the family.

Benny had attended Saint John's School in Elm Street as well as a Hebrew school that ensured he could read some Hebrew. His teacher encouraged reading at home but Benny's family could not afford a suggested children's weekly newspaper. Despite the hardships he experienced, Benny won a scholarship to Manchester Central High School for boys. He made significant academic progress and was also good enough in the gym to ensure he participated in the schools gym display during Manchester civic week. This was despite the family being unable to provide him with the right equipment.

However, in return for his mother's witnessing of a neighbour's will the latter used a rich cousin to help find Benny a job with Tom Garner's Motor company on Peter Street, Manchester. Despite his disappointment at having to leave school so early, Benny, even after a heavy dressing down from his headmaster, understood there was no alternative as he was needed to help his widowed mother support the rest of the family.

This work did not meet with the approval of his extended family who felt that if he must work at such an early age it should be in clothing, a traditional Jewish trade characterised by small workshops and factories. Clothing and furniture-making industries were to be hit hard by the economic depression of the 1920s and 1930s and, like many other workers in Lancashire, the Jewish working class communities of Cheetham and Strangeways were to suffer great hardship. It was amidst this dismal economic climate that Sir Oswald Mosley launched the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in Manchester in 1932. Benny was to be one of its most active opponents.

CHAPTER 3

Becoming a communist

At work, Benny often found himself in discussions with his workmates. An ex-seaman, Bill Dunn, a Communist Party member, learned that he was studying and provoked arguments with him in which Benny was left floundering. Benny was invited to attend what he believed was an economics talk but in fact turned out to be a meeting of the Young Communist League (YCL) which, after some hesitation, he joined. The YCL had been founded in 1921. Although it had organisational independence from the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), which began life in 1920, the YCL remained under the Party's political direction as it was viewed as a recruiting school for future adult member activists.

Bill took Benny to a number of Sunday night forums at local venues including the Clarion club on Market Street. He learned a great deal from the speakers, some from the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB), some from the ILP and more rarely from the CPGB.

A regular income allowed Benny to buy a secondhand lightweight bicycle. He joined the local Clarion Cycling Club (CCC), that was originally formed as the Socialists' Cycling Club in 1894, where he soon became the minutes secretary and began going on Sunday club outings.

Benny never felt entirely comfortable within the CCC, the membership of which he regarded as right wing Labour. As a consequence he preferred to ramble and camp with his work-mates and friends from Cheetham, visiting Millers Dale, Disley and other places surrounding Manchester.

In 1931 when Benny heard of efforts to set up a British Workers' Sports Federation (BWSF) section in the Manchester area he joined and he swiftly became the Lancashire branch secretary. The BWSF had been established in 1923 by the national CCC, Labour Party sympathisers and trade union officials and activists. However, from the late 20s onwards the BWSF became increasingly influenced by the CPGB which saw it as a means of recruiting working class, particularly young, people to Communism through sport.

The bike gave Benny his first taste of the outdoors. He knew almost nothing about the area beyond his local community and when he cycled to Knutsford he returned disappointed after not seeing any nuts. There were also no knots at Knott End near Blackpool but it was there that Benny had his first camping experience when he slept in a shed with two young goats. Later he began his long association with what became his beloved Peak District. He rode to Hayfield and walked on from there, leaving his bike with some friendly cafe owner or local resident.

Taking a tent with him, Benny had his first bike holiday when he cycled to North Wales, sleeping the first night at Prestatyn in someone's back garden. When a local farmer learned that Benny intended climbing Snowdon alone he arranged for an older man to accompany him. However, waking up early in the morning and finding no one around he assumed his 'guide' had left him and so left to make his own way up the mountain.

Armed with a cheap Woolworths' guide, Benny made his way up the Pen-y-Gwryd footpath to reach the summit of Snowdon and celebrate his 16th birthday there. He had seen no one during his ascent. On a beautiful day Benny was bowled over by that first magnificent view over Snowdon across to the sea. This became an enduring memory for him.

The next place he visited was the Lake District where he found that many local people were helpful, allowing him to sleep in their barns or leave his bike with them for a few days. He climbed Scafell Pike. On occasions he camped wild, thus ensuring a cheap week's holiday.

Benny fancied becoming a motor salesman, a flashy job at the time. In 1927, he started a night school course in salesmanship and advertising, also studying economics and economic geography at the Peter Street YMCA.

Many of the young people who were attracted to the BWSF, especially in Manchester and East London, were Jewish with the organisation being a major provider of sport and recreation to young second generation Jews. During the inter-war years these youngsters were moving away from the culture, religion and authority of their elders and this general weakening of ethnic and communal cohesion increased the levels of assimilation amongst young British born Jews.

In 1929 the Jewish Chronicle claimed that an 'estranged generation' of younger Jews existed within the population. Sport played a major role in drawing Jewish youngsters away from immigrant society and helped them integrate into the indigenous working class. The BWSF and the CPGB was key to these developments.

However, the domination of the BWSF by the CPGB led to other socialist groups leaving to form a less radical body called the National Workers' Sports Association.

In 1932 Benny built a canoe for BWSF camp.

© Harry Rothman



Benny, like most members, got involved with the BWSF because he wanted to provide opportunities for outdoor activities amongst local young people and to strengthen existing "connections between the cycling world, the campers and ramblers across the Manchester area." Although it did promote football – it even led a campaign in 1931 for Sunday League Football – it was much more strongly associated with walking, cycling and camping as the organisation was designed to be a vehicle for "labour sport" and aimed to "promote international fraternity and substitute the spirit of sport for the spirit of militarism."

The BWSF participated in the first Summer International Workers' Olympiad in Frankfurt in 1925. Workers' Olympiads were viewed as an alternative event to the Olympic games, which were seen by labour and socialist organisations as being too elitist, sexist and racist. Vienna staged the second summer Olympiad in 1931 and Antwerp the third in 1937 when plans for the event to be held in Barcelona had to be abandoned because of the Spanish Civil War.

Because of his Clarion connections Benny was asked by the BWSF to select the cyclists who would go on a sporting delegation to the Soviet Union in 1931. Benny decided to organise an open 25 mile trial which attracted considerable publicity for what he later declared "was one of the most open competitions of its kind in the country."



Sid Harris and a Crewe man named Taylor won and both went to Moscow although in the event the cycling race was not on the roads but on a wooden dirt track more like a Wall of Death. Consequently the British team captain, motor cyclist Clem 'Dare Devil' Beckett, who had taken his dirt track bike to the Soviet Union competed until the track collapsed!

Benny raided BWSF funds to hire tents and other equipment and organised rambles and lively camps at weekends in Disley, Marple and Rowarth. This introduced 50 to 60 working class people of all ages to the outdoors. The campfire sing songs were particularly popular.

In late 1929, Benny was eagerly looking forward to the launch on New Year's Day 1930 of the CPGB's new daily newspaper, the Daily Worker. The new paper aimed to report and interpret working class life and lead the struggle. Its banner heading was "Workers of the World, Unite."

Benny chalked on the pavement near Piccadilly station that people should look out for the new paper. Despite an attempt by a passing member of the public – who happened to be the Manchester CPGB organiser Frank Bright – to argue that he had committed no crime, Benny was arrested by a police officer. He was charged with obstruction and later fined 7s 6d (37.5p). His conviction was widely reported in the local papers and went down badly at his workplace where he was doing quite well, having been placed in charge of a small department dealing with all the guarantees when new cars broke down. Benny many years later remarked "I certainly blotted my copybook."

According to Benny's son Harry: "My dad liked working in the garage and he was offered a promotion as he was good at his job. He turned down the offer, which was one of a number he received during his working life including one as a personnel manager. But he was not like many other socialists an opportunist who used the struggle to personally advance themselves."

When the Daily Worker first appeared Benny sold 50 to 60 copies a day in the first week. On 3 January 1930 the paper included an article on "Capitalist Sport is rotten!" and, the following day there was a lengthy piece on "Russian Working Women Build SOCIALISM and overcome evil legacies of Tsarism." Women readers in London were urged to write to women in Soviet Russia.

Later in the month the paper attacked the Labour government, police and magistrates for the jailing of two militants from Cardiff who had been arrested and imprisoned for obstruction at a meeting held by Welsh seamen in support of striking seamen in London. In the same edition there was an uncritical, highly laudatory article on Joseph Stalin, the then leader of the Soviet Union, who was described as "A steadfast Bolshevik: agitator, organiser and military leader who carried on the life work of Lenin."

4
DAILY WORKER
January 22, 1930

STALIN—THE LIFE STORY OF A STEADFAST BOLSHEVIK

*Agitator, Organiser and Military Leader Who Carried on
The Life Work of Lenin*

JOSEPH STALIN was born in 1879 in the town of Gori in the district of Tiflis, is of Georgian extraction, and the son of a worker employed in a shoe factory.

He attended the Tiflis training college, from which he was expelled for organising Marxian circles and revolutionary propaganda.

In 1908 he formally identified himself with the Tiflis organisation of the Russian Social Democratic Party, with which he had previously been connected in his illegal work.

The first years of his revolutionary activity were passed in Tiflis, Baku and other cities of Trans-Caucasia. After the split in the Social-Democratic Party in 1903 he joined the Bolshevik fraction and, as delegate of the Trans-Caucasian Bolsheviks, was present at the Bolshevik Conference in Tammefors and the Party Conferences in Stockholm in 1906 and London in 1907.

Prior to the 1905 Revolution, and during the ensuing years, he was arrested more than once and banished to distant places in Siberia, but he succeeded several times in escaping.

Illegal Work

Elected as a member of the C.C. of the Party, he worked illegally in



J. STALIN.

The time of the Civil War was passed by him at the War Fronts and, together with Voroshilov and Minin, he organised in 1917 the defence of Zarsyn against Krasnov's troops and, in

and then from 1925 until 1927 against the so-called "Leningraders" (Kamenev, Sinoviev) and united opposition, the anti-Leninist, opportunist nature of which he exposed.

At the 14th Party Conference of the C.P.S.U. in 1925 he developed Lenin's fundamental ideas in relation to the industrialisation of the country as the central task of the Party.

At the 15th Party Conference in 1927, in the period of reconstruction, the Party, under Stalin's leadership, completed the decisive course taken for the collectivising of agriculture and for the developing of the Socialist offensive against the capitalistic elements in town and country.

In 1928 he promptly mobilised the Party and the working class for the struggle against the Right deviation (Bukharin, Rykov, Tomshik), which brought about the complete defeat and bankruptcy of the Right opposition.

Iron Determination

At all stages of this struggle Stalin has consistently and with iron determination, steadfastness and extreme perspicacity, laboured for the Leninist policy of the Party and against the attempts to subject this policy to a revision, repudiating all attacks and

**MORE STORIES
OF LENIN**

**Anecdotes by Comrades
Who Knew Him**

The following incident is related by Comrade Podolsky, who was an officer in the Red Army during the struggle against the counter-revolutionary armies.

Lenin, who had followed with the greatest attention the advance of Koresky, and the progress of the White Guard uprising, was very clear about our critical situation at the Front.

Quite unexpectedly, he with Stalin and Trotsky, turned up at the District Staff. He summoned Antomov, Mechnoschin and myself to him and asked us to give him an accurate report of the situation in order to make him acquainted with the forces at our disposal, the power of the enemy and of our plans of operation.

To my question, what his journey here meant, whether it was mistrust of us, or something else, Lenin replied simply, but definitely:

In 1932 textile workers across east Lancashire took strike action and battled in the face of international competition to save their jobs and industry. The Daily Worker provided extensive coverage and mercilessly criticised trade union officials for what they felt was an unwillingness to organise all-out strike action and if necessary take over and run the factories without the employers.

Stalin becomes more prominent in the Daily Worker.

The newspaper was seen by the rich and powerful as posing a direct challenge to the capitalist system. Those who sold the paper could point to what had happened in the Soviet Union where the Tsar had been overthrown in 1917 and capitalism was being replaced by socialism. Poverty, unemployment and alienation were being eradicated.

Although it sold well at first, Benny soon found that sales declined. He felt this was probably because it didn't address the concerns of most people. He did manage to sell a few at the garage, but clearly most of the customers were from the better off sections of the community, whilst the managers were generally hostile. There was a low trade union density amongst the workforce with only two other people being openly identified as trade unionists. Bill Dunn was one and the other was a turner called Whitworth. Years later, Benny discovered a third undercover member. Attempts to get all the workers to enrol as trade unionists were unsuccessful and when Garners later merged with Rootes this allowed the new company to rationalise by dispensing with many workers including Benny Rothman with the young communist being one of the first to go.

CHAPTER 4

The Kinder Scout Mass Trespass

This was pretty much the extent of Benny's involvement in politics prior to the Kinder Scout mass trespass of 1932. It is for this which he is internationally known and which he covered in his *The 1932 Kinder Scout Mass Trespass* book first published in 1982. The protest played a significant part in the ultimately successful campaign for public access to moors and mountains.

To celebrate the 70th anniversary of the trespass, writer Roly Smith, who is the current Vice President of the Outdoor Writers' and Photographers' Guild, wrote the following piece in 2002 and which Unite is grateful for allowing to be republished here.

Forgive us our trespasses

Sunday, April 24, 1932 dawned fine and clear: a perfect day for enjoying that away-from-it-all, top-of-the-world feeling uniquely and so easily available to ramblers on the high moorland of Kinder Scout.

But 70 years ago, the highest and wildest moorland of the Peak remained frustratingly out of bounds to the growing army of walkers who had joined the huge rambling craze in the surrounding cities. Only a dozen footpaths of two miles or more crossed the open moorland of the Peak District, and not one crossed the 15 square miles of the ramblers' Holy Grail, the 2,000-foot summit of the Kinder Scout plateau.

Britain was then "bumping along the bottom" of the depths of an abysmal depression, and nothing that Ramsay MacDonald's Labour Government could do seemed to help. Dole queues stretched in the streets of Manchester and Sheffield, and the newspapers were full of reports of demonstrations by the unemployed, as the jobless total topped three million.

The Great Escape offered by the misty, inviting moors of the Peak, just a sixpenny (2.5p) bus ride away from the grimy, back-to-back terraces, was a magnetic temptation; a chance to recreate in the true sense of the word.

Many were prepared to risk an encounter with the burly gamekeepers who jealously guarded the moors for their grouse-shooting masters.

Trespassing had become a popular sport, adding an extra frisson of excitement to a moorland ramble. G.H.B.Ward, the King of the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers, had dubbed the pastime, "the gentle art of trespass," and gained the dubious distinction in 1923 of having a writ served on him making him apologise for past trespasses on Kinder, and promise not to trespass again. "But the gamekeepers are not always there," he gleefully reported in the 1952-53 Clarion Handbook, "and after a while, the amount of general trespassing did not decrease." He regarded the writ as "a greater honour than any OBE," and added: "May Kinder be 'free' in 1953, and may those who never knew this fight for Liberty deserve the Victory by their use of, and behaviour on, Kinder Scout."

It was against this kind of background that the famous Mass Trespass on Kinder Scout took place. There can be no doubt now that the trespass was politically motivated. But it was born out of a mounting sense of frustration felt by many young outdoor people at the apparent lack of progress made by the rambling establishment towards the long-standing goal of obtaining free access to Britain's mountains and moorland – a goal now within sight after the recent passing of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. Intellectuals like Prof. C.E.M. Joad and Prof. G.M.Trevelyan appeared to support the idea of trespass. Joad, addressing a ramblers' rally in The Winnats, Castleton, had told his audience: "If you want the moors to be free, you must free them for yourselves." Most interpreted that as an invitation to trespass, although Joad later denied this.

The rambling federations of Manchester and Sheffield were opposed to the use of direct action. Both Harold Wild of the Manchester federation and Stephen Morton of the Sheffield group went on record as saying that they believed the trespass had put back the access campaign by 20 years. It came at a time when they genuinely believed they were at last beginning to break the power of the landowners by getting them to agree to meet around the conference table.

Access campaigner Tom Stephenson, while opposing the tactic of mass trespass, thought this was nonsense. The cynical emasculation in Parliament of the 1939 Creech Jones Access to Mountains Bill showed how little reasonable hope there was for access legislation at the time. Stephenson acknowledged that the 1932 Mass Trespass was the most dramatic incident in the long access campaign. "Yet it contributed little, if

anything, to it," he claimed. Edward Royce, access secretary of the Manchester federation and a leading champion of the access cause, was equally dismissive. "The year 1932 will not be remembered as a red letter year for the Rambler," he wrote soon afterwards. "It has been a period of more than the usual froth and bubble."

Royce's successor as access secretary was Philip Daley, later to become national chairman of the Ramblers' Association and chairman of the Access and Footpaths Committee of the Peak District National Park authority for 19 years. As such, he was closely involved in the negotiations for the first access agreements with the landowners in the Peak, and said he found the mass trespass was invariably used as an argument against public access. "Such access as we have gained," he wrote, "owes nothing whatever to the mass trespass....and I can say quite categorically without fear of contradiction that the mass trespass was a positive hinderance and deterrent to the discussion and negotiations to secure the freedom of the hills."

The idea of a mass trespass originated during the Easter 1932 weekend camp of the Communist-inspired British Workers' Sports Federation held at Rowarth, on the western edge of Kinder Scout. A visiting group of London-based BWSF walkers had been turned back by abusive and threatening gamekeepers at Yellowslacks, on the western approach to Bleaklow from Glossop. Back at the campsite, it was agreed that if enough ramblers had been there, no number of keepers could have turned them back. "We decided then and there to prove the point," recalled Benny Rothman, then secretary of the Lancashire district of the BWSF.



The BWSF Rowarth Camp 1932 that triggered off the Mass Trespass.

© Harry Rothman

Which was why that sunny Sunday morning found Rothman, then a 20-year-old unemployed motor mechanic, and his best friend Woolfie Winnick, cycling out of Manchester to the friendly village of Hayfield, which shelters under the western ramparts of Kinder Scout. They were already wanted men, having used their bikes to avoid police waiting at

Manchester's London Road station with a restraining injunction against the event, which had been deliberately well-publicised by Rothman in the Manchester newspapers. The bells of St. Matthews Georgian parish church were ringing out as Benny and Woolfie planned the event which was to change the course of rambling history over a cup of tea in the village tearoom.

What happened next is now firmly established as part of rambling folklore. The march of about 400 ramblers from Hayfield Recreation Ground to Bowden Bridge quarry, (where a plaque unveiled on the 50th anniversary now commemorates the event); the impromptu speech by Rothman when the main speaker failed to arrive; the joyful, arm-in-arm, singing procession up the Kinder Road by Nab Brow above the reservoir and into William Clough; and the sudden break-out onto the forbidden ground of Sandy Heys at the prearranged signal of three blasts on Woolfie's whistle.

Tom Stephenson always insisted that the trespassers never reached the summit of Kinder Scout, which is two miles away and about 400 feet higher, and the available evidence seems to bear him out. Rothman himself said that the body of ramblers was about halfway up William Clough on the Hayfield to Snake Inn public footpath, which had been negotiated by the Hayfield and Kinder Scout Ancient Footpaths Association as long ago as 1897, when the trespass actually began.

At Woolfie's signal, they started to scramble up the steep slopes of Sandy Heys in open formation. A line of between 20 and 30 keepers was waiting for them on the brow of the hill. The few, undistinguished scuffles which followed resulted in one temporary keeper, Edward Beevers, being knocked to the ground, injuring an ankle. Press photographs taken at the time actually show concerned ramblers coming to his assistance. John Watson, one of the group of stick-wielding keepers waiting on Sandy Heys said afterwards: "We could hear them cheering and yelling as if they had achieved something, when they had achieved nothing at all. They had only trespassed about 100 yards – they never got halfway up the clough."

Rothman later agreed with Stephenson that the so-called "victory meeting," when the Hayfield group met up with others from Sheffield, who had come by the much more difficult route across Kinder's peaty plateau from Edale, was held near Ashop Head, at least two miles north-west of Kinder's hard-to-find summit. But in the end, what was more important was that they had trespassed in such a public and positive way, rather than how far they had trespassed.

The trespassers agreed that they would march back to Hayfield "with their heads held high" and not disperse like a band of criminals. "It was a demonstration for the rights of ordinary people to walk on land stolen from them in earlier times," Rothman was to write later. "We were proud of our effort and proudly marched back the way we had come."

The police, who had declined to take part in the scramble up Kinder's steep flanks, were waiting in a line across Kinder Road when the trespassers returned. Five people were arrested, in addition to John Anderson, a Rambler actually opposed to the trespass who had just come along to see what would happen, but was apparently arrested when he went to assist the injured Beevers. They were variously charged with public order offences such as riotous assembly, but significantly, not with trespass.

The story of the trial of the trespassers at Derby Assizes is as riddled with the same kind of class prejudice as the rest of the event. The judge, Sir Edward Acton, was true to the best traditions of English justice. When it was revealed that a copy of a book by Lenin had been found in the possession of one of the accused (Tona Gillett) when arrested, he innocently enquired, to the merriment of the court: "Isn't that the Russian gentleman?"

Rothman's self-conducted defence, prepared in the darkness of a Leicester prison cell, was a masterpiece of open-air, working-class rhetoric. "We ramblers, after a hard week's work in smoky towns and cities, go out rambling for relaxation, a breath of fresh air, a little sunshine," he told the court. "But we find when we go out that the finest rambling country is closed to us, just because certain individuals wish to shoot for about ten days a year."

Ironically, it was the severity of the sentences handed down by the judge on the five young defendants – ranging between two and six (*) months' imprisonment – which was to unite the ramblers' cause. Even those implacably opposed to the trespass were appalled by the "savage" sentences, and the Manchester federation were among many who appealed to the Home Secretary for a remission. A writer in the Manchester Guardian compared the affair to a university student rag, pointing out that people arrested during rags were not usually sent to prison. The Clarion Handbook of 1933-34, reported that the stiff sentences handed out "did not bring laurels to the other side" and thousands of ramblers were reported to have gone to view the scene of the trespass immediately after the event.



1932 Jacobs Ladder protest meeting against prison sentences of trespassers. Jud Clynes speaking, Tony Gillett, sitting with his head in his hand. They had both been jailed for 2 months. Benny was still in jail.

© Harry Rothman

The annual ramblers access demonstration in The Winnats a few weeks later drew a record 10,000 people, and further mass trespasses followed at Abbey Brook in the Upper Derwent, and on Stanage Edge, but significantly, no arrests were made. Indisputably, the mass trespass on Kinder in 1932 bought the access issue to a head, and acted as an important catalyst to the whole National Parks and access to the countryside campaign which eventually led to legislation in 1949. When the Peak District National Park authority came into being in April, 1951, it lost no time in addressing the access problem, and it was no accident that the first-ever access agreement allowing walkers the freedom to roam was signed just a year later, covering 5,780 acres of Kinder Scout and Broadlee Bank Tor. Today, more than 80 square miles of moorland are covered by such agreements.



© Mark Harvey

The “Right to Roam” Countryside and Rights of Way Act of 2000 can be seen as the crowning culmination of the efforts of those brave pioneering trespassers, though few will live to see its enactment. There can be little doubt either, that the Kinder trespass has entered the realms of the mythology of the outdoor movement, giving its few survivors a totally unsought aura of martyrdom.

Roly Smith

* John Anderson received the longest sentence for assaulting the gamekeeper, a charge he disputed to the end of his life and one which Derbyshire's Chief Constable publicly stated in 1994 he was innocent of.

Who else attended the Trespass?

Jimmie Miller was there. He is better known as Ewan MacColl, the singer who wrote and recorded The Manchester Rambler. MacColl later married Peggy Seeger.

AJP Taylor, who in 1932 was a Manchester University lecturer, later became a distinguished historian.

Clem Beckett Clem 'Dare Devil' Beckett, the man who rode the Wall of Death on his motorbike.

Benny Rothman is, of course best, and widely known, for the mass trespass. Yet according to Harry Rothman "my Dad barely mentioned it as he always had too much on. He knew it was important but he was engaged in things that were immediately important such as trade union and Communist Party work."

Although Benny had not chosen to go to prison he did utilise his time there productively by learning shorthand. This was to prove a very useful skill when he became a workplace union representative, allowing him to constantly challenge management when they changed their attitudes during negotiations and sought to dispute they had previously concluded an agreement.

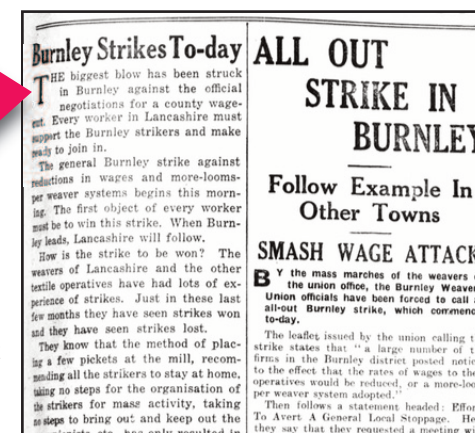
CHAPTER 5

Fighting fascism

When Benny came out of prison the continuing high levels of unemployment meant he could not find work locally as the negative publicity also meant he was blacklisted. The YCL proposed and he agreed to go to Burnley with Ernie Regan, an Openshaw lad of Irish extraction, where the pair would be involved in the struggle across North East Lancashire by clothing workers who were on a prolonged strike against the "more-loom system." The aim was to build a YCL group but this proved almost impossible as any previous organisation had become defunct.

The BWSF Rowarth Camp 1932 that triggered off the Mass Trespas.

Benny found the poverty in Burnley to be much worse than in the Manchester area. Interviewed years later he recalled a young married man in his early 20s. The couple were living in a little terraced house and had a table but only one chair and a couple of boxes to sit on. They may have had one or two cups, but they were living in abject poverty. His wife was expecting a baby and he went to the hospital to arrange for her to go into hospital to have the baby. He was told she could only go in when she went into labour. At one point they thought she was going into labour and they rang for an ambulance but were told they had to make their way to hospital on their own. They set off to the hospital which was at the top of a long hill and as they were walking the last lap she collapsed on the pavement. A tram driver stopped his tram and took the couple as near as possible to the hospital. The baby was lost and the tram driver got into very serious trouble for doing what he did because he had breached regulations. "That was an indication of the atmosphere at the time," said Benny.



Attempts to get young people from the mills into a political movement floundered as meetings were very poorly attended. More successful was the establishment of a Sunday Football League but when the football authorities said they would exclude any football team who played in it from the ordinary normal competitions then this broke up. It was also possible to get a small rambling club started. But these were no consolation for the failure to build a political organisation. Benny returned to Cheetham after 4 to 5 months away, stating later "I wasn't cut out for what I had been asked to do as I wasn't previously that much involved directly in politics."

On his return home, he helped resurrect the Cheetham YCL branch in 1933 and became its first secretary. This was to become one of the two largest YCL branches in the country – the other being in another large Jewish area, Stepney. Later in the year, Benny helped set up the Challenge Club on Herbert Street, Cheetham. Challenge was the name of the YCL paper. The club, which eventually shared a healthy number of its 400-plus members and facilities with Cheetham YCL branch, offered an impressive range of activities including rambling, cycling, a boxing club, gymnastics and even Sunday evening dances that because of its amplified music became very popular with local young people. The club was to become the hub of anti-fascist activities in Manchester over the next few years.

Meanwhile the act of combining social with political activity meant the YCL branch grew to over 200 dwarfing the local CPGB membership itself which was less than double figures. Such growth failed to prevent Benny being criticised with his opponents fiercely arguing he was not engaging in political but social activity.

Benny in 1933 at High Tor, Matlock. He was returning from the Clarion Cycling Club AGM in Nottingham.

© Harry Rothman



A former Conservative MP, Sir Oswald Mosley had been a minister in the Labour Government of 1929-31 but, inspired by Benito Mussolini in Italy, he helped found the BUF in October 1932.

Taking advantage of the desperate economic climate right across Lancashire, Mosley aimed to make Manchester an important centre of his activities. He blamed the Depression on minorities, including Jews, and left-wing and communist movements, rather than on the capitalist system. He was successful in obtaining the backing of the Daily Mail owner Lord Rothermere and at one point the BUF claimed to have 50,000 members, including a corps of black shirted paramilitary stewards, nicknamed the Blackshirts. Fascism became visible in Britain at the same time as Adolf Hitler began to consolidate power in Germany after he became Chancellor on 30 January 1933. He then eliminated all political opposition en route to becoming dictator of Germany.

GOVERNMENT ASSISTS TERROR AGAINST WORKERS

Suppression of Communist Party Threatened : Workers Rallying

A wave of Fascist violence is being let loose against the German working-class and the Communist Party.

With the aid of the Papen Government the Hitlerites are endeavouring to terrorise the workers and to prepare the way for seizing power, either legally at the General Election on July 31, or illegally if needs be.

THIS is the real meaning of the terrible shooting affrays of the last few days. The Fascist dictatorship is being prepared. The Papen Government, which raised the ban on the Fascist storm troops, and consequently directly initiated the present wave of terror, has now banned all out-door meetings and processions. This ban will fall on the Communist Party, which is barred from many halls. The Fascists will continue their activities under the protection of the Government.

A semi-official statement declares that this ban is only the first step. Measures will shortly be adopted against the illegal carry-



Daily Worker reports on the battle against Nazi terror in Germany.

In Manchester the BUF set up its headquarters in the Northumberland Street and Tyson Street areas where many Jewish people lived. According to Benny the BUF drew their membership from "lots of unemployed people who got a uniform and a club where they could box...there was a lot of antisemitism at the time."

According to Manchester Chief Constable John Maxwell, the fascists adopted a "policy of deliberate provocation of the Jews...visiting the Jewish quarter to make insulting remarks which lead to outbreaks of disorder." The Jewish Chronicle of 24 July 1936 reported how fascists had appeared outside a Cheetham cinema that was frequented by many Jewish people and began selling their newspaper, Action, whilst shouting out "the only paper in the country not financed by Jews."

Faced with such intimidation, Benny helped organise local opposition.

"The battles with Mosley's Blackshirts started when they tried to go into Cheetham and were driven out by the YCL. We eventually made it impossible for them to hold an event. At one meeting in Marshallcroft we turned their van over and at any event they organised we turned up and heckled. On one occasion I was arrested but the charge was later dropped."

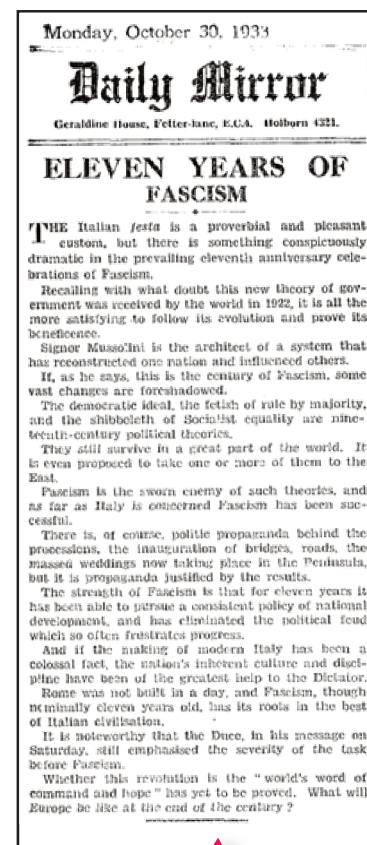
However the fascists were able to hold weekly meetings in other parts of Manchester and they distributed literature door-to-door that sought to divide the working class on religious and ethnic lines. Eighteen new BUF branches were established locally in 1933 and 1934.

The largest BUF activities were mass meetings and rallies, which were designed to demonstrate its invincibility to its opponents and potential supporters. A large rally was held on 12 March 1933 at the Manchester Free Trade Hall and a further Manchester city centre BUF meeting was held on 29 October 1933. Benny Rothman was amongst the anti-fascists who physically opposed both meetings. At the former he was very fortunate when the event erupted into fighting between the fascist and anti-fascists, who were mainly Communists, and he was shoved over a balcony, only escaping serious injury when his fall was broken by a fascist sitting below.

Fascism was meanwhile gaining significant political support and interest. The following day the Daily Mirror editorial was headed Eleven Years of (Italian) Fascism. It concluded "Rome was not built in a day, and Fascism, though nominally eleven years old, has its roots in the best of Italian civilisation. It is interesting that the Duce, (Benito Mussolini) in his message on Saturday, still emphasised the severity of his task before Fascism. Whether this revolution is the "world's word of command and hope " has yet to be proved. What will Europe be like at the end of the century?"

Then on 31 October 1933 the Daily Mirror carried an article reporting the comments of the Nottingham Lord Mayor Mr H Seeley Whitby headed "We need a Hitler" in which the Lord Mayor hoped for a man with "the energy and initiative" of Hitler and Mussolini.

At Belle Vue on 29 September 1934 Mosley picked up on Hitler's attacks on Jews by telling the audience that his opposition was "financed by Jewish financiers" who "had stabbed our men in the back when they were fighting in the last war."



Some capitalist papers ignored the real dangers of fascism.

This event though proved to be a failure for the BUF.

'Bye Bye Blackshirt: Oswald Mosley defeated at Belle Vue – Michael Wolf.

Reproduced thanks to Searchlight magazine

After the notorious brutality of the fascist meeting earlier in 1934 Mosley thought he would have a repeat performance in Manchester. To combat this threat an anti-fascist co-ordinating committee was created to counter the fascist thugs. A dynamic campaign of leafleting, fly-posting and public meetings were organised to mobilise the opposition. Deputations were organised representing the broadest possible democratic coalition to demand the banning of the fascist meeting. In the face of all the protests the meeting was allowed, and to add insult to injury the Chief Constable banned all marches, a decision clearly taken to make anti-fascist mobilisation more difficult.

However, the anti-fascists were determined that there would be no repeat of fascist violence and intimidation. Saturday 29th September the opposition mobilised. Three marches

from Openshaw, Miles Platting, and Cheetham marched to meet the hundreds already waiting to meet them at Ardwick Green to form a united demonstration of over 3,000 who would march along Hyde road to join the protest meeting outside Belle Vue. The contingent from Cheetham comprised in the main young working class Jewish activists from the Challenge Club, the Youth Front Against War & Fascism and the Young Communist League. Together they formed the backbone of the group that was to rout the fascists later in the day. When the marchers arrived at Belle Vue they were greeted by the hundreds

already assembled for the protest meeting. The marchers however had not come to listen to speeches. They had come to stop Mosley.

At the agreed time they left the meeting, crossed the road and in orderly fashion queued up to pay their entrance fee for Belle Vue. Once inside the amusement park scouting parties tried to find the fascists. They had no success, as these examples of the “master race” were hiding in the halls hired for them.

Mosley was to speak from The Gallery which was protected by the lake, his supporters were to assemble on the open air dance floor which was in front of the lake. Even so the fascist leader did not feel safe and in addition to the gang of thugs he called his bodyguard, there were wooden barriers and the police. In case this was not enough searchlights were available to be directed against the anti-fascists and fire engines with water cannon at the ready. The scene was set. 500 blackshirts marched from a hall under The Gallery and formed up military style. Mosley, aping Mussolini stepped forward to the microphone to speak. He was greeted by a wall of sound that completely drowned his speech. “Down with fascism”, “Down with the blackshirt thugs!”, “The rats the rats clear out the rats!”, “One two three four five we want Mosley, dead or alive!” There were anti fascist songs, the Red Flag, and the Internationale. The sound never stopped for over an hour. In spite of the powerful amplifiers turned up to maximum Mosley could not be heard. To quote The Manchester Guardian, “Sitting in the midst of Sir Oswald’s personal bodyguard within three yards of where he was speaking you could barely catch two consecutive sentences.”

Mosley tried all the theatrical tricks he knew to try and make an impression but without any effective sound he appeared like a demented marionette. Defeat stared him in the face and he knew it, as did his audience which slunk away as soon as the police bodyguard was removed. The humiliation of the fascists was complete. The only sound they could now hear was the singing of ‘bye bye blackshirt’ to the tune ‘bye bye blackbird’, a popular song of the time.

With the fascists defeated and demoralised, the protesters raised their banners and posters high and proudly rejoined the meeting outside Belle Vue.

Mosley’s humiliation was complete, what was supposed to have been his most important meeting since Olympia was in fact the first of a series of defeats he was to suffer in Manchester.

CHAPTER 6

Finding work and becoming active in the Amalgamated Engineering Union

On the employment front, matters improved as Benny found work again preparing cars.

“My dad was a fitter, he never did a formal apprenticeship but he was one of those people who could copy others just by watching them. He was a very quick learner who could have walked into University nowadays,” explains Harry Rothman.

Benny, now working again, joined the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) but there was only one other employee at work who was a member and that was the foreman. Nevertheless, Benny began to get himself involved at a minor level within the AEU by becoming the minutes’ secretary for the Manchester 2 branch and from which he was elected as a delegate to the Manchester and Salford Trades’ Council.

The secretary of this was AA Purcell who Benny described later “as a great character.” Purcell was heading towards the end of his life but he had sat as a Labour MP in the House of Commons on two occasions and was President of the International Federation of Trade Unions from 1924 to 1928.

However, when Benny realised that he could do far more for the working class movement by working in a factory, he managed with some difficulty to get work at a Newton Heath aircraft factory called A V Roe. (Avro) Bernie was later sacked for unknown reasons by Avro when they found out that he was a Communist.

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB)

The CPGB was formed in 1920 with the aim of establishing a communist society based on the common ownership of the means of production whereby the surplus product – the excess of products and services necessary to maintain everyone at a decent standard of living - is retained by the labouring class rather than under capitalism where it belongs to the ruling class in the form of profit.

Three years earlier in 1917, the Russian (or Bolshevik) Revolution overthrew the oppressive Tsarist autocracy and then, with Vladimir Lenin at its head, the Bolshevik Party replaced the Provisional Government with a new form of rule based on Soviets - workers' councils - through which the working class would rule.

In the aftermath all of Russia's banks were nationalised with private bank accounts confiscated whilst all foreign debts were repudiated. The Bolsheviks, through the Communist International which they had founded in 1919, made it apparent that they hoped and wanted similar revolutions to occur right across the world. In reaction, eight foreign nations, including the UK, militarily backed anti-Communist forces known collectively as the "White Armies" but which were later defeated in a Civil War lasting several years.

Success in Russia generated enthusiasm in Britain and the CPGB was formed from the merger of smaller socialist parties with the aim of replicating what Lenin and the Bolsheviks had achieved. From the beginning one of the major contested issues was "Parliamentarism" and what attitude the party should have to the Labour Party. Initially, it was agreed to work with the existing reformist trade unions and Labour but, after the latter refused to allow the CPGB to affiliate as an organisation, then any CPGB members who joined Labour did so as individuals.

During the 1920s, the CPGB maintained a policy that it should only consist of revolutionary cadres prepared to fight capitalism and, by doing so, demonstrate to an increasingly desperate, often starving, working class that the only organisation that could lead it out of its misery was the CPGB.

Membership and influence amongst militants, particularly in mining communities, grew and then, in 1929, a new "Class against Class" policy was adopted after the 1928 Communist International Congress declared that this was an era of economic collapse, in the wake of

which, there would be mass working class radicalisation which, with communist leadership, could lead to proletarian revolution worldwide.

This "New Line" meant that from now on social democratic parties were viewed as being much as a threat as the openly capitalist parties such as the Conservatives as well as the emerging fascist parties such as those led by Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany. In turn, fascism and, with it, the suppression of all forms of democracy were seen by the CPGB as tools that the ruling class in capitalist liberal democracies would turn to as a last resort in their battle to keep power.

"Class against Class" meant that the CPGB became not only viewed as an enemy by the ruling class but also by many in the Labour Party and trade unions who found themselves wrongly dubbed "social-fascist." The situation facing many CPGB members at work became hostile and many were victimised and put out of work.

Even after the CPGB abandoned "Class against Class" – after Hitler came to power – and adopted a Popular Front policy of trying to forge alliances with Labour, and even some openly capitalist parties, the bad feelings generated earlier meant that despite CPGB members being at the forefront of struggles – especially around unemployment and Spain – they continued to face an uncomfortable time from progressive fellow workers angered at being mislabelled in the past. Meanwhile, the capitalist press continued to warn of the "Red Menace" to help defend a system still wracked with high levels of unemployment, poverty and low levels of welfare provision.

Happily married

Before he lost his job at Avro, Benny met and later married, at Christmas 1937, fellow communist Lilian Crabtree. Lily's mam, Maria Doyle, was Irish and her dad, Paul Crabtree, a moulder and life long socialist, was from Lancashire. Lily was a card room worker in Rochdale's cotton mills. Over the years she also worked in numerous jobs – she calculated 19 in all – including engineering, asbestos manufacture, cooking at school, house keeper to middle class ladies who found work too hard and as a carer for several people. In the 30s she often found herself the sole working member of her family.

Lily was an active trade unionist and shop steward herself within the General and Municipal Workers Union and the TGWU. She finally retired

CHAPTER 7

"Metro-Vicks"

Following his Avro dismissal, Benny was able to get a job at engineering giant Metropolitan Vickers ("Metro-Vicks") which was eager to recruit skilled labour as Britain began to gear itself up for war with Germany. Benny found that whilst there were a number of Communist Party members at the company they were not very active.

By this time, there was a growing drive for assistance to Spain where a rebellion against the democratically elected Republican Government had been organised by General Franco with armed backing and military support from Mussolini and Hitler. The fear was that a Franco victory might further encourage Hitler and Mussolini to spread their poisonous regimes by invading other parts of Europe and Africa.

In response, thousands of volunteers from across the globe went as part of the International Brigades to help defend the Spanish Republic. Getting there was difficult because whilst Germany and Italy ignored the non-intervention agreement signed in January 1937, the Conservative government in Britain banned volunteers from going to Spain. Anyone caught going from Britain to Spain to fight fascism faced the possibility of imprisonment.

At least 2,500 British men and women fought for the Spanish Republic and many had a strong trade union background, including the later TGWU general secretary, Jack Jones, who served with distinction in Spain between 1936 and 1938, when he was repatriated after being seriously wounded at the Battle of Ebro. Jones said: "Since the governments of the world, governments like Britain and France were not prepared to go to Spain's aid and were standing on the sidelines, we felt that it was right to give whatever help we could in supporting them."

Others who volunteered to fight in Spain included Tom Jones, who later became the Welsh TGWU general secretary and whose tale is told in Issue 1 of this series of books.

just two years before she died, just six months before her husband's death, at aged 86. She was from a family of 13 of whom only 8 survived childhood. Before Lily was born her family had been forced to go into the workhouse where one of her sisters contracted meningitis and died.

Her eldest brother Tom was crippled fighting in World War I, two other siblings escaped poverty by emigrating to Australia and another moved south to work on the railways in Oxford. In order to earn some money some of Lily's brothers boxed at semi-professional level.

"We used to visit Rochdale on the bus from Manchester's Stephenson Square and in the mill towns you saw all these great big chimneys that steeplejack and TV personality Fred Dibnah later blew up. They were everywhere, it is hard to imagine it now," recalls Harry Rothman.

Lily's family were fine about her marriage to a Jewish man, admittedly not one who was in any sense religious. By contrast, Benny's mother and family were deeply unhappy that he had married outside their faith and did not attend the marriage ceremony, making clear that, from then on, he was not welcome at home and they did not want to see him again. As a consequence, his brother "Gersh" and his uncle Arthur were the only family members to maintain contact with him over the next two decades. Sadly, Lily's mother, Maria, also did not make it to the wedding as she died a couple of days before the big day.

Originally, the newly married couple lived in Failsworth. But, in 1938, as their first baby, Harry, born 19 July 1938, was due they were able to move to the recently constructed Riddings Estate in Timperley, near Altrincham. "It was wonderful for them to get out of that dark industrial terraced housing into a semi-detached house with a garden," explains Harry. The couple, who had a second child when Marian was born on 14 December 1940, were to spend almost 60 years living in the house, which they eventually bought.



Harry and Marian Rothman on a ramble in 1944/45

At an Aid for Spain gathering in the Manchester Free Trade Hall, Benny volunteered as a driver. His offer was refused as he was not an experienced driver and would not have been able to handle ambulances and buses over the mountain passes.

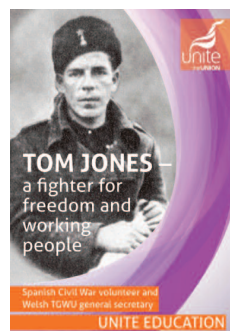
Benny threw himself into raising money and support for Spain but could not do so openly at work where he also had to be careful about selling the Daily Worker. He got himself heavily involved in arguing, particularly with Labour Party members, after Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returned from discussions in Munich with Hitler in September 1938 declaring "Peace in our Time."

Opponents of the deal argued that by appeasing Hitler it would simply inspire him to expand his military capabilities and make war even more certain in the future. Supporters of the deal believed that by allowing Germany's annexation of parts of Czechoslovakia then Germany would be content and not seek further expansion.

Ultimately critics of the deal were proved right as within a year the world was at war. One of the most prominent critics of appeasement was Communist MP Willie Gallagher who had opposed the First World War but was aware what dangers the working class faced from fascism.

Benny believed that much more should have been done to get support against Hitler and that, as a result, Britain entered the war much less prepared than it should have been. When war broke out in September 1939, however, he was heavily criticised at work because a month earlier the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, had signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. This committed each country not to aid each other's enemies or to engage in hostile acts against one another.

Many Communists in Western Europe were outraged at Stalin's actions and quit the party in disgust. But, Stalin needed a breathing space to build up his armed forces that had been severely damaged by the purges he had conducted against important military leaders.



Benny wanted more done to prepare Britain for war against fascism.

At the same time the two states agreed to partition Poland between them with Germany taking by far the larger part. There were atrocities in both parts of Poland although those committed by Hitler's Nazis far exceeded anything elsewhere. The pact was broken, though, when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, a move that ultimately proved crucial in the German dictator's defeat.

Benny, who by now was also in the Home Guard, became an elected shop steward at his department within "Metro-Vicks" and he helped set up a Timperley AEU Branch of which he became one of the first officials. He was becoming more and more involved in trade union work at factory, branch and, later, district level. "Metro-Vicks" was one of the leading organised trade union workplaces in Britain, if not in Europe. The Works Committee was very long-standing and a lot of officials in the union at the time were either elected or selected from among the workers at "Metro-Vicks." Later these

included Hugh Scanlon, who subsequently became the AEU president, Ellis Smith, Norman Atkinson, Stan Orme, Frank Allaun and Fred Lee, later all Labour MPs. The Labour Party wanted its MPs to have been workers then!

"Metro-Vicks" was, in reality, a conglomerate of factories and the Works Committee had about 15 or 20 delegates on it that each represented a department. Just before World War II started, Benny became the delegate from West Works switchgear where 800 to 900 worked.

As there was also a new factory there to work on radar work and he also represented that group, which was 1,000 strong, then, he was representing nearly 2,000 workers on the Works Committee. Most departments, however, were three to four hundred strong. During the war, there was also a Womens' Works Committee as so many were imported, particularly from the North-East. The women were as equally well organised as the men.

Supporting racially abused colleagues

There were also workers that came in from the colonies and Benny later recorded an incident in the blacksmith shop involving a worker from Jamaica. The black worker had clearly not undertaken an apprenticeship but he had obviously been working as a blacksmith for many years. He was about 5'9" tall and the same width and he must have weighed about 18 stone. He was a very nice, pleasant, well-behaved chap whose attitude changed dramatically when the man who fixed the rate for the job came along. An argument developed about the price of the job and the rate fixer abused the blacksmith by saying, "Look, Sambo." Bang – he was out! They carried him to the ambulance and the blacksmith was sacked for assaulting him. The department stopped immediately in support of the blacksmith and he was reinstated and the rate fixer was shifted into another section.

According to Benny, the arrival of black workers caused virtually no racism and he believes this was because there was no threat to jobs. "Metro-Vicks" had previously had a tradition of employing black college students from the colonies and there was a very small number of black second generation workers who lived in Stretford.

During the war, management, workers and their unions sought to increase output and quality. For management this meant more profit but union reps wanted to maintain the terms and conditions they had previously negotiated and won. The factories had lived by piecework and there was always constant pressure from management for increased efficiency that would bring down the rate for the job. Management began retiming jobs and it meant people were holding back from increasing output as they faced being asked to work twice as hard for the same money. Benny was able to win an agreement that when production was increased then there was a corresponding rise in pay.

There were very few strikes in "Metro-Vicks" during the war. One that did occur was in the West Works 5 area where there had been a big influx of women workers and some of them approached Benny to complain that they were earning very little from piecework. Benny was convinced that the women workers were being exploited by experienced rate fixers and he discovered the women were getting much less than women workers in other parts of the workplace. Benny told management to sort out the problem and the next day he heard that there was a strike as the women felt they were still being messed around. Benny approached the female

workers and promised them he would resolve the problem if they went back to work, which they did. After discussions with management, the rate fixer was eventually moved into an office job and the women were guaranteed an average price for their work for a number of weeks until a completely new set of prices was established.

Strikes in the Second World War were a matter for the Ministry of Labour and when they did break out it was usual to see the former TGWU general secretary Ernest Bevin, the Minister for Labour in the coalition government led by Winston Churchill, coming along to ensure they were resolved as quickly as possible.

Benny's standing rose even further during the war once the Soviet Union began to participate and, as it became clear that the Soviet Red Army was playing a vital role in defeating fascism, some of those who had previously given Benny a hard time for his CPGB membership melted away.

Victimised

Towards the end of the war, there was then a big influx of new members into the CPGB. Benny was able to openly sell seventy to eighty Daily Workers each day at his workplace and a fellow member in West Works 5 was matching him on sales. Lots of stewards and workers became CPGB members, which Benny attributed to "the leadership we'd given in the factory during the war."

Despite this not everyone was a fan of Benny as he later recalled. "There were some tremendous battles between the right-wing and left wing of the trade unions inside the factory. In "Metro-Vicks" there was a big religious faction – Catholic Action – of right-wingers led by Chris Blackwell. It was vicious and it finished off ultimately with me being fired, as much as anything through this battle, and victimised."

It was only weeks after the Conservatives were returned to power when Benny was dismissed at "Metro-Vicks" on 20 November 1951. On that day, a welder was threatened with dismissal if he refused to go ahead on his own with a job that was normally undertaken in conjunction with a fitter.

Three leading shop stewards who inspected the work all agreed it was a two-person job whereupon the men in the department all stopped work. When Benny called a meeting with management's permission in his own department, the men there also agreed to stop work in solidarity. Benny

was then dismissed for “participating in a stoppage,” following which the men in the West Works downed tools in support of their elected representative. The strike was to last eight days.

What followed was a complex

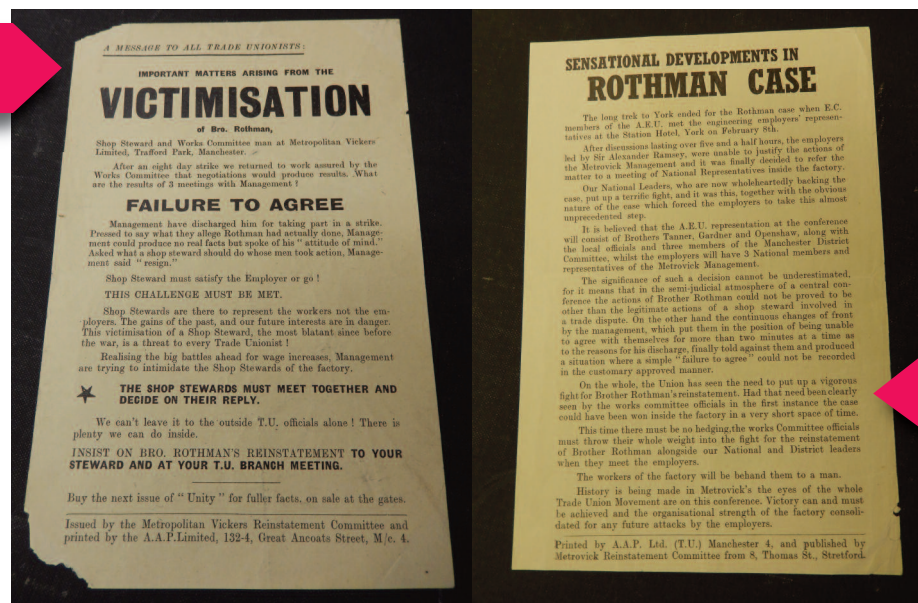
A Metro Vicks Reinstatement Committee support leaflet.

situation in which the AEU district committee was split over whether to spread the stoppage and when it discussed whether “the week’s notice given to Brother Rothman is a straightforward case of victimisation and constitutes a threat to the shop stewards in the area” the vote was tied at 14-14. The President then ruled that the resolution was not carried.

Significantly, although he was a member of the Manchester District Committee – which had steadily lost power as national and workshop bargaining agreements became the norm with the result that the power base within the union changed accordingly – the convenor at “Metro-Vicks”, Bert Brennan, was not present for the vote. Brennan, with whom Benny had regularly tangled with in the past, had, in fact, with the support of the Works Committee, urged the men in the West Works to return to work.

Brennan argued that any attempt at making an issue of Benny’s dismissal would jeopardise relations between the Works Committee and “Metro-Vicks” management. The convenor also argued that if the strikers had returned to work immediately he was confident he could have got Benny his job back. Adding to Benny’s difficulties, the local Stretford branch of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), consisting of many “Metro-Vicks” employees amongst its 1,500 members, declared itself against the strike.

In response, the West Works workers formed a (unofficial) strike committee, which was then backed by the District Committee, and a number of leaflets headed UNITY were issued in support of the strike.



When a special “Metro-Vicks” AEU shop stewards meeting was held on 26 November 1951, the strike committee claimed there were 2,800 on strike with management claiming just 654. Whichever figure was the

most accurate, it was apparent that the majority of the 18,000 workers at “Metro-Vicks” had not been persuaded to back Benny Rothman by taking strike action and thereafter the Works Committee within the factory declared itself against the strike. Faced with such overwhelming odds against them, those workers who had taken strike action reluctantly returned to work without Benny.

Official support lacking when Benny was victimised.

The struggle though was not over and it bubbled on for well over two years as the district committee applied pressure on Brennan and the stewards at “Metro-Vicks” to get them to continue the fight for Benny Rothman’s reinstatement. It is

clear that there were considerable tensions. A letter by the Manchester District Secretary S.Gardner that was written on 29 February reveals there had been no love lost when a meeting involving 76 AEU stewards at “Metro-Vicks” was held on 26 February 1952.

Whereas a motion that Benny Rothman was dismissed for trade union activities was unanimously carried by the meeting, another stating “this body of stewards expresses full confidence in Brennan” was not supported by everyone although there is no record of exactly how much dissent there was with the convenor. A “Metro-Vicks” Reinstatement Committee was set up to pressure the stewards to back further action and, in its February 1952 bulletin, it lambasted the Works Committee and reported that management had thanked the latter at the Christmas Eve meeting for their “very proper attitude in the recent Rothman case.”

There is a letter within Benny Rothman’s files in the Working Class Movement Library in Manchester, that is dated 6 August 1953. It is to Mr

Main, the managing director (*) at "Metro-Vicks", and in it the AEU district secretary asks the company to consider re-instating Benny.

The letter refers to a conference that had taken place at which union and management had met to discuss the ongoing failure to agree over Benny's case and at which "it was agreed that Mr Rothman was a very satisfactory workman" but that the firm "did not wish any time to be put on the question of reviewing his re-employment but ... would be reasonable in the matter."

The letter goes on to state: "Mr Rothman has had difficulty whilst seeking employment and that his present employment is causing him financial difficulties." There is a reference to "the atmosphere at the time of his dismissal is not now with us, and therefore, I would request your sympathetic consideration to the application on behalf of Benny Rothman."

It would appear to be the case that management never clarified what was "reasonable". The matter was never resolved to Benny's satisfaction and he never returned to "Metro-Vicks".

Thankfully, Benny was able to find work in 1953 at Meldrum Brothers Limited in Timperley where he again became an AEU steward but unfortunately he lost his job when the company folded the following year. According to Harry Rothman, his dad then "got a job with the British Rayon



Benny as AEU shop steward at Metro-Vicks.

Research Association, an industrial research organisation at Heald Green near Stockport. He really loved that job, working with scientists," added Harry. "Then, later, he got a job at a firm in Broadheath but got sacked in 1956 after the Hungarian Revolution was put down by the Soviet Union and the company found a reason to sack him."

Stalin v Trotsky

Meanwhile, while Harry was sympathetic to his dad's plight he did not share his belief in the Soviet Union or in Joseph Stalin, whose long dictatorial rule, in which he had eliminated all his political opponents, created a reign of terror and adopted a policy of socialism in one country, had finally ended when he died in 1953.

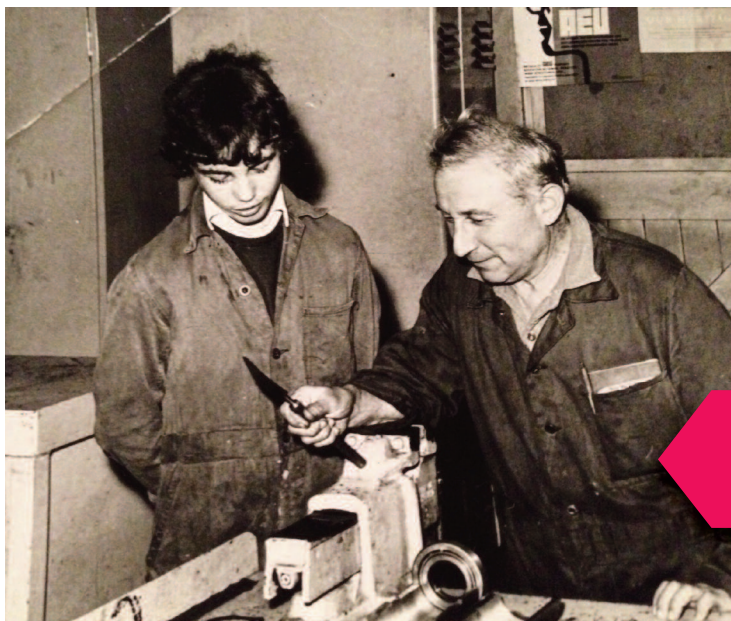
"I lived at home until I was 18 and after University I never returned. I later became a Trotskyist, Trotsky being the opposition leader who Stalin had assassinated in Mexico in 1940. I had great admiration for Trotsky and thought he was proved right by the way the Soviet Union collapsed in the end. I tried to discuss this without success on many occasions with my dad but you have to remember that if you had lived in poverty like working class people did during his childhood – and his parents had come out of poverty-ridden eastern Europe and my mum was from a mill town where deprivation was rife – then the Soviet Union seemed to be a utopia.

"I tried to understand where my dad came from. To stand against all the propaganda held against the Soviet Union was because people like my dad – and mam – held a vision and also the Communist Party led many of the industrial struggles in his time. It represented his class. My dad read a lot; he had a library of over 500 books in our house and not just politics but also books on natural history, linguistics and he bought me The Children's Encyclopaedia.

"He would tell me about the tricks that people got up to when the time and motion men came round, if you could do something in one movement then you could do it in two or three for the inspection as people were aware the management was trying to rob them by reducing their wages, as the aim of efficiency was to extract more surplus value. He read the Manchester Guardian but the most important publications for him were the Daily Worker and Labour Monthly, especially Rajani Palme Dutt's Notes of the Month in Labour Monthly – these were very important to my dad as they gave an insight as to what was happening in

the world. Dutt may have been a Stalinist, but he did write about what was going on and about the nature of imperialism and how that was affecting the British situation. There is no one doing that today.

“My dad and mam saw themselves as members of a revolutionary party and my mother talked of “the movement,” but where were they going? It was towards a better society, a better world, a world where you did not have to flog your guts out, where you could get proper health treatment, a proper roof over your head, where you could live well. They had an idea of the future, a heaven on earth, utopia. Name anyone who does not want this? The CPGB promised a route to change the world and the members went along with that.”



Benny training an apprentice at Kearns.

© Harry Rothman

CHAPTER 8

Immense political activity

In 1956, Benny started work at Kearns-Richards where he remained until he retired in 1976. Whilst there, he served as an AEU (which, from 1967, also included Foundry Workers) shop steward, chairman of the shop stewards' committee and convenor at the factory on Atlantic Street in Broadheath – Altrincham's industrial enclave – where the other recognised unions included the Association of Patternmakers, the Amalgamated Society of Wood Workers, General and Municipal Workers Union and the ETU.

In addition to representing individual workers at grievance and disciplinary meetings with management, Benny worked alongside the other unions on a number of joint union/management committees. These examined jobs skills and responsibilities when – in order to increase productivity amongst a workforce that manufactured high-speed, surfacing, boring, milling and drilling machines – management began introducing new machinery and production methods and techniques. In many cases, it proved difficult to prevent job losses and there was also a deskilling amongst some workers. In response, Benny worked hard to ensure that workers who remained benefited with improved wages and bonuses.

Fighting for jobs

Benny also performed the role of secretary of the Broadheath Shop Stewards' Forum (BBSF) for many years. In January 1972, it was announced that the Churchill machine tool factory in Broadheath was to close and production be transferred to Coventry with the loss of a 1,000 jobs. Stewards at the plant quickly established a fighting fund and there was a mass demonstration when Altrincham MP and Chancellor of the Exchequer, Anthony Barber, visited the factory to meet management and shop stewards and was given a rough reception. Benny was quoted in the Daily Mirror on 13/01/1972 saying: “It is inhuman and ridiculous to close this factory.”

The proposed loss of jobs at Churchill's was being mirrored in other parts of the north west of England. A leaflet issued by the Churchill Liaison Committee pointed to AEI, Openshaw Steel, Arundel's and Craven's at Stockport, Richards and Essex Tool at Altrincham as examples of firms that had "lengthened the dole queues by closures and redundancies." It asked workers to support the fight to retain jobs at Churchill as part of a generalised struggle against "the plundering of north west industry" whereby work was being taken "and given to areas like the South East, already bloated by over-population."

Fears of unemployment and a return to the 1930s were real with over 800,000 out of work in Britain in 1971, half a million more than in the mid-1960s. Faced with a deepening economic crisis, Labour and Tory governments sought to deal with the problems through wage restrictions although ultimately they looked to use legal restraints and legislation to curb trade union activities.

When Labour announced its In Place of Strife White Paper in 1969, this threat against the trade union movement was met by widespread strikes that ultimately forced the government to abandon its plans.

Then, when the new Conservative government pushed ahead with even more stringent plans, they were met by strikes on 8 December 1970. Amongst the one million or more workers who participated were a great many AUEW (the AEU became the AUEW in 1971) members such as Benny, who as a CPGB member had helped establish in 1966 the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions. This body had initiated the campaign for Industrial Action on 8 December and those actions that followed, including the big protests against the anti-trade union Industrial Relations Act in March 1971 that formed the back-bone to the strike and those that followed.

Industrial tension was high. In July 1971, there began the Upper Clyde Shipbuilding occupation that was to last many months and during which anyone entering the workplace was placed under the shop stewards directions. Trade unionists donated over £400,000 towards the occupation which, when it ended in 1972, had saved all four yards from closure.

Under the pressure of related strikes and protests to "Kill the Bill", the Tories shelved the Industrial Relations Act which had as one of its main targets the AUEW and its network of 30,000 plus stewards. Indeed, a million workers walked out in July 1972 in support of five dockers from the TGWU who had been jailed for "illegal" picketing by the new

Industrial Relations Court. As the protests against the imprisonment escalated towards a spontaneous general strike, the TUC pledged official national action unless the dockers were released. This threat shook the Tories and led to a tremendous victory for the working class.

Nevertheless, there remained equal concerns among trade unionists over ongoing job losses. In June 1972, workers at Briant Colour Printing, a tiny printing works in London's Kent Road, occupied their workplace in protest at plans by management to close the business. The occupation was to last over a year. (An earlier one-day occupation in April 1971 against forced redundancies had been successful)

1972 saw a huge rise in occupations by workers. None more so than in the North-West where the tactic was employed in January at Fisher Bendix in Liverpool, at Dawson-Barfos/William Crosland in Manchester and at Sim-Chem in Stockport.

In March 1972, steelworkers at GKN's Bredbury Steel Workers near Stockport occupied the workplace and inspired almost another 50 sit-ins across the Manchester area by close to 30,000 engineering workers seeking better pay and conditions. (A £6 wage rise, 35 hour working week, equal pay and longer holidays, which if granted would lead to more workers being needed and a fall in unemployment) Most of those involved with the occupations were AUEW members and their actions had the support of Benny Rothman and the BSSF.

In turn this outraged the likes of Barber who in May 1972 said the engineering sector in Manchester was "traditionally the most militant in the country" and spoke out against "the few who seem hell bent on wrecking both the prosperity of the area and deterring new industries from coming here." The Chancellor also claimed that two major companies had been unwilling to consider his proposal to move to Manchester because "they were not prepared to risk the sort of industrial action they associated with the area."

In response to Barber's statement the BSSF met and afterwards its secretary Benny Rothman said: "Mr Barber did not name us directly for reasons better known to himself but smeared us by implication....we are not wrecking employment but fighting to prevent closures of local factories....he should ask local factory managements about this. We know that at this current time only a reduced working week can bring our unemployed colleagues back into unemployment...as workers we are

not trigger happy for industrial action but we will always fight for jobs and a future." He urged Barber to name the two companies if his allegations were to be taken seriously.

Meanwhile the closures continued. Despite a campaign that had involved the local council, the Chamber of Trade and Manufacturers' Association it was announced that the fight at Churchill's was to end after the workers agreed to accept the closure decision when the Alfred Herbert Group, of which Churchill's was a part, announced a £4 million loss on the year.

Back fighting fascism

With Benny always fully aware that only the ruling class would benefit if people were divided on racial lines, then when he was approached in 1973 to assist local anti-fascist activists in their struggle to have a local National Front (NF) march banned, he immediately invited them into Kearns.

"We had orientated ourselves towards the working class and had approached the most powerful unions in the area. At Kearns, Benny gathered round as many people as he could to listen to us. He was clearly well respected. Our campaign reduced the NF to holding a static rally and so it was a partial success," said Graeme Atkinson, then a member of Manchester Anti-Fascist Committee.

"The purpose was to kick the NF off the streets but for those of us who were more politically conscious we felt that we needed some political education. When we held day schools much later, Benny came to speak about the fight against the Blackshirts in the 1930s and like another anti-fascist veteran, Issy Luft, he had people enthralled. It showed our lads – all working class – where they had come from and that it was not just about having a few scraps. Incidentally, we won the struggle against the NF hands down and we did not see them in the centre of Manchester for many, many years," added Graeme.

Benny retired from Kearns in 1976 when he reached 65. It by no means, though, ended his involvement in working class politics and the trade union movement. In 1976 to 1978, he organised through the Trades Council a support group for the mainly immigrant Grunwick strikers, who sought union recognition at their workplace in Willesden, north London and he later did the same in 1984-85 when the miners' attempted to save their jobs and communities.

"During the miners struggle, I was given responsibility by the NUM for organising the collection of food and money for North Derbyshire coalfields. One of the first people I approached to help in this collective effort was Benny Rothman because I knew he had the commitment and determination because of his loyalty to the working class. That can't be replicated and, on a more practical level, he had a big vehicle. It was a Moskvitch estate car, into which we could pile tons of boxes of baked beans, packets of potatoes and loads of bread. The car was packed to the rafters every Friday night when we picked up collections from the Stockport AEU offices and Co-op before heading over to Chesterfield Labour club. When we were there, Benny made a very strong impression on people. He rarely, if ever, drank and he mingled very well and he was talking about how important the struggle was and how it took him back to the situation of his youth. This was the kind of struggle he grew up with.

"He understood that the possibilities of revolution had disappeared. But he was still a revolutionary, it is a way of viewing the world, and he never lost sight of the fact that fundamentally the capitalist society is a living contradiction, that it embodies a struggle between classes. He was one of the most consistent people and he was one of the people who no one could ever accuse of betraying anyone. Like one of his friends, Issy Luft, who was also of Romanian Jewish heritage, Benny remained true to his ideals as a revolutionary to his dying day," says Graeme Atkinson

In 1967-68 Benny had become the secretary of the AUEW, AEU Timperley branch, which he had helped set up in 1942, and it was a role he returned to – and undertook for many years – when he retired. He also held in retirement a variety of positions on local and regional trades council federations.

In 1980, at 68, Benny was recognised when the TUC presented him with a Gold Badge for his 46 years service as a trade union member with the AUEW as it was by then. Ten years later, he was given the AEU's highest award, the Special Award of Merit.

In 1982, Benny was the first secretary of the Kinder Scout and High Peak Advisory Committee, created after the National Trust had bought Kinder Scout. Not everyone at the Trust or the National Park welcomed Benny's involvement or attention. Roly Smith explains why: "As Head of Information of the Peak District National Park authority, I would organise access rallies, but there were certain members of the board such as landowners and

farmers who would never attend because of 1932 and who would say don't talk to Benny. But I ignored them and we rang each other regularly as we knew one another very well and became good friends."

The Rivington Pledge
Painted by his daughter-in-law the painter Anne Berg.

In 1989 Benny set up and took on the role of secretary for the Rivington Pledge Committee, which was a response to the Water Bill's threat to close access to open country owned by the water authorities. The pledge was recited by 3,000 people at a rally near Rivington, Lancashire on 7 May 1989.



We pledge our lifelong intent to regard ourselves at liberty, in exercise of the simple human freedoms which we rightly claim, to walk with our families and friends for recreation of body and mind wherever public access to open country is presently allowed by the water authorities. We shall cause no damage, break no criminal law, neither threaten nor commit any violence nor intrude upon anybody's privacy. But if free access to these lands is at any time denied we now declare that the threat of legal action for trespass, which is not a criminal offence, shall not deter us from exercising our traditional right of access to the hills.

On 8 November 1989, Benny wrote a letter from the Rivington Pledge Committee to Peggy Seeger extending his deepest sympathy for the loss of her husband, Trespass veteran, internationally renowned folk singer and friend, Ewan MacColl.

A day later and after several weeks of unrest the East German government announced that all its citizens could visit West Germany and the celebrating crowds then demolished the Berlin Wall that divided west from east. This marked the beginning of the end of Communism in Eastern Europe and must have come as a major blow to Benny even though he knew by then that ending capitalism during his lifetime was never going to happen.

CHAPTER 9

Recognition comes at last

Benny nevertheless continued to fight on behalf of the working class until the very end. He was prominent in the fight to prevent the military use of Holcombe Moor near Ramsbottom and he backed the work of many environmental groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. Active in Altrincham CND and TU CND, he attended as a delegate the CND annual conference.

In his 'spare' time – and the list of other organisations and activities he was involved at this time is truly amazing – he tended his allotment from which he donated produce to the annual bazaars of the *Morning Star* (previously the *Daily Worker*) to which during his lifetime Benny, as a keen amateur photographer, had also submitted and had had published many photographs of demonstrations and athletics events he had attended.

He also continued to go rambling. Said Roly Smith: "I remember going on a walk up the trespass route with Benny and Lily, beginning from where it started at Bowden Bridge. Benny was over 70 then and I could not keep up with him, he went like a train as he was a very fit man. He turned into a good speaker and in his retirement he became a spokesperson for the access movement. He was always looking out for problems with landowners and always on the ball and he knew more about it than I did. People were delighted to see him and everyone liked him as he was a very infectious, mischievous bloke with a great sense of humour. On that walk up Kinder, we raised a few grouse and they flew off with their distinctive 'go back, go back, go back' call. Benny just said: "No my friend, I am not going back."

And he didn't. Even in the early 1990s, he addressed a big Earth First rally at Twyford Down where a huge number turned out to protest at the despoliation of this beautiful countryside for the building of a cutting for the M3 motorway.

Media work became very important to Benny in finding the widest possible audience for the cause of access to the countryside. In 1991 Benny Rothman presented a programme I made for Channel 4 about the history of power in the British landscape – who owned what and who had access to it...For one shot to illustrate the exclusion of people from the land I located a stretch of country road with high wire fences on both sides. I got permission from the Ministry of Defence – whose fence it was – and we set up the camera on a grass verge to watch Benny striding by.

“Before we got properly started, a car full of athletic young men stopped next to us, and we were asked firmly what we were doing. I referred them to the MoD. Then another car stopped. Then another. Two more senior-looking soldiers in civilian clothes appeared. One was a major, second in command he said, the other was his sergeant. Despite our official permit they asked us to desist, in case “our friends in the Provisional IRA” should glean useful intelligence. Throughout the transaction, the sergeant kept one hand in his pocket. If they had known who Benny was, they might have been even more alarmed. In the end we went away without our shot. If I had been bolder I would have rolled the camera and tried to film a discussion between Benny and the soldiers of the SAS. “Freedom,” he said to camera at the end of the film, “isn't a battle you fight once, and win. It goes on for ever – for ever.”

Shortly afterwards in 1994, Benny suffered a stroke that then confined him to a wheelchair. Not that this stopped him from remaining active and he regularly responded to requests for interviews from outdoor organisations, students, journalists. He remained well-known nationally in the rambling and outdoor world and for his work on environmental issues. His roles as a militant trade unionist and as a lifelong Communist, though, rarely featured in any articles written about him. In 1996, he was made an Honorary Life Member of the Ramblers' Association.

At aged 90, Benny died in Billericay, where he was being cared for by his daughter Marian, on 23 January 2002.

He has not become forgotten. In addition to many articles written about the Kinder Scout trespass there has also been a mountain named after him. As an article in Ramblers magazine in February 2005 reported: “Even in death, the honours came in. A mountain was even named after him – in Greenland of all places. Jeremy Windsor and three colleagues made the first ascent of the 2,782m peak in eastern Greenland. Tent



Lily and Benny celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary in 1987.

bound for a few days, Windsor found a faded newspaper cutting of Benny Rothman's obituary and read it to his friends. They realised that this was a man who had shied away from the limelight and whose actions had largely gone unrecognised. They decided the best name for peak they had 'conquered' was Mt. Rothman. As climbers who regularly visit crags and mountains in the Peak District, they appreciated the work of Benny and others who organised the Mass Trespass and provided the foundations for the wider freedoms people like themselves now enjoy.”

Additionally, on 21 April 2007, the 75th anniversary of the Mass Trespass, David Miliband, the then Environment Secretary unveiled on a nameplate 'Benny Rothman-Manchester Rambler' on a Northern Trains locomotive at Piccadilly Station, Manchester. This train can still be seen regularly on the Manchester-Sheffield line.

Finally in January 2013, a blue plaque was placed on his former family home at Crofton Avenue in Timperley, his home for 58 years.

“He was an incredible character, a pint sized powerhouse, a man of tremendous principle and energy. He never boasted about his achievements but I think he was proud of what he had done.”
Roly Smith



In 2013, a plaque was mounted on Benny's former home.

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This is the fifth booklet written and compiled by Mark Metcalf. The first was on Tom Jones, the second on Julia Varley, the third about the Great Dock Strike 1889 and the fourth on Tony Hall. Look out for the next book in the series, Mohammad Taj.

A good read for Unite members – book of the month

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Tutors on Unite education courses often get asked what books they would recommend reading. As a result we have set up a book of the month service for Unite members. The subjects chosen are varied and include politics, sport, social and labour history and economics. There is a review of each book and details of how each readers can obtain copies. There are also reviews of books written by Unite members past and present.

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Contact Mark Metcalf on 07952 801783 or mark.metcalf@rocketmail.com

Rebel Road is a section of the Unite Education website that celebrates trade union and labour movement heroes that have been publicly recognised in one form or another such as a statue, plaque or building named after them. You'll also find pubs with historical connections and museums and exhibitions that anyone wanting to know more about labour history should consider visiting.

For more details contact Mark Metcalf on 07952 801783 or mark.metcalf@rocketmail.com