

Read sources A and B and watch source C

Source A

“1894 was a good time to enter the coffin-furniture trade, but what you won’t often hear is that it was a dangerous time. And not because of industrial accidents or poor working conditions. This was a well-organised and tight-knit industry where outsiders were not highly thought of or easily admitted.

In fact, by 1888 admission to this exclusive group was strictly regulated and you needed just two things in common: to be master coffin-furniture makers and second, to ‘doth your cap’, or sell your soul, as others saw it, to the reigning organisation known as the ‘Alliance’. [...]

By 1888 there were around 19 master coffin furniture manufacturers in the UK, with the overall majority in Birmingham. But there was also a wider ‘black’ section of the trade, making cheaper products in the city. This was allegedly causing a fall in prices and profits, and the ‘masters’ did not like it.

18 of the 19 firms joined forces creating a monopoly or even a cartel, as some may argue. Together, they intended to eliminate any outside competition by encouraging others to buy from them, and them only. Rather than accepting a free market, the Alliance instead, made moves to control it, and this is where the recent production of Peaky Blinders comes to mind. But initial attempts weren’t as successful as they had hoped. It was clear that more severe actions were needed. They needed leverage – they needed control of a bigger force, what they needed was to control the workers.

Manufacturers did exactly that and joined forces with workers creating a new ‘union’ between masters and men. This was led by the Alliance and what they did was instrumental – they created a Trade Association, which outwardly appeared as though it was acting as a union for the labour force, but this was a front. And why a front? Exactly because workers didn’t decide when to strike – they were strategically encouraged to strike at manufactories which chose to operate outside of the Alliance’s remit. And their efforts were successful. They managed to engage nearly the entire labour force of the coffin furniture trade by offering 10% bonuses to any worker who joined them.

Bribery was the name of the game at the prospect of more money, workers forgot their sense of loyalty.

[...] the Association tried their luck at Newman Brothers and the call to strike left Alfred Newman with no workers except for a few boys. Alfred was forced to concede and joined this new alliance between men and manufacturers. He did however fine six of his workers £3 each for breach of contact.”

Extract take from ‘Letters, Lies and crossing the picket line’. Written by Newman Brothers Historian, Sarah Hayes

<https://www.coffinworks.org/letters-lies-and-crossing-the-picket-line/>

Source B

“A few of the ladies at Newman Brothers, led by Dolly Dunsby, went on strike after a disagreement with the directors about tea-break duration. Joyce Green, company secretary at the time, argued that the ladies’ 10-minute tea breaks had turned into half an hour breaks, and informed the directors about how much this was costing the company. She advised that in order to save money, the tea break had to be a strict tea minutes, as it was costing the company precious production time. This may not be the full story, but it wasn’t well received. Dolly Dunsby, Alice Overton and few other ladies walked out on strike.

In the early 1960s, the company was left with no Warehouse staff, which stopped production. The ladies were eventually convinced to come back to work by directors, Mr Kellet and Mr Floyd, a few days later. When recounting the incident, Joyce Green remarked that:

“We’d no warehouse staff. My fault. However, went home one day, I don’t really know how many days it was and John Kellet said, ‘Oh dear we’ve got to solve this haven’t we? We shall have to go and see them. We shall have to go and see Mrs Overton’.” Who then lived at the bottom of the road here. Anyway, eventually they did come back. Oh dear, so...”

Extract from <https://www.coffinworks.org/objects/teapot-and-cups-on-a-tray/>

Questions

1. Describe two examples of challenges to authority by workers at Newman Brothers.

2. Explain how the Alliance benefited factory workers, and at what price.

3. How significant was strike action for Newman Brothers' business?

4. Throughout its 100 year history, loyalty has rarely existed at Newman Brothers. How far do you agree with this statement?