

NUBSO

By Sue Miller

In 1912 the Northampton Branch of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (NUBSO) bought 97 Charles St from the Ives family. They used the building as an office and for meetings until 1931, when the Northampton Labour Party bought it as a constituency office and meeting place. Their headquarters was based in Earls Barton.

NUBSO was founded in 1874 by men employed as riveters and finishers in the machine-made boot and shoe industry, initially as the National Union of

Operative Riveters and Finishers and then in 1890 as NUBSO.

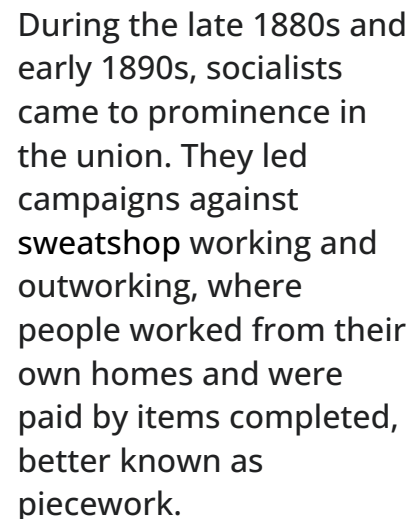


They'd broken away from the Amalgamated Cordwainers Association, a craft union concerned with the interests of hand-sewn shoe workers. The Cordwainers Association's traditions and mastery of their craft was unchanged for centuries. They considered the workers using machinery as inferior and after a number of acrimonious disputes the new groups of riveters and finishers were ejected in 1867, readmitted in 1870 but after further disputes about finance, 25 workers from all over the country formed their

own union in 1874. They called themselves the sons of St. Crispin and soon had 4,000 members in 35 branches.

The first conference was held in Northampton in that same year.

There were attempts to strengthen unionism in Northampton. A dispute in 1887, with a 5 week lockout, ended with some concessions made by the employer, largely that disputes should be submitted to a board of arbitration before any strikes or lockouts. Northampton gained more union members as a result of the dispute, and it marked a turning point of the fortunes of the Union here. Union expenditure had been considerable, but was considered worthwhile as the Union became stronger both in numbers and influence.



This poster explained the union's position.

1905 The Raunds March

A strike began after the War Office ignored agreed-upon price lists and reduced wages. It gained national attention when 115 NUBSO men, led by James Gribble the union organiser from Northampton, marched to London to take their grievances to the highest authorities, creating an historic precedent.

The early half of the twentieth century was a good time for NUBSO. Between 1914 and 1918, membership rose from 49,000 to 83,000, and again to more than 100,000 by June 1920 (although these figures included men enlisted and conscripted into the armed forces who remained in benefit at the union's expense). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, membership remained within a range of 77,000 to 80,000 at any one time. But the union was becoming better organised. The total number of full-time local officers rose from 42 in 1920 to 52 in 1934.

Things would take a turn for the worse in the second half of the century, as cheap imports all but destroyed the British shoemaking industry. This led the union to merge with the Amalgamated Society of Leather Workers, the National Union of Glovers and Leather Workers and the National Union of Leather Workers and Allied Trades forming the National Union of Footwear, Leather and Allied Trades in 1971.

Women in the Union

A few women joined the union in the late 1880s, making it the first outside of the textiles trades to admit both men and women. The 1904 Conference remarked that women are becoming well organised and there ought to be a minimum wage for adult women. Significantly women delegates attended conference for the first time. Employers were arguing that women were not represented by the Union and were therefore outside terms of wage settlements. Leicester was at the forefront of women organisers, who largely felt men organisers were dictatorial and indifferent to women workers. Led by Lizzie Wilson she became the first woman elected to the Council in 1910.

Locally women managed to achieve equal pay in the 1930s, long before equal pay for women came into force as national legislation. The driving force behind the revolutionary pay deal was Elsie Maye Dicks, from Raunds; she'd been a trade unionist since the age of 18 (1936). During her time as a union representative, Maye was also instrumental in winning holiday pay for shoe workers.

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