

# The Performance of Striking: The Past, Present, and Future of Picketing in the UK

Sebastian Mylly



Fig. 1: Members and supporters of CWU (Communication Workers Union) at a rally outside Mount Pleasant Post Office on 26 August 2022, dancing to Gala's *Freed from Desire*. (Photo by author.)

## The Picket as a Blockade

Pickets are not what they used to be. The history of the British picket is fraught with militancy and violence, and the Thatcher era and the 1970s and 80s National Union of Mineworkers' (NUM) strikes in particular irrevocably changed picketing practices in the UK: Martin Adeney and John Lloyd argue that the success of the tactics of the 1972 strike and especially the mass picket that came to be known as the Battle of Saltley Gate precipitated

a significantly harsher police response to the 1984-5 pickets and brought on an onslaught of legislative retaliation from the government, profoundly redefining the picket (100). As the culmination of the 1972 strike which combined multiple tactics and secured victory for the miners, Saltley was an especially embittering defeat to the police and to the government. The picket, began by miners and later joined by thousands of other workers in order to shut down the distribution of coke fuel from a Birmingham fuel depot, was, in Diarmaid Kelliher's words, 'celebrated by the labor movement for demonstrating the power of solidarity and mass picketing, and demonized by its opponents as a symbol of mob rule' (Kelliher 5). Sure enough, secondary picketing (the picketing of a location economically connected to but separate from one's employer), flying pickets (the picketing of a location that belongs to one's employer but is not one's workplace), and solidarity strikes (strike action in support of workers in dispute elsewhere) were all either banned or restricted by the Employment Act of 1980 passed by Thatcher's government. The Code of Practice for Picketing, introduced in the same year, expressly denied picketers the legal power to physically obstruct would-be picket line crossers and, infamously, instituted a limit of six picketers per workplace entrance. The Code of Practice and the Act combined produced what Peggy Kahn, Norman Lewis, Rowland Livock and Paul Wiles describe as 'a conflation of the civil and the criminal law' in the public mind; the complex restrictions on picketing practices and increased police authority over picketers dragged the distinction between criminal offence and civil liability into murky waters (Kahn et al. 49). Indeed, Nick Blake pointedly argues that the government was 'keen to plant an association in the public mind between the recourse to violence of striking miners and terrorism' and that the 1972 NUM strike prompted the authorities to 'form an overall strategy to prevent effective picketing' (Blake 109 and 103). Robert East, Helen Power, and Philip A. Thomas similarly interpreted these chang-

es as an attempt by the state to ensure the inefficiency of picketing, 'most obviously by "criminalising" the miners and their supporters who sought to engage in such activity, thereby assisting the presentation of mass picketing as anti-social and a threat to law and order" (East et al. 305).

It is, of course, not only inevitable that such legal restrictions would change picketing practices, but it is also a possible (and understandable) consequence of what Blake as well as East et al. see as an intentional propaganda project by Thatcher's government that today's picketers might want to disassociate themselves from the spectre of disorder and lawlessness that still haunts the picket to this day. After all, as Joshua Clover writes, 'There is no mystery' as to why the strike as a tactic 'should wish so insistently to distinguish itself from the riot, given its need to make claims of legitimacy both against state repression and for support from other trade unions' (Clover 82). The picket has certainly changed dramatically over the last fifty years: while the practices of informational picketing to gather public support and of persuading others to not cross the picket line do continue, 'the old push and shove' has given way to shared food, music, conversation, and even dancing (Adeney and Lloyd 114). The shift of rhetoric around pickets over the past few decades is rather telling of this transformation. To Arthur Scargill 'the sanctity of the picket line was a vital weapon, particularly if it could be extended' via secondary picketing; the picket was 'the basic tenet of trade unionism' precisely because it physically obstructed the flow of people and commodities in addition to having the psychological element of persuasion (Adeney and Lloyd 93 and 92). East et al. assign a comparable level of significance to physically obstructive pickets, associating picketing by 'small numbers of quiet individuals not trying to stop vehicles and responding immediately to demands of police officers' with inefficiency (East et al. 306). Although NUM officials had advocated for peaceful picketing in the 1970s, in 1984 police brutality was a real enough possibility that NUM's

National Co-ordinating Committee went so far as to recommend picketers to wear 'industrial type footwear and clothing, and, if possible, safety helmets' (Adeney and Lloyd 92). In stark contrast to this, today's picket organisers may set their pickets up with sound systems for music and speeches and may provide snacks for strikers and their supporters (Fig. 2); some even encourage picketers to bring their children. When members and supporters of the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) gathered outside Mount Pleasant Post Office on 26 August 2022, CWU's London region representative Mark Dolan declared to the crowd that 'our pickets are great, everyone knows that'. The implication that what makes a picket 'great' today has more to do with sociality and enjoyment than pushing and shoving was confirmed later as the rally erupted into song and dance, waving flags and jumping up and down to Gala's 1997 europop tune *Freed from Desire* blasting from the loudspeakers (Fig. 1). The picket, once a site of potentially violent confrontation and Scargill's 'key tactical weapon', has thus become something more akin to a political picnic – or, indeed, a performance of striking (Adeney and Lloyd 92).

This is not to say that the picket would now be devoid of purpose (nor is it my intention to call for a return to more militant picketing practices). Rather, I want to suggest that the decline of the picket as a physical barrier preventing the circulation of goods and enforcing the withdrawal of labour has left behind a space that has been taken up by alternative forms and uses, heightening the picket's sociality and its role as a co-constituted space of collective protest. Although the Thatcher administration reduced the picket's capacity to interfere with the smooth functioning of economic reproduction, the fact that striking workers continue to picket their workplaces today indicates that the practice still has value and is, in some way, useful in industrial disputes. I do not want to imply that other aspects of picketing – such as speeches and leaflets – would be irrelevant or inconse-

quential to the picket as a tactic in helping win a strike: the picket does of course retain its powers of persuasion, and for many picketers the recruitment of fellow workers to the cause and the convincing of members of the public to support the fight and to boycott employers remains the primary purpose of picketing. However, I would argue that there is more to the contemporary picket than this. I want to suggest that the historical shift of the picket from a barricade to a picnic means that today's picket has different aims and purposes than the picket as a blockade (that has now been policed and legislated out of existence): rather than a tool for economic disruption, it is a primarily social space that acts on its participants as much as it does on its audiences. Thus, a shift in analytical tools is required: if we are to understand the purpose and meaning of the picket today, we must take into account not necessarily its (directly measurable) economic consequences, but rather its social features.

In what follows, I will analyse the picket in the framework of performance offered, on the one hand, by Richard Schechner and by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow on the other. Schechner contends that 'just about anything can be studied "as" performance' and that this approach facilitates the analysis of 'things otherwise closed off to inquiry' such as the significance of the spatiality and temporality of an event (Schechner 38 and 48). Building on Schechner's assertion that 'there is no human social interaction that is not [...] rule-bound', Diana Taylor stresses the importance of 'reiterative elements' and 'meanings and conventions' to the broader meaning of performance, adding that 'A protest is not just any walk down a public street'; indeed, Taylor includes 'sociopolitical and cultural practices' such as protest in her definition of performance (Schechner 51, Taylor 15 and 17). Mirroring the consequently interdisciplinary nature of performance studies, Tilly and Tarrow borrow the 'theatrical metaphor' to describe forms of protest as 'contentious performances' and 'contentious repertoires' that not only

have performers and audiences but also what Taylor might call 'reiterative elements that are reactualized in every new instantiation' (Tilly and Tarrow 16 and 11, Taylor 15). The public and repeatable (or, as Tilly and Tarrow call it, 'modular') nature of protest and the presence of performers, audiences, and 'shared scripts' make the metaphor an apt one and comparisons between protest and performance rather organic (Tilly and Tarrow 12). Performance studies is thus well-placed for the purposes of examining the picket as a form of protest and working out the picket's role in today's industrial disputes (and, hence, in building and imagining other futures for our workplaces and for our society). It is in this context that I want to argue that the historical evolution of the picket has endowed a previously de-emphasised social dynamic within it with a heightened significance that deserves attention and that today's picket operates in the realm of affect as well as in that of persuasion.

## **The Picket as a Performance**

When picketing is practiced as part of industrial action, it draws attention to the dispute between workers and employer by establishing the workers as physically present at the picket line – which designates them as separate from and in opposition to their place of employment. The picket line marks the place of employment as a place to be avoided; something unjust or at least unfair is happening on the other side of the picket line, and the picket line is hence not to be crossed. While the hard pickets of the decades past emphasised a more economically tangible approach to enforcing the boycotting of picketed places of employment, the tightly regulated pickets of today are much more limited in their capacity to assert the authority of the picket line – so much so that Frances Fox Piven contends that the picket line is now 'merely a form of speech' (Piven 21). The death of the blockade-picket has aligned the picket more closely with performance: the picket now

functions as the physical articulation of the act of striking that gives form and substance to not going to work (as well as working towards economic disruption for the employer via peaceful persuasion). Given that a strike in and of itself is an absence of action rather than an action in itself (at least in that a strike constitutes the withdrawal of labour, the absence of it, the stoppage of the production of commodities or nonmaterial goods), the picket is an opportunity for striking workers to assemble and perform their strike, i.e. to make it visible by gathering together to demonstrate that they are outside their workplace because they are not going to work. They are not simply striking, as in not going to work, but picketing, as in making a show of not going to work and dedicating time to not going to work. The picket and the strike are not synonymous (*ceci n'est pas une grève*); although the two commonly co-occur, one can be had without the other. A strike is a strike with or without pickets; a worker can be on strike in the comfort of their home without standing outside at a picket. Similarly, buildings and other spaces can be picketed without strike action being involved. In other words, (very) strictly speaking a strike doesn't need pickets. The picket certainly strengthens strike action, and it is for good reason that the picket and the strike usually do walk hand in hand; recognising that they are two separate and distinct – and not necessarily contiguous – contentious performances however speaks to how valuable the picket still is to the strike in spite of its lessened capability to turn workers and others away from the place of employment. It may well be that this capability, lessened though it is, might in and of itself be sufficient to ensure the picket's continued importance to striking workers; however, I would argue that the weakening of the picket line as a hard boundary has been supplemented by the strengthening of the social dimension of the picket.

As Nick Blake writes, pickets 'provide visual confirmation to the doubting worker that he or she will not be alone when embarking upon the un-

equal struggle between employer and employee'; the 'evidence of visible solidarity acts on the individual worker as a reminder that he or she is part of a group or a class and that the hardships to be faced will not be faced alone' (Blake 107). The picket is where class solidarity finds a material expression; at the picket, 'the materialization of community, identity, and working-class respectability are mobilized' (Nield 89). The picket allows its participants to 'have the experience of recognition, of belonging to a whole', as Clayton Bohnet argues; even more so when it succeeds in its persuasive function and finds more workers to join the strike (Bohnet 39). Thus, just as many other forms of protest, the performance of picketing is addressed to picketers themselves just as much as it is to employers, passersby, and would-be picket line crossers: 'the question of efficacy and size' should hence also be thought 'in relation to the protest itself, where it would seem that the growth of the movement would have its greatest effect' (Bohnet 39). In this sense, the picket can be understood as a space of affirmation and imagination: we see others who are also engaged in the same struggle and may be reassured that by working together in our numbers we may bring about an improved future. The decline of the picket as a direct action tactic has made the picket more akin to the protest demonstration: a gathering of (more or less) like-minded individuals intended to express a collective opinion and spread awareness of their cause. The demonstration and the picket both look to the future by offering their participants and audiences the possibility of change and by imagining alternatives to the current state of affairs; or, in L.M. Bogard's words, they 'provide a prefigurative vision of the world we want to see, and thus help make that other, better world possible' (281). This does not, however, mean to suggest that the picket is (or even imagines) a utopia or a complete vision of society. It should be noted that the picket can and often does also create division as well as unity: the picket, does, after all, draw a more or less literal line dividing us (or those who are



with us) from them (or those who are against us), thus singling out and/or ostracising those who cross the picket line. In other words, solidarity is not a given and the picket is a space of struggle and protest just as much as it is that of sociality and collectivity. Unsavory though it might be, this could simply be seen as an extension of Bogad's 'prefigurative vision' in that the future imagined by the picket may not be unconditionally inclusive; likewise, Nield's 'community' and Blake's 'whole' both imply an outside or an opposition to them, an out-group to their in-groups. (A full analysis of the ethical and moral implications of this is, sadly, outside the scope of this essay.)

Nevertheless, the sharing of food, the playing of music, and even dancing make pickets spaces that have a lot in common with what Bogad calls tactical performance, i.e. 'the use of performance techniques, tactics, and aesthetics in social-movement campaigns' (2). Bogad's analysis of the role of performance in protest emphasises 'the pleasure principle' and 'serious play'; he argues that 'Even if the issue is deadly serious, there should be something about the time spent and the physical movement through space that inspires desire and defiant joy' (281 and 89). In this way, the picket also resembles what Bogad describes as 'carnavalesque' protest, meant to 'inspire desire, collective stories, group cohesion, and identity formation' (96-7). To Bogad, enjoyment as part of protest interrupts what he terms the hegemonologue: 'the hegemonic monologue of common neoliberal ideology that drones on from big and little screens, with favorite themes being the criminalization or pathologization of dissent, and the inevitability of predatory and unrestricted global capitalism' (32). Insofar as the picket can be understood as a protest gathering that reappropriates time that would otherwise be dedicated to wage labour, devoting it to shortbread and laughter instead, we can also understand the picket as a space that breaks with the hegemonologue. As not only a materialisation of solidarity and a performance of strike action but a space where collectivity is expressed through

free food and shared enjoyment, today's picket runs counter to the ideas that protest is an anti-social phenomenon and that there are no alternatives to neoliberal capitalism's ordering of society.

Both Bogad and Bohnet derive an understanding of protest as a participatory experience capable of rupturing the hegemonologue from Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*: what Bogad describes as the interruption of the hegemonologue, Bohnet associates with 'a rupture with the ideological presuppositions that set the spectacle up as the sovereign domain of recognition and solidarity' (166). 'The outside of the spectacle', thus, is 'a democratization which dis-alienates one from the present' and can 'help communities to reclaim their existence for something besides obedient production and consumption' (Bohnet 165 and Bogad 282). Bogad and Bohnet take somewhat different approaches in their Debordian interpretations of protest: while Bohnet alludes to Rousseau's direct democracy without representation as key to piercing the spectacle, Bogad reads in Debord 'a desire for a more participatory and playful life' and an encouragement to 'a participatory, do-it-yourself form of political action and communication' (64 and 106). Both, however, associate a certain immediacy to the collectivity of protest: there is a sense here of protest being able to generate or materialise something more direct, something more real, than other forms of political participation. The picket as the reclamation of labour time touches upon precisely this. By choosing to come together to perform their strike and to dedicate their reclaimed labour time to protest, picketers create an alternative to what Bogad terms 'obedient production and consumption': the picket, as a contentious performance, frames the time taken away from production as explicitly disobedient to the exigencies of wage labour and economic reproduction.

While many experienced picketers would likely wince at the idea of associating picketing with leisure, allowing and inviting picketers to have

fun at the picket rather than gearing them up for a fight does emphasise the picket as a space removed from work, carving out a space of not just non-work but of joy to the side of the workplace – but specifically doing so in the context of protest and contention. The picket thus creates a collective, co-constituted space that explicitly and purposefully exists in opposition to the workplace while carrying within it an echo of a whisper that goes something like “we could do this more often”. Implicit and understated though it often is, there is a glimmer of a different future in the picket. As a physical manifestation of solidarity, the picket can rupture the spectacle of compulsive representation (that, to Bohnet, constitutes an ‘abnormal need’ ‘to be a spectacle’ and ‘a consequence of the radical self-estrangement the spectacle engenders’) and instead stake a claim to public space to enact an alternative to neoliberal individualism (Bohnet 138). The teach out, often found at the picket lines of universities, is a particularly good example of this. The sharing of knowledge outside the university in a manner not too dissimilar to lectures and seminars decommodifies what the university sells as a product and hence not only imagines but enacts a different way of education.



*Fig. 2: A breakfast spread at a University and College Union (UCU) picket outside Queen Mary University of London on 20 March 2023. (Photo by author.)*

## **The Picket As...?**

Much like Blake and East et al., Bohnet also understands the criminalisation of protest as a way of rendering protest compliant and ineffective. Bohnet sees the 'regulated, patrolled and controlled forms of dissent' as acquiescing to 'the demand [...] for state and consumer behaviors not to be in any way disrupted, threatened, de-legitimated'; such protest 'counts on its spectacularization' and therefore becomes part of the spectacle, mere representation (167 and 32). As Bohnet indicates, Debord's theories thus anticipated debates about the inefficiency and co-optation of protest (55). It is this very concern that prompted Kai Lumumba Barrow to aptly term 'ritualized' performances of protest as the 'spectacle of protest'; the fear is

that playing by the rules makes protest useless or banal, just for show, or, as Piven put it, 'merely a form of speech' – like logging a complaint that is taken note of but never acted upon (Barrow et al. 322). It should now be noted that although the picket has evolved to find alternative ways to articulate its nature as a protest and to challenge the spectacle, it certainly does play by the rules. In this sense, the picket represents exactly the kind of 'regulated, patrolled and controlled' protest that Bohnet speaks of; criminalisation, whether by legal text or by the manipulation of public discourse, appears to have left the picket little choice but to reinvent itself within the strict parameters imposed upon it (as opposed to contesting said parameters).

We might then echo Barrow's reflections on the nature and efficacy of protest as a response to anti-Black violence and ask ourselves: 'Are our tactics and methods of dissent predictable?' (322) A staple in the industrial action variety of our repertoire of contention though the picket might be, can it still help win a strike? Is the picketnic enough? I ask the question not in order to suggest that the practice of picketing would be obsolete, meaningless, or not worth the effort (as I have argued above, I certainly do think the picket still has its uses), but as something of a provocation. It might well be that leaflets and peaceful persuasion, alongside pastries and music, are indeed enough for the picket to continue to be a viable and relevant contentious performance. However – is this all that the picket can be? The brief historicization of the picket above points to the possibility of alternatives; granted, a return to the picket's more confrontational origins is not necessarily neither desirable nor feasible, but perhaps there is a prospect of further evolution here. Embracing Bogard's 'pleasure principle' even more fully might sound appealing to some, while others would undoubtedly scoff at the idea. Regardless, the flicker of possibility that the picket projects into public space might inspire or instruct the building of new futures: as Sita Balani writes, pickets 'are part of a pedagogy of defiance, creating spaces in

which new kinds of knowledge are produced' (Balani 18). The ways in which the picket might articulate the futurity within it thus deserve deliberation and speculation – perhaps even premeditation.

Perhaps it is true that the picket found its feet and began dancing only once its hands were tied. However, the evolution of protest tactics in itself is nothing out of the ordinary. Repertoires of contention change over time as previous performances become ineffective; as Charles Tilly reminds us, our present repertoire looks nothing like that of the 18th century and has remained virtually unchanged since the 19th century (Tilly 20). 'The first strike is a mystery, the second an outrage, the thousandth a problem to be dealt with'; people have always learned new tactics to challenge the various injustices they have been faced with and updated their skillsets to match their circumstances (Tilly 19). Clover also warns against forgetting this 'process of transformation' lest we would be 'left instead with its resultants standing before us as givens' (83). Adaptation and evolution are inherent to social movements and repertoires of contention, and 'The preservation of collective action's many modes, of the creativity of antagonism, is a vital task' (Clover 80). Piercing the spectacle is one of the challenges contentious performance today is tasked with achieving: as Barrow argues, 'Any tactic or strategy that becomes too familiar turns stagnant – into a spectacle, so to speak. In this sense, I think we must always be willing to interrupt ourselves, even when we think we've got it "right"' (323). The picket is no exception to this. It is worthwhile to question what the picket intends to achieve and how that something is (purportedly) achieved – to question whether the picket is mere spectacle, an antidote to spectacle, or something in between – when trying to understand how the picket strives to change futures and presents. In other words, it is worthwhile to question whether the picket is just a familiar ritual with little material impact or whether it is still a relevant and useful tool in building better futures. If not, the question

becomes not whether anything at all can be done anymore but what else is yet to be done.

## Works Cited

- Adeney, Martin and Lloyd, John. *The Miners' Strike 1984/5: Loss Without Limit*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Balani, Sita. 'Pedagogies of Defiance'. *Wasafiri* 37:4 (2022): 11-18.
- Barrow, Kai Lumumba, Cohen, Yve Laris, Spade, Dean, and Young, Kalaniopua. 'Models of Futurity'. *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. Edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A Stanley and Johanna Burton. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2017. Pp. 321-337.
- Blake, Nick. 'Picketing, Justice and the Law'. *Policing the Miners' Strike*. Edited by Bob Fine and Robert Millar. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985. Pp. 103-119.
- Bogad, L.M. *Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Bohnet, Clayton. *Toward a Philosophy of Protest: Dissent, State Power, and the Spectacle of Everyday Life*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020.
- Clover, Joshua. *Riot. Strike. Riot: The Era of New Uprisings*. London and New York: Verso, 2016.
- East, Robert, Power, Helen, and Thomas, Philip A. 'The Death of Mass Picketing'. *Journal of Law and Society* 12:3 (1985): 305-319.
- Kahn, Peggy, Lewis, Norman, Livock, Rowland, and Wiles, Paul. *Picketing: Industrial Disputes, Tactics and the Law*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.
- Kelliher, Diarmaid. 'Disruption and Control: Contesting Mobilities through the Picket Line'. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 0:0 (2023): 1-17.
- Nield, Sophie. 'Toward a Theatrical History of the Picket Line'. *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance*. Edited by Shirin M. Rai, Mili-ja Gluhovic, Silvija Jestrovic, and Michael Saward. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 89-100.
- Piven, Frances Fox. 'Protest Movements and Violence'. *Violent Protest, Contentious Politics, and the Neoliberal State*. Edited by Seraphim Seferiades and Hank Johnston. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2012. Pp. 19-28.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 3rd ed., London and New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Taylor, Diana. *Performance*. translated by Abigail Levine, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.

- Tilly, Charles. "Introduction". *Class Conflict and Collective Action*. Edited by Louise A. Tilly and Charles Tilly. Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1981. Pp. 13-25.
- Tilly, Charles, and Tarrow, Sidney. *Contentious Politics*. Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2007.
- Young, Martin. 'Work | Strike | Dance: The Paris Opera Ballet and the 2019 Pensions Dispute'. *Platform* 14:1 & 2 (2020): 131-138.