

10 June 2024

PCS at Derby Silk Mill Festival

PCS General Secretary, Fran Heathcote, spoke at the event on Saturday, commemorating the first industrial trade union dispute in Britain.

The annual Silk Mill Festival in Derby remembers the struggle of workers in the city in the 19th century, which laid the ground for trade unions today. The festival began on Saturday (8 June) with a march from Derby Market Square to the festival site at Cathedral Green. There were family-friendly activities, food and drink, live music and speeches from the trade union community.

History

In November 1833, Mr Frost, a silk manufacturer, sacked one of his employees for refusing to pay a fine for “shoddy work” – a routine method of the employer cutting his workers’ pay. The employee’s workmates walked out in support and within a week 800 people, in a town of 24,000, were involved. When many local employers then declared they would not employ trade unionists, another 500 walked out and by February 1834 the numbers had leaped to 2,000.

The strike continued for months but eventually the workers were forced back to work by poverty and hunger. Many strikers were subsequently victimised and never worked in their trade again. Nevertheless, in late 1834, the Dorchester Agricultural Labourers at Tolpuddle took up the struggle for trade unions, which only exist today because of the sacrifices made by workers like the Derby silk workers, Tolpuddle Martyrs and London dockers of 1889.

Inspiration

In her speech at the festival, PCS general secretary Fran Heathcote said: "The struggle of the Derby silk workers was the first organised struggle of the working class and its importance cannot be overstated.

“The workers who took a stand at the silk mill were inspirational, not just because they were the first set of workers to begin an organised struggle but also because of the insurmountable odds that they faced in their fight.

"The workers from Derby Silk Mill set in motion a chain of events that would lead to the birth of our movement, which we celebrate today."