

Working Together: recording and preserving the heritage of the workers' co-operative movement
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Name: Martin Spence Worker Co-ops involved in: Days of Hope bookshop
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Summary of interview:

[00:04] Martin Spence outlines how he became involved in Days of Hope Bookshop, Newcastle and its early years. [09:35] Comments on the decisions to structure the bookshop formally as a neighbourhood co-op rather than a workers co-op. [11:41] Outlines why the bookshop eventually shut down in the early 1980s. [17:03] Talks about Days of Hope's links to the national Labour Movement and the CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) and the interesting characters involved with the bookshop including: Andy McSmith, Alan Milburn, E.P Thompson, Bob Clay, and Mo Mowlam. [25:00] Talks about backlash from extremist right wing groups. [28:18] Discusses the customer base of the bookshop. [31:22] Discusses in further detail the decision to structure as a neighbourhood co-op rather than a workers co-op [37:27] Talks about decision making and pay of the workers in the bookshop [43:17] Comments on the gender balance in the bookshop. [46:04] Discusses decision making in the bookshop. [55:09] Comments on networks with other worker co-ops [57:57] Discusses career post Days of Hope. [01:03:07] Speaks briefly about Penge Housing Co-op (South London).

Transcript

[00:04]

So this is an interview with Martin Spence, hello Martin, if you could just briefly outline for me your involvement in the worker co-op movement.

I guess my involvement started with the Days of Hope Bookshop which we'll be talking about which was established as, as a co-op, but since then, I mean I'm a member of the co-op myself I have been for years, and as it happens I now live in London and I live in a street of houses that was built by a pioneering housing co-op in London, so I've actually been doing some research into housing co-ops and, in the late 19th/early 20th century, but my main practical involvement, Days of Hope.

[00:49]

And, so if you could tell me a bit more about how you personally became to, came to be involved in Days of Hope

Yep, Days of Hope was the socialist bookshop in Newcastle upon Tyne. I went to University in Durham just down the road, and I guess I got involved, I moved up to Newcastle after graduating which was, I moved up in 1977, and you know I was a socialist, I was a radical, I was part of you know I'd been active in student politics and, wanted to continue to be active in left politics in Newcastle, and the bookshop, as it then existed, this was before it was called Days of Hope, it was called Cradlewell Books, it was way outside the centre of town in , in a sort of rather respectable little, suburb called Jesmond, and it was associated with and it had been set up by the Tyneside Socialist Centre. And the socialist centre really, was a very active political initiative that was trying to cross sectarian and party divides and trying to involve not just political party activists but trade unionists, active trade unionists, reaching out to the women's movement, reaching out to the environmental movement, it's ambition to become a sort of organising, focus for radical activity on Tyneside, and the, the first practical thing it did was to set up this small bookshop, so both because I was keen to get involved in the socialist centre, and because, you know I'm a book person, I was I would call by as a customer in those early months... shall I move on?

[03:19]

Yeah, no go for it

And at that point I was actually working as a, on the local council's play schemes with kids, that didn't, you know, we parted company me and the council, I suppose I was at a bit of a loose end in late '77, late '78 early '79, by that time the socialist centre had found a new place for the bookshop much more central, not very central in Newcastle but just off the main shopping area, as a tenant of an independent theatre the New Tyne Theatre which was, also a new project that was trying to get itself started, so we were sort of next to the theatre. And they'd changed the name by then to Days of Hope, the name was taken, some people will remember this, Ken Loach had a TV series that I think went out in 1975 or '76 about left politics, radical politics, around the time of the First World War, actually very apt for something, now that we're going through the centenary and that was called Days of Hope and it was about conscientious objectors and radical opponents of the war, and it was just a great title, so people in the socialist centre seized on it, I guess they got Ken's approval, because he's always sort of been a friend and supporter of, of the bookshop and radical causes. But they adopted that name, opened up the new shop, and in early '79 they were looking for new people to work with them and I started working there together with, a couple of other colleagues who I have to say didn't last very long, they quickly found it wasn't for them, but I started working there in the spring of 1979, by the end of '79 I was working with one other co-worker, a guy called Andy McSmith, who, was before that a journalist on the Newcastle Journal, he was taking a break from journalism at that point and writing plays, but he then went back into journalism, moved down to London and worked for years on the Independent, I mean he's actually quite, he was well known as the Independent's sort of political commentator, but he maybe for 18 months, 2 years we worked together and were the two workers at Days of Hope.

[05:01]

And at that point, I mean the socialist centre was still going, but I guess '79, '80, the bookshop was just about holding it's own in terms of making enough money, I mean we were paid, you'll be too young to know about this, but we were paid wages council rates, you know there was no National Minimum Wage back at this point, certain industries which were always, or sectors, which tended to have low pay, for

years actually I think since about the First World War, had had these national bodies called wages councils which were statutory bodies and they said 'right in you know retail, shop workers should be paid no less than X, we've looked at the retail price index, we've looked at inflation, we've looked at all the various factors this is the minimum that a shop workers should get, this is a minimum that a textile worker should get'. So low wage industries each had their own wage council. And it was a partial National Minimum Wage arrangement but it only existed for those, industrial areas where a wage council existed. We were on the wage council rate, so we were on a low rate of pay. We could only actually afford to do that by having a sort of, appeal fund, sort of a rolling appeal fund where socialist centre supporters could put a bit of money in each month to help, basically, pay our wages.

[06:30]

So it was always hand to mouth, it was always hand to mouth existence, and there was also a sort of political tension, because, and I think probably the tension was there before I got so closely involved working in the shop, around the move to, to get the shop into the centre of Newcastle there were some people who were basically saying 'hang on this is not what the socialist centre was all about we weren't just about running a bookshop, bookshops a great thing to do but we've got other ideas '. And I mean the big idea was for the socialist centre to find premises which would be a meeting place, I mean not a small meeting place, but a significant meeting place, there would be a bar, there would be a coffee bar, it would be a social centre, I mean the phrase that got used more than once was 'we want to be a people's palace', this is a people's palace for the left, and progressive, and, and radical movements and you know, and causes and campaigns in and around Tyneside. And of course a bookshops part of that, course it is but it's not the whole of it, and there was a fear, which I have to say was justified by events, that actually the socialist centre idea was sort of, starting to take second place to the survival of the bookshop and that, that, that was all that was really happening. I mean as things turned out that is what happened, and in itself that was sad cause, the dream of a people's palace , you know a left wing, radical, socialist, people's palace in Newcastle would've been brilliant, but it just never came about, all we managed to do was get this bookshop going. But it was controversial there were big meetings and, big arguments, about it, and that then also fed in to the legal structure of the bookshop itself cause it was set up in the very first

place as a sort of practical immediate initiative, let's just get it going so they just basically set up a company, a sort of off-the-shelf company you know in a very conventional way, I mean I'm guessing it was a Company Limited by Guarantee, it was never intended to generate profits, but still it was a company so as part of this whole debate, there was also a general agreement that the bookshop should be some sort of co-operative venture.

[09:35]

And the argument then was should it be a workers co-op? Or should it be, what was called I mean it was a new idea to me, a neighbourhood co-op. At the time there was a, a Northern Regional Co-operative Development Agency that was just set up, quite active, and I think they were very keen to pioneer the idea of neighbourhood co-ops so they were sort of, quietly sort of saying 'this would be a really pioneering venture if you were to go for this option, your choice, but you know you'd be sort of, you know, breaking new ground'. In the end we decided to go for a neighbourhood co-op which crudely has a kind-of two tier structure, you've got, you know, the committee that was running the bookshop for day to day purposes which you might almost think of as a sort of a little workers' co-op core, around it, or sort of underpinning it was a larger body of members who were supporters and sympathisers, and well wishers of the bookshop, and anyone who could sort of demonstrate that they had an interest could join. And I think the reason we went for that was because we felt that was, it was sort of marrying the socialist centre vision into this sort of structure, you know the idea of a broader initiative of which the bookshop was, the practical day-to-day running of the bookshop was part, it seems to us to be consistent with that socialist sense of vision. I think the truth is it didn't, for a lot of members of the socialist centre, that really wasn't, still wasn't their, their dream. They didn't just want to be part of a broader set of supporters of the bookshop, they wanted to be a whole load of other things quite separate from the bookshop, but I think it, you know was done in good faith, and it worked for a few years, and it was you know we took ourselves seriously and we had elections and people came and people left and you know...so yes, I mean it worked on a co-operative basis. Is it ok if I just ramble on?

[11:41]

Yeah, no, go for it, yeah

I mean if you want to intervene if you feel you want to pick something?

No, I'll jot down anything I want to ask and then I'll ask after

Ok, fine. I mean I've been, I haven't I have to say brought up a whole lot of paperwork with me, I'm still going through it, but looking back through the papers I've got, I mean I haven't got a complete set of minutes or anything like that but one of the things that struck me, that you know 30 years later, I'd almost completely forgotten was that throughout the time that I was there and I worked in the shop from 1979 through to 1984 those were my, that was my period, of service, we were constantly looking for new premises, I mean my day to day memory is that we were on this site, we were next to the theatre, it was a small shop, I mean it was a small shop with a tiny little back office where two of us sort of crammed in and did our best to do the stock keeping and the accounts you know, but next to the New Tyne u on the Westgate Road in Newcastle, and you know I've got lots of memories five years you know of actually being in the shop, of dealing with customers, of dealing with the volunteers because the Socialist Centre gave us a network of, sort of well wishes and supporters and the co-op structure did as well people who'd come in and maybe do a couple of hours on the till just to sort of free up the full time workers that were doing other things, but what I'd forgotten is that we were constantly looking for new premises, we were always aware that, you know passing trade was not, we weren't in a great place really so in 1981 there's a whole lot of minutes of an attempt to, I mean we actually identified another shop, you know we knew where we wanted to go it was a better street, closer to the centre, we reckoned it would meet our needs, a whole lot of work was done and we got quite excited about it, then we sat down and really crunched the numbers and decided we just couldn't afford it, you know, we didn't and this was the Catch 22 that we were actually stuck in throughout the history of the shop we couldn't generate enough trade in the premises we were already in to provide if you like, to give ourselves a working surplus to finance a move to better premises where we could actually increase the level of trade, we just couldn't make the jump. So 1981 we got very excited, I mean it felt like, from the minutes it almost reached like 'we're doing it, we're on the v-we're on the way, this is the day' and then there's a record saying right the finance committees now looked at this, crunched the numbers, this isn't going to work, we'd bankrupt ourselves, we would kill ourselves.

1984 it happened again we found somewhere else, trade was a bit better in 1984, probably 1983/4 was our best trade year and so I think we allowed ourselves to believe, actually, we can do this. We can make this work. We crunched the numbers and it wasn't going to work.

[14:45]

And then the final. I mean in a sense what over a two year period precipitated the closing of the shop was in 1985, the theatre came to us, and they were always very fair ten-er landlords, they were always you know, because having a left wing bookshop right next door to you I could forgive them for thinking this isn't the best advertisement you know, we're trying to, you know, they were a very conventional theatre, they were putting on almost old time music hall and pantomimes and you know that was their pitch but they were always very good to us and basically they came in 1985, and I'd left shop then as a worker but was still on the committee and they said to us 'right we're renovating the whole theatre, we're changing the whole site, we need your shop space as our new box office, so we can't give you a date yet but we're putting you on notice that we will be coming to serve notice on your, on your tenancy, and we didn't have a lease, didn't have a fixed term lease it was just rolling forward quarter by quarter, and from thereon we knew, that, our number was up, and again we looked for other premises, the theatre actually offered us other premises but, even worse than the place where we already were, I mean it was a dead end street, it was a street with no other shops in it, it was round the back of the theatre in effect, it was almost like next to the stage door, it was, and although we looked at it and we did some sums, it was never going to happen, and in 198...5, sorry 1985 they gave notice that they would be needing us to move out, early '86 we were hopeful we might make go of it, by mid '86 we'd again we'd looked at the numbers and our accountant was saying, 'don't even think about this'. [Inaudible] basically they were saying 'you're hardly viable now, you would not be v..you cannot finance a move to new premises, when they're going to be in a worse position than you're already sited in', so in mid '86 we closed down, and by then there were new workers' in the shop and, and I mean they were involved in all the discussions and unfortunately they could, they could see the way things were going and, and we were no more.

[17:03]

So that's a short history of the shop, I mean it all sounds, and I've made it sound pretty gloomy, I mean it wasn't really, it wasn't really, there were some interesting characters passed through the shop, I mean I've mentioned Andy McSmith, who went on to become quite a well known national political journalist. When he left, I think Andy must have left maybe in... '81/82, something like that, his replacement who was then my colleague that ran the shop through to until '84 was Alan Milburn, who you know then went in to went in to the Labour party, went in to Parliament, went in to Government, very much part of the whole New Labour thing. And I mean I think it's, you know, Alan's politics changed over time which is fine, you know, because we all live lives and our ideas change. I mean I do remember when he first came to work in the shop he was absolutely over the moon, to be working in Days of Hope bookshop and we had a good working relationship, we I mean we got on, you know, really well. Because around this, in the 1981, 1982, the shop had sort of put itself in a position where we were... a) a very natural point of contact and sort of news gathering point for the whole peace movement, for the whole resurgence of CND, which by then was in full flood, I mean it started back in 1980 and I mean most people now think, you know the big revival of CND was you know 1981, mid '82/83 running up the general election in '83, actually the starting point was in 1980, the Labour Party at that point it's leader was Michael Foot, and you know it's, you can't draw parallels, you can't say Michael Foot was the Jeremy Corbyn of his time because it was a different time, and he was a different character, he, but he was a left wing leader, and he'd always been very passionate about CND and about the peace movement, so under his leadership the Labour Party 1980, I think this is often forgotten but before CND had really got itself organised, it was Labour Party that organis...called a big national demonstration in London about the plans to site cruise missiles in Europe, and CND picked up on the back of that and it was great and it had to be an independent peace movement, but it was the Labour Party that made, a quite courageous early initiative there. The bookshop we ended up being the place where you could buy tickets for the buses from Tyneside to go down the Labour Party, to the Labour Party demonstration. There was then a big meeting organised in Newcastle which sort of kicked off the peace movement and kicked off the revival of CND, where we got E.P Thompson, to come along and give a talk, who was a, you know extraordinarily popular figure at that point...we filled a theatre, actually not the theatre next door to us, another of the theatre's in Newcastle, but we filled in to capacity with E.P Thompson, you know

there must have been sort of 1500 people there or something, and on the back of that CND got itself properly organised and you know it sort of went from there, the bookshop was central in actually organising for that meeting, selling tickets for that meeting. So we'd, placed ourselves...at the centre of a lot of the most you know, lively political activity, in Newcastle around the, early 1980s and I think it was because, the people who were in and around the bookshop were actually plugged in, to lots of other things that were going on, I mean I, wasn't in the Labour Party, for most of the time I worked in the bookshop, but I was very involved in, in I joined USDAW, the shop workers union as soon as I became, a worker in the shop, started going to USDAW branch meetings, became an USDAW activist, got myself delegated to Newcastle Trades Council to the Trades Union Council which was a very large, active, really well regarded trades council, so immediately we had connections in that area, one of the key figures who'd been involved in the Socialist Centre, and in the bookshop, from before my involvement was a bloke called Bob Clay. Bob Clay was first the convener of the bus drivers in Sunderland the local authority bus drivers when there were such things as local authority bus drivers you know it was a genuine sort of public service. But while he was, and he was the treasurer of the bookshop and very much involved in day to day management of it, then he got himself selected as the prospective Labour parliamentary candidate for one of the Sunderland constituencies and in '83 he was elected to Parliament, so he was really well connected right throughout the Labour movement, I mean the Labour Party of course, but through his trade union activity in the Labour movement more generally not just on Tyneside but over on Wearside and in the North East generally. When Alan started working, err Andy was very active in the local Labour P., in his local Labour Party, Alan was very active in his local Labour Party obviously and became increasingly so, during his time at the bookshop, and he was very involved in the peace movement as well, so we would work together on that, so, Mo Mowlam was another person, she was at that point, this was before she, she left Tyneside and got another job and that led on to her selection for a parliamentary seat in Redcar, but she was an academic at Newcastle University, again very involved in the peace movement, and she and other lecturers and academics, who were, I suppose you know socialists or sympathisers would do their best to send their students to us, they would let us know what the key texts were for their courses, and then they would say to their students 'right, you know, obviously you can buy this in the University bookshop but I'll tell you a really

interesting other little place that I know also has in stock Days of Hope bookshop on the Westgate Road so if you're prepared to just walk across town a little bit further, there's lots of other interesting you know, and a lot of students came in and brought their texts from us'. So really in those you know, maybe for 3 years you know from perhaps '80 through to '83, the bookshop we were struggling it was never easy, we were never making a surplus, but we were politically quite close to the centre of a lot of the, the activity that you know in that very sort of vibrant period, I mean it was, it was the early years of Thatcherism, there was still a sense, you know perhaps until the Falklands war and then the '83 election, in those early years there was a sense, that, Thatcherism and the Tory government, that they were fragile you know, I mean they were so unpopular we forget this now because we look back and Thatcher seems to just dominate British politics for a decade or more, well she did, but in those early years it was touch and go, she was enormously unpopular, the Tories were in 1980, 1981. I mean it was really, the Falklands War and the sort of you know pressing the you know jingo button that pulled it out of the fire for them. And the bookshop was part of that whole ferment of sort of saying right, we're up against, we're up against an enemy that's more viciously, anti Labour, anti trade union, anti working class than anything we've faced for years and we can beat them, and we can beat them, we can see them off, there was that sense, and it didn't come to pass, but that doesn't mean that the politics of the time wasn't an interesting and exciting and important actually, the energy of that time carried over for much longer, so it was, it was a good thing to be involved in. I've probably talked myself out for a bit.

[25:00]

No that's great, that's really good. I was just wondering if, because some of the other people I've interviewed that worked at radical bookshops said that they did get some, kind of, I guess violent backlash for their politics, did you experience any of that?

We did some, we had, we had problems with the local fascists and it was, it was the National Front at that point, you know that was the organisation. It came, it came, I mean if I say it came in waves that probably sounds much, makes it sound slightly more dramatic than it did, it came in sort of, surges. There would be, I mean I noticed again going through the minutes right towards the end, maybe almost in the two or three final months before the bookshop closed, we were getting regular, visits from

some of the local fascists and they would come into the shop, and, there was one incident where, where our shop window was broken and we never knew who did it, we got a call out in the night, the window had been broken so it might've been them, and it might've just been some other idiot you don't, you never know. But, they used to come into the shop, and they would basically stand around, and walk around in a threatening way, I mean you know, behind the till as often as not I've said you know, we would have volunteers, you know from our sort of network of the wider membership of the co-op who would come in, and help out by sitting on the till for a couple of hours, so I mean it might be, you know, a student, it might be a female student from the university who's involved in the local Labour club who'd come to sort of, maybe, do some reading while sitting on the till...and suddenly there's these two or three really nasty guys who've walked in who are swaggering around the shop, picking things up off the shelves sort of sneering and throwing them aside, just sort of being vile and macho and pathetic, it didn't usually get beyond that. I had one or two encounters, of that sort when I was in, I mean sort of all of the workers did from time to time, but I mean they never, they never tried to firebomb the shop, which happened in other shops, other left wing bookshops at the time, we never had anything like this, the nastiest thing we had...you know it was nasty was one evening at home, you know, at my home, there was a phone call and it was just somebody asking for Martin, so I came and took the call, and it was one of these guys who got my home number somehow, and basically he just sort of said 'right, now you know, we know where you work, and we know where you live', and he just put the phone down...which was quite unpleasant, and, I mean I didn't do anything different as a result of it, I didn't see what else I could do, I let the police know, I said 'I've had, you need to know, I've had a threatening phone call, and this is who I am and this is why I've had it and it's quite clear that these are the people who've made it', so you know, but I mean what can you do you've still got a life to live, so, nothing happened as a result, I mean I wasn't attacked, I didn't find myself followed down the street or anything, so we did have problems but, I mean I wouldn't want to, and it's obviously upsetting because you never know what's going to happen tomorrow, but we didn't have problems on the same scale as some other shops I'm pleased to say.

[28:18]

And in terms of your customer base you've kind of spoken about students, but did you find you had people coming in from quite far away or was it more people just in the local area that came in?

It was, I guess, because Newcastle is the sort of you know, it's the, sort of cultural-cum-shopping-cum-educational centre for, you know, a big region, you know up into Northumberland and down into County Durham so yeah, we would get people, coming from quite, quite, you know far away, I mean we were the radical bookshop in the North East you know, there was never really anything, there was a tiny shop which was attached to a, sort of a fruit and veg co-op, that also sold a few books in Durham, there was never anything to my knowledge on Teeside, there was never sort of equivalent on Teeside, I mean it's a big industrial, big trade union centre, but maybe because, maybe to be honest because it didn't have a university, it does now, but it didn't then, it didn't have a sort of a higher educational institution and the sort of, the role of students in providing sort of, an element of the sort of customer base that you need sort of wasn't there, so yeah I mean we, we had you know, we worked very hard, we worked as hard as we felt we could while just keeping the shop on the go in its site at Westgate Road, we worked very hard at trying to get people to use us as a resource and to come and take books away to run book stalls at meetings, so there was one particular Labour Party branch just outside Durham city that did that quite, you know they were really good, they would drive up, we would have a box of books ready for them, we knew what they wanted, I mean it was almost like you know, it got to be a regular thing they just put the box in the boot, drove off and came back with you know sort of £15/£20 of sales you know, which was great, so we tried to encourage that, that was our sort of outreach strategy, we tried at times to do similar things in connections with, the Newcastle University and what was then Newcastle Polytechnic, which is now University of Northumbria, you know with the higher education institutions to get bookstalls there, but sometimes that was a bit more difficult, in terms of the politics of those institutions, cause we were an unashamedly socialist bookshop and I think they just thought that might be trouble for them, they just wanted a commercial bookshop, to come and, actually you know, come into the students union for the sake of argument. But I think we were, we were probably quite fortunate in being the, you know if anyone in the North East of England, wanted, to, to go somewhere where they would find, not just socialist, but feminist,

environmental, peace movement, anti-racist, books, labour movement books, across the board then we were the place they'd come to, so I mean I suppose we were quite favoured really, yeah.

[31:22]

And sort of going back a bit more to the structure, I'm quite interested in idea of the neighbourhood co-op cause you said about the worker, how the core structure was kind of a worker co-op and then there were the wider kind-of more community aspects, but could you go into a bit more detail about that?

The, from memory, the way it worked was that you...you had to be a member of the wider co-op, I mean the starting point was to be a member of the wider co-op, and the, you know, the...whatever our constitution, it wouldn't have been article and memorandum, it would have been our constitution, or our rules or whatever, you know, that specified that the purpose of the co-op was to provide, book services, you know sort of literary services blah blah blah, and because we were a co-op I guess it needed to say, you know, to its members, it was a service to our own members...and that was why it existed and of course if other people wanted to come in and buy them as well, that was great, so, to some degree we were able to pick up on the people who'd identified themselves with the socialist centre as being, as being you know a first port of call but we were also, there were also people who, didn't have a history of involvement with that but just liked the idea of a progressive bookshop and wanted to sign up and show some support for that, then within that, there was an elected committee, the employed workers were on it ex officio, and then other people who took an active, who were prepared to put in more time, and take an active role, as part of the management committee for the bookshop, would be elected onto that committee, at the annual general meeting each year, I mean to be frank it was not, these posts were not highly contested, the reason I think why some people feared, and I do understand it, why some of the people who were arguing earlier on 'we should be a workers' co-op not a neighbourhood co-op', was that you know what a neighbourhood co-op, possibly, posed was the risk of being taken over, by some group that would basically, you know, all join, pack the meeting, vote their own people on to the committee then suddenly, the bookshop belongs to them, and I mean, I mean well, I'm sure the sort of organisation that some of those people would've had

in mind was the SWP, which, and I mean I've got nothing in particular to say about the SWP, but whether fair or not, they had a reputation for being quite cynical in their preparedness to sort of take over other organisations, I'm not saying that was deserved or not, some people believed that that was what they were inclined to do, to be honest they never showed any interest in us except as a place that would sell Socialist Worker, they brought them in, we sold them, we gave them some money at the end of the week, it was perfectly amicable, but there were fears that maybe, there would be sort of entry-ism, it never happened, I mean it never you know, it could've happened of course, in principle it could've happened but it never did, and actually again, looking back through the minutes it's clear that we were actually, quite, stern, at every AGM, not just in admitting new members and having elections for the management committee, but that we would lapse from membership every year, we lapsed from membership people, who hadn't attended any meetings, and hadn't really, played any role or shown any active practical inclination to be involved in, you know, in the affairs of the bookshop, and I mean I was looking at the names and these are people I can remember, I mean they were people who were friends of mine, but we were, basically we said nope, well they, they've fallen short, the rules are if you don't attend 'X' number of meetings, or give apologies, whatever the rules were, you are lapsed, well they haven't so, they're lapsed, so I think we were quite stern in making sure that, the members of the co-operative were actually people who demonstrated an active, an active commitment.

[00:35:19]

And that wasn't, it wasn't a financial commitment, it was a turning up...

It was a time, a type of solidarity commitment, an active commitment, and turning up as a volunteer to do, you know a few hours on the till sort of, you know, that something of that sort, that's right, that's what we were looking for.

[00:35:36]

And when you decided...you know when you were deciding between a neighbourhood co-op and a worker co-op...what was it about the neighbourhood co-op that you preferred to the worker co-op model

I think the feeling was that, you know, we were having this conversation in the context of that wider debate about..., the relative downgrading of socialist centre activity, and the focus of everyone's energy into the bookshop, and keeping bookshop alive and you know, and in business, so, I've come across something that I wrote in the context of that discussion you know, I was saying, this is, this is the best way of keeping that socialist centre culture alive, you know this is the best way of actually, yes we want to keep the bookshop going, but we do realise that it's part of a wider community and we could use co-operative membership as the vehicle for building that wider community, and actually with enough people and enough energy and so on, there's no reason why the neighbourhood co-op couldn't change its rules, for the sake of argument to run not just a bookshop but you know if we can find a premises, a coffee bar, or a meeting space, or an arts venue, or whatever we might want to do, you know this could, the neighbourhood co-op could be the legal structure for all sorts of things...that's not how it worked out, it ended up as just the support structure for the bookshop, but, I think that was the idea, that was why we went for that structure in the end, it was because it seemed more consistent, with our history as a shop that had come out of a, bigger and more ambitious political project, and the hope was that we could carry on that bigger political project, but it was a hope that wasn't realised in the end.

[00:37:27]

And with, as a worker...in terms of the full time workers, did you kind of make decisions together, was it equal pay, was it, how did that start to kind of work

It was, it was equal pay, absolutely, it equally, equally [laughter] yes we did. We always had, perhaps we were just lucky but, certainly you know my period when it was Andy and myself and then my period when it was Alan and myself, I mean we you know, we were mates and I mean that was lucky, and it was just men, that's undeniable, and...well we could talk about that perhaps but

Was that in the wider membership as well?

No it wasn't, no it wasn't at all, but, it was that period, but let me, let's think about that...but yeah, yeah we were mates, we worked together well, it was, and there was a degree of just day to day trust and friendship I suppose in the organisation that also, I

can't really remember, the only time I can remember, the two workers, two of us in a sense being up against...the rest of the management committee, the group that was most actively involved, ironically, was around, it must've been, it was Andy and me, so it was maybe round about 1981 and no, we were, it was hand-to-mouth, we were only getting by on the basis of the, sort of subsidiaries, you know voluntary support from other people who were helping to top up the wages basically, and, I can't remember which year it was but it had been a bad year, and some people were sort of basically starting to say 'this isn't working, actually, you know this isn't, this can't, we can't survive', and, Andy and I were basically saying, well we want, the shop to survive, we're prepared to put in you know, the hours and the effort, to make it survive, if for a short period of time, we actually have to take a pay-cut, we, we're telling you that we're prepared to do that in the interests of keeping our jobs, and other people were saying, quite properly you know with good socialist principles, we are not prepared, to cut your wages you know, I didn't, I didn't become part of the management committee of a socialist bookshop in order to do to our workers, what we would never accept any other employer doing to their workers, and we were saying, well we're the workers [laughing], and we're telling you that's what we want you to do, because we think that in 6 months, or 9 months time, you will be able to put our wages back up again, but right now, we want to get through the next 6 or 9 months so that we'll still have a job at the end of it, and actually we sort of, we won the argument, I mean it was pretty outrageous moral blackmail

[laughing]

in a sense, and you could say it's, quite, you know it's an argument that the Labour movement always has, you know when employers come to the people and say, in order to save your jobs now, you know we're going to close down your pension scheme what do you want? You know a few of you will go out with a good pension; the rest of you will lose your jobs. What's it going to be? And you know on the, from the Labour movement I was a trade union official for almost 20 years, we would say that's a completely outrageous choice, to put to people, but hand-on-heart I have to say, that's what we were saying to our colleagues, and it was only a brief time, and actually we were proved right, we did get out of that particular hole, and they were able to put our wages back up so, so that was good, but, that's the only time I can remember, the two workers in a sense, being at odds for a short period, with the

committee, it was pretty, it was very collegiate, it was very consensual, even the final decision, to close down the bookshop...I mean, basically the, the two workers to take-over, when Alan and I left, I mean I went to get a job with a film company which then led to, you know my subsequent career in film and TV and as a union official. Alan went to get a job, as the director of the Trade Union Studies Unit which was like a trade union research unit, funded by a number of trade unions, based in Newcastle and that provided him with a, a very important...I don't want to say launch pad, but a very useful place from which, his political career became you know entirely viable, and very successful, and we both left within a few weeks of each other in the summer of '84. The two workers who took over from us, Steve and Jan...so we did have some gender balance then, they didn't have the, they didn't have the same connections in the Labour movement or in the Peace movement, or in the Women's movement as we did, they loved the bookshop, they wanted to work in a bookshop, and they were both on the left, but they weren't activists in the same way, but I think they were also coming in at a time when, it was already a, before Alan and I were leaving it was becoming more difficult again, '83, '84 had been our best time and then it was falling off, it was falling off in terms of trade. But the final decision to close, again Steve and Jan to their credit, when we'd been looking at the possibility of this move to the place that the theatre was offering us just round the corner, and they wanted to keep their jobs, and they wanted to keep the shop going, and then they just looked at the numbers and they sat down with the accountant, and they came back to us and they said this, we are being told..that actually when you look at the numbers, this is not going to work, and we wish it did, but it won't, and the rest of us looked at the numbers and we basically said, we're very sorry but we agree. So even at that critical point, it was, it was sad but it was sort of, it was a consensual sort of decision. Yeah.

[00:43:17]

Did you want to talk about the gender balance?

Yeah, it's, I mean women, women were very, a large component of the socialist, the socialist centre sort of starting point was a section of the women's movement on Tyneside, I mean you know you can never, these things are always complex but I mean in very broad terms there was a socialist, an active and quite large socialist, feminist, community in Newcastle, on Tyneside, in the late 70s' and early 80s, and

there was an active and large, radical feminist community, and of course there was some overlap between the two, but I mean there were, there was a distinction if you like between the centres of gravity, the socialist, feminists were always very supportive of the bookshop, the radical feminists weren't hostile to the bookshop and we'd have a lot of people who'd come in and keep us well briefed. I mean this was at a time when there was a lot of really creative writing going on, I mean this was around the time I guess when Virago, and Women's Press, and women's publishers were becoming very active, a lot of really creative writing was going on, a lot of it, very much on the radical feminist wing of things and there were people who'd come in and say, 'you really need to stock this book' this you know is coming out very soon, its getting fantastic reviews, people want this and so they were supportive in that sense, but politically, in terms of putting in time, the socialist, feminists were always very, very much part of our community of support, for a long time, our network of volunteers was coordinated by, by Bob Clay's partner, by Uta Clay, who was very much part of a, who came from that world. She was in and out of the bookshop on a daily basis and basically she would say 'right, you know, tomorrow you've got David coming in, in the morning and you've got Maureen in the afternoon, day after that we've got Helen coming in, in the morning but she has to go by 12, so there won't be anyone in-between 12 and about 1:30 or 2, and then Pete can do a couple of hours', you know, and she was constantly doing it, so women, you know, it wasn't an all male preserve, but it's true that in terms of the full time jobs for those 5 years, it was me and a bloke, and then me and a bloke, and I'm not sure if, I mean perhaps I'm not the person to ask as to whether there's some lesson to learn from that, perhaps there's a few women who might look back and say 'yeah, I mean actually there are some lessons to learn from that'. But in terms of the broader community, no it wasn't a boys club, it wasn't.

[46:04]

And did you ever have any debates on what to stock in the bookshop? Was that something that was made as a wider decision?

We did, we had, I can remember some great debates with this guy, this lovely bloke, who first came in, I mean he was much older than most of us, he was probably about my age you know, the age that I am now, then, and he was a travelling salesman, he

used to sell floor and wall coverings for some, you know to, sort of factories and warehouses and places, maybe shops as well, but I mean it was almost sort of the last job you can imagine, a radical socialist to be doing but that's what he'd ended up doing, you know he was a guy who was socialist in his youth, very committed, this was the course his life had taken, and almost after like 20 years out, he discovered the bookshop, and he really liked it, and so he, he started off as a regular customer, and then you know you see a face a few times you start to sort of have a chat, and because he had to account to his bosses, I mean he understood accounts, he understood sort of accounting, he understood stock turnover, although he wasn't, you know he was in a sense providing merchandise for people who were selling stuff, he had to understand their business in order to sort of do his job, and a bloke called Ted, Ted Mason ...and he got involved and he joined the co-op and he was on the management committee, and he was on the little finance committee that did the number crunching, and you know Ted would say, meeting after meeting 'I know, it's like talking to a brick wall, but I'll say it again, ' he says you know, 'I have been coming in this shop 3 years' or however long it had been 'and I look at that top shelf up there and you've got X volumes, you've got 15 volumes of the collective works of Marx and Engels, and they've been sitting there ever since I came into the shop' and he said, 'that is money tied up...it is making nothing, you paid for those books, it's just a loss, it's just a direct loss to the shop, you need to take them down, sell them at a knock down price, and put books there that will actually sell, because then, you're making money.' And you know we were saying and I have to say I was saying, 'this is a socialist bookshop, you can't come into, if you come into a socialist bookshop you are entitled to expect them to stock certain classics, it's almost like an investment in our identity'. And looking back I think maybe, he was more right than me, because its, you can actually get hold of the collective works of Marx and Engels if you really want to, but that was the argument we made at the time, and I think he was right, and we were wrong, we were, I suppose we were very, because we were all activists, we were very, very conscious of our identity, you know, we were a socialist bookshop, we weren't a, we weren't a sort of 'alternative' bookshop, I mean if you can pick up the distinction between those two things, I mean we were very active in supporting the Peace Movement, but we saw that as part of 'the Left' broadly defined, we were a socialist bookshop, we were about the Labour movement, and we were about campaigns, and working class people you know, to transform and improve their lives that's what we were there for, and

there is a literature that is part of that, that sort of political and intellectual heritage, and part of our role was to make that literature available, even if no one wanted to buy it [laughing]. Which looking back, was a bit mad really, but there we are [laughing].

[49:59]

Was the decision made on consensus, or were certain decisions like that were they made on consensus at a meeting, or was it just kind of...

It was just, I can't remember, I mean we, my memory is, and I should really remember this better because I sort of, I usually led on stocking, stocking policy for most of the time I was there. We obviously had lots of links with left, progressive, publishers and, the distributors that sort of acted for those publishers, so in a sense we were on their radar, they would almost, I mean without being asked, they would, they would obviously restock anything that we asked to be restocked, but they would just automatically send us their new titles, so we, you know, again: Virago, Women's Press, Lawrence & Wishart, Merlin, Pluto, etcetera, etcetera, we would get, their new titles automatically. At the time there was a distributor called, P.D.F, which, is that right or am I thinking now of, I know there's a PDF files now, was it PDF? Publishers and Distributors? Or was it PDC

Oh, PDC, yeah

PDC, thank you, shows how digital we are now, PDC, so they acted for a lot of these publishers, and so they were in a sense, they took a lot of the pain out of ordering, they would, they would monitor new titles, make sure we were stocked with them. There were the sorts of arguments in retrospect that I've just been describing then, with Ted, about if books were just hanging around on the shelves, what should we do? And we did have sales, you know we did have periodic clear outs and have sales and, sort of cut our losses. There were arguments, the biggest single argument I can remember, and this was actually something we did get from, it just arrived from PDC, was, an anarchist pamphlet, called, 'The Anarchist Cookbook'..which was, a, it was a, I mean it called itself anarchist, it was looking back really..it was quite an unpleasant publication, it was a sort of survivalist..manual, and it was about do-it-yourself, how to make a bomb...how to make, you know crude, weapons, I mean it was that notion of, I mean I think you know, anarchism has always had this, this

element to it of, you know propaganda by the deed, and it's always been a tiny minority of people that actually call themselves anarchists, who are usually utterly harmless in my experience, but anyway, 'The Anarchists Cookbook', yes we sold 'The Anarchists Cookbook', and I don't know how the word got out, but, one of, you know Newcastle was a Labour Council, Tyne and Wear County Council was a Labour Council, but there were a few Tories on Tyne and Wear County Council and one of them got tipped the wink that there was this bookshop, selling, a bomb making manual for anarchists, so he came into the shop, I mean we didn't recognise him, I'm sure he'd never been in there before, he came into the shop, asked for it, was sold it, and he then wrote, put out this press release, saying 'do you realise that there are terrorists, selling terrorist manuals in the streets of Newcastle' and it all became suddenly we were in the news, and not in a good way, and it actually led to probably unwisely, it was my first experience of an interview, local radio picked it up and, invited us, invited us to send somebody to do an interview, up against this Tory councillor, and I was deputed to go, and it was quite difficult, I mean today I would say it was a dreadful mistake, and we shouldn't have stocked it, I think it was unforgivable, but I mean what I was trying to argue, was, this is a legal publication, you know if it was illegal by definition, we wouldn't be stocking it because it wouldn't be available to be stocked, it's a legal publication, it isn't saying anything that anybody who doesn't for example choose to join territorial army couldn't find out, this is not very secret information, you know this is just basically a political stunt by a councillor who wants to get his name into the papers and it's all a big storm in a teacup..but I don't think I won the argument, I don't [laughing]

[Laughing] Have you listened back to the argument since?

So, that was the most, that's the most controversial, single, incident, I can remember, I can remember. I mean I'm sure there were times when people came in and said, 'have you got such and such a title', and were appalled when we didn't and sort of said, 'you call yourself a socialist bookshop, how can you not have x or y', but then that's almost getting us back to the, the thing I'd said before, you know, people come in, their entitled to know that they can buy, selected works of Marx and Engels, whether they want them or not their entitled to know that they can, and they'll always be here, so there's obviously that, we were a small shop, I mean you know our ability to you

know, our stocking level was pretty low all the time, but I can't remember any big debates.

[55:09]

And sort of thinking about, your relationship with other co-ops, or other worker co-ops, did you have a kind of network of other worker co-ops?

There was a, the only network I can remember was the Federation of Radical Bookshops, and we used to go along, I can remember going to meetings, people would sort of take it in turns, that's my memory, to go along to meetings. We were never, we were never sort of movers and shakers in it but it was, it was always nice to meet, I mean they were a nice bunch of people obviously, they were sort of we were all very much on the same wave length, so it was a good place to sort of, you know exchange views and find out how similar and how different other shops were in their ethos and just their day to day, day to day practices, so I mean my memory of those meetings is that they were friendly and useful on a sort of, sort of useful tips, 'that's a useful tip, I'll remember that, I'll take that, oh we could do that' you know, maybe something about opening hours, I mean you know we had a late opening on a Thursday, and I cannot remember why we fixed on a Thursday as our late opening day, maybe it that was Newcastle City Centre's late opening, I can't remember, but you know stuff like that you know...but, in terms of co-ops in the North East, not really, no, no I mean, we, we were in touch with the Northern Regional, the NRCDA, the Northern Regional Co-ops Development Agency, and actually, in the very, in this very final phase, when we were considering the possibility of moving out of, the Westgate road premises and round the corner to these other premises in the you know, basically a side street that the theatre was offering us when we were sort of thinking maybe we should go for this, we actually negotiated a loan from the NRCDA, to help finance the move, didn't have to call upon it in the end because the move never happened, but, so we were in touch with them, but we were in touch with them as if you like a support agency rather than , as you know fellow co-operators, I suppose.

[57:13]

And that was kind of, financial support or training and guidance?

It was..I guess they gave us that advice that led to us, opting for, the, regional co-op as opposed to worker co-op model, that was very much on sort of with their, on their advice and guidance. I can't remember going, having any training, I mean I'm sure we'd have benefitted from it, and I'm not saying it wasn't available for us but, we never took it up, I mean training in basic accounting I'm sure, you know we were I didn't have any background in, in accounting, we were just learning it all on a, I didn't have any, any background in running a shop, we just learned it on the job, we, so I'm sure we'd have benefitted from that, but I'm afraid we didn't take it up if it was on offer.

[57:57]

So, you left the co-op in 1984?

Yep

And why did you decide to leave and kind of what did you go into, you've mentioned it briefly?

Yeah, I was..I was..I can't say I was headhunted but I was invited to apply, for a job in a, a local film company, that was, it had probably, it was about a year old by that point, these were the, these were the early years of channel 4, and, channel, when channel 4's early years, it took very seriously, the remit which it was given, by Parliament when it was set up to, to provide you know innovative and radical programming, rooted throughout the United Kingdom, I mean the view then as now is that, you know, film and television production is far too London based, and that there should be a positive policy of producing programmes, which are rooted in communities outside, London and the South East. And a discussion had gone on, between.. the union, the film union which at that point was called the ACTT, and channel 4 television, and the British Film Institute, about, making possible a new sort of film production, programme production company called, Workshops. And they would be low budget, they wouldn't actually have to apply all the union's usual rules and I mean ACTT was a powerful union with you know, powerful agreements right across the industry and very clear views as to what each member of a film crew, or post-production crew should be paid for their particular job, the workshop model was, equal pay, it was about flexibility of people working across different jobs...and the

deal was, that, the union would relax its usual rules for these workshops, in order to make the experiment possible, but that if, films were actually accepted to be shown on television, then if you like, a retrospective payment should be made, so that the cost of the programme itself wouldn't undercut, the cost of programmes coming if you like through more conventional commercial routes, so that the union position overall, wouldn't be undercut, otherwise they'd of been setting up workshops everywhere. So this workshop model was developed, with an enormous amount of creativity, really, in retrospect, and channel 4, then, had a budget to invest in workshops, and it basically, groups were invited to set themselves up to constitute themselves if you like as potential workshops, and to bid for channel 4's financial support, and this company trade films, which was actually based just across the river from Newcastle in Gateshead..won, one of these franchises as they were called, the other local company that got a franchise was Amber Films, which is based in Newcastle, which had actually already been going about 10 or 15 years by then, but they used the workshop model as well, so Trade Films basically was a new company, it had money, and basically the role it had carved out for itself, that it had identified, when selling itself to channel 4 was, 'we will base ourselves in the Labour movement, and the sort of progressive movement's which are part of the culture, an important part of the culture of the North East, you know, this is an industrial working class community which has never been properly represented in sort of film, tv, audiovisual terms, we as a company will represent, them.' And they invited me to apply for a job there because they saw me as somebody who was plugged into those sorts of networks, I mean, a bit through the peace movement, probably more through my activity on the trades council, I'm not sure I'm, I might have been sec[re]tarial president of the trades council by this point, I can't remember, how the timing went, but I was very much involved in the trades council in Newcastle, they saw me as somebody who could, bring, some of those links and associations, so, I mean I'd never actually, I never had any ambition to work in film and television, I mean millions of people do, I didn't, but I sort of stumbled into this job, then again like when I started at the bookshop and had to learn very quickly on the job because I really had no background in that, but anyway. Yeah, and Alan got this job, Alan similarly was invited to apply for this job running the trade union studies unit and, I probably as a result of the work he did with the campaign to save the shipyards, which were facing closure both on the Tyne and Wear, he gave a lot of, he was a very active public advocate of the campaign to save

shipyards, to stop, avoid closure, which by and large, failed, the naval yards stayed open but the merchant yards all closed, but by then I think he'd attracted a lot of attention, you know he was a you know, telegenic young man, very clear, very articulate, comes across well, and I think that's when people started to think you know, he could go far.

[01:03:07]

And what was your kind of involvement in co-ops post that?

After that Trade Films wasn't a co-operative, our legal structure was that we were a company limited by guarantee, we worked in an, we worked to a degree in a co-operative way, but, only to a degree, I mean you know looking back, and I mean we were aware of this at the time and we had discussions and arguments about it at the time, but basically there were the, if you like, there were the programme making employees who were the majority, and we did meet regularly and by-and-large made decisions together, although I think its true to say that there were a couple of individuals who were very much more powerful voices than anybody else, but then we also employed secretarial admin staff, two of them, both women, who weren't part of that at all, who just basically..did their jobs, worked for us and the issue did come up, we did talk about it, but we never, that was the structure we remained with, we weren't formally a co-operative, that wasn't our structure. So since then in terms of my personal biography, I..as it happens, I mean a long time later, I worked at Trade Films through until the early 90s', I went freelance for a couple of years, and I then came down to do a job with the union, I'd always been very active with what was ACTT, what became BECTU, in the mid 90s I came down to work for BECTU in London, on what was initially a one year contract, but it then got, and it was basically about recruitment, and building up the union's membership, but I got taken on to permanent staff, and ended up as the assistant general secretary, so that was my career after that, and I found myself living in South London in a little street, which, I'd always known that somewhere in Penge there was a housing co-op, a pioneering housing co-op, but I couldn't work out where it had been and then I discovered I was actually living in it, and my street was it, I mean it was quite, it was quite weird because I had been vaguely aware, it's not as if I'd been busting a gut about it, it had been at the back of my mind, so I, I came up here and used the archive here which

was great, and really, I mean lovely staff, but also they've got some fantastic stuff here as I'm sure you know, and I was able to find out quite a lot about it, and it was a pion[ee]ring, it was the country's first housing co-operative, it was an initiative by a guy who used to work for the CWS down in London and who just had a vision that the co-operative movement, it almost feels like I'm rerunning all the stuff I'm talking about with the socialist centre, the co-operative movement shouldn't just be, about, retail, it shouldn't just be about our co-operative stores, you know at that point they had all the network of factories and, you know the whole distribution thing but, it should be, we should be reaching into other parts of life, and you know we should be providing co-operative housing, but in order to demonstrate that's possible, we need some sort of exemplary initiatives, and so he got this, housing co-op off the ground, bloke called Ben Jones, the truth is it didn't really work terribly well, it wasn't structured in a..with all the benefit of hindsight, it wasn't structured most appropriately, but they did build the houses, and people did live in them, and they were all co-operative tenants, and everyone who lives in my street is delighted when, you know, when new people arrive I knock on the door and say 'Hello, here's the history of our street', they say 'oh...thank you'. And I couldn't have produced it without the help of the people here [laughing].

So yeah, those are all the questions I'd like to ask actually, unless there's anything you feel that we've missed, that you'd like to mention?

I don't think so, I think I've rattled on at some length, and I think I've offered all the little, sort of points I made here.

Did you say you had some material, did you want to talk through any of that?

Well, what I've, I've got a very, I haven't brought it with me, I mean these are just notes I've made from it, just if I needed them sort of for this discussion. I've got, a very patchy set of minutes of meetings, the earliest of which probably go back to 1980 or '81, and the very latest actually go through to '88 although the shop stopped trading in '86, Days of Hope booksellers continued to exist, on paper, until '88 and it was then formally sort of closed down, de-registered, whatever the term is, so I've got, I've got those records, they're mixed up with a whole lot of other stuff, some of which is, sort of more personal, and in my view, might be appropriate for an archive but only when the people to whom it refers, if they're happy for it to be, so I just

thought rather than doing it in dribs and drabs, and some point I will run off copies of the minutes and give them through to you, because I can't see any, I think that's appropriate to be available, its only, its partial, there are big gaps, but they are what they are you know. And maybe some of the other stuff as well, if other people are happy for me to do that, so, so there's more stuff on the way.

Cool, thank you very much.

You're welcome