

VOICES OF '74 – STRIKE (A)

STRIKE: PART 1 AND PART 2 - MOTIVES, ACTIONS AND EARLY IMPACT

TEACHER OVERVIEW

The Ulster Workers' Council Strike resulted from growing anger amongst Unionists and loyalists toward the implementation of the Sunningdale Agreement and power-sharing at Stormont. The strike was organised by the Ulster Workers' Council and the Ulster Army Council, a group which included loyalist paramilitaries. There is debate as to whether "strike" is the best description for an action which sought to bring down a government and effect constitutional change. The action began slowly but quickly picked up momentum as workers from key industries including power stations walked out. Soon the economy was brought to a near standstill and essential services affecting people's everyday lives were disrupted. To what extent people willingly supported the strike and what role intimidation played in forcing workers to comply, are still contested issues.

KEY INQUIRY QUESTIONS

- 1) Why did the UWC opt for the action they did?
- 2) Committed, Coerced or Defiant? Was intimidation the main reason for children not attending school and adults not attending work?
- 3) Did ordinary people suffer hardship during the UWC action?

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Students should have an understanding of the circumstances surrounding the signing of the Sunningdale Agreement and the reasons why it provoked such a backlash amongst hardline Unionism.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

The key resources for the study are the *Voices of '74* Clips, [Strike: Part 1](#) and [Strike: Part 2](#).


The work is structured around the three enquiry questions above.

Enquiry questions 1 and 2 draw largely on [Strike: Part 1](#).

Enquiry question 3 focuses on [Strike: Part 2](#).

The study is based on recent oral testimonies. Therefore, it is essential that at the outset of each enquiry students have the opportunity to **watch** the accounts as recorded.

EACH ENQUIRY REQUIRES STUDENTS TO:

- Test a range of accounts for their validity, reliability and utility
 - Balance, synthesise and evaluate differing perspectives and interpretations.
 - Supplement their understanding with reference to other relevant material.
 - Engage in discussion with peers (through whole class dialogue, pairs and group work) to clarify thinking and test their ideas against those of others.
 - Conclude by articulating a reasoned personal position on each of the enquiry questions.
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STRIKE: PART 1

ENQUIRY QUESTION 1:

WHY DID THE UWC OPT FOR THE ACTION THEY DID?



Watch and listen to *Strike: Part 1*. Collect class reactions / understandings of what is being said.

In pairs, read the introductory statement below. Then, examine each of the 10 cards and discuss answers to the accompanying questions. Please note that some of the extracts below are taken from the extended versions available online (*Strike i*).



The election results consolidated opposition to Sunningdale and signalled the inevitability of a move to active protest. The decision was made that this action should take the form of a strike. The following testimonies begin with a consideration of why this form of action was chosen.

Card 1 – Erskine Holmes

Yeah, well, speaking with my colleague or my comrade, Brian Garrett, um, he said that they used the term to him, um, um, the constitutional stoppage. Not, not a not a strike..... Well, it clearly wasn't an official strike. If it was not an official strike, then it's an unofficial strike. Far better to call it a constitutional stoppage.

*What do you understand to be the difference between a “strike” and a “constitutional stoppage”?
Why might it matter to some people what the action was called?*

Card 2 – Don Anderson

It was a weapon of last resort. They felt that the election result, which was anti Sunningdale, the February of '74 one, that electoral politics had deserted them in terms of what they needed. And all they could do was this.

Why a “last resort”?

Card 3 – Dawn Purvis

And I think that was the only reason that the strike was, was chosen just to put two fingers up to, to Whitehall and Westminster and say, look at the power we have, you know, and if you think you're going to impose anything over our heads, you're going to be sadly mistaken.

Does the speaker see the action as a protest or a show of strength?

Card 4 – Helen Crickard

Because they knew it, ... they knew they could bring the place to a standstill because they had the power. They worked in the electric board, they worked on the roads, they worked in education, they worked in health. [...] They had the power and that was what they were going to do.

Card 5 – Kenny McFarlane

And so they knew they had the workers on board and people were frustrated. [...] So all of a sudden you had these people who were, who were actually saying the working class has power, which was something which had never really, would never have really been thought of beforehand, so, and it gave, so the strike was a great way of doing it, it was actually it was a powerful way of doing it and it was more likely a bigger threat to Unionism than it was anybody else.

Cards 4 and 5 talk of having “power”? What do they see as the source of this power?

Card 6 – Douglas McIldoon

Well, I don't think the Unionist leaders chose that as a form of action. I think it was a grassroots thing that emerged within well, trade union circles, or people who were organising trade unions and they, they understood, well they understood trade unions structure, they understood mobilising working people, particularly in strategic industries. And the power industry being the obvious one.

According to Douglas McIldoon, where did the energy for the action come from?

Does this link in with Kenny McFarlane's view that "it was more likely a bigger threat to Unionism than it was anybody else"?

Card 7 – Chris McGimpsey

I think people, I feel like they were, probably they were seeing strikes generally, all over the world, you know, in Europe and South America and so on there were, strikes were taking place to change government policy and opinion.

Card 8 – Boyd Black

So maybe they thought that striking might be effective. And it turned out that it was.... Because Heath had been brought down by the miners' strike just before that, over the, they had a three day week and that yes, the power and that sort of it was a power shortage, there's was an electricity shortage that caused a three day week. So that have given them an insight.

How do cards 8 and 9 suggest that the action may have been shaped by events outside Northern Ireland?

Card 9 – Bernadette McAliskey

And, and I made the point that the loyalist strike and I made it, still make it, every worker on the face of this earth owns and controls their own labour and has a right to withdraw it at any time. So my complaint with the loyalist workers' strike was not that workers withdrew their labour, it was the reason for which they withdrew it.

What is Bernadette McAliskey's big problem regarding the motivation for the action?

Card 10 – John Rankin

Well, as you know there were a lot of killings and bombings going on. Probably the majority of it was coming from the Provisional IRA at the time, this was probably a peaceful way of doing it or as near enough peaceful as you could get without causing lives to be lost. Probably because they could bring the country to a standstill and people would stand up and recognise what's happening

Why might the background violence of the Troubles have influenced attitudes to the UWC action?

Using all the cards are there differences in the way those from Unionist and Nationalist backgrounds interpret the UWC action?

In small groups, take the statements below in turn and decide which card sources support the statement and which challenge it.

Reasons for choosing the action	Card evidence which supports the statement	Card evidence which challenges the statement
A direct act of defiance to the British Government and the power-sharing Executive		
A desperate attempt to have objections to power-sharing heard		
A concerted effort to bring Northern Ireland to an economic standstill		
The use by working class loyalism of organized labour and trade union principles to bring about change rather than rely on conventional politics		
Recognition that strikes had worked effectively in other places to force change		
The action was seen as a way of demonstrating Unionist / loyalist anger at continuing Republican violence against Protestants		
Rather than being just a STRIKE, it had the power to bring a CONSTITUTIONAL stoppage		

Return to the Enquiry Question. Read the section in the textbook which deals with the events of the strike or carry out some online research on the strike. Discuss which reasons above best answer the Enquiry Question.

*Individual work: In your view, based on your study, **Why did the UWC opt for the action they did?***


STRIKE: PART 1

ENQUIRY QUESTION 2:

COMMITTED, COERCED OR DEFIANT? WAS INTIMIDATION THE MAIN REASON FOR CHILDREN NOT ATTENDING SCHOOL AND ADULTS NOT ATTENDING WORK?

As the strike took hold, ordinary citizens, right across Northern Irish society had to deal with the inevitable fallout from the stoppage and decide where they stood regarding the call for action. The following testimonies focus on a series of reflections on the everyday experiences of schoolchildren and workers during the stoppage.

 Watch and listen to [Strike: Part 1](#) sections on “school” and “work”.

 In pairs, work through each of the extracts below. Please note that some of the extracts below are taken from the extended versions available online ([Strike i](#)).

SCHOOLCHILDREN

Extract 1 – Dawn Purvis

Even when the strike was on, we were sent to school and she came home from work one day and I will never forget it. And of course we were sent to bed as usual and the, the granny came up the street and knocked the door. We weren't long in bed so I was eerie wiggling at the window and I could hear voices and I don't know what happened anyway, but the next day - we were raging at having to go to school because nobody else was going to school. You know, and my mummy was going, you have to go to school because I have to go to work. So you have to go to school. Right, okay. So the next day we didn't, we didn't go to school and mum didn't go to work, but she was up early and she was away round to the phone box on Donegall Pass and then back around again and I said, where were you?

She said I had to go and phone, I think it was Mr. Park you called the man that owned the fruit shop to tell him that I couldn't come in today and are we not going to school, no you are not going to school, yeah, we're not going to school. Now it was, it wasn't until years later that the granny had visited Mum and said, you're still sending them kids to school and you're still going to work. And mum says, I have no other choice. I have no income. I can't look after my kids. And she says, You're not sending those kids to school tomorrow and you're not going to work. And my mum says, Well, who's going to feed my children? And she says, We will look after everybody in the street, but you're not going to work and them kids aren't going to school because if you do go to work, you'll have no house to come home to.

So and, and when she told me that, you know, a number of years later, I was absolutely horrified, absolutely horrified. There's a single woman on her own with three children and they're threatening to burn her out If she doesn't conform.

Extract 2 – Derek Moore

You know, we did become aware of what was happening probably because, you know, because we were off school, you know, we went to school, but the teachers led a walk out of the school that we were at Templemore and, you know, we, we had to walk home then I remember that because we had no school bus, you know. So I suppose we were aware of what was happening. But again, it was it seemed to be a very slow burner at the start.

Extract 3 – Kathy Wolf

And I always remember I was first year and my friend and I were at the front of the bus, gabbing to the bus driver because I would be I'd be very quiet and reserved, you know, but I can remember coming to the Boys Model and there was a UDA checkpoint there and because I was at the front of the bus you are sort of looking and going and all these guys and some with guns and you know balaclavas and that on. And one got on to the bus And he says to the bus driver, he grabbed me and the other girl and he put the gun to us and said get all these f***ing kids off the bus. And I can remember just being standing there petrified and the bus driver shouting to the kids you've got to get off the bus. Get off the bus quickly. And people starting to get off the bus and another guy coming along and saying, What are you doing? He says getting the kids off the bus we will take the bus and he goes, get them kids back on the F***ing bus and he says to the driver, get them kids back and don't be coming back here tomorrow. Or we won't, we won't be as lenient or we won't... whatever. And I can remember being gobsmacked on the bus and not kind of saying, the bus was, I remember the bus being totally quiet. Now, a double decker bus with as many school kids as rammed on there. I had never heard it quiet, the place was just quiet. Total silence. On the bus and you could hear sobbing. And I can remember getting off the bus and running up the road. And I remember crying as I was running, because I was absolutely petrified....

Extract 4 – William Mitchell

Well, so a number of us got together and said, wow, we're not going to school. What we did was we went into school mounted a protest and all immediately got up on a given time that we had all prearranged and just completely marched out of school. And you had all the teachers across the playground towards the front gates out, all back. into class, aye no chance, steamrolled over the top of them. [...] No, no, we didn't go back to school at all until the strike was called off. In actual fact not taking any a glorification in any of this. But what did we do? We marched to the local Catholic school, and smashed all of the windows.

What different emotions of young people are referenced in the extracts? From the extracts identify examples of:

- (i) Those who were **committed** to the strike's aims
- (ii) Those who felt **coerced** by the strikers
- (iii) Those who **defied** the intentions of the strikers

WORKERS

Extract 5 – Paul Arthur

Now, I was really afraid during that period. I got into school most days and what I would do was, I would drive, I would take my car as far as Bangor and then one of the teachers there would pick me up and you would go through various barricades and for the most part they were fine. You said, you know, you said, look, you were going to teach in school. Their response was, I wish I had got an education, you know, and then to do it, which is fair enough. But during that period, I had published my book on the People's Democracy. I had done a television interview about it, which raised the profile again in the school. And then I was asked to go for an interview at the Ulster Polytechnic. I remember going for that interview, which was at the height of the UWC strike, and having to negotiate my way past. I don't know, you exaggerate the number of barricades you went through, but you certainly went through several barricades and you do worry. And I went through and did the interview.

Extract 6 – Helen Crickard

Because I remember my dad having to go to work and going to work out the back and walking up through the field and trying to change his route every day and Philip as well? I think Philip had just started working in Ballylumford, building the power station and he was. Yeah, So he I think he was 16, maybe older, but I remember that there was a high level of fear for the older ones.

Extract 7 – Tony McMullan

Now, we were allowed to work because I worked in the DHSS and of course oh, because they were paying the benefits. Of course we, I mean we got a special pass from the UDA to say this man is this person is a benefits clerk or something. I mean it was really, when you think about it now, you know, you're getting you're getting a pass handed to you by ...well, paramilitaries. But they have no electoral mandate whatsoever to determine how people should go about their work. So we went to work every single day of the strike, every single day of the strike. But every single day we were stopped at least two or three times to get from Newtownards to Belfast, to Stormont..... Oh, it was a very intimidating experience because, I mean, obviously my father was conscious, well conscious that. We were Catholics and I mean, like although they had given us this because they thought it was a benefit. They didn't know what religion I was. And but we were terrified for that. If they found out that what could happen to us. But my father was determined to go to work every day..... And I, I was determined to go to work if I could.

From the extracts identify examples of:

- (i) Those who were **committed** to the strike's aims
- (ii) Those who felt **coerced** by the strikers
- (iii) Those who **defied** the intentions of the strikers

Discuss what both sets of extracts tell us about attendance at school and work as the action took hold.

Read a short secondary account of the strike which refers to the intimidation issue.

Individual work. Answer the Enquiry Question: **As the action took hold was intimidation the main reason for children not attending school and adults not attending work?**

STRIKE: PART 2

ENQUIRY QUESTION 3:

DID ORDINARY PEOPLE SUFFER HARDSHIP DURING THE UWC ACTION?

As the strike took hold, ordinary citizens, right across Northern Irish society had to deal with the inevitable fallout from the stoppage. The following testimonies focus on the emergence of a certain communal solidarity, the central role of women, as well as how the strike was experienced in rural communities and within the Nationalist population.

▶ The [Strike: Part 2](#) video covers 4 key themes:

- (i) Rations / Solidarity
- (ii) The central role of women
- (iii) Impact on rural communities
- (iv) The experience of Nationalists

Rations / Solidarity: the impact of the strike on urban communities

▶ Whole class: Watch/listen to this [Strike: Part 2](#). What impression emerges of living during the UWC action? Deprivation? Fear? Solidarity? Excitement?

▶ Small groups – distribute sets of cards to each group. Please note that some of the extracts below are taken from the extended versions available online ([Strike ii](#)).

Card 1 – Eileen Weir

So when the strike came, you know, and the electric went off and everything went off, I mean a lot of my memories of that time were happy memories, believe it or believe it or not, because our communities really came together then, because there was no electric so anybody who used to go camping on their holidays all the wee primus stoves were out making dinner for the whole street.

As a young person then, what is this contributor's main memory of living during the strike?

Card 2 – Danny Morrison

Funny enough a lot of loyalists were coming up into our area to get bread and milk because they weren't getting it into their areas. But I mean we were cooking out in the yard. There was a sort of a, a blitz mentality, I suppose, you know, people sharing and some guy going off and getting a crate of milk and helping the rest of the street out, especially if there were kids in the house.

Looking back, what does this contributor find unusual?

Card 3 – William Mitchell

I remember the vans coming around and going to people and distributing milk and stuff like that. Potatoes and bread and all, I remember that. But, you know, invariably that, that was paramilitaries, so, I know we say, well were they a threat but also there were, they were supportive as well so it was people who were connected to the paramilitary organisations that were instigating this distribution of stuff but they weren't doing it in masks you know, and the likes of that..... People rallied to support each other, and this is demonstrated in looking out for your neighbours.....

How does this contributor regard the role played by paramilitaries? Where might those supplies have come from?

Card 4 – Bernadette McAliskey

You know, ... there were two different bits of community solidarity going on there. You know, one was, you know, we make we'll, we, we muck in here as our contribution to the strike. And the other was we'll muck in here as a contribution to not being cowed. And it was very brave for, for members of the Protestant community who, who were small, small business people, small farmers, to do that in the face of that intimidation and those things get, get overlooked, you know.

Explain the difference between these two sources of solidarity?

Card 5 – Kathy Wolf

I suppose to be quite honest, you know, growing up like it was slightly fun, going, we have to go round the back of the garage, it was a wee bit like a Secret Service. We're going to be spies here, we're going to sneak around the back of the garage because he's got some petrol for us. [...] There was a certain bit of fun to it, it wasn't fun for the mothers and the grandmothers.

How does the contributor suggest her attitude may have been different from that of mums and grannies?

Complete the table below by drawing on material from each of the card sources?

Impact of the UWC Action on communities		
Negative aspects	Positive aspects	Card sources

THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN



Whole class: Watch/ listen to [Strike: Part 2](#). What impression emerges of the role played by women in Loyalist areas?



In pairs read through each of the extracts. Please note that some of the extracts below are taken from the extended versions available online ([Strike ii](#)).

Extract 1 – Mike Nesbitt

I think one of the constants over the whole course of the Troubles was the fact that the wives and the mothers would keep the family bound together and whatever they thought about what their husbands were doing, even if they totally disapproved of the actions they were taking their priority was to look after their loved ones, their children. And then there would be a common bond with the mother next door and next street and next estate. And you could see, perversely, that would bring a communal binding together.

Extract 2 – Dawn Purvis

They wouldn't see anybody stuck, you know, if there was, and there were families, as I say, who were poorer than others. So really didn't have any food. So they were sharing the food or they were baking. They were making pots of soup pots of stew, you know, they were sharing it out. They were making sure that everybody had and nobody was left out.

Extract 3 – Eileen Weir

But you know I would say women were the ones that kept communities going while the men were fighting to a certain degree. And that wasn't the same across all communities. There was a difference within probably Republican families where women were more active within the combat area than it was within Protestant communities and women and were making the teas, making the dinners, making sure, you know, especially during the strike, it wasn't the men that was cooking. It wasn't the men that was peeling the potatoes. It wasn't the men that was getting their kids out to school. It was the women that was doing all these things.

Extract 4 – Mervyn Gibson

So women had a strong role in making sure that the strike was observed. But they also a strong role then in providing for people. You know there was innovation, if you made a meal, you made it for three or four houses. Or they made sure the elderly in the street were fed. But that would have fallen down to the women you know, the men might have posed at the corner standing looking like vigilantes and stuff like that but in many cases it was the women who were doing the work behind the scenes.

Extract 5 – Chris McGimpsey

The boys, I mean, they need this backing of their, of their womenfolk to, to do these things.

What roles are attributed to women in each of the extracts?

Extract 1	
Extract 2	
Extract 3	
Extract 4	
Extract 5	

One contributor maintains that women were 'crucial to the strike'. Does the evidence here support that view?

THE RURAL EXPERIENCE



Watch/ listen to [Strike: Part 2](#), focussing in particular on the rural section of the video. Please note that some of the extracts below are taken from the extended versions available online ([Strike ii](#)).

What attitudes to the UWC Action are expressed?

Extract 6 – Jim Dillon

It probably was hard for some people. Probably maybe people living in the town and having to depend on everything they bought from the shop. But out in the farming community, I mean, you could always get enough to do you because you had your own eggs, your own milk and your own butter.

Extract 7 – Chris McGimpsey

But I, one of the things I can remember very well, because I remember a disagreement with my cousin Bill about this, they showed, they couldn't get the milk lorries out because the roads were blocked and they went to some farm and they got some boy, there and he was emptying big churns of milk down the drain. And the boy says, somebody said to him well, how do you feel about that, you've built up your herd, you have a good farm, you've worked all your things for milk. What are you doing about it now and he said, we've all got to make a sacrifice. And he just emptied another churn of milk down the drain. That's, that is the way people are feeling. I mean you've got farmers pouring their own milk down the drain because they support the strike and that's how they show their support. They're not trying to get the milk out, and I said well it just shows you how strongly the feelings were.

Extract 8 – Jim Dillon

Well you see the farming community owned the country because they owned the land. And the perception was about, well, if you lose this battle, you'll lose your farms. Maybe. They will be taken from you, they will maybe nationalise them, and you just don't know it when you see what has happened in the Republic of Ireland, in the Free State.

Using Extracts 6, 7 and 8, in what ways was life easier / harder for farming families during the strike?

How do the extracts help us to understand why the farming community were so important to the impact the strike had?

THE EXPERIENCE OF NATIONALISTS

Watch/read these testimonies. Are the tone and attitude of speakers different from those from the Loyalist / Unionist community?

It's pretty clear that, you know, within a week of it beginning that in, within the Protestant community, there was massive support for it because they think this - we're winning.

They must have been frightened, they must have been intensely concerned, if you want to put it that way. I mean, I mean, the Prods were out, they were on the street, they were mobilised and why would they not be frightened?

Loyalist protests, particularly during the UWC strike, weren't met with British army repression or violence. No barricades were taken down, no rubber bullets were fired.

I remember one of my main concerns was where we were to get a drink.

NATIONALIST EXPERIENCES

You know, it made you realise, how insecure everything was that at a flick of a switch people could turn your whole life upside down. You know, they could withdraw your

And the idea that the British army were going to lift loyalists [...] No, the army was not used against the loyalists. And that was always the big issue that how come?

If we had jobs and were unionized and could strike, would we get striking for 14 days. ..Without intervention, would we be allowed to block the roads with tractors? And saw up trees and fell them across the road? Would we be allowed armed and masked to stand on the public highway for 14 days?

The Nationalist community banded together. If you take West Belfast, they actually did manage to get, if you like, avenues out into the Republic where they were getting some essential supplies in. [...] But there was definitely a sense of fear because underneath [...] they didn't know how it was going to end.

Select six adjectives which best express the feelings of this group of Nationalists towards the UWC Action:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Now, return to the Enquiry Question:

Did ordinary people suffer hardship during the UWC Action?

In your groups prepare a 5 slide PowerPoint presentation.

Drawing on your findings sum up to what extent each group experienced hardship

Slide 1 Urban communities

Slide 2 Women

Slide 3 Rural communities

Slide 4 Nationalists

Slide 5 Bring your findings together to reach a conclusion:

Did the UWC action actually cause suffering to people in Northern Ireland?

VOICES OF '74



Nottingham Trent University

