

Professor Ruth Pearson
Centre for Development Studies
University of Leeds
Email: r.pearson@leeds.ac.uk

Co-applicant:
Professor Linda McDowell
School of Geography
Oxford University
Email: linda.mcdowell@ouce.ox.ac.uk .

Subverting Stereotypes: Asian Women's Political Activism: A Comparison of the Grunwick and Gate Gourmet disputes

Project Summary

Thirty years ago, the workers in a photo-processing plant in north west London – Grunwick's – walked out in an industrial protest about low pay and exploitative conditions. The workers and the leaders of the industrial action were mainly women, and the majority of them first generation Asian migrants to the UK. This strike became an iconic example of Asian women's political empowerment in post-war Britain. Led by Mrs Jayaben Desai, the press and other media of the time



represented the strike in stereotypical terms: fragile Asian women in unfamiliar clothing, defying their upbringing, culture and husbands in pursuit of social justice. Thirty years later, almost identical imagery was used in the coverage of the Gate Gourmet strike, a strike by workers in a food preparation firm providing airline meals for flights from Heathrow.



The aim of this project is to explore the similarities and differences of the strikes in terms both of the ways in which they were represented, who was involved and with what consequences for their identities as both workers and Asian women in Britain. The main methodologies include oral histories undertaken with women workers and the collection and

analysis of archival and other documentary sources relating to both strikes and other examples of Asian women's political involvement in UK workplaces over the period. We plan an exhibition as well as the production of a CD, in

cooperation with Vera Media, which will include both documentary material and women's voices (with permission).

The project is directed by Professor Ruth Pearson in the School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds and Professor Linda McDowell in the School of Geography at Oxford University. It will start in April 2007 for a period of two years. A research worker, preferably with language skills in either Gujarati or Punjabi, will be appointed for the whole period and will be based at Leeds and London. Further information from r.pearson@leeds.ac.uk or linda.mcdowell@ouce.ox.ac.uk .