**The Big Meeting**

My great grandfather, grandfather, father in law and husband all worked in mines across the North East and collectively between them worked for more than 120 years in the industry, most mine workers were in a trade union. Perhaps that’s why by nature I’m a collectivist and inspired by how they organised for better pay, safer conditions and better working hours.

It is probably for this reason that the second Saturday in July is one of my favourite days of the year. The day of the Durham Miners’ Gala.

The very first Gala meeting was called in 1872 to celebrate the fact that united action by the miners had broken the grip of unscrupulous coal owners, marking the end of bonded labour (the practice of working to pay off a debt).

133 years later, the Gala is one of the most significant events in the trade union calendar and the biggest trade union gathering in Europe. I usually start the day at 8am, walking over The Old Elvet Bridge to the market place, as pit villages and unions assemble their banners and some of the finest brass bands begin warming up to play in front of the balcony at the County Hotel. It is great to see communities marching behind their banners to remember the effect that collective action had on our society.

The spirit of the Gala is incredible; solidarity and collectivism is what the Gala means to me; standing together with others knowing that together we can achieve more than we can alone.

Durham Miners’ Gala is as important now as it was in the years when miners fought for justice and fairness in the workplace. The mines may have closed but unscrupulous practices, unfair wages and unsafe conditions in the workplace continues and while it does, the coming together to celebrate and remember the power of collective action to change things must also continue.

As the TUC approaches our 150th year we continue to be the largest democratic voice of working people. We exist to make the world of work better for everyone.

Support for the Gala is an inspiration to the rest of the labour and Trade Union movement. There hasn’t been a time when that inspiration was needed more. You don’t need me to tell you how difficult things are for working people.

For the first time in living memory, we have a generation of young people who are growing up worse off than their parents.

It’s vital to the survival of The Gala that unions encourage branches and members and their families to become friends of the gala, to keep supporting this wonderful event and ensure its legacy lives on.

Beth Farhat

Regional Secretary Northern TUC