

Recognising working class culture

My first reaction to the renaming of Newtown Square, was 'who the ... is Mary Fitzgerald?' It appears that my reaction was no different from those of many others (see Redeye).

Mary Fitzgerald or otherwise known as 'Pickhandle Mary' rose to fame during a strike by tramwaymen in 1911. Callinicos in her book entitled *Working Life: 1886-1940* describes how armed police broke up a union gathering in Market Square (Newtown). During this encounter with the police she found some pickhandles had been dropped. From then on she carried a pickhandle as a symbol of the brutality of the authorities.

She later campaigned and led the 1914 strike in protest against the death rate of miners who were dying from phthisis (a lung disease caused by dust pollution). During her career as an activist she was involved in a number of socialist organisations and at one stage was the deputy major of Johannesburg.

Some have questioned why a cultural precinct which has become renowned for its performances and plays was named after a trade unionist. Callinicos explains that the Newtown precinct was not only known as a cultural area but also a meeting place for political and trade union activities from the turn of the century. This history of the precinct has been overlooked as it was transformed into a centre of the arts.

The renaming of Newtown Square as Mary Fitzgerald Square caused some strange and mixed reactions. René Grawitzky talks to Luli Callinicos about Mary Fitzgerald and her connection to Newtown.

What is important to note, Callinicos says, is an attempt to separate workers and strikes from what is defined as culture. Working class culture is intrinsically linked to Newtown but that has not been acknowledged. Newtown itself has many layers of history and was always characterised by an interesting blend of culture and politics. 'Culture is not just about plays but is a manifestation of people's day to day experiences and activities.'

Callinicos outlines the history of the Newtown area which was transformed over the years from a place where people gathered for political or other activities including May Day rallies to becoming a produce market. From 1976 onwards the area was transformed by a group of dedicated performers into the Market Theatre precinct renowned for protest theatre. Callinicos describes this in her book *The World that made Mandela*.