



SAVE

Billingsgate Market

The case against the
abolition of the bye laws



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Introduction

Unite is fighting for the future of Billingsgate market and all its workers. On 30th June 2010, the City of London Corporation (COLC) announced the start of a 12 week consultation period over proposals to abolish the bye laws that govern the market – bye laws that have successfully operated since 1840. We believe that if they get their way, the Corporation's plans will lead to the end of Billingsgate Market as we know it and will in turn lead to the destruction of a crucial part of London's heritage and history, and of traditions that are hundreds of years old.

There is no business case for the Corporation's proposals and in fact the opposite is the case; there are strong arguments for keeping things as they are for the fish merchants, for the market workers, for the customers and for the people of London. Here Unite sets out the arguments against the COLC plans and seeks support in opposing these ill thought-out proposals'.



What are the bye laws that COLC want to abolish?

The bye laws govern how the market operates and are crucial to the successful operation of this vibrant, community based fish-market, arguably the most famous fish market in the world. They include the requirement for the licensing of all fish porters, the highly skilled workers who are responsible for carrying all the fish around the market and ensuring that the market's many thousands of customers get exactly what they want at the right place and the right time. This is a very simple explanation of a highly complex and responsible job but licensed and regulated fish porters are at the heart of what makes Billingsgate the thriving, successful and profitable market it is today. The bye laws also dictate other crucial elements of the market's operation to ensure that the fish merchants can provide the best quality fish to all customers, irrespective of the value of their order, in a healthy and safe environment where business and enterprise can thrive and many hundreds of working people from local communities can earn a honest livelihood.

Why should fish porters be licensed?

The current proposals of the COLC, that have been made in conjunction with the London Fish Merchants' Association (LFMA), centre very much on the licensing of the fish porters, the vast majority of whom have been organised by their union for decades. COLC has given no coherent reason for wanting the change but have implied that the licensing system simply provides a closed shop, protectionist environment for the porters themselves who are only motivated by their own self-interest but nothing could be further from the truth.

The porters provide a world class personal customer service which many a top store would envy and the licensing system has a proven track record of its suitability to adapt to the changing needs of merchants and customers and of the market in general. To appreciate the value of the licensing system, there needs to be some understanding of how fish porters operate within Billingsgate which has a unique system of operation.

Billingsgate Market porters are separately employed by individual merchants who all pay the same flat rate retainer to their porters. Porters then receive additional payments from customers and merchants called 'bobbin', which although unique is very similar to modern performance related pay schemes as it is based on the amount of fish moved by each porter.

The job of a porter is highly skilled and responsible, and it is essential that they all have the highest standards of personal integrity. They are personally responsible for making up complex orders, often worth thousands of pounds from the different locations throughout the market where each merchant stores their fish and to do this, they need a detailed knowledge

not just of the different kinds of fish, quality and weights and so on, but also of the needs and preferences of the customer. They deliver all completed orders to the customer's refrigerated vehicle and in this way, every customer gets a personal portering service from each merchant that s/he buys fish from, with the porters able to iron out any glitches relating to the customer's requirements without having to go back to the fish merchant. It is because of these levels of service that make customers only too happy to pay the 'bobbin'.

In the course of a day, porters will select and move hundreds of different orders, carrying in their head details of all the locations of each type of fish by species, weight, origin, age of stock, customer preferences and so on – this expertise is learned through years of experience, with new porters having in effect served an 'apprenticeship' as a 'shop boy' working on the stalls. To make sure that only the best quality individuals are selected to be porters, there is a rigorous application process requiring excellent references and this process guarantees that the same high standards operate across the whole market, guaranteeing consistency of service to everyone who comes to Billingsgate to buy their fish. Only licensed porters can move fish in the public walkways and the license must be renewed annually, another safeguard of quality and integrity of service. Billingsgate fish porters can be identified by the distinctive badge that they wear with pride, and they will tell you what they do is far more than a job, it is a way of life and a vocation in the market that they love, which is why they are campaigning to protect the future not just of their profession but of Billingsgate market.

Why should the COLC proposals be thrown out?

1. The COLC proposals make no business sense

- There is a strong business case to retain the bye laws and licensed porters in their current form, and no evidence whatsoever that their abolition will do anything to benefit the workers, the fish merchants, the customers or the general public, especially not the vibrant East End community that surrounds Billingsgate.
- Through the bye laws, the fish portering system has a track record of keeping up with modernisation as well as leading from the front in introducing and embracing change; it is madness to seek to introduce a totally unregulated and uncontrollable 'everyone for themselves' ethos to the market
- The current system is a no cost item for the Corporation of London – fish porters are directly employed by the fish merchants they serve

- We believe their proposal will ruin Billingsgate Market, fish porters are proud to have been an integral part of the creation and maintenance of Billingsgate, the world famous "brand name" that the fish merchants depend on for a significant part of their success. Customers come to Billingsgate to buy fish from every corner of the UK because of the reputation of the market; any change to the winning formula could have a significant and detrimental impact on trade, as some of those who have relocated know to their cost.
- The successful operation of the whole market – the merchants, porters, shop boys, constabulary, the cafes and their workers, the laundry, the cleaners and others – and the public that buy the fish benefit from the name of Billingsgate and what it stands for and what it delivers. The Corporation of London is under-valuing and undermining the Billingsgate brand

2. The COLC proposals would cause permanent cultural damage

The COLC proposals would rip the heart out of London's heritage. The Market rights of the City of London were established by Royal Charter in 1327 and in 1699 an Act of Parliament established Billingsgate market as a market that would sell only fish. Its traditions and heritage are every bit as important as the Tower of London with its Beefeaters and Buckingham Palace with its Guards. Customers and tourists alike go to Billingsgate Market not only to buy top quality fish but also to see the real London and experience the market banter, the East End friendliness and meet characters with "hearts of gold". The fish porters in particular, with their distinctive uniforms, are an integral part of the colour and traditions of the market and are regularly invited to turn out in their full regalia for Civic functions. The COLC proposals, if allowed to go through, would in one fell swoop destroy a key part of London's history and the centuries old traditions of the market.

Is there a hidden agenda?

COLC claims that the bye laws are outdated and unnecessary and focus their arguments on the way in which the fish porters are employed, but Unite believes that they have a hidden agenda and that behind what at first sight seem to be fairly bland proposals is the first stage in a plan to free up the 13 acres of land that Billingsgate sits on, the last remaining undeveloped land at Canary Wharf worth millions of pounds. Unite has concerns that after abolishing the bye laws, the way would be open to close the market and move it to a new site, probably after the 2012 Olympics, where the market could be radically different with fewer merchants, an eradication of the history and traditions, and in particular the end of the world class levels of produce and of customer service that the market currently provides.

What are the COLC and the LFMA?

The City of London Corporation is a centuries old and very wealthy local authority covering the square mile. It is run by a group of elite and largely unaccountable individuals and it owns and manages Billingsgate, Smithfields and Spitalfields markets. Although it is elected, unlike any other similar authority, the businesses operating within their boundaries have the right to votes in all elections and in fact elect 80 out of the 100 councillors. Whilst it claims to be non-political, it clearly invests significant amounts of time and money in protecting the interest of big business – and particularly the financial institutions – and pays little heed to the needs of the workers who made those businesses the success that they are, or of the local communities it is meant to serve. The London Fish Merchants' Association is the trade body for the fish merchants who operate in the market, and Unite firmly believes that in supporting the proposals to abolish the bye-laws they are not acting in the best long-term interests of their members, whose trade would undoubtedly suffer considerably if these plans go through.

Conclusion

If COLC and LFMA get their way, there will be a number of serious and detrimental consequences both for Billingsgate Market and for London as our capital City.

The delicensing of fish porters and the abolition of the structures they work within, structures that have served the market for centuries, will lead to a race to the bottom in terms of jobs and pay, and in our view will lead to a return to the bad old days of casualisation.

With the elimination of the highly skilled and very personal service that fish porters provide to customers, as well as the inability to control the way in which the market operates for customers, the proposals would transform Billingsgate from the world class fish market of choice that it is for all, into nothing better than a large cash and carry. This would have a very negative impact both for the customers as well as for the fish merchants.

We cannot allow such an important part of London's history to be destroyed in such a thoughtless and cavalier fashion. Billingsgate Market must be saved; the proposals must be thrown out.

What you can do to support our campaign

Sign the petition - www.unitetheunion.org/campaigns/billingsgate
Write to the COLC to protest – there's a standard letter on our campaign website you can download. Write to your MP and ask them to become involved in the campaign.