

The birth of the Labour Party

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In February 1906 the Labour Representation Committee won 29 seats at the general election. It promptly changed its name to the Labour Party. Dave Stockton draws the lessons from its founding years

In February 1900 the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) was founded - and not before time. Nearly every major European country had an independent working class party by then. But not Britain. From the early 1870s to the end of the century the trade unions hung on the coat tails of the Liberal Party. Some trade union leaders, especially in the coalfields, were even elected as Liberal MPs. These were known as the Lib-Labs.

Then in 1893 Keir Hardie, who had recently been elected as independent labour MP for West Ham South, formed the Independent Labour Party (ILP). He wanted to persuade the unions to break from the Liberals and form exactly what it said on the tin: an independent labour party. In the 1890s various attempts were made to unite the ILP with the various Marxist and Fabian groups that emerged in the 1880s, but the latter parties resisted.

But disillusion of trade unionists with the Liberals and their hatred of the Tory judges attacking the right to strike created a new impetus. The 1899 Trade Union Congress (TUC) narrowly passed a resolution to convene a special congress to devise ways and means for the securing of an increased number of Labour members in the next parliament.

On 27-28 February 1900 this special congress founded the LRC. Unions with over 250,000 members agreed to affiliate to it. The Marxist influenced Social Democratic Federation (SDF) proposed that the representatives of the working class movement in the House of Commons shall form there a distinct party based on the recognition of the class war and having for its ultimate object the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange.

The ILP opposed this with a resolution in favour of establishing a distinct Labour Group in Parliament who shall have their own whips and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to co operate with any party which, for the time being, may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interest of Labour.

The ILP motion was carried by 53 votes to 39. The parliamentarism of the ILP's position is obvious with its nod in the direction of the Liberals. Independence was considered purely organisational. The SDF's resolution was much more principled, seeking to win Labour to socialism. Their flaw was sectarianism: a tendency to give ultimatums to mass organisations. A year on from this conference they presented the same resolution and when it was again rejected they walked out.

The decision to form the LRC raised a whole series of questions about the nature of its activities. What sort of organisation was needed at local level? Was this organisation to be limited to electioneering? What

were the LRC's policies on political questions? What goal would it adopt? In short what was to be the LRC's programme, tactics and organisation?

In fact different parts of the LRC gave different answers to these questions. For the ILP, led by Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, socialism was a progressive series of reforms: the introduction of unemployment benefit, the eight-hour working day, pensions, free secondary schooling. All of these were essential measures to meet the pressing needs of working class people. But none of them struck at the roots of the power of the capitalist class.

New unions

An explosion of trade unionism amongst the less skilled workers between 1888-1892 more than doubled the total number of trade unionists. Since the leaders of the new unions were all socialists the ruling class feared the formation of a Marxist party on the continental model, which might lead the working class to challenge the very existence of capitalism.

In response, both Tories and Liberals in the 1890s developed 'social reforming' wings. They cultivated close links with trade union leaders, the Fabian Society, and, after 1900, the LRC.

The Fabians, headed by Sidney and Beatrice Webb had a strategy for socialism that sought to 'permeate' both capitalist parties with reformist, state interventionist ideas. Thus at precisely the point when the LRC was formed they were ardently wooing the new Liberals and at the same time a group of Tories, the so-called social imperialists, to form a new party based on 'National Efficiency'.

Hardie and MacDonald's idea of socialism was fundamentally the same evolutionary model as that of the Webbs's, but their methods for achieving it differed. Hardie retained a lifelong emotional hatred of the rich and what they did to working people and their families.

He solidarised with the suffragettes, the Irish nationalists and the pre-1914 antiwar movement. But he was an organic opportunist, blithely sacrificing fundamental working class interests for any temporary or minor advantage, particularly a parliamentary one.

For example, shortly after the LRC was founded, he wrote to John Morley, the leading Liberal opponent of the Boer War offering him the leadership of the LRC. He later did the same thing to Lloyd George. Herein lay his fundamental difference with the Webbs -they wholeheartedly supported imperialist Britain against the Boers.

Hardie and MacDonald, unlike the Webbs, did want independent labour representation, because MPs, even working class and trade union ones, who were members of the Liberal Party, repeatedly sold out their union members' interests to the government. The problem was that their gradualist view of piecemeal social reforms somehow piling up till Britain was socialist rendered a 'socialist government' neither practical nor even necessary.

Since new Liberals, like Lloyd George, advocated similar reforms why not trade workers' votes in the great majority of constituencies for a free run from the Liberals in a few dozen others?

Ramsay MacDonald was the most consistent in following through this line. His hostility to the class struggle and Marxism was lifelong. He wrote:

'The best expression of class war is trade unionism. It concerns itself with no opposition except that between capital and Labour no union of interests except the interests of wage earning, no field of activity

wider than the factory. It leads nowhere because it has no ideal goal; its only results can be the bondage of one side or the other.?

By the last sentence, he clearly meant that the victory of the workers would be as bad as the rule of the employers!

According to MacDonald, the working class was faced not with the task of winning political power, nor was this power essential to building socialism. He often went so far as to deny the working class character of the party of which he was a leader - a regular theme of labour leaders to the present day.

?When we think systematically of the scattered fragments of reform promised by the political parties, we see that they are but the foreshadowing of socialism; when the tendencies begun by scores of experiments, factory laws, public health laws, municipalisation, are followed out, joined together and systematised, Socialism is the result. And the political movement which is to express and ultimately satisfy, this need for the organic unity of society, must be a movement of the whole of society and not one of its sections the working class.? (Socialism and Society, 1908)

MacDonald saw independent Labour representation as an unfortunate necessity, caused by the hard heartedness and class bias of the Liberals. They had rejected people like himself - quite literally, since he had tried to stand as a Liberal candidate in the early 1890s. Their refusal to sponsor the ?rise of labour? was, he felt, in contradiction to their own ideals, not the expression of their essential character as a class party of the bourgeoisie.

Electoral Obstacles

The LRC and the Labour Party faced another obstacle in the grossly undemocratic constitution and electoral system. Even today many people think Britain has been a democracy for centuries. Far from it. After the 1884 Reform Act only 28 per cent of all adults had the vote; women were without the vote altogether, but 44 per cent of men also had no vote.

The size of constituencies was grossly unequal, with industrial cities and towns scandalously under represented. The rural areas, where the great landowners, could intimidate their workers and small tenant farmers into ?voting for the squire?, were overrepresented.

The LRC, the unions and the socialist parties thus had two alternatives. They could rouse the working class, the women and the Irish to fight for their democratic rights, as well as, full-blooded economic and social issues, or they could seek to win a few constituencies by striking sweetheart deals with the Liberals. They could use parliament as a tribune to preach revolt, or they could follow the Liberals reform programme. They could use their trade unions as an organising basis and the political mass strike as a weapon, as the Chartists had done, or they could confine themselves to purely legislative activity.

The union leaders and the opportunist ILP leaders chose the latter alternative with scarcely a moment?s thought. The political party of the working class stood aside from all the great mass movements of the pre-war period: the militant miners and transport strikes of 1910-1913, the great suffragette movement, and the mounting struggle for Irish independence. Indeed, Ramsay MacDonald and the trade unions? man in the leadership, Arthur Henderson, frequently condemned these struggles.

Labour and the anti-union laws

The new party started life inauspiciously. No sooner had the LRC been formed than it had to fight the 1900 ?Khaki Election? held at the height of jingoistic hysteria surrounding the Boer War. The LRC won only two

seats, Keir Hardie's at Merthyr and Richard Bell, a trade union leader, at Derby. On entering the Commons, Bell promptly rejoined the Liberals leaving Hardie as the sole Labour representative. Labour might have collapsed into the arms of Liberalism after its first step but for the class animosity of the employers.

The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRC), which had proposed the conference, which founded the LRC, had been engaged in a bitter dispute to gain recognition. The railway companies argued that safety required the railways be run with near military discipline. They imported scabs too to break local strikes.

In one case, in 1901, on the Taff Vale railway the ASRC dissuaded scabs from working. The company took the union to court, where the judges ruled that it was liable for damages. At a stroke all unions found their funds were opened up to wholesale judicial plunder. All the rights won between 1871 and 1875 were abolished overnight.

Anti-union judgements, like anti-union laws today need legislation to firmly and universally abolish them. Even the most craven union leaders recognised this. Thus unions previously hostile the idea of political independence flocked to join the LRC. Whereas at the latter's formation there were only some 250,000 trade unionists affiliated, by 1903 this had risen to nearly one million. In the words of the Labour historian, GDH Cole, 'the Taff Vale Case created the Labour Party'.

Given the historic role played by the rail union in founding the party it was bitterly ironic that just over a hundred years later it should be unceremoniously bundled out because it agreed to spend part of its political levy on supporting the Scottish Socialist Party candidates, who supported the unions' anti-privatisation campaign.

After the great Liberal landslide of 1906, in which the LRC took 5.9% of the vote and won 29 seats, the newly renamed Labour Party had one real legislative success, largely because union MPs were mandated to reverse the Taff Vale judgement at all costs. The Trades Disputes Act of 1906 did this. True to form the Liberals tried to get away with a much weaker bill but the unions stood their ground. The Liberals eventually caved in and thus the fundamental basis for trade union rights was established until Thatcher's anti-union laws abolished them.

But after this victory the Labour Party tamely followed in the wake of Liberals own reform programme. These were at first quite substantial, like Lloyd George's introduction of non-contributory old age pensions. Labour's own proposals, based as they were on what they deemed possible for the capitalists to grant, did not go beyond those of the social Liberals.

For the Liberals the purpose of the reforms was quite clear. As Winston Churchill (then a Liberal) told the Daily Mail in 1909: 'With a stake in the country in the form of insurance against evil days the workers will pay no attention to the vague promises of revolutionary socialism.' The Labour Party neither warned the working class of the reasons for the Liberal reforms nor pressed for more radical measures.

The judges, however, soon returned to the attack. With the Osborne judgement of 1909 they ruled that it was illegal for unions to use their funds to support and maintain Labour MPs. The Parliamentary Labour Party and the union leaders - far from rallying the millions of union members to mass action - supinely accepted the 'rule of law' and used it as an excuse for even greater degree of dependence on the Liberal Party. The threat of no salaries was enough to make sure that MPs did nothing to antagonise its Liberal masters.

Party democracy

Closely related to the opportunism of the Labour Party's tactics was its undemocratic constitution particularly on the issue of the MPs' accountability to the Party as a whole.

As early as the 1907 conference a resolution attempted to put the parliamentary party under the discipline and control of the conference. Keir Hardie and Arthur Henderson insisted that conference decisions were 'opinions only'. When, and even whether, to implement them was the task of MPs alone. This attempt at democratic control of the heroes of the House of Commons was lost by 642,000 to 252,000 votes.

Another test was whether Labour MPs should insist, as their manifesto had pledged them to, on the total and equal enfranchisement of women. Keir Hardie, as usual, thought a bill for limited suffrage for women was fine; it would lead to the full thing in the end. But conference ignored his pleas. The enraged Hardie rushed to the rostrum to threaten that, 'if the motion they had carried was intended to limit the action of the Party in the House of Commons, he should have seriously to consider whether he could remain a Member of the Parliamentary Party.' Conference caved in. So from the earliest days the MPs faced down democracy within the party setting an evil precedent that has never been reversed.

The Great Unrest

From 1910 onwards, there was a massive eruption of class struggle. About 1.2 million people went on strike in 1912 alone - three times the number of people striking between 1895 and 1909.

In South Wales in September 1910, 300,000 miners went on strike, waging pitched battles with the police. Liberal Home Secretary Winston Churchill sent troops into the Rhonda Valley. One striker was killed in Tonypany and many injured. The miners were not forced back to work till August 1911.

But the miners' defeat was not the end but the beginning of a wave of militancy in the mines and beyond. The national seamen's union struck in June 1911, and the government sent 3,000 troops and hundreds of police to occupy Liverpool. Police and troops savagely attacked a peaceful demonstration of 80,000 people on 13 August. Troops shot two strikers dead.

Another mighty miners' strike broke out in March 1912. In June dockers and other transport workers struck and huge demonstrations - 100,000 strong - marched from the East End to central London. Again police shots were fired. Ben Tillett, the dockers' leader went so far as to say, 'We must use other power - the means we have to use are violence and physical power.' In 1913 in Dublin, James Larkin led a huge and prolonged lockout strike in which five strikers were killed.

These major struggles inspired many other groups to take direct action. School student strikes broke out in working class areas in 1911. Women workers in the sweated garment trade struck in the same year.

Union membership soared from 2,477,000 at the end of 1909 to 4,135,000 at the end of 1913.

Above all the 'Great Unrest', as it came to be called, was an explosion of militancy at the rank and file level. Many workers were becoming clearer about whose interests the Labour Party really upheld. Signalling this disenchantment, dockers' leader Ben Tillett wrote a pamphlet entitled *Is the Parliamentary Labour Party a Failure?*

While the leaders of the ILP and Labour Party were increasingly to be found in the pockets of the Liberal Party, socialism was making more headway amongst the working class. Symptomatic of this was the success of a 25-year old socialist Victor Grayson at the Colne Valley by-election in 1907. Grayson fought

the seat as a socialist against MacDonald and Henderson's instruction and won a resounding victory over a Liberal and a Tory.

The Labour Party and its leaders condemned the syndicalist trade union fighters like Tom Mann, who were in the forefront of the mass strikes, from a purely parliamentary and reformist perspective. Arthur Henderson, chairman of the PLP actually put forward a motion in the Commons, which proposed that strikes should be declared illegal unless 30 days advance warning (to the employers!) was given.

Yet, it was because of the class collaborationist policies of the Labour Party and the trade union leaders that the Great Unrest took the form it did. Politics was construed by both by the syndicalist militants and by Labour and union leaders as parliamentary politics. The syndicalists rejected it out of hand as of no use: the MPs and bureaucrats as the only realistic policy. But Tom Man, Ben Tillett and Jim Larkin were unable to develop an alternative political strategy based on class struggle.

Labour's attitude to the strikes of 1910-14 was a prelude to an even greater betrayal of the working class. In 1914, along with most other parties of the Second International, the party dutifully placed itself at the service of the warmongers as the First World War erupted. In place of international solidarity came shameful chauvinism. Labour gave its blessing to the worst slaughter the world had hitherto witnessed in the pursuit of profit and world domination.

Marxism and reformism

The SDF proved unable to take the fight into the heart of the new party - even though, had they done so, an all-out war and a future split with MacDonald and Hardie was a near certainty. Even when the great workers' upheavals - in 1889-1891 and 1910-1913 - presented Marxists with massive opportunities, they bungled it.

The answer to the problem was neither staying in the Labour Party at the price of submission to its leaders' discipline, nor ultimatums and walking out. What was needed was a struggle for an operative Marxist programme inside the party.

Affiliation by socialist parties and the near-autonomy of the few dozen constituency based LRCs and then Labour Parties made this quite possible. As it was, the SDF did attend Labour Party conferences as delegates of their unions and local trades councils.

If such a struggle had led to expulsion, then the Marxists would have fought to rally the maximum number of workers and socialist to a new revolutionary party.

But a more serious weakness on the left was the inadequate idea of what a revolutionary party should be - i.e. a party engaging seamlessly in all spheres of the class struggle, developing and fighting for a strategy for power, a revolutionary programme. However, outside of Russia none of the parties of the Second International had yet developed such a model. Once that model had been established, then the election-focused model was an outdated obstacle - whether it be either Labour's opportunist one, or the 'orthodox Marxism' of German Social Democracy.

The superiority of the German party lay only in this that it educated hundreds of thousands of workers in a spirit of class consciousness and intransigence, whereas Labour did not. The result can be seen in the emergence after the First World War of a revolutionary communist party in Germany with hundreds of thousands of members, whereas in Britain the communist party had but a few thousand.

The future development of a new and revolutionary workers' party in Britain lies in learning the lessons of

history. These include the fact that avoiding the struggle for a revolutionary programme strengthens reformism; the pursuit of immediate, practical reforms alone leads to class collaboration; creating a party dominated by trade union bureaucrats and MPs is a blind alley; and subordinating the direct action of the masses to electoral gains won by manoeuvres and compromises with alien class forces leads to disaster.

At a time when sections of workers and the oppressed are looking for a political alternative to Blair and are being offered Respect or a re-run of Old Labour these lessons are vital ones.

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