

# How the Labour Party began

## A party born of struggle

By Brian Pearce

**D**OWN to the 1880s there was no 'labour movement' here in the continental sense at all. There were strong trade unions (of the skilled workers), and these unions were politically-minded — but the only parties were the two ruling-class ones, the Tories and the Liberals. The trade unions expressed themselves politically by serving as the arms and legs of one or other of these parties — usually the Liberals, though in an area such as Lancashire and Cheshire where the employers were strongly Liberal the trade unions might retort to this by supporting the Tories! The political prospect of the trade unions was to get one or other of the ruling-class parties to pass laws favourable to the workers; and they tried to consolidate their 'poor-relation' influence with these parties by persuading the Liberals to accept a few trade union officials among their parliamentary candidates.

During the 1880s there occurred, in a very small way at first, the rebirth of socialism in Britain after an interval of forty years. Old Chartists, reinforced by immigrant workers from Germany, had kept the flame burning in obscure clubs, but now a certain expansion began, with the establishment of the Social-Democratic Federation. In part under the guidance of Frederick Engels, pioneer socialists began a twenty years' propaganda for the launching in Britain of an independent class party of the workers with socialism as its aim. The setting up of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 constituted the first break-through to success of a campaign which for long had seemed to many just the bee buzzing in the brains of a few cranks and fanatics, inspired by antiquated (Chartist) and foreign (German) notions. The workers learnt the hard way the need for a Labour Party.

The eventual success of the socialists' efforts was made possible by profound changes in the economic and social situation of the British workers. It is important to get clear just what these changes were. Was it that the workers were 'getting poorer' in this period between 1880 and 1900? On the contrary, these years saw a drop of about 50 per cent in the cost of living: even allowing for increased unemployment there was a big advance in real wages. In that important



aspect, the workers had never had it so good!

But there was more unemployment than there had been in the previous period, and this led to a new feeling of insecurity and doubt about the social system. There was also a big drive on for speed-up and stricter discipline in the factories — 'American methods' as the phrase was. Increased mechanisation was undermining the strong position of the craftsmen, the skilled workers, introducing on a large scale the category of the 'semi-skilled'. The growth of the scale of industrial ownership, the concentration of capital into ever-larger holdings, was reflected in greater remoteness of employer from worker and also in the appearance of an important new stratum of office workers who interposed themselves between the employers and the manual workers and came more and more to take the place of the old 'aristocracy of labour'.

All these changes unsettled sections of the working class which had been most uncritically loyal to the 'great Liberal party of Mr. Gladstone, the people's friend.' Other factors which came into play were a growth at the end of the nineteenth century in lavish, ostentatious spending by the ruling class, providing clear proof that whatever was happening to the poor the rich were certainly getting richer; and the rise of a generation of workers educated under the Act of 1870, who knew a lot more about the details of ruling-class life than their fathers had done.

The socialists sought out the most politically-minded rank-and-file workers in the

places where they were — especially in the Radical (left-wing Liberal) clubs in traditional working-class centres of that time like the East End of London. Besides their propaganda, the socialists carried on agitation around issues of interest to these workers and fights for which would help them to clear their minds of the confusions that kept them in the Liberal ranks. Struggle for trade-union organisation in trades and factories where the employers were well-known Liberals; struggle to defend and extend the right of free speech for street-corner orators and in places like Trafalgar Square, against police attempts to encroach on this right; above all the campaign for the eight-hour day. (At this time many workers worked a ten-hour day or more, and with the appearance of unemployment and the intensified strain of speed-up and so on the need for a shortening of hours was felt more and more keenly.) The battles fought around these issues made many questions clearer to the workers who were involved in them, and prepared their minds to understand a great deal in the socialist message which previously had seemed strange and unreal to them.

A factor of very considerable weight in helping the idea of an independent workers' party to take root was the example provided by the Irish nationalist party at this time. A small but well-disciplined group of members from Irish constituencies kept themselves independent of both of the British parties, concerned themselves exclusively with pushing Ireland's claims for 'Home Rule', and by their obstructive tactics compelled attention to their case. Inceas-

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ingly, many politically-minded British workers came round to the view that British labour needed a party of its own that would act like this.

What made up the minds of a wide section, and in particular influenced a number of trade union leaders who had no wish to take any new step unless they were obliged to by unbearable pressure, was the employers' offensive which began in the 1890s. It was as much, or more, under the blows of the employers that these people came round as under the pull of their militant members. This was the time when the ending of Britain's former monopoly position in the world's markets, as 'workshop of the world', became apparent in a big way, with the rise of German and American competition.

To safeguard their developing industries the Americans even put up a tariff barrier against British goods. The reaction of British capital was twofold: on the one hand, the path of the export of capital to backward countries, with a shift from textiles to railway materials as typical goods exported, the path of 'imperialism' accompanied by political and military grab; on the other, an intense drive to force down the standards of the workers at home, to make them accept unrestricted speed-up, abolition of 'restrictive practices' and lower wages all round.

**A** WAVE of lockouts and provoked strikes swept the country in the 1890s. A body called the Free Labour Association was set up to organise mobile squads of assorted strikebreakers ('finks' is the American term), ready to go anywhere and do anything.

Not only police but also troops were used against strikers on a scale unprecedented since Chartist times. There were shootings and killings — one case, at Featherstone, became a bitter byword in the movement, especially as a Liberal Home Secretary was responsible.

In response to this sharp dose of basic political education, the idea of an independent workers' party began to catch on in areas where it had been resisted by traditional 'Radical' prejudices up to then — in particular in Yorkshire and Lancashire, key areas then for the working-class movement. 'Independent Labour Unions' arose in centres like Bradford and Manchester, and working-class papers like the *Workman's Times* organised to bring them together in a national association. In 1893 a big step towards the Labour Party as we know it today was taken when the Independent Labour Party came into existence as a national party aiming to win the labour movement for independent class politics.

Contrary to the legend which has been cultivated by the Right wing, while the small group of British Marxists did play a part in

the creation of the ILP, the Fabian Society had nothing to do with it. This latter group of reformists were still at that stage devoted to achieving socialism (or what they called socialism) through 'permeation' of the Liberal Party, and they regarded the ILP as 'wreckers'. Only as it became apparent that the cause of Independent Labour was going to succeed in spite of them did they change their line. The band-wagon was rolling along before they climbed on it!

At first the ruling class of this country, or its responsible representatives, did not realise the significance of what was happening. We have a very acute and very flexible ruling class, but they weren't born that way, they had to learn it by being taught some disagreeable lessons by the workers. They don't enjoy having to be so acute and flexible in their dealings with their workers, and would like to get rid of what forces them to act like that.

The Liberal Party, reflecting the hard-

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ened attitude of the employers towards the workers, became colder than ever towards the attempts of trade unionists to get themselves adopted as 'Liberal-Labour' candidates. Some quite insulting rebuffs were handed out. This is what Ramsay MacDonald meant when he wrote explaining why such as he had taken the path of independent labour politics which they didn't feel at all enthusiastic about: 'We didn't leave the Liberals. They kicked us out, and slammed the door in our faces.'

The 1897 engineering lockout, the ruthless beating down of the engineering workers and imposing upon them humiliating terms of settlement, designed to make plain who was master in the works, left many of the most conservative section of the British workers in those days with little grounds for doubt that times had changed.

In 1900 the socialists of the Independent Labour Party and other groups made their historic first breakthrough into an organised relationship with the trade unions, with the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee. A limited number of trade unions at last agreed to associate with the socialist societies in promoting parliamentary candidates who should be independent of either of the ruling-class parties.

It was the ruling class which, still not grasping what was happening 'down below', gave several more still-hesitant trade unions the necessary final shove to bring them in behind the Labour Representation Committee. Following a series of articles in *The Times* which called into question the very existence of trade unionism, the House of Lords upheld against appeal a judge's decision which dealt a practical blow, in terms of hard cash, at the whole functioning of trade unions. This was the 'Taff Vale judgement', when the railwaymen's union found themselves forced to pay out enormous damages to a company which had incurred loss through a strike they had called. If this was the law, no strike could take place anywhere on any issues without the risk of financial ruin for the union concerned. At long last a number of trade union leaders saw the point — the working class must put itself in an independent political position from which it could compel changes in the law in its own interest, instead of relying on the sweet reasonableness of one or other group of the ruling class. In 1901 and 1902, after 'Taff Vale', the Labour Representation Committee received a big accession of strength — though still, it is worth recalling, the miners remained wedded to Liberalism and did not come in until eight years later, after a lot of 'unofficial' activity had been put in at lodge and district level. The decision to create and adhere to the Labour Party was not hastily or lightly taken by the British working class.

**A** S ALREADY mentioned, a lot of the leading men in the movement had to be pushed every inch of the way into their new political stand, and they wanted even now to separate from the Liberals to as small an extent as possible. Few had any idea of operating as more than a pressure group — though now at least nominally outside the Liberal Party instead of inside it. They did not in the least contemplate supplanting the Liberals as one of the two major parties in the country and of course there could be no question in their minds of becoming the government of the country. When, therefore, the Liberals, shocked at last into awareness of the working class getting out of hand politically, took steps through private negotiation to show themselves 'conciliatory', a man like MacDonald, secretary to the LRC, was only too pleased to meet them halfway.

MacDonald's correspondence with the Chief Liberal Whip had to be kept a secret from all but a few of MacDonald's colleagues, lest some crude-minded types might take exception to it. So early began the practice of talks between Labour leaders and the ruling class behind the backs of the movement as a whole. The outcome was a 'gentleman's agreement' for the LRC

to restrict its candidates to certain seats, in return for which the Liberals would not oppose them in some of these. Characteristic was MacDonald's reaction to the news of Arthur Henderson's victory as a Labour candidate at Barnard Castle, over both Liberal and Tory opponents: he welcome it as strengthening his bargaining power in dealings with the Liberals, but hoped it would not encourage the 'wild men' to demand openly that Labour should go it alone in every possible constituency. Just sufficient life in the working-class movement to give them something to use in horse-trading with the capitalists, and no more; that has always been the ideal of the Right wing.

When, therefore, a group of 50 Labour MPs were returned in the 1906 general election, which gave a Liberal majority, there was heavy dragging of feet to do no more than accord critical support to the new government, merely pressuring it a bit in the direction of social reform. The socialists in the Labour Party (as it was now formally called) faced the task of forcing the pace against this entrenched resistance. In 1907 the socialist Victor Grayson was run as candidate, against Liberal and Tory, in a

traditional Liberal seat, by local Labour organisations who defied the ban imposed by headquarters. His triumphant success encouraged the Left in the movement but infuriated the 'statesmen' of the Parliamentary Labour Party. A typical incident occurred in 1908 when Grayson tried to protest in the House against the welcome by the Liberal Government to a visit by the Tsar of Russia, but the official Labour spokesman at once got up to move the closure!

Nevertheless, the growth of socialist influence within the party compelled the leaders to apply for admission to the Second International, so associating the Labour Party with openly socialist parties in other countries. This was the occasion on which Lenin proposed that the Labour Party be accepted into membership of the International on the carefully-defined grounds that 'it represents the first step on the part of the really proletarian organisations of Britain towards a conscious class policy and towards a socialist workers' party.'

The fight to get the Labour Party to adopt socialism as its aim instead of merely tolerating socialists as members along with

others had to go on for another ten years. Among important landmarks in this struggle was the formation of the British Socialist Party, in which the old Social-Democratic Federation came together with significant breakaway groups of the ILP in a new organisation under at least nominally Marxist leadership, and this affiliated to the Labour Party in 1914. During the first world war the BSP followed, after 1916, a different line from that of the official one of support for the war, but was not disciplined for this, much less expelled; such was the freedom for working-class trends of all kinds allowed in the party in those days as a matter of course.

The BSP was allowed to carry on its propaganda for socialism, which was helped by the harsh experiences of the workers at the hands of the Liberal-Tory coalition government. And though the Labour Party leadership accepted a place in the coalition, an attempt by Arthur Henderson, 'Labour's minister', to keep in with the growing international anti-war feeling of the workers led to such rude treatment of him by his capitalist colleagues — the famous 'doormat' incident when Henderson was kept cooling his heels outside the Prime Minister's door till it was convenient to have him in — that life on these terms was made very hard for the Labour leaders concerned. The co-operative societies, too, which had held aloof until now, were forced during the war to align themselves with Labour by the discriminatory policy of the Government in its working of the rationing system and its application of excess profits duty.

The Russian Revolution gave the final jolt, and in 1918, at the conference of that year, the Labour Party formally adopted socialism as its aim, in the historic Clause Four of a new constitution. The Right wing tried to offset this concession by depriving the socialist societies of their reserved places on the party executive, in connection with the starting of individual members' sections, the future local Labour Parties. This ousting of the socialist societies from their place in the party was followed up in 1932 by driving the ILP right out of the party; in 1937 by banning the Socialist League, which had taken its place; and in 1946 by introducing a rule prohibiting the affiliation to or formation within the Labour Party of societies such as had initiated the very creation of the party.

The Labour Party became the chief opposition party in 1922 and the largest party in Parliament in the following year. The first Labour Government, 1924, marked a new phase both in the advance of the working-class movement and in the degeneration of its leadership...

Since then the party has had many ups and downs which it is not the purpose of this article to trace.

## The Renegade

### A portrait

Aye, yes 'tis old, scarce can we trace,  
The lines of that once handsome face,  
The face that comrades loved to scan  
When all could say, "there is a man."  
Aye, yes, 'tis old, all blurred and dim,  
Fit emblem and the type of him  
Who once and well swung Freedom's  
blade  
And yet became — a renegade.

Those compressed lips, that deep-set eye,  
That yet would seem to give the lie  
To later deeds that down would drag,  
What once he fought for — Freedom's  
flag.

By God, 'tis strange, this man could wield  
This marshal-baton on the field,  
When Labour holds its war-parade.  
Yet think of him — a renegade.

While mind the sphere of thought must  
range,

Till all is known; men well may change,  
Or lose their way; and oft the best  
Will feel the doubt rise in their breast  
And leave the ranks. But foul attack,  
To stab old comrades in the back,  
Who still step forward undismayed,  
That stamps a man — a renegade.

And he has done this. Time and oft,  
He struck at those who held aloft  
The blood-red symbol, once his pride,  
The flag he bore when Linnell died,  
The flag that still, 'gainst fearful odds,  
Leads on the war with Mammon's gods.  
He now, with jibe and sneer arrayed,  
Makes jest of it — the renegade.

The mob's applause, the smiles of those  
Who jeered the "man in working clothes,"  
Had they not power to make him pause  
And think how stood he to the Cause?  
The fawning of the slimy brood  
Might well have told him how he stood;  
On shattered hopes and trust betrayed,  
We know him now — the renegade.

'Tis pity, yes, but mourn him not,  
Give him the meed for which he wrought;  
A day will come when memory keen  
Will show to him what might have been.  
A name illustred — handed down  
From sire to son — the laurel crown,  
Might well have lift of fight repaid:  
What gains he now — the renegade?

Go weigh it 'gainst a grain of dust;  
From this side hate, from that distrust;  
Such ever dogs, and, soon or late,  
Will weary down, the apostate.  
What tries the true man? Why, success,  
'Twas it induced the foe's caress  
And led him on the downward grade,  
And turned him out — a renegade.

The portrait's old, a blurred and dim,  
Fit emblem and the type of him,  
Who once and well swung Freedom's  
blade,  
Ere he became — a renegade.

*John Leslie,*

\* Most likely, the person portrayed here was John Burns, the former Marxist, a leader of the 1889 Dock Strike, who was elected an MP with Liberal support and thereafter moved steadily towards the Liberal Party. When miners were shot down at Featherstone in 1893, Burns defended Liberal Home Secretary Asquith in the Commons. Burns was a Liberal government minister after 1906.