A Party with Socialists in It

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A History of the Labour Left

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CHAPTER ONE

Divided Beginnings

The Labour Party was founded by socialists, but it was not a socialist party they founded. From its conception, Labour was a broad church designed to represent the entire labour movement. As such, it was a party born of contradictions.

Capitalism inevitably generated popular movements seeking to counteract the excesses of the system and to attempt to reform or even replace it. Trade unions and cooperatives were becoming increasingly common even in the early nineteenth century. Chartism was the first major political expression of the demands of working people in Britain; it was a movement that used revolutionary methods and petitions to demand political reform, until it was repressed during the 1840s.

The early cooperative movement underwent an evolution. Starting with utopian projects of building villages of cooperative producers (which had all failed), the movement turned to setting up cooperative businesses to compete with established companies on the high street. While some of these businesses initially thrived, they came into intense competition from the growing monopolies run by exploitative capitalists, a competition they would gradually lose over the next hundred years.

By the mid nineteenth century the workers' movement was dominated by guilds and craft unions made up of a privileged section of well-paid skilled workers who had gained the vote

after 1867. Their strategy took the form of a Lib-Lab pact, with the workers supporting Liberals in elections to further their aims in Parliament. In fact, some of the union leaders went on to become Liberal MPs themselves. They believed firmly in a gradualist approach to politics, whereby things would slowly improve if one applied a little friendly pressure – the Whig View of History as inevitable progress.

But as capitalist growth began to slow down, the old methods proved inadequate. A decline in Britain's world trade in the 1890s, and its loss of manufacturing strength to other countries, led to bosses attacking workers over pay and the length of the working day in order to claw back profits. Many industries saw wages lowered for the mass of unskilled, precarious workers. This led to an upsurge in class struggle centred on the 'new unionism': mass unions organising on an industry-wide basis. These unions chalked up impressive victories in the fight for the eight-hour day and higher pay.

The economic slowdown meant Parliament was increasingly hostile to workers. The response to the new unionism was to ban picketing in 1896. At this point the Liberals could no longer be relied upon to advocate for workers' interests. Many Liberals were even supportive of anti-union measures, acting less as fair-weather union allies and more as representatives of Britain's industrial class. Workers began to talk about needing their own people in Parliament, representing their own interests.

In 1893 an ex-miner named Keir Hardie was elected as an independent MP for West Ham South. He was the first explicitly working-class candidate elected on a platform of supporting the workers' movement. Accompanied on his march to Parliament by a procession of cheering workers and

their families, the press subsequently falsely reported that the crowd had attempted to force their way into the Commons. It seems Labour has rarely had friends in the media even at its founding. Hardie advocated independent working-class representation and called a conference in Bradford to launch a new national party to take workers' issues into Parliament. The result was the Independent Labour Party. Dismissing any alliance with the untrustworthy Liberals, the ILP's programme called for the 'collective ownership of all the means of production, distribution and exchange', alongside immediate reforms such as the eight-hour day, a welfare state and an extension of voting reform. The ILP looked to Parliament to implement its transformative agenda. This turn to parliamentary politics, alongside the cooperatives and trade unions, created the modern workers' movement.

Within a few years, the ILP had gained several thousand members, among them Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden. Key women's rights activists and Irish freedom campaigners also flocked to the ILP, including James Connolly and Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst. The formation of the party was a significant step forward for the class consciousness of workers, enabling them to represent themselves independently of a wing of the capitalist class. The ambitious founders of the ILP wanted a real, *mass* party of the working class and believed that such a party needed to be based on the largest workers organisations, which in Britain meant the trade unions. Hardie called this the 'Labour Alliance': the unity of the socialists in the ILP with the industrial and financial resources of the unions. The one could not succeed without the other. With the Lib-Lab strategy failing, the unions and socialists needed to work together to create a new mass party of the workers.

However, arraigned against the ILP and others advocating for labour representation were many officials in the Trade Union Congress who were profoundly hostile to the idea of a separate class-based party. Many union leaders still saw the Liberals as their best bet for ameliorating the worst excesses of the system. These 'loyal, but disheartened Gladstonites'[1] had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the new class party. Some trade union leaders felt that a separate party would jeopardise years of collaborative work and could introduce a dangerous destabilising factor into British politics. In opposing the officials, the socialists narrowly won a motion at the TUC (546,000 to 434,000) calling for a specially convened conference to 'devise ways and means of securing an increased number of Labour members in the next parliament'. A narrow win, but enough to establish a new electoral alliance, known as the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), in 1900.

The conference that met to launch the LRC was attended by union delegates representing around 545,000 people, alongside socialist societies including the ILP (13,000 members), the Social Democratic Federation (9,000) and the Fabian Society (861). As the conference delegates gathered to found the LRC, they knew that by taking steps towards the creation of a party of the working class they were raising the stakes considerably. Despite its parliamentary character and the clear intention of most of its founders to play by the rules of parliamentary democracy, it was then and remains now a scandal for the capitalist class that the workers have their own party. Having committed to establishing a party of the working class, the conference debated how to achieve material gains for that class. It is tempting to say that the history of the Labour Party is a footnote to this founding conference, since the

arguments raised and the political divisions that emerged in 1900 continued to reverberate down the years as contending social forces played themselves out over motion papers and policy documents.

It was the unions, not the socialist societies, who really mattered in Labour's political and social make up. By 1900, powerful networks of full-time officials had been established across the trade unions, forming a caste who saw themselves as negotiators and mediators on behalf of their members. Even today, the structural role of trade unions and their officials in the bureaucracy mean that they are usually averse to more militant forms of action, preferring the negotiating room to the picket line. The Labour Party was from the start a product of the desire of the unions for a political extension of their negotiating power. The point of unity between the ILP and the unions was that both sought to realise their goals through Parliament – the ILP as a route to socialism, the unions as a way to secure social reforms. It is also the point of unity for the integrationist approach – the material basis of MPs and union full-timers lends itself to incorporation into the existing state structure.

In the initial constitutional arrangement there was no individual membership or branches, only affiliations from trade unions, trades councils and socialist societies. Outside the unions, the ILP made up the LRC membership on the ground, their branches acting as the local branches of the new party. Of the three socialist groups present, the political lines of difference were clear: the ILP's was the dominant line, flanked by the Marxist left and the Fabians on the pro-liberal right. The ILP brought together traditions of municipal socialism, ethical romanticism, radical trade unionism and

local activism. The SDF were led by H.N. Hyndman, an eccentric ex-banker who fancied himself a Marxist, though of a somewhat sectarian and doctrinaire sort. The Fabians attracted intellectuals (including George Bernard Shaw and Sidney and Beatrice Webb), artisans and academics. The Fabians initially remained aloof from the party, their strategy being to 'permeate' the Liberals and Tories with left-wing ideas, convincing the establishment to support the plight of the poor through rational and moral argument. Their fear was that a new party might damage that long-term goal by sowing divisions.

The debate at the founding conference was largely between the SDF and everyone else. The SDF wanted Labour to be an explicitly socialist party. Their motion to the meeting argued that 'the representatives of the working class movement in the House of Commons shall form there a distinct party ... based upon recognition of the class war, and having for its ultimate object the socialisation of the means of production, distribution, and exchange'. Keir Hardie opposed this, arguing instead that the remit should be more limited, to seek to form 'a distinct Labour group in Parliament, who shall have their own whips, and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to cooperate with any party which for the time being may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interests of labour'. Hardie's version was not socialist and rejected the idea of class struggle – it was just about independently 'promoting' working-class interests. This position was far more palatable to the trade union leaders and the gradualists in the Fabian society. Hardie's own view of socialism was a thoroughly gradualist one, focused on parliamentary legislation. As he explained in 1904: 'I can imagine one reform after another

being won until in the end socialism itself causes no more excitement than did the extinction of landlordism in Ireland a year ago.'[2] Hardie also believed that for the Labour Party to succeed, it shouldn't look to foreign political movements like communism or even social democracy – in his view it was necessary to 'have done with every *ism* that isn't Labourism'.[3] This was a direct swipe at the Marxists in the SDF, as well as a warning shot to any other radicals inspired by wild continental politics. It was Hardie who thus stamped his own ideas on the fledgling party, backed by the majority of the ILP. The SDF, unwilling to make the same compromises as the ILP and defeated on the crucial questions at conference, declared the new party to be insufficiently socialist and left in 1901.

The early Labour Party also debated the nature of capitalism and socialism. Ramsay MacDonald had an organicist view of society: we are all part of one social body and the role of Labour should be to ensure that neither bosses nor workers became too greedy or disruptive to the smooth functioning of the economy. Both had to know their place. MacDonald preferred to agitate around how capitalism was inefficient and how Labour could improve the functioning of the economy through social ownership. Ethically minded, he despised the atrocious living and working conditions of the poor and saw legislation as the primary means for reform. Others favoured the introduction of socialism as an entirely new economic system, because exploitation was built into the very nature of capitalism.

At this stage, no one involved theorised on the nature of the British state or whether it was amenable to being used as an instrument for socialism. Most were convinced, as the Fabians had argued, that 'Parliament, with all its faults, has always

governed in the interests of the class to which the majority of its members belonged … And it will govern in the interests of the people when the majority is selected from the wage-earning class.'[4] They saw no distinction between Parliament and the wider state and political-economic establishment.

Even after helping to found it, most unions remained sceptical of the LRC until the threat of the British ruling class to break the workers' movement forced them to look again at the political question. The Taff Vale judgement of 1901, which opened the door for businesses to sue striking unions for loss of earnings, meant that the ability to strike was under threat (along with the salaries of union officials). Lacking any clear support from the wavering Liberals, a number of unions switched their financial and political backing to the LRC. At the 1906 election, the number of Labour representatives in Parliament rose from two in 1900 to 29.[5] At the first gathering in Parliament the MPs met and agreed to call themselves the Labour Party.

Creative Revolutions

One of the major tests for the new party was how to respond to the growing demand for women's suffrage. The working class was split on the issue – many supported votes for women, but there was also a conservative tendency in many parts (often inspired by religious reaction) against suffrage. They feared that it might break up families or lead to social anarchy. Among the left there was disagreement with the slogans of some of the suffragettes. Did they back equal voting rights (which pre-First World War meant only middle-class women getting the vote) or universal suffrage whereby working-class men and women

could vote? The women's question was also a class question. The issue was made more complicated for the Labour Party by the tactics of many radicals in the suffrage movement who turned to militant direct action as a way of forcing the issue into the national debate.

Women's suffrage leaders Sylvia and Christabel Pankhurst had joined the ILP alongside their parents. Sylvia and other campaigners demanded that Labour MPs – who in theory supported votes for women – vote against all government bills until their demands for suffrage were granted. Only Hardie and George Lansbury accepted. Lansbury circulated an appeal across the labour movement which led to criticisms from the party leadership. With little support from the other Labour MPs, he resigned his seat in 1912 and stood on a platform of women's suffrage. Despite a huge East End campaign and mass rallies, the by-election ended in a narrow defeat by just 600 votes. Lansbury was out of Parliament for another 12 years. His defeat was seized upon by some to argue against throwing support behind the women's movement, especially if it meant decent Labour men might lose seats. In some cases the MPs refused to support women's demands in Parliament. Arthur Henderson argued at the 1907 conference on the suffrage question: 'I have the strongest desire to respect the feelings of conference. I must, however, have some regard to those I directly represent in parliament.'[6] Labour didn't support universal suffrage until 1912.

The ILP supported women's suffrage but was not immune to backwards attitudes towards women: when Sylvia and Christabel's father Richard Pankhurst died in 1898, the ILP in Salford raised money to build a hall in his name. Sylvia Pankhurst, a well-known artist at the time, was asked to decorate the hall,

only to discover on opening night that the local branch did not want to admit women.[7]

Angry at the initially cool response from the Labour Party to the cause of women's suffrage, Emmeline Pankhurst called a meeting to establish the Women's Social and Political Union. The success of organisations like the WSPU (which terrified the establishment by taking a militant turn towards street actions, including smashing windows and blowing up post boxes) undermined the peaceful constitutional approach of the mainstream of the Labour Party. Left intellectuals and some workers were horrified at the attitude of the Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith when he imprisoned many suffragettes. Calls grew for a 'creative revolution' to challenge the state.[8] The militancy of the suffragettes, in particular among working-class women, opened up new possibilities for radical politics. The Labour left found inspiration from the radical actions of the women's movement.

Alongside the fight for women's suffrage, the years leading up to the First World War saw a dramatic increase in unofficial strikes and militant direct action by workers. The idea of using strikes as 'an offensive weapon in a war against class society'[9] gained traction in parts of the country. The left found themselves at the centre of a nexus of issues that could help cohere a working-class party as well as a strong transformative agenda.

Despite this space opening up, Labour's fortunes were initially poor. During this period, the most militant workers were dismissive of Labour – its parliamentary nature meant that it had little connection with the mass strikes that broke out. The strike wave between 1910 and 1914, known as the Great Unrest,[10] saw growing distrust by workers of both their