

# **Labour & Socialism**

**Steve Thompson**

## **The Labour Movement Background**

Collectivism, people coming together with a common purpose is not new. Indeed it is the only possible response to the institutional exploitation of the common people. There are records of the peasants revolt in 1381 and resistance both before and after that. In every case a challenge to the accepted order of things. The normal order is a small elite collecting fabulous wealth and power by the domination and exploitation of the mass of the common people. Private vested interests have always been protected by the Law, exercised by royalty and parliament at the expense of the common man.

Qualifications to sit in the House of Commons were always limited to a small elite of landowners. For this reason, people organised for a democratic franchise. They demanded the acceptance of a charter to make Parliament more representative.

This was a movement known as the 'Chartists' which were active in the early 19th century. It was about this time that another form of collectivism emerged, 'the co-operative movement'. This has been well documented as has the response by working people organised in trade unions who challenged the appalling employment conditions of the time.

But it was not until the last decades of the 19th century that a political movement began to emerge with the collectivist power to challenge the exploiters, the private owners of land and private owners of capital.

The collective labour force, workers on the land and in industry began to challenge the private vested interest which made the labouring class poor and wretched. These vested interest groups could be called the private owners of land and capital. The people who worked for them, labour. It was and still is, a straight fight between capital and labour.

That is the background. The Labour Movement started in the late 19th century with the beginnings of a fightback,(labour) against the elite (capital).

## **Representation**

In the 19th century the right to vote and stand for parliament and municipal councils was limited to landowners. Women were not allowed to vote or stand for election. By the last decades of the 19th century the franchise had widened allowing working men to vote and stand for election. Trades unionists were now able to stand to represent the labour force. But they had no political party. There was a radical wing of the Liberal Party and this made it possible for working men to stand for parliament under the Liberal banner to represent the labouring class. They were known as Lib/Labs (liberal/labour) and were members of the Liberal Party. This was not easy for working men because MP's were not paid, the assumption being that anyone standing for parliament would be financially independent. Lib/Lab MP's might be supported by their trade unions. Generally speaking, the trade union members aim was not to challenge the supremacy of private capital, but to seek improvements in working conditions.

The Liberal Party was the only vehicle for working men, radicals and humanitarians at that time. But it was a deeply establishment party which always sided with the employers in industrial disputes.

## **Socialism**

Keir Hardie writes in his book 'From Serfdom to Socialism' (published 1907); "the economic object of socialism

is to make land and industrial capital common property, and to cease to produce for the profit of the landlord and the capitalist and to begin to produce for the use of community”.

This is the core of the meaning of socialism.

Socialism has been a significant factor in British affairs since the foundation of four organisations during the 1880's and early 1890's;

The **Social Democratic Federation (SDF)** was established as Britain's first organised socialist political party under the leadership of H. M. Hyndman, and had its first meeting on 7 June 1881. Those joining the SDF included William Morris, George Lansbury and Eleanor Marx. However, Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx's long-term collaborator, refused to support Hyndman's venture. The SDF was a Marxist party.

**The Socialist League** was an early revolutionary socialist organisation in the United Kingdom. The organisation began as a dissident offshoot of the Social Democratic Federation of Henry Hyndman at the end of 1884. Never an ideologically harmonious group, by the 1890s the group had turned from socialism to anarchism. The group was finally disbanded in 1901.

**The Fabian Society** was founded on 4 January 1884 in London as an offshoot of a society founded a year earlier called The Fellowship of the New Life. Early Fellowship members included the visionary Victorian elite, among them poets Edward

Carpenter and John Davidson, sexologist Havelock Ellis, and early socialist Edward R. Pease. The Fabian Society founded the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1895 "for the betterment of society."

The **Independent Labour Party (ILP)** was a socialist political party in Britain established in 1893, in Bradford.

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The steady growth of support for socialism in the 1880's involved some crucial decisions for its converts whether they came in through;

- Owenite Co-operation
- Georgeite Land Reform
- Christian brotherhood
- Secular progressivism
- Industrial organisation
- Marxist economics

Was parliamentary democracy the way?

William Morris thought that it was futile to send a socialist or anyone else to parliament when what was needed was agitation, education and organisation throughout society.

Henry Hyndman, old Etonian, Oxford graduate, barrister and Tory who came from a family with extensive mining interests stood as an independent Conservative in the 1880 election. He had an authoritarian personality. Hyndman became converted to Marxism during the last years of

Marx's life. He suggested to Disraeli that the Conservatives should adopt Marxism, Disraeli politely declined the suggestion. Hyndman went on to establish his own group, the Democratic Foundation in 1881 and went on to popularise Marxism by writing pamphlets and public speaking. Marx found Hyndman's writing objectionable and his friend Engels ridiculed Hyndman as the leader of a 'sect'. The Democratic Federation nevertheless started to attract a following and became a political party in 1884 called the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) with its own publication '*Justice*'. William Morris joined and also the daughter of Karl Marx, Eleanor. Morris stuck it out for a year and left, unable to stomach Hyndman's autocracy or his increasingly insane talk of revolution by force. He went on to found the Socialist League but within a short time it fell to fighting between the 'anarchist communists' and those who followed Morris's brand of communism. Morris walked away from it and founded the Hammersmith Socialist Society.

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By 1884, a group of educated middle class social activists in London began the Fabian Society. Members included George Bernard Shaw, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and Annie Besant. Their purpose was to facilitate socialism and democracy by research and the publication of pamphlets and books and trying to influence the Liberal Party.

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The only way for working class people to achieve

political representation was by electing their candidates as Liberals (Lib-Lab's). But when they arrived in parliament they were tied to Liberal Party policy. Because of this there was an increasing demand by socialists for independent labour representation.

At first, the trades unions were resistant to making a break with the Liberal Party, particularly the miners and textile workers who stayed with the Liberals longest.

But by 1893 the time had come for independent labour representation.

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### **Independent Political Representation for Working People**

By 1892 there were hundreds of independent labour groups and socialist societies, particularly in the North of England. Bradford had independent labour councillors and more thriving labour clubs and parties – 23 by then – than any other town in the country. It had a Labour Church (a non sectarian religious society) and a strong trades council.

There was the Colne Valley Labour League (later Union), the Labour Electoral Association in Salford, and an Independent Labour Party in Manchester.

In the General Election in 1892 three working men had been returned to Parliament; Keir Hardie, John Burns and Havelock Wilson.

Keir Hardie had already been involved in the founding of the Scottish Labour Party and had formally set out the Party's programme.

Many workers were increasingly frustrated by the political partnership between labour interests and the Liberal Party generally supported by trades union leaders. A standard argument of the time was that the Liberal Party could represent both the labour interest and the employer interest at one and the same time. In practice, the Liberals always sided with the employers in any industrial dispute.

An important step forward in the growing demand for independent labour representation took place at the 1892 TUC Conference in Glasgow. Keir Hardie called for the establishment of a national independent labour party. A committee was set up to form this Party. One of the members of this steering group was Katharine St John Conway, who was later to become a member of the first National Administrative Council of the Independent Labour Party, thus setting a precedent for women's involvement in the leadership of political parties.

The founding conference of the Independent Labour Party took place at the Labour Hall in Bradford on the 13th January 1893. The Conference was chaired by Keir Hardie. There were 120 delegates including Ben Tillett, Robert Blatchford, Katharine Conway, Bruce Glasier, Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, and George Bernard Shaw from the Fabian Society (his credentials were thoroughly checked before he was allowed to gain

entry).

Eleanor Marx, the daughter of Karl Marx also attended.

The most important argument at the conference was whether this new party was to be a socialist party or a labour party. The Social Democratic Foundation (SDF) delegates proposed that it should be for socialists.

Keir Hardie and Katharine Conway argued that it should appeal to the broad movement. If the word socialist was in the name, it would limit recruitment. Socialism was not understood by most people. The founders knew that they lived in an environment hostile to socialist ideas but they believed it was possible to overcome this, to change peoples' outlooks, to 'make socialists'.

By excluding the word 'socialist' from its title, the ILP served notice of its all embracing attitude; as it aspired to harness the support of the trades unions there was no sense in frightening them away from the start. Thus the Conference agreed the name of the Party should be The Independent Labour Party (known as the ILP).

The programme for the Party was adopted;

- Public provision for the sick and old
- Collective ownership of Land, Production, Railways, Banks and Mineral Rights.
- Graduated income tax
- Free non-sectarian education from school to university

- Control of the liquor trade
- Eight hour day legislation
- Full employment
- National Insurance for working people
- Legislation providing homes

The programme was similar to the one proposed by Keir Hardie for the establishment of the Scottish Labour Party.

For the first time, a national political party had the implicit understanding that the interests of the capitalists and the landowners were incompatible with the interests of the people who worked to survive.

Frederick Engels joined the ILP and recommended the organisation as 'the very party which the old members of the International desired to see'. He made clear that if Karl Marx had lived he too would have found its membership congenial. Writing in the Labour Leader the ILP newspaper, Keir Hardie was keen to make this known. (Labour Leader 24th December 1898).

The ILP has always been much more than a political party.

To many who joined it was 'a great social fellowship..... a communion comparable to that of some religious fraternity who's members have taken vows of devotion to a common cause'. It was profoundly evangelical, with public rallies, meetings and much socialist oratory. Hardie specifically disavowed any parliamentary exclusiveness 'instead

of seeking to convert legislators to its programme....it is seeking to convert the community itself'. As Katharine Conway put it, it was 'in league with life.... every living thing is sacred'.

To Keir Hardie, the ILP was dearer to him than the Scottish Labour Party which came before it, or the Labour Party which came after. When the inaugural ILP meeting ended Hardie insisted that 'Auld Lang Syne' be sung. In his rich baritone voice he struck up the tune and sang it through twice for the English and non-trades unionists who did not know the words. The Labour Party sings it still.

The ILP supported trade union action, helping, advising and raising money for strike funds. ILPers active in the unions helped to persuade the TUC that it would be a good policy to seek independent labour representation in parliament and this was formally agreed at the Trades Union Congress in 1899. This made it possible that there could be a distinct labour group in Parliament.

In 2013 the ILP celebrated 120 years since its foundation.

The link below takes you to many articles about the people and events in the life of the ILP

<http://www.independentlabour.org.uk/main/page/5/?s=ILP%40120>

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## **Early Days of the ILP and Political Representation.**

The winter of 1893 was so bitter that the Thames froze over. Keir Hardie asked in the House of Commons what the local authorities were doing to help the poor and destitute. The answer was that this was not the House's business.

Hardie raised the question about the 'widespread misery due to large numbers of the working class being unable to find employment in the cities' and claimed that 'Any government that can ignore... the unemployment and yet claims to represent... the interests of every class... is unworthy of the confidence of this House and of this Nation'. He said Parliament speaks only 'for a section of the nation' and he introduced his remarks by introducing an amendment to the Queen's Speech. No working man trades unionist MP would second the amendment for fear of upsetting the Liberal Government. This was the pattern of things in Parliament at the time.

Hardie proposed sixpence an hour minimum wage for labourers in the governments dockyards and arsenals, combined with a forty-eight hour week for all government employees. This was thought to be proposing unwarranted interference by Government, which was the accepted view by both the Liberals and Tories.

It was claimed that Hardie was misusing the

House's adjournment procedures to raise matters relating to workers grievances. Hardie made tenacious use of Question Time to take up one individual case after another, each with an important principle at stake: a twelve hour day in one factory with only thirty minutes break allowed; workmen dismissed in another case ostensibly for poor work, in fact for signing a petition complaining about working conditions; dismissal of mail carriers for having attended a meeting called by a union. When a minister said that even though the Government ran the postal service, the latter case was nothing to do with the Government because it had happened with sub-contractors. Hardie pursued him to withdraw their government contract. The minister was forced to say that he would look into it. On several occasions Hardie asked Gladstone himself why government workshops permitted abuses, with always the same reply; 'it is not open to me to disturb the general course of business in the House for discussion of a matter lying outside the business of the House'.

I quote all of this to illustrate the culture of Parliament at that time. Keir Hardie was shunned and ostracised in Parliament. Many column inches in the press were devoted to how Hardie dressed, in tweed and a soft hat, and how it was a disgrace when other MP's wore a black frock coat and black silk top hat (even the other trade union MP's conformed with the accepted mode of dress). Hardie's lifestyle was out of keeping, he was teetotal and pacifist and became a vegetarian. However he was a pipe smoker.

The general point here is to note how easy it was for working men MPs to take a comfortable position of non resistance to the status quo and merge in with the Establishment. Keir Hardie was one of the few who was not like that.

Lib-Lab MPs, of course, were elected as Liberals and took the Liberal whip.

## **The Labour Party**

The Labour Representation Committee had its origin in 1900 and at its founding conference over 100 trades unions were represented (not the miners who were still wedded to the Liberals). The Fabian Society were there, having given up their original idea of 'permeating' the Liberals with their detailed policies for progressive reform. The Social Democratic Federation (SDF) were also there and called for 'a recognition of class war' and for the 'socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange'. The founders opted for the ILP's much looser formulation. Unhappy with this decision, the SDF soon broke away.

Keir Hardie who chaired the Labour Representation Committee (which changed its name to The Labour Party in 1906) moved the successful resolution defining the Party's purpose as setting up 'a distinct Labour Group in Parliament'. He did so conscious that the trade union leaders were unwilling to consider any wider political commitment.

Thus the fledgling Labour Party was not socialist (it

was not until 1918 that Sidney Webb drafted the famous clause four part four\* which committed the Party to socialism and which was revoked in 1995). There was no individual membership only affiliated members through their trade union or socialist society. Many had their membership through the ILP. While this development represented a clear *organisational* break with the Liberals, radical liberalism as a set of political ideas, rather than collectivism, still remained a major influence within Labour ranks.

Leading ILPers, notably Ramsay MacDonald, provided the Labour Party's first generation of parliamentary leaders and so began the accommodation of labour leaders into the parliamentary system.

The ILP provided the main agitational rank and file base of the Labour Party in the constituencies. Its members led campaigns to win support from the wider working class.

The early ILP did more than playing a role in setting up and sustaining the Labour Party, however. It made a unique contribution to the socialist movement in another way, through the distinctive quality of many of its members politics.

Its largely working class members favoured a very ethical, indeed evangelical, approach to socialism. They wished to live their socialism, to put it into practice, to prefigure the sort of society they wished to create. ILPers brought to their politics a passionate fervour, a burning desire to redress the

injustices and suffering of people's daily lives under capitalism. As a result they tried to reconstruct their whole environment and to foster a spirit of comradeship and community. They built their own meeting halls using them for political, social and cultural activities, and of places for the political education of the young. Thus the ILP provided an educational and creative environment. People without formal education had the chance to develop the skills of public speaking and organising. Here was a workers university where they could mix with all sorts of people and argue about all kinds of subjects such as vegetarianism, simple life styles and self sufficiency, art and free school meals and of course Marxism.

There was a lively socialist press which included Robert Blatchford's paper, the Clarion. There was the Labour Leader edited by Keir Hardie and the Daily Herald edited by future Labour Party leader George Lansbury. The reading matter for the Movement is an interesting subject in its self.

\* Clause 4 part iv Labour Party Constitution (1918)

*To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.*

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## **Understanding The Labour Movement Today**

The first thing that becomes evident, looking at political history is that the people with wealth - landowners, owners of industry and the privileged classes do not want change. The establishment Parties which represent them, the Conservatives and the Liberals traditionally resist interfering with existing legislation, constitution and economic structures. The exceptions to this is where there is a threat to private property interests. Perhaps the philosophy which might be associated with them is 'leave things be' and money will control society. Gaining the popular vote is relatively easy for the establishment Parties because they offer an easy way - leave it to the important people. Both these Party's are aptly named, Conservative; to keep things as they are. Liberal – not to restrict freedom, in other words not to intervene, to give liberty to the powerful who make the lives of the great masses of people wretched for their own aggrandisement. In both cases minimal regulation.

In the 1980's onwards, however, the Conservatives took this protection of private wealth interests beyond non interference into aggressive radicalism on behalf of the privileged and against the interests of society as a whole.

Examples of this would be wholesale privatisation, and political interference with the rights which working people had gained through trades unions and strategic political policies to undermine the trades union movement.

This goes far beyond the traditional Conservative culture of *Laissez-faire*\* administrations.

But of course, the Conservatives are always true to their culture of non interference when it comes to the protection of the environment and the integrity and well being of society as a whole because this would be seen as restrictive to private enterprise and private wealth and property interests. The wealthy do not need social protection or collective solidarity, their money can pay for whatever is necessary.

Without social legislation, working people and the disadvantaged have no protection from the market economy which de-humanises people.

Labour interests are dependent on collective self-help which requires effort, commitment, and self discipline. It is unrealistic to expect the rich and powerful to provide help and solidarity. The privileged classes maintain divisions and look after their own interests, and have the political advantage of offering the easy way to electors, which is electorally popular.

This has to be the starting point for any understanding of what can be achieved by the non privileged classes.

## **The Achievements of Labour Administrations**

When the Labour Party is in a position to form a government, it has the opportunity to enact

legislation which will bring certain protections to working people and the disadvantaged. Furthermore, it can help to create a political climate which redresses the imbalance of quality of life to create a more inclusive society. This programme, if the Labour Party is true to its democratic principles and purpose will be guided by the decisions of the Labour Party National Conference.

Since its inception, the Party has been in minority Governments and also Governments with a working majority;

1924 Minority Government  
1929 Minority Government  
1945 Government  
1950 insecure majority  
1964 Minority Government  
1966 Government  
1974 Minority Government  
1974 insecure majority

This was the last time that Labour was in Government.

After the reform of the Labour constitution in 1995, the Labour Party became New Labour and became one of the Establishment Parties.

Labour in power achieved most during the 1945 administration. After the second world war, during which there had been a coalition government of Labour/Conservative, a political environment of collective responsibility and central control had been engendered to meet the national emergency. The spirit of the time was people working together for

collective benefit. This provided the conditions for a Labour Government to implement its policy.

The Beveridge Report on National Insurance was implemented, paving the way for the National Health Service and the 'welfare state'.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beveridge\\_Report](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beveridge_Report)

Collective ownership under the nationalisation model:

- **1946** Coal industry under the National Coal Board
- **1946** Bank of England
- **1946** National Health Service created (with separate units in England, Wales, and Scotland and for Northern Ireland) taking over hospitals and making medical services free. NHS started operations in 1948.
- **1947** Central Electricity Generating Board and area electricity boards.
- **1947** Cable & Wireless.
- **1948** National rail, inland (not marine) water transport, some road haulage, some road passenger transport and Thomas Cook & Son under the British Transport Commission. Separate elements operated as British Railways, British Road Services, and British Waterways.
- **1949** Local authority gas supply undertakings in England, Scotland and Wales
- **1951** Iron and Steel Industry, (denationalised)

by Conservative Government in 1955, and re-nationalized by Labour in 1967 as British Steel Corporation)

The Labour Government adopted Keynesian economics.

In 1997, 2001 & 2015 New Labour was in power with a different purpose. It had become a common belief in the Labour Party that a General Election could not be won unless the Labour Party took on the character of the Establishment parties and became acceptable to the owners of the popular press.

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*\*laissez-faire* is an economic system in which transactions between private parties are free from government interference such as regulations, privileges, tariffs, and subsidies. The phrase *laissez-faire* is part of a larger French phrase and literally translates to "let (it/them) do", but in this context usually means to "let go"

## Useful Books

### **ILP Past & Present**

Barry Winter

Published by Independent Labour Publications (ILP)

<http://www.independentlabour.org.uk/main/>

### **What Would Keir Hardie Say?**

Ed. Pauline Bryan

### **Keir Hardie**

Caroline Benn

### **The First Fabians**

Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie

### **Keir Hardie**

Bob Holman

### **From Serfdom to Socialism**

Keir Hardie

### **George Lansbury**

Jonathan Schneer

### **Clem Attlee**

Francis Beckett

### **The Enthusiasts: biography of John & Katharine**

**Bruce Glasier**

Laurence Thompson

### **Speak for Britain – a new history of the Labour Party**

Martin Pugh

