

A Tale to Tell: Autobiography of Syd Bidwell MP



Review by Mike Watts

A Tale To Tell, the autobiography of Syd Bidwell is not one of the great political memoirs. But it is a fascinating insight into the life of a warm, principled, interesting and very brave man. It weaves together three themes, the personal and working life of someone who left school at fourteen, a personal political adventure and the larger political picture.

The book ends abruptly at the time of Jim Callaghan's agreement with the Liberals to support the Labour Government which Syd describes as "a very dangerous activity not carried out with consultation with all members of the Parliamentary Labour Party". Syd died twenty years later in 1997 following a sad de-selection by his Southall CLP and a long period of ill health of both Syd and his wife Daphne.

Syd lived to witness the Blair victory in 1997. On learning of the result his response was "I guess I should be happy" a sentiment familiar to many of us. It would have been fascinating to have heard Syd's views on Tony Blair.

Syd was born into a working-class household in Southall in 1917 the year of the Bolshevik revolution as Syd is keen to remind us. He left school at the age of fourteen and almost immediately joined the Great Western Railway Company thus triggering two great loves, railways and trade unions. We are treated to a lot of railway anecdotes and Syd charts his gradual rise through the ranks of the National Union Of Railwaymen and Trotskyist politics. Yes Syd was a Trot! He joined the the Workers' International League the forerunner of the Revolutionary Communist Party and was hailed as their first ever working-class member.

After the war Syd joined the Labour Party and became a lecturer and then organiser with the National Council Of Labour Colleges. This appointment reveals one of his great passions, political education. Throughout his life Syd devoured knowledge via various forms of formal and informal self-education and he was passionate to pass on this knowledge.

I found it very nostalgic. When I joined the Labour Party in the late fifties, I joined an organisation eager to teach me about the basics of politics, the Party's history, the meaning of socialism and many other aspects of politics. I and my contemporaries received a true political education, courtesy of people like Syd Bidwell. His description of training courses at Beatrice Webb House evokes many happy memories.

The demise of the NCLC following its absorption into the TUC was deeply regretted by Syd and his bitterness at the way he believed George Woodcock and Vic Feather let its education role die is palpable. He writes "I am not alone in the labour movement in thinking that the poverty of the Labour Party, politically deficient in its education work, has been a great deal responsible for its socialist decline".

In 1966 Syd became the member of parliament for Southall. By this time his home town had become the home of large numbers of immigrants, mainly from India. Racial tensions had become inflamed. This was the time of the slogan "if you want a n----r neighbour vote Labour". Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech was soon to come. Syd stood firm as a passionate defender of racial equality. He bravely opposed the London dockers when they marched on Westminster to support Powell. Not only was Syd's life threatened, his family's lives were threatened, their home was attacked but Syd never wavered, he worked tirelessly to build and maintain harmonious race relations in Southall.

This is a book I'm glad I read. It evokes a time when the politics of the left was very different and tells us about a man who gave far more than he ever took from the labour movement.

I had the pleasure of meeting him once, his fellow Labour MP Russ Kerr introduced us. Syd told me he had written a book called Red, White and Black, he continued, "white is for my white constituents, black is for my black constituents," he then puffed his chest out "and the red is for me, I'm a red!" Yes you were Syd and proud of it.

'A Tale to Tell' is available from Labour Heritage at £5 per copy (post-free)