



Labour  
Heritage

# Labour Heritage

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## The Firestone strike of 1933

By John Grigg

This story of the 1933 strike at the Firestone tyre factory on the Great West Road, is based mainly on reports from the *Daily Worker* and the *Brentford & Chiswick Times*. The Strike involved other battles as well as the struggle for better wages and conditions.

The Firestone Tyre factory, built in the 1920s and demolished in 1980, was the most handsome of the buildings on the Great West Road. The art deco frontage, set well back behind lush green lawns,

gave an image of a modern enlightened factory unlike the traditional British dark satanic mills. But what was it like to work there? What drove nearly all the 650 men and 200 women to come out on strike in 1933? A risky thing to do at a time of high national unemployment.

The company claimed wages ranged from £4.15.0 for men in the production department to £2.1.4d for women in the factory service department, which was good in those days, but in reality the take home pay was much less. Workers were not paid if a machine broke down or if they were waiting for stock. One tyre builder claimed his waiting time was nearly four hours and his pay that week was £1.10.0d. On 16 July 1933 the *Daily Worker* reporter was shown pay slips by a dozen of the women. The highest he saw was for £1.14.0d. That's at least 7/- lower than the company was claiming it paid.

Much was made about how modern the factory was, and how it had a canteen for its workers, but the *Daily Worker* reported that men were working an 8-hour day with only a 15 minute break and did not have time to use the canteen. Sometimes they had to work a second 8-hour shift. Men of thirty were on youth rates and were afraid to ask for men's rates in case they were dismissed.

Everyone was on piece rates. Even lavatory cleaners were on a task-work system and were given 12 minutes to fill 12 boxes with toilet paper. A man in the building department said 'Firestone have

been cutting rates over the last four years until we are now doing double the work for the same money'. Another man told of how one shift was congratulated for turning out 1,000 tyres. The next day they reduced the piece rate. He said 'You can walk around ....and see wreckages of men who know the work is killing them'.

### **The Strike Begins**

The strike started spontaneously on a Friday in the tyre-curing department where 75 employees downed tools when they claimed a new speed-up piece work system was going to reduce take home pay by up to 24/- a week. The next day the whole factory was out, and all production of tyres ceased. There were two mass meetings and a strike committee was elected with representatives from each department.

At the second meeting Fred Bramley of the Communist Party London District Committee was 'applauded to the echo.' He was an interesting character who stood for Parliament as a Communist candidate in Hammersmith North, and he was very proud of the fact that as leader of the London Communist Party he was on the list of 2,000 people to be eliminated by Nazi Germany if they invaded Britain. His early presence at Firestones indicates how quickly the Communist Party took over the leadership of the strike.

The strike committee's demands were: union recognition, the abandonment of the new piece work system in the Curing Department, payment for waiting time, a basic daily rate for tyre builders and better safety precautions in the plant.

There were claims that the strike was 100% but the Engineering Department, where the Amalgamated Engineering Union had a strong presence, did not come out despite sending a deputation to their

London District Committee proposing they should call out the engineers.

Mass picketing started almost immediately, and it was not entirely peaceful. The windscreen of a car used to carry strike breakers was smashed. On 27 July the *Daily Worker* reported that 'a few of the blacklegs went into work with slightly changed facial appearances .....'. Later on there were a few court appearances on charges of assault and obstruction that were either dismissed or bound over or resulted in modest fines, although one man was sentenced to two months' hard labour for a serious assault.

The real trouble and strife came when the British Union of Fascists appeared on 13 July and after some fighting were driven off. Later they returned and distributed a pamphlet:

*Fascist Union of British Workers*

*Firestone workers! We Fascists have offered you our services in combating the disgraceful conditions of work forced upon you by foreign financiers .....*

*Fascism stands for increased wages, higher standard of life for the British worker*

The *Daily Worker* went through the pamphlet line by line 'exposing its lies' which they said was noticeably similar to Nazi propaganda aimed at workers in Germany.

Another intervention was made by the Green Shirt Movement who tried to persuade the strikers to adopt their monetary reform policies as a means of promoting good industrial relations. One of their publicity methods involved throwing green bricks through windows and they did this at 11 Downing Street.

## Support for the Strike

The strikers received support and donations from several trade union branches and work places, but the strike was not official so no strike pay came from the Transport and General Workers Union or the Amalgamated Engineering Union, who were attacked by the Communist Party for not being sufficiently militant. Both unions gave some financial support, but would not have been happy that the Communists were in control at Firestones. A soup kitchen was set up, and donations of food came from some local traders.



From the *Daily Worker*

The women on strike played an increasing role collecting money in the high streets and attending the picket lines, and one woman told the *Daily Worker* reporter 'Let everyone know the truth about Firestone's 'model' factory. It's good to look at – from the outside. A new building in modern style, surrounded by green lawns. But inside! It's rush and tear and sweat. Three shifts working day and night – the machines never stop'.

Another said, 'Look at my friend's arm!' The reporter asked how she got such an

ugly-looking gash. 'Well,' she said, 'I've worked here for years and our rates have been gradually cut until we turn out more work and get less for it. There's a lot of waiting time. Sometimes for stock and sometimes because the machines break down. But we don't get paid for waiting time, and we've got to pretend we're busy all the time. One day I was waiting and was given work ripping old beads with a rip knife. Girls are not supposed to use this kind of knife at all. It being the first time, I ripped my arm instead of the tyre. It was a mess. I went to hospital and had gas and six stitches.'

## The Progress of the Strike

There were a number of demonstrations during the strike including a march from Brentford to Hammersmith led by the West Ham Unemployed Band, and on another occasion a big meeting was held in Hammersmith Town Hall.

The behaviour of the police came in for some criticism. They tried to use the licensing laws to stop the Castle Hotel in Brentford High Street being used as the strike HQ but that failed, and on occasions they were tough in clearing the Great West Road of pickets. One afternoon, a mounted policeman went into a café to order strikers who were having tea to move away. Presumably he got off his horse before he went in.

On 16 July 30 members of the Strike Committee met the management for five hours and the Company came up with a list of concessions that included overtime at time and a half after 10 hours, double shifts no longer being compulsory, a guaranteed basic wage, and waiting time to be paid for.



But they refused trade union recognition, and would not back down on the original cause of the strike – the new piece-work system in the Curing Department. The Strike Committee wouldn't budge on either of these issues.

The Company, sensing that the strikers could not stay out for ever, sent a letter to all strikers on 23 July setting out the concessions, and demanding that all workers who wished to remain with the company apply for their jobs by the following Monday. The Strike Committee's reaction was to recommend continuing the strike and this was endorsed in a ballot by 436 votes to 19.

Then the Company started recruiting new hands from the unemployed, which together with the small number of strike breakers gave the impression that production might be starting up again. In fact this was not so, and a striker who got into the factory reported that only seven tyres had been produced the previous day.



From the *Daily Worker*

The Company then dismissed all strikers and returned their insurance cards through

the post, and said that each of them could apply for their jobs. Which of course many did, and the first chinks in the solidarity appeared.

### **The End of the Strike**

On 4 August the *Brentford and Chiswick Times* reported a company statement that 50% of old employees had returned, and 100 to 150 new employees had been taken on. The Company would interview ex-employees and take their previous record into account.

The Strike Committee recognised on 9th August that the game was up, They were not going to get union recognition, which of course was the prime objective of the Communist leaders of the strike. Most strikers were reinstated – but the Company took the opportunity to get rid of nearly 100 whom they saw as trouble makers.

So who won? There were a number of battles going on. One was the fight between the Fascists and the Communists for the support of the working class. The Fascists lost that one but the Communists never really attracted the support of the working class, which went to the Labour Party.

Then there was the battle for control of the trade unions between the Communists and those whom they called 'the reformists'. Probably the reluctance of the Transport and General Workers Union and the Amalgamated Engineering Union to give other than tentative support to the strike reflected their opposition to the Communist Party. They did not want to back a Communist led cause.

There was also the battle for trade union recognition which was lost in the 1933 strike, but as a result of the strike the Transport and General Workers Union recruited, and retained, over 650 members.

A Works Committee was established and by the post war years trade union recognition was achieved. A number of concessions were gained on overtime and waiting time payments, minimum wages and working conditions.

The big achievement was the end of total domination of the work force by the management. Firestones had seen how easily a strike could stop production, and from then on would think twice about the consequences before introducing new production measures that would disadvantage their workers.

Sources: *History of the Great West Road*. James Marshall, A.L.A

Newspapers: *Daily Worker* and *Brentford and Chiswick Times*

*The Marx Memorial Library*.

This Firestone Strike article first appeared in the Brentford & Chiswick Local History Journal in 2011.

## **Krishna Menon**

By John Grigg

During research at Hounslow Library I came across the report below in the Middlesex Chronicle of a 1933 meeting of Heston Ward Labour Party. There was the usual report of events on the Heston and Isleworth Council (I knew both Owen Ashdown and Harvey Body in later years) but what mainly caught my attention was the visiting speaker.

Krishna Menon was much in the news and he is most famed as the outspoken head of the Indian delegation at the United Nations between 1953 and 1962, where he often propounded India's non-aligned tendency on the world stage, charting a third course between the USA and Russia.



He was born in South India to a wealthy Indian aristocratic family and obtained a bachelor's degree at Madras Presidency College in history and economics. He came to England in 1928, studied and graduated at the London School of Economics and University College London, and then took a law degree at Glasgow University. He was called to the bar at the Middle Temple and practised as a lawyer.

He was elected as a councillor in St. Pancras in 1934, where he served for 14 years. He was also involved in the founding of Penguin Books and was their first editor. But his main activity was as secretary of the India League campaigning for Indian independence which became the most influential Indian lobby in the British Parliament. He had a close association with Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, and became India's first High Commissioner in London in 1948 before representing India at the United Nations. On returning to India he became a member of the Indian Parliament in 1953 and was still a member when he died in 1974. From 1957 to 1962 he was Minister of Defence and during that time India annexed the Portuguese colony of Goa. But he was later criticised for India's lack of preparedness during the brief Sino-India war in 1962 and was forced to resign.

He abstained from tobacco, alcohol and meat. He often fasted and lived a simple life preferring to live in a single room and used public transport whenever possible. He refused a salary when he was the High

Commissioner in London. Despite this he was famed for his bespoke suits and was impeccably dressed in public.

In 2006 the V.K. Krishna Institute was established to commemorate his life and achievements.

There is considerable information on Menon on the internet and there have been several biographies.

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*The Middlesex Chronicle*, March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1933

### **Heston Ward Labour Party Address on Indian situation**

There was a large attendance at the monthly general meeting of the Heston Ward Labour Party at Heston Senior Schools on Wednesday week when Mr. O W Ashdown took the chair.

Alderman Body outlined the recent work of the Council and gave many interesting facts of importance to Heston residents. In connection with the erection of the pavilion in Heston Park he stated that although there was a difference of £300 between the lowest private tender and the Surveyor's estimate for the job, the Labour amendment that the work should be done by direct labour under the municipal authority was lost owing to opposition of the two other parties. In consequence of this the residents would have to pay £300 more for their pavilion than would have been the case had they elected Labour councillors at the last election. Owing to the raging economy campaign he said they would have to wait for many moons ere they could hope to see a permanent library building in Heston. He also stated that efforts were being made by Labour councillors to arrange weekly collections

in respect of mortgage loans and rates through the Council instead of the present monthly and half-yearly payments.

An informative address on India was given by K. Menon who recently returned from a long tour in that country having been a delegate on the Investigation Commission sent out by the India League. He pointed out that the conditions in India were not disclosed in the newspapers. It was the task of the present generation to right the wrongs committed to India in the past. India would never rest until justice was accorded to her and the old-time narrow conception of Empire which condemned her to remain a "subject" race was swept away. The nationalism of India was in no sense identical with the spirit with which one associated Hitlerism but rather the sum total of all the forces in India to remove foreign interference with their national affairs. The intellectual ability of the Indian nation was equal to that of any other people and they naturally desired to govern themselves and achieve their own ideals.

Judged by results the British government of India for the last 150 years had failed to bring about any improvement in the conditions of the mass of its people. A million Indians still lived in a state of semi-starvation for the whole of their lives, whilst the sanitary conditions were appalling. There were no educational facilities for the children of the working classes and even if there had been such facilities, the terrible poverty prevented children from being spared to go to school.

The agitation for freedom had now spread to the lowliest villages and the whole power of the Government was necessary to suppress the aspirations of the Indian people. Despite the institution of martial law in most districts the movement for freedom continued to grow throughout

India and no ordinances or imprisonment would prevent the ultimate triumph of the desire for emancipation from foreign interference.

## **Studying the left in Croydon** **By Dan J. Frost**

I came back to Croydon whilst studying for my MA in 2014.

Croydon had a special place in my heart, already – a longing to return, having moved away as a child. At the same time, Croydon had a reputation (or reputations). In my early twenties, it was probably the distance from London which was paramount: frequent jokes about requiring a passport to board the Thameslink. Croydon was a common punchline, and an appropriate setting for the popular *Peep Show* (2003-2015). And it could seem to be outside history – and certainly outside the history of left-wing politics and the labour movement.

As I remade myself at home in Croydon, however, it was just such a history which confronted me. I started attending meetings of the ‘Communist University in South London’, organised by the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), headquartered in the third iteration of Croydon’s Ruskin House. Here, in one of the last labour halls in London, was a version of Croydon which didn’t quite fit the narrative that I had in my head.

Cedar Hall, built in the building’s garden soon after it was purchased for the labour movement in 1966, would also play host to the trades-council-initiated Croydon Assembly, led by the late Ted Knight (1933-2020) – better known for his activism in Lambeth, but living close to the Croydon border in Gipsy Hill. It was at those meetings that I first met Sean

Creighton, the prolific historian of the labour movement (and much else besides) in South London. His publication of Michael Tichelar’s thesis on the labour movement in Croydon drew my attention to the histories which had already been written, chiefly on the nineteenth century.

I was coming across evidence, though, of Croydon’s significance for left-wing politics through the twentieth century, and after 1956 in particular – a period to which local historians of the labour movement have paid less attention. Croydon elected Labour MPs in the landslides of 1945 and 1966, and Bill Pitt for the Alliance in 1981, but was otherwise stubbornly Conservative until the 1990s. Yet that did not tell the whole story: in the late 1950s and early 1960s, for example, Croydon possessed one of the most active Youth Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) groups in the country, which with the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS) birthed an active New Left Club. In the 1970s, a vibrant underground press emerged, with such luminaries as Jamie Reid – an editor of *Suburban Press*, later to gain recognition as the art designer for the Sex Pistols. I was also finding intriguing references to the Croydon-Brixton Collective (sometimes known as the ‘Black Marxist Collective’), active in the late 1970s, and the Croydon Black People’s Action Committee (CBPAC), which received funding from Ken Livingstone’s Greater London Council.

If studying Croydon allowed me to research a wide range of different organisations and moments in left-wing history, it would also allow me to explore methodologically. Most of the relevant records are scattered across the myriad archives which cater to this history, in Manchester or London or at the University of Warwick – the Museum of Croydon, which has suffered from the borough’s recent repeat bankruptcies, held only a few of these records at the start of my PhD.

And, because of the paucity of archived records which afflicts left-wing history especially, I knew that I would take the opportunity to practice oral history.

### **Talking with comrades**

I had re-joined the Labour Party in 2015 and saw my involvement increase as ‘Corbynism’ gathered steam. By the time that I came to conduct my interviews, in 2019, I could not have helped but form connections with comrades whose activism in Croydon far predated my own. Whilst my narrators were not limited to those that I knew directly, many were found through ‘snowballing’ – and almost all of my interviewees, even those whose connection to present-day activism in Croydon was weaker, wove commentary on current affairs into the narratives of their own lives.

Of the 18 people that I interviewed (across 16 interviews), 13 reported their current involvement in the Labour Party or Momentum, of which seven were known to me already. Moreover, Dr Martin Graham, the treasurer of the CPB and one of the reasons that the party had decided to move to Ruskin House, is the husband of a Labour member, Lynda, and I interviewed them together as a couple – something that I also decided upon for my interview with the writers Leni and Peter Gillman.

If their relationships demonstrated that connections on the left can be richer and more complex than the formalities of party lines, their life stories also complicated the set-piece narratives with which we often explained Corbynism. Only three of my narrators had never been in the Labour Party: one was Hamish MacColl, son of the Beckenham-based folk musician and communist Ewan MacColl. The rest had all been in the Labour Party at some point, but their histories with the party were much more nuanced than is captured by a

division of post-2015 members into ‘new joiners’ and ‘returners’.

There were certainly people that I interviewed for whom the Labour Party was at the centre of their activist experience – or sharing that centre with their trade unionism. Equally, many had really been politicised through their involvement in CND and other social movements. There was a former IS/SWP member who had been within the Labour Party prior to the 1968 decision to breakaway (and another that opted to stay), and it was common for activists with more limited histories in Labour to have had family members with closer connections.

Whilst this, again, speaks to the connections between left-wing activists across party lines and across the life course, we should also remember the diversity of practical and ideological experiences which was brought into Corbynism. I interviewed two former members of the Communist Party of Britain Marxist-Leninist (CPB-ML), the Reg Birch-led anti-revisionist party which had a relatively strong branch in Croydon in the 1970s and 1980s. They had pivoted from staunch opposition to electoralism in the 1970s to campaigning for Labour and against Margaret Thatcher by the end of the next decade. Years later, how did these experiences shape their involvement in Corbynism, if at all?

Though some interviews took place in the run-up to the 2019 general election, it was the surprising 2017 result which tended to be referenced, often by comparison to the defeat of 1979. In that election, a spirited campaign fought in Croydon Central by David White, amongst just three candidates nationwide to be endorsed by Militant, ended in disappointment: a 164-strong Conservative majority growing to nearly 8,000, though with (as White put it) a ‘fairly average swing’ for the night. In 2017, Sarah Jones faced an eerily-similar Tory majority of 165. With large numbers



of left-wing activists drawn to campaign in Croydon, this time by Momentum, Jones was elected with a majority of 5,652, rising to almost 6,000 in 2019. Whereas the Militant supporters, predominantly LPYS members and often from the north, had raised acrimony, Momentum's role in the 2017 election – and its broader age profile and greater membership from London and the South East – even won the respect of activists unlikely to describe themselves as 'Corbynists'. As well as telling us something about the significance of 2017, however, the comparison casts light historically on the way that Militant's involvement was received and remembered.

At the same time, whilst most narrators were happy to note that we were amid a left-wing revival, there were reservations about the extent to which activism had changed. Lynda Graham, for whom traditional political meetings ('sitting in rows – all men with their back to you, and all pontificating') had been alienating, was enthusiastic about some of Momentum's practices. The Gillmans, on the other hand, were 'horrified' by the lack of a quorum, agenda, or minute-taking in a local Labour meeting which they had attended. Similarly, a former CPB-ML member – whose local Momentum group met in the same room which his previous party had once used – noted the intellectual and practical seriousness of those earlier meetings, and the then-total absence of ward-level Labour organisation in his constituency.

Regardless, my narrators tended to agree that their involvement in activism had given them a better understanding of their local area. As one interviewee, Marian Carty, put it: 'One of the things that's been great, being in the Labour Party – I feel more connected with Croydon.' In my research, I found that narrators' relationships to Croydon were tightly bound up with their activist histories.

## Four Croydons

My narrators were proud to come from Croydon, and sometimes defensive about its reputation. Nevertheless, it was common to hear them say (with sighs) that it was 'battered about', 'down at heel', and 'rundown'. There was a strong sense that Croydon had changed – in some ways for the better, but often in ways that stirred ambiguous, contradictory emotions. Over the course of my research, I came to understand Croydon in four different aspects, and this provided a structure to the thesis.

Most of my narrators were born between the late 1930s and the late 1950s and grew up during the post-war 'boom' and the growth of the 'New Left'. Importantly, however, my first chapter argued for the importance of their early childhood experiences – and the imaginary or second-hand childhoods communicated by parents and grandparents – in shaping their understanding of their surroundings. This was the Croydon which was made in the nineteenth century: a bustling Surrey town surrounded by the sprawling middle-class suburbs of the Norwood Ridge and the Shirley Hills. It could be a place powerfully associated with exclusion and embarrassment, but in memories of coffee shops and (sometimes) the safety of the childhood home, there was also much affection.

That Croydon was already being displaced by the time that my narrators entered school. There seemed some promise that a 'Tory town' might be transformed by the rise of new public services and estates like New Addington, as a Croydon which suffered heavily during the Blitz was rebuilt. Comparisons to Coventry were common. Despite the election of David Rees-Williams in 1945, however, this was a Croydon of compromise. The schools which my narrators joined were fraught with class prejudices and many remained

private, whilst the Croydon Corporation Act of 1956 was overseen by the enigmatic Conservative council leader Sir James Marshall. Nostalgia for the social-democratic settlement, ubiquitous on the left, remained tainted.

My third chapter dealt with the Croydon which emerged from these compromises: a Croydon compared, with bathos, to Los Angeles and Manhattan, home to Selsdon Man and office blocks beyond number. Undoubtedly, this was a Croydon which stirred resentment; the second Ruskin House (1919-1966) was demolished to make way for the widening of Wellesley Road. Venues which had catered to the 'first' New Left were similarly closed. But younger activists had reasons to enjoy this new, shiny Croydon, with fond recollections of the Whitgift Centre and a thriving music scene. Though partially detached from more traditional left-wing politics, the growing underground offered an alternative way to understand the appeal of socialism in the suburbs.

The reactionary backlash of the 1970s, which swept away this optimism whilst absorbing some of the frustrations with post-war social democracy, framed neighbouring 'inner-city' areas like Brixton as a cancer threatening suburban Croydon. Over the 1980s and 1990s, though, with demographic change and economic crisis, it was increasingly Croydon which was seen as 'inner-city' and subject to a similar 'decline'. At first, it was groups like CBPAC which seized upon this, articulating themselves as representatives of a different Croydon – against the Conservative council and older activists alike. By the 1990s, however, New Labour was winning the support of both those directly impacted by Croydon's apparent 'decline' and those that were worried about it – a paternalistic, 'multicultural' combination, and a new form of compromise. Many of my narrators had been drawn back into supporting Labour out of desperation and

were ambivalent about its legacy. Pleasure at the diversity of the new Croydon mixed with regret about its recent redevelopments, with worries often tied to their own experiences as parents and grandparents.

If my work has told a story about Croydon, it has also told a generational story – a story which might help with understanding the trajectories of the left, and Britain, across the twentieth century. I have tried to sketch out some of the ways in which those histories might be re-periodised by focusing in on the local. Developments once understood as 'progressive' have had untoward consequences, sometimes unravelling earlier 'gains'; equally, activists have stubbornly found ways of moving forwards, finding unlikely sources of strength in situations which seemed abject.

Often these assessments have differed from one generation to the next. Sometimes that has produced conflict – at other times, learning. Shared spaces and stories, I have found, are an important part of encouraging the latter. If my thesis has done anything to capture the complex but comforting stories which I have heard about activism in twentieth-century Croydon, it will have done its work.



Ruskin Hall, Croydon

## **The Labour Party 1920-2020: a short history**

**By Barbara Humphries**

### **Nuclear Disarmament**

Although it was only in office for a short time the Labour Party had made its mark on British politics 1945-1951. In the 1950s the Party was divided especially on the issue of nuclear disarmament. At the 1960 annual conference and with trades union support, a resolution supporting nuclear disarmament was passed. Hugh Gaitskell who had taken over as leader, when Attlee stood down, defeating Nye Bevan, said that “He would fight, fight and fight again to save the party that he loved.” The nuclear policy was reversed at the 1961 party conference. However Gaitskell was not to lead Labour into the next general election as he died. He was replaced narrowly by former left-winger Harold Wilson.

### **Labour in government in the 1960s and 1970s**

When elected again in 1964 and 1966 Labour implemented a series of measures such as comprehensive education and the raising of the school leaving age, equal pay for women, decriminalisation of homosexuality, abolition of capital punishment and the first ever race relations legislation. (although immigration controls implemented by the Tories were not repealed). The government however inherited a balance of payments crisis from the Tories. This led to the devaluation of the pound and abandonment of much of its social reforms. Strikes and clashes with the unions over a wage freeze and *In Place of Strife* led to the worse election result ever in 1968, but councillors not MPs bore the

brunt of it. There was scarcely a Labour controlled council left in the country.

In 1970 polls predicted a Labour victory but that did not happen. However it regained councils in 1971 after a year of Ted Heath and the Tories. The Tories waged war against the trades unions and they nearly presided over a general strike when dockers were jailed for taking action against the Industrial Relations Act. During a second strike by miners and a three day week Ted Heath called a general election in February 1974, on the issue of who ran the country, him or the unions. After canvassing in the dark of winter Labour won the election unexpectedly and much to the dismay of Ted Heath and the Tories who, for a week refused to resign. In a second election in October 1974 Labour’s manifesto called for an irreversible redistribution of wealth to working people and their families. It won with a small workable majority which was gradually whittled away. A social contract was agreed with the unions, whereby there would be voluntary pay restraint in return for maintaining the social wage. (the Social Contract). This broke down when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1976 demanded cuts, resulting in the Winter of Discontent in 1979. A vote of no confidence moved by the Tory opposition was passed by one vote. Thatcher won the ensuing general election in the spring of 1979. The Labour government had presided over rising unemployment and the consequent rise of nationalism. It became dependent on minority votes from Scottish nationalists, and Unionist parties from Northern Ireland. In England racism and fascism raised their ugly heads with growing electoral successes for the National Front.

Jim Callaghan resigned as leader to be replaced by Michael Foot, the unity

candidate. This was the last time that the leader of the party was elected solely by the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). Reforms approved by a special conference in Wembley stadium in 1981 broadened the base of the electorate. Denis Healey was narrowly elected as deputy leader, defeating Tony Benn who was popular with left-wing activists.

### **Thatcher's First Term 1979-1983**

Thatcher, elected in 1979 was deeply unpopular in her first two years, as unemployment soared and companies collapsed under her monetarist experiment. Michael Foot led demonstrations up and down the country. There were riots on the streets. She was saved by the Falklands War in 1982 and went on to win the 1983 general election. From having been 20 points behind in the opinion polls in 1981, the Tories won a landslide victory. Also by this stage a number of prominent MPs such as Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams had left Labour and set up the Social Democratic Party (SDP), with the potential of splitting the Labour vote. The Labour Party was split during the election campaign with Michael Foot appearing not to support some left-wing candidates such as Militant supporter Pat Wall in Bradford. Labour's election manifesto which called for nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from the European Economic Community (European Union) was dubbed 'the longest suicide note in history'. After this election defeat Foot stood down and Neil Kinnock was elected as leader.

The SDP failed to attract the majority of Labour's membership and affiliated unions, and only a handful of MPs joined. Its membership was made up of 'political novices'. It did however make gains in elections, thus splitting the anti-Tory vote. Labour's right-wing now had control of

the Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) and leaders of the largest trades unions. This set the background for a witch hunt against the left, starting with the editorial board of the *Militant* newspaper. *Militant* supporters controlled the Labour Party Young Socialists and had enough influence in constituencies to have three Labour MPs. It was strongest in Liverpool, where the council set a deficit budget in 1984. Its leading members were to be expelled from the party.

### **Miners' Strike 1984/85**

Thatcher's victory was a green light for her to attack the National Union of Miners, who were defeated after a year-long strike. This was a serious defeat for the whole labour movement, including rebel councils such as Liverpool, Lambeth and the GLC. Labour made gains in the 1986 council elections but the Tories went on to win a large majority in the general election of 1987 as the economy improved. In 1990 however Thatcher was ousted by the Tories. Her over confidence made her believe that she could introduce the Poll Tax and get away with it. The 'men in grey suits' in the Tory Party thought otherwise.

The Tories now led by John Major went on to win another election in 1992 The Poll Tax was replaced by the Council Tax. Together with division over Europe, getting the UK thrown out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, and negative equity in the housing market, the way was paved for Labour's landslide victory led by Tony Blair. He had been elected leader after the tragic death of John Smith, and a deal with his long term leadership contender, Gordon Brown.

## **New Labour**

Blair had been elected after John Smith died of a heart attack, and having done a deal with Gordon Brown. He pledged to govern as New Labour and called a conference to replace Clause 4, part 4 of the Party's constitution, which had committed it to public ownership since 1918. John Major's government limped on until May 1997, when Blair and New Labour won the election with a landslide majority.

Most Labour Party members had few illusions in Blair but were glad to see the back of the Tories after 18 years. The government introduced a minimum wage, the Good Friday Agreement which brought some peace to Northern Ireland, signed up to the European Union (EU) Social Chapter, and introduced the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. Devolved governments were implemented by referendum for Scotland and Wales and London regained its government with the Greater London Assembly. 'Sure Start' was introduced for children of nursery school age. However initially the legacy of the Tory years was maintained in the guidelines for fiscal discipline and their anti-union laws were not repealed. Many of the democratic reforms from the 1980s which allowed higher participation in the selection of MPs and leader had long been lost or modified.

The price of New Labour was the demise of Labour Party democracy, alienating both the left and old right wing of the Party. It was however the Iraq War in 2003 which brought about thousands of resignations and reduced the once vibrant political party to a shadow of its former self. Discontent had sprung into the open with campaigns to 'reclaim the party' by trades union leaders, known as 'the

awkward squad.' A 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the Labour Representation Committee was formed with the Socialist Campaign Group in Parliament. But Blair would not stay forever and he stood down in 2007, when Gordon Brown took over the reins and for a while it looked as if he had built up support to win a general election. But he chose not to call one and he had the misfortune though to preside over the 2008/9 financial crash. The Tories did not waste time in putting the blame on him and the Labour Government for this crisis which involved the nationalisation of two banks, Northern Rock and the Royal Bank of Scotland. It was out of necessity but would the Tories have done this or were they wedded too much to free market economics?

## **Austerity and Coalition Government**

In the 2010 election it looked as if the Tories would win an all out victory but it was a hung parliament, and they had to go into coalition with the Lib-Dems. This was suicidal for Liberal leader Nick Clegg who had built his popularity on abolishing student tuition fees. The government increased fees. Cameron and Clegg implemented a programme of austerity including cuts to public services and rises in VAT. This was soon to become very unpopular with voters. However the opposition by Ed Miliband, newly elected Labour leader was minimal. He said that the Tory/Liberal coalition was cutting 'too far and too fast'. But should they have been cutting at all?

## **Jeremy Corbyn and Momentum**

It was in response to austerity that the Labour Party elected Jeremy Corbyn as leader in 2015. This was after a second election defeat for Labour. Corbyn was a long standing left-winger who had been a



backbench MP and rebel for over 30 years. His election polarised the Party. His opponents were horrified, and supporters were both surprised and delighted. In 2016 he faced a second leadership contest against Owen Smith. This time he was elected with over 60% of the vote from members, trades union affiliates and registered supporters, but not MPs. The membership of the Party more than doubled with branches taking on new life and in some cases there were acrimonious debates. Thousands queued to get into public meetings. A new organisation called Momentum was set up.

## **Brexit**

If the 2015 election was a defeat for Labour it was a disaster for the Lib-Dems whose number of MPs was reduced to single figures. The good news for the Tories did not last long. Rashly, and in order to appease his party David Cameron had promised a referendum over Britain's membership of the European Union. In June 2016 much to his horror the vote went against him and he resigned. The 2017 election campaign resulted in a hung Parliament and humiliation for the Prime Minister, Theresa May who had replaced Cameron. Corbyn backed by Momentum mobilised mass canvasses in marginal seats, attracting hundreds of activists with a manifesto *For the Many not the Few*, which pledged to reverse austerity. The Tory lead of 20 points was gradually whittled down so and they lost their overall majority in Parliament.

For the next few years British politics was in turmoil with the Tories led by Theresa May losing key votes by large majorities in Parliament. Finally she resigned and Boris Johnson was elected leader of the Tories winning a large majority to 'get Brexit done.' Large numbers of traditional

Labour voters, who had voted for Brexit in 'Red Wall' constituencies felt abandoned by their party and voted Tory for the first time. The 2019 election was a defeat for Labour as the Tories won an 80 seat majority. Jeremy Corbyn was to step down when a new leader was elected.

## **COVID**

Then came the pandemic. Reluctantly Johnson called on the UK population to "stay at home" to defeat COVID-19. Previously he had wanted to rely on 'herd immunity'. Having called for a lockdown as in other countries, Labour was only able to follow this advice, perhaps with tougher and earlier restrictions. Much time had been lost.

In the Labour leadership election of 2020 Keir Starmer was elected, pledging himself to keep to the policies adopted by the Party under Corbyn, including nationalisation of public services. However he was to try to exclude pro-Corbyn members of the party from positions of influence, including becoming MPs. Corbyn himself was suspended from the Parliamentary Party for refusing to apologise for underestimating the extent of anti-Semitism in the Party.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, politics is not a game of cricket played on a level pitch. Much of what has been achieved by Labour over the last century would not have been done by the Tories. From the early days the British establishment were loathe to see the Labour Party as the main party of opposition and government, even at times of turbulence in the ranks of the Tory Party, like over the past year. The Tories as representative of the British ruling class claim to have the entitlement to govern

and much of what they are doing today has the aim of retaining themselves in power, with the mass media on their side.

The first part of this article – the Labour Party 1920-1951 was published in the Labour Heritage bulletin Autumn 2022.

## **The British Labour Party and the German Sozialdemokratisches Partie Deutschlands (SPD)**

**By Barbara Humphries**

There were many close contacts between members of the British Labour Party and the SPD before and after 1914. Up to 1914 the SPD was the largest socialist party in Europe, and the Labour Party was in its infancy. But the SPD had needed support from socialists throughout Europe at the time of the Kaiser's Anti-Socialist Laws. Eleanor Marx wrote articles about German socialism for the International Notes section of *Justice*, paper of the Social Democratic Foundation. She used this column to raise funds for the SPD. Many German socialists, such as Eduard Bernstein had been in exile in London, and this had strengthened his friendship with Ramsay MacDonald, William Morris, George Bernard Shaw and the Webbs. Max Beer was the London correspondent for the German socialist papers – *Vorwärts* and *Die Zeit*. After 1900 the SPD came to be seen as a model for the Labour Party, in terms of its organisation – with its million plus members, it boasted a whole raft of societies – sports, drama, choral, not to mention dozens of newspapers. In its strongholds it was an alternative way of life for its mainly working class supporters. Keir Hardie had been an admirer of its organisation, and attended its conferences in 1910 and 1913, visiting Hamburg, Berlin, Leipzig and Cologne.

However the more pessimistic predictions of Hyndman and Blatchford were to be borne out when the SPD unanimously voted for war credits in 1914. This blew away any hopes that the international socialist movement could stop World War 1. But those such as Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald who opposed WW1, still retained an audience in the SPD newspaper *Vorwärts*. They maintained contact with anti-war socialists in Germany such as Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht.



After 1918 the SPD model continued to impress the architects of the British Labour Party, in particular Herbert Morrison, who wanted its organisational strength to be applied to the newly formed London Labour Party. To some extent this was applied, as Labour Party constituencies acquired their own social life – with choral societies, drama groups, not to mention Labour Party whist drives! By 1952 the Labour Party was to become the largest socialist party in Europe, at the peak of its membership. The inter-war years had been troubled for German socialists to put it mildly. But socialists in Britain offered solidarity – the Labour Party condemned the Treaty of Versailles which was to bring hardship for German workers. Financial support was offered during the German trades unions strike against the occupation of the Ruhr Valley in 1923 by French troops. After the SPD was destroyed by the Nazis after 1933, many German socialists found themselves to be refugees, needing help in exile. But this assistance was not one-way. German trades unions

had raised financial funds for the TUC during the General Strike of 1926, and during the lockout of engineers in 1922.

From *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900-1931*, Stefan Berger, Clarendon Press, 1994

**Brother, be United, and you will be Strong: The Farm Workers' Union in the Basildon Area, 1872-94, Ted Woodgate**  
**Book Review by John Grigg**

Labour Heritage member Ted Woodgate's book focusses on the ups and downs of numerous branches of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) in that part of Essex around what is now the new town of Basildon. It records detail of the strikes and lockouts and how branches were formed and ceased to exist.

Farm workers in 1870 were at the bottom of the social hierarchy and living standards were woefully low. A history of deference to the local gentry and the 'touching of caps' was the accepted way of life. So the countryside seemed an unlikely place for resistance against the established order. Although from time to time there had been uprisings of protests – the 1381 Peasants Revolt (500 years earlier!) being the most famous.

But times were changing and the NALU was founded in 1872 led by the agricultural worker and Methodist preacher Joseph Arch. Membership nationally had grown to 40,000 by 1875 and the union had initial successes achieving wage increases. But as farmers organised against the union, and also because poor harvests and increasing agricultural depressions caused rural unemployment, the union's attainments and the membership declined over the next two decades. Despite some occasional late

local successes and revivals the union was dissolved in 1896.

In the South Essex District of the union that covers the area investigated by Ted there were 44 village union branches in 1877/78. By 1883/84 this had declined to 26 branches and by 1892 only 6 remained in the South Essex Division of the Union.

Ted's book is thoroughly researched and is an example of local working class history that Labour Heritage encourages. Its primary sources are the weekly union newspaper *The English Labourers' Chronicle* the *Essex Weekly News*, and *The Chelmsford Chronicle*. As I have discovered local newspapers contain a wealth of information about labour history.

As well as the main purpose of gaining wage increases the union had a Sick Benefit Fund which was an additional incentive for becoming a member.

The union's political connection, as in the trades union movement generally, was with the Liberal Party. (Joseph Arch, like a number of other trade union leaders, was a 'Lib/Lab' MP. He represented Norfolk, North Western from 1885 to 1900). The union in Essex, as well as elsewhere, campaigned for an extension of the franchise. Meetings were organised and were well attended, but there is evidence that for the general membership extension of the franchise, although seen as beneficial, was of secondary importance to the wages issue.

Gladstone's 1884 Third Reform Act extended the same voting qualifications that existed in the towns to the countryside. But many in the rural areas did not meet the property qualification which was ownership of land valued at £10 or paying rent of more than £10 per annum, and over 40% of men across the nation were still without the vote. (If the

disenfranchised female population is taken into account only 17% of the adult population had the vote!) However in the 1885 general election there is evidence that many of the extra votes went to the Liberal Party, and Ted's research concludes that the biggest swings were in areas where the NALU was strongest.

Being enfranchised enabled men to be appointed or elected to parish councils and Ted identifies parishes in North Essex where the union was most active as those where parish councils had more working class members.

What I like about books like this is that the research finds people, long forgotten, who fought for the improvement of the lives of oppressed sections of the community. Their names are now recorded in Ted's book – such as David Sage, secretary of the Union's South Essex District, and Gorge Ball from the North Essex District. Both worked tirelessly on the men's behalf. Also Mrs Calloway who was 'full of fighting enthusiasm for the Union.'

The decline of agriculture, increased unemployment and the growth of industrialisation not far away in East London finally did for the union in 1896.

The book also has photographs of five pubs in South Essex where NALU village branches used to meet. They are still there and perhaps Labour Heritage could organise a coach tour to visit them one weekend.

*Ted Woodgate's book can be purchased for £7.50 plus £1.50 postage and package. Initially Ted should be contacted on [tedwl@live.co.uk](mailto:tedwl@live.co.uk).*

## **People's History Podcast Series**

**by John McDonnell MP**

To understand and to add meaning and strength to current movements and campaigns it is invaluable that participants in today's struggles have an appreciation and knowledge of past struggles.

Over the 800 years, generation after generation of working-class people have thrown themselves into struggles and campaigns to improve their lives and livelihoods, to right injustices and fight for what we would regard as basic civil liberties, essential human rights and improved conditions of employment.

We now also live in tumultuous times.

But it is remarkable how little today's discussions of the issues facing society draw upon the lessons of past periods of change, across Britain, Europe and globally. If nothing else, understanding the past may enable us to avoid the mistakes of the past and build upon the lessons of experience.

The history of working class struggles and campaigns to improve their lives and livelihoods, address injustices and secure basic human rights is an impressive record of determination, courage, often self-sacrifice, and of course both success and at times, tragic failure. Having a sound understanding of this legacy should nourish and inform today's actions.

In this podcast series my aim is to introduce more of today's activists to the history and achievements of working-class struggles in Europe and globally over the past 800 years or so, and ensure the lessons of these great revolutions and transformative reform programmes can be applied in the struggles working people now face.

There are many misconceptions and false reporting about working-class revolt and progressive struggles. Consequently, we work with leading experts in their field to consider: What really happened? What was society like

at the time? What were the causes of revolt?  
And what is the legacy for politics today?

So, this is an invitation to join me talking to expert historians and activists to analyse and debate some of the key working class struggles of the 800 years of our history.

This podcast series is available wherever you get your podcasts, or via the Spotify player.

### **Episode 1 - The Peasants' Revolt**

Join John and three expert historians for a discussion of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the people's revolts of the 15th and 16th centuries. What caused the people's revolts? What was society really like in this period? And what were the lasting consequences for working people in Britain? John McDonnell explores this area of our history with historians Martin Empson, Ted Vallance and Justine Firnhaber-Baker, and a more recent employer of camp tactics in Climate Camp and Occupy, Joe Ryle.



### **Episode 2 - The Civil War**

Join John for an exploration of the English Civil War (1642–1651) with historians Ann Hughes, John Rees and Ted Vallance. What caused the English Civil War (1642–1651)? What was society like for working people in this period? And what impact did the Civil War have on society then - and now, more than three centuries on? Explore this interesting area of our history with John McDonnell and three expert historians: Ann Hughes, John Rees and Ted Vallance.

### **Episode 3 - The Chartists**

Explore the Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s with John McDonnell and historians Emma Griffin, Katrina Navickas and Rob Sewell. The Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s was the first mass movement driven by Britain's working classes. But how and why did the movement arise? What was society really like for working people at the time? And what were the lasting impacts and implications of the Chartists' struggle? Explore this fascinating area of our history with John McDonnell and three expert historians: Emma Griffin, Katrina Navickas and Rob Sewell.



### **Episode 4 - The Foundation of the Labour Party**

An exploration of rise of the trade union movement and eventual foundation of the Labour Party in 1900, with John McDonnell and three expert historians and activists.

Exploring the rise of the trade union movement and eventual foundation of the Labour Party in 1900, with John McDonnell and three expert historians and activists: Matthew Worley, Simon Hannah and Baroness Pauline Bryan.

### **Episode 5 - The Attlee Government**

A discussion on the background to and the formation of the Attlee Government in 1945, with Francis Beckett, author, journalist, biographer and historian; Rebecca Long-Bailey, Member of Parliament for Salford and Eccles, and former Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; and Paul Dimoldenberg, Labour Councillor in Westminster since 1982 and author of 'Building the New Jerusalem'.



## Episode 6 - Struggles against fascism and the far right in Italy and Spain

This episode explores the conditions that led to their rise and the left struggles in both country during and after the establishment of both fascist regimes - John McDonnell speaks to three expert historians: Jessica Thorne; David Broder and Professor Paul Preston.

## Episode 7 - The Russian Revolution

On the Russian revolution, its successes, failures and lessons for today. A discussion on the context and events of the Russian Revolution including the nature of Russian society prior to the revolution; the emergence of the revolutionary movements and the Bolshevik Party; what sparked the revolution and the civil war; and the lasting international impact of the revolution. John McDonnell speaks to two expert historians and activists: Professor Mary Davis and Paul Feldman.



## Episode 8 - Global Environmental Movements

An exploration of how global environmental movements have emerged and where next for these movements, with John McDonnell, Vijay Prashad and Asad Rehman. Exploring the formation, impact and goals of environmental movements globally and how they intersect with the fight against global inequality.

## Episode 9 - The History of Anti-Colonial Struggle

The history of anti-colonial struggle is explored with John McDonnell, Asad Rehman (War on Want) and Heidi Chow (Debt Justice). Exploring the history of anti-colonialism, struggles against neo-colonialism, and the continued fight against global inequality.

## Episode 10 - The EU and Freedom of Movement

Exploring the state of the left across Europe, the European Union movement and one of its core principles in-depth - free movement. John McDonnell speaks to Dr Philippe Marlière and Dr Maya Goodfellow. Exploring the state of the left across Europe, the fight against the rising far-right, the European Union movement and one of its core principles - the concept of free movement and the role it played in the Brexit debate.

This was a talk given by John McDonnell at the Essex Labour Conference November 2023.

<https://peoples-history.simplecast.com/>

## Letters

I was interested to read Sam Johnson's contribution in the Spring 2023 bulletin although disappointed that she has given so much credit to Annie Besant and the Fabians for their alleged role in helping the matchwomen take strike action against Bryant and May in 1888. It would seem that Sam has not had the benefit of reading the excellent work by Louise Raw. Her book *Striking a Light* was published in 2009 by Bloomsbury with many reprints since. Louise demonstrates by her meticulous research findings that contrary to the claim that Annie Besant was a leader of the matchwomen's strike, it was the women themselves who led the walk out in July 1888. Indeed two days into the strike Besant appears not to have been aware of it having started. She was not expecting them when a 200 strong group of striking women presented themselves at her Bouverie Street offices two days after the walk out. Indeed she had not favoured those women taking strike action, preferring a consumer boycott of Bryant and May matches.

The strike not only won the 1,400 workers their demands in terms of pay and health

and safety (remind you of the 2022-23 struggles?) but had a strong influence on other East End workers such as the dockers and gas workers.

Each year the Matchwomen are remembered in the Matchwomen's Festival to be held this year on Saturday, 15 July beginning at 2pm until 10pm at the Bow Arts Trust, 183, Bow Road, London E3 2SJ. There is an "Eventbrite" ticket booking facility on the web site (search Matchwomen's Festival).

Please read the book. You can borrow it from your public library.

Gwen Cook

Diane Hayter's piece in the Summer 2022 bulletin in favour of history as distinct from psychology, sociology and anything else was welcome.

In the USA, from where I am writing, in my wife's country, the failure of the labour and Liberal movements to protect our subjects from over-dilution by these other subjects in the rubric of high school Social Studies and in popular TV journalism, for sure, accounts for a lot of the bad features of a too great immutable or unchangeable present mindedness, which explains a lot of disasters like uncontrolled guns through a mythical non-historical understanding of later eighteenth century society and its constitution so-called on one level. Or on another level, more recently, the botched if necessary withdrawal from Afghanistan military occupation.

But please, Labour Heritage writers from John Grigg to Dr. Humphries, in vast ranges of knowledge, have tried to emphasize that behind the mistakes as much as the successes of every one of the Labour governments, whose rarity Labour Peeress Hayter celebrates, is a mass

movement from the grassroots up in sheer variety of socialism and radicalism alike.

In my own research, for my forthcoming book on the first two Jewish women Labour MPs, Phillips and Gould, I have found for instance that the women's movement that they represented was often very badly ignored by these male-dominated Labour governments she praises, yet both in 1929 to 1931 and 1945 to 1950, the women's movement was aided in many rebellious votes by around one hundred or so idealistic male Labour MPs of the character of the aging Sidney Silverman to the youngster if long-living one, Dick Crossman.

Who knows? If they had been listened to at all by the two right-wing respective MacDonal-Snowdon and Attlee-Bevan leaderships, then, not only might those governments have been more long-living but important causes like family allowances and state of Israel basic recognition might all have come about much earlier than they did.

Lastly, Lady Hayter may parrot the common line at the moment of both the Corbyn and Starmer front benchers that Brexit may not necessarily be reversible, but to many of us Remainers, it is the future still to remain and big Labour cities like even northern Newcastle, where I did my first degree, strongly in youngsters and educational worth, see still no future in isolationism whatsoever."

Larry Iles

For more information about Labour Heritage and access to previous bulletins go to the website at [www.labourheritage.com](http://www.labourheritage.com)