

NEW UNIONISM

How workers can fight back



A dayschool to discuss struggles past and present
Saturday 18 February 2012

Reading pack

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(Picture shows the Bryant & May matchworkers' strike committee, 1888)

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**A dayschool to discuss struggles past and present
Hosted by Workers' Liberty**

This pack contains reading linked to the themes of the workshops at the event. With this pack, you can read about the themes and topics even of the workshops you don't attend – or find out what you missed if you didn't attend the dayschool!

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NEW UNIONISM

By Cathy Nugent

(From *Solidarity* 234, 15 February 2012 -

<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2012/02/15/new-unionism-1880s>)

Beginning in the late 1880s, a great unionising drive among unskilled and semi-skilled workers began. This period of “new unionism” lasted — with setbacks and shifts in character along the way — right up to the 1920s.

1887 marked the beginning of a trade boom — short-lived, like most capitalist booms and slumps at the time. And, as in the past, a unionising drive followed. It was more extensive than before. From the beginning of 1888 there was an upsurge in strike action, much of it in the basic industries around the UK — mines, cotton mills, iron and steel works. In 1889 a summer-long strike wave around east London included the most famous “new unionist” action of all — the London docks strike.

The foundations for new unionism had already been laid. In 1871 the population of Great Britain was 31.5 million people. Of these, 8.2 million men and 3.2 million women were waged workers. One estimate for the number of trade union members among them put it at just 143,000. By 1881, the population had grown to 35 million and trade unions had expanded to 266,000 members.

Trade unions in the 1850s and 60s had very much been craft societies and confined to the skilled workers. But by the 1870s mining unions and mill workers’ unions were organising all grades of workers. New sections of workers were now organising; gasworkers formed an East End Union in 1872. Some of these unions survived, others did not.

The leaders of Victorian craft-based unions tried to meet the expectations of Victorian employers, and took care to present themselves as skilled, responsible, steady workmen. In contrast, the bosses hated and feared unskilled, itinerant and casual workers.

Socialist Harry Quelch described the attitudes of the skilled artisan worker with contempt: “Can there be anything more exasperating than to hear a skilled artisan, who ought to know that the whole of society is living on the labour of himself and his mates, skilled and unskilled, talking of his home as ‘not bad for a working man’, his set of books as ‘quite creditable for a working man’, his children as ‘a good-looking set of kids for a working man’ and so on?”

Some of the most ambitious union leaders got themselves elected to Parliament. Alexander MacDonald and Thomas Burt of the Miners’ Union became MPs in 1874. But they were Liberals. The performance of “Lib-Lab”

trade union-sponsored MPs — 12 were elected in 1885 — helped turn trade unionists away from both the toadying policy of the old unions and a reliance on the Liberal Party to deliver for the workers.

The first high-profile confrontation of the period came in July 1888 when matchworkers at Bryant and May's east London factory struck in solidarity with a sacked colleague. Conditions at the firm had been exposed by the socialist H H Champion in the *Labour Elector*, by Tom Mann in an 1886 pamphlet arguing for the eight-hour day, and by Annie Besant in *The Link*.

The young, mostly casual, mostly women workers (some as young as 13) worked very long hours and were paid just four shillings an hour. They were subject to all kinds of humiliations including arbitrary fines for trivial misdemeanours. Because they ate at their benches, they ingested white phosphorus, causing a debilitating disease of the jaw ("Phossy Jaw").

Annie Besant, a Fabian socialist, has been given most of the credit for the matchworkers strike. But as Louise Raw's 2011 book, *Striking a Light*, convincingly tells us, they were a self-organised workforce with a history of struggle. And they went on to found a "new union", the Matchmakers Union.

The matchworkers were the sisters, mothers, daughters, wives and inspiration for other East End workers who would strike a year later. Many were from Irish immigrant families. They could not have been more different — in temperament and in outlook — to the craft unionists of the earlier period.

The writing of the history's next chapter was led by Will Thorne, a Birmingham-born gasworker who had been agitating for a gasworkers' union at the Beckton works in east London from as early as 1884.

The story of how the gasworkers' union (the ancestor of the modern GMB union) was founded is the clearest example of how socialists influenced the formation of the new trade unions.

Who were the socialists? The Democratic Federation, later the Social Democratic Federation, was for many years the largest and most influential socialist organisation of this period. It was set up in 1881 by a well-to-do man, H M Hyndman, who had an idiosyncratic reading of socialist theory and an autocratic manner, and who denied the importance of trade union struggle.

Neither the SDF, nor its split off, the Socialist League of William Morris, had much idea about how to prepare the ground for political working-class struggles or how to develop workers' organisation. Their role was simply to make propaganda, to prepare for "the crisis". Morris explained his resolve at the time of the SDF-SL split: "To teach ourselves and others what the due social claims of labour are... with the view to dealing with the crisis if it should come in our day, or handing on the tradition of our hope to others if we should die before it comes."

But the SDF was not a homogenous organisation. Leading trade unionists Tom Mann, Will Thorne and Ben Tillett were all members at one time or

another. As socialists began to throw themselves into the class struggle they had to think about how to address the issues thrown up — union recognition, the employers' offensive, strike-breaking...

Will Thorne and his workmates had been powerfully affected by general socialist agitation for an eight-hour day (Tom Mann had set up an Eight Hours League in 1886). Their job of stoking the monster furnaces was made more hellish by the fact that they had to work 12-hour shifts.

Thorne made a new attempt to organise a union in spring 1889, spurred on by the introduction of "The Iron Man" into the Beckton works. This new machine was constantly breaking down causing extra time to be worked making the repairs. Some men on the Sunday shift were asked, with no notice, to work 18 hours. Thorne, talking many years later about that time, said: "This was the psychological moment for forming the union." Like the matchworkers, the gasworkers had simply had enough.

Following a mass meeting a union was formed. By mid-April 1889, the union had 3,000 members. It was to be a general union for unskilled workers.

It grew incredibly quickly, and by the middle of July 1889 both of London's major gas companies had acceded to the new union's eight-hour day demand.

In 1889 the main docks in the port of London were in the control of five companies.

Alongside the docks was a complex of wharves spread out along the river, which by the mid-1800s handled the bulk of trade.

This complex and busy industry created a highly differentiated workforce with many separate and specialised trades and jobs. A multitude of other workers serviced the port trade. But the biggest segment was made up of relatively unskilled, very casually employed (often surplus) workers. Their lives were grim — a daily struggle against starvation, homelessness.

The rise of the wharf business had resulted in huge competition within the port. There had also been a tailing off of the rate of overall increase of trade in the port. A squeeze on profits followed, and that led to a squeeze on an already deeply impoverished and underemployed workforce.

The hourly rate of wages (usually 5d) was supplemented by an extra payment called "the plus". This was calculated on a tonnage basis but the company never disclosed the scales on which the plus was based. In the late 1880s the scales were revised downwards.

At some docks the work was let out to small contractors who would employ as few dockers as possible and worked them as hard as possible. These abuses came on top of daily humiliation at the "call on" — the practice at some docks of choosing the casual workers. A contemporary report in the Times said:

"There is a chain put up right across the entrance to the docks, and the contractors are on one side of the chain and the men the other.... 1,500 to 2,000 men crowded together, the front men forced up against the chain: the back

men are climbing over the heads of those in front, and the contractor behind the chain is picking out the men, generally his own favourites or somebody recommended by his own favourites.

"I myself had had eight or 10 men upon my shoulders and my head, and I have been hurt several times in a struggle for employment like that."

There had been earlier attempts to organise. Socialists involved in the Land and Labour League (an early socialist organisation) built a dock workers' union and led a strike in 1872.

In 1887 Ben Tillett, who became the leader of the 1889 strike, set up a new port workers' union, the Tea Operatives and General Labourers' Union. It was very hard going.

But on 12 August 1889 a dispute broke out at the South West India Dock over the distribution of the "plus" on the "Lady Armstrong". The strike quickly spread and demands were shaped. These included 6d an hour (forever known as the "dockers' tanner"), a minimum shift of four hours work, a reduction in the number of "call ons", and an overtime rate of 8d an hour.

The solidarity of the stronger, more "craft"-oriented stevedores union was crucial. They encouraged other port workers to join the strike, they already knew how to organise a strike committee, and they were a powerful group of workers whose action could bring work at the docks to a halt.

Tillett called on other socialist organisers such as Tom Mann and John Burns to help in the dispute. Burns was already well-known as a socialist "stump orator" around the docks. Eleanor Marx acted as the unpaid secretary for the dispute. Funds were very short and only grew when big donations came through from Australia (where over £30,000 was raised). The women of the docks organised a rent strike.

At the end of August, in the face of continued intransigence by the dock companies, a plan was hatched to call a London-wide general strike. Tom Mann was probably the main architect of the plan.

The plan was quickly abandoned, but it was based on a real and continued general unrest in London. Groups of workers on strike during 1889 included: printers, export iron mongers, millers, Pickfords workers, jam factory workers, young women rope makers, iron workers, Bryant and May workers (again), coal depot workers, brewery workers, sea-going engineers, carpenters, shipwrights, Peak Frean biscuit factory workers, Billingsgate cutlery workers, ordinary engineers, builders at Woolwich Arsenal, laundry workers. At the beginning of September, Jewish tailors, cigar and cigarette makers and book finishers went out on strike.

The docks strike came to a successful end when the ship owners put pressure on the dock companies and a section of the wharf owners moved to settle. 6d an hour and negotiations on an end to the "plus" and contract system of employment were granted.

The great London docks strike was an enormously important turning point in the history of the British labour movement. The new union which emerged — the Dock Wharf Riverside and General Workers Union (with 18,000 members by the end of 1889) — set a pattern for other “new unions” in and outside London.

The innovations of this period were:

- The organisation of workers deemed to be “unskilled”.
- The recruitment of members from a wide range of industries and occupations. The establishment of general unions such as the Gasworkers’ Union.
- The commitment to being “fighting unions”, charging low membership subscriptions, and using what funds they did have for strike pay.
- Militancy. In a pamphlet on new unionism, Tom Mann and Ben Tillett described new unions as centres for educating workers in collective class consciousness.
- Political radicalism, questioning the adherence to the Liberal Party.
- Making space for the organisation of women workers.

By 1891 there were 274 unions with 1,500,000 members. Other important unions organising semi-skilled and unskilled workers were the National Union of Dock Labour (Glasgow and Liverpool), the National Amalgamated Union of Sailors and Firemen, the National Amalgamated Labourers’ Union (Cardiff), the National Amalgamated Union of Labour (Tyneside), the Metropolitan Cab Drivers’ Trade Union, the London County Tramway and Omnibus Employees’ Trade Union. There were some 2,400 strikes and 11 million work-days lost between 1889 and 1890.

By 1893, one third of the new membership had been lost. Entire unions collapsed and died. Some of the unions which became extinct were small and local, and others disappeared through merger, but nonetheless there was a big slump in organisation. Why?

The short answer is that by 1892 economic slump and rising unemployment had re-emerged, lasting until the second half of the 1890s. And new technology — such as the introduction of steamships — was putting many out of work.

In these years, the employers went on the offensive. They set up explicitly anti-union, bosses’ combat organisations. The Shipping Federation, for example, organised armies of strike-breakers with military precision. It would be 20 years before the unions felt strong enough to put up a really serious defence.

In the meantime, and increasingly, the surviving new unions built stronger links with each other. In 1896 the International Federation of Ship, Dock and River Workers was set up (the employers’ offensive was not confined to the UK).

The century ended with a lock-out of engineers by a newly formed employers' organisation. It was a test of strength in which the engineers lost. In this context Tom Mann worked on the formation of the Workers' Union (in 1898) — a union for the unskilled and semi-skilled workers which unions such as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers simply were not organising (despite rule book changes to facilitate it).

The Workers' Union was not an industrial union (that was the "big idea" whose time would come later). It was a general union. In Mann's words, it was "open to any section of workers of either sex for whom no proper union already existed".

Despite the setback, the experiences of "new unionism" laid the basis for two other developments. These were a parallel development of growing independent "labour" politics and a future wave of industrial militancy, beginning around 1910: the Great Unrest.

In late 1889, the Gasworkers' Union had stood for, and won, two seats on the Barking School Board (an important arena for working-class political representation). West Ham Council had four "new unionists" as councillors.

The founding conference of the Independent Labour Party, held in Bradford in 1893, was, according to Henry Pelling, visibly the product of "new unionism".

Here was "a new type of political delegate — the intelligent, respectable, working trade unionist of the new labour clubs. Men [mostly men, though many women joined the ILP] of this type, young and friendly, their countenances gleaming with good humour above their loose red ties, dominated the scene. They were not politicians for politics' sake; they were the working class in earnest, the product of the new education and the widening franchise. Their enthusiasm and discipline impressed the observers in the gallery and the reporters who crowded at the press table. They were the tangible evidence of a new factor in British politics". The ILP and its founder Keir Hardie (elected MP for West Ham South in 1892) were sure that Parliament was a useful arena for working class politics.

Although held back by declining union strength and the anti-union climate (the Taff Vale judgement of 1901 undermined the legality of strike action), the class struggle did begin, incrementally, to rise.

Union membership grew from 1.5 million in 1895 to 2 million in 1900. A rise of real wages between 1900 to 1910 began to tail off; this was a crucial factor behind growing unrest.

The "Great Unrest" (1910-14), as it became known, was preceded and inspired by several precursor struggles — Penrhyn Quarry strikes (1901), the Belfast Dock Strike (1907), the Plebs strike (1909), the Durham and Northumberland miners strike (1910), and the Cambrian Combine strike (1910).

Revolutionary industrial attitudes, methods and ideas became an influential force within the renewed movement. The extent and exact nature of the influence of explicitly revolutionary ideas is a matter of debate, but they were certainly key parts of big movements internationally — in parts of Europe, the USA, Latin America and Australia. Groups of like-minded individuals and organisations were known variously as “industrial syndicalists”, “revolutionary syndicalists” or “anarcho-syndicalists”. The different labels reflected slightly different strategic goals.

The profile of the syndicalists in Britain was raised by the involvement of Tom Mann – his organising flair helped galvanise struggles like the Liverpool Transport Workers’ strike (1911). Mann had been “converted” to syndicalism while living and working in Australia.

As the trade unions became increasingly concerned with the formulation of state policy directed at working-class lives and protecting their interests more consistently, the capitalist class was looking for ways to defuse class struggle by incorporating trade union representatives into bargaining institutions. One of the features of the Great Unrest was local and particular unions testing and challenging the functioning and basis of those institutions.

Increasingly, trade unionists were dismayed at the resistance of union officials to any kind of direct action at a time when direct action was desperately needed. That is both the story of then, and of our own times.

HOW TO BE A TROUBLEMAKER

(From *Solidarity* 232, 1 February 2012 - <http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2012/02/01/union-organising-how-be-troublemaker>)

Kim Moody is a writer and activist in the labour movement. His books include *Workers In A Lean World* and *US Labor in Trouble and Transition*. In 1979, he helped found *Labor Notes*, an independent trade union magazine that has gone on to become one of the most important focuses for rank-and-file organising in the American trade union movement. Now based in Britain, Kim is involved in *Trade Union Solidarity* magazine. He spoke to us about the *Labor Notes* publication *The Troublemaker's Handbook*, a guide to militant organising at work.

There are two *Troublemaker's Handbooks* (TMH), the first published in 1991, the more recent one in 2005.

The first TMH was the result of a “Workplace Strategies School” which *Labor Notes* (LN) held in 1989. This was based mainly on union members relating experiences of using tactics or ways of organising that worked — i.e., won. There were about 100 workers from a variety of unions and industries at the weekend-long school, and about 25 workshops on different issues, but mostly focused on the workplace.

The “stories” were so great that we had the idea of pulling them together in a book. We (LN) hired Dan La Botz, an experienced socialist, activist and writer, to do this. As he worked on it, he ran across even more “stories” and ideas about workplace struggle. So the first TMH ended up being quite long.

Although Dan edited it, it involved dozens of rank-and-file union activists, helping to solidify the network we always hoped to build. The LN staff also helped out, so it was a very collective effort.

I think it did help a number of the workers involved see the bigger class picture, because it involved people from all kinds of jobs facing similar problem and using collective means to fight back.

The second version of the TMH was edited by LN staffer Jane Slaughter, and involved the same collective process. By the time we did the newer one, LN had held several conferences, drawing up to a thousand union activists, and five weekend schools dealing with lean production and new management methods. So the experience was even richer.

TMH is used mainly by workplace activists, stewards, and reps, but it also serves as an educational tool for many union locals [branches]. A few “official” unions have used it in their training programs, such as the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (before merging several times with other,

more conservative, unions); the United Electrical Workers; sometimes the Communications Workers of America. Various labour education programmes or individual union tutors in the US use it, typically by reproducing pages or chapters of it. Mostly, though, it is individual activists, groups of militants, or local unions that use it. The first version sold about 15,000 copies, the second probably more.

Its success inspired LN to organise “Troublemakers’ Schools”. These are one-day schools that have been held in about 20 cities in the last couple of years. LN staff initiates them, but it is local people who put them together, select the workshop leaders, etc. These schools, too, have helped to create a growing (admittedly very loose) network of workplace activists across the country. One result was that the last LN conference in 2010 drew 1,200 people — the biggest yet.

These conferences are not one-day rallies, but weekend educational events with about 50 workshops and a number of plenary sessions. People are encouraged to use the weekend to make links with others or even to form rank-and-file networks in their own unions. They typically draw about 100 immigrant workers and many international participants.

TMH has been used by reform groups [rank-and-file campaigns for democratic reform within particular unions or union branches] such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union, New Directions in the Transport Workers Union Local 100, and many smaller, local ones.

It brings people with diverse views on many questions together and teaches them how to look at their problem collectively in an era when the powers-that-be want us to think in individual terms. It allow reformers, militants, and radicals to bring more conservatively-minded workers together to get a bigger view of what conflict at work is really about, and to see things across the entire working class. It’s political in that it deals with a wide variety of issues, including race, gender, and international connections, but puts them in a class context and proposes collective ways to fight back. Struggle is the force that overcomes conservative views, and TMH provides practical ways to conduct struggle.

TMH can do this in part because it and LN are viewed as being independent of both the union bureaucracy and of any particular political group, even though some of the staff and close supporters are known socialists.

Despite being embedded in the US (and, to a lesser extent, Canadian) industrial relations systems, which are quite different from the UK, I think TMH is particularly relevant today because you now have a situation here where stewards and activists are buried alive in “casework”; i.e., individual grievances, tribunals, etc.

Since that has long been the case in the US, TMH attempts to address this by finding ways to turn individual grievances into collective actions whenever possible.

Here in the UK, we are in a situation where most of our high-level leaders, even the most left-wing of them, can't seem to think beyond one-day strikes. For its part, too much of the revolutionary left sees union activity in terms of running for high office, as though that was a shortcut to mobilisation and grassroots organisation. Changing things or reviving our unions involves more than ritualistic calls for a general strike or running for places on National Executives. It means building from the base in the workplace or on-the-job, activating people collectively, and expanding consciousness through struggle. TMH is one of many tools for doing that.

One-day strikes are just not effective in most cases. A problem here, of course, is that to strike legally there must be a ballot beforehand, which means it's harder to catch the employer off-balance. However, once the ballot has been taken the union can decide when and where to strike, so rolling, selective and repetitive strikes are possibilities. There are also various "inside strategies", like work-to-rule or additional harassment tactics like "quickie" stoppages on the job, mass grievances, everyone coming to work late by a few minutes, etc. This kind of thing is in both editions of TMH. In the final analysis, however, the open-ended [indefinite] strike is workers' most powerful weapon if well-prepared and conducted. This means various efforts at activating and mobilising members before the strike, again using some of the tactics you can find in TMH.

It's also worth keeping mind that several groups of workers have simply defied the law in the last few years and gotten away with it.

For the government to come down hard on a large, strategically important, group like the engineering construction workers is somewhat risky. So, they turn the other way and pretend nothing happened. This wouldn't necessarily work for all workers, but if enough people did it, it might bring aspects of the anti-union laws into public debate.

In fact, it's already in public debate. The Tories want to make it harder to strike at all. A little "civil disobedience" might well be in order.

I think something like LN, adapted to British conditions, would be extremely useful for getting the trade union movement going again. We have a problem with turning points that don't turn. There's a big strike or occupation, but no follow-up.

A UK version of LN could help build a cross-union network that could provide some continuity. It would provide access to various strategies and tactics, a network of workplace reps and activists to spread these kind of ideas and, when possible, organise for them. We hope the re-launched Trade Union Solidarity magazine can play this role.

Of course, it takes time to build up a network across union lines. A UK TMH is a great idea, one that Sheila Cohen of *Trade Union Solidarity* [and author of *Ramparts of Resistance*] has been suggesting for some time.

It is a big project, however. Like the first one we did in the US, you need to build up the “stories” and tactics by extending and deepening the network. Perhaps some “schools”, where people tell what kind of tactics worked for them, would be a way to start.

THE PLEBS LEAGUE AND WORKING-CLASS SELF-EDUCATION

By Colin Waugh

(From *Solidarity* 144, 15 January 2009 -
<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2009/01/16/league-plebs>)

In October 1908 industrial workers who were union-sponsored students at Ruskin College in Oxford founded what they called the League of the "Plebs". Former students who had returned to their jobs as miners, railwayworkers, textile workers and engineers, supported them.

From January 1909 they began to organise socialist classes in South Wales, the North East, Lancashire and other working-class areas. Under the umbrella of the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), there were, by 1926-27, 1,201 classes like this across Britain, with 31,635 students.

Many classes that had begun in this way were still running in 1964. In February 1909 the students launched a monthly, *The Plebs Magazine*, which continued till 1970. Between 26 March and 6 April 1909 they conducted the "Ruskin College strike" (actually a boycott of lectures). And in September 1909, with the union and socialist support they had built, they opened the Central Labour College, which survived until 1929.

Working-class political independence demands that workers produce for themselves, from amongst their own ranks, thinkers and organisers who remain answerable to them. The Ruskin students and ex-students understood this and went a long way towards creating the mechanisms necessary for achieving it. What was the background to their actions?

After Chartism collapsed in 1848, ruling class Christian socialists decided that, as well as armed force and the "dull compulsion of economic relations", an ideological weapon was needed against any future resurgence of working-class self-assertion. The answer, in their view, was to create within the working class a layer of class collaborationists. They saw adult education as a good method for doing this. One product of this approach was the university extension movement.

During the 1870s Cambridge, Oxford and London Universities all developed extension networks. They sent lecturers all over the country to give talks on topics of general interest, often to very large audiences. Some working-class groups — for example Northumberland miners in the 1880s — did attend extension lectures. However, by about 1900 it was clear that working-class people, and union activists in particular, were rejecting extension. It was equally clear that socialist ideas were gaining support

amongst a growing minority of militants. (This was a period when some workers would go without food to buy a secondhand book, and risk the sack by reading it at work.)

In 1899 two American socialists, Walter Vrooman and Charles Beard, tried to create a movement for working-class adult education in England. They were inspired by the ideas of the former Oxford university professor and art critic, John Ruskin. They set up Ruskin “halls” in several working class centres, a system of correspondence tuition, and local discussion groups linked to it, plus the residential Ruskin college in Oxford. (The money for this came from Vrooman’s wife.) At the start, Ruskin in Oxford was a mixture of utopian colony and labour college. But soon working-class activists sponsored by union branches came to form the overwhelming majority of its students.

In 1902, Vrooman and Beard returned to the US. Now the college had to look for other sources of funding.

In the late 1890s, Albert Mansbridge offered the extension movement a way of recruiting and holding working-class students. Mansbridge was a working-class product of the extension movement itself. He was also an ardent Anglo-Catholicism convert. He particularly enjoyed mingling with the bishops and upper-class tutors who ran the Oxford Extension Delegacy. Mansbridge’s idea was that, instead of one-off public lectures to large audiences, they should provide classes for small groups, focused on social, political and economic topics. This would provide a route for selected working-class students to progress to Oxford itself, where they should do a special diploma in economics. The result would eventually be a layer of union activists and working-class politicians who believed in harmony between employers and workers. Sir Robert Morant, the chief civil servant at the Board of Education, wrote a clause that empowered local authorities to fund classes of this type into the 1902 Education Act.

In 1903 Mansbridge founded the organisation which eventually became the WEA. The Oxford Extension Delegacy backed this at once. As well as this, a group of young, upper class, Christian socialist Oxford tutors aligned themselves with Mansbridge’s approach. They formed a semi-secret group, the “Catiline Club”, which aimed to convince broader sections of the establishment that this was the way forward. The rising tide of strikes in the early 1900s made this solution increasingly attractive.

The WEA/Extension project needed an institution which could function as a halfway house between tutorial classes and Oxford University. Ruskin College was earmarked for this role.

Along with the growth of working class self organisation in this period, new forms of rank and file unionism and socialism from below began to appear. These included movements for industrial (as opposed to craft) unionism, and syndicalism. In 1906 a Liberal government came to power, and gave several union leaders jobs supervising its welfare reforms. This caused

the interest in rank and file control to grow stronger. The poor performance of the 37 MPs elected for the first time as the Labour Party added to rank and file dissatisfaction.

In this situation, ideas put forward by the US academic Daniel De Leon became influential. The Socialist Labour Party group in Scotland published *Two Pages from Roman History*, a reprint of two talks given by De Leon in 1902. In the first of these, De Leon drew a parallel as follows. In Rome, after the plebs — the poor and working people — withdrew from the city in 494 BC, the ruling class created “tribunes of the people”. These functionaries were supposed to represent the plebs, but in fact ended up by selling them out. De Leon argued that the mainstream trade union bureaucrats were doing the same for the working class of his day.

Another factor which affected the growth of socialist ideas amongst workers in England and Wales at this time was the character of the main universities.

Because of the 1789, 1830 and 1848 revolutions, universities on the continent produced a thin layer of educated people who were prepared to throw in their lot with the working-class movement. (Examples include Marx, Plekhanov, Kautsky, Lenin and Luxemburg.) But in England the two main universities — and especially Oxford — reflected the compromise between the bourgeoisie and aristocracy at the end of the Civil War. They were dominated by the need to produce Anglican clergymen, civil servants and colonial administrators. If Oxford graduates became socialists at all, they became Christian socialists like those who backed Mansbridge, not revolutionaries. Working class activists here, then, had to do most of their thinking in isolation from educated people. This forced them to rely on reading the main socialist texts for themselves. On top of this, many texts which we now think of as essential had not yet been translated into English.

In 1907 the TUC leadership gave in to rank and file pressure, and put out an appeal across the whole movement to support Ruskin College. This meant that Ruskin might have for the first time a reasonably secure future as a labour college. The leaders of the WEA/Extension alliance realised that they must seize control before the chance to incorporate Ruskin in their project was lost.

The WEA annual conference in August 1907 was held during the Oxford Extension Delegacy annual meeting. The Portsmouth shipyard worker and Labour councillor J MacTavish made a speech in favour of tutorial classes. The Delegacy then set up a joint working party with the WEA to report on Oxford and Working-Class Education. This report was written by Mansbridge and MacTavish for the WEA, and members of the Catiline Club for the university. It recommended tutorial classes throughout the country. These in turn would select working-class students to enter Oxford. The report also put forward detailed proposals about syllabuses, teaching methods and how

extension tutors could handle Marxist ideas. It endorsed the idea that Ruskin should become the main entry point for tutorial students progressing to Oxford.

In January 1908, the WEA opened its first tutorial classes, in Longton in Staffordshire and in Rochdale. The Catiline Club member RH Tawney taught both of them, and workers signed up. This was evidence that Mansbridge's approach could work in practice.

The students who were at Ruskin in 1907 had their own ideas about the adult education which workers needed. They called this Independent Working-Class Education (IWCE). It was flatly opposed to the WEA/Extension model as set out in Oxford and Working-Class Education. Instead of revering mainstream higher education like Mansbridge did, they saw this as "orthodox" education which reflected the class interests of the well-off and must therefore necessarily miseducate workers.

They thought that the content of adult education for workers should be Marxist economics, industrial history and philosophy, which to them meant the capacity to reason things out for yourself. Like Mansbridge, they favoured a participatory teaching and learning method. Their method, however, was borrowed from the SLP group in Scotland. It involved close reading and small group discussion of classic socialist texts. It aimed to produce activists who could hold their own in arguments, including against ruling class spokespersons. They had already begun to use this approach amongst themselves.

Once an interim version of Oxford and Working-Class Education had come out (in mid 1908) Oxford University management began to intervene directly in the running of Ruskin College. A key supporter of the extension project who was already on the staff of Ruskin, H B Lees Smith, was moved to a position of increased power, and he then appointed two of his friends as lecturers.

The executive committee of the College was restructured so that the authority of the principal appointed by Vrooman and Beard, the socialist Dennis Hird, was undermined. Compulsory exams (called "Revision Papers") were introduced, to control which students could go on to a second year. The executive tried to ban Hird from teaching sociology. Students were banned from speaking in public. Because students were starting to challenge the newly appointed lecturers about their teaching of economics, and even to stay away from their lectures, all lectures were made compulsory.

During the autumn term of 1908, Ruskin students kept on being invited to tea with Oxford tutors, and prominent figures from the university came to speak to them in the college. The most famous such visit was in October 1908, by the chancellor of Oxford and former viceroy of India, Lord Curzon. He and Dennis Hird clashed in front of the students about whether Ruskin should relate to the university or to the labour movement.

The Extensionists were also lobbying in the House of Lords and putting articles into the press. In one article, the recently-appointed Ruskin vice-principal Charles Sydney Buxton wrote: 'The necessary common bond is education in citizenship, and it is this which Ruskin College tries to give — conscious that it is only a new patch on an old garment, an idealist experiment in faece Romuli'. This was a posh way of saying that the Ruskin students were the dregs of British imperial society.

The students and ex-students mobilised against the WEA/Extension attempt to seize control. In October 1908, they formed the League of the "Plebs". (This name was a reference to De Leon's pamphlet but also as a response to Buxton's article.) Later in the term they published a pamphlet, *The Burning Question of Education*. (This title echoes another pamphlet by De Leon, *The Burning Question of Trade Unionism*). In this, they argued that Ruskin should have "a more satisfactory relation to the labour movement'. In January 1909, they began setting up local classes. In February they launched their magazine.

Early in March the Ruskin executive demanded Dennis Hird's resignation, on the grounds that he was failing to maintain discipline. This was a response to his confrontation with Lord Curzon, which had shown that he was determined to stand with the students. On 26 March, Hird told the students that he had resigned. A meeting later that day agreed overwhelmingly to boycott all lectures except Hird's until he was reinstated. The students also agreed to conduct their own classes as part of the action. This action — the Ruskin "strike" — continued until 6 April, and became national headlines. Nobody could believe that a small group of workers would take on the most prestigious university in the world.

During the strike, the Ruskin governors endorsed the decision to sack Hird. Opinion amongst the strikers now swung in favour of setting up a Central Labour College (CLC) outside, rather than continuing the struggle within Ruskin. When the executive closed Ruskin for two weeks and agreed to pay their fares back to the areas they came from, they called off the strike. Many went home to build on the classes started in January. One, the Bermondsey carpenter George Sims, whose scholarship was withdrawn at the governors' instigation, stayed in Oxford.

Between April and August 1909, 29 of the most resolute strikers, led by Sims and an ex-student, the Mardy miners' agent Noah Ablett, organised for the launch of the CLC, both on the ground in Oxford, and across the union and left-wing movements. At the first Plebs annual "meet" on 8 August, 200 people from a range of organisations agreed to back Sims' proposals for the CLC. This opened at the beginning of September elsewhere in Oxford, with 20 union-sponsored students and Hird as warden.

The editorial in The Plebs Magazine issue 1, probably written by Sims, says that the League of the “Plebs” endeavours to permeate the Labour Movement in all its ramifications with the desire for human liberation”.

Because the struggle between class collaboration and independent working-class self-organisation in post-compulsory education is still going on now, we need to find out everything we can about the strengths and weaknesses of the IWCE movement which the Ruskin strikers started.

ORGANISING THE UNORGANISED

In 2008, workers' solidarity campaign No Sweat brought French fast food worker and union activist Axel Persson and New Zealand union organiser Mike Treen to the UK for a speaker tour to discuss their experiences of organising young, precarious workers. These are speeches they gave at a meeting in London on Saturday 16 February.

(From *Solidarity* 127, 21 February 2008 - <http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2008/02/22/organising-young-workers-it-can-be-done>)

Axel Persson

Union activism in the fast food industry first started up after a 2002 strike in McDonalds that lasted for over a year. About a year ago a few of us in the CGT union decided to do some serious union work in the industry.

We decided that we needed at least one person in each restaurant if we were going to be successful. Given that no one was coming to the union by us leafleting outside, we decided to "colonise", to send members in to work there.

I applied for a job at a Quick in Paris [Quick is a French fast food chain, similar to McDonalds]; it is the biggest in France with over 150 workers. I needed to let people know that someone in the restaurant was a union member. Either I could try to talk to each and every worker (and of course I tried to talk to many people) or I could produce a bulletin to get out to everyone. The bulletin option proved to be the most useful tool, providing a backbone for the union.

The bulletin's contents related to the working conditions of the restaurant; everyone could recognise what the bulletin was talking about — this was their working life. Facts about the inadequacy of the equipment, about a manager making a racist remark, about promises on wages being reneged on, and so on.

I produced this bulletin on my own initiative, but others in the union helped me to do it.

I started handing it out in front of the lockers, talking to people about what was in it. I also put it in each and every locker. The bulletin told the workers that the union would be operating in the workplace and if they wanted to discuss anything they could come to me.

Some of these workers had never met a union activist before, and maybe didn't even know what purpose the union served. The first step then is to explain the role of the union, that it was there to stand up for the workers.

After a few weeks of handing out the bulletin, discussions began to multiply. People began to talk about the content, point out what was missing etc. I would suggest they should write the next article... people began to be associated with the bulletin. I was no longer the only person.

After about two months we had a group of members and union sympathisers. We decided to announce the presence of the union in a bigger, more public way. We put a union table outside the restaurant with flyers, papers, leaflets. Union activists from other fast food restaurants came along. We advertised the event to the workers inside and told people they could come along to discuss any issues they might have. Several dozen people came and talked to us. It was the start of a real union of seven people within the restaurant.

After asking people what the main demands should be, we launched a petition. The demands were better pay, better job security and more regular and predictable hours. We didn't think the managers would cave into our demands. The petition was to help build organisation, to get names and contact details. And we wanted show the workers what the managers were about — they rejected the demands. We got about 60 signatures.

We haven't managed yet to organise a complete walkout at my restaurant. We have organised strikes of specific groups of workers. Usually these take place between 11am and 2pm, as that is the time when 80% of the profits are made. We organised a picket line in my kitchen, to demand gloves for handling hot water.

We are not yet at the stage where we can organise a national campaign against Quick. We are still building the organisation at the grass roots.

This kind of union activity has been much more successful in southern France. This month the CGT managed to organise a 24 hour strike simultaneously at 17 McDonalds restaurants.

It is also important to address the issues that affect these young workers outside of their work. In Paris especially these workers come from the poor neighbourhoods and they face poverty, unemployment, poor housing and sometimes police harrassment. Usually they end up in the fast food industry because they need the money and there are no other jobs for them. So we used more direct political propaganda to get talking to people and get into wider discussions.

A significant proportion of the workers leave after a short time. There is an extremely high turnover. They want to find something better. It has been difficult to convince people to join a union if they don't intend to stay. That is why we make sure that the people building the union whom we rely on intend to stay there for at least six to eight months.

All of us working in fast food unionism in France agree that our activity has to be extremely dynamic, offensive, radical and directly political. If union

activism has no backbone no one will see the need for it. As the saying goes, you should be “as radical as reality itself” if you want to be up to the task.

Any time strike action has happened in fast food in France it has always been very radical, pretty impressive, with demonstrations, picket lines and occupations. People don't usually go on strike but when they do it usually lasts.

For example the first strike ever in fast food was not over pay, but a solidarity strike in defence of two sacked union activists. It lasted for a year and they won.

Mike Treen

In 2005-6, over those two years, there was a campaign to reunite the fast food sector as well as call centres, hotels, casinos and similar industries.

At the end of that campaign we had union-negotiated collective employment agreements at all of the big fast food chains: McDonalds, KFC, Burger King, Starbucks, Wendy's and some smaller ones.

We had recruited two to three thousand fast food workers. And we had organised a major political campaign associated with the key demand for \$12 [about £5] an hour minimum wage and the abolition of youth rates for 16 and 17 year olds countrywide. From beginning of this year we will have a \$12 an hour minimum wage and the abolition of youth rates in fast food. Winning those key demands was a big issue in New Zealand's broader political and industrial news.

Where did it all start? It was a very long way from here. In the early 1990s, the New Zealand labour movement went through a deep recession, lasting five or six years. During this period, industrial activity declined to the lowest point since records began. Union membership went from 49% of the workforce to 22%.

Industrial laws were adopted that made it very difficult for unions to organise: outlawed strikes outside the negotiating period, outlawed political strikes, outlawed solidarity strikes. It made it very difficult to access workplaces to recruit etc. It was illegal to organise industrial action for a multi-employer collective agreement.

When the law was brought in every single worker was put onto an individual agreement that was the same as their previous collective agreement, but in order for the union to be able to continue to negotiate on your behalf you had to sign an individual authorisation. It was very difficult for some unions to manage that. Many were eliminated overnight.

The central bureaucracy of the union movement capitulated completely to these changes and refused to organise broader industrial struggle, let alone a general strike, despite the fact that there was overwhelming sentiment for

such a struggle and a general strike. Motions calling for it in workplaces were crushed by the bureaucracy.

The impact of the recession and the new law was intensified by the demoralising effect of this failure to resist. From that time real wages were under sustained attack. In New Zealand real wages, hourly rates, for unskilled workers declined by 25%. Real incomes for the people we represent declined by 30% or 40%.

All of the legal wage protections which stipulated overtime rates, Sunday rates and so on, went. Minimum conditions were now very limited - three weeks holiday, five days sick leave, that was about it, especially in areas where the workers were more vulnerable. The unions had no strength. Everything else had to be negotiated again. It was a stunning assault on working people.

Officially unemployment was 10% (although in real terms higher). Official unemployment for Maoris (who make up 14% of the population) was 30%, again higher in real terms. Working-class communities in south Auckland were devastated.

The free trade policies adopted by both Labour and the Tories [the New Zealand National Party] led to massive factory closures. The entire car industry was eliminated, textile industries were closed. Other industries with traditionally strong union organisation, like the meat industry, were restructured and thousands lost their jobs. There used to be four meat plants with one or two thousand workers each. There is now one plant.

Union bargaining became concession bargaining only. Over 15 years there was no attempt or struggle to maintain levels of income or organisation. In so far as you had a collective agreement, it was how much below inflation your settlement was going to be. It was accepted that it was going to be below inflation. There were exceptions, but in general that was it, especially in the private sector.

In the private sector levels of unionisation went down to 9%. In other countries union rates went down, but collective bargaining coverage remained very high (in Australia for example). In New Zealand that wasn't the case at all.

Concession bargaining remained the norm until 2005. In that year things began to change. Even the more conservative unions, for instance the engineering and manufacturing union, were calling for 5% when inflation was running at 3%. This was a radical change. But it happened far too late.

From the mid-1990s there was a sustained economic recovery. It came after a decade of rising employment. Unemployment levels are down to 3.4% of the workforce, one of the lowest in the OECD. From 1996 the union movement should have been reorganising and rebuilding in the private sector. Unemployment was no longer the terror it had been prior to 1996.

In 1999 a Labor-Alliance [the Alliance Party was a leftish split from Labor] government changed the law on union rights. Union organisers regained

access to workplaces. The unions now had the right to pursue multi-employer collective agreements through industrial action. Political and solidarity actions are still outlawed, and you can only take action in the bargaining period. But there are few other limitations. You don't have to give notice to employers or ballot for example. In 2000, replacing striking workers with outside scabs was also outlawed. However, there was still voluntary unionism, there was a freemarket in unions and the unions still competed for each others' members.

Left activists, in the Alliance Party, were bewildered by the failure of the unions to take advantage of this new law. If someone rang up a union for help, it wasn't a recruiting opportunity. They would refuse to talk to you. If you weren't a paying member of the union you had no rights to any support. The loss of confidence in organising workers for struggle, the cynicism involved, was total. However, more struggles began to happen in the mid-2000s, as some unions began to raise their sights.

As a consequence of the implosion of the Alliance Party [over sending troops to Afghanistan, which the left opposed] some of us were liberated from the parliamentary framework; we were able to reorient, to help to organise the people we'd claimed to be the political representatives of. We needed to re-earn the right to speak for working people. In the 2002 election the vote for the Alliance Party (now two organisations) collapsed.

Many of us still wanted to be part of a political anti-capitalist project, but we felt we had to re-earn the right to do that. One way we can do that is by seriously engaging in struggles to advance the interests of workers, through political and industrial campaigning. In some cases that involved getting jobs with existing unions.

In my and Matt McCarten's case there was another job we wanted to do — to organise the working poor, to reunite the precarious. We decided to form a new union.

In the end we didn't have to do that because a little union called Unite existed, with less than a hundred members, run in a voluntary capacity by Alliance Party union officials, with a broad membership clause. We were given the mandate to do an organising campaign in Auckland and an initial donation of \$500.

We had a gut feeling and confidence that we could do this. We did not believe young people wouldn't join a union if they were asked and we had the right now under the new law to ask them. They were on the minimum wage, and with minimal unemployment there was not much to lose even if you did stick your neck out. It would always be possible to get another job with no rights.

Surveys also said that the main reason people don't join unions everywhere in the world is that nobody asks them. That statistic applies to young people as much as anyone else.

We had no plan B. This was not play acting. We borrowed, begged, stole money to do this. We weren't new to this, of course. Matt had been a union organiser and leader of the hotel workers' union, leading a struggle to democratise it, before he became President of the Alliance Party. When Matt said he was going to do something, people took note. They gave or lent us the money we needed.

In Unite, we faced no encumbrances. No-one telling us they knew better. No one telling us about the "organising model".

I had never heard about the "organising model" until we started doing this. We were told off for not following the model that had been so successful in the previous decade in organising no one at all! It was almost like a religious mantra with some unions.

Our premise was to have a public political campaign, and that we were going to throw everything possible at the organising effort. We had three or four paid organisers, on the minimum wage. That's all. All the rest was done by volunteers.

These workers had nothing to lose. But in order to fight, they had to believe you were going to fight with them, you weren't going to be there one week and gone the next week, you were going to come back. If they were victimised you were going to protect them. If you could show that militancy, people would rise to the occasion.

We tested it out in a couple of places, and as we had no bureaucracy involved, we could change our minds, switching things around if they didn't work.

We had a membership form which we copied off another union with all the usual personal details. One day one of our organisers, a hotel worker and volunteer, went to one of the nice hotels in Auckland to speak to the housekeepers and came back with a notebook full of names and addresses of people interested in joining the union, 60 names. We thought "if only she'd taken some membership forms."

Then we thought, hang on, all the information we want is name and address, phone and email. So our membership form became like a petition, with half dozen names per sheet. The process of signing up became more collective.

We made our fees simple. Our fees were 1% of earnings up to a maximum. We had to give people something before they started to pay. We told them we would deliver the company to the negotiating table. You don't have to pay the fees until we've got them to sit down with your representatives.

We hand over the memberships at that point. Everything is a collective process and there is no chance of victimisation. What we achieve at the negotiation is up to you we said. That depends on how many members you have, how willing you are to fight, what sort of struggle you want to organise.

A lot of people hadn't seen a union before, they didn't know what a union was. Our message was that you can't negotiate individually, you can only do it as part of a collective.

The trial in two places, two cinema complexes, was a great success. It was a very young, very casualised workforce. We signed up around 300 workers, which was pretty much everyone.

We discovered the big issues were ones involving personal dignity. These kids were given two free tickets each week, but they were taken off you for every petty infraction. If you were five minutes late, if you had a sick day, looked the wrong way at the manager, you lost your "comps". The main issue was having the tickets as a right.

We also got an extra five minutes on the paid break in the shift inserted into the contract, so that people could actually have a cup of tea, or a cigarette, or whatever. This was the first time a paid break had actually been negotiated in New Zealand for a very long time.

We also found that we could sign people up very quickly. That gave us confidence to move on.

We were never going to be able to organise trench warfare in these industries, pull people out for long periods of time. But we were going to be able to push employers into signing agreements.

We went after the brands with a public, political campaign, to humiliate them.

In May 2005 we launched a recruitment drive in against Restaurant Brands, who run Starbucks, Pizza Hut and KFC in New Zealand. They were the biggest. They had 7,000 employees, the biggest employer of young people in the country. We signed up about 1,000 members in Auckland.

We had little strikes, for a couple of hours each, in different stores, moving from store to store. This helped build confidence. But it wasn't enough. So then we did marches in Auckland, a Town Hall meeting with a broad range of speakers, a big concert in the park. But none of this was enough.

Then a group of high school students came to us and said they wanted to organise a strike of their own. They had been inspired by this campaign (and many of them worked in the stores). They wanted twenty buses, so we hired twenty buses. They filled them! The police tried to stop them marching, but they streamed through the centre of town, stopping, sitting down and screaming outside every fast food outlet. A few days later the company called us and said they wanted to talk.

We got a deal. Security of hours, a youth rate that was 90% of the adult rate, minimum length of shifts, union rights. It was only a matter of time before we knocked over McDonalds. They fought it. They gave a pay rise to all the non-union staff, they threatened to sue workers who went on strike, they threatened to sue us; but we won. The very last was Burger King.

What was proved conclusively was that young workers will fight if they think they have a chance of winning.

During the campaign there were lots of texts and email messages going out. We did mass texting and emailing to let people know what was going on. We should have a regular electronic newsletter, that's on our agenda. Even when we do our stop-work meetings, at Sky City for example, we will do a mass text to everybody. We use it whenever we have an event.

How will we keep up the membership? We have an absolute insistence on routine visits to all of the sites. We have a monthly newspaper, which gets out to all of the sites. We also have a constant process of trying to identify delegates and get them to our regular delegates' conference. They have a role in maintaining the organisation on their site. We can keep up membership through developing a delegate structure.

Getting the supervisors in is very important. They are the people that carry the experience to pass on to new people. We are careful about formulating demands in contract negotiations that relate to that group, and each time we've negotiated we've managed to win improvements. We've not had to have strikes in this round, mostly, though there have been a few in the picture theatres.

Generally the employers know we could cause them quite a bit of difficulty if they don't negotiate seriously. So delegates are pretty proud of the union and make sure people join the union.

We have mostly kept up the membership, despite the huge turnover, so we must be doing some things right.

We are now looking at ways to get the minimum wage up to something like \$15 an hour (which is almost two thirds of the average wage). If we can do that for some groups of workers, it will help win it more generally. The next big thing is to raise the bar of the minimum wage. We need to develop a public campaign around that.

The other thing is fluctuating hours. Hours are more secure now, but not good enough; the companies are still not obliged to offer regular hours. There is still lots to be done.

THE GREAT UNREST

By Edd Mustill

(From The Great Unrest blog - <http://thegreatunrest.net/2010/12/17/the-great-unrest-an-overview/>)

It's difficult to put an exact date on the start of the period known as the "Great Unrest." Was it in March 1909 when students at Ruskin College went on strike to defend the idea of independent working-class education? Was it on 1st November 1910 when a lock-out at a South Wales pit provoked a sympathy strike throughout the coalfield? Was it November 18th 1910, Black Friday, when women calling for the vote were brutally beaten by police in Parliament Square?

A century later, as we enter a new period of struggle against the injustices of modern capitalism, we know that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly the birth and death of any movements. The Great Unrest is a chapter in the story of working-class resistance which will continue as long as it is necessary. It is part of the histories of socialists, anarchists, syndicalists, and feminists, but a part that has too often been overlooked.

Working-class independence

School children are still told of the great reforming liberal government of 1906-14 that paved the way for the welfare state, with its pensions and national insurance reform.

What is forgotten is how controversial these measures were at the time. The working class had its own organisations independent of the state which provided welfare, and many mistrusted the government's motives. Millions were members of friendly societies or the growing co-operative movement.

It was at one of these institutions that the opening act of the drama of the Unrest occurred. Ruskin College in Oxford was founded in 1899, and provided education to a small number of students from the trade union movement. Some were concerned that the college would be absorbed into Oxford University, and formed the Plebs' League. They wanted Ruskin to teach a socialist curriculum, not just extend the traditional liberal subjects to a few lucky workers:

"Enter the Plebs, not from above but from below, not to fight a sham battle among the shadows by the orders and for the interests of our masters, but to fight a real battle in the full light and with clear knowledge of the issue before us."

After the college principal, who was sympathetic to the Plebs, was sacked, they launched a nine day long student strike, complete with picket lines and mass meetings. Eventually the radicals seceded to form the Central Labour College, which won support from the TUC on an equal basis to Ruskin for many years, and was a theoretical training ground for Marxist revolutionaries.

The strikes

Some Ruskin College strikers, like Noah Ablett, were Welsh miners. They became involved in the Cambrian Combine dispute in Autumn 1910, when sympathy action spread to the entire South Wales coalfield after a lock-out over pay at Ely pit.

This was the dispute which saw the famous Tonypandy Riot occur on November 8th. A group of pickets comparable to the Orgreave mass picket in 1984 fought a battle during which one miner, Samuel Rays, was beaten to death by police. Shops were smashed, many of which had operated a "blacklist" denying credit to strikers' families.

Eventually the miners had to return to work the next summer, but in March 1912 there was a national miners' strike over the issue of a minimum wage. The Minimum Wage Act that was brought in allowed different regions to set different rates.

It was from these experiences that the Miner's Next Step pamphlet emerged. It argued for taking the power to accept or reject agreements away from the union executive and giving it to a vote of the whole membership. It also argued for centralisation of the union to avoid different deals being reached in different regions, based on the principle that no-one section should get back to work until everyone had won.

A similar sense of solidarity was to be found in the huge transport workers strikes of the period. Tom Mann wrote tirelessly on the need for different grades on the docks to strike together, and to refuse to work with non-union workers. This was most successful in Merseyside, where the situation approached a general strike in the summer of 1911.

It was here that state repression reached its worst. Gunboats were sent up the Mersey to intimidate strikers, and troops were used to escort goods out of the docks. A police charge at a mass rally became known as Bloody Sunday as batons were used indiscriminately. Just a few days later, two people were killed by troops.

Four days after that, on 19th August, two bystanders were shot and killed at a mass picket in Llanelli, where railway workers were on strike.

The railway strike went national as Yorkshire and Lancashire workers walked out, and the leadership of the ASRS union was forced to back a

national strike: "Your liberty is at stake. All railwaymen must strike at once. The loyalty of each means victory for all."

Workers and women; women as workers

Unfortunately the majority of the trade union movement was deeply sexist at this time. Those few women who were organised were largely in separate organisations like the National Federation of Women Workers led by Mary Macarthur.

The NFWW won a stunning victory in the Black Country in 1910 organising chainmakers in Cradley Heath.

The NFWW and groups like it eventually began to work with the militant suffragette movement which was emerging. Many suffragettes were socialists, members of the ILP which was the only left group which has substantial numbers of women members. It was during this period that Sylvia Pankhurst broke with her mother and sister by organising working-class women in the East End, with the help of George Lansbury who resigned his seat in Parliament on the issue of women's suffrage.

Some conclusions

Many of the big strikes, like the railway workers', did not achieve their immediate demands,. A further dock strike in 1912 collapsed after a month.

But many strikes were won. The unions grew enormously, especially unions for general, unskilled workers, some of which became three times their previous size. Where there had been no organisation before were swept along in the tide.

While the Industrial Workers of the World was never large in Britain, its idea of One Big Union found a ready audience during the Unrest. Sectional prejudices were broken down as unions amalgamated. The National Union of Railwaymen was formed (1913), as was the National Transport Workers' Federation (1911) which later became the T&G. Even the relatively conservative engineering unions were affected, most of them eventually merged in 1920 to form the AEU with Tom Mann as president.

More than anything else, it is the spirit of absolute and unconditional solidarity in industrial disputes which makes the Unrest such an interesting period. The readiness to use unofficial action and sympathy strikes, to show the power of the working class by shutting down whole industries, to move towards workers' control as the strike committee in Merseyside did, are all a million miles ahead of today's trade union movement which sees the occasional 24-hour strike as all that is necessary for us to "make our voice heard." Likewise, the suffragettes show us that tireless organising and a willingness to use direct action are necessities for any movement.

As we stand on the verge of our own huge struggles a century later, we need to rediscover these traditions. We should not do so out of academic curiosity or a sense of keeping our own, pure, history.

We should do so because we are the same class, fighting the same battle against the rule of capital, as Tom Mann, Sylvia Pankhurst, and millions of others were fighting one hundred years ago.

WOMEN WORKER ORGANISERS: THE LIVES OF ADA NIELD CHEW AND MARY MACARTHUR

By Jill Mountford

(From *Solidarity* 194, 23 February 2011 and *Solidarity* 189, 19 January 2011. - <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/16131> and <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/15875>)

Ada Nield Chew

As the misery and injustices of the capitalist system are laid bare in the starkest manner and the life chances for our children diminish before our eyes, the words of a young and politically inexperienced Ada Nield Chew should be taken on by us all: “I feel it to be personally degrading and a disgrace upon me to remain silent and submit without a protest to the injustice done me.”

Ada, then working in a clothing factory, wrote these words as part of a series of letters she had published anonymously in the Crewe Chronicle in 1894, describing the injustices of factory life. Ada explains the piece-work system: in her section women work between 9 and 10 hours a day; however, much of this time is spent not earning money but waiting for work, gathering materials to work with, waiting for work to pass inspection, etc. This results in women needing to take work home, adding a further 4–5 hours to the working day, in order to earn anything like a living wage. She then declares:

“We are not asking for pity, sir, we ask for justice. Surely it would not be more than just to pay us at such a rate, that we could realise a living wage — in the true sense of the words — in a reasonable time, say one present working day of from 9 to 10 hours — till the eight hour day becomes general, and reaches even factory girls. Our work is necessary (presumably) to our employers. Were we not employed others would have to be, and if of the opposite sex, I venture to say, sir, would have to be paid on a very different scale. Why, because we are weak women, without pluck and grit enough to stand up for our rights, should we be ground down to this miserable wage?”

Ada was sacked from her job once her identity as the letter writer had been discovered. But uncowed and undeterred she went on to develop her political ideas through reading, argument and writing; and she used all of these skills to organise within her class.

Ada was a formidable speaker, always ready to describe the situation of working-women and raise demands to improve their lot.

Ada joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). In early 1905 she wrote a letter published in the *Clarion* challenging the policy of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by the suffragette "nobility" Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst.

Ada argued that the WSPU policy was for "the entire class of wealthy women be(ing) enfranchised, (while) the great body of working women, married or single would be voteless still, and that to give wealthy women a vote would mean that they (would) vot(e) naturally in their own interests..." Christabel responded the following week and a fervent exchange went on.

History proved Ada to be right: Emmeline Pankhurst went on to stand for Parliament as the Conservative Party candidate in 1928. And it was Emmeline and Christabel who wandered the streets of London handing out white feathers to any young man not in uniform during the First World War — defending their own bourgeois class interests. For her part, Ada opposed the war and argued against Millicent Fawcett, the leader of the NUWSS, when she suspended all activities for the duration of the war.

Ada Nield Chew was born more than 140 years ago into a poor working-class family, one of 13 children. Her formal education was brought to a halt at the age of 11. She fought within herself and against others so that her background should not impede her. Instead it propelled her forward.

According to her daughter Doris, Ada was "keenly aware of the difference in education and upbringing between her and the middle class women around her". Yet she fought against this, was unafraid to speak out against injustice, refused to be silenced or immobilised by those considered to be "better educated" or by their elevated position.

Ada Nield Chew's political activity should influence working class women in 2011. It should inspire us to "protest the injustice done" to us all — to fight the onslaught of attacks on every aspect of our lives as the bosses' class takes our jobs, our benefits, our health care and pensions, our children's chances of going to university.

We must not allow them to make us pay, yet again, for the inevitable crisis of capitalism.

Mary Macarthur

For as long as workers have been fighting for their rights there have been key women organising other women and fighting alongside men. We begin a series on these inspirational women, often hidden from history.

Mary Macarthur was a socialist and trade unionist. She had what Labour MP Margaret Bondfield described as “boundless energy and leadership of a high order”.

Mary left Glasgow for London (at the age of 23) in 1903 to pursue political activity, leaving behind the man she loved and who wanted to marry her. Mary was active in the women’s suffrage movement, trade unions and the Independent Labour Party. She set up the National Federation of Women Workers in 1906 to organise women in small unions and workplaces of the “sweated industries” and to campaign for a minimum wage.

She was involved in the setting up of the Anti-Sweating League and in 1910 she played a central role in the Chainmakers’ Strike that won the first minimum wage for women in Britain.

The Chainmakers’ strike (in Cradley Heath, West Midlands) was an indefinite strike of around 700 women over pay. The chainmaking women worked for long hours and piece work rates, often with their children alongside them or heavily pregnant in small forges hand-hammering chains for domestic use; some forges were in their own backyards, with a few as two workers in a workplace.

The oldest striker, Patience Round, was 79 years old and had been making chains all of her working life. Early in the strike she said: “These are wonderful times. I never thought that I should live to assert the rights of us women. It has been the week of my life — three meetings and such beautiful talking.”

In March 1910 a minimum wage of tuppence ha’penny per hour was proposed to replace the old piecework system. Low as this was, it more than doubled most women’s pay. The bosses, however, got a delay for six months. During this gap they had forms drafted saying workers wished to “contract out” of the minimum wage. They then dedicated middle managers’ time to getting these forms signed by illiterate women workers. Those who refused to sign were told there was no work for them.

Meanwhile employers were stockpiling chains made under the old rate which they would sell when the new rate became legally binding.

On 23 August the National Federation of Women Workers demanded the minimum wage be paid immediately. The employers refused and the union called a strike for all those women on less than the minimum wage. At a mass meeting of 400 women workers, they all pledged not to sign the form “contracting out” of the minimum wage.

The strike was not easy to organise. These women earned around five shillings a week for 55 hours work; they needed every penny of their pay to eke out a miserable existence for them and their families.

More than half of the women on strike had not joined the union because the weekly subscription of 3d could buy a loaf of bread — a serious matter for these women in 1910.

Mary set about raising national awareness of the strike and the women workers' conditions and the donations to the strike fund came flooding in. Mary reported that 20 people were working day and night to respond to the letters of support. This was mainly down to the work of Mary herself. She exposed the chainmasters. She was media-savvy, and used it to promote the cause of women, placing the likes of Patience Round at the forefront of the struggle.

The last of the employers gave in by 22 October, when the dispute ended. But though this was an historical victory the mood was subdued. J J Mallon, one of the organisers, said he thought this was because the women realised what they'd had during the strike — a great sense of power and solidarity — and that was now over.

In the summer of 1911 Mary organised more than 2000 women in 20 concurrent strikes in Bermondsey and other parts of London.

She was founder of the Women Worker a newspaper (eventually weekly) for women trade unionists with a circulation of around 20,000.

Unlike many socialists in Europe, Mary opposed the First World War. After the war she stood as Labour candidate in Stourbridge but she did not win; it was thought her stance against the war went against her.

Mary did marry the man she loved, Will Anderson; he had moved down from Glasgow a few years after her. They fought the class struggle together until his death in 1919.

Mary died of cancer at just 40 years old, but knowing not one moment had been wasted from the fight for justice and freedom for the working class.

THE BRYANT & MAY MATCHWOMEN AND THEIR PLACE IN LABOUR HISTORY

By Louise Raw

(From Louise's website - <http://www.louiseraw.co.uk/moreinformation.htm>)

The Strike

In the summer of 1888, fourteen hundred workers, mostly young women and girls, walked out of Bryant & May's match factory in Bow, East London.

Before the strike the matchwomen were regarded as the 'lowest strata of society'.

The ideal 19th century woman was the 'Angel in the House,' a deeply respectable wife and mother – she did not work in factories, and was not to be found in pubs and music halls nor enlivening East End nights with enthusiastic renditions of 'Ta-ra-ra-Boom-de-ay' (as the matchwomen frequently did).

However, their strike changed everything: during it they were the subject of thundering editorials in the Times, and impressed MPs with their intelligence. After it, they formed the largest union of women workers in the country. They received death threats from someone claiming to be 'Jack the Ripper' (the first of the notorious murders occurring just after their victorious return to work) but also attracted the more wholesome attentions of 'celebrity socialists' like George Bernard Shaw and, most significantly, Annie Besant, Fabian journalist and, according to all previous sources, the leader of the strike.

The matchwomen's temerity in taking on Bryant & May, one of the Empire's most powerful and successful companies, was breathtaking. As working-class female 'casuals' they were paid a pittance, could be hired and fired at management's will and were supposed to know their place – which was firmly at the bottom of the labour hierarchy. That they returned to work two weeks later with their demands for better pay and conditions met, was completely unexpected and not lost on other exploited workers in the East End and beyond.

'White Slavery'

However, because of Besant's supposed role, history has frequently treated the matchwomen with condescension to match that of any Victorian grandee.

Certainly Besant published a blistering exposé of Bryant & May under the resounding title 'White Slavery in London' after interviewing a handful of matchwomen outside the factory.

Besant wrote that Bryant & May's enormous profits- shareholders were receiving dividends of 20%- had been achieved by slashing wage-rates so dramatically that they were lower in 1888 than 15 years previously.

Accordingly the youngest women were obviously malnourished and small for their ages. Factory foreman beat the women and the machinery cut their hands- even severing the fingers of one, who was then unable to work and left penniless.

'Phossy Jaw'

However their biggest fear was 'phossy jaw', the dreadful industrial disease of matchmaking. Toxic particles from white phosphorus, used to dip the match heads, entered the workers' jawbones through holes in the teeth, causing pain and facial swelling.

Eventually the jaw would start to decay, and pieces of bone the size of peas would work their way out through suppurating abscesses. The resulting odour was so appalling that even sufferers' loved ones could not stand to be in the same room. Factory inspectors would report cases of phosphorus victims living on the outskirts of towns like outcasts. The disease could end in disfigurement and agonising death.

Annie Besant

Besant's article shocked the nation, and several days later the matchwomen walked out. Accordingly historians have concluded that they were little more than political puppets.

After ten years research I have been able to prove that Besant was in fact nowhere near the match factory when the strike began, and completely unaware of it until a deputation of strikers came to her offices days later. Besant was a remarkable woman whose life, traced in the book, was an extraordinary fin de siècle search for meaning, ending in India where she had become the effective leader of a new age religion and where her body was burned on a funeral pyre. In 1888 she unquestionably produced valuable publicity for the matchwomen, but by no stretch of the imagination led them.

Just a year after the matchwomen's victory, a wave of strikes resulted in the unionisation of tens of thousands of the most exploited workers, and sowed the seeds of the independent Labour Party. The most famous was the

Great Dock Strike, which began within walking distance of Bryant & May's: but historians would have us believe that this was purely co-incidental. However, I've found considerable evidence that the matchwomen were a clear and admitted influence on the Dock Strikers, who sought their advice, and hailed their example at strike meetings throughout 1889.

From 'the Emerald Isle'

I believe that an important factor in the strike was their Irish heritage. As their employer said, most 'hailed from the Emerald Isle', as did many dockers.

The Irish community in London at the time was famously close-knit and political, united against prejudice in England, which combined with oppression at home, heightened class as well as national identity.

After several years' research I was finally able to identify the women who really began the strike and show that they had strong ties to Dock and Irish communities, living in streets variously described, with the casual xenophobia of the time, as 'Fenian Barracks', 'a regular Irish den...all the vices of the Irish rampant', and 'inhabited by many Irish...a rough lot, given to drinking, racing and betting'.

Real Women

The most exciting and moving part of my work was tracing and meeting grandchildren of the Bryant & May strikers. In my book I introduce key figures like Mary Driscoll and Eliza Martin for the first time, and follow their remarkable lives beyond the strike, into marriage and motherhood.

After writing articles for Irish papers I was sent these words, received by a dock striker in a letter from Ernest Bevin:

'Fifty years ago...you were among those who were involved in a great industrial upheaval- virtually a revolution against poverty, tyranny and intolerable conditions.

You little thought during those weeks...that you were laying the foundation of a great Industrial Movement.'

I believe that this is an equally fitting tribute to the remarkable matchwomen, who were nothing less than the mothers of the modern labour movement, and to whom we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude.

THE LABOUR PARTY: BORN OF STRUGGLE

By Brian Pearce

(Adapted from Brian Pearce's pamphlet "How the Labour Party began".
From *Solidarity* 119, 11 October 2007 -
<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2007/10/12/labour-party-born-struggle>)

Down to the 1880s there was no "labour movement" [in Britain] in the continental sense at all. There were strong trade unions (of skilled workers), and these unions were politically-minded — but the only parties were the two ruling-class ones, the Tories and the Liberals.

The trade unions expressed themselves politically by serving as the arms and legs of one or other of these parties — usually the Liberals, though in an area such as Lancashire and Cheshire where the employers were strongly liberal the trade unions might retort to this by supporting the Tories! The political prospect of the trade unions was to get one or other of the ruling-class parties to pass laws favourable to the workers; and they tried to consolidate their "poor-relation" influence with these parties by persuading the liberals to accept a few trade union officials among their parliamentary candidates.

During the 1880s there occurred, in a very small way at first, the rebirth of socialism in Britain after an interval of forty years. Old Chartists, reinforced by immigrant workers from Germany, had kept the flame burning in obscure clubs, but now a certain expansion began, with the establishment of the Social-Democratic Federation.

In part under the guidance of Frederick Engels, pioneer socialists began a twenty years' propaganda for the launching in Britain of an independent class party of the workers with socialism as its aim. The setting up of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 constituted the first breakthrough to success of a campaign which for long had seemed to many just the bee buzzing in the brains of a few cranks and fanatics, inspired by antiquated (Chartist) and foreign (German) notions. The workers learnt the hard way the need for a Labour Party.

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

allowing for increased unemployment there was a big advance in real wages. In that important aspect, the workers had never had it so good!

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

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

The socialists sought out the most politically-minded rank-and-file workers in the places where they were — especially in the Radical (left-wing liberal) clubs in traditional working-class centres of that time like the East End of London. Besides their propaganda, the socialists carried on agitation around issues of interest to these workers and fights for which would help them to clear their minds of the confusions that kept them in the liberal ranks.

Struggle for trade-union organisation in trades and factories where the employers were well-known Liberals; struggle to defend and extend the right of free speech for street-corner orators and in places like Trafalgar Square, against police attempts to encroach on this right; above all the campaign for the eight-hour day. (At this time many workers worked a ten-hour day or more, and with the appearance of unemployment and the intensified strain of speed-up and so on the need for a shortening of hours was felt more and more keenly.)

The battles fought around these issues made many questions clearer to the workers who were involved in them, and prepared their minds to understand a great deal in the socialist message which previously had seemed strange and unreal to them.

A factor of very considerable weight in helping the idea of an independent workers’ party to take root was the example provided by the Irish nationalist party at this time. A small but well-disciplined group of members from Irish

constituencies kept themselves independent of both of the British parties, concerned themselves exclusively with pushing Ireland's claims for "Home Rule", and by their obstructive tactics compelled attention to their case. Increasingly, many politically-minded British workers came round to the view that British labour needed a party of its own that would act like this.

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

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

A wave of lockouts and provoked strikes swept the country in the 1890s. A body called the Free Labour Association was set up to organise mobile squads of assorted strikebreakers ready to go anywhere and do anything.

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

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

Contrary to the legend which has been cultivated by the right wing, while the small group of British Marxists did play a part in the creation of the ILP, the Fabian Society had nothing to do with it. This latter group of reformists were still at that stage devoted to achieving socialism (or what they called socialism) through "permeation" of the Liberal Party, and they regarded the

ILP as “wreckers”. Only as it became apparent that the cause of Independent Labour was going to succeed in spite of them did they change their line. The bandwagon was rolling along before they climbed on it!

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

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

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

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

It was the ruling class which, still not grasping what was happening “down below” gave several more still-hesitant trade unions the necessary final shove to bringing them behind the Labour Representation Committee. Following a series of articles in The Times which called into question the very existence of trade unionism, the House of Lords upheld against appeal a judge’s decision which dealt a practical blow, in terms of hard cash, at the whole functioning of trade unions. This was the “Taff Vale judgement”, when the railwaymen’s union found themselves forced to pay out enormous damages to a company which had incurred loss through a strike they had called. If this was the law, no strike could take place anywhere on any issues without the risk of financial ruin for the union concerned. At long last a number of trade union leaders saw the point — the working class must put itself in an independent political position from which it could compel changes in the law in its own interest, instead of relying on the sweet reasonableness of one or other group of the ruling class. In 1901 and 1902, after “Taff Vale”, the Labour Representation

Committee received a big accession of strength — though still, it is worth recalling, the miners remained wedded to liberalism and did not come in until eight years later, after a lot of “unofficial” activity had been put in at lodge and district level. The decision to create and adhere to the Labour Party was not hastily or lightly taken by the British working class.

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

MacDonald’s correspondence with the Chief Liberal Whip had to be kept a secret from all but a few of MacDonald’s colleagues, lest some crude-minded types might take exception to it. So early began the practice of talks between Labour leaders and the ruling class behind the backs of the movement as a whole. The outcome was a “gentleman’s agreement” for the LRC to restrict its candidates to certain seats, in return for which the Liberals would not oppose them in some of these. Characteristic was MacDonald’s reaction to the news of Arthur Henderson’s victory as a Labour candidate at Barnard Castle, over both Liberal and Tory opponents: he welcomed it as strengthening his bargaining power in dealings with the Liberals, but hoped it would not encourage the “wild men” to demand openly that Labour should go it alone in every possible constituency. just sufficient life in the working-class movement to give them something to use in horse-trading with the capitalists, and no more; that has always been the ideal of the right wing.

When, therefore, a group of 50 Labour MPs were returned in the 1906 general election, which gave a Liberal majority, there was heavy dragging of feet to do no more than accord critical support to the new government, merely pressuring it a bit in the direction of social reform. The socialists in the Labour Party (as it was now formally called) faced the task of forcing the pace against this entrenched resistance. In 1907 the socialist Victor Grayson was run as candidate, against Liberal and Tory, in a traditional Liberal seat, by local Labour organisations who defied the ban imposed by headquarters. His triumphant success encouraged the left in the movement but infuriated the “statesmen” of the Parliamentary Labour Party. A typical incident occurred in 1908 when Grayson tried to protest in the House against the welcome by the

Liberal Government to a visit by the Tsar of Russia, but the official Labour spokesman at once got up to move the closure!

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

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

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

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

formation within the Labour Party of societies such as had initiated the very creation of the party.

The Labour Party became the chief opposition party, in 1922 and the largest party in Parliament in the following year.

The first Labour Government, 1924, marked a new phase both in the advance of the working-class movement and in the degeneration of its leadership...

NOTES ON TOM MANN

Introduction

Over sixty years from the early 1880s Tom Mann was involved in most of the significant working class organisations.

He was prominent in the early Marxist organisation, the Social Democratic Federation, during the 1880s. He was a leader of the “new unionism” of the late 1880s. He was there at the beginning of the Independent Labour Party in the 1890s. He was an innovator and supporter of the “syndicalist” current in the UK in the early twentieth century.

Later still (though by then, elderly, more as a figurehead) he joined the Communist Party. To tell the story of Mann’s life is also to tell the story of how the working class in Britain struggled for an independent political voice and how socialism and socialist ideas developed.

In doing so we do not have to accept the way the Communist Party elevated Mann to the status of sainthood.

Early political life in the SDF

→Grim capitalist reality

Great Depression 1874-95. But were also short upturns (during on New Unionism kicked off).

→Self-education with no real guidance - Ruskin remained a favourite author

→Political antecedents of SDF

End of Chartism 1848+ to 1880s has been seen as a dull time (but important for secularism/radicalism/republicanism). First International & Paris Commune provided examples and militants for the future. Radical clubs had some with links with Chartist Bronterre O’Brien (Labour Emancipation League). Political disappointment with the Liberals

→Democratic Federation formed 1881 becoming Social Democratic Federation in 1883. SDF has more or less a “Marxist” theory. Idea that socialism would be the result of dramatic crisis/breakdown in economy/society. SDF preached abstract socialism and a few eclectic demands rather than linking up with struggles creatively, or widening struggles. But they were not uninterested in political action they did a lot of electoral activity – School Boards, local councils and general elections.

→View of the state:

“To get complete control of the state departments for the people was the main object in order to democratise them entirely, and thus do away with that State as class domination for ever.” Hyndmann 1884.

But capitalist class domination of the state and idea of smashing existing institutions was not so much in focus at this time.

Accused of being state socialists (by e.g. the Socialist League) and adhered to the Iron Law of Wages (Lassalle).

→Mann joins the SDF in 1885 (in Battersea and through the influence of John Burns). He is already 30 years old. Closest collaboration was Henry H Champion.

→Mann was restless. His preferred *modus operandi* was to “rouse the workers” in activity.

Eight Hours Campaign: rejected by Battersea SDF

Eight Hours League and What a Compulsory Eight-Hour Day Means to the Workers (1886). But it not clear how this demand would be won. In contrast to the later Legal Eight Hour Day Campaign of Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx.

→Organising in Newcastle, 1887, Organising in Bolton, 1888

Helps with Kier Hardie’s election campaign in Mid-Lanark April 1888.

By 1888 working with Champion on the *Labour Elector*: for a new working-class party with strong links to the trade union movement. Mann wanted a “labour party” with a socialist leadership.

→But did not fight inside the SDF for a change of direction. Dismayed by their hostility. He drifted out/allowed himself to be pushed out, sometime in 1889.

→That did not end his association with the SDF forever. As ILP Secretary 1894-6+ tried to bring about unity between ILP and SDF. In 1896 Mann stood in a by-election in Aberdeen as the joint candidate of the local SDF ILP and Trades Council. Joined again in 1910.

Tom Mann and New Unionism: A timeline

Summer 1888: strike at Bryant and May match factory in east London — of casual, extremely exploited mostly female workers — marks the birth of new unionism.

From around 1885: Will Thorne an SDF member and gas worker at a gas works in Beckton starts proselytizing for a gasworkers’ union.

1888: Formation of the Tea Operatives and General Labourers' Union on the London docks. Ben Tillett is the secretary. Tillett knows Mann, Burns, Thorne.

March 1889: The Gasworkers' and General Labourers' Union is formed. By July they have won the 8 hour day.

12 August 1889: London dock strike begins with a dispute at the South West India Dock over distribution of the "plus" (bonus payment) on the Lady Armstrong. Tom Mann and John Burns (well-known) as a socialist "stump orator" around the docks, help with the organisation. Eleanor Marx is the unpaid secretary for the dispute. Stevedores leader (and socialist) Tom McCarthy is another important figure. Demands of the highly casualised workforce include 6d an hour (dockers' tanner), a minimum shift of four hours work, a reduction in the number of "call ons" (humiliating hiring process) and an overtime rate of 8d an hour. The strike is strengthened by picketing (against strikebreakers), public support and money sent from Australia.

Summer 1889: Many disputes taking place around London. Printers, export iron mongers, millers, Pickfords workers, jam factory workers, young women rope makers, iron workers, Bryant and May workers (again), coal depot workers, brewery workers, sea-going engineers, carpenters, shipwrights, Peak Frean biscuits, Billingsgate, cutlery works, ordinary engineers, builders at Woolwich Arsenal, laundry workers, Jewish tailors, cigar and cigarette makers and book finishers.

1890: Liverpool dock workers' strike. Central demand was union control of work. Larger employers formed a Employers' Labour Association to resist.

1890: Mann and Tillett publish "The 'New' Trades Unionism"

1891: Now 274 unions with 1,500,000 members. In 1871 there had been 34 unions with 300,000 members. Apart from London-based Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labour's Union (after 1889) and the Gasworkers' Union other important unions which organised semi-skilled and unskilled workers were: National Union of Dock Labour (Glasgow and Liverpool), National Amalgamated Union of Sailors and Firemen (1887), the National Amalgamated Labourers' Union in Cardiff, National Amalgamated Union of Labour (Tyneside), Metropolitan Cab Drivers' Trade Union (1890), London County Tramway and Omnibus Employees' Trade Union (1889). Later similar unions were the Workers' Union (1898) and the National Federation of Women Workers (1906).

Tom Mann the syndicalist

→1890s were a difficult period for the new unions – membership collapsed and a highly organised employers' offensive. Mann was involved in two initiatives to strengthen organisation. These pave the way to the kinds of organising – industrial syndicalism – he advocated later.

→International Federation of Ship Dock and River Workers (1886). Mann wanted a true global union, so that they could realise "an injury to one is an injury to all". Idea of "ca' canny" ("go easy"). The bosses should get what they pay for – a from of "work to rule".

→The Workers' Union (1898). Formed after the engineer's lock out – Mann felt had been undermined by not organising semi- and unskilled. The would be a union that would definitely bar no one.

→1902-1910 Mann was in New Zealand and Australia.

→Became an organiser for the Labor Party in Melbourne (Victoria). But had close associations with socialists outside Labor leading to little political fights. He felt the unions were far too reliant on Labor. 1905 joined the Social Democratic Party of Victoria (later Victoria Socialist Party) – drifts out of that in 1908.

→1905 foundation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Mann was aware of this and of e.g. Eugene Deb's presidential campaign (1908).

→Becomes organiser for Broken Hill Combined Unions Committee, September 1908. January 1909 Broken Hill Proprietary Company (mining) begins a lock out as two year agreement comes to an end and proposes to cut wages by 12.5%. Only recognises the company union. But real union under CUC is growing under Mann's organisation. Ends in defeat. Lessons learnt: Federal Arbitration Court (found in favour of the workers but made not difference)

→Attitude of the Federal Labor Party in power (in a coalition) backing police to enable scabbing at nearby smelting works.

→Writes about lessons in *The Way to Win*.

Was for "genuine federation of all organisations, with power to act unitedly for industrial purposes". Increasingly he did not think workers should rely on Parliamentary change.

→Returns to England in May 1910, and rejoins the Social Democratic Federation (resigns end of 1911). Then tours France for a look at French syndicalism. Resignation letter to SDF: “economic liberty will never be realised by [Parliamentary action]. So I declare in favour of Direct Industrial Organisation, not as a means but as the means whereby the workers can ultimately overthrow the capitalist system and become the actual controllers of their industrial and social destiny...”

→Great Unrest

1909: 2.5 million trade unionists. By 1914 4 million. Biggest gains were from unskilled workers. 1910, 1911, 1913, 1914 - 10 million strike days. 1912 - 41 million.

→Mann is involved with:

1910 Cambrian Combine Dispute,

1911 chair of the strike committee Liverpool Transport Workers Strike.

Afterwards sets up the *Transport Worker*.

1912 speaking to miners during strike

the 1913 Black Country strikes for a minimum wage.

Organising for the Dockers' Union and the National Sailors and Firemen's Union.

→November 1910 sets up the Industrial Syndicalist Education League (paper is *The Industrial Syndicalist* started in July 1910).

→Mann's views:

- Fighting, aggressive unions
- Use of sympathy strikes
- Solidarity
- Formation of industrial unions by reorganising existing structures in the first place federation (Setting up National Transport Workers' federation July 1910)
- Reducing hours
- Workers' control
- But does not stress the general strike (because workers' organisations are not yet strong enough)

This was heavily criticised by e.g. people in the Socialist Labour Party and being not true “Industrial Unionism”/not political etc. But movement quite quickly fragments.

FURTHER READING

Frederick Engels on the English working class in 1844 and in 1892:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1892/07/21.htm>

General background on New Unionism

<http://www.workersliberty.org/node/8994>

Tom Mann and his times (PDF)

<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2012/02/08/tom-mann-and-his-times>

The Beckton gas works dispute, 1889:

<http://www.gmbunion.org/history/WillThorne.htm>

<http://www.gmbunion.org/history/Dispute.htm>

The London dockers' strike, 1889:

<http://www.workersliberty.org/node/9253>

<http://libcom.org/history/1889-the-great-london-dock-strike>

Women organising:

Eleanor Marx: www.workersliberty.org/node/7356

Selina Cooper: www.workersliberty.org/node/15973

More on Cradley Heath:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/images/cradleyheath/>

History of May Day:

<http://www.marxists.org/subject/mayday/articles/tracht.html>

Pitfalls of the official “organising agenda” today:

<http://www.workersliberty.org/crosby>