

LABOUR HISTORY IN THE NORTH WEST

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The study of labour history is now established as a respectable sub-discipline of history. Courses flourish in many universities, polytechnics and colleges of further education. The non-vocational sector of adult education, especially extra-mural and extension departments of universities, the Workers' Educational Association, adult education colleges and the like provide courses and/or stimulate interest through local research activities. The annual History Workshops held over a weekend offer opportunities for researchers to put forward their ideas over a wide range of themes in a less formal manner than the conferences and seminars organised by academic institutions. To complement the (National) Society for the Study of Labour History there are the Scottish, Welsh and Irish Labour History Societies respectively and a number of regional groups including the North West Labour History Group. There is the recently established and deservedly popular Merseyside Museum of Labour History and shortly Manchester will house the revitalised National Museum of Labour History. Political parties of the left and feminist groups often provide material on the history of the labour movement. At all levels, it can be claimed, labour history is flourishing as never before.

who became the first secretary of the London Trades Council and, later, secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress between 1871 and 1875. Howell's ambitions were to become a writer and an MP both of which he achieved. He was, however, a staunch defender of craft trade unionism with little interest in the efforts of the less skilled to secure organisation. Indeed his *Trade Unionism, New and Old* remains of interest primarily as an example of special pleading for craft unionism and an antipathetic view of the new unions of the unskilled workers that were emerging at the time, threatening the hegemony of 'established' unionism.

Of far greater importance were Sydney and Beatrice Webb. Their prolific writings on social and economic issues, their involvement in the establishment and development of the Fabian Society and their monumental *History of Trade Unionism* (1894, revised edition 1920) make them a 'tradition' as Asa Briggs once remarked. It is quite extraordinary that a book first published as long ago as 1894 should still be of major importance as a source for labour historians. It was they who 'set the chronology and established a picture of the structure of Labour History



Tom Mann addressing dockers and seamen during Liverpool General Transport Strike, 1911.

It is as well, however, to remind ourselves that this is a relatively recent development. Before the 1960s the serious study of labour history was confined to a handful of scholars and institutions. Further back still, a hundred years ago, the pre-eminence of constitutional history over-shadowed the efforts of those few who were interested in the lives of working people and their institutions. George Howell, for example, may have been the first to attempt a history of trade unions in his *Conflicts of Capital and Labour* (1878) and *Trade Unionism, New and Old* (1891). Howell was a bricklayer

with which succeeding historians have organised their work.¹

John and Barbara Hammond in the early twentieth century sought to provide portraits of working class life in their highly perceptive and very readable books *The Village Labourer* (1911), *The Town Labourer* (1917) and *The Skilled Labourer* (1919) while scholars such as Raymond Postgate (*The Builders' History* (1923)) and Max Beer (*History of British Socialism* (1921)) produced pioneering work that remains of importance to the present day.

G.D.H. Cole was, however, the most well-known advocate of labour history in the inter-war period. He was a prolific writer publishing a stream of learned articles, popular pamphlets and books on the development of socialism and the labour movement as well as material on contemporary left-wing politics. Two books are of particular interest to labour historians: *A Short History of the British Working Class Movement* (first published in three volumes between 1925 and 1927 but revised on a number of occasions, the final edition in one volume appearing in 1948) and *The Common People* (written with Raymond Postgate) first published in 1938. These pioneering works were supplemented by the autobiographies of some working class leaders, e.g. Tom Mann's *Memoirs* (1923) and by some official trade union histories.

But the study of labour history scarcely disturbed the historical establishment. Institutionally only at Oxford and the London School of Economics under the influence of Cole and Lance Beales respectively were there opportunities for serious study of the subject.

It was not until after the Second World War that a more sustained interest in labour history emerged. During the 1950s a new generation of scholars began to question the findings of the Webbs, introduced new areas of debate and widened the scope of labour history away from the institutional history of trade unions. The work of, among other, Eric Hobsbawm, John Saville, Edward Thompson, Henry Pelling, Asa Briggs, Hugh Clegg and A.E. Musson encouraged others in the field and labour history became acceptable as a respectable subject for study in the post-war expansion of the university sector.

It was in this context that the Society for the Study of Labour History was formed in 1960. The initial membership was no more than 71.² It is now of the order of 1000. Its rapid development led to the formation of a Scottish committee which became the Scottish Society for the Study of Labour History in 1967 followed in the 1970s by the formation of Welsh and Irish Labour History Societies. The four national societies have been supplemented by regional groups, the first of which was the North East group formed in 1966. The North West group was formed in 1973.

Before considering the formation and experience of one regional society it might be instructive to discover why there has been such a sustained development in labour history over the last thirty years. The editors of the national society's *Bulletin* suggested six possible explanations. Firstly, the 'sheer increase in university population, both students and teachers . . . allows a greater degree of specialisation as well as a wider choice of subjects of special interest'. That observation was made in 1962 and since then the foundation of polytechnics and colleges of higher education has reinforced this trend. Secondly, the 'tendency of academic historians to widen their concept of history as a subject to include social, cultural and other aspects of the life of nations besides the traditional political, dynastic and military history'. Thirdly, the growth in power and importance of labour from 1945 (until 1979 with the onset of the Thatcherite backlash) was bound to lead historians to reflect this by examining the historic role of labour. Fourthly, the development of multi- and inter-disciplinary courses and degrees has brought together clusters of subjects which would normally have to consider some aspects of labour history. Fifthly, the growth in the number of teachers 'with strong sympathies for the political and social ambitions of labour, many of



Cartoon during textile dispute, 1908.

them with roots in working-class families', and, sixthly, the growing "'respectability' of the subject".³ Since 1962 other factors have emerged. Many institutions of higher education now encourage the entry of mature students into their courses through schemes very different from the normal 'A' level requirements for eighteen-year-old students. This, coupled with the sheer expansion of higher education from the 1960s, has increased the total number of students in universities, polytechnics and colleges of higher education. Many students, mature and eighteen-year-olds, come from working-class backgrounds and are attracted to courses in labour history.

We should not discount the influence of the foundation of labour history societies in providing through their conferences and workshops an attractive forum for discussion and through their journals an increasingly wide range of articles on issues of interest to labour. Nor should we overlook the published work of talented scholars who have been able to combine high standards of scholarship with an ability to communicate to a non-academic audience. The great success of Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* or Eric Hobsbawm's *Labouring Men* are examples.

Finally, we should always be aware and glad of the fact that the study of history — and, perhaps, particularly labour history — is not the sole prerogative of academic historians. There are many local groups whose enthusiasm for the history of their region, city or town involves them in valuable research often involving labour history. I am reminded of the Liverpool Second Chance courses in this respect. A research project undertaken by a group of working-class women, most of whom had never studied history before, has led to a publication, *Women's Work on the Waterfront* (1988), which has added significantly to our knowledge.⁴ Their enthusiasm and expertise is to be applauded.

The above is an extended preface to an account of the foundation and development of the North West Labour History Group. The north west is particularly rich in material of interest to labour historians. The staple industries of nineteenth-century Britain flourished here: cotton textiles, coal and iron mining, shipbuilding, engineering and chemicals. Urbanisation was rapid with the spectacular development of Liverpool and Manchester and the cluster of towns in the textile districts such as Oldham and Stockport in south Lancashire and Nelson, Colne and Blackburn in the north of the county.

Migration into the boom cities and towns was remarkable with the Irish predominating but with substantial enclaves of Chinese and Blacks especially in Liverpool, bringing in its wake ethnic and sectarian issues that fragmented working-class unity and retarded progress. Consumer co-operation was created in Rochdale and the co-operative movement became particularly associated with this region. The excesses of industrial capitalism encouraged radical protest movements that have become part of the tradition of the labour movement. Almost at random we can point to Peterloo in 1819, Chartism in the 1830s and 1840s and the foundation of the Trades Union Congress in Manchester in 1868. Radicals such as John Doherty and Robert Owen are associated with this region as are the early struggles of trade unionism especially in the cotton textile district.

With such a rich tradition there was good reason to establish a labour history group here. The initiative was taken in January 1973 when an inaugural meeting was held in Liverpool attended by about 15 people and the North West Group for the Study of Labour History (later renamed the North West Labour History Group) was established. The aims of the group were similar to those of the national society but with an emphasis upon the north west. We sought to bring together all those who were interested in labour history in the north west and to encourage and organise that interest. We sought to preserve existing records. These aims were to be achieved through meetings and publishing pamphlets and books. From the outset our intention was to hold at least two meetings a year, one in Manchester and one in Liverpool and to publish an annual bulletin, a journal for members and the general public which would focus on issues of labour history in the region. These aims we have honoured. Up to date there have been thirteen issues of the *Bulletin* and our conferences attract an audience of about thirty.⁵ The annual Liverpool meeting tends to concentrate on local issues such as waterfront workers, Merseyside workers and the Spanish Civil War, the development of the Liverpool Labour Party and ethnicity and sectarianism. The Manchester conferences are often more broadly based and have involved discussion on Chartism in the north west, the textile industry and the Irish and British Labour Movement.

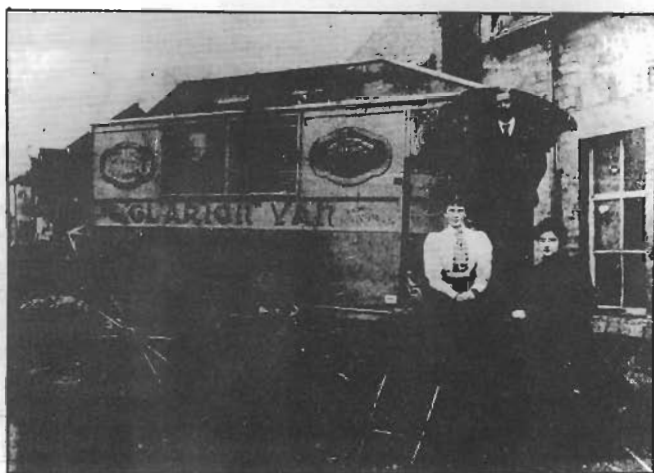


MINERS HISTORY – THE LANCASHIRE SEAM

thus enriched analysis of the theme under discussion. I recall the recent (1987) weekend conference in Liverpool to celebrate the centenary of the establishment of the National Union of Seamen and the dockers' unions. One session was devoted to the post-Second World War period and contributions from seamen and dockers provided a vivid and often humorous account of struggles to reform the waterfront unions to reflect the aspirations of the rank and file. Our *Bulletin* No 11 (1985-6) was devoted to coalminers' history in recognition of the prolonged strike of 1984-5. It included a number of short articles by those involved in the strike including the Agecroft Women's Support Group.

The development of the group's activities has been greatly helped by the presence in Manchester of the unique Working Class Movement Library. The creators of that library, Ruth and Edmund Frow, provided a venue for our committee meetings and the resources of the library have permitted us to have material for exhibitions at our conferences. Their world-wide contacts have ensured a regular flow of distinguished speakers. Salford Corporation with enlightened wisdom has recently arranged for the library to be sited in new accommodation at Jubilee House, Salford which includes an excellent hall for our Manchester conferences.

The group has been in existence for fifteen years and this is an appropriate opportunity to summarise our strengths and weaknesses. Our strength derives from the handful of activists who serve on the committee. They keep the group active and the effort of successive editors of the *Bulletin*, secretaries and treasurers in particular are to be applauded. The regular publication of the *Bulletin* has been a commendable feature of the Group's activities. Over the last fifteen years, as the appended list indicates, we have been able to publish a wide range of original articles which have made a genuine contribution to deepening our understanding of labour history in the north west. It is encouraging to note how frequently articles in the *Bulletin* are referred to in the work of other historians working both inside and outside of the region. Our membership of about 350 should be much higher and our activities should be more widespread. We have held successful conferences in, for example, Preston, Nelson



Enid Stacy seated on a Clarion Van.

Our effort both in the *Bulletin* and the conferences has been to present labour history in a manner that appeals to all interested in the subject. Our approach is exploratory, searching, analytical and critical but presented in a manner which we hope is interesting and lively. Some of our most successful meetings have been when working men and women have recounted their experiences and

and Bolton but our group tends to be based firmly in Liverpool and Manchester. We would welcome greater interest from other areas of the region. As is the case with most small societies a major problem facing the group is lack of finance. Indeed at the time of writing the group faces a financial crisis. The production of the *Bulletin* in its present form is now in jeopardy. Spiralling printing costs have not been matched by an increase in income. We face a dilemma by seeking to keep the annual subscription low to encourage all those interested in labour history irrespective of their income but we need increasing resources to meet printing costs. In the past we have been generously supported financially by sympathetic local authorities and organisations but these sources themselves are under financial pressure and hence the subsidies have diminished. In autumn 1988 an appeal was launched to recruit new members and for individual donations to our publication fund. If this fails we shall be unable to produce annual bulletins in their present form in the future. This would be a grave setback and I am hopeful that sympathetic readers may wish to support our work and contribute to our slender resources.

Our conferences continue to attract committed audiences. Speakers give generously of their time and discussion is normally lively. Two meetings stand out particularly. In 1981 the Irish Labour History Society joined with us for a weekend conference on *The Irish and British Labour Movements: the Experience of Dublin and Liverpool*. Some forty Irish colleagues met with us in Liverpool for a wide-ranging series of papers and discussion extending from English Working Class Radicalism and the Irish, 1815-50 to contemporary developments in Dublin and Liverpool. The social evening will be remembered for the superb singing of protest and radical songs mainly by our Irish friends. More recently, in 1987, a co-operative effort involving the group, the Merseyside Labour History Group, the Transport and General Workers' Union and the National Union of Seamen led to a weekend conference on seafarers and dockers. Papers were read on a wide range

of topics including women's work at the docks, the lives of seafarers and seafarers' wives, the early struggles of seafarers' and dockers' unions and militancy and shop stewards' activity in the post-war period. I shall long remember the contribution of Jack Dash, once a major figure on the London docks, who is still a formidable and passionate speaker; and the contributions from rank and file seamen on their experiences in the 1960s.⁶

Despite financial problems the group will continue to mine the rich seam of labour history in the region. Will labour history continue, however, to flourish as it has done over the last twenty-five years or so? As suggested earlier one of the reasons why labour history developed so rapidly has been the growth of political power of labour since 1945. That came to an abrupt end in 1979 and many of the most cherished beliefs of the left have been challenged since then. The emphasis has shifted from collective responsibility to individual enterprise and phrases such as 'value for money' and 'targetting resources to those in greatest need' have taken on meanings redolent of George Orwell's *Newspeak* in 1984. The left has so far been unable to recapture the ground lost in 1979 and socialist principles and values are under strong attack. In that context will labour history wane? Will the young, in particular, now find little of interest in the history of the working classes, their culture, their struggles, their victories and defeats? Evidence suggests that ordinary people remain deeply conscious of their roots and the experience of their predecessors. If that is the case labour history will continue to attract and groups such as ours can face the future with confidence.

Membership of the North West Labour History Group is £3.00 per annum entitling members to one copy of the annual *Bulletin* and information regarding the group's activities. Other contributions to further the aims of the Group will be gratefully received. Cheques should be made payable to the Publication Fund, North West Labour History Group. All enquiries should be made to John Smethurst, Treasurer, North West Labour History Group, 81 Parrin Lane, Winton, Eccles, Manchester M30 8AY.

WOMEN & THE LABOUR MOVEMENT



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ARTICLES IN BULLETIN

BULLETIN No. 1

- R. & E. Frow The General Strike in Manchester.
R. Bean The General Strike on Merseyside.
N. Kirk The Decline of Chartism in S.E. Lancashire 1850-1870.
I. Prothero Chartism in the North West.

BULLETIN No. 2

- N. Todd The Labour Movement in North Lancashire 1890-1910.
J.P.H. Carter Contributions, Badges and the Liverpool Carters.

BULLETIN No. 3

- A.V. John The Lancashire Pit Brow Lasses.
A. Bullen The Calling of the 1932 Cotton Strike.
E. Taplin Liverpool Trades Council 1880-1914.
J. Smethurst The Manchester Banner Makers.
E. & R. Frow Trade Union Emblems.

BULLETIN No. 4

- A.J. Ainsworth Aspects of Socialism at Branch Level, 1890-1900; Some notes towards analysis.
 A. Fowler Lancashire and the New Liberalism.
 S. Carter ILP in Ashton-under-Lyne, 1893-1900.
 J. McHugh Belfast Labour Dispute and Riots of 1907.
 E. Conway Teaching Labour History.

BULLETIN No. 5

- A. Bullen Watching and Besetting: the Burnley Police and the More Looms Disputes.
 H. Weinroth John Foster's *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution*.
 N. Reid Manchester and Salford ILP: a more controversial aspect of the pre-1914 era.
 D. Bateman The ILP between the Wars.
 A. Linkman Manchester Studies Trade Union Project: Records of the Cotton Unions.

BULLETIN No. 6

- R.S.W. Davies The Liverpool Labour Party and the Liverpool Working Class, 1900-1939.
 A. Shallice Orange and Green and Militancy: Sectarianism and Working Class Politics in Liverpool, 1900-1914.
 R.M. Jones The Liverpool Bread Riots, 1855.
 A. Fowler Trade Unions and Technical Change: The Automatic Loom Strike, 1908.

BULLETIN No. 7

- J. Norris Women's History.
 J. Liddington Looking for Mrs. Cooper.
 A. Tuckett Enid Stacey.
 K. Hunt Women and the Social Democratic Federation.
 L. Grant Women's Work and Trade Unionism in Liverpool, 1890-1914.
 K. Clark and G. Porter Manchester Women's History Group.

BULLETIN No. 8

- J. Belchem English Working-Class Radicalism and the Irish 1815-1850.
 A. Shallice Liverpool Labourism and Irish Nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s.
 D. Morris Origins of the British Socialist Party.
 J. Hill Social Democracy and the Labour Movement: the Social Democratic Federation in Lancashire.
 A. Mutch Lancashire's "Revolt of the Field": the Ormskirk Farmworkers' Strike of 1913.

BULLETIN No. 9

- J. Norris Women's and Men's Unemployment in Macclesfield Between the Wars.
 J. Whitehead 1911: The Great Unrest comes to Horwich.
 J. Garnett My Autobiography.
 E.L. Taplin Irish Leaders and the Liverpool Dockers: Richard McGhee and Edward McHugh.

BULLETIN No. 10

- D. Howell Was the Labour Party Inevitable?
 D. Pye Fellowship is Life: Bolton Clarion Cycling Club and the Clarion Movement: 1894-1914.
 P. Salveson Getting Back to the Land: The Daisy Colony Experiment.
 A. Fowler Labour and Liberalism in Textile Lancashire: 1910-1914.
 Seth Sagar's Memoirs.

BULLETIN No. 11

- P. Holden True Story of a Lancashire Pit Brow Lass.
 "The Rover" The Stirring Recollections and Boy Life of Bill Johnson, Lancashire Pit Lad.
 J.B. Smethurst Portraits of 19th Century Lancashire Miners Leaders: William Pickard, George Pickard, Joseph Booth and Robert Lewis.
 P. Salveson Songs from the Lancashire Seam.
 B. Davies The Strange Story.
 J. Dronsfield Sketches of Collier Life.
 A. Clarke Patsy Filligan on the Coal Lock-Out.
 Speedwell Tom Burke — Coal Miner and Opera Singer.
 L. Davies What it was like in '26.
 E. Jones, M. Jones and J. King It's **Our Fight** Too! Solidarity and Support in Lancaster during the Miners Strike of 1984-85.
 N. Sammon Bold Memories of '84.
 M. Short One Woman's Story.

BULLETIN No. 12

- E. & R. Frow Jill Norris: Some Memories.
 M. Kirrane Early Women Office Workers.
 J. Whitehead No place for a lady: how the unions tried to keep women out of office — a case study of Alice Foley.
 Manchester Women's History Group Ideology in Bricks and Mortar — women's housing in Manchester between the wars.
 E. Horriby A Shopworker's Success.
 M. Short Fighting on: Lancashire Women Against Pit Closures.
 C. Collette An independent voice. Lisbeth Simm and women's labour representation in the north west, 1906-14.

BULLETIN No. 13

- Ruth Frow interviewed by Joyce Whitehead.
 A. Kahan The Working Class Movement Library — once removed.
 The Half-Time System: Two forgotten short stories.
 J. Saville The Hunger Marches of the 1930s.
 E. Frow Engineering Struggles.
 R. Futter A new role for the Crescent.

Many of the early numbers of the Group's *Bulletins* have sold out but back issues of *Bulletins* No. 8, 10 and 12 are still available from John Smethurst at the above address at £3.40 per copy post free.

NOTES

1. Asa Briggs, 'Open Questions of Labour History', *Bulletin No. 1 Society for the Study of Labour History*, Autumn, 1960.
2. *Bulletin No. 1, Society for the Study of Labour History*, Autumn, 1960.
3. *Bulletin No. 5, Society for the Study of Labour History*, Autumn, 1962.
4. *Women's Work at the Waterfront* is available from Eileen Kelly, Second Chance, City College, Clarence Street, Liverpool, L3 5TP at £2.40 per copy, post free.
5. The current *Bulletin* (No. 13, 1988) is dedicated to Ruth and Edmund Frow and their Working Class Movement Library.
6. Some of the papers from this conference form the major part of the next issue of the *Bulletin* which we hope will be published in 1989.