

## EDMUND FROW, 1906 -1997

**The death of Edmund (Eddie) Frow in May 1997 at the age of 90 years has robbed the working-class movement of a notable man who devoted his adult life to radical causes with a rare passion and commitment.**

He was born in the village of Harrington, Lincolnshire, the family moving to Tingley, near Wakefield, when he was a boy. After leaving technical school at 16 years of age he was apprenticed to George Rhodes, a Wakefield engineering firm. In the final year of his apprenticeship the TUC called the General Strike in May 1926. Although engineers were not part of the first wave he left work and travelled to Northampton to assist in organising meetings and distributing leaflets. On returning to work he found he was sacked. He completed his apprenticeship in Derby but was sacked once again when he was entitled to a full adult wage. He moved to Liverpool, where he worked for Meccano but was out of work again in 1929 following the impact of the Wall Street Crash. It was not until 1934 that he once again secured work, this time in the Manchester area. Although he was never again unemployed for any length of time he remarked on one occasion that he had 30 jobs in 20 years and had walked out on only one in spite of his noted skills as an engineer with, it was said, the best tool kit in the industry.

His turbulent employment record stemmed from his political and union activities. He had joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1924 becoming party organiser in Liverpool, notable as a powerful speaker at outdoor meetings and a regular seller of the *Sunday Worker*. He was a member of the Communist Party delegation to Moscow in 1930 accompanying Harry Pollitt and Willie Gallacher among others. In that year he moved to Salford where he became active in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. In 1931 he led a demonstration of 10,000 people to Salford town hall in Bexley Square where they were attacked by the police with batons swinging. Eddie was arrested and taken to the police station where he was beaten up. His nose was broken, necessitating treatment at Salford Royal Hospital. He was subsequently sentenced to five months imprisonment in Strangeways prison for his part in what came to be known as 'The Battle of Bexley Square'.

He was, as might be expected, an active member of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU). He served as a shop steward in a number of factories and sometimes as a convenor. He was elected to the AEU's national committee, attended the TUC as an AEU delegate, and later became full-time secretary of the Manchester District Committee. His knowledge of the engineering industry was immense and he fought consistently for trade union rights for workers. In 1971 he retired at the age of 65 years.

In spite of his dedicated work as a political and trade union activist, Eddie Frow will be remembered more for the establishment of the Working Class Movement Library, an enterprise that, with his wife, Ruth, absorbed them for over 40 years. Eddie and Ruth met in 1953 and were married in 1960. Both had small libraries that complemented each other but with irrepressible enthusiasm they began travelling the country collecting books, pamphlets, posters and memorabilia of the British labour movement. At first they used a 1937 Morris van, camping in a field or grass verge near to a local book-

shop. Later they acquired a small caravan which improved their creature comforts and provided more space for their purchases. Booksellers throughout the country from Edinburgh to Devon came to know them. Meanwhile their modest semi-detached house in King's Road, Old Trafford, Manchester was filled with books and other labour history material. Every room, except kitchen and bathroom, was lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling, the stairway and hall hung with posters and trade union banners. As their collection expanded, including many rare items, their home became a mecca for scholars and research students from all over the world. A crisis of space was approaching when, in 1987, the Labour controlled Salford Council, with enlightened wisdom and generosity, transferred the whole library to Jubilee House, The Crescent, Salford opposite the university. Eddie and Ruth were given a flat on the top floor thus maintaining close involvement with the library. The collection continues to grow as individuals, trade unions and other sympathetic bodies donate relevant material. Moreover, the collection cannot be broken up as a charitable trust was established in 1959. Recently the library has been awarded £200,000 from the national lottery to further its work.

His absorption in book collecting did not prevent him from undertaking other activities. He was a member of The Society for the Study of Labour History and its treasurer from 1974 to 1980; a member also of the North West Labour History Group from its foundation in 1973 and his counsel on its committee will be sorely missed. With Ruth (it is difficult to separate them) he published a stream of books, pamphlets and reviews including a two volume history of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council.

Modest to a fault both Eddie and Ruth were, nevertheless, rightfully awarded honorary degrees by the University of Salford and the University of Central Lancashire in recognition of their outstanding contribution to labour history. Eddie was a man of unflinching courtesy, generosity and integrity. Ruth and Eddie welcomed all who shared their enthusiasms. I recall the pleasure and pride with which he would hand me a precious new acquisition to the library with a gleam of joy in his eyes.

Communist, skilled engineer, trade union activist, bibliophile, labour historian and lover of the countryside (he was walking in the Welsh hills in his eighties) he was a colleague to be treasured and will be sorely missed.

Eric Taplin  
University of Liverpool and Chair of the North West Labour History Group.

NB. Readers of this obituary may be interested to know that the North West Labour History Group has published a booklet of 72 pages, 'Born with a book in his hand.' A Tribute to Edmund Frow, 1906-1997 edited by Michael Herbert and Eric Taplin which contains memories and appreciations written by friends and colleagues encompassing many aspects of Eddie's life. Copies may be obtained from John Smethurst, treasurer, NWLHG, 81 Parrin Lane, Winton, Eccles, Manchester, M30 8AY. The price is £5.00 per copy (£50p p.& p.). Cheques, etc. should be made payable to North West Labour History Group.