

# UNION FIRST, POLITICS AFTER: OLDHAM COTTON UNIONS AND THE LABOUR PARTY BEFORE 1914

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In 1909, Shadwell observed that Oldham was “the most complete example of the purely manufacturing town that can be found anywhere”, and that “There seem to be no residents of the leisured class at all.” Its population did indeed consist overwhelmingly of industrial workers: in 1911, professional occupations accounted for only 11 per thousand; and commercial occupations 14 per thousand.<sup>2</sup> Ethnic and religious minorities were small. Denvir estimated Oldham’s Catholics as forming just over 4% of the population.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, in his history of labour representation in 1912, A.W. Humphrey wrote that “There is no constituency in the kingdom which would be more fittingly represented by a Labour member than Oldham.”<sup>4</sup> Yet Labour did not win in Oldham until 1922. Even then, the constituency was not part of the Labour heartland: the Conservatives won in 1924, Labour in 1929, and the Conservatives in 1931 and 1935.

The purpose of this article is to examine the barriers to Labour success in Oldham before 1914. This entails two tasks. The first is to explain why, until 1903, the dominant cotton unions opposed the idea of independent labour representation. The second is to explain why, once the idea was accepted by a majority, Labour candidatures failed disastrously, with candidates twice withdrawing in acrimonious circumstances. When a candidate finally stood in the 1911 by-election, the outcome led a speaker at the 1912 national conference to comment that “The Labour Party had had three or four fiascos in Oldham, but the last was the worst.”<sup>5</sup>

## Wages and Life Chances

Oldham was dominated by coarse spinning, which accounted for 63% of all those engaged in occupations in 1901.

### OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE OF OLDHAM IN 1901

|                                | Males  | Females |
|--------------------------------|--------|---------|
| Cotton manufacture             | 12,372 | 17,099  |
| Other textile manufacture      | 134    | 170     |
| Engineering and machine making | 11,012 | —       |
| Building                       | 3,499  | —       |
| Conveyance of men and goods    | 2,850  | —       |
| Commercial clerks              | 1,094  | —       |
| Coal and shale miners          | 559    | —       |
| Iron and steel manufacture     | 57     | —       |
| Domestic service               | 2,341  | 2,140   |

The material circumstances of the majority of Oldham’s working class gave them an interest in maintaining the *status quo*. Spinners were among the best paid workers in the country: in 1906, they averaged 41s.10d. and in 1908, between 38s. and

46s., at a time when 30s. was a good wage for an adult male urban worker.<sup>6</sup> Schulze-Gaevernitz cited the example of a 42-year old, married spinner with seven children whose income was £206, expenditure £185, and who therefore saved £21 a year.<sup>7</sup> Typically, part of the savings went to ‘going-off clubs’, and sick and burial clubs; but most was used to buy a house. In 1908, the local Medical Officer of Health estimated that 10,000 operatives were home owners, the better-off able to afford a five-roomed house.<sup>8</sup>

Oldham was a co-operative centre second in importance only to Rochdale. By 1900, the Equitable had 12,000 members, and the Industrial 13,718.<sup>9</sup> They were the main institutions for house purchase loans, and strongly encouraged education. The Industrial, it was claimed, provided the highest education grant of any co-operative society in the world, and Albert Mansbridge, the founder of the WEA, commended its policy.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in 1911, 78% of Oldham firms were joint-stock in origin. Cotton operatives accounted for 30% of shareholders, and usually invested not in the mills where they worked, but in the mills where they could get the highest return. With reason, *The Times* welcomed the limiteds as “voluntary missionaries of capital among the mass of labourers”, and the Webbs characterised cotton operatives as “eager by individual thrift to rise out of the wage-earning class.”<sup>11</sup>

## The Cotton Unions

In 1886, the *Cotton Factory Times* claimed that “We are certain no other class of work-people have derived so much good from their trade unions as the cotton operatives.”<sup>12</sup> Modern scholarship concurs: Clegg *et al.* concluded that the Spinners’ organisation was “nearly perfect.” The Amalgamated Association of Cotton Spinners had secured 90% unionisation by 1888 and 95% by 1891, and provided “the most comprehensive and expensive system of benefits in the country.”<sup>13</sup> It also had by far the largest strike fund per voting member of any British trade union.<sup>14</sup> Demarcations were rigorously upheld. Above all, spinners maintained their assistants, the piecers, in a subordinate position within their union. The Spinners’ Executive arbitrated in disputes between spinners and their piecers.<sup>15</sup>

The second key cotton union in Oldham was the Amalgamated Association of Card and Blowing Room Operatives, established in 1886. Three-quarters of cardroom workers were women, yet, by 1900, 80% of the card room was unionised. The Association agreed to co-operate with the Spinners in the course of disputes in 1891.<sup>16</sup> A formal *Agreement for Securing Joint Action in cases of Individual Strikes* was drawn up in Oldham in 1899, and re-negotiated in 1904.<sup>17</sup>

The Oldham Employers’ Secretary, Samuel Andrew, told the

British Association in 1887 that in no other place were disputes as easily settled as in Oldham.<sup>18</sup> Union leaders agreed: William Mullin, the General Secretary of the Cardroom Association, told the Royal Commission on Labour in 1891 that only in very exceptional cases did employers refuse to see the unions, and that practically all disputes were with individual employers.<sup>19</sup> Although there was a general lock-out between November 1891 and March 1892, it was ended by the Brooklands Agreement, which, by creating procedures for automatic annual wage adjustments and for referring mill disputes, laid the foundation for industrial peace in cotton until 1908.

Moreover, according to the Webbs, the Brooklands Agreement also produced "a peculiar type of Trade Union official... a combination... of the accountant and the lawyer", rather than the born orator. Negotiations became "the meeting of the salaried professional experts on each side."<sup>20</sup> Experts changed sides: in 1905, Pogson resigned as Assistant Secretary of the Oldham Spinners in order to become Assistant Secretary of the Oldham Cotton Employers' Association.<sup>21</sup>

Such instances could be taken as evidence of the incorporation of union leaders. However, contemporaries were generally struck by how completely the Spinners' Amalgamation was a "representative institution."<sup>22</sup> The 100-strong 'Cotton-spinners' Parliament' was elected annually in strict proportion to membership. Its 'Cabinet', the Executive Council, was elected by the general representative meeting. The Webbs observed its work for seven years, and wrote, "we can testify to the success with which both efficiency and popular control are secured." Efficiency was due to the "adequate, highly -trained, and relatively well-paid and permanent civil service" of the union. Popular control was secured by "the real supremacy of the elected representatives", and the fact that the representatives "can scarcely fail to be in touch with the general body of the members", since they shared a similar life-style, were subject to annual election, and had to explain their actions to their mem-



*James Mawdsley, General Secretary of the Amalgamated Association of Operative Spinners (1878-1902).*



*Thomas Ashton, President of the Amalgamated Association of Operative Spinners(1878-1913).*

bers, who also received printed reports. Ballots of the entire membership were held on critical issues. If an official appeared too friendly with the employers, there were many opportunities for members to demand an explanation. The cotton unions had their own newspaper, and union leaders wrote much of the 'labour news' in the provincial press.<sup>23</sup> Significantly, when cotton workers formed "rank-and-file committees", it was often to oppose the ambitions of their leaders.<sup>24</sup>

In these circumstances, the political priority of the cotton union leaders was to ensure that their industrial strength was not dissipated by the divided party political allegiances of their members. The securing of the Brooklands Agreement reinforced their belief that industrial strength alone sufficed.<sup>25</sup> For many, notably James Mawdsley, the General Secretary of the Amalgamated Association of Operative Spinners from 1878 to 1902, party politics were an opportunity to be exploited to achieve union goals, or a nuisance to be contained.

The cotton workers had long looked to Parliament, and the United Textile Factory Workers' Association (UTFWA) was created in 1883 in order to unite the cotton unions and promote "the removal of any grievance from which its members may be suffering, for which parliamentary or governmental interference is required."<sup>26</sup> The Webbs thought this "a political machine of remarkable efficiency."<sup>27</sup> In the course of the successful campaign for the Cotton Cloth Factories Act in 1889, union leaders had summoned 30 Lancashire MPs to a meeting, chaired by Lord Cranborne, the Prime Minister's son, to draft the bill. The Liberals extended the legislation in 1895.<sup>28</sup> Both front benches did their bidding. Usually, employers were also approached in order that the trade could press the government.<sup>29</sup> The unions routinely demanded explanations of their voting record in Parliament from local MPs.<sup>30</sup>

For lobbying to succeed, party feeling among the membership had to be contained. One strategy was to seek prestigious, non-political public positions, such as membership of the local magistrates' bench. When Thomas Ashton, General Secretary of the

Oldham Operative Spinners' Amalgamation and President of the Amalgamated Association of Operative Spinners from 1878 to 1913, was made a JP in 1891, the textile trades could boast six magistrates. At the public celebration, the Chairman declared:

*The confidence now manifested in the selection of working men magistrates is a feature we hail with joy, and is in our opinion calculated to give stability, even as well as dignity, to the Bench, and is another indication of the speedy disappearance of class distinction.*<sup>31</sup>

Union leaders did sometimes stand as party candidates. A bipartisan scheme was proposed in 1895, under which Mawdsley would stand as a Conservative, and David Holmes of the Weavers as a Liberal. The Webbs thought that this balance was "a fortunate chance", for it ensured that no MP for a cotton constituency, of whichever party, escaped pressure.<sup>32</sup> Yet the scheme failed because of "strong party feeling."<sup>33</sup> In the 1899 by-election, Mawdsley gained 11,444 votes, but was narrowly defeated. If all the 12,000 enfranchised male textile trade unionists had voted for him, he could have won.<sup>34</sup> The decision of the Union Executive to allow him leave of absence had not been unanimous: 59 were for, 37 against, and 34 abstained.<sup>35</sup>

Yet it is clear, even from the by-election, that Mawdsley was not an ideologically committed Conservative. In the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Ramsay MacDonald termed Mawdsley "a trade unionist candidate for parliament", and this is accurate.<sup>36</sup> Mawdsley's stance as a member of the Royal Commission of Labour between 1891 and 1894 was a revelation to the Webbs. He was one of the signatories of the Minority Report, drafted by Sidney Webb, which advocated 'public for capitalist enterprise': "The only alteration he insisted on was the omission of the word 'Socialism', though he agreed to the substitution of the words 'public administration, national and local'."<sup>37</sup> Otherwise, Mawdsley was almost always in agreement with other commissioners who represented the 'interests of labour', whether they were Liberals or 'Labour'.<sup>38</sup>

Mawdsley distrusted mere words. He believed that "It did not matter what a man professed, but what he did. He should be judged by his works."<sup>39</sup> He himself used whichever political language was appropriate in the circumstances and for his purpose. He told the 1886 International Trade Union Congress at Paris that he "did not understand their Socialism"; but he struck a 'socialist' note notwithstanding: the English workers "at least, possessed one clear conception, they realised that the actual producers did not obtain their share of the wealth they created."<sup>40</sup>

### Conservatives and Liberals

In 1906, workers accounted for 70% of Oldham's electorate. The cardinal feature of the seat was that it was extremely marginal. Between 1868 and 1900, elections were determined by swings of a few hundred electors. Even in 1910, the *Manchester Guardian* described it as a 'wobbly' seat, just beginning to achieve some stability.<sup>41</sup>

Table 1: Oldham Parliamentary Election Results – 2 Members

|          | ELECTORS |          |         |          |       |
|----------|----------|----------|---------|----------|-------|
|          | LIB (I)  | LIB (II) | CON (I) | CON (II) | LAB   |
| 1868     | 6,948    | –        | 7,278   | –        |       |
| 1874     | 8,397    | 8,360    | 8,582   | 8,541    |       |
| 1877     | 9,543    | –        | 8,880   | –        |       |
| 1880     | 10,630   | 10,409   | 8,982   | 8,593    |       |
| 1885     | 12,254   | 11,847   | 11,992  | 11,491   |       |
| 1886     | 10,921   | 10,819   | 11,606  | 11,484   |       |
| 1892     | 12,619   | 12,541   | 12,205  | 11,952   |       |
| 1895     | 12,249   | 12,092   | 13,085  | 12,465   |       |
| 1899     | 12,976   | 12,770   | 11,477  | 11,444   |       |
| 1900     | 12,947   | 12,709   | 12,931  | 12,522   |       |
| 1906     | 17,397   | 16,672   | 11,989  | 11,391   |       |
| Jan 1910 | 19,252   | 18,840   | 13,462  | 12,577   |       |
| Dec 1910 | 17,108   | 16,941   | 13,440  | 13,281   |       |
| 1911     | 10,623   | –        | 12,255  | –        | 7,448 |

Source: J. Vincent and M. Stenton, *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book: British Election Results 1832-1918* (Brighton, 1971).

In 1906, the Oldham Trades and Labour Council acknowledged that the workers were split between Liberals and Conservatives. There were, it was claimed, Liberal streets and Conservative streets, and whole districts had a common political opinion.<sup>42</sup> A majority of cotton workers were probably Conservative before 1906.<sup>43</sup> Contemporaries certainly thought so. The *Manchester Guardian* ridiculed the Oldham working man: "gi'e us good awd Owdham notions. You've hit it. Aw'm a downreets straight aw'd Tory."<sup>44</sup>

Both the established parties recognised the importance of the working-class voter in Oldham. Both had accomplished registration agents, and founded party clubs. A Working Men's Liberal Association was created in 1868. A Working Men's Conservative Society was organised in 1880. By 1893, 7 out of 12 councillors were cotton spinners.<sup>45</sup>

The Conservatives selected parliamentary candidates sympathetic to the cotton workers' cause. In 1895, their candidate was Robert Ascroft, a popular local solicitor, who was the legal adviser to the Card and Blowing Room Association, and had helped to reorganise the union when it collapsed after an unsuccessful strike in 1878. Ascroft had also played a prominent part in bringing the 1892-1893 lock-out to an end. During the campaign, he referred constantly to his connection with the cotton unions. After his death, a statue to his memory, bearing the inscription, 'The People's Friend', was unveiled in 1903 by Thomas Ashton.<sup>46</sup>

The Liberals also courted trade unionists. In 1892, Cheetham favoured reductions in hours and provision of working-class housing.<sup>47</sup> Above all, Free Trade was normally a trump card. When this was threatened during the Government of India's campaign for cotton duties in 1894, the Oldham Liberal MP, and one of the Joint Secretaries of the Treasury, Sir John Herbert, told his constituents that if he had to choose between their

Table 2: Oldham Municipal Elections and the ILP % votes per party

|        | ST.JAMES'S | ST.PETER'S | ST.PAUL'S | MUMPS | WESTWOOD | ST.MARY'S | HOLLINWOOD | CLARKSFIELD | WATERHEAD |
|--------|------------|------------|-----------|-------|----------|-----------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| C      | 88         | –          | 50        | 50    | 48       | 49        |            |             |           |
| 1892 L | –          | 76         | 45        | 46    | 48       | 45        |            |             |           |
| ILP    | 12         | 24         | 5         | 4     | 4        | 6         |            |             |           |
| C      |            | 47         | 46        | 50    | 45       | 75        |            |             |           |
| 1893 L |            | 48         | 51        | 44    | 41       | –         |            |             |           |
| ILP    |            | 5          | 3         | 6     | 14       | 25        |            |             |           |
| C      | 49         |            |           |       | 49       |           |            |             |           |
| 1894 L | 43         |            |           |       | 40       |           |            |             |           |
| ILP    | 8          |            |           |       | 11       |           |            |             |           |
| C      | 46         |            |           |       |          |           | 47         |             | 83        |
| 1895 L | 48         |            |           |       |          |           | 46         |             | –         |
| ILP    | 6          |            |           |       |          |           | 7          |             | 17        |
| C      |            |            |           |       |          |           |            |             | 58        |
| 1897 L |            |            |           |       |          |           |            |             | –         |
| ILP    |            |            |           |       |          |           |            |             | 42        |
| C      |            |            |           |       |          |           |            | 52          |           |
| 1900 L |            |            |           |       |          |           |            | –           |           |
| ILP    |            |            |           |       |          |           |            | 48          |           |
| C      |            |            |           |       | 51       |           |            |             |           |
| 1904 L |            |            |           |       | 33       |           |            |             |           |
| ILP    |            |            |           |       | 16       |           |            |             |           |
| C      |            |            |           |       | 62       |           |            |             |           |
| 1905 L |            |            |           |       | –        |           |            |             |           |
| ILP    |            |            |           |       | 38       |           |            |             |           |

interests and those of the Government, he would choose theirs. Even so, Hibbert lost his seat in 1895, after duties were temporarily imposed.<sup>48</sup>

Since many employers were Liberals, the Liberals were always disadvantaged by being identified with the employers' application of "the screw".<sup>49</sup> They responded by making a virtue of their candidates' knowledge of trade: in 1900, they argued that a vote for their candidates, Emmott and Runciman – the former's family mill-owners for several generations – was a vote for 'Industry and Commerce', and 'Trade and Shipping'; whereas a vote for the Conservative candidates, Churchill and Crisp, was a vote for a man 'Who Knows Nothing about Trade', and a man 'Who Knows Nothing about Cotton'.<sup>50</sup>

### Socialists

In such circumstances, socialism made little headway. In the late 1880s and 1890s, a number of socialist bodies were formed. Of these, only the ILP had any appreciable influence. Even then, its influence derived primarily from the fact that some of its leading members were prominent 'new' trade unionists.

In October 1885, *Justice* stated that an Oldham branch of the Social Democratic Federation had been "definitely constituted"; but in 1888, it was re-formed. The SDF had no electoral success in Oldham. A SDF municipal candidate failed in 1894. The following year, Oldham was selected as one of 34 constituencies that would be contested; but it was not recommended again, for:

*In the future it was absolutely necessary that they should not damage the cause by putting forward candidates where they had not the slightest chance of making a decent show.*<sup>51</sup>

The SDF blamed the hostility of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) for its lack of success. It also blamed the workers: "The workers of Lancashire seem quite indifferent to their own interests."<sup>52</sup> In 1891, the Oldham Fabian Society was formed, but seems to have played no further local role.<sup>53</sup> The Oldham Labour Executive was in touch with the national society only once, in 1909, to ask for a list of candidates.<sup>54</sup>

The inaugural meeting of the Oldham ILP in June 1892 was addressed by Robert Blatchford, and John Trevor, who argued that the ILP programme was "out and out a Socialistic one."<sup>55</sup> J.R. Clynes, the organiser of the Gas Workers and General Labourers' Union, and the secretary of the Oldham Trades Council from 1894, was the most notable of a number of 'new union' leaders active in the ILP. Winning over the unions was a central task. Locally, it sought "Labour reform, wages reform, sanitary reform and the reform of the Borough bench." Its membership fluctuated: 272 in 1897; 146 in April 1898; 80 in September 1898; 58 in 1899; 250 in 1900. The branch came close to collapse in 1898-99, but after re-organisation, it became one of the most active.<sup>56</sup> In 1900, it was the second largest branch, after Bradford, with 1,000 members. However, the 1900 ILP conference correctly appraised its situation when it criticised fighting the 1899 by-election "for propaganda purposes", and felt the circumstances had not justified putting forward a candidate. Its record in municipal elections was similarly unsuccessful (see Table 2).

## Opposing Labour Representation

What Mawdsley and the Spinners had in abundance was trade consciousness. What they lacked was class consciousness, and hence a capacity for class action. At the 1882 TUC Congress, Ashton rejected the idea of class action through a universal federation as “utterly impossible”, since “their interests were so varied, and they were so jealous with regard to each other’s disputes.”<sup>57</sup> Beatrice Webb wrote in her diary for 1889 that the cotton union officials believed in dealing with each trade separately: “Ideas such as the *solidarity of labour* are to them absurd.”<sup>58</sup> They opposed the Eight Hours Bill at the 1890 TUC, “as to do so would endanger their position as wage-earners.”<sup>59</sup>

The cotton unions’ resistance to countenancing either class action or independent labour representation is evident in the history of the Oldham Trades Council. Between 1883 and 1893 membership of the Council increased from 5,783 to 29,226. Much of this increase was accounted for by one union, the Cardroom Operatives, which had been reorganised in the 1880s, and accounted for 43% of the Council’s membership in 1893. The Spinners, who had provided 71% of members in 1883, comprised 21% in 1893. However, the Textile Trades’ Section accounted for 82% in 1883, and 77% in 1893.

In 1890, several new unions were founded in Oldham: the Gas Workers and General Labourers; a branch of the General Railway Workers’ Union; and the Amalgamated Society of Plate and Machine Moulders. On the Trades Council, the new union leaders argued for direct representation, because of “how little our rights are studied by many of those who claim to represent us.” However, even the largest new union, the Gas Workers, only accounted for 3% of the Trades Council’s membership in 1893. The cotton unions therefore continued to determine the Council’s strategy. They believed that:

*Trades’ Councils should be Trades’ Councils, and not be made into political institutions for party purposes.... Trades’ Unions and Trades’ Councils never prosper when trade questions are mixed up with politics.*

The result was increasing friction between old and new union leaders. The parting of the ways came in 1894, when the Trades Council voted in favour of local labour representation. The formal vote was 6,331 for and 1,482 against; but the Spinners, with 11,267 members, had withdrawn from the Council, and not voted. Council membership collapsed:<sup>60</sup>

Table 3: Oldham Trades Council Membership

|      | Total  | Textile Trades Section |
|------|--------|------------------------|
| 1892 | 29,226 | 22,484                 |
| 1898 | 9,007  | 3,915                  |
| 1899 | 5,520  | 292                    |

In 1898, the name was changed to the Trades and Labour Council, but it was a pyrrhic victory. Its income in 1900 was a mere £58.

Cotton union leaders saw no advantage in ‘labour representation’ in the 1890s. For them, “it is a matter of holding their own against all comers.”<sup>61</sup> However, there was a growing body of support among their members, which they had somehow to accommodate. A UTFWA ballot on the issue in the autumn of 1894 showed that spinners were divided, with 5,221 for, and 4,789 against.<sup>62</sup> A decision was left to a representative meeting in January 1895, which was unanimously in favour. The cotton

workers could expect to control twelve seats in Lancashire.<sup>63</sup> The expense, “a farthing per member once in three months”, was regarded as manageable, except by women workers.

Party attachments remained the “principal difficulty”: had workers progressed sufficiently to enable them to place their own personal interest in front of the more or less imaginary interests that are supposed to constitute politics?

Doubts multiplied, and in March 1895, representatives of Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cheshire and Derbyshire spinners decided almost unanimously not to nominate an independent Labour candidate, or “at the present time to take part in such a movement.” The reasons given were the strong party feeling, and the cost.<sup>64</sup>

From then on, the cotton unions resisted moves towards an independent labour party. At the 1895 TUC Congress, Mawdsley and Burns engineered the revision of the Standing Orders to exclude trades’ councils, and the adoption of the ‘card vote’.<sup>65</sup> In January 1900, the *Cotton Factory Times* complained that “Labour candidates are becoming as plentiful as blackberries in September”; a Labour Congress was a trick to “find somebody some jobs”; and there was the “all-important money question.” The cotton unions remained confident of their ability to secure changes through the existing political parties:

*It is questionable if there is a single MP at the present time who could not honestly subscribe to them [Labour principles], as every one would assert that he is animated by a sincere desire to see justice done to Labour in every possible way.*<sup>66</sup>

## Changed Circumstances

Yet the Oldham Spinners resolved to be represented at the conference on labour representation in London in February 1900.<sup>67</sup> By 1902, the Oldham Trades and Labour Council had 23,923 members; and in 1903 it reported that its membership efforts “may be termed complete because at present practically every trade society in the town is connected with the Council.”<sup>68</sup> Why had the Spinners shifted their position? A complete answer is not possible from the local archival sources. Some things are clear, however.

One reason for the Oldham unions’ acceptance of independent labour representation was that a majority of the UTFWA were now in favour. A UTFWA ballot on the issue in 1902 revealed what the *Cotton Factory Times* regarded as “a remarkable change in the opinion of the workers since 1894”: 9,978 for, and 3,057 against. A UTFWA conference in Manchester in January 1903 decided to affiliate to the LRC, contest Preston and Bolton, and pay salaries to elected candidates.<sup>69</sup> The Oldham province had to go along with this decision. By December 1903, it had accepted the case for independent representation. In an address to his members, Ashton acknowledged that since the UTFWA had affiliated to the LRC, “it is requisite for Local Organisations to form Labour Representation Committees.” The Spinners sent two members of their Council to represent the Association at the Labour Conference in Bradford in February 1904.<sup>70</sup> These developments were triggered by the unopposed election of David Shackleton of the weaving union in formerly Liberal Clitheroe in the by-election on 1 August 1902.<sup>71</sup> Shackleton’s success was all the more palatable since it vindicated direct representation of *trade* candidates.

There was evidently also a wider awareness of new and unfavourable political and industrial circumstances. The Spinners' Amalgamation reported in 1902 that "many people think that the foundations on which our trade unions have been built are now undermined."<sup>72</sup> Concern about the Taff Vale judgement led to the formation of the Oldham Trade Union Law Committee, which organised a series of conferences, attended by the Spinners' representatives.<sup>73</sup> Tariff Reform posed an even greater threat, so much so that, in 1910, textile unions and employers signed what the *Manchester Guardian* described as a non-party 'Great Manifesto Against Tariff "Reform"'.<sup>74</sup> Defending Free Trade presented either an opportunity or a danger for the unions: either Conservative trade unionists could be persuaded to abandon their political allegiance to defend their economic interests; or their industrial strength was dissipated by an intensification of party feeling.

Ramsay MacDonald, however, believed that dissatisfaction with the Brooklands Agreement "opened the door for the political labour party."<sup>75</sup> In September 1904, the General Secretary of the Cardroom Association noted in the *Quarterly Report* that the Employers' Federation "lately seem to ignore the spirit and intentions of the Brooklands Agreement", making it valueless, with little hope of it reviving; disputes brought before the Joint Committees "have proved to be a waste of time, money, and trouble."<sup>76</sup> The greatest friction was over 'bad spinning' cases. The Agreement allowed such cases to drag on for weeks, since a union could not support a group of workers in a strike until a complicated adjudication procedure had been completed.<sup>77</sup> Union leaders were divided over how to proceed, but, as early as 1907, by 29 to 27, Oldham supported an unsuccessful resolution at the Amalgamated Council to withdraw from the Agreement in relation to bad spinning cases.<sup>78</sup>

1908 saw the first industry-wide stoppage since 1893. The employers argued that operatives had obtained advances in wages in good times, and so had to accept retreats in bad. The Cardroom Association contended that "our members did not get



Mr. James Crinion, J.P. President of the Oldham Cardroom Association

a fair proportion of the advantage obtained during the boom in the cotton spinning trade", and gave notice that "General advances and reductions in future will not have to be carried on as they have been in the past." A lock-out of around 80% of cotton workers followed, and even after six weeks Ashton did not expect a settlement.<sup>79</sup> In the end, the Cardroom Association was forced to submit to a 5% reduction in wages.

The dispute strained relations with the Spinners, who had accepted the wage reduction. The Cardroom Association said that the Spinners had "run to the Employers like whipped serfs", and their attacks had caused its defeat. The Spinners' *Annual Report*, in turn, condemned the Association, because it had dragged them into a seven week campaign to which they had not consented.<sup>80</sup>

In September 1910, the dismissal of George Howe at the Fern Mill, Shaw, caused another serious confrontation. Backed by the unions, he had refused to perform tasks which were held to be 'new work'. The employers made it into a vital issue of their authority in the mills. The two sides eventually agreed to abide by the award of the government Arbitrator, who later recalled that one difficulty had been that the Brooklands Agreement was "badly drafted."<sup>81</sup>

The Spinners finally withdrew from the Brooklands Agreement on 31 January 1913. The Agreement had dealt with over 4,000 disputes between 1904 and 1913, but it was simply overburdened between 1911 and 1913.<sup>82</sup> The Cardroom Association did not withdraw at the same time, but in disputes its position became untenable, and the Association withdrew in October 1913.<sup>83</sup>

### Ashton's Candidature 1903

The first test for labour representation in Oldham came in 1903, when the UTFWA nominated Ashton, their secretary, as the 'Labour candidate' to fight the next general election. The UTFWA co-operated with the Oldham TLC to form an LRC.<sup>84</sup> Ashton himself was a Liberal, a member of the Oldham Reform Club, and the contributor of 'Labour Notes' to the Liberal *Oldham Chronicle*.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, Oldham Liberals gave him their support, in what Emmott called a "union of the progressive forces", and, in 1905, one of the Oldham seats was included in the Gladstone-MacDonald Pact.<sup>86</sup>

The purpose of Ashton's candidature was to advance "the workers' interest in Parliament." The precise programme on which he fought was considered of secondary importance, and its publication deferred. The campaign posters ordered by the LRC dealt with 'Labour at the Gate', 'Chinese Labour', 'Guarding His Own', 'Old Age Pensions' and 'Taff Vale'.<sup>87</sup> Oldham drew heavily on the national LRC for assistance. Ashton invited Henderson and Crooks to speak at the first meeting, planned for November 1903, and requested MacDonald to provide speakers.<sup>88</sup> Henderson, MacDonald, Snowden, Shackleton and Mrs. Pankhurst came to speak.

The Oldham LRC was dominated by the cotton unions. Four of the eight members of the crucial Finance Committee were representatives of the UTFWA.<sup>89</sup> Many meetings were held either in the Spinners' Offices, or the Cardroom Offices. Labour activists bravely maintained that "Mr. Ashton's Election Committee know no party except that of the Labour Party."<sup>90</sup> This was not true. There was a great deal of inter-union tension.

The Cardroom Association refused to endorse LRC candidates in municipal elections, and to pay a 1d. levy: the Secretary of the TLC was notified that Cardroom delegates "cannot see our way at present to advise our members to take part in Local Labour Representation."<sup>91</sup> In June 1903, James Crinion, the President of the Oldham Cardroom Association, requested a meeting with the Spinners in order to oppose the formation of an LRC for municipal elections, on the grounds that "such a course of action would be detrimental to the interest of the Labour Candidate at the next General Election." The meeting decided to consult members in the districts before agreeing to the TLC making levies.<sup>92</sup> The Spinners Executive endorsed Crinion's objection by 12 votes to 2.<sup>93</sup> In November, however, it left it to the discretion of district committees whether they paid a levy of 1d. per member for labour representation.<sup>94</sup> Finally, in May 1905, the Spinners' Executive refused to join a committee established by the TLC to consider forming a local LRC.<sup>95</sup> The Cardroom Association, meanwhile, found that 8 districts were in favour, and 4 against, but it did not resolve the matter.<sup>96</sup>

In October 1905, Ashton withdrew his candidature. Conservative newspapers claimed that he was "unable to go the full length laid down by the Labour headquarters as to the independence of his position."<sup>97</sup> This was not true; instead, his decision reflected the priority Ashton accorded to his *union* work over his commitment to *Labour* advance. He was not in the best of health, and, in September 1904, his assistant, Pogson, as already noted, had accepted a post with the Oldham Cotton Employers' Association, leaving Ashton to run the union single-handedly. The Spinners refused to give Ashton time off to contest the election, because his absence "would practically mean placing two strangers in the office to deal with work of which they had not had any previous experience."

The LRC was left in a spot. Clynes appealed to MacDonald, who replied that the type of candidates on the national list would not go down well in Oldham. MacDonald tried to persuade Clynes to stand, but Clynes appealed to the UTFWA, and it decided that it could not name another candidate for some time, and withdrew their finances. A group within the ILP saw an opportunity to put forward their candidate. Clynes, however, believed that to take action "without regard to the trade unions and other Labour bodies" would "only tend to make the position worse", and his view prevailed.<sup>98</sup>

### **Crinion's Candidature 1908**

In 1906, the TLC finally established the Oldham Labour Party. By 13 votes to 2, the Spinners' Executive had decided to hold a special delegate conference to vote by ballot on this proposal. The vote was 512 for, 279 against.<sup>99</sup> The Executive faced a dilemma: it could ignore neither the majority nor the minority. It decided to assuage opponents by minimising the *cost* of membership. It rejected a levy of 1d. by 8 votes to 6, and agreed on 1/2d per member per year. Its delegates to Labour's Annual Meeting were instructed to vote against any payment to officials.<sup>100</sup>

After Ashton's withdrawal, some members of the Cardroom Association had been strongly in favour of Crinion becoming the Labour candidate.<sup>101</sup> However, the Association was still divided on the issue of local labour representation. It decided that the matter should be settled by a ballot of the members.<sup>102</sup> The result was 4,959 in favour, and 1,665 against, which did not resolve the issue. One group argued that the Association should

now join the LRC. Another group maintained that since fifty per cent had abstained, the matter should be deferred for three months. Crinion's main concern was the strength of the union: he felt that with only half the membership having voted, the size of the vote was not satisfactory. A decision was postponed.<sup>103</sup> The division of opinion continued at the next meeting. Opponents pointed to Weavers' Associations in a number of towns which had lost members through joining a local LRC; they believed it was "wrong to introduce politics, and some proof should be given as to the benefits to be derived by adopting it." Supporters held that members would leave if the Association did not affiliate. Eventually, seven districts voted to join on the 1/2d scale, and five districts voted not to.<sup>104</sup>

In December 1907, a UTFWA deputation nominated Crinion as Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate.<sup>105</sup> A week later however, an ILP deputation nominated H. Russell Smith of Southport. Pressure was then put on Russell Smith to withdraw "in the interests of unity", even though the ILP did not approve of Crinion's views.<sup>106</sup> The Spinners' Executive decided, by 12 votes to 4, to instruct their delegates "to vote in favour of a textile candidate."<sup>107</sup> When Crinion was confirmed as the candidate in April 1908, the UTFWA once again dominated preparations: it formed a Finance Committee, and asked the Labour Executive to send representatives.<sup>108</sup> Meanwhile, even though its President was the candidate, the Cardroom Association voted against paying an extra 1/2d per member, making it the only union not paying the 1d. levy.<sup>109</sup>

In November 1908, Crinion withdrew his candidature, stating publicly that Labour had "no hopes of success and was a waste of money." The Labour Executive could only ask the Legislative Council of the UTFWA to persuade him to reconsider.<sup>110</sup> Crinion withdrew because he felt that he was being undermined by two bodies. The first was the Spinners, whom the Cardroom Association blamed for their defeat in the 1908 lock-out. The second was the ILP, which decided to play no further part in his election bid. It publicly stated that his principles were not acceptable, and were "in the main, opposed to the principles of the National Labour Party."

After resigning, Crinion wrote to MacDonald, and obtained confirmation that his views were not opposed to the principles of the National Labour Party, and not a condemnation of the actions of the Oldham ILP. The crux of the matter was that Crinion was "a man who refuses to admit the claim that Labour and Socialism are synonymous."<sup>111</sup> Most of the interests represented on the Labour Executive accepted this, but not the ILP. Union leaders continued to see parliamentary candidatures as opportunities to advance the interests of their own trade. The next two attempts to find candidates failed precisely because union leaders thought only in trade terms.

### **1911 By-Election**

In the two elections of 1910, Oldham was not contested under the terms of the Liberal-Labour arrangement, but Alfred Emmott's elevation to the Lords in 1911 occasioned a by-election. W.C. Robinson, a local man from Heywood, Vice-President of the UTFWA, and Secretary of the Beamers, Twisters and Drawers Amalgamation, was chosen as the candidate. A Central Committee Room was quickly established, with a full-time, paid, local election secretary until Peters, the National Agent, arrived and took charge. An *Oldham Labour Herald* was issued during the campaign.

Robinson rejected Liberal overtures and accused the Liberals of splitting the 'progressive' vote. He made much of the fact that his opponents were a peer and a barrister.

The result on 13 November 1911 was:

|                                      |        |
|--------------------------------------|--------|
| E. R. Bartley-Denniss (Conservative) | 12,255 |
| A. L. Stanley (Liberal)              | 10,623 |
| W. C. Robinson (Labour)              | 7,448  |

Privately, MacDonald thought it an "Excellent result for Labour Candidate. Poll from 1000 to 2000 more than expected..."<sup>112</sup> This was an ill-conceived view, as bitter recriminations were to prove.<sup>113</sup> The Liberal candidate pointed out that at least 6,000 Labour votes had come from the Liberals, only 1,000 from the Conservatives.<sup>114</sup> Despite Tariff Reform, the allegiance of Conservative trade unionists persisted.

Above all, the by-election had no more succeeded in overcoming trade consciousness than had previous episodes. Some union leaders were accused of undermining Robinson. In proposing the vote of thanks, Bell of the Weavers, a former Labour chairman, hinted that "certain textile interests" had failed to give support. The TLC Executive raised the matter at Labour's National Conference in Birmingham, where the debate was frank and heated.<sup>115</sup> The Oldham Labour Secretary complained that Ashton had refused to sign Robinson's nomination paper, and that several prominent trade union leaders, in particular Mullin, had not attended the adoption meeting. The result was that:

*the rank and file of the Trade Union Movement thought that Mr. Robinson was not a bona-fide Labour Candidate, and that added greatly to the difficulty of his task.*

Mullin replied that he had not supported Robinson because "he did not agree with the policy of the Oldham Labour Party": "As a Party they had no organisation and no money. They had nothing behind them." Emphasising that he was representing his members, he stated that "he had to consider their interests as well as Mr. Robinson's." He continued that:

*If Mr. Robinson had been a candidate of the Textile Workers he would have helped him all he could, as he had helped every other candidate they had brought out.*

Since Robinson was not a *true* textile trade candidate, the vital issue for Mullin had been the Insurance Bill, and "as that was a measure that he wished to see carried, he wanted the Liberal Candidate to be elected."

The Spinners too had been obstructive. Two weeks before the election, the Executive passed a motion to take no further action for Robinson, and rejected an amendment to give its moral support to Robinson. The Executive was divided, with 8 voting for the motion, and 5 for the amendment.<sup>116</sup> In turn, some Oldham spinners were highly critical of the eight Executive members who had refused to support Robinson. No.2 District declared

that the eight should "give their support to the friends of Trade Unionists as they will be badly needed in the near future." In addition, "the ballot of the Textile Factory Workers' Association on labour representation gave them a mandate to do all they possibly can to return Labour candidates to the House of Commons."<sup>117</sup>

The incompleteness of the Spinners' Amalgamation's commitment to Labour was confirmed by the result of the ballot under the Trade Union Act of 1913. The Trades Unionists' Defence League had lobbied the Spinners about the illegality of paying union money for political purposes, and they had faced a local version of the Osborne judgement when a Bolton spinner applied for an injunction.<sup>118</sup> In the ballot, only 17% of Spinners voted, with 49.2% in favour, and 50.8% against. Of the 15 Oldham districts, 5 were more or less evenly divided, 4 voted decisively against, and 6 decisively in favour.<sup>119</sup>

## Conclusion

The barriers Labour faced in Oldham were formidable. In 1908, the secretary of the Oldham party highlighted material factors to explain its failure in municipal elections. Oldham operatives had:

*grown Rich on mill shares and there are many hundreds of mill-workers in Oldham who own their own houses, also have shares in mills, and it is this class of workers our opponents play on, when they say Socialism means this and means that.... When you know, that the working class in Oldham are without doubt, the best paid in Great Britain, and that we have fewer unemployed than almost any town in England, you will understand why we don't move so quickly.<sup>120</sup>*

As important, was the absence of class-consciousness among cotton workers. This was reinforced by the attachment of the powerful cotton unions to promoting 'trade' interests, which, in practice, often pitched the spinners against the cardroom workers, and left room only for temporary co-operation based on self-interest alone. "In things Essential, Unity" was the motto of the Oldham Spinners; that it should, or could, be the motto of their class struck most of their leaders as a nonsense.<sup>121</sup>

A maxim advanced by the Secretary of the Bolton United Trades Council was "Labour first, politics after."<sup>122</sup> The sentiment was only half true for Oldham. Ashton and Crinion held as strongly as had Mawdsley to the view that *any* party allegiance, unless it was subordinated to the interests of the union, was disruptive and unwelcome. Labour's champions in Oldham tried to accommodate this view by presenting the Labour Party as in no way party political in the conventional sense. Thus, Labour was blandly sold as simply "a power in our midst for the amelioration of the lot of the worker."<sup>123</sup> The word 'socialism' was not used in the TLC's *Annual Reports* until 1910. Yet even this was too unpalatable for many Oldham cotton union leaders. The maxim they might have advanced was "Union first, politics after".

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