

THE NORTH WEST LABOUR HISTORY GROUP

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Long-standing readers of this Review may recall that in Volume III, No.1 (1989) I contributed an article on the development of labour history in the north west with particular reference to the foundation and activities of the North West Labour History Group. This brief contribution seeks to review the progress of the Group over the last ten years or so.

It may be useful to refresh readers of this journal (and inform more recent subscribers) of the foundation of the Group and our initial objectives. Foundation followed in the wake of the formation of the National Society for the Study of Labour History in 1960. The rapid development of that society led to the establishment of national societies in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Regional groups, the first of which was the North East Group in 1966, supplemented these four national societies. The North West Group was formed in 1973 based primarily in Liverpool and Manchester.

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 growth 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 these towns was remarkable. Although the Irish predominated, considerable numbers of Welsh, Scots and workers from neighbouring country districts poured into the major towns in search of higher standards of living. There were also substantial enclaves of Chinese and Blacks. The influx of people, many of whom brought with them their own culture and religion, led to serious ethnic and sectarian issues, particularly in Liverpool, which inhibited working class unity and progress. The retail cooperative movement was founded in Rochdale and exerted a profound influence within the region. Shopping at the coop was the norm for many working class people until well after the Second World War. The excesses of industrial capitalism encouraged radical protest movements that have become benchmarks in the history of the labour movement. Peterloo in 1819, Chartism in the 1830s and 1840s and the foundation of the Trades Union Congress in 1868 are examples. Radicals such as John Doherty and Robert Owen are associated with the region, as are the struggles of trade unions, particularly in the cotton textile districts and at the waterfront in Liverpool.

Foundation and aims

With such a rich tradition there was good reason to establish a labour group here. An inaugural meeting was held in Liverpool in January 1973 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 formed. Our aim was similar to

that of the national society with an emphasis upon the north west. We sought to bring together all those interested in the labour history of the region and to encourage and organise that interest. This was to be achieved through meetings and the publication of pamphlets and books. At first we intended to hold at least two conferences a year, one in Manchester and one in Liverpool, and to publish an annual journal for members and the general public.

In respect of meetings we have met with mixed success. Initially they were successful, but we found that conferences organised by the group itself failed to attract a sufficiently large audience, a result, perhaps, of the competition on Saturdays for sport and shopping. However, by associating with other like-minded organisations joint conferences have been more fruitful. In 1981, for example, the Irish Labour History Society joined us in Liverpool for a weekend conference on The Irish and British Labour Movements: the Experience of Dublin and Liverpool which proved to be a great success. More recently the group was joint organiser

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To be SOLD,
A NEGRO MAN, about 22 Years of Age,
an excellent House Servant, and perfectly skill'd in the Business
of a BARBER and HAIR-DRESSER, the Property of a Gentleman
lately returned from the West-Indies.
The Slave was bought at Guadaloupe from a famous French
Barber, with whom he learn'd the Trade.
N. B. He understands the CARE of HORSES. Apply to
James Campbell, Broker.

Black Presence in the North West

with the national society and the Manchester Metropolitan University in a conference to celebrate the centenary of the Labour Party that was held in March 2000 with some 150 participants.

The first issue of our Journal was published in 1974 and has appeared annually since then. From humble beginnings – the first issue consisted of 18 pages and was typed and stapled – the annual Journal, now usually over 100 pages in length, is printed and bound. We have sought to provide articles and book reviews that have an academic merit but which are presented in an accessible form for non-academic readers. Our approach is exploratory, searching, analytical and critical, but presented in a manner which, we hope, is interesting and lively. Articles have covered a wide range of historical issues including Chartism, the General Strike of 1926, Women and the Labour Movement, the Cooperative Movement, the Black presence in the north west, the Irish Community in the north west, the Lancashire cotton textile industry, Liverpool waterfront organisation and the Labour Party.¹ Contemporary issues of importance have not been neglected. In recognition of the coalminers' strike of 1984/5, an issue was devoted to coalminers' history, including a number of short articles by those involved in the strike such as the Agecroft Women's Support Group.² The prolonged Liverpool dock workers' dispute that lasted from 1995 to 1998 has been covered in three contributions.³ Our latest issue (No. 24, 1999/2000) has concentrated on sport, leisure and society in the north west with articles on football, rounders and Lancastrian football heroes.

An Appeal

The editors of our Journal wish to appeal for contributions to two forthcoming issues. The intention is to publish two themed issues on the 1960s (to appear in 2001) and the 1970s (for 2002) in the belief that it is the right moment to examine these decades from a more considered historical perspective. It is also intended to shift the focus towards the north west and away from national movements and developments in London which have typically concerned historians to date. Topics that might be covered include: militant trade unionism, anti-Vietnam protest, Black power, CND, the women's liberation movement, Irish politics in Britain, anti-racist activity, Trotskyist groups, student radicalism and so on. Contributions are invited both from researchers and also people who were active themselves in the radical political

and labour movement of those decades.

The Working Class Movement Library

The group is closely associated with the world-famous Working Class Movement Library, founded by Ruth and Eddie Frow. It is the venue for our committee meetings and the resources of the library provide us with material to support our publications.

The strength of the group derives from the loyalty of our members and the handful of activists who serve on the committee. The devoted efforts of successive editors of the Journal, the secretaries and the treasurer in particular are to be applauded. No survey of our activities would be complete without paying tribute to Eddie Frow. He was a founder member of the group and a committee member until his death in 1997 aged 90 years. His enthusiasm for our group, his wide knowledge and world-wide contacts were of immense value. To honour his memory the group published a commemorative book containing a collection of articles and reminiscences reflecting his interests and the passions of his life.⁴

There are some 400 members in the group and in common with most small societies finance is a perennial problem. Our membership should be much higher and we invite readers who are interested in the history of the north west to join us (details below). The cost of publishing our annual Journal absorbs most of our resources and as these costs continue to rise so the need for new members becomes increasingly urgent.

The study of labour history has experienced a number of vicissitudes over the last 20 years. Nevertheless so long as there are activists who seek to secure a more equitable society; so long as there are those who appreciate the importance of the struggles and endeavours of past generations to achieve that end, the continuance of our group is assured. We face the new millennium with confidence.

Membership of the North West Labour History Group is £7.00 per annum for individuals and £10.00 per annum for institutions. For further information contact, John Smethurst, Treasurer, NWLHS, 81 Parrin Lane, Winton, Eccles, Manchester, M30 8AY.

Notes

1. On Chartism see *North West Labour History*, 1 (1974), and 17 (1992/93). On the General Strike: *Ibid.*, 1 (1974), 11 (1985/86), and 15 (1990/91). On women and the labour movement: *Ibid.*, No. 7 (1980/81), 9 (1983/4), and 12 (1987/88). On the Cooperative movement: *Ibid.*, 19 (1994/95). On the Black presence in the north west: *Ibid.*, 20 (1995/96). On the Irish community in the north west: *Ibid.*, 8 (1982/83), 9 (1983/84), and 16 (1991/92). On the Lancashire cotton textile industry: *Ibid.*, 3 (1976/77), 5 (1978/79), 10 (1984/85), 15 (1990/91), 21 (1996/97), and 23 (1998/99). On Liverpool waterfront trade unionism: *Ibid.*, 9 (1983/84), 14 (1989/90), 15 (1990/91), 21 (1996/97), 23 (1998/99), and 24 (1999/2000). Labour Party: *Ibid.*, 2 (1975), 6 (1979/80), 8 (1982/83), 10 (1984/85), 12 (1987/98), 16 (1991/92), and 23 (1998/99).
2. *Ibid.*, 11 (1985/86).
3. *Ibid.*, 21 (1996/97), 23 (1998/99), and 24 (1999/2000).
4. Michael Herbert and Eric Taplin (eds.), *Born with a Book in his Hand. A Tribute to Edmund Frow 1906 – 1997* (Manchester, 1998).