

*Labour's Origins*

Philip P. Poirier, **The Advent of the Labour Party** (Allen & Unwin).  
Frank Bealey and Henry Pelling, **Labour & Politics: 1900-1906** (Macmillan).

The scant reference that is made to the British Labour movement in historical and biographical studies, even as recently as the turn of the century, will not occasion much surprise. But that Labour historians should now display something of the same exclusiveness is a matter for surprise. In recent studies, Messrs. Poirier, Bealey and Pelling deal with the formative years of the Labour Party: between its foundation in 1900 as the Labour Representation Committee and its emergence on the Parliamentary scene in 1906 with some thirty Members of Parliament. They concern themselves, that is to say, with the early fortunes of the Socialist-Trade Unions alliance forged at the Plymouth T.U.C. of 1899. Yet they neglect the Trade Union side of the alliance. This is regrettable, for it constitutes a serious criticism that must be advanced against two valuable books. Indeed, the authors are to be congratulated on the thoroughness of their tasks, and the high standard of scholarship that is employed throughout. But their treatment of the alliance does tend to be one-sided. This is much less true of Frank Bealey and Henry Pelling than of Philip Poirier. As a matter of fact, the latter admits that the Trade Unions section of the alliance receives 'less

attention than it perhaps deserves'; whereas the former are at their best when they consult the Unions, notably in the chapters ... 'The Politics of Coal' and 'Cotton and Clitheroe'.

In a book that for method and construction leaves nothing to be desired Professor Poirier skilfully describes the developing relationship between the L.R.C. and the Liberal Party. But this approach does not help us to understand the alienation of the workers from both Liberal *and* Conservative political ties. Neither does it bring out the economic and industrial forces that were slowly but inexorably propelling the workers (even in the most conservative of Unions, such as the Boilermakers and the Society of Carpenters and Joiners) into independent political representation. How far, for example, does one attribute the deepening mood of exasperation that pervades all shades of opinion in Trade Union circles by 1903 to the 'twofold attack upon Trade Unionism, legal and journalistic', in the words of the Boilermakers, meaning the Taff Vale judgment and *The Times* attack? Or, how far does one go in accepting the view (which is not an isolated one) of the Stratford branch of the Society of Carpenters and Joiners which, on a unanimous vote of 31 members present agreed that it was due to the class war?

'... for example - the Featherstone miners shot down by a Liberal Government, the Taff Vale decisions by the House of Lords and Law Courts, the Gibraltar lock-out, the Denaby miners' evictions and the injunction brought against their society, and lastly, the standing army of unemployed and the Penrhyn dispute, all striking instances of the class struggle.'

Taff Vale apart, Professor Poirier scarcely takes cognisance of these factors.

It is tempting, of course, to settle for orthodox research: to rely on the collections of the established, and the correspondence of the articulate. But then one cannot complain if one's findings smack of the Establishment. It is much more difficult, but much more desirable in this connection, to undertake fieldwork in search of the scattered laboratory notes of a Labour movement (not to mention the unorganised) that was still rough-hewn, inarticulate and not yet conscious of its place in history. Professor Poirier explains in his preface that 'The emphasis throughout the book is on politics - on the tactics, bargaining and compromise that enabled socialists and trade unionists to work together in the Labour Representation Committee, and on the origins, the nature and the extent of the Committee's electoral collaboration with the Liberals.' Thus he would doubtless justify the exaggerated role allocated to J. Ramsay MacDonald and the importance attached to the secret electoral pact between the L.R.C. and the Liberal Party headquarters. Yet this secret pact apart, Liberal-Labour relations can be recounted quite adequately in terms of the industrial experience of the Society of Railway Servants and the conduct of its general secretary, Richard Bell. After all, this Union adopted a policy of 'independent' Parliamentary representation in Newport as far back as 1894, resisted attempts to modify it at the annual conferences of 1899 and 1900, moved the resolution at the 1899 T.U.C. that eventually gave rise to the L.R.C., and was implicated in the famous Taff Vale judgment. Bell promised with Keir Hardie in 1900 to provide the nucleus of an independent Parliamentary Labour Party, but soon retreated to the Liberal fold, and in so doing

helped shape the new political machinery of the L.R.C. into a distinctly independent Party. The steps taken at its Newcastle conference of 1903 to give the L.R.C. the authority and the money to build a Parliamentary Party stemmed mainly from the conduct of Bell. Incidentally, they also sowed the seeds of another historic legal decision in which this Union was involved - the Osborne judgment of 1909. Moreover, the secret electoral pact apart, the history of the L.R.C. can undoubtedly be written in terms of the Railway Servants, the Steel Smelters, the Miners and the T.U.C.

Frank Bealey and Henry Pelling recognise this in parts of their book, but only in parts. Therein lies the book's chief fault, its patchiness, doubtless a function of dual authorship and hurried publication. More chapters such as those on Coal and Cotton, which are very good, are called for; alongside this need the chapter on the 'Socialist Revival' is unimportant and perhaps irrelevant. It is all the more regrettable therefore that so much space was given over to the Taff Vale strike, and the aggressive role of Mr. Beasley, the general manager. After all, it was the same company which initiated the movement in 1876 to overturn the Nine Hours System - much to the astonishment of the Engineers. On the other hand, Messrs. Bealey and Pelling, like Professor Poirier, make no mention of the Penrhyn Quarrymen's dispute. Yet this dispute brought home to Trade Unionists everywhere the dangers implicit in the Taff Vale decision. For the manner in which the Penrhyn Lock-out, the bitterest of all struggles between employer and employed in the concluding years of the nineteenth century dragged on into the new century, together with the pitiful efforts resorted to by the strikers as they scattered far and wide in attempts to alleviate their plight, secured for it the widest possible publicity in Trade Union journals. As the Steel Smelters observed:

'A victory means added strength to the movement all round, a defeat means added strength from the employers' standpoint to the Taff Vale decision.'

Furthermore, neither book deals adequately with the 'Lib-Labs', who were far from united on the question of Labour representation. With Thomas Burt and John Wilson, for example, Liberalism came first, the fact of a man being, or having been, a working-man was not to be regarded as anything more than an incidental point in his favour. Another version of Labour representation, in the words of Keir Hardie, 'would fain straddle both horses at one time', This fairly expresses the outlook of leaders such as Ben Pickard and Richard Bell who, *mutatis mutandis*, held that Labour should be independent, but fundamentally believed that it should lean upon Liberal crutches and not attempt to walk alone. Yet other versions, as expounded by John Ward of the Navvies Union and J. Havelock Wilson of the Seamen's Union, appeared to be inspired more than anything else by a desire, on the one hand, to frustrate the growing Socialist hegemony, and concern, on the other, to safeguard their own positions. In varying degrees, the latter is true of them all, which raises the further question of oligarchic leadership in the Unions.

Generally speaking, the question of Labour representation and the degree of independence to be exercised was the point on which the 'Lib-Labs' made their last stand. Even after bowing to the inevitable and reluctantly recognising the need for Labour representation of a more independent

they were by no means reconciled to working in harness with

the Socialists. The latter, however, manoeuvre their opponents, both in the L.R.C. and the T.U.C., and even in the Miners' Federation - where, on the death of Pickard in 1904, Federation attachment to 'Liberal-Labourism' becomes an issue of fierce controversy - into supporting the idea of a Labour party operating quite independently of the Liberal and Tory Parties. The counter-attack of the 'Lib-Labs' - through the disclaiming of responsibility for the L.R.C. at the 1904 T.U.C., and the setting up of a Parliamentary Labour Party in 1905 - came too late. For the tide of affairs in the Labour movement by this time was flowing strongly in favour of the advanced elements.

Over and against the dissensions and rivalries to which this contest between the 'Lib-Labs' and the Socialists gave rise must be set certain unifying trends, notably the widespread concern aroused by the Penhryn Quarrymen's dispute, the agitation for old age pensions (described by W. T. Stead as the movement 'which first drew the previously warring sections of British Labour into effective agreement') and the yearning manifest in the Caxton Hall Concordat for some consolidation of Labour's forces. These developments went a long way towards offsetting the disintegrating influence of the struggle for the leadership, and strengthened basic Labour unity and working-class solidarity. So that on the eve of the 1906 General Election we find former conservative Unions like the Compositors, Boilermakers and Cotton Spinners publicising and assisting their own sponsored candidates to work up adopted constituencies alongside those of more forward Unions like the Railway Servants, Engineers and Steel Smelters. Undoubtedly the placing of these candidates was important, and in so far as it was achieved with the co-operation of the Liberals, the scheming of MacDonald was useful. But it was much more significant that rank and file Trade Unionists should have agreed to levy themselves in order to finance such candidatures.

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