

When and why did a Labour party develop and how important was it by 1914?

The development of the Labour party began in the 1880s, although signs of an increased working-class consciousness were evident from the middle of the previous decade. A number of factors contributed to its development; the new organisation of the labour forces, particularly into trade unions, their increased political interest, laws introduced at the time and the relative decline of the Liberal party.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the growth and increasing strength of the working class, who were articulate, powerful and important. The Labour aristocracy involved in the old or 'model' trade unions were wanting to take a much more direct and positive part in politics. By 1875, the model unions had secured all their own legal rights. By 1885 all unions had their full legal status secured; the new unskilled ones as well as the old model ones. Between 1889 and 1891 the number of less skilled unions doubled. There was a series of strikes which brought these non-skilled workers into the limelight, for example the Matchgirl strike of 1888, the Gasworkers' strike of 1889 and the Dockers' strike of the same year.

After losing the strikes, managers hit back. In the 1890s they set up what developed into the National Free Labour Association. Its members were people who were prepared to take up jobs while the usual workers were on strike. This undermined trade union activity and made the working class more determined to get themselves heard.

Urbanisation and industrialisation were nearly complete by the mid nineteenth century. The growing strength of the trade unions was establishing a more organised working class. They were not always united or skilled but they became aware of their exclusion from political life, and were fed up of it. They had been constantly disappointed by the twentieth century; the reform acts had not helped their situation, the Chartists had failed and the unions had not yet achieved a prominent status in British politics. In 1874 two working-class MPs had been elected. However, they sat as Liberals and were not considered to be sufficient representation of working-class interests. As Sean Lang confirms; 'by the 1880s the working classes were rapidly becoming more politically active than they had been since the heyday of Chartism.'

However, the rise of Labour was not inevitable. There were many different methods of promoting and protecting working-class rights; socialism, Marxism, the Socialist League and, from 1884, the Social Democratic Federation and Fabian Society. These groups were to come together, excluding the Social Democratic Federation, to form the Independent Labour Party.

The term 'unemployed' came into use in 1882. This was significant because it represented a realisation of working class issues. The Redistribution Act of 1885 meant that there was a much clearer cut division into class-defined districts. This further developed working class organisation, and as Ross McKibben argued, the success of the Labour Party before 1914 was 'based upon a highly-developed class consciousness and intense class loyalties.'

By 1889, there were eight working-class MPs, and by 1900, there were eleven. In 1887 the Liberals had failed to support Scottish miners who went on strike, asking for an eight-hour day. So the following year Keir Hardie stood as a Scottish Labour candidate at a by-election. He lost, but this was a catalyst. In 1892 five candidates stood for the Scottish Labour Party. They were all defeated, but they had made a start. In 1892 the first proper Labour MPs were elected; Hardie, John Burns and Joseph Havelock Wilson. They were soon joined as MPs by Ramsey MacDonald and Phillip Snowden. The Independent Labour Party was formed in 1893, and it began to get itself heard. However, there were still problems. In 1895 all twenty-eight Labour candidates were defeated, including Hardie. In 1899 the Trade Union Conference and Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants passed the resolution; 'we must secure better representation of the interests of Labour in the House of Commons.' This led to the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee. This was the Labour Party in all but name. A meeting was set up, and 129 delegates came to discuss what should be done. They were representatives from all socialist groups. The Socialist Democratic Party dropped out however, as the decisions were not radical enough for them. In 1900 Hardie and Bell were elected as Labour MPs, and were soon joined by Arthur Henderson. By 1906 they had twenty-nine MPs. The Taff Vale case of 1901 happened as a result of a strike at the unfair dismissal of a railway worker. After the strike, the managers sued the union and it was forced by the House of Lords to pay £23,000. Both unions and individual unionists could be sued, which very much restrained union action, and was seen as an insult on the rights of workers. It drove more unionists to support Labour. The historian Ross McKibben argued that it was this winning of trade union support which accounted for the growth of Labour. Indeed, the vast majority of trade unions, including the very large and powerful Miners' Federation of Great Britain, were affiliated to the Labour party by 1909.

In 1903 there was a secret pact between the Labour Representation Committee, represented by Ramsey MacDonald, and Herbert Gladstone, the Liberal Chief Whip. Gladstone agreed to leave some Labour candidates unchallenged by Liberal in the next election in return for Labour support of the Liberals. At this time, Labour and the Liberals had

very similar policies. In 1906 the Liberals passed the Trade Disputes Bill, which restored the status of the unions as it had been before the Taff Vale case. It also allowed peaceful picketing. In the same year the Labour Representation Committee became the Labour Party, although it was still not really organised as a national party. It returned thirty MPs in the 1906 election, and forty-two MPs in 1910, but as Derek Murphy comments; 'to most contemporaries the party was seen as a radical tail to the Liberals.' The limited parliamentary success Labour achieved up to 1914 was done so in spite of some major financial obstacles. The most significant of these was the Osborne Judgement of the House of Lords in 1909, when Walter Osborne objected to the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants imposing a levy on its members to raise funds for the Labour party. In 1911 the payment of MPs was brought in. This meant that more working class candidates would be able to enter parliament.

In 1912 Labour finally accepted the idea of female suffrage, therefore gaining some support from female campaigners. In the same year two pro-Labour national newspapers developed, the Daily Herald and the Daily Citizen, which helped spread Labour ideas and policies.

Historians such as McKibben have argued that Labour's success was limited before the 1918 Reform Act because the extremely varied male, property-based suffrage disfranchised up to 40% of working-class men, and of course, no women were able to vote. However, Labour were performing well in municipal elections from 1909 onwards, which may give a better indication of their true popularity. They gained 82 seats in 1909, and this figure rose to 171 in 1913, and the following year they held approximately 500 of the 8000 municipal seats.

The issue of how important the Labour party was by 1914 is an extremely contentious one. Keith Laybourn explains; 'Labour's pre-war parliamentary performance was hardly indicative of the true level of its appeal.'

It is true that it is hard to assess the party's real importance by 1914, as while it amassed huge levels of trade union support, this was not transferred to votes because of the party's financial restrictions and the limited franchise of the time. However, the rise from two MPs in 1900 to 42 in 1910 still represents an impressive first decade, which perhaps indicated that its popularity would continue rising after 1914. The historian Jack Reynolds confirmed this belief, concluding that Labour was progressing well before 1914 as long as she kept close links with trade unions, which she invariably did. This is disputed however by the historian Roy Douglas, who stated:

'No shred of evidence existed anywhere which might suggest that within 10 years the Labour party would be forming the government of the country.'

The historian Derek Tanner went as far as saying that in fact Labour was in deep trouble by 1914, appearing to be past its peak, and was only saved by the war. This is probably an exaggerated perspective, as while Douglas is correct in stating that Labour's subsequent successes could not have been prognosticated, when their severe restrictions are taken into consideration, the meagre success they experienced before 1914 was promising and augured well for the future.

#### Bibliography

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