

Kier Hardie – Labour's First MP

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18 minutes

Kier Hardie

Labour & Trade Union Review commemorates the election of the first Labour MP

The decision of the Kinnock leadership not to commemorate the election of the first Labour MP one hundred years ago is remarkable, but it is not surprising. All that is surprising is the bluntness with which they ridiculed the reporter who during the election campaign asked them if they intended to commemorate it. They told him he needed his head examined for asking such a question.

James Kier Hardie was born in Lanarkshire in 1856. He was the eldest of nine children. At the age of ten he went to work in the coal mines, having previously worked as an errand boy in Glasgow. By his early twenties he had been sacked from the mines and blacklisted for his efforts at union activity. He then became a journalist while helping to establish the Ayrshire Miners Union, of which he became the organising secretary in 1886. In 1887 he started a monthly periodical, *The Miner*, which in 1894 became *The Labour Leader*.

His early political activity was within the Liberal Party. Gladstone made a strong bid to contain the developing Labour movement within the Liberal world outlook and the Liberal Party. Hardie cut the umbilical cord with the Liberals by standing as Independent Labour in 1888. Though he was defeated by the Liberal his action led to the formation of the Scottish Labour Party. Labour politics had begun.

In 1892 Hardie became the first Labour MP, winning the West Ham seat. This success led to the formation of the Independent Labour Party at Bradford in 1893, with its slogan: Educate, Agitate, Organise.

Twenty eight Labour candidates were fielded in 1895, with no successes. Hardie lost his seat. But defeat only made him more determined, and he made plans to establish Labour as a great national Parliamentary Party.

Having opposed the Boer War (which began in 1898), Hardie won the Merthyr Tydfil seat in 1900.

Until 1899 the TUC had been opposed to the establishment of an independent Labour Party. But the political influence generated by Hardie overcame the old attachment to the Liberal Party. And in February 1900 the TUC called a Conference, attended by the ILP, the Fabian Society and some other socialist groups, which established a Labour Representation Committee. The LRC sponsored fifteen candidates in the 1900 election. Two were successful: Hardie and Richard Bell. In 1906 it sponsored fifty candidates, of which 29 were elected. Labour was on the way.

It is an oversimplification to say that the Labour Party was formed by the trade unions. While the 1899 decision of the TUC to call a Conference on Labour Representation was a watershed in British political history, that decision was itself a product of the pioneering work of Kier Hardie and the ILP.

Despite the establishment of the LRC in 1900 and the presence of a Labour Party in parliament from 1906, there was no real Labour Party membership until the 1918 reorganisation. Membership was possible only through affiliated organisations, which in practice meant the Fabian Society for middle-class smart-alecs and the ILP for working class socialists. The ILP therefore continued to play a vital part in the movement until 1918, although from 1906 on, ILP MPs were a minority of the Labour MPs.

The ILP disaffiliated from the Labour Party in the early 1930s, it did not behave very sensibly in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and it disappeared as a political force in the 1945 election. But that has nothing to do with Kier Hardie. He died in 1915, having led the ILP into opposition to the war, which the non-ILP element in the Labour leadership supported. It was the principled opposition of the ILP to the war, and its refusal to bow the head before the deluge of jingoism unleashed by Asquith and his Liberal Imperialists, and its refutation of the mindless reasoning deployed in justification of the war by Oxford professors and Fleet Street hacks alike, which gave the Labour Party street credibility in the disillusionment of the post war years.

We give below two extracts from William Stewart's biography J. Kier Hardie, published in 1921, which was one of the standard books of the Labour movement in the 1920s and 1930s:

“James Kier Hardie was born on August 15th, 1856, in a one-room house at Legbrannock, near Holytown in Lanarkshire, amongst the miners, of whom he was to become one, and with whose interests he was to be closely identified all through his life. His father, David Hardie, was not, however, a miner, nor of miner stock, he was a ship carpenter by trade, drawn into this district by the attraction of Mary Kier, a domestic servant...

“Not much is known of Kier Hardie's years of infancy, but ... in his eighth year we find the family- increasing in numbers – living in the ship-building district of Glasgow in very

straightened circumstances even for working folk ...

“One of Hardie’s earliest recollections was of attending a trade union meeting with his father who advised against a strike on the grounds of lack of funds and slackness of trade. During this dispute the family were compelled to sell most of their household goods, and what was worse, to enlist the boy of seven as one of the breadwinners. His first job was as a message boy to the Anchor Steamship Company, and as school attendance was now impossible, the father and mother devoted much of their time to his education, and were at best able to teach him to read ...

“After a short time spent as a message boy, he was sent into a brass finishing shop, the intention being to apprentice him to that trade, but when it was learned that the first year must be without wages, brass finishing was abandoned, and his next place was in a lithographer’s in the Tron gate at half-a-crown a week. That did not last long, and we find him serving as a baker’s message boy at three shillings a week. From this he went to heating rivets in Thomson’s shipyard on a forty per cent rise in wages, four shillings and six pence a week. He would probably have continued at this employment... but a fatal accident to two boys in the shipyard frightened his mother, and once more he became a baker’s message boy ...

“There had been a great lock-out of Clyde shipworkers lasting six weary months. In the Hardie household everything that could be turned into food had been sold ... ‘The outlook was black’. says Hardie, looking back upon it, ‘but there was worse to come, and the form it took made it not only a turning point in my life, but also in my outlook in men and things. I had reached the age at which I understood the tragedy of poverty ... One winter morning I turned up late at the baker’s shop ... and was told to go upstairs to see the master. I was kept waiting outside the door of the dining-room while he said grace – he was noted for religious zeal – and, on being admitted, found the master and his family seated round a large table. He was serving out bacon and eggs while his wife was pouring coffee from a glass infuser which at once – shamefaced and terrified as I was – attracted my attention. I had never seen such a room nor such a table ... The master read me a lecture before the assembled family on the sin of slothfulness, and added that though he would forgive me for that once, if I sinned again by being late I should be immediately dismissed, and so sent me to begin work.

“‘But the injustice of the thing was burning hot within me, all the more that I could not explain why I was late. The fact was that I had not yet tasted food. I had been up most of the night tending my ailing mother, and had risen betimes in the morning but had been made late by assisting my mother in various ways before starting. The work itself was heavy and lasted from seven in the morning till closing time.

“‘Two mornings afterwards, a Friday, I was again a few minutes late, from the same source, and was informed on arriving at the shop that I was discharged and my fortnight’s wages

forfeited by way of punishment. The news stupefied me, and finally I burst out crying and begged the shopwoman to intercede with the master for me ... She spoke to the master through a speaking tube, ... but he was obdurate, and finally she, out of the goodness of her heart, gave me a piece of bread and advised me to look for another place. For a time I wandered about the streets in the rain, ashamed to go home where there was neither food nor fire and actually discussing whether the best thing was not to go and throw myself in the Clyde and be done with a life that had so little attractions. In the end I went to the shop and saw the master and explained why I had been late. But it was all in vain. The wages were never paid. But the master continued to be a pillar of the Church and a leading light in the religious life of that city!' ...

“The upshot of it all was that the father in sheer despair went off again to sea, and the mother with her children removed to Newarthill, where her own mother still lived, and quite close to the place where Kier was born.

“Thus there had arrived ... a turning point in his life, deciding that his lot should be cast with that of the mining community and determining some other things which, taken altogether, constituted a somewhat complex environment and impulse for a receptive minded lad growing from boyhood to adolescence.

“Both parents had what is called in Scotland a strictly religious upbringing, and had encouraged the boy to attend regularly at Sunday School. The Glasgow experience had cleared all that. They were persons of strong individuality. The mother especially had a downright way of looking at life, and had no use for forms of religion which sanctioned the kind of treatment which she and those she loved had passed through. Henceforward the Hardie household was a free-thinking household, uninfluenced by the ‘kirk-gaun’ conventionalities or more traditional beliefs. Priest and Presbyterian were not kept outside the door, but there was free entrance also for books critical of orthodoxy and secular in interest, and on the same shelf with the Bible and Pilgrim’s Progress might be found Paine’s Age of Reason and works by Ingersoll, together with Wilson’s Tales of the Borders and the poems of Burns. All the members of the family grew up with the healthy habit of thinking for themselves.

“Almost immediately on coming to Newarthill the boy, now ten years of age, went down the pit as ‘trapper’ to a kindly old miner, who before leaving him for the first time at his lonely part, wrapped his jacket round him to keep him warm. The work of a ‘trapper’ was to open and close a door which kept the air supply for the men in a given direction ...

“At this time he began to attend Fraser’s night school at Holytown... The father returned from sea and found work on the railway then being made between Edinburgh and Glasgow. When this was finished, the family removed to the village of Quarter in the Hamilton district, where Kier started as pit pony driver, passing from that through other grades to coal hewing, and by

the time he was twenty had become a skilled practical miner, and had also gained two years' experience above ground working in the quarries.

“He was in the way however of becoming something more than a miner. At the instigation of his mother he had studied and become proficient in shorthand writing, and through the same guidance had joined the Good Templar movement which was then establishing itself in most of the Scottish villages... His habit of independent thinking too, had led him, not to reject religion but only its forms and shams and doctrinal deceptions, and he associated himself with what seemed to him the simplest organised expression of Christianity, namely the Evangelical Union ... Because of the part he was now playing in the local public affairs his brother miners pushed him into the chair at meetings for the negotiation of their grievances, and appointed him on deputations to the colliery managers ... Without knowing it, almost involuntarily, he had become a labour agitator, a man obnoxious to authority, and regarded as dangerous by colliery management and gaffers.

“The crisis came for him one morning when descending No. 4 Quarter pit. Half-way down the shaft, the cage stopped and then ascended. On reaching the surface he was met by the stormy-faced manager who told him to get off the Company's grounds and that his tools would be sent home. ‘We'll hae nae damned Hardies in this pit’ he said, and he was as good as his word, for the two younger brothers were also excommunicated. The Hardie family was having its full taste of the boycott. Kier now realised that he was evidently a person of some importance in the struggle between masters and men, and a comprehension of that fact was perhaps the one thing needed to give settled direction to his propagandist energies, hitherto spent somewhat diffusely in movements which afforded no opportunity of getting at close quarters with an enemy. By depriving him of his means of livelihood, the enemy itself had come to close quarters with him. He had been labelled an agitator and he accepted the label.”

Of the many struggles that he was then to engage in, the struggle against the mutual slaughter of World War One was perhaps the most important:

“The common people did not enter into the war. They were dragged into it. That they could be dragged into it was due to the fact that they had been kept wholly ignorant of the doings of their diplomats, and they had not believed the ILP when it tried to inform them. The ILP ... directed all its efforts towards keeping the nation out of the war.

“With a spontaneity which was a striking proof of how surely rooted in principle was the organisation, every section of it moved the same way ... and on Sunday August 2nd, in every city, town and village where there was a branch or group of the Independent Labour Party, a public protest against the nation being dragged into war was made, and a demand that whatever might happen in Europe, this country should stand neutral and play the part of peacemaker. Hardie ... had reason to be proud of his beloved ILP that day.

“He himself was in Trafalgar Square taking part in a demonstration organised by the British Section of the International Socialist Bureau, of which he was Chairman ...

“On the following night interest was transferred to the House of Commons, and Parliament was ‘allowed to say a few words’ before the war, always decided upon, was started officially

...

“Hardie had yet another ordeal to pass through ... He had to see his constituents. He knew well that the drums of war that were already beating would, in proportion as they roused national pride and prejudice, drown reason, and that if he was to get a chance to explain his position it would have to be immediately. On August 6th he spoke in Spurdore. What happened there is best described by one who was present. ‘As soon as the hall began to fill it was obvious that a large hostile element was present... the Chairman spoke without interruption, but as soon as he called Hardie, the uproar commenced. A well organised body of men had taken strong positions near the back of the hall... They were members of the Conservative and Liberal Clubs who always hated Hardie. Their opportunity had come at last. ‘God save the King’ and ‘Rule Britannia’ were sung lustily ... It soon became evident that Kier Hardie was not going to be heard that night. Hardie continued to speak for about half an hour, ... but his voice could not be heard further than the front seats... A small body of comrades closed round Hardie. There was a rush to the door but the street was reached safely. The crowd surged down the side street, but in the main street it began to get less. But several hundred men followed him up the main street singing their jingo songs. Hardie walked straight on with his head erect, not deigning to look either to the right or the left. He was staying with Matt Lewis, the school teacher, secretary of the local Labour Party... Hardie sat down in the armchair and lit his pipe. He was silent for a time, staring into the fire. Then he joined in the conversation, but he did not talk as much as usual. I had to catch the nine o’clock train down the valley. He shook hands, and said ‘I understand what Christ suffered in Gethsemane as well as any man living’ ...

On August 27th, he had an article in *Labour Leader* which showed no falling off in vigour of expression or lucidity of statement. It was in answer to the specious plea put forward on behalf of those socialists who had become aggressively pro-British and needed some plausible justification for their lapse from the principles of Internationalism. Their plea was that this country was not at war with the German people but with the Kaiser, that the overthrow of Kaiserdom would be in the interests of Socialism in Germany. The victory of the Allies, in fact, would be a victory for Socialism. Logically, though the apologists shrank from committing themselves to the statement in so many words, the war, from the British point of view, was a Socialist one. Hardie reminded the people who argued in this fashion that one of the allies was the government of the Czar, and he wanted to know how Socialism would gain by the substitution of Czardom for Kaiserdom ...

“Let anybody take a map of Europe and look at the position of Germany: on the one side Russia with her millions of trained soldiers and unlimited population to draw upon (its traditional policy over a hundred years had been to reduce Prussia to impotence, so that the Slav may reign supreme), and on the other side France, smarting under her defeat and the loss of her two provinces, Alsace and Lorraine, in 1870. For a number of years past these two militarisms have been in close and cordial alliance. What was it that brought the Czardom of Russia into alliance with the Republic of France? One object, and one alone, to crush Germany between them. German armaments and the German navy, were primarily intended to protect herself and her interests against these two enemies. If this reasoning be correct, it follows that our being in the war is a matter of the free choice of our rulers who appear to prefer that Russia should become the domineering power of Europe. I do not write these words in order to say that we should now withdraw from the conflict. That is clearly an impossibility at present. But if we can get these facts instilled into the mind and brain of our people, and of the working class generally, we shall be able to exert a much greater influence on bringing the war to a close much more speedily than the military element contemplates at present... Some British Socialists are unfortunately ranging themselves on the side of militarism, and we shall require to take the strongest possible action to make it clear to our comrades on the Continent that the hands of the ILP, at least, are clear, and that when the conflict is over, and we have once again to meet our German, French, Belgian and Russian comrades, no part of the responsibility for the crime that has been done in Europe can be laid at our door.’

“By this time it had become evident that the ILP would be the only political party or section in this country refusing to accept any share of responsibility for the prosecution of the war. The Government started a great recruiting campaign and called upon all political and Labour organisations to assist. A majority of the Labour Party Executive accepted the invitation, as did also the Parliamentary Labour Party, and both placed their organising machinery at the service of the War Office.

“The ILP representatives on the Labour Party Executive opposed this decision and reported to their own Head Office, while MacDonal had resigned from the position of Chairman of the Labour Party, actions which were endorsed by the National Council and the entire ILP movement”

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