

REPORTS and CORRESPONDENCE

Labour History in the North West of England

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Ample evidence exists to support a recent claim that labour history in Britain has been established as a "flourishing sub-culture of academic enquiry."¹ Apart from the role played by the universities and polytechnics in stimulating interest in labour history, the non-vocational sector of adult education via university extra-mural departments and the Workers' Education Association also plays a positive role in enhancing the study of labour history in Britain. In addition various labour history societies exist, both national and regional. Their aims are to encourage study, teaching and research of labour history and to safeguard the preservation of labour archives. Most of these societies publish their own annual bulletin, whilst the national society publishes its *Bulletin* twice yearly to act as a "tool for the trade," concentrating on archival retrieval, bibliography and review essays. Naturally political parties of the left and various radical and feminist groups produce literature on the labour movement, whilst current research on labour history is often given an airing by young researchers at the various History Workshops, which are organized yearly at different venues throughout England. The "Workshops" provide an adequate counterbalance to the more orthodox forums at academic conferences and were pioneered and popularized at Ruskin College, Oxford.²

Before considering the activities of one regional society it may be instructive to explain why there has been a sustained growth of interest in labour history in Britain. The expansion of higher education has led to increasing academic specialization and the growth of interdisciplinary and integrated approaches to study. Therefore the study of history is not now confined to students and teachers in history departments. Related to this expansion has been the significant increase in the number of teachers who had according to the *Bulletin* "strong sympathies for the political and social ambitions of labour, many of them with roots in working class families."³

In this situation, the primacy of conventional history, that of the politics of ruling elites, dynastic struggles, high level diplomacy, and constitutional issues, began to be challenged. Historical enquiry now began to embrace more fervently than ever social, cultural and economic aspects of the past seen and heard by other classes than the predominant privileged section of society. These developments were taking place when the labour movement itself began to establish a formidable presence in postwar Britain. No longer cast as an occasional irritant to Conservative political power, the labour movement through its new importance helped focus attention on its origins. Then in the sixties the orthodox left met a new challenge from an emergent "New Left." In this hot house atmosphere labour history flourished. E.P. Thompson's seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class* appeared in 1963 and provided new direction not only for British historiography in general but for British Marxist historiography in particular.⁴

These developments bore a special importance for the North West of England. This region can claim to have been the birthplace of industrial capitalism, whose cotton textile workers were aptly described by Engels as the "eldest children of the industrial revolution." Dominated by two large concentrations, Manchester and Liverpool, the region contains the classic staple industries, ranging from textiles to ship-building, and it provides a rich and variegated seam of source material and topics for the labour historian to work. It is not surprising that another seminal work, John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (1974) studies Oldham, a classic cotton textile town, to "further our understanding of how industrial capitalism has developed as a whole."

Four universities, three polytechnics and a number of teachers' training colleges in this heavily populated area provide the opportunity to study labour history for both the undergraduate and post-graduate, whilst university extramural provision coupled with the existence of Workers' Education Association branches permits adults to be involved. With the region's long tradition of trade unionism, consumer co-operation, religious non-conformity and class conflict, there appeared to be every reason to set up a local labor history group, and this was achieved in early 1973, when a group of 15 enthusiasts attended an inaugural meeting in Liverpool. The group's aims conformed closely to those of the national society but with an emphasis on local issues and topics. A policy of organizing exhibitions, lectures and conferences and producing pamphlets was adopted. In addition a yearly *Bulletin*, at first duplicated but now with a print of 500, is published and is free to the hundred or so members of the group.

Since the group's inauguration at least two conferences a year have been organised, usually in Liverpool or Manchester. The Liverpool event tends to concentrate on local historical episodes. This apparent parochialism can best be explained by the distinctive culture of Liverpool. Like most ports it has a multi-racial population, including the largest Chinese community in England outside of London, a long established Black community and strong Irish, Welsh and Scottish influences. Dockside labor, Irish politics, inter-communal strife combined

with harsh social conditions have given Liverpool's working class a degree of militancy and politicization hardly matched elsewhere in the country.

By contrast the Manchester meetings tend to be more general but linked to the region. Chartism, mining men and women, the Independent Labour Party are some of the topics presented at conferences by professional historians and working-class activists. Indeed one of the most important and democratic features of the group is the involvement of historians who are not academics or teachers. Their activity helps the group to de-mystify academic research and to further democratization of its work. Occasional conferences have been held in other centres throughout the region, and exhibitions of trade union emblems, banners and badges have also been mounted.

The presence in Manchester of the unique Working-Class Movements Library has been indispensable to the group's success. It provides materials for displays and conferences, ensures a steady flow of enthusiasts to the region from literally all over the world, and supports such activities within the region as the successful Manchester History Workshop, now in its fourth year, and the Manchester Studies team at the Polytechnic, who are involved in a number of projects, such as the retrieval of cotton textile records, local Jewish history and the International Brigades. Further north in the region Lancaster University contains the Centre for North West Regional Studies and has concentrated some of its efforts on investigations of the consumers' co-operation movement in that area, as well as encouraging the collection of reminiscences from the surviving representatives of the now defunct haematite iron ore mining industry. Liverpool Polytechnic has commenced a project similar to Manchester Studies, whilst a small body of trade union activists, inspired by a short course of labour history conducted via the W.E.A., have formed a research group in the Accrington area of Lancashire.

The many strands mentioned above are linked by overlapping personnel and interests, and there appears to be a great deal of co-operation within the region. Enthusiasts of labour history will always find the North West of England a rich area to pursue their interests, simply because of its historical association with the advent of modern industrialisation. Those living in the area are aware of this, and through their collective efforts there is a continuing attempt to rescue 'labour' from obscurity by preserving its records, and discussing and researching into its struggles, its organisations and its culture.

NOTES

1. Robert Turner, "The Contribution of Oral Evidence to Labour History," *Oral History*, 4 Spring, 1976), 23.
2. For evidence of the growing popularity of History Workshops, see *History Workshop Journal*, 6 (Autumn, 1978), 241-42.
3. Society for the Study of Labour History, *Bulletin*, 5 (Autumn, 1962), 4.
4. A section of Thompson's book appears in the second edition of Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History* (1970), under the category "Social History," which was absent from the first edition.