

The Roots of Labour
in a West London Suburb
– Ealing in the 1930s

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INTRODUCTION

Local labour history is of interest to activists who have their roots in a particular town, because events, places and individuals are familiar to them, if only by name and because they can see their own contribution to a movement in perspective. To the labour historian local history throws light on national and international developments, and puts flesh on histories which cover national conferences, elections, strikes and lists of statistics. Local labour history is primarily about people who have committed a significant part of their lives to a cause, and without their efforts institutions such as the Labour Party and the trades unions would not exist. This is the importance of “history from below”.

Political histories of the 1930s focus on the National Government of 1931, the hunger marchers, the rise of fascism and outlines the activities of the Labour leaders and the great debates which took place within the Party. But what is missed out is the experience of working people at a grass-roots level.

- What impact did these events have on their lives?
- How did they campaign in their area?
- What was it like to be a member of the Labour Party in the 1930s?
- What sort of party was it?

This is important both for activists and labour historians, because it offers the explanation as to why the Party, having been founded in 1906, became in 1945 the architect of post-war British society for a whole generation. In 1938 the Labour Party National Executive Committee reported that the “growth of our Party has been the most magnificent achievement of modern times.”



The 1930s Context

Before focusing on Ealing it is worth looking at the general political situation in the 1930s. In many respects the 1930s were a time of despair, but it was also a time when Labour made large gains in terms of membership. In spite of the 1931 National Government fiasco when Ramsay Macdonald and several other Labour cabinet ministers deserted the Party, leading to a general election rout for Labour, the membership of the Party actually doubled between 1928 and 1936 (214,970 - 430,690). From the mid 1930s trades union membership also picked up in the new industrial areas and gains were made in local government. The main prize was the London County Council won by Labour in 1934.

The mid-1930s saw the growth of new industries - motors, electrical engineering and cinema. Those who were in work saw real wages and living standards rise. For many, housing conditions improved. It was possible for a skilled worker to buy a house for the equivalent of two years wages. New council housing estates were built by the London County Council.

This was in contrast of course to some of the depressed areas where unemployment never fell below 70% for the whole decade. Young people in the 16-35 age group migrated into the new industrial areas. This North-South divide had implications for the labour movement, as depopulation affected traditional areas of Labour support such as the North of England, South Wales, and Scotland. But workers moving to new industrial areas in the South of England often brought their political traditions with them.

The growth of the Labour Party and the trades unions in the 1930s was in the new industrial areas. The number of constituency parties grew from 532 in 1928 to 614 in 1936, some of these grew significantly in numbers. Uxbridge Labour Party, for instance, which then included industrial areas of outer West London such as Hayes, grew from 300 members in 1930 to 1,962 by the end of the decade. At one time the Amalgamated Engineering Union was recruiting at the rate of 4,000 a month. The Labour Party ran national campaigns on unemployment, holidays with pay, education, campaigns which involved public meetings and leafleting. In 1933 there was a "Victory for Socialism" campaign. In 1937 there was a "Socialist Crusade week". There was a lot of interest amongst young

people. In 1934 there were 526 branches of the Labour League of Youth, some with 2,000 members. Labour politics placed a large emphasis on political education and involvement. Labour's programme was elaborated in a lot of detail as to how Labour would run finance, transport, and the electricity supply industry for example. The membership had a vision of a new society to which they were committed.

This outline of the labour movement in Ealing in the 1930s is based partly on reports from the local newspapers, Labour Party literature and backed up with interviews with Labour Party activists who have memories of the time.

Newcomers to the Borough

The population of the Borough of Ealing and the surrounding parts of West London were transformed by the industrialization of the 1930s. Known as the "Queen of Suburbs" it was still largely rural in parts. Doris Ashby (member of Ealing North Labour Party) who moved to Perivale in 1933 with her parents recalled picking wild flowers to take to school in Hammersmith, as their house in Federal Road was literally at the end of the road. It had been a very Conservative stronghold. In 1918 the Conservative candidate in Ealing won 17,000 votes in the Parliamentary election compared to Labour's 4,000. The political map was also very different from today in terms of Parliamentary Divisions and the Council. Southall was included in the Uxbridge Constituency and the growth areas of Greenford, Perivale, Northolt and Hanwell were in the Harrow Constituency. There was only one constituency for the town of Ealing. There were town councils for Acton, Southall and Hanwell as well as Greenford and Northolt - areas which were to hold the majority of the population covered by the council.

By the 1945 General Election the Borough was divided into two constituencies - Ealing West and Ealing East. The Labour candidate James Hudson won Ealing West with 29,115 votes. This vote compared to 1918 illustrates the rapid changes which had taken place in the population of the area during the 1930s. Since that time there have been further alterations to the Parliamentary boundaries and the amalgamation of the Boroughs of Acton and Southall with Ealing to form one Council. This pamphlet describes the development of labour politics in

the whole area now covered by Ealing Council as well as other parts of outer West London.

What were the changes that took place in the 1930s? Parts of Ealing already had some industry and a working class tradition, for example, laundries in Acton. Southall was a centre for the railway industry, and there were transport depots in Southall and Hanwell. The Great Western Railway was a large employer. Syd Bidwell (former Labour MP for Southall) who was born in 1917 describes Southall in his childhood as "a working class fraternity", unlike its neighbour Ealing "the Queen of Suburbs". Syd himself left school at 14 to work on the railways. The labour movement had deeper roots in Southall than in the rest of the Borough. There had been a branch of the Independent Labour Party both in Southall and Ealing in 1906. Syd's father was an active socialist in the ILP. There was a Southall branch of the National Union of Railwaymen which met above the Co-op Shop on the Green. Syd's father was a carpenter – he was on the strike committee at the time of the 1926 General Strike. Syd remembers a bus which was being driven by a blackleg student being pushed right over by striking bus workers. At the Hanwell tram depot the local Labour Party organised meetings in the Broadway for striking tramworkers. In Ealing itself Joe Sherman (one of the founders of the movement) chaired the strike committee and mass meetings were held on Ealing Common. So there was an early industrial and labour movement tradition in the area. But major changes in population came the new industries of the 1920s and 1930s.

Between 1921-1931 Middlesex had the greatest increase of population of any county, a 30% growth. Many of these people migrated from other parts of London as well as other parts of the country. Doris Ashby, for instance, moved from North Kensington "where housing was very poor" to Perivale. Marianne Elliott (a member of Ealing North Labour Party) described how her parents moved to Perivale in 1932 from North Kensington. Her father had originally moved from Lanarkshire to find a job as a carpenter in the Wembley Exhibition Centre when he lost his job in the Lanarkshire shipyards. He later found well paid, but insecure work in the newly developing film industry making sets. A lot of this work was very casualised. One motive for workers moving within London was to move to better housing, perhaps nearer to work.

In the early 1930s most of the new houses in the area were for sale but could be afforded by skilled workers. Doris Ashby, for instance, said that her parents raised the £25 deposit from her mother's "Co-op Divy". Average wages for a skilled worker in West London were at that time £2-£3 per week. Jean Humphries (member of Ealing North Labour Party) also recalls moving to Ealing from Islington when the firm where her father worked relocated to Park Royal. She remembers the pleasure for the first time of "having a room of her own".

The Labour Party was to be very successful in getting support from these newcomers to areas like Perivale. They were people who had seen poverty, but as Doris Ashby said "they were the more intelligent members of the working class who had taken action to help themselves". She remembers large numbers of Welsh people moving into the area attracted by work at the Hoover factory on the A40. Some of the houses in the area were bought by Hoovers for their workers. Between 1920-1939 three out of the four million new homes which were built in total, were built by private enterprise for sale.

London County Council Housing in Ealing

A million homes were built by local authorities. One of the most significant housing developments in the Borough in the 1930s was the Cuckoo Estate in north Hanwell, built by the London County Council in 1936. During the building of this estate there was a strike of bricklayers belonging to the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers who were in dispute over dismissals by the Contractor Unit Construction Company. The London County Council did not intervene in this dispute. But finally the estate was finished and in 1937 the newcomers started arriving.

The *Ealing Gazette* women's page issued a feature including interviews with some of the newcomers who had moved from other parts of London. They were happy with their improved housing conditions – they had for the first time their own front doors, garden and privacy. Others however disliked the time spent travelling into work, the isolation and lack of a community. One person said that the fresh air was too strong for someone who had grown up in Kensington. Both the main political parties paid attention to

these newcomers. The Conservatives organised a tea party on the estate "in honour of the mothers of Hanwell". The Labour Party organized political meetings. Councillor Chilton said that the Conservative controlled Council had fought tooth and nail to prevent the estate from being built "because they objected to the residents".

The prospective Labour parliamentary candidate for Harrow, Mr Davidson said to the tenants - "you are disturbing the sedate posts of Tory respectability that have so far inhabited this part of the world" (*West Middlesex Gazette*, 1937).

This was one of several LCC estates built in London. The Tories accused Labour of building estates to change voting patterns in Conservative London boroughs! However most newcomers to the Ealing area were homeowners not council house tenants and they maintained their Labour politics.

New Industries

The growth of industry in the area was the other major attraction for newcomers to parts of West Middlesex. The growth areas were the Great West Road, the A40 and Park Royal. In 1914 Park Royal had been completely rural, the nearest large stretch of open land near to London. By 1929 there were 140 factories employing 13,4000 people. This growth accelerated after 1929. Other key industrial areas in West London were Southall, Hayes and Acton Vale. In 1932 the Hoover factory opened on the A40 in Perivale employing 800 workers. In 1934 the *West Middlesex Gazette* reported a "Second industrial revolution". - "a manufacturers' mile on the Great West Road". Between 1932-1933 83,000 new jobs were created nationally. 50% were in the Greater London area. Living standards rose for those in work, as prices were falling. At Christmas 1936 a prosperity bonus was paid to workers at AEC, an engineering firm in Southall. However in many of the new factories working conditions were primitive and workers were subject to the pressures of the production line.

Malcolm Mitchell, a trades unionist from Acton, recalls his first job at Napiers in Acton Vale where the toilets did not have doors and were little more than a trough. This was to stop "malingering". But canteen facilities, Christmas parties and outings laid on by the firm were becoming a feature of working life as new

employers adopted paternalistic practices. There was stiff resistance to the setting up of trades union organisation.

Unemployment

However, the fall in unemployment in West London was not universal. In areas such as Southall it remained high and was a political issue throughout the decade. There was an influx of workers from the distressed areas. Workers were prepared to live in tents to find jobs.

Unemployment had been one of the main issues for the Labour Party at the beginning of the 1930s. In 1932 there were 1,000 unemployed in Ealing. Labour Councillors lobbied for public works to provide amenities such as schools, libraries, and swimming pools. The Council was urged to bring forward repairs and the government to fund new projects such as the Piccadilly line extension and the A40 extension. However in the wake of the National Government's imposed cuts in 1931, the local Conservative controlled Council abandoned unemployment relief. By April the number of unemployed in Ealing had doubled to 2,000. The Ealing Labour Party and Trades Council called for the setting up of Labour Exchanges. There was also a backlash against newcomers with local people asking for Londoners to get first priority for employment. Syd Bidwell recalls the slogan "Welsh go home" being painted on a wall in Southall. (In the 1950s "Go home blacks" was painted on the same wall!).

The National Unemployed Workers Movement organised demonstrations to the Council. Hanwell Labour Party called upon the Council to feed the children of the unemployed and the Party itself organised a tea party for these children.

The Mayor's Fund

Whilst public funds for unemployment relief were drying up, the Mayor launched an Unemployment Distress Fund. He urged local employers to take on additional workers where they could be employed in the building and furniture trade adding that "Every additional job will mean extra wages which in turn will be spent on the necessities of life, again engaging labour in the production of commodities." He urged wealthy people in the Borough to spend their way out of the recession and the local paper

ran a campaign "Spend that idle money to help the idle many". The local Tories believed in spending their way out of a recession in those days. The Middlesex County Council raised its rates by 3 pence to pay for unemployment as 5,573 people were now receiving outdoor relief in West Middlesex, an increase of 224.5% in two years. A total of £8,000 was raised for the Mayor's relief fund. Acton Council set up a Social Council and called for money to employ building workers. But the scheme was attacked by some of the Acton Labour Councillors. Councillor Spark said "no useful purpose could be served by co-operating with the Social Council as nothing short of a change in the economic system could solve the problem." "It was an attempt to deprive the people of the true and proper remedy. Those promoting the Social Council were such as were responsible for the present unemployment and they also supported a government which had vastly increased unemployment." He pointed out that £2,000 million of unused capital lay idle in the banks. 40% of capital was lying idle in this way. "So much for the £6000 raised by the Social Council. The Labour Councillors wanted work or full maintenance."

A branch of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement was founded in Acton. This lobbied the Council. By 1938 unemployment had fallen substantially in Acton. This was not the case in Southall however. Syd Bidwell recalls how the level of unemployment had influenced him in his decision to join the Labour League of Youth in 1933. He recalls working at the Electric Transformer Company in Hayes in the early 1930s where workers were made redundant every week and he remembers workers breaking down in tears on a Friday afternoon when they were tapped on the shoulder and given their cards, wondering how they were going to face their families. There was little welfare then-families looked after their own people. But the lack of welfare provision did not mean that workers were able to find jobs! Unemployed men were visible they stood on street corners, not hidden as they are today. Unemployment was a major political issue even in West London.

The Labour Party in Ealing

West Middlesex was one of the high growth areas for Labour in the 1930s. Joe Sherman, one of the founders of the Ealing Labour Party and Trades Council had presented his annual report

to the Ealing Labour Party. He said that as a majority of the population in Ealing were working class, the borough should vote Labour. He urged members to get sympathisers into the Party and get them a job to do. In 1926 The Ealing Labour Party had acquired its own premises - Dorset Hall (now renamed Sherman Hall). By 1937 there were 3,000 members in the borough.

The main areas of growth for the Labour Party in the borough were Northolt and Greenford. These were the main growth areas for the population of the Borough which together with Hanwell accounted for 45% of the population of Ealing by 1937.

Joe Sherman recounts "When Greenford developed we built up the Labour vote. I can remember when the population of Greenford was about 1,000. In the 1930s Ealing was developed. A lot of people came from South Wales. Dai Cousins (who was to become the agent for Ealing North for many years) came from South Wales. It was all very solid Labour. Most of our councillors came from there. Greenford was very solid Labour."

In 1932 there were only 4 Councillors out of 32 on Ealing Council, 3 of these were from Greenford. By the middle of the 1930s all 6 Councillors from Greenford were Labour. The Labour Party branch in Greenford had only been set up in 1927. In 1933 it was split into Greenford South and Greenford North and in 1936 the Perivale branch was formed with 100 members. Northolt Labour Party was set up in 1932 and in 1938 it split into two branches. In 1935 a 10% increase in membership was reported in Greenford and 150 attended the Annual General Meeting.

The Labour Party was a very active party in the 1930s. Doris Ashby remembers her mother's activities in the Labour Party in Perivale. Her mother was a subs collector in Federal Road where they lived and there was only one household from which she did not collect the subs of 2-3 pence a week.

Jo Sherman recalls "We had a tennis club. We had a cycling club. We had a dramatic society. There was always discussion. I used to speak at these open air meetings every week, at West Ealing on Fridays, at Ealing Green on Saturdays. at Ealing Common on Sundays. You wouldn't

believe how interested people were because the labour movement was developing rapidly in those days. I remember talking on Ealing Common starting at 7.30 p.m. and going on until 10.30 p.m. and nobody would go away. When it started to rain we used to move under the trees and that was how we built the movement in those days."

Public Open Air Meetings

Public open air meetings were a regular feature of Labour Party activities in the 1930s. Syd Bidwell recalls speaking at street corner meetings in Southall when he chaired the Labour League of Youth. Speakers were trained by the National Council of Labour Colleges. They could speak without notes for 30 minutes or more on the political issues of the day. In Acton outdoor meetings were held every week on the Mount and a paper called the Acton Citizen was distributed in the area. In Ealing open air meetings were held in Leeland Road on Saturday and Sunday evenings. Because of the length of the working day, this was the only free time that many people had. In Hanwell public meetings were held at the Park Theatre. Subjects included the crisis of capitalism, Russia, political repression in India and local issues such as the housing shortage and lack of public amenities in the area. National speakers such as the miners' leader Arthur Cook came to speak in the area. The Greenford Labour Party held open air meetings at the War Memorial on Sunday evenings. Key issues in the 1930s were unemployment, and the threat of war. Collections were made for the workers of Spain in their fight against fascism and the Labour Party campaigned for the lifting of the arms embargo on the Republican side. In 1934 the Labour Party nationally launched its "Socialist Crusade" week when 100 members were recruited into the Party in Ealing. There had also been attempts to start a Borough-wide Labour Party newspaper called the *Citizen*.

Political Education

The Labour Party took political education very seriously. The Party nationally produced a whole range of pamphlets on political issues such as India, poverty, education, and the running of industries. Literature secretaries elected by the branches were to encourage the membership to read these. Local speakers were competent to

speaking at party branches. It was reported for instance that Comrade Hay had spoken on "the transition to socialism" for 50 minutes at the Greenford branch in 1931. Northolt Labour Party had set up study groups which were held once a month. Subjects discussed at Labour Party branch meetings included capitalism and socialism, history of the British Empire and the Popular Front. The branch asked its secretary to write to the Labour Party headquarters and ask what their policy was with regard to the immediate introduction of socialism. 100 copies of Labour's immediate programme were bought and distributed in the branch. By 1937 Northolt Branch had 150 paid up members, of these 88 were men and 62 were women. There were day schools on fighting fascism, and the problems faced by German workers under fascism. In 1931 the National Council of Labour Colleges organised a school and exhibition to commemorate Karl Marx. This was held in Acton and attracted 40 Labour movement organisations. Ealing Labour Party and Trades Council jointly published a pamphlet entitled "India and Great Britain" of which 100 copies were purchased. The Labour League of Youth also had a full programme of political education.

Social Life

As well as political activities the Labour Party in the 1930s had a social life which was widely supported. Doris Ashby believes that this was due to the lack of television in those days. People had to make their own entertainment. Perivale branch had monthly socials in the school hall. Many people attended Labour Party dances. The local party also held whist drives, football teams, cricket teams, a choir and a dramatics club. The youth of Greenford were also reported to have danced to the "strains of the Labour Party orchestra". Fetes were organised and there were Sports Days for children. People like Mrs Ashby (Doris's mother) organised the refreshments. For children there was also a Socialist Sunday School attended by 700 children. It had its own naming ceremonies and harvest festivals. It attracted a lot of hostility from the local Tories. Children were trained how to chair meetings and other political skills.

The labour movement had a very high level of involvement in those days, it was almost an alternative way of life for those who participated.

Labour in Local Government

Special attention needs to be given to one of the main activities of the Labour Party in the 1930s, that of local government. With the splitting of the Parliamentary Party in 1931 and the formation of a National Government, Labour was to be out of office until 1945. However Labour did a lot better in local government, winning control of key local councils such as the London County Council in 1934. The only Council to be controlled by Labour in the Ealing area was Southall at this time, but in Acton and Ealing the Party was focused on local issues and campaigns. Other Councils in West London to be controlled by Labour included Willesden and Hayes, which was controlled by Labour between 1934-1939.

In 1932 only 4 of 32 councillors on the Ealing Borough Council were Labour. These were all from Greenford. By the middle of the decade Labour had started winning seats in the old Borough of Ealing south of the Uxbridge Road. Labour contested all the seats for local elections. Ealing Council was controlled by Ratepayers who were really Conservatives under a different name. Labour brought politics into local government. The Labour Party campaigned for more municipal facilities, for public conveniences and slipper baths in Hanwell, for the opening of schools, libraries, and public open spaces such as Brent Meadows which the Council bought for £7,000 in 1931. However by the end of 1931 the National Government's cuts had led to cuts in local council spending. In October 1931 Ealing Council announced cuts of £8,000. This meant that capital projects such as housing, schools and highways and treeplanting were abandoned and teachers' salaries were cut by 10%. This led to a deterioration of the unemployment situation and Labour Councillors from Greenford campaigned for the Council to bring forward projects like a Greenford library, Stanhope School and the Western Avenue extension to provide relief.

Labour Runs Southall Council

In 1936 the Labour Council in Southall embarked on a programme of public works and 2 miles of sewers were constructed at a cost of £37,000. The *Southall Gazette* regularly ran campaigns against the Labour Council in Southall. 15 out of 24 Councillors were Labour.

"Ratepayers" condemned what they called "socialism by the backdoor of municipal politics"; they called Labour "Commissars" and "Dictators". The local Labour Club in Southall was called by local Conservatives "the Kremlin". Further political controversy resulted when the Council banned a fascist rally from being held in Southall Park whilst at the same time permission was given to the local Communist Party to go ahead with a rally in the Park. The seven ratepayers walked out of the local Council meeting. Labour also backed local parents in a dispute with the Middlesex County Council over education. 80 children had been moved from Lady Margaret Road to Tudor Road School, over one and a half miles away. In protest the parents had kept them at home until their wishes were met in 1937. In 1938 Labour came under attack again for a large rate rise. Ratepayers condemned the Labour Councillors because "they were not business people" and "there had been too many projects such as housing, a pool and the town hall". Despite this Labour made gains in the local elections held later in the year.

But Labour Fails To Win Acton

Labour failed to take Acton Council for the whole of the 1930s in spite of the changing population. Gains were made and Labour was contesting every seat. The voting figures for local elections in 1931 were 16,377 for the Conservatives, 6,572 for Labour. By 1933 this had changed to 10,278 for the Conservatives and 10,600 for Labour. But in 1932 there had been no change in the composition of the Council, 23 Conservatives and 9 Labour. The Acton Labour Councillors campaigned for more housing and local public works, and called for direct labour employed by the Council to replace contract labour. They had an ally in the Reverend Gough, the Rector of Acton who gave them his support. Labour held public meetings in the Glebe Theatre every Sunday during election campaigns. The Acton Council, despite being Conservative, had also embarked on public buildings such as baths and houses. This attracted opposition from some ratepayers in the borough but was defended by Labour.

Labour continued to attack the Conservatives for the amount of debt charges on housing, but constant pressure on the Council led them to agree to build 800 new homes a year. In 1937 Labour criticised the Council's plans to spend £2,200 on Coronation celebrations. In 1938 the

building of Acton Town Hall began. Hence despite being in a minority Labour was able to influence the policy of Acton Council.

By 1933 election results were starting to turn in Labour's favour but it was not until after 1945 that Acton became a Labour area, presumably as workers from the factories started to move into the area to live.

Labour and the Unions

The Labour Party had been formed from the trades union movement and in Ealing there were close links between the Party and the unions. Many of the local Party activists were also trades unionists representing a whole range of skills. Labour candidates in the municipal elections in Acton in 1930 included a transport worker, (member of the National Union of Vehicle Builders), a branch secretary of the Railway Clerks Association, a bookbinder and an engineer. (They were not exclusively manual workers, however, as the list included a headteacher and an insurance agent). These people had received their political education through organisations like the National Council of Labour Colleges.

In 1937 Councillor Sparks was selected as the Labour Parliamentary candidate for Acton. He had been a member of the National Union of Railwaymen since the age of 16 and had been to the Central Council of Labour Colleges. In the early years of the labour movement, Trades Councils and Constituency Labour Parties met jointly. When the Ealing Labour Party was set up it had been the Ealing Labour Party and Trades Council.

The 1926 General Strike in Ealing

During the 1926 General Strike a speaker from the Hanwell Labour Party had addressed striking tramworkers in the Broadway. When the strike was called off the 300 tramworkers marched back to work singing the Red Flag. The Ealing Labour Party held collections for miners who were locked out in 1926.

Joe Sherman also recalls the General Strike of 1926. He was secretary of the Trades Council at the time. He said "Believe it or not Ealing was dead. Everything stopped. We had a taxi put at our disposal. I used to run around in a taxi cab by permission of the Ealing strike committee. I

had a letter from the borough surveyor, Hicks asking whether the strike committee would give permission to deliver two tons of coal to the Ealing Memorial Hospital. It showed how strong we were. Fortunately we had the Labour Hall open. We had about 1,000 people there every day. We had a demonstration on Ealing Common vast numbers coming from Hammersmith, vast numbers coming from Acton, vast numbers coming from Southall. It was one the biggest demonstrations ever seen on Ealing Common. There must have been 50,000 people."

The 1937 Bus Workers Dispute in Ealing

In 1937 there was a busmen's strike in London in support of the 8 hour day. This received 100% support from the workers at the Hanwell Trolley bus depot (the tram depot of 1926). The *Gazette* ran articles on "How Ealing is affected by the bus strike" and reported that strikers were playing darts, football and other games. In fact 200 busmen held a public meeting on Ealing Common in support of their cause. Being a London bus driver was relatively well paid, but as the Union pointed out, conditions were very stressful with many leaving the industry at the age of 46 due to ill health. The average age of a London bus worker in the 1930s was 34. Conditions on the roads had deteriorated due to the increasing number of private cars and the accident rate was very high for the number of cars on the road. The bus strike had support in the local community. At the end of the strike the secretary of the Hanwell Bus Strike Committee thanked the public for their donations. Thanks were individually sent to the manager of the Odeon at Northfields, Mr and Mrs Bennett of the Kings Arms (Hanwell Broadway) for food parcels, the clergy of Our Lady and St Joseph for use of the Parish Hall for meetings and Teds Coffee Bar for letting striking busmen have reduced tariffs.

Unionisation in the new Engineering Factories

West London was a key area for some of the unions in the 1930s because of the large scale industrialisation.

The Amalgamated Engineering Union held open air and factory gate recruitment meetings and

marches especially in the Southall area. Membership reports for the AEU reported new branches in West London.

There were also industrial disputes, for instance, stay-in strikes (factory occupations) at Fairey Aviation and Glacier Metal. These were in support of union recognition.

The progress of the Southall branch of the Amalgamated Engineering Union was reported at its annual dinner in 1938. 150 attended the dinner and the district secretary reported that 1,000 new members were joining a year. The district had been set up in 1916 with 95 members in Southall, Hayes and Brentford. By 1935 there were 6 branches with 1294 members. By 1937 there were over 200 shop stewards. Slough was added to the District taking the membership to 3,470 by 1938. In the new factories the main issues were the speed up and mechanisation. This of course took place against a background of unemployment. Also some of the new large employers took quite a paternalistic attitude to their employees. Hoovers on the A40 for instance held a sports day attended by 2,000 people, had company outings and provided housing for some employees. These methods used by employers of the new large plants on the continent and the USA were designed to mitigate against the setting up of trades unions. There were disputes in the plants to obtain union recognition, for instance at Firestones on the Great West Road in 1933. Support from workers in Southall and Hanwell was organised by the Independent Labour Party. Disputes also took place with local authorities over pay rates in the building trade. In Ealing there was a dispute over the rate for digging trenches for civil defence at the end of the 1930s.

Gains were being made in working conditions such as paid holidays for the first time. The AEU launched an engineering charter which included a minimum wage, abolition of overtime, trades union control of apprenticeships, paid holidays, sick pay after 12 months service and 100% unionisation. In the 1930s a new Trades Council was set up in Acton.

The links between Labour and the unions in the Borough continued into the 1960s and 1970s. Marianne Elliott recalls Bill Molloy the MP for Ealing North, addressing factory gate meetings at Hoovers in the 1970 General Election. The number of trades union delegates to the Ealing

North constituency was very high. There were always people to do the work.

The Labour League of Youth

Most Labour Party activists played a role in the youth wing of the Party. In the 1930s this was called the Labour League of Youth. Both Syd Bidwell and Joe Sherman recalled their activities when they chaired the Southall and Ealing branches. Attendances were high and there was scope for a whole range of activities such as cycling and sports as well as politics. In the 1950s Marianne Elliot joined the Young Socialists. At the age of 16. She recalls meetings, camping and drinking a lot of cider at Harefield. She remembers Syd Bidwell speaking at a meeting of the YS when he was a lecturer for the National Council of Labour Colleges. The Gazette reported Labour League of Youth activities in the 1920s and 1930s. Activities included lectures on "Pacifist morality", dances with the London Harmonic Orchestra, and a cycling club which met every Sunday. There were weekends youth hostelling in Hertfordshire, football and netball practice. The Southall Labour League of Youth held meetings on Russia and discussed "wireless programmes".

Nevertheless there were problems with the Labour League of Youth due to fluctuations in membership and factional fights with supporters of the Communist Party, against which the Labour Party headquarters took a very hard line. In 1934 the Ealing Labour League of Youth was set up for the second time. Their meeting was addressed by the prospective Parliamentary candidate for Uxbridge who condemned the policies of the Communist Party. Labour he said could effect a change from capitalism to socialism without violent upheaval. Again there was a high emphasis on political education on a whole range of subjects. Southall Labour League of Youth debated "whether sport played too great a role in modern life". The branch also set up study circles with examinations. The Southall Labour League of Youth played a role in getting branches set up in Northolt and Greenford. Membership campaigns and a "youth day" were to be set up.

Labour League of Youth and the Communist Party

The Young Communist League was also active in Southall and in some areas the Popular Front campaign of the mid-1930s attracted Labour League of Youth members to joint activities with the YCL especially in relation to collecting money for workers in Spain, and in organising against the Blackshirts, as Mosley's fascists came to be known. Syd Bidwell recalls taking action against the Blackshirts in Southall. The idea was to surround them completely with sellers of left-wing newspapers so that they could not escape. The Southall LLY was reformed after having ceased to exist for a few months and attracted 40 new members. Links continued with the YCL and public meetings were held in support of the Popular Front under the guises of a Socialist Forum. In the meantime the Ealing LLY received a letter from Labour Party headquarters telling them not to associate with the campaign for a Popular Front.

The Communist Party in the 1930s was seen as the party of direct action in fighting fascism, organising marches against unemployment and collecting money for workers in Spain. This was in contrast to the Labour Party, which was committed to Parliamentary change, to winning hearts and minds to socialism, with a high emphasis on political education and organisation. Labour's model was the German Social Democratic Party, prior to 1914. However it never achieved the same level of organisation and range of clubs which had given the Social Democratic Party the status of an alternative way of life for German workers.

Support for the Labour League of Youth continued to the end of the decade. A recruitment week was held in Southall in 1938 on the theme "The socialist answer to war, unemployment and poverty". A public meeting was addressed by Syd Bidwell. The Labour League of Youth became increasingly concerned with the issues of fascism and war. At the end of the day despite all the controversies the youth section had an active political and social presence in the borough.

Women in the Labour Party

Support for women's sections was also strong. Women were active in the Women's Co-

operative Guild as well as the Labour Party. There were as many women as men in the Labour Party in the 1930s. Both Doris Ashby and Marianne Elliott who were interviewed said that it was their mothers, not their fathers, who were active in the Party. Their fathers were sympathetic but not members. Doris herself was still at school in the 1930s and when she started work as a nurse during the war she could not take an active part except at elections. It seems that membership of the Labour Party meant active commitment in those days and participation was expected. Indeed guides to party organisation published by the Labour Party headquarters advised that inactive members should be visited and encouraged to attend meetings. Branches were encouraged to have literature organisers to assist political education.

The women's sections of the Labour Party tended to have a life of their own reflecting the fact that most women did not work and therefore attended meetings in the afternoon. Women were an integral part of the Labour Party at a time when men and women led separate lifestyles. Women attended political meetings, they were not confined to organising bazaars or making the tea. (although the evidence is that they did do a lot of that as well.). It was surprising to read in the local paper a reference to the Southall Labour Party's men's section !

Acton women's section attended a rally in Hyde Park against unemployment in 1931 and it held weekly meetings. It is interesting to note that Acton Labour Councillors supported Acton Council's plan to dismiss married women employees in 1934 (if their husbands were on good wages). There was no commitment to equal opportunities in those days. Activities of the women's sections were reported in the *Ealing Gazette*. In 1925 the *Ealing Gazette* reported in January on the annual meeting of Labour women in the Borough. 300 new members were accepted the meetings took place twice a month and there were sales of a monthly paper called *Labour Woman*. Meetings were held on public health in Ealing, and sympathisers were invited to meetings. In 1926 the President of the Ealing Independent Labour Party was a woman, Mrs Mabel Thompson. In 1926 the women's sections organised collections for miners wives. Women were attracted to the Labour Party by the Party's concern over issues like the lack of public facilities such as baths. In 1933 The Greenford Women's Section held a meeting to discuss the

United Front and also the arms trade. In 1937 it was reported that a Labour women's section in Perivale met with 15 members chaired by a Mrs Ashby. In 1938 a women's section was formed in Northolt and a West Middlesex rally was held on Labour's immediate programme. Labour women's sections had social events such as whist drives and outings.

Women also did a lot of organising for prestigious events such as the all London Labour fete and borough wide bazaars.

Children

The Labour Party also attempted to organise children through the Socialist Sunday Schools where children were to learn at a young age skills such as charring meetings. The Labour Party in the 1930s aimed to find ways of organising all sections of the working class.

One issue which did not involve the Labour Party but which attracted a lot of attention in the Borough was the issue of birth control. In February 1933 Marie Stopes came to speak at Ealing Town Hall and the hall was packed to overflowing. 1,000 people actually had to be turned away because they could not get in. The pages of the *Gazette* were filled with the controversy for weeks afterwards.

The Independent Labour Party

The ILP had existed before the Labour Party and retained its independent existence after 1918. Its split with the Party in 1932 caused havoc as activists were members of both parties. How did this affect the Ealing Labour Party?

There were 32 branches of the ILP in London in 1894 including Hackney, Hammersmith, Poplar, Ealing and Wandsworth. But the ILP was not particularly successful in London. The London Labour Party was founded in 1914 with 134,000 affiliated trades union members, but its strength was in limited areas such as West Ham and Battersea. In 1906 the Ealing branch of the ILP had approximately 15 members. In Acton there was a branch of the Social Democratic Federation with 13 members and independent Labour Councillors. The ILP in the Borough maintained its own activities and meetings after 1918. In 1931 it organised demonstrations against the cuts imposed by the National Government. In 1927 Arthur Cook attended a

meeting of the ILP in the Victoria Hall, in Ealing Town Hall. Meetings were held to protest at the Trades Disputes Act passed by the Conservative Government after the defeat of the General Strike. Joe Sherman was the President of the Ealing ILP and in March 1930 he said that it was necessary to maintain a branch of the ILP despite having a Labour government. The ILP had stood its own candidates for the Council.

The influence of the ILP in the Labour Party after 1931 was quite critical in the organization of demonstrations against the Government's cuts. In September 1931 a demonstration was called on Ealing Common. Banners read "Down with the National Government" and "No starvation wages". Tom Mann was the main speaker. He denounced the National Government as a capitalist plot and called for a 6 hour day to solve the problem of unemployment caused by cost-cutting machinery. He opposed all cuts and called for action. The meeting was joined by a procession from Southall according to the local paper "the participants were orderly and well dressed and of all classes". The ILP continued to hold political forum on socialism and Christianity and land values amongst other issues. Increasingly the ILP became involved with the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. They were openly critical of the trades union and labour leaders and became involved with campaigns supporting trades unionists abroad in India and China. The Acton ILP had called a meeting to defend Indian trades unionists in the 1920s, calling upon the then Labour Government to secure their release.

The ILP Splits from the Labour Party

But in 1932 the ILP left the Labour Party. This was to lead to the demise of the ILP and it also left a vacuum on the left of the Party, later to be filled by Stafford Cripps and the Socialist League. The breaking away of the ILP had repercussions within the ranks of the Party. In a relatively new area like Ealing the effects were probably not as bad as in the older industrial areas. There had been branches of the ILP in Ealing, Southall and Acton but no support in the new areas of Greenford. Some of the wards in Central Ealing - Lammas, and Grosvenor experienced problems with membership decline after the 1932 split according to the minutes of the Ealing Labour Party and Trades Council. Party officers resigned and some wards

temporarily collapsed. This situation was not reversed until after 1934 with the Socialist week campaign when hundreds of new members were recruited

The Fascists

A note must be made of Ealing's notorious Labour Party member, Oswald Mosley. According to Joe Sherman Mosley was the MP for Harrow and Hanwell in 1924 and he was a 'radical Tory.' But he changed sides and joined the Independent Labour Party.

When he was in the Labour Party Mosley spoke at meetings in the Park Hotel in Hanwell. He became President of the Hanwell Labour Club in 1926. He was later to set up the British Union of Fascists.

In the 1930s when Mosley was with the British Union of Fascists his activities were picketed by local Labour Party activists. He addressed 500 fascists in the Central Hall, Acton and 1,000 people demonstrated outside singing the Red Flag and demanding "We want Mosley dead or alive" and "We want to get rid of the rats".

Labour's Vision in the 1930s

If you joined the Labour Party in the 1930s it was a way of life. The Party had a vision of a future socialist society a "new Jerusalem" which would come about because enough people believed in it. There was a sense of being on the right side and that eventually in spite of all setbacks you would win. This was reflected in the speeches of Labour activists and politicians,

When Mr Gough (the Rector of Acton) sent his support to the Acton Labour councillors he said "Your movement has attained its present success in England by sheer force of idealism and it can win all the support it wants by the same means." Logically the working class (workers by hand or by brain) who were the majority of the population, would come to support the Labour Party.

George Lansbury speaking in Acton in 1928 said "the people of Acton are better dressed but they were the same type as the people of Poplar. They were workers by hand or by brain, but they were all still earning the means of life."

At a meeting in St Annes School in Hanwell in 1930 a Mr Whiteley said "there has never been in the history of the country or in the history of the world a political, social or religious movement which had had such a phenomenal rapid or remarkable growth in a comparatively short period of time as the labour movement."

The Labour Party had gained eight and a half million votes between 1900 and 1929. It had not yet changed society as it was designed to do as it was still a minority government in 1931, but there was the overwhelming belief that Labour was destined to replace the capitalist system. For example, commenting on the policies of the 1929/31 Labour Government, Mr Maycock said "it was not the Labour Government which was on trial it was the capitalist system."

On the prospects for capturing Ealing, one speaker said "Nothing could be accomplished unless there was absolute soldarity amongst the working class. Ealing was not an easy area for the Labour party to conquer but it could be done! He praised those determined to rebuild the Party after 1931. Councillor Holmes said "although we are backward in Ealing you are not going to say that it is a hopeless case. Hard work had produced thousands of votes in a few years. '

The Importance of Economic Planning

The growth of economic planning and government regulation of industry in the 1930s seemed to mean that socialism seemed to be the inevitable goal of history. A meeting of Hanwell women's section in the Hanwell Library was addressed by a Mr Lees-Smith who said that socialism in our time, that is, public ownership of the power, banks, transport and finance was inevitable.

Labour had a programme for every industry. Labour's policy was to show that socialism was a rational way of ending the recession of the 1930s. It was just commonsense as a leaflet produced by the Party pointed out. Labour's immediate programme "Socialism in our time" was based on the premise that capitalism was collapsing and when every voter in the country "saw the light" Labour would be waiting in the wings to take over. However Labour was still very much a working class based party which saw itself as representing the interersts of workers against capitalists.

For instance Mr Kennedy speaking at a public meeting of Ealing Labour Party said that "a workers wage or salary is less than the labour produced. A worker is a worker because he is propertyless. He sells his work and gets less than what is the value produced." "industry" he said "was social in character, it should be accompanied by social distribution." He also called for the raising of the school leaving wage to share out the work.

Labour remained in opposition throughout the 1930s, after the 1931 split and National Government. However gains were made in local government, the trades unions and Labour Party organisation. In 1945 Ealing gained its first Labour MP James Hudson. Both Southall and Acton had Labour Councils. Ealing did not have a Labour Council until Ealing was amalgamated with Acton and Southall in the 1960s. The area has remained marginal between Labour and the Tories with the exception of Southall which has retained a Labour MP throughout the 1980s. Ealing Council has changed hands on a regular basis. Since the "high tide of Labourism" a lot of gains have been temporarily reversed. But only temporarily. This study of the roots of the labour movement in this part of West London in the 1930s shows that the foundations painstakingly built by committed party activists changed the map for ever politically and contributed to the success of the Labour Party in the second part of the 20th century. The example of Ealing and outer West London must have been repeated in many parts of the country.

Labour in the 1930s - a General Perspective

The 1930s was a decade of mass unemployment but after the National Government of 1931 Labour remained out of power. Activities such as the hunger marches and the anti-fascist movement involved members of the Labour Party but the Party itself was not the main organizer of these activities. At the same time the 1930s saw a substantial restructuring of the economy and society in general which involved large movements of population which were to change the political map of the country. Workers moving to new industrial areas to find work took their political affiliations with them although they obtained a better standard of living when they found work. For many workers, apart from those in the depressed areas wages kept ahead of prices in the 1930s. Living conditions improved

as workers moved to better housing, and had electricity and paid holidays for the first time. Where the Labour Party gained a foothold in local government improvements were made to public housing and transport. After 1934 the trades unions also began to pick up members as the economy came out of recession. So the 1930s were not a lost decade for Labour. In fact the election victory of 1945 had its roots in the previous decade as Labour established its influence and party organisation outside of its traditional heartlands.

The experience of the 1930s made the laissez-faire nature of British capitalism look outdated. The experience not only of Soviet Russia, but also the New Deal in the United States, were alternative models which showed that public ownership and/or state regulation of the economy were necessary. The market economy was a thing of the past, but the Tory Party, backed particularly by the most backwoodsmen of British industry such as the mineowners, were still wedded to this concept. Labour in 1945 was seen as the party which would modernise the economy being prepared to nationalise substantial parts of failing British industry. In this sense Labour was swimming with the tide.

But the Labour Party achieved power because it challenged the British establishment. It remained firmly linked to the trades union movement and it retained its vision of an alternative socialist society. This was what motivated the people who built the Party in the 1930s in areas such as Ealing. The Labour Party was the architect of its own success. The Party did not neglect even the most difficult areas - Brighton, Torquay, Aylesbury and Dorset - all saw evidence of Labour Party activity in the 1930s. The trades union movement also recruited in the new industrial areas where the new large factories were not easy to organise. Campaigns were held to attract agricultural workers, women workers and "blackcoated workers". The Party aimed not just to win votes but to win people from all walks of life to socialism as a lifetime commitment. This was how the Party was built. There was a forward march of Labour in the 1930s.

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