

of the big obstacles to working-class activity in local affairs was the holding of Council meetings during the daytime. In Liverpool, when the local Council had in call a statutory Town's Meeting of citizens to sanction the borrowing of money, the meeting would be arranged for 9.30 a.m. in a private house. But one day in the 1880's this cosy Council had a shock. A meeting had been called to sanction the building of a fever hospital. James Sexton, leader of the Liverpool dockers, tells the story in his autobiography:

"A few of us went down to the docks, taking ~~ray~~ two lorries, to which we added two hired carts. These we loaded up with dockers who had failed to get work that morning, and drove in state to the meeting, to which we demanded admittance as ratepayers and burgesses.

"The room in which it was being held might perhaps have accomm-
-dated a gathering of twelve people, providing none of them was more than eight stone in weight. It was impossible for us to get in. The best we could do was to secure an adjournment to a more convenient place --the Town Hall - at a more convenient hour."

The dockers attended the adjourned meeting, and said what they thought of the terrible housing conditions that had made a fever hospital so nece-
-ssary. From that time the Liverpool Labour movement began to put up candidates for the municipal elections, though it was many years before they won a victory,

The Socialists arrive

In the 1870's the Trade Union movement was becoming interested in the idea of "Labour Representation" in Parliament, but this was not yet seen as "independent" representation (i.e. independent of the Liberal Party to which the Trade Unions had become attached.) Interest in local elections was not so great, though a leading Yorkshire miner, John IT^orman-
-sell, was elected to Barnsley Town Council in 1867 with the financial support of his union.

In London several leading trade unionists stood for the first School Board election in 1870 and one of them, Benjamin Bucraft, a member of the First International, got in for Finsbury. Trade unionists continued to take an interest in the London School Board until the abolition of the Boards by the Education Act of 1902.

The revival of socialist ideas in the 1880's, and the creation of socialist parties, led to greater interest in local affairs. The marxist Social Democratic Federation (established in 1884), although placing little faith in those days in elected bodies as a road to Socialism, found in practice that its programme of "palliatives" (i.e. reforms"which could be won within the capitalist system pending the Socialist Revolution) could best be forwarded by taking part in local government affairs. In London, for examples, the S.D.F. campaign on Unemployment in 1886 included taking deputations to the Guardians with practical proposals for relief work.

Perhaps it was the open-air work connected with this campaign - the dock-gate and street-corner meetings, and the plodding to the workhous-
- that made these socialists conscious of defects in their municipal govern-
-ment, for very soon it was reported in "Justice", (S.D.F.weekly) that

"At Canning Town, owing to the exertions of our branch, the Town Council have begun to move in the matter of the better paving and lighting of the streets." (Jan. 8th, 1887)

This first tiny step taken by the West Ham. S.D.F. in purely municipal matters led to the election of Will Thorne to the Town Council in 1891 and the eventual capture of the Council by a Labour majority - the first Labour municipality in England.

The Fabian Society (founded 1884) was the first, socialist body as such to take part in the fight for better local government. As Reformists they believed that nationalisation could come about gradually, largely by municipal action. Although municipally owned buses, gasworks and slaughterhouses have not in fact led to Socialism, nevertheless "gas and water socialism" did a lot to improve local government.

The Fabians themselves, mainly Londoners, took part in the great movement for London reform which in 1889, with the support of the trade unions captured the new London County Council for the so-called "Progressive Party". Several trade unionists (including the socialist John Burns) and Fabians were elected to the Council, where they fought not only for municipal services but also for the principle that Councils should pay better wages and provide better conditions than private employers, and should recognise the trade unions.

The Fabians took a special interest in education, and several members were elected to the London School Board. They also greatly helped progressive candidates and councillors everywhere by publishing a series of factual Fabian Tracts and leaflets on all kinds of local government matters, and by the Local Government Information Bureau which they later ran jointly with the I.L.P.

The Independent Labour Party (founded in 1893) was based on the principle of vanning "the independent representation of Socialist principles on all elective bodies" (Statement of Constitution and Rules, 1897). The members of this party took a great interest in local affairs and were perhaps the biggest influence in laying the foundations of the later successes of the Labour Party in local government.

A pamphlet published round about 1895? called "What Boards of Guardians can do", is a fair sample of the human approach of the I.L.P. This pamphlet was based partly on a survey of the Poor Law and partly on the experience and example of some of the progressive Boards such as Sheffield and West Derby in Liverpool. It finds that "the law, though not perfect, is far better than its administrators. It is not the law that, is at fault, but the character of the man elected on the Boards of Guardians, who frequently lose sight of the fact that they are Guardians of the Poor, and make themselves the Guardians of the Rates."

The Poor Law, for example, authorised Guardians to provide useful work for the able-bodied unemployed, and to rent land for cultivation by them. Yet in most workhouses the task work imposed was stone-breaking or oakum-picking - "as useless as it is degrading".

No less than 45% of the over-65's in the working class had to go to the Guardians for help. "The reward of a life spent in the service of industry is the pauper's garb and the pauper's grave". In the workhouse the old couples were separated, and had to wear a special uniform. Yet at West Derby single-roomed cottages had been provided for aged couples. "The food is supplied to them, which they can cook themselves and dispose, of how and when they please".

There were actually more sick people in the Workhouse infirmaries of London alone than in all the voluntary and endowed hospitals of the United Kingdom. Yet "how little we hear of these State Hospitals, over which the electors exercise control by their voting power. Surely the duty of providing, for the proper medical attention, nursing, and food, of all these helpless ones should be eagerly discharged by all citizens worthy of the name."

Children of destitute parents and orphan children had to live in the Workhouse, amidst the aged, sick, and infirm of mind and body. But in Sheffield the Guardians had rented houses "in which a matron - a mother - looks after half-a-dozen or so of the State children" and the children attended the ordinary schools.

The pamphlet, concludes:

"All these and many other improvements can be carried out immediately if the voters will only elect Guardians determined to enforce the law... The law is here, ready to hand. All that has to be done is to reform its administration. It is the working classes who suffer from the maladministration of the laws, and it is they who must effect the remedy by manning and womanning the Boards of Guardians with earnest, capable and humane representatives."

The birth of "Poplarism"

In the meantime, individual socialists had been showing how to "humanise the Poor Law". The most famous pioneer was George Lansbury, elected to the Poplar Board of Guardians in January 1894. George was in those days a member of the S.D.F., and twelve weeks after his election as a Guardian he wrote an article for the party's weekly journal "Justice". In this he tells of his immediate campaign for better food in the Workhouse. He started paying visits at mealtimes unexpectedly. One suppartime he found everyone refusing to eat the skilly, for the not uncommon reason that it contained "mouse manure". He called the woman in charge. The conversation that followed is reported more fully in George Lansbury's autobiography, "My Life"»

(She) "immediately argued against me, saying the porridge was good and wholesome.

"'Very good, madam', said I, taking up a basinful and a spoon, 'here you are, eat one mouthful and I will acknowledge I am wrong.'

" 'Oh dear no!', said the fine lady, 'the food is not for me, and is good and wholesome enough for those who want it. '"

But George called the Workhouse Master and the doctor, who promptly ordered cocoa and bread and margarine to be served.

Continuing his article, George wrote:

"Since that day there have been many rows about the food. I made it a special study to watch the food, and can honestly say that the food now served out is as good and wholesome of its kind as it is possible to get. This however is not all. The dietary scale has "on my motion been completely overhauled; and today is the most liberal of any such scale in the Metropolis. Instead of skilly every, day, morning and evening, it is now only given twice a week. Instead of suet pudding only for dinner, other things are given as well. Instead of meat pies without meat, each man and woman gets their own pie with the quantity of meat weighed in. Instead of skilly and bread for supper, it is now coffee, cocoa or tea, and cheese and onions. Then each afternoon the old men and women got a cup of tea served out to them instead of having to smuggle it in and make it on the sly."

Besides these reforms George Lansbury had effected a revolution in the clothing, shaming the Guardians into providing underclothes to go with the uniform. But this was not the sum of his efforts in twelve short weeks. He had got the exercise yard paved, trees and shrubs planted and seats provided. A library of newspapers and periodicals, with draughts, dominoes and chess, were now available in each day room. In the summer a band was to be engaged, and already four entertainments had been given since January, the normal being one at Christmas.

Besides the workhouse inmates, others had benefitted by having a socialist on the Board. "Outdoor relief" (i.e. a weekly allowance) was being paid to some old couples. The Guardians had begun to employ direct labour for its works, and where paupers worked for them (as in the bakery) they now received wages.

Was there no opposition to all this "extravagance"? George Lansbury does not mention any at this early stage. But when the ruling class realised what was happening, the policy of "poplarism" became "one of its bugbears, to be brought out at every local election.

George was no doubt an exceptional person. But he worked as a member of the S.D.F. with the full support of his party, as is shown in the pages of the "Bow & Bromley Socialist", a monthly journal published by the local S.D.F. branch in the later 1890's. In October 1897 "the Poplar Guardians took over control of the Forest Gate School for pauper children. George Lansbury and Mrs. Wilson, another member of the S.D.F., were elected to the new School Committee. The S.D.F. journal urged them to carry out two immediate reforms: "first, to thoroughly revise the dietary scale; second, to abolish uniform, and allow the children leave to go out between meals, school and bedtime."

By the next January this journal reported that "The dietary table is being overhauled, and in the meantime the children are getting broad and butter or dripping instead of dry broad, and on Sundays a small piece of cake is provided. Despite these changes, there is very little extra outlay as the bread and butter is now served out in slices, and consequently only that which is needed is used. Under the old system a huge hunk of dry bread was given each child, a big portion of which went to the pig tub." The Guardians had also agreed to abolish the wearing of uniform.

This report points out that while socialists have led the way, "it is only fair to state that, Tories and Progressives have all agreed." What, then, had been the trouble? George Lansbury, in his "Life", describes his first visit to this school before the transfer:

"After our first committee meeting we were taken downstairs, where a seven-course dinner was to be served. It was this which made me very disgusted with the middle-class men and women who controlled this institution. They could let little girls who they knew must be half starved, and who were shockingly dressed, stand and wait on them while they ate chicken, nice soups, sweets, etc., all at the expense of the rates."

To the middle-class Guardian, destitute working-class children were a race apart, as insensitive as their own domestic servants were expected to be. To the working-class socialist, they were like his own children. Only the working class could bring human sympathy into the administration of the Poor Law. Only the working class would fight for changes in the law that would place on the State the responsibility for providing for the unemployed and their families, the old and the sick and the orphans.

So we find the two socialist parties, the S.D.F. and the I.L.P., continuing to fight for their candidates at the annual elections of the Guardians, at the same time as they developed a programme of legislation for which they campaigned. In 1908, for example, the Annual Conference of the S.D.P. decided, by 76 votes to 15,

"That the time has now arrived for the complete abolition of the entire poor Law system and the substitution of the following proposals!

State maintenance for all children;
public provision of useful work for the unemployed, at not less than Trade Union rates of wages, with the organisation of their labour in agriculture and industry on cooperative principles;
and the institution of a complete system of free and adequate State pensions or provision for the aged, the sick or disabled."

Socialists on the Councils

These examples of the work of a pioneer socialist on a Board of Guardians could be multiplied by similar work of many other members of S.D.P. and I.L.P. Socialists were also elected to the School Boards (until their abolition in 1902), where they campaigned for the provision of school meals, for secular education, and better conditions for teachers and caretakers.

After the passing of an Act in 1908 to empower (but not compel) local authorities to provide school meals, socialists campaigned to have this put into operation. In Erith William Hampson got elected to the Town Council and was put on the Education Committee. When that Committee refused to provide meals for the children, on the grounds that private charity was sufficient, Hampson said "Very well. They have to be fed. I will feed them." With the help of mothers and children of the Socialist Sunday

enormous meat-and-potato pies and mugs of cocoa. The schools were left, empty. The Education Committee despaired of their attendance books, on which their grant depended. But Hampson threatened another picnic. The Committee decided to operate the Act. (This story is told in "Smoky Crusade" by R.I.; Fox,)

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Socialists elected to Town Councils exposed the condition of slum property and agitated for the rehousing of the inhabitants. The work of Fred Jowett, pioneer member of the I.L.P. on Bradford's Council, is told in F.Brockway's biography, "Socialism over Sixty Years". In the Foreword Jowett: describes the typical working-class home as it was in 1892, and into which he himself had been born 28 years earlier: "One room upstairs, one downstairs, and a windowless cellar... with privy middens for each block of houses in the backyards. All these houses were built back-to-back."•

Inevitably, Jowett began with the privy middens. With the help of the Medical Officer he outflanked the sabotage of Tory Councillors, and the installation of water-closets became a routine job. in 1898 he urged the Council to use its powers under the Housing Act of 1890 to clear one of the worst slums. It took three years to beat down the opposition of property-owners and builders on the Council, but Bradford's first municipal flats still stand as a memorial to the work of this I.L.P. Councillor.

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By 1905, the S.D.F. could list in its Annual Report, seventy-seven, of its members elected to public bodies. In the previous year the "Directory of I.L.'P. members on public bodies" contained 253 names. But it was not easy going for either party. At its 1906 Conference the S.D.F. reported that in the previous November elections the party was

"not quite so successful as on the preceding occasion, due principally to the combination of Liberals and Tories against the Socialist candidates. They publicly thanked each other for the support which they received from their political antagonists against the Socialists."

In 1906 the pace got hotter. After the sweeping victories of the Liberals and of 29 Labour candidates in the General election, it might have been expected that the municipal elections would show a similar advance for Labour. But in fact, although there were 64 gains in the country, these were nullified by similar losses in London boroughs due to "the tremendous onset of the press, the anti-municipal associations, and the coalitions between Liberals and Tories." ("Labour Leader", Nov.9th, 1906) The Tories were rampant against "extravagance", particularly in Poplar. But the electors of Poplar returned two more socialist, members than before.

A few months later the L.C.C. was recaptured by the Tory "Moderates" for the first time since 1889. The S.D.F. attributed the rout of the Progressives to the fact that they had failed to put into practice the "socialist" principles by which they had originally won their positions,

"The anxiety of the Progressives to prove that everything: they undertook was 'paying' front the 'business' standpoint recoiled upon themselves." - -

For the Tories, backed by business interests and transport monopolies, could easily outdo them; at this.

The Trades Councils enter local politics

In the 1906 municipal and L.C.C. elections there were nearly 600 candidates described as "Socialist." or "Labour", of whom about 130 won seats. The mention of Labour candidates is a reminder of an important ideological battle that had been taking place since the early 1890's within the Trade Union movement.

The battleground was usually the local Trades Council, the meeting, place of socialist and non-socialist trade unionists. Until the 1890's "the Trades Councils had consisted of the old-style craft unionists, who normally supported the Liberal Party. But the rapid spread of the New Unionism; militant and socialist-inspired, resulted in a great influx of unorganised workers into the Trade Union movement. New branches "of the New Unions, and even of the old unions too, affiliated to their local Trades Council, sent militant delegates who were often socialists, some-time." provided new officers for the Trades Council, and transformed its whole outlook.

The socialist delegates needed no persuasion to take part in local affairs. To them, this meant putting up socialist candidates in local elections, sponsored, if possible, by the Trades Council. But the idea of putting up candidates in opposition to the Liberals still scorned to the older Trades Council delegates a revolutionary and undesirable thing.

It was not that the Trades Councils had been uninterested in local affairs. The question of the wages paid by contractors working for the Town Council was a vital one for trade unionists. The attitude of the local watch Committee, which controlled the police, might be crucial in a strike. The opportunities for technical education for young people and night schools for adults was a question that drew the attention of Trades Councils to their local School Boards.

But as a rule the Trades Council was content to leave local government affairs in the hands of the existing parties, intervening only at election times with a questionnaire to each candidate, on the basis of which the trade unionist vote was normally given to the Liberal. If the Liberal Party could be persuaded to allow a "working man" to stand as Liberal candidate, the Trades Council was well content.

The ideological battle, then, was for the principle of "Independent Labour Representation"; a cause which aroused hot discussion in the early 1890's and resulted, in the Parliamentary field, in the election of Keir Fardie in West Ham in 1892. Trades Council annual reports show the progress of this battle, which proceeded at a different pace in different places, and was often stimulated by some local incident.

Bradford Trades Council was influenced by the conduct of the Watch Committee during the long strike at Manningham Mills against a heavy wage cut. They saw a music-hall proprietor threatened with the loss of his licence if he continued to let his hall free to the strikers. When the Strike Committee held a Sunday meeting in another hall, "one of the speakers made some disrespectful references to His Satanic Majesty the Devil", and the police warned the strikers that no more meetings in a licenced hall would be permitted unless "remarks tending to bring religion into ridicule

were prohibited". When the Strike Committee then organised large open-air meetings to protest against this infringement of free speech, the police tried to ban the meeting's and used force to disperse the crowds.

In the November municipal elections following this strike the Trades Council "resolved that four of the Wards of the Borough should be contested on strict labour lines", and one candidate, was successful. In other ways too, the Manningham strike influenced the growth of independent Labour representation, for Bradford socialists were strengthened in their enthusiasm, and Bradford became the cradle of the I.L.P.

Leeds Trades Council held a large demonstration on Woodhouse Moor in September 1891, with Tom Mann and Ben Tillett as speakers. The meeting agreed unanimously that "the time has arrived when the artisan and labour classes should be represented by men of its own order on all local government bodies", and pledged its support for the next municipal elections. In November three candidates were put up and obtained good votes though they failed to win seats. In 1896 the secretary of the Trades Council won a seat on the City Council, the Gasworkers' Union subscribing "to recompense him for loss of work" in the course of his duties as Councillor. By 1905 there were eight Labour members on the City Council.

Bolton Trades Council had started earlier. In 1887 ten candidates were sponsored, of whom eight were elected to the Town Council. The Trades Council report attributes this success to "the feeling that existed in the town caused by the action of the Mayor and Watch Committee introducing the mounted police and military to suppress the agitation for the maintenance of trade union rights by the A.S.E. and others who were at that time on strike." By 1890 these Labour Councillors had got a "Fair Wages clause" passed by the Town Council.

The Newcastle & Gateshead Trades Council, which regularly submitted a list of questions to each municipal candidate, expressed its policy in "political and municipal affairs" as being one of "strict impartiality as between members and candidates, irrespective of class, creed or party considerations, keeping a constant, watch over their doings on our representative bodies, and according praise or blame just as it is deserved." But in 1900 this Trades Council affiliated to the newly-formed Labour Representation Committee (forerunner of the Labour Party) and in November accepted an invitation to attend a conference in Jarrow organised by the "L.R.C, "to consider the best means of promoting the direct representation of Labour in Parliament and on our local bodies."

These examples show how the Trade Union movement, revitalised by socialists and New Unionists, was turning to local government affairs in order to further the interests of the working class. The new Councillors were not always socialists; but because they owed their position to the Trades Council and were sometimes being supported by it financially, they were held responsible to the organised Labour movement. In other words, they were Labour Councillors.

Steps towards democracy

Until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 the Labour movement put up some hundreds of candidates each year in local elections. According to G.D.H. Cole (in "A History of the Labour Party from 1914") there were roughly 850 Labour and Socialist candidates in 1913, (excluding "the Boards of Guardians), of whom 392 were elected. Labour's success in establishing a foothold in local government was' of course, partly due to the dempocrat-ising changes that had taken place towards the end of the 19th century - all as a result of pressure from radicals and socialists: the creation of County Councils in 1888 and of parish Councils and Urban and Rural Dis-trict Councils in 1894- all on an elective basis; and the abolition of plural voting for the Vestries and Boards of Guardians in 1894.

In mining areas, where the Urban District Council became the governing body, candidates were put up by the Miners' Lodges of the union. Even in agricultural districts it was now possible to put up Labour candidates for the Parish Council, and it was the election of some farm-labourers to the Parish Council of Burston in Norfolk in 1913 that led to the victimisation of their instigators, the school teachers Mr. and Mrs. Eigdon, followed by the famous School Strike.

Service on local elected bodies provided valuable training for future Labour M.P.s. The potted biographies in the "Daily Herald Book of Labour M.P.s" show that 60% of the Labour"members at the time of the first Labour Government in 1923 had experience on local government bodies.

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During the First World War elections were suspended, and the class struggle was carried on mainly outside the local government machine. Besides the industrial struggles, the anti-war campaign of socialists and pacifists, and the fight against rent increases in Glasgow, there was also a mass struggle (especially in East London) to maintain the living stand-ards of the working class in the face of food and coal shortages and profiteering. These struggles were the basis of the next great advance made by the working class in local affairs.

A new form of democracy

In 1919, a century after the Petorloo massacre, the Labour movement won a victory which would have surprised and delighted those early fighters for reform. In the November elections for the London Boroughs (the first to be held since before the War) the working class increased its Labour Councillors from 46 to 572. Twelve London boroughs were now under Labour control. There were similar victories in other parts of the country. This was the reaction away from the Government of "hard-faced men who looked as though they had done well out of the War", the Government elected in the snap Election of 1910 before the soldiers had been demobbed and found themselves without jobs.

Of all the London boroughs, the change-over in Bethnal Green was the most spectacular. Before the War, the only Labour Councillor here was Joe Vaughan, member of the marxist British Socialist Party (formerly the

S.D.F.), and chairman of the Trades Council who had put him up as candidate. In 1919 Labour swept up 24 of the 30 seats, and elected their pioneer leader as Mayor - "the Bolshevik Mayor of Bethnal Green", as the newspapers called him. In the next, nine years, up to the time when the policy of disunity in the national Labour Party led to the exclusion of Communists from the Labour Party and the disaffiliation of those Labour Parties who, like Bethnal Green, refused to throw out their Communists, the Bethnal Green Council shows a remarkable record of activity in the interests of the working class.

It was not only that the Borough Council speeded up the building of new flats; that playgrounds and public baths were provided; that a Public Library was built and opened by the Communist-Labour Mayor. It was not only that the Borough Council, in true democratic spirit, invited representatives from the Trades Council to sit on the Food Control Committee, and from the Unemployed Association on to the sub-committee: for relief-work schemes; or that they gave a welcome to the deputation from the Police Union on strike. Nor that they cooperated in comradely fashion with the other Labour Borough Councils at militant conferences called on Unemployment, the coal and milk shortages, and the wages of municipal employees; and supported such resolutions as Camberwell's protest against "the brutal massacre at Amritsar", and Poplar's demand "for a Public Inquiry into the murders and burnings which have taken place in Ireland and for the withdrawing of British troops, "leaving the people of Ireland with a free right to determine their own form of government."

All these things were typical of the activities of those militant post-war Labour Boroughs, before the splitting of the Labour movement.

But Bethnal Green deserves a special place in the history of "Local Government" because, under the leadership of Joe Vaughan, it developed a new relationship between the elected Local authority and the local Labour movement, which can be an inspiration to us in our own struggle for a distinctively British road to Socialism.

Using the traditional form of democratic public discussion, the "Town's Meeting", held in the Town Hall and chaired by the Mayor, this Borough Council developed it into a means of keeping close contact with the working class who had elected them. At these crowded meetings the Councillors discussed with their own electors the major problems of their day. Here the tragic problem, of Unemployment was discussed; here the people of Bethnal Green pledged their support for the great struggle of the Poplar Borough Councillors in 1921 and directed their own Councillors to "Follow Poplar" - into prison, if need be; and here they expressed their opinions in times of international crisis.

In loyalty to Trade Union principles, too, the Bethnal Green Borough Council set a fine example. In the General Strike of 1926 the Town Hall was lent freely to the Strike Committee, and so became the centre of local power in the hands of the working class. The Council's good relations with its own employees led it into a long-drawn-out struggle of its own against the Government's auditors who refused to sanction the payment of a higher wage than had been assessed by an Arbitration Court. Harried from law court to law court, the Council was finally defeated by a decree of the House of Lords.

Poplar's fight. - militant Councillors plus mass action

In this same period of municipal militancy there occurred the most famous episode ever recorded in Council Minutes, the Rates Battle of the Poplar Council.

The story is well known and can be briefly stated. The East London boroughs, with the lowest-rated property, were also those with the greatest poverty and unemployment. Their Boards of Guardians, with Labour majorities, insisted on paying relief on a scale above starvation level, and were getting hopelessly into debt. Their source of income was the Borough rates, collected by the Borough Council. To increase, the rates which were already high, would simply hit the poverty-stricken population.

The Labour Councils refused to take the "easy" course of reducing the relief scales. They demanded that the rates all over London should be "equalised" so that richer boroughs with less unemployment should help the poorer ones. But the matter was urgent. Then the Poplar Council, under the brilliant leadership of George Lansbury - originally a member of the S.D.F., then of the I.L.P. and now of the Labour Party - hit on a striking course of action. They refused to pay their quota of rates to the London County Council. Sued in the High Court, and disobeying the Court's order to pay up, the Councillors were then imprisoned for the crime of "Contempt of Court" - indefinitely, until they would give in.

The Labour movement was thrilled. Claiming "editorial privilege", George Lansbury was able to edit his own "Daily Herald" from Brixton Gaol, using that militant working-class paper to organise the campaign "for the unconditional release of the Poplar Councilors, with equalisation of the rates and a national policy for Unemployment as the ultimate objectives. After six weeks of concentrated activity the Labour movement win a complete victory.

This story" by itself is a shining episode in the struggle in local affairs, and shows that the class struggle can make use of every form of democratic institution. But it is important to notice that the Poplar Borough Councillors were too wise to rely only on their own strength of mind. They were prepared to go to prison as part of their Campaign. But George Lansbury was careful to make the issue clear in the "Daily Herald" just before the arrests were made. - .

"Our call, comrades, will be to you; and you must organise to ensure that victory shall see the end of our imprisonment."

"The campaign that followed is a classic example of "how to do it." In Poplar the people held mass demonstrations of support, and won special privileges for the Poplar Prisoners - the right to meet together with their Council officials in order to conduct the Council's business, the right for Lansbury to continue editing the "Daily Herald"; and the right to read newspapers and be kept in touch with developments. The people of Poplar also organised a Tenants' Defence League and planned a rent strike as a last resort,.

The Labour movement nationally supported in the traditional way with resolutions and demonstrations. The Labour Borough Councils in London played a special role, their Mayors going up "to Scotland to Interview the Prime Minister who was holidaying in the Highlands.

But probably the decisive aspect of the struggle was the organised "direct action" of the Unemployed movement (the N.U.W.M. under the leadership of Wal Hannington) which took mass deputations of thousands of unemployed men to the various Boards of Guardians in London to demand a higher scale of relief. Labour Guardians, with a few dishonourable exceptions, were willing enough to grant this, and Islington's action, in particular, aroused the anger of the ruling class and helped to bring the whole struggle to a climax.' Besides this, the N.U.W.M. answered Lansbury's call in early October - "To the L. C. C. Unemployed, Do your Bit." - by organising a large demonstration in Trafalgar Square, within earshot of the L.C.C. office in Spring Gardens where a crucial meeting was taking place' The Government's attempts to prevent this demonstration by police violence only added to the din. The L.C.C. decided to withdraw its claim for payment of the rates quota - the first step towards getting the Poplar Councillors out of prison.

Obviously, then, the lesson of the poplar Councillors' fight of 1921 is not simply: "Elect militant Councillors like George Lansbury and his Labour and Communist colleagues and everything will be all right", but: "Elect militant Councillors and then back them up to the hilt by mass action."

"Beautification" made Bermondsey a show place

Open conflict, with a Tory Government in the interests of the working class was not, of course, a common activity of Labour majorities on local government bodies. Even the most militant Labour representatives had to spend most of their time in routine work. The less imaginative often succumbed to the routine and became entangled in red tape. Then local Labour rule became bureaucracy, and eventually resulted in Labour representatives acting as local administrators for Capitalism

But it is the work of the imaginative and honest Labour representatives that poses the real problem. How far can Reform go within Capitalism without becoming mere Reformism?

Municipal reform at its best was seen in Bermondsey. Here, after many years of campaigning, the Labour Party won a decisive majority on the Borough Council in 1922. Led by an experienced group of socialists, old I.L.P. members, the new Council proceeded to carry out its plans. In 1934 the local Labour Party published a booklet: "Twelve Years of Labour Rule a Labour's Magnificent Record".

This was no exaggeration. Bermondsey had become a show place for visitors from all over the world. For besides doing all the more obvious things - clearing slums, providing clinics and maternity homes, public baths and wash-houses, children's libraries, etc. - the Bermondsey Council had opened the first municipal Sun-ray clinic in this country,, pioneered street-corner lectures and cinema shows on public health matters, and set up a Beautification Department to plant trees along the streets, convert old churchyards into recreation grounds, encourage the cultivation of fore-courts and window-boxes, and organise an annual Flower. Show.

Bermondsey's record is important, for it showed what could be done within Capitalism by a determined body of working-class representatives.

But it could lead to acceptance of a Welfare State as a substitute for Socialism. The veteran leader of the Bermondsey socialists, Dr. Alfred Salter, gave a warning in this booklet against such an attitude.

"We are not out merely to make Bermondsey just more tolerable, more habitable. We do not want merely to ensure a rather more comfortable existence for 'the working classes'. We are out to abolish the working classes as such and to create a classless society,.... We must .give all possible assistance and backing to the Labour Party nationally in order to alter the basis of Society. Not till we have changed present-day private proprietorship in the means of life into public and common owner-ship by the whole people - not till then can we realise the city of our dreams." -

The Berrnonlsey Councillors of 1934 still saw the gleam of Socialism that had inspired the pioneers. But since then a Labour Government that refuged to "alter the basis of Society" has made it more than ever necessary to fight for "the city of our dreams" as an alternative to a nightmare of radio-active rubble.

Labour and Communist militants

While Labour Councillors in Bermondsey and elsewhere were showing by their achievements the positive side of local government, events of a very different kind were taking place in Britain.

Five years after poplar's historic fight in defence of the living standards of the unemployed. Guardians in the poorest parts of London who had followed Poplar's example and paid adequate relief were deeply in debt. The Government now seized its chance. Loans would be made available to Guardians - conditionally: relief scales must be cut: Host Guardians gave way. But in West Ham they refused the terms. Backed by the local Labour movement and by mass demonstrations, they stuck to their guns until the Minister of Health armed himself with special powers to supersede the elected Guardians. "Let the Minister take over", "they said then in West Ham, 'and he can take the two million pounds debt as well.'"

While this struggle was going on, the refusal of the miners to accept starvation wages led to a lock-out; and the T.U.C. called a General Strike. After the betrayal of the Strike by the Trade Union leaders, leaving the miners in the lurch, the problem of Guardians in mining areas became acute. The Tory Government now tried to kill two birds with one stone. Labour Guardians were ordered not only to refuse relief altogether to miners on strike, but also to cut down the normal relief scales. If they refused, no loans would be available. Further, they would be superseded under the Government's new powers. By the betrayal of the Strike the ruling class had get the whip hand. All the same, the Guardians of Chester-le-Street continued to pay relief to locked-out miners. When they were superseded by Government officials, 25,000 men, women and children, carrying banners of Lenin and Keir Eardie, demonstrated outside the relief offices. There a Labour Councillor said:

"Labour Guardians will always refuse to wait until men's ribs can be counted through their

"In 1929 the so-called "boom" broke and the capitalist world entered" a serious crisis which deepened until, in 1931, three million people were out of work in Britain alone. The National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) which had been so evident in the Poplar Council's fight in 1921 re-awakened to intense activity. The Communist Party and wide sections of the Labour movement backed up the struggles of the unemployed, who became in this period both the major victims of Capitalism and the biggest thorn in its side.

Once again, as in the fight against the New Poor Law a whole century before, a mass movement flared up, but this time with a national organization and with the backing of a national working-class party, the Communist Party (the Labour Party and T.U.C. having refused to take the leadership). This fact had its effect on local elections in the "depressed areas" of greatest unemployment. In the spring of 1932 the Communist Party put up 52 candidates for the Urban District Council elections, in 22 areas including mining areas (where the U.D.C. was the normal form of local government).

The background of this election was the betrayal of Labour by Ramsay MacDonald the previous autumn and the rout of the Labour Party in the "land-slide" Election that followed. The Communist Party fought on the class issue of opposition to the economy cuts in unemployment benefit, wages and local government grants. The candidates were practically all known for their work with the N.U.W.M. There were two victories, both in mining areas; and in the Rhondda, though no seats were won, 9,723 votes were given to Communists, Arthur Homer getting 1505 votes against his opponent's 2101.

By the time of the 1935 General Election the Communist candidates in West Fife and Rhondda (Willie Gallacher and Harry Pollitt) could point to local Communist Councillors as an example of what militant Communists could do on an elected body even when in a minority. In Rhondda, four Communists had obtained maternity clinics and improved the working conditions of nurses in the local hospital and of the Council's watchmen. In the same year, two Communist County Councillors were returned unopposed in Fife; and in a by-election in Abertillery held in the midst of great demonstrations against the new Unemployment Bill with its Means Test and Slave Camps, a Communist won the seat on the Urban District Council.

Clearly, these left-wing candidates were elected on the basis of their work in the mass protest against starvation; and no doubt many militant Labour Councillors were elected for the same reason. By 1937 the Communist Party had 54 representatives on Urban District and County Councils. A self-critical section of the Report to the 14th Congress of the party in that year says:

"The old attitude of aloofness towards local and county government politics is being slowly broken down. There is now a more responsible recognition of the great services that can be rendered to the workers by Communist representation on these Councils." (The 54 Councillors) "are all comrades who do everything in their power to serve the people they represent."

In fact the "old attitude of aloofness" was not so old. The forerunners of the Communist Party, as we have seen, had played an active part in local affairs, and so had foundation members of the Communist Party such as Joe Vaughan and others in the early 1920's. But the exclusion of Communists

from the Labour Party in 1925 isolated them for a while. They fought their way out of isolation by leading the mass movement in all localities.

(in 1937 the Labour Party could report its own position not in numbers of Councillors but in numbers of Councils controlled by Labour. These were: 4 County Councils (including London)? 55 boroughs (including 15 in London); 14 Scottish burghs; and over 100 Urban Districts.)

A new sphere of struggle

In the later 1930's the Communist party initiated new ways of dealing with the problems of high rents, slum conditions and jerry-building. Smarting with individual cases of illegal overcharging of rent, thousands of pounds were, with the help of sympathetic lawyers, recovered for working-class tenants. Then tenants' associations began to be formed,, both to fight illegal rents and to draw the Borough Councils' Health departments into the struggle for*repairs and a decent standard of housing. The idea of tenants' associations spread to municipal estates, where amenities like playgrounds and pram-sheds were

Then in Stepney a

movement of tenants developed, under the leadership of Phil Piratin and other Communists with the support of local Labour and religious leaders. In whole streets and blocks of tenements, tenants went on strike against slum landlords, winning rent reductions and considerable repairs. Bailiffs and police were repulsed, and evicted tenants were put back into their homes. In the course of these struggles Phil Piratin was elected in 1937 to the Borough Council. Inspired by Stepney's example, tenants' associations were formed all over the country,

A comparable struggle developed amongst owner-occupiers of new houses built by jerry-builders with the backing of Building Societies. Led by Elsie Borders, who conducted her own case in the law courts, thousands of these victims won back money and got repairs done. Soon the tenants' and residents' associations got together in a national Federation.

This was the background to the spectacular rent strike of 45,000 municipal tenants in Birmingham, in 1939 against, a rent increase coupled with a Means Test imposed by the Tory City Council. Beginning on May Day, 90% of the tenants of the many scattered estates in the outer suburbs withheld their rents for ten weeks. Raids by bailiffs escorted by police were driven off. Picketing was so strict that Pressmen could only visit the estates armed with a permit stating that "The bearer is not a bailiff". The highlight of the struggle was on the occasion of the formal opening of the 50,000th Council house by the Lord Mayor, when 8,000 women joined in a funeral procession of a dummy bailiff, tried and executed the previous week, who was now buried with pomp and ceremony opposite the new house. In the end solidarity won a complete victory, the increases being withdrawn and the reductions already made remaining in force.

Ruling-class manoeuvres

In the two decades following the sweeping victories of Labour in 1919 local government affairs were taking on the colour of the class struggle as it developed. On the one hand, the disastrous split in the Labour movement, encouraged by the ruling class, was reflected in electoral conflicts between Labour and Communist candidates. Vital questions of policy, which could

have been thrashed out inside the Labour Party if the Communist Party's request for affiliation had been accepted, had to be brought openly into election campaigns, where the fear of splitting the working-class vote often prevented acceptance of the more militant policy.

On the other side, the ruling class was already embarking on a policy, since carried much further, of transferring whole aspects of community life from the control of local elected bodies into the hands of remote Boards appointed from above. An article in "Communist Review" (Oct.1950) on "The Growth of "Bureaucracy" pointed out that this policy had "gravely weakened the type of local Authority which is most subject to the influence of the class movements namely the "Borough and Urban District Councils." (To this might be added the Boards of Guardians, most vulnerable to local pressure, and abolished in 1929 when the whole "question of maintenance of the Unemployed was" transferred - after a short period of "Public Assistance Committees" which also proved vulnerable - in the more remote Unemployed Assistance Boards) The lack of resistance of Labour Councillors to this anti-democratic development is attributed in this article to the reformist belief in the neutrality of the State; every new power added to the "Welfare State;" was welcomed as a step towards socialism.

But the recapture of Parliamentary control by the Tory Party in 1951 dispelled this illusion. At the Annual Conference of the Labour Party in 1955 a resolution was passed (after acceptance by the N.E.C.) viewing "with misgiving" this creation of ad hoc bodies, which has the effect of "seriously diminishing the sphere of local democracy". The resolution proposed that any future local government reform should "answer to the following criteria: (a) will it facilitate progress towards a Socialist society, and" (b) is it democratic?" But the only step adopted by the Conference was to ask the * N.E.C. for special conferences to discuss the matter. A more practical proposal in another resolution, for a permanent liaison between all Labour Councillors, was rejected by the N.E.C. and defeated.

• # #

Meanwhile the class struggle continues to be fought on the local battle ground. Coventry City Council's refusal in 1953 to operate the futile Civil Defence Rehearsal was in the best Labour tradition. In the field of housing and rents many Labour Councils have taken an extremely firm stand against Government policy, and refuse to introduce differential rent schemes in spite of pressure from their leaders. Some local authorities in London have held Public conferences on this issue embracing all political parties including the Communist Party, or have invited Communist deputations to place their views before the full Council. Many Labour authorities throughout the country have protested against the Government's policy of high interest rates and abolition of housing subsidies. On the other hand a few Labour Councils have introduced differential rent schemes, so taking an unworthy way" out of the struggle against, the capitalist policy of making profit out of the housing shortage. The pressure of tenants' associations and other sections of the Labour movement will help to decide the issue.

Affairs of local government are still, as they have been in the past, an important part of the struggle against Capitalism..

This pamphlet can give only a sketch of the class struggle in local government affairs. The full story is rich in detail which, only local research can reveal. This pamphlet has tried to show the general pattern by means of actual examples, and to bring out the role of the class struggle in the developments that have taken place. But the story told "here is" incomplete, and can be added to by referring to the books mentioned below, and by further research.

For general reading and reference

Webb, Sidney and Beatrice i English Local Government - Parish and County
ditto ditto Manor and Borough
Hammond, J.L. and Barbara: The Town Labourer, 1760-1832 (esp.chap.III & V)
Smallie, K.B.i History'of Local Government
Engels, Ft Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844

Parliamentary Papers referred to in this pamphlet

Report of Select Committee on Vestries, 1830, IV
Report of Poor Law" Inquiry, '1834 (Cambridge evidence is in Vol.XXVIII)
Report of Select Committee on Parliamentary and Municipal Elections,
(Evidence) 1868-9, VIII
Report of Select Committee on Hours of Polling, 1877,XV, and 1878,XIII.

Some Local Histories which throw some light on local politics

Brigg's, A: History of Birmingham
Brockway, F : Socialism over Sixty Years - Life of Jowett of Bradford
Chaloner, W.H.: Social and Economic Development of Crewe
Patterson, A.Temple: Radical Leicester, 1780-1850.
Robson, W.A. : The Government and Misgovernment of London
White,-B.D.: -History of the Corporation of Liverpool, 1835-1914

East London Communist Party has published pamphlets on: "The Story of Joe
-Vaughan, first Labour Mayor of Bethnal Green", and "The Poplar. Story, 1921"

Some biographies and autobiographies of socialists and trade unionists refer to local government affairs. George Lansbury's "My Life" includes reminiscences of his early work on the Poplar Board of Guardians. There is a series of potted biographies of various 3.D.F. members on local government bodies, including Mary Gray of Battersea, in the "Social Democrat", 1899-1900. Trades Council Reports are valuable, but hard to find; there are a number (mainly of the 1890's) in the Webbs' T.U.Collection at the London School of Economics. The best sources for any study of local Labour movements and local affairs are the socialist journals and the local newspapers.

This pamphlet is the first quarterly number of "Our History" published by the Historians' Group of the Communist Party. Future numbers will deal

with: "Attitudes to machinery" - from Luddism to Automation"

"The struggle for educational opportunity"

"The role of Law in class society"

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