The early socialist and trade union leader Ben Tillett addresses striking dockers in 1911. Since the late 19th century, trade unions – dedicated to improving workers' bargaining position within the labour market – have been a cornerstone of British socialism

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BRITAIN'S CAUTIOUS REVOLUTIONARIES

While Europe's early socialists sought to smash the system, their counterparts in Britain were content to work within it

By Jon Lawrence

Accompanies the Radio 4 series *British Socialism: The Grand Tour* BBC RADIO 4

In 1965, the great Marxist historian and radical EP Thompson wrote an essay on the "peculiarities of the English". He did so to refute the claims of a rising generation of leftwing intellectuals for whom British history had been little more than a series of catastrophic wrong turns and failed revolutionary opportunities. By contrast, Thompson sought to bring out the importance of a minority strand of radical, dissenting politics running through English history. He also insisted on the need to study the past on its own terms, rather than measured against theoretical models of how it 'should' have unfolded. It is a lesson that can be applied to the history of British socialism, which is not short of its own peculiarities.

Considering that British industrialism would provide the model for the Marxist theory of socialist revolution, it is striking how slow Britain was to develop its own domestic socialist tradition. It is equally striking that when socialism did begin to put down strong roots in Britain in the half century between the 1880s and the 1930s, many of its distinctive characteristics placed Britain firmly outside the mainstream tradition of European socialism.

On the continent, socialism had been born in the shadow of the French Revolution and the failed revolutions of 1848, and long remained clandestine and persecuted. It was no accident that many European socialist leaders spent time as political émigrés in Britain, most famously Marx himself. And though the revolutionary fire gradually receded in many European socialist parties as they came within the fold of formal politics, they generally retained a doctrinal commitment to class conflict, the abolition of private property and the overthrow of both capitalism and religion.

British socialism was strongly religious and overtly constitutional. It was also less focused on questions of production and economic ownership, more working-class in its leadership and, paradoxically, less willing to accept that socialism had anything to do with class politics. The roots of these peculiarities can be traced back to the early 19th century – to the very time that Marx and Engels were constructing their theory of socialist revolution in direct response to the British experience of industrialisation.

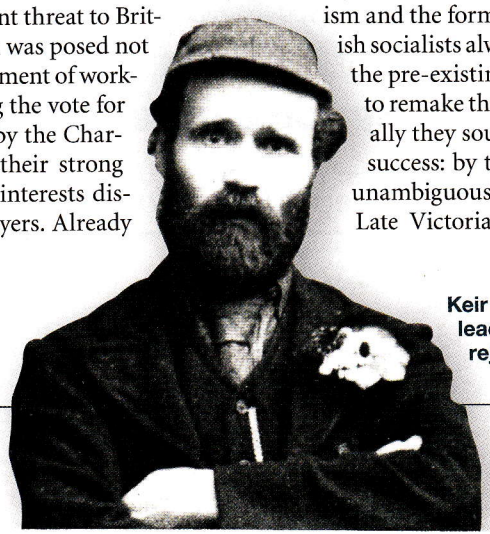
When, in 1842, Karl Marx's friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels came to Manchester to help run his father's textile factory, he was quick to see that the most significant threat to Britain's emerging capitalist industrial system was posed not by socialism but Chartism (the huge movement of workers demanding political reform, including the vote for all men aged over 21). Engels was struck by the Chartists' instinctive anti-capitalism and by their strong sense of themselves as a class apart with interests distinct from, and at odds with, their employers. Already in correspondence with Marx, it was the young Engels' vivid descriptions of working-class life and politics in industrial Manchester that played the vital role in persuading Marx that industrial workers acting in their own class interests could bring about the socialist revolution he desired.

Although the Chartist movement lost its ability to mobilise British workers on a mass scale after 1848, its ethos continued to stamp working-class, radical politics for the rest of the century. In many ways, it was the Chartist legacy that gave British socialism its distinctive character, shaping working-class radical politics long before socialism emerged as a distinctive political tradition during the 1880s and 1890s. But Marx and Engels had misread Chartism. Chartists might be intensely class conscious, but this sprang from their anger at workers' exclusion from the franchise established by the Great Reform Act of 1832. Their goal was full incorporation into the political order, rather than the destruction of that order.

Radical protest was only one facet of 19th-century working-class politics. No less important was the enormous effort workers put into developing working-class institutions capable of taming the worst effects of industrialisation. The defensive, self-help institutions built up by the Victorian working class took many forms: friendly societies providing mutual self-help in times of adversity (these had more than 4 million members by 1870); co-operative societies for the provision of goods and services on a mutual, not-for-profit basis; working-men's clubs to provide leisure – especially beer; and trade unions dedicated to improving workers' bargaining position within the labour market. Crucially, none of these institutions was socialist.

As a result, unlike in most European countries, socialism emerged as a political movement *after* the stabilisation of capitalism and the formation of a mature working-class culture. British socialists always had to decide whether they would adapt to the pre-existing culture of working-class institutions or seek to remake those institutions in the image of socialism. Usually they sought to do a bit of both, and with considerable success: by the 1920s only the friendly societies remained unambiguously outside the orbit of Labour politics.

Late Victorian British socialism was diverse and loosely



BRIDGEMAN

Keir Hardie pictured in the 1890s. The first leader of the Labour party vehemently rejected the idea of all-out class war

British socialism was more overtly constitutional, less focused on questions of production and economic ownership, and more working-class in its leadership than its continental equivalents

An engraving shows protestors looting Piccadilly shops in 1886, following a meeting addressed by leading socialist (and future Liberal cabinet minister) John Burns. The dominant strand of socialism would seek to reform society rather than dismantle it

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structured, but we can identify two main strands: radical revolutionary, and reformist constitutional. The Social Democratic Federation (SDF), formally socialist from 1883, proclaimed itself a Marxist revolutionary party and had its roots in post-Chartist working-class radicalism. By contrast, the miscellaneous local socialist societies and labour parties that came together in 1893 to form the Independent Labour Party (ILP) looked to trade unionism as the key to establishing a strong socialist movement in Britain. The clue was there in the ILP's choice of name – 'labour' – but also in its principal strategy: to win trade unions, and especially the over-arching federation of unions known as the Trades Union Congress (TUC), to the cause of independent working-class representation in both local and national politics.

At this point in the late 19th century, British trade union leaders were strongly linked with the centrist Liberal party, which set them at odds with a rising generation of more radical trade union activists. By the late 1890s, almost any gathering of British trade unionists would have included a large minority of men, mostly young, sporting the hallmark red tie of the independent socialist. Perhaps because they often saw Liberal trade union leaders as the enemy, many of these young activists remained deeply sceptical about the ILP leadership's fixation on securing a tactical alliance with the TUC. They wanted to take the message of socialism directly to ordinary workers in the manner of religious evangelists, rather than rely on reaching workers indirectly through their organisations.

But, at the TUC conference of 1900, the party rank-and-file found themselves outmanoeuvred. In what was one of the most significant moments in the history of British socialism, the TUC signalled its break with a tradition of political collaboration which had resulted in more than a dozen trade unionists taking the Liberal whip in parliament as Lib-Lab MPs. From now on, Labour candidates would be independent of other political parties. This was a decisive victory for the ILP's 'big four' leaders – Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden and Bruce Glasier – and the very moment that the British Labour party can be said to have been born. By 1906, 29 independent Labour MPs had been returned to parliament, and the movement had adopted the name: the Labour party.

Keir Hardie, Britain's first socialist MP, was the key figure binding Labour together in these early years. His fiery rhetoric and iconoclastic radicalism (perhaps best epitomised by his refusal to attend parliament wearing the conventional frock coat, silk top hat and starched wing collar) endeared him to activists steeped in the traditions of 19th-century, working-class radicalism. But his dedication to building an alliance with organised labour, and his strong com-

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A speaker preaches the virtues of socialism from the 'William Morris Clarion van' in c1915. By now, Labour was positioning itself as the party of welfare provision and public services, a political union fighting the corner of those too disadvantaged to help themselves

The Labour party's antipathy for the far left, its determination to draw a sharp line between itself and communism, did as much as anything else to forge the distinctive features of its politics

mitment to both parliamentary politics and state social reform aligned him firmly with the reformist strand in British socialism.

Certainly Hardie had few regrets when, in 1901, the Marxist Social Democratic Federation chose to break with Labour, having failed to persuade the new organisation to commit itself wholeheartedly to socialism and "recognition of the class war". Hardie insisted that socialism "makes war upon a system, not upon a class". Not only was there room for all classes within his vision of socialism, but socialism was a question of ethics more than economics. Workers, as much as capitalists, must transcend their immediate class interests in the interests of humanity as a whole.

Ramsay MacDonald was the other key figure behind the growth of Labour politics in Britain before (and after) the First World War. He was the Labour party's main public intellectual in this period, publishing a series of books arguing the case for a distinctive brand of ethical, reformist parliamentary socialism. MacDonald used the new language of evolution to present socialism as the logical extension of 19th-century parliamentary liberalism, harnessing the fashionable idea of society as an organism to argue that only socialism could cure the social ills that threatened the body politic. Like Hardie, MacDonald might reject the politics of class, but his humble working-class origins remained central to his public persona.

When MacDonald was sworn in as the first Labour prime minister in 1924, with mill-worker's son Philip Snowden as his chancellor, millions of Labour supporters celebrated a triumph for their class as much as for their politics. In turn, when MacDonald and Snowden broke with Labour in 1931, forming a National Government with Conservatives and Liberals, many Labour supporters found this an impossibly hard blow precisely because they had projected so much onto the pair's defiance of the class order.

But it was the campaigning work of rank-and-file MPs – not Hardie and MacDonald's charisma – that secured the Labour party's future in the early days. In 1901, a change in the law meant that trade unions calling a lawful strike were potentially liable to meet claims for damages. Anger at the so-called Taff Vale ruling had already done much to boost affiliations to Labour. The new party's credibility was further strengthened when its lobbying effectively ensured that, in 1906, the Liberal government acceded to the demand for the restoration of trade unions' full legal immunity.

Yet it would be a mistake to imagine that Britain's hybrid labour/socialist alliance put industrial issues at the heart of its political programme. Quite the reverse. There was growing interest in the idea of minimum wage and maximum hours legislation, but both trade unions and Labour leaders recognised that not everyone could join a union or go on strike. The Labour party existed to be the political union for those too weak or disadvantaged to help themselves.

Until at least the Second World War, one of the most striking features of the British Labour party was that it understood socialist politics largely through the lens of consumption rather than production. Writing in the 1920s, the London-based German socialist Egon Wertheimer saw Labour's prioritisation of housing, health, education and social welfare, rather than control of industrial production and the wider economy, as its most distinctive feature. But he also saw Labour as more definitively constitutional in outlook than European socialist parties, noting that it had been born as a parliamentary party, rather than being founded in opposition to state and society. The British Labour party also appeared more open to absorbing recruits from outside the working class, in part because it did not understand socialism in terms of class politics.

True, Labour was not wholly indifferent to questions of economic ownership and control. In the famous Clause 4 of its 1918 constitution, the Labour party signalled its formal commitment to socialism by declaring in favour of "the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange". But Labour's offer to the public was always first and foremost about welfare and public services – as it still is.

Labour's adoption of a formally socialist constitution in 1918 represented a defining moment in British socialist history. But, arguably, the founding of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) two years later was almost equally important.

The split between parliamentary and revolutionary socialism was less severe in Britain than in many European countries – partly because, on the ground, Labour and communist activists often worked harmoniously together. However, Labour's leadership wasn't quite so sanguine as the party's grassroots about the emergence of this new political force. It disowned as "unconstitutional" the communists' proclivity for public demonstration and street protest. Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden went further still, disbanding local Labour parties that allowed joint membership or refused to oppose communist candidates at the polls.

This antipathy for the far left, this determination to draw a sharp line between Labour and communism, did as much as anything else to forge the distinctive features of British Labour politics – its strict parliamentarianism, its focus on questions of consumption, and its hostility to 'class politics'. Such peculiarities might have deep historical roots, but they were renewed by this new fear of communism and revolution. And they still resonate today. H

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