UNDER SIEGE

INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY.
(West London Federation.)

GREAT LABOUR RALLY

Town Hall, Uxbridge,
FRIDAY, MARCH 2nd, at 8 p.m.

J. KEIR HARDIE, M.P.

Will speak, supported by
E. A. CAVE, B.A., B.Sc. (Int.), J. COCHRANE,
W. HERBERT, R. W. HUDSON, F. ROLFE,
T. ROWLEY, F. YOUENS,
(Labour Candidates for Uxbridge Urban Council,)
Councillor E. R. WESCOTT, and Others.

Chairman: Councillor L. W. SPENCER.

ADMISSION FREE. Reserved Seats, 1s., 6d., 3d.
“She had heard someone say something about an Independent Labour Party, and was furious she had not been asked.” So wrote Evelyn Waugh of his character Agatha Runcible, one of Britain’s so-called Bright Young People, whom he satirized in his novel *Vile Bodies*. Waugh’s character was based, quite unmistakably, on Elizabeth Ponsonby—who, while certainly very fond of parties, would probably not have mistaken the reference. The daughter of Arthur Ponsonby, a prominent figure on the British Left who was active in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) after the First World War, Elizabeth was romantically involved in the early 1920s with John Strachey, who was soon to join the Labour Party and the ILP, himself. Waugh, of course, was not known for his warm embrace of left-wing views. Yet his quip serves to remind us that in 1930, the year that *Vile Bodies* appeared, the ILP was a well-known actor on the political stage, having existed, at that point, for nearly forty years.

Founded in 1893, the ILP had initially pursued the “Labour Alliance” strategy of one of its most prominent leaders, Keir Hardie, combining with trade unions to secure parliamentary representation for the working class—an initiative that culminated in 1900, with the formation of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC). From the start, the LRC was often referred to as the “Labour Party,” and this became its official title in 1906. At this stage, the Labour Party was a federation of socialist organizations and British trade unions. Among the former, the ILP was the largest, and its members accounted for many, if not most, of the local activists who held public meetings, knocked on doors, and delivered leaflets during elections. The ILP’s situation would change in 1918, however, when the Labour Party adopted a new constitution. To Labour’s federal structure was added, for the first time, the possibility of joining the party directly, as an individual member, and contributing to the activities of one of the party’s newly forming local branches. These changes challenged the traditional role of the ILP within the federation, raising, for the ILP, the urgent question of what part it should, or could, play within the new arrangement.

The founding, in 1920, of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) likewise altered the landscape of the British Left, and the ILP was, of course, obliged to respond to this new presence. With respect to the interwar period, historians sometimes tend to view the Labour Party and the CPGB as the only two significant forces on the British Left, with the ILP accordingly presented...
as lacking a clear-cut ideological identity—as struggling to distinguish itself, on the one hand, from an increasingly cautious and conventional Labour Party and, on the other, from the self-proclaimed revolutionary Communists. In his pioneering history of the party, *Left in the Centre*, Robert Dowse argues, for example, that the “lack of identity” of the ILP was “exacerbated” by the emergence of the CPGB. “The I.L.P. had its birth-right filched,” he writes; “it was no longer the most significant left-wing Party in Britain.”

But, while the CPGB was certainly a competitor, the creation of that party hardly sounded the death knell of the ILP. At the time, the ILP was indeed an important presence on the British Left, with an impressive range of local branches, especially in Scotland and in the industrial heartland of England. It was an active publisher of party literature, including a national newspaper, the *Labour Leader* (later to become the *New Leader*). It also enjoyed the support of a number of local and regional papers, among them the *Merthyr Pioneer*, the *Leicester Pioneer*, the *Huddersfield Worker*, the Glasgow-based *Forward*, the *Bradford Pioneer*, the *Birmingham Town Crier*, and *Labour’s Northern Voice*. Granted, party membership declined and much of this support was lost after 1932. All the same, as Gidon Cohen points out at the start of his groundbreaking book on the ILP in the 1930s, at the time of its disaffiliation from Labour, the party had five times the membership of the CPGB. In short, the ILP was far from a moribund organization during the interwar period.

As Dowse’s title suggests, a tendency also exists to adopt (whether consciously or not) a Leninist perspective on the ILP and view the party as a “centrist” organization. While no doubt this is exactly how many political activists and observers saw the ILP in the interwar period (and, in some cases, even after 1932), the label almost inevitably suggests a rather indecisive group of people uneasily adrift between the “realistic” politicians of the mainstream Labour Party, to the right, and, to the left, the sharp-witted Marxist-Leninist intellectuals of the British communism. But obscured by this view is the fact that the ILP had ideas of its own, including some that arguably situated the party to the left of the CPGB. Moreover, in the later 1930s, it was the ILP that opposed participation in any “popular front” that included “bourgeois” parties, while the CPGB sought affiliation to the very Labour Party that the ILP had left in 1932 in order to pursue a “revolutionary policy” of its own.

But if the identity of the ILP was in some sense under siege, it was not only from the Communists. The postwar period saw former Liberal Party MPs, such as Charles Trevelyan and Arthur Ponsonby, join the party, bringing with them new perspectives. In particular, these newcomers tended to place considerably greater priority on international affairs than was customary among ILP members. Given the rise of the ILP’s Ramsay MacDonald to Labour Party leadership
and the prospect that Labour would form the next government, membership in the ILP was also, for a short period, an attractive option for those seeking to gain seats in the House of Commons. For a while, writes Fenner Brockway, secretary of the ILP at the time, “wealthy careerists buzzed around us, anxious to be adopted as candidates, proffering contributions in the hope of securing rewards.” In addition, former ILP member Oswald Mosley, who broke with the Labour Party in 1930, continued to have his supporters within the ILP—some of whom even followed him into his British Union of Fascists. At the same time, the 1930s also saw a number of the earliest British Trotskyists join the ILP.

Another major besieger was the Labour Party itself, whose revised constitution of 1918 threatened to make the ILP redundant. Even within the ILP itself, there were those who argued at the time that the ILP should be dissolved or turned into what we might now call a socialist think tank. In addition, many ILP members questioned whether the ILP would be able to press its own radical policies through its group of Labour MPs, and it was this perceived threat that underlay the struggle against the standing orders of the Parliamentary Labour Party—a struggle that contributed significantly to the ILP’s decision in 1932 to disaffiliate from Labour.

During the early postwar period, the ILP might have given in to the pressure to conform to Labour Party orthodoxy. Equally, it might have been completely absorbed by the Communists. In the early 1920s, in the wake of the founding of the CPGB, a group known as the “Left Wing of the ILP” made a concerted effort to persuade the party to leave the Labour Party and affiliate instead to the Third International, otherwise known as the Communist International, or Comintern. Had this effort been successful, it could only have resulted in the speedy integration of the ILP into the CPGB, as the Comintern would accept only one affiliate from a given country. A merger with the CPGB seemed again to be a possibility in the 1930s, after the ILP left the Labour Party to pursue its “revolutionary policy.”

Historians of the ILP generally agree that disaffiliation from the Labour Party in 1932 was a fatal mistake. Dowse has relatively little to say about the period after 1932: he seems to view disaffiliation as such a disaster that what subsequently happened to the ILP is hardly worth discussing. Indeed, within just a few years, erstwhile leading advocates and supporters of disaffiliation within the ILP had already begun to doubt the wisdom of the decision—doubts that culminated in August 1939, when the ILP’s National Administrative Council (NAC) voted in favour of seeking reaffiliation. Granted, Cohen takes a more nuanced and generally more positive view of the ILP post-disaffiliation than does Dowse. What needs to be more widely recognized, however, is that, at the time, both alternatives seemed fraught with danger. Some within the ILP
feared that if the party chose to remain beneath Labour’s umbrella, this would be the beginning of a process that would see the ILP’s radicalism tamed or even totally extinguished. In retrospect, this fear seems misplaced, at least insofar as one can judge from the activities of former ILP members who remained in the Labour Party. But to those contemplating the choice that lay before the party, the possibility that continued affiliation would spell the end of the ILP’s radicalism seemed very real. As for disaffiliation, the chief concern was that, its ties to Labour severed, the ILP would eventually be absorbed by the Communists—who, during the 1930s, made a very serious attempt to infiltrate the newly independent party. If, in the end, disaffiliation proved to be a mistake, the ILP in fact escaped both of these possible outcomes: neither was it tamed, nor was it absorbed.

The aim of this study is not to tell, once again, the same sad story of the decline of the ILP. Rather, my aim is to examine the distinctive ideas that animated the ILP during the interwar years—ideas that not only help us understand more fully the British politics of the period but also constitute the ILP’s lasting contribution to democratic socialist thinking and remain the most significant part of its legacy. Some of those within the wider labour movement of the period distrusted the ILP, seeing it as a band of “intellectuals.” The ILP did include among its members a number of influential writers and thinkers, such as John Middleton Murry and, later, George Orwell, whom history has recognized as intellectuals, even if they tended to remain in the party for a relatively short time. But ILP policy was shaped as much by the ideas of those who would not claim such a title, and my focus accordingly falls at least equally on their contributions to the party’s ongoing internal debates. As Kevin Morgan put it so succinctly in the context of his exhaustive exploration of the impact of Bolshevism on the British Left, “it is not intellectual history, if that means the history of intellectuals.”

During the interwar period, the ILP became a sort of residuary legatee of the pre-Leninist British Left, as it existed prior to the 1917 Russian Revolution, and of nonconformist currents of the early postwar period. The party’s policy on radical parliamentary reform, first articulated by MP Fred Jowett before the First World War, continued to be supported by party members long after the war. During the 1920s, the ILP also embraced some of the principles of guild socialism and, in the 1930s, had a serious flirtation with the idea of workers’ councils.

Like so much of the pre-1917 Left, the ILP stressed the virtues of internal democracy, though it did adopt what it called “democratic centralism” in the 1930s—with no obvious success. For many years, the ILP also pursued a radical economic policy, predicated on the ideas of J. A. Hobson, among others. This was exemplified by its policy initiative known as both the Living Wage and...
Socialism in Our Time. That something of this combination of constitutional and economic radicalism—a strain of distinctive radical democratic socialism—survived into the post-1945 period in the Labour Party and among its supporters can be attributed to the ILP more than to any other single organization, particularly if we include the various offshoots of the ILP, such as the Socialist League and the Scottish Socialist Party.

It would be wrong, of course, to claim that everything the ILP did in the interwar period exemplified some form of democratic socialism or that all members of the party deserved the designation of democratic socialist. And it would be ridiculous to pretend that there were no democratic socialists and strains of democratic socialist thinking in Britain outside the party’s ranks. But more than any other organization in Britain over the two decades in question, the ILP did much, however imperfectly, to keep such ideas alive. In 1921, George Clarke, a member of the ILP’s Altrincham branch, declared at a Lancashire Division conference “we are the only Party that can consistently stand for democracy.”

While no doubt coloured by party pride, Clarke’s claim was not, in the end, that far off the mark.

In this book, my focus falls on ideas and proposed policies that led to substantial debate within the ILP. Many of the party’s positions, although contentious in a broader public context, were accepted with something close to unanimity among ILP members themselves. The opposition to war and warmongering, to capital punishment, and to imperialism are some obvious examples, as is the party’s support of internationalism in the wider world and of devolution within the United Kingdom. The ILP was, from its inception, more supportive of women’s rights than most other political groupings, including other left-wing organizations, and accordingly less apt to be dominated by men. A number of women were prominent members of the ILP in its early years, during the 1890s, and we will meet others who were active in the party during interwar period. The ILP was also a strong supporter of democracy in the Empire—and especially of the movement in India. That such issues will not receive greater attention in what follows does not, of course, in any way lessen their significance.

All of the debates and events involving the ILP during the interwar years contributed—directly and indirectly—to the policies, culture, and ambience of the labour movement after 1945. Fenner Brockway, who became the ILP secretary in 1923 and was the party’s chairman from 1931 to 1934, appears frequently in the pages that follow. During his long and very active life (he died at the age of ninety-nine), Brockway went on to become the most high-profile former ILPer of the postwar period. Among his many activities, he was a founding member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, War on Want, and the
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World Disarmament Campaign, as well as chair of the Movement for Colonial Freedom and the British Council for Peace in Vietnam. One thinks also of his attempts, while a Labour MP in the 1950s and early 1960s, to promote legislation outlawing racial discrimination.

The main sources for this study are the ILP archives, housed at the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the London School of Economics; the party’s weekly national paper, Labour Leader and then the New Leader; and, especially for the early 1930s, the Glasgow-based Forward and Labour’s Northern Voice, published by the party’s Lancashire Division. The two major studies of the ILP in this period, by Robert Dowse and Gidon Cohen, have, of course, been invaluable and are essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the ILP within its broader context. So, too, is the work of David Howell—notably, his book MacDonald’s Party—and Matthew Worley’s Labour Inside the Gate. In addition, Kevin Morgan’s magisterial Bolshevism and the British Left trilogy offers countless invaluable insights into the Left during the interwar years. For anyone wishing to follow the fortunes of the ILP beyond the interwar years, I recommend Peter Thwaites’s dissertation, “The Independent Labour Party, 1938–1950,” as well as Barry Winter’s The ILP Past and Present, which covers the entire history of the organization.

The chapters of this volume are thematic but follow a broadly chronological sequence. One partial exception is the first chapter, which provides a wide sweep of the history of the ILP from its foundation, in 1893, until just before the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1939. The story of these decades is told through an examination of F. W. (Fred) Jowett and his ideas about the radical reform of parliamentary procedure and representative government. Although, as this book will amply illustrate, the ILP’s ideological positions shifted considerably during the interwar years, Jowett’s views represent a strand of continuity, in the form of an underlying commitment to radical and democratic socialism that survived in the ILP—if only, at times, precariously.