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# The Story of the British Labour Party.

by Morris Hillquit

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Until the end of the last century, the workers of Great Britain had no political organization of their own. They believed that their trade unions were all-sufficient in their fight for better working conditions. They did not perceive that their everyday lives, at home and in the shops, were powerfully influenced by politics. They failed to realize that liberal labor laws could mean better wages, shorter hours, greater protection of life and health in connection with their daily labor, healthier home surroundings, provision against destitution in old age, in periods of unemployment, in cases of industrial accidents and sickness, and better facilities for the education of their children, while laws hostile to labor could put heavy obstacles in the way of the workers for human existence and reduce them to a state of helpless subjugation to the employing classes. It did not occur to them that a hostile government with the aid of the military and police force and, above all, the courts, could destroy the usefulness and efficiency of the very trade unions upon whom they relied for their struggles.

They ignored the fact that the vital social policies of the government are fashioned by the men in the legislative, judiciary, and executive bodies and are determined by the views, sympathies, interests, and class ties of these men; that they could elect these men themselves; that an independent party of labor could break into the political game, exert a direct influence on the government, and eventually run it.

They were handicapped by the superstitious belief in the "two-party" system of politics. For generations Tories and Whigs, Conservatives and Liberals, had alternated in the control of the British government. The British workers had always voted for the one or the other, just as the workers in America always voted the Republican or the Democratic tickets. When

labor issues became more acute, the workers rallied to candidates professing friendship for them, and these were mostly found in the ranks of the Liberal Party, just as the workers here are in the habit of locating their "friends" in the Democratic Party. Towards the end of the last century, the Liberal Party made it a regular practice to name on its ticket a few men from the ranks of organized labor as candidates for the House of Commons. These were known as Liberal-Labor Representatives. They had no consistent political labor program; they were not accountable to definite labor constituencies; they were controlled by the policies of the Liberal Party, and were on the whole quite ineffective for the cause of labor, just as our own "Union-card" members in Congress and in the various state legislatures of necessity have proved to be.

For many years men like Keir Hardie, the clear-headed and forward-looking Scotch miner, and other Socialists urged upon the British workers to form a new and independent political party of labor. They were decried as visionaries by the conservative leaders of organized labor, who were honestly convinced that the thing "could not be done."

But finally the ice was broken. A series of intense industrial struggles in which the powers of the government were openly and consistently arrayed on the side of the employers and against labor resulted in a heightened political interest in the ranks of the workers. In 1899 the British Trades Union Congress passed a resolution calling for a conference of trade unions, socialist parties, cooperative societies, and other labor organizations to devise ways and means for securing a better representation of the interests of labor in the House of Commons.

In the following year the conference was held in London and a permanent "Labor Representative Com-

mittee" was formed. It was not until five years later that the organization adopted the name of Labour Party.

The beginnings of the new party were very modest indeed. The organizations which joined its founding in 1900 represented a total membership of less than 400,000. In that year the new party polled a total of about 63,000 votes in 15 constituencies and returned two members to the House of Commons. But these meager results did not discourage the pioneers of the movement. They continued the work of political organization and education among the workers with unabated faith and increased zeal year after year, and year by year the new party grew in width, depth, and strength.

The membership of the organizations affiliated with the Labour Party has doubled in the first two years of its existence, it passed the million mark in 1907, jumped to 1.5 million in 1911, grew to 2 million in 1915, 3 million in 1918, and closed with around 4 million in 1921.

The electoral successes of the party during that time kept pace with the growth of membership as the following table will show:

<i>General Election of</i>	<i>Labor Vote</i>	<i>Labor Candidates</i>	<i>Members Returned</i>
1900	62,698	15	2
1906	323,195	50	29
1910 (Jan.)	505,690	78	40
1910 (Dec.)	370,802	56	42
1918	2,244,945	361	57

In 1922 the British Labour Party polled in round numbers 4,250,000 votes (a full third of the total vote cast) and returned 142 members to the House of Commons. Two additional Labour members have since been elected in bye-elections.

The British Labour Party today has a larger representation in Parliament than the two wings of the Liberal Party combined. It is numerically the second strongest party in the country and is the recognized and official party of the opposition. If the present government falls, as it may almost any time, the Labour Party will be called upon to form a new government. If the government survives till the next election, the Labor Party will in all likelihood receive a plurality, if

not a clear majority, of all votes and take over the government permanently.

The great British Empire governed by labor! Imagine what that will mean for labor, for Britain, and for the whole world.

For, strange as it may sound, the Labour Party is not a class party. The vast bulk of its members and voters come from the working class, and its activities are frankly directed in support of the producing classes and in determined opposition to the classes thriving on profit and privilege, but its supreme and ever-present aim is to do away with all class privileges and class distinctions, and to run the government for the pure and equal benefit of the whole people.

The last electoral platform of the party announced in unmistakable terms that the party is resolved "to change as speedily as possible by constructive measures the social and economic system which confers unfair privileges on the few and undeserved hardship on the many and to bring about a more equitable distribution of the wealth produced by the common efforts of the workers by hand and brain."

The Labour Party of Great Britain is the party of social progress and political idealism. That is why the best elements of the country are rallying to its support. Not the leaders of labor unions and organizations of farmers, but men and women prominent in all walks of intellectual and artistic pursuit sit in the councils of the party and on its benches in the House of Commons.

The Labour Party of Great Britain is vastly more than a mere political party. It is a great educational and progressive force, the greatest in the country. By its constant contact with the millions of organized workers in the affiliated trade unions; through the educational activities of the affiliated Socialist parties; through 2500 divisional and local groups and numerous women's organizations it carries on an unceasing campaign of political and social enlightenment. It has enlisted the best minds of the country to study all important social problems affecting the nation and the world, and the results of such studies are communicated to the people through the labor press, numerous leaflets and pamphlets, and in public meetings regularly held throughout the country.

British labor is politically emancipated. It has ceased to follow the parties of their masters; it has

ceased to knock at the back doors of legislative bodies, to lobby and to beg. It has risen to political dignity. It has asserted its political strength. While yet in the minority, it has forced such radical labor legislation as old-age pensions and unemployment insurance and the full legal recognition of the right of trade unions and the immunity of their treasuries. The Labour Party moreover has educated its members in the art of true statesmanship and political leadership. When the hour will strike for the British workers to assume the responsibilities of government, they will be ready for it.

This is the story of the political achievements of the British workers. Its lesson is inspiring, its moral is simple. It loudly cries to American Labor: "Go thou and do likewise!" — The American workers are not inferior to their British brothers in natural intellect, in courage or perseverance — what our comrades on the other side of the ocean have accomplished is not beyond our reach. There is no reason why the American workers should continue to be the football of the disgusting game of old-party politicians, ever cajoled and despised, deceived and betrayed, impotent and humiliated; there is no reason why they should continue the futile policy of supporting the parties of the master classes and reaping the reward of their political weakness in hostile governments, hostile laws, and hostile courts.

With the crying needs for political relief in this country and with the example and ready methods of England back of us we can form a powerful Labor Party in this country today; we can challenge the supremacy of the old parties in a few years.

Let us go and do it.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*  
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