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## THE SOCIALIST LABOUR LEAGUE

The SLL (Socialist Labour League) was founded in 1959, and was a deliberate attempt to transform ourselves from the small circle – the Group – that we had been. The initial recruitment was enormous. Our willingness to take on the right wing and the trade union leadership attracted many to our ranks. A number of the contacts we had made organising the National Rank And File conference applied for membership, and since 1956 we had recruited a number of militants from the ranks of the Communist Party.

One such comrade was Brian Behan, brother of the author Brendan Behan and leader of many a struggle on the London building sites. In 1960 Brian Behan proposed that we should leave the Labour Party and launch ourselves as an open workers' party. We held a Yorkshire aggregate of all our members (as did all other areas) to discuss this question. Behan did have some support in the area, but the proposal for the open party was decisively rejected. But neither were we going to surrender the *Newsletter* and the SLL in order to snuggle up nice and cosy as a 'pressure group' in the Labour Party. We chose instead to take the fight to them. However those who supported the call for an open revolutionary party ended up diving into the deep end of the Labour Party pool and came up spluttering. It was really an example of how sectarianism and opportunism can come from the same source.

Over the next years we went on the offensive. We took on Gaitskell and Nye Bevan (who had completely gone over to the

Moscow line). Bevan said that 'we could not go into the negotiating chamber naked'. We fought for unilateral disarmament in the Labour Party and in the wider movement. The demand that Britain should unilaterally disarm grew in spite of the united opposition of the Labour Party, the trade union right wing and the Communist Party. It was a great day when at the Labour Party annual national conference at Scarborough, unilateral disarmament won the day. It was a very angry Right Hon Hugh Gaitskell who told the conference that he would 'fight, fight, and fight again against this decision'.

On the other hand we continued to defend the gains of the past struggles. We defended and used Clause Four of the Labour Party constitution, continuously struggling for socialist principles. Alongside we continued to participate in the struggles of the working class. Our activities brought a constant flow of new recruits into the Labour Party and the SLL. The bulk of these were youth who took up activity in the Labour Party wards and in some cases became ward officers. But the main activity was setting up Young Socialist branches throughout Britain. The Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy were running scared of the success we were having. It must have appeared to them that we had tens of thousands of members because we were everywhere.

The youth we were recruiting were thrown into the fight in the Labour Party, not just to be used as election fodder but as political working-class fighters. The National Executive proscribed the Socialist Labour League, and soon after banned the *Newsletter*. The Labour Party bureaucrats all over Britain flexed their muscles and prepared to get rid of these annoying socialists from their ranks. In Leeds we were the first to suffer a concentrated attack. Leaving work one night I was making my way down Chorley Lane to catch a bus round the corner in Park Lane. Someone ahead of me had bought a paper from the seller at the corner of the street and was shouting up to me that I had been expelled from the Labour Party. Sure enough on the front page of the *Yorkshire Evening Post* was a banner headline saying 'Nine Leeds Labour Chiefs Expelled'. There were some photographs, mine among them.

Arriving home I spotted a car parked outside our garden gate and as I approached the driver got out and asked me if I was Norman

Harding. He told me that my parents would not let him into the house and that they had appeared a little nervous. I was not surprised as they had been told from many sources that I would be getting into trouble because of the company I was keeping. I told him that I would not make any statement until the nine of us had met to discuss the issue. He said he was an active member of the National Union of Journalists and assured me that he would only report what we told him. He gave me his telephone number, and I said that he would be contacted if we agreed to make any press statement. (He was true to his word and we were able to work with him many times over the years.)

When I got to the back door, Mum and Dad were there to meet me. They were worried because the paper had not made it clear why we had been expelled and, as Mum put it, 'People will think that you have been fiddling the funds'.

The expelled got together that night. They were John Archer, Mary Archer, Jack Gale, Celia Gale, Cliff Slaughter, Barbara Slaughter, John Walls, Ron Sedler, and Norman Harding. The Leeds Nine. Ron Sedler, a solicitor, explained that we had been expelled illegally. We had not been informed of any charges or given a chance to defend ourselves. This was an infringement of natural justice. An appropriate letter was sent to the Leeds Labour Party. The result was that we each received a telegram telling us we were no longer expelled. In the next post we received a letter laying down charges: being associated with a proscribed organisation, the Socialist Labour League, and selling the banned *Newsletter*. We were to answer these charges at the next City Party meeting. Each of us would make a statement and be allowed to have one person to speak in our defence. Tom Jackson (of the handlebar moustache) spoke in my defence. I was expelled and he went on to become General Secretary of the Post Office workers' union.

For two or three nights I slept with a notepad by the side of my bed. I would awake with some point or other, jot it down and go back to sleep. It was a Wednesday night when the 'trials' were due to take place. The night before I must have gone over my blasted speech a dozen times, then on the morning gone over it again. I donned my motorcycle gear and set off for work on my BSA

Bantam Major 149cc. I knew that I was focused on the meeting but I did not realise just how much. I pulled up at the kerb but did not get off the bike because when I looked around I realised that I had pulled up outside the Leeds Trades Hall. Instead of going straight down into Park Lane from the Headrow I had turned right into Upper Fountain Street and arrived for the meeting twelve hours early. Funny, but scary just the same.

We all made our speeches. I made points about fighting for the principles of socialism and defended Clause Four. I made the point that as the Conservatives had their representatives in the Labour Party, such as Mathews, why couldn't the socialists? The vote was taken on each of the accused. John Walls, an engineering shop steward, received the smallest vote for expulsion. This was after he had called the Labour Party leadership a load of rascals and traitors. He told them to get on with it and do their worst. Maybe the delegates were touched by his honesty. We were all expelled but later Ron Sedler applied to renew his membership. At a meeting where he was to be considered for re-admittance we organised a picket outside of about 30 YS members demanding that he should be let back in. He was readmitted.

The SLL and the *Newsletter* continued the work in the labour movement. Over this period everyone expelled was replaced by many, many more. Those who were expelled worked twice as hard as before. The Labour leaders had thought that by expelling our leadership their problems would be solved. They were so wrong. Young Socialist branches took on a new life; they were springing up like daffodils in the spring. The youth that were already in the Labour Party were tired of being envelope fillers and found a political voice in this fast-developing youth movement. Students from the colleges and universities moved around starting branches where none had existed before. From this activity the local Labour Parties were flooded with new, young and enthusiastic comrades. Our campaigns were against youth unemployment, the Tories, and the Vietnam War. The two main groups battling it out in the Young Socialists were the 'official' Labour Party around *Advance* and ours around *Keep Left*. It was soon obvious that we were steadily building a very influential part of the labour movement. The annual



*East Leeds Young Socialists in the late 1950s*

conferences of the Young Socialists were beginning to experience a culture shock. Each year more and more delegates were young unemployed and other radicalised sections of the youth.

I had a Hillman Husky and every weekend I would take a team of youth out to the small towns around Leeds to recruit and start new branches. Many of our student comrades took on the responsibility of building and developing new branches. Comrade Guyton built a very large branch on a housing estate near Sheffield. On one occasion it organised a demonstration of a couple of hundred through the estate against youth unemployment.

The campaign around youth unemployment and the Conservative government did not go unnoticed. Harold Wilson, who was hoping to be the next prime minister, knew that these youth would not put on soft gloves if he moved in at Number 10. As you can imagine he was a very worried man. Then through the pages of *Keep Left* we moved up a gear and started to work with the intention taking the Young Socialists out of the hands of the Labour Party by winning all the regional seats of the national committee with one of our comrades as national secretary. That was one hell of a campaign. In or out of the Labour Party it was all hands on deck. Those of us who had been expelled had to work under cover with greater caution than ever and at the same time work harder.

The trades councils called a national demonstration and a lobby of parliament on the question of unemployment. *Keep Left* called for support. In Leeds we told the Trades Council to put us down for three coaches. The coaches were to make their last pick-up at the top of Morritt Avenue, Halton, so that the cars could be parked outside the Gales' and the Lakes' houses. Anyone who has been involved in organising transport and getting everyone to the transport on time will know how difficult a job that is. I had the job of making sure that everyone from the east Leeds area was shuttled over to the coaches from various points. We were to leave no later than midnight. For weeks our comrades had been working flat out to make this a success. It was one of those periods when I would go for days without seeing my parents, up in the morning to go to work and home long after they had retired for the night. I made my last trip with the Husky, put the passengers on to the coach, then went to park outside Jack Gale's. The next thing I knew I was being awakened by Comrade Parsons, an NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) comrade from Castleford. I had parked and immediately fallen asleep.

Lambeth Trades Council had invited Leeds, among others, to have breakfast in a hall just off Euston Road opposite St Pancras Station. This was a welcome respite before going to the assembly point. Bert Ramelson, the Communist Party Yorkshire Organiser, was seen tucking into his food. Cliff Slaughter went over to him and said, 'I hope the Trotskyist food does not choke you.'

I was told during breakfast that I was to be one of the speakers at the rally at Central Hall, Westminster after the lobby. I was sitting at a table with Kevin Fitzpatrick, Tricia Sorbie, Brenda Ingleby and other comrades from the university. I commented to them that I was feeling pretty exhausted. I said I thought that the way I felt I would be in no fit state by the time of the meeting. Brenda brought me a glass of water and a couple of pills. I don't know what they were but later I felt quite refreshed.

The demonstration was huge and attracted lots of attention from the onlookers, many of them tourists. At one stage I found myself walking alongside the Liverpool contingent when a dozen or more broke ranks and surrounded one of the onlookers. They had

recognised one of the characters from an American TV series called *Wagon Train*. It was Wishbone the cook. He talked with them and put money into all of their tins. I gave him a leaflet for the rally. Before he turned to leave he said to me, 'What a shame, what a waste.' He was seen later outside parliament and at the rally.

Carrying banners and placards within a certain radius of parliament was banned. There was a snowball's chance in hell of this being observed. Thousands were milling about outside St Stephen's Gate. The approach roads were a mass of banners and chanting and cheering demonstrators. It was a most exhilarating sight. A Young Socialist climbed up the wall at St Stephen's Gate. When he had reached a respectable height there was a tremendous cheer from the vast crowd as he secured a red flag and copies of *Keep Left*. A window above opened and Barbara Castle stuck her head out, waving her Labour Party membership card and shouting, 'I am one of you'. She was invited to jump down and join us. She neither came out nor jumped down!

Remembering that I was to speak at the rally I found a spot on a wall to prepare my notes, a very inspiring spot among the banners and the constant barrage of demands being put on the Right Hon gents inside. The demonstration began to disperse as the time came for many to catch their transport. They did not move off as disorganised groups but as a demonstration with their banners held high. I made my way with other comrades to the Central Hall wondering how many would attend the rally. To fill this large hall would still only be a very small percentage of those attending the day's events. I made my way to the front and on to the stage. The only other speakers I can remember were Dave Finch (chair) and Liz Thompson, one of the Rand family, who along with their entire Young Communist branch joined us after the events of 1956.

Dave opened the meeting while I took stock of the audience. The hall was packed with people standing down the sides and along the back. Dave leaned over and told me to get ready as I was next. My notes were three headings with notes under each: 1. Agitate; 2. Blast the Tories; 3. Fight will continue under a Labour government. The rally was a huge success. Now we had to get back to Leeds, see

everyone back home and hope to be able to go to work the following day. As I was leaving I was told that Healy wanted to see me. He said that he was going to do a speaking tour of the north of England and he wanted me to be the supporting speaker. He added that he was impressed by my work in Yorkshire. I took this to be a great compliment.

Once again we were able to extend our influence in the Young Socialists and strengthen our existing branches. Now the fight for control of the YS national movement was on. At the 1964 YS annual conference the main job was to make sure that we were strong enough in all the regions of Britain to win the nominations for representatives on the national committee. The Labour Party leaders were aware that they were in danger of losing their YS organisation. Wilson could not tolerate the thought that with Labour expected to win the next election there would be a youth movement prepared to take him on. He also knew that we had the experience, ability and enthusiasm to rally huge numbers of working-class youth, and we were gaining increasing support in the constituency Labour Parties. The dirty tricks department was determined to do all in its power to sabotage this conference. The big weekend came and the Friday night, and what a night it was. We had four coach pick-up points in Leeds. Supporters and members started at about 20.00 hours getting all the youth under various roofs ready for the next step of getting them to the coaches. As a precaution we had arranged for the coaches to arrive at the pick-up points an hour earlier than necessary and for all four areas to ring Jack's as soon as the coaches arrived. Jack and I were there to receive these messages. The news was the same from all four: no coaches. Jack rang the coach company's office and was told that a member of the YS had rung to change the pick-up points of two of the coaches. They told him where the new points were. The other two coaches turned up all right at the arranged places. We concentrated as many of our cars that we could on the old points and shuttled the youth over to the new pick-up points. We told expelled members to keep away from this operation, as we were sure that the Labour Party would be



Above is the march leaving Marble Arch. In front of the banner are YS National Committee Majority members (from l. to r.): Mike Farley, Dave Ashby (chairman), Sheila Torrance (vice-chairman) and Bob Hamilton. Below are some of the pensioners who joined the march.

## ***Pensioners march to lobby Parliament***



*London, Thursday*  
**H**UNDREDS of old  
people demanding

by Newsletter  
reporting team

and Young Socialists from  
Liverpool, Wigan, Bolton and  
Manchester.

Twenty Young Socialists

The Newsletter, 6 February 1965, reports the march

watching very closely. Two coaches set off on time and the problem ones set off half an hour late.

We were successful in winning the vast majority of the regions and so had a majority on the national committee. Dave Ashby was elected as national secretary: we had done it. This we did at a time when the SLL was proscribed and the *Newsletter* banned and YS members could be and were expelled from the Labour Party for associating with expelled members. When future historians write up the history of the Labour Party this will be regarded as one of the biggest defeats suffered by the Labour Party (excluding general elections), and far greater than a defeat at their annual conference on some resolution or other. We had taken away their youth movement. But of course Wilson and his Labour Party leadership were not keen to be looking down the barrel of the YS cannon. At every opportunity they made attacks on the YS branches and the constituencies that they were associated with.

We kept up the pressure. One of the things we did was to organise a national demonstration and lobby of parliament in support of the demand for an increase in pensions. This was to be a combined demonstration of youth and senior citizens. During the build-up to this demonstration it became obvious that there was a strong bond between young and old. The youth looked after the pensioners on the coaches during the journey to London from all over Britain. This was not just our YS members but youth who had decided to go on the demonstration. It was the same kind of relationship that you find in families between grandparents and grandchildren. Although the length of the demo was only a short distance, transport had been arranged for anyone who could not walk the whole way. Even so the majority opted to walk. The youth, with the dress and hairstyles of the day that the media associated with 'trouble' and 'hooliganism', acted in a way that many of the onlookers found baffling. Many of the police walking at the side of the demonstration looked puzzled at the sight of pensioners being helped along by a youth on either arm.

On arriving at the St Stephen's entrance a queue was formed to go in and lobby the MPs. There was an attempt to only let in pensioners and exclude the youth. This was soon nipped in the bud.

Mrs Anderson led a number of irate pensioners to the door and kicked up such a fuss that they had to continue letting in the youth.

I wanted to get inside early to be around with others to keep an eye on things. The police on the door were quite keen to stop queue jumping. I asked Marty, an American student from Leeds, to go with me to the door and put on a deep American accent and explain that we were on a tourist schedule. It worked a treat and we were let in with a smile. I gathered a group of lobbyists and sent in a request card asking the Right Hon Denis Healey to come out and meet his constituents. The card was taken in by one of the liveried gentlemen. One youth said, 'Don't they wear funny clothes', much to the amusement of those who heard. The Right Hon finally appeared and went straight into attack mode – 'I will only speak to the OAPs and all you others can get out' – telling the OAPs that the 'others' were Trotskyists 'trying to take over your protest'. Healey was told in no uncertain terms by the pensioners that in that case they too were Trotskyists, because without the Young Socialists they would not be having this protest. 'Throw them out and you will have to throw us out first,' they said. The Right Hon soon found out that they were not going to be fobbed off with the usual parliamentary language, phraseology without any meaning, talking without saying anything. After about ten minutes he moved away, saying that he had some important business to attend to. He should never have said that. OAP Mrs Anderson, who had been a shop steward in her Leeds clothing factory, wasn't going to let him off lightly. She was after him like a greyhound after the hare. She tried to follow him into the inner sanctum but was stopped by the men in fancy dress. He left with 'so you don't think our pensions are important' ringing in his ears. She made an impression that day, as she did later at the Young Socialists' annual conference.

There were many tired people travelling home that night. Those who could not be dropped off at their homes were taken home by cars.