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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE LABOUR LEAGUE OF YOUTH

Michelle Webb

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

The University of Huddersfield

July 2007

The Rise and Fall of the Labour League of Youth

Abstract

This thesis charts the rise and fall of the Labour Party's first and most enduring youth organisation, the Labour League of Youth. The history of the League, from its birth in the early nineteen twenties to its demise in the late nineteen fifties, is placed in the context of the Labour Party's subsequent fruitless attempts to establish and maintain a vibrant and functional youth organisation. A narrative is incorporated that illuminates the culture, organisation and political activism of the League and establishes it as a predominantly working class radical organisation. The reluctance on the part of the Labour Party to grant autonomy to its youth sections resulted in the history of the League of Youth being one of control, suppression and tension. This state of affairs ensured that subsequent youth groups, the Young Socialists and Young Labour, would be established in an atmosphere of reservation and scepticism.

The thesis places the prime responsibility for the failure of the party's youth organisations with the party leadership but also considers the contributory factors of changing social and political circumstances. A number of themes are explored which include the impact of structure and agency factors, the power of the Parliamentary Labour Party, the political socialisation of leading figures within the party, the social context in which each of the groups emerged and the extent to which the youth groups were prey to intra-party factionalism.

The thesis redresses the balance of research where most accounts have focussed on the Young Socialists and traces the common characteristics that are prevalent in the way the party leadership has approached its relationship with its youth organisations. Use has been made of previously unpublished primary source material, the major source being the League of Youth members themselves whose recollections have helped to demonstrate the arguments put forward in this thesis.

Michelle Webb

July 2007

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Key Dates in the History of the Labour Party's Youth Movement

1924	Labour Party annual conference launched <i>The Scheme for the Organisation of Youth</i> under which the first Labour League of Youth was established.
1938	First Labour League of Youth disbanded.
1939-45	Second World War.
1945	Labour government Second Labour League of Youth established.
1955	League of Youth disbanded and reverted to youth sections under control of local parties.
1959	Youth commission set up to discuss future of Labour youth.
1960	Young Socialists established.
1965	Young Socialists renamed Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS).
1986	Labour Party, led by Neil Kinnock, re-organised LPYS in order to root out Militant.
1993	Labour Party conference in Brighton supported motion to set up Young Labour.

Documentary Sources

The author's interest in the Labour League of Youth pre-dates the start of the thesis by several years while the knowledge of its existence stretches back to childhood. It is one of the many narratives and recollections with which the sons and daughters of working class Labour activists will be familiar. Yet, the history is barely known beyond these circles.

This is the first time, to the author's knowledge, that primary and secondary material has been used, in conjunction with oral interviews, to form a study of the entire history of the Labour League of Youth. It is also the case that some of the primary material itself has been used for the first time, for instance the League of Youth material relating to Newport, held at the University of Wales and the complete minute books of the Huddersfield League of Youth, which are used to support the case study of that area.

The history of the Labour Party is well documented in academic literature, biographies and autobiographies; nonetheless, while this secondary material has been valuable in setting the work in context, few mention the League of Youth. Pimlott, in *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*¹, gives perhaps the most detailed account of the conflict between the League of Youth and the party surrounding the united and popular front movements in which the League played a role. It was not however the intention of Pimlott's study to analyse the reasons why the League of Youth was involved in these and subsequent movements. Layton-Henry's 1976 work, *Labour's Lost Youth*², is possibly the only published study of the Labour youth movement. The work provides a critique of the attitude of the Labour Party towards its youth organisation, and its failure to sustain both the League of Youth and the Young Socialists. The study nevertheless does not provide an insight into the character of the League of Youth and ignores the effects on young people of the changes in society, particularly after the Second World War. *The Labour Party and the Recruitment of the Young, 1945-70*³, a recent study by Fielding, makes a convincing case for the effect of social change on youth recruitment but fails to make adequate use of oral evidence. Betty Boothroyd is unique among politicians in that her autobiography gives an account of her time in the League of Youth and the effect it had on her future career but it is descriptive and possesses little analytical value.⁴

Nevertheless, the narrative of the rise and fall of a series of youth organisations is valid only when it illuminates facets of the history of British politics and the character of the

Labour Party itself. For that reason, a number of classic works on the history of party and British politics have also been consulted, as have publications that are more theoretical on such related themes as the debate about structure and agency, social change and its political impact, and factionalism. These works are listed in the bibliography.

The dearth of published work on the history of Labour's youth movements means that the thesis has relied heavily on primary source material. The reader will note that throughout the thesis the structure and procedures of Labour Party meetings, mirrored in the League of Youth, come up for much criticism. It is a fact however; that without them, the archive of Labour Party history at local and national level that has provided the framework for this study would not exist. Extensive use has been made of the primary material in the Labour History Archive in Manchester and at the University of Huddersfield Archive. The national and local picture is enhanced by the material held at the University of Wales in Bangor, which records the origins and development of the Labour Party at local level in parts of Wales, and the West Yorkshire Archive. A comprehensive set of minute books details the everyday activities of the members of the Huddersfield League of Youth. Newspapers, in particular the Labour Party's own journals such as *The Citizen* and *Tribune* have provided valuable insight into the relationship between the Labour Party, its youth movement and commentators of the period.

The major source of evidence however, comes from those who were part of the movement itself. Oral histories are not new and material such as the *Mass Observation Surveys* provides valuable insight into the everyday lives of working class people. Yet, even in these, membership of the League of Youth is mentioned only in passing. It is, therefore, the first occasion on which the people who have been interviewed for this study have been asked to share experiences of their time in the League of Youth. From this point of view, the study is unique. Sadly, for the 'League of Youthers', time is no longer on their side; few remain from the first League and there is the concern of fading memories. The writing of this thesis is therefore timely. The oral interviews serve to demonstrate and support the arguments advanced by the thesis, and to capture the experiences and views of those who were members of the League of Youth before and after the Second World War.

References

¹ Pimlott, 1977

² Layton-Henry, 1976

³ Fielding, 2000

⁴ Boothroyd, 2002

Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation explores the history of the Labour League of Youth and places it in the context of successive abortive attempts by the Labour Party to establish and maintain a youth organisation. The purpose is to describe the history of the Labour League of Youth and of such subsequent attempts to sustain an organisation for youth in the Labour Party such as the Young Socialists and Young Labour. In order to understand this history more fully and to provide the discussion within the wider context of party life various themes are emphasised. These include an analysis of the relative impact of structural and agency causes in the failure of these organisations, the question of the possible dysfunctional nature of these organisations owing to their contribution to divisive intra-party factionalism, the reality of the domination of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) over other sections of the party and the impact of political socialisation. In considering the impact of structural factors there is consideration of the impact of the changing social context on the party's attempts to establish successful youth movements. While the failure of these various youth organisations is ultimately the responsibility of the role played by the PLP and the party leadership, changing social and political circumstances contributed to the failure.

The failure of the first Labour League of Youth in the nineteen thirties, the second in the nineteen fifties, the Young Socialists in the nineteen eighties and Young Labour in the twenty first century, can be attributed to common characteristics although each failure also reflected particular circumstances. After a long and determined effort to set it up, which is described in chapter 3, the League of Youth has been the most enduring youth organisation in the party lasting for almost four decades since the party's inception. In order to explain the ultimate failure of the League it is necessary to set it in the context of subsequent attempts, by the Labour Party, to form youth sections.

A strong commitment to socialist politics has always been a minority phenomenon among British youth generally but that does not explain fully the failure of the Labour Party to create an effective youth organisation. The lack of such an organisation has been to the party's detriment. The failure to establish an enduring youth section, and in particular the demise of the League of Youth, can be attributed to both structural and agency explanations and to the interaction between the two. The Labour leadership cannot be acquitted of responsibility for the demise of its various youth movements. It is evident that both agency factors; the ability of individuals to act upon a situation, and

structural factors; events dictated by circumstances and institutions, contributed to that failure and both are connected by the ideational and interpretative frameworks of the PLP and also the leaders of the respective youth organisations. Yet the social conditions and structure in which individuals live, also influenced, constrained or enabled them in the decision making process.¹

Colin Hay demonstrates that structure and agency logically entail one another and that social or political structures provide both constraints and opportunities for political actors.² Hay's arguments are examined in chapter 2. Agency is explained further as involving the selection of objectives and the search for the most appropriate means to achieve those objectives within a particular context at a particular moment in time. Therefore, agency is the product of strategy and intention. The ideas of structure and agency are central to any notion of power. Power is a question of agency, of influencing or 'having an effect' upon the structures that set contexts and define the range of possibilities of others. The actions of ministers and governments, for example can produce the structures that create constraints for others in society. Hay also states that it is crucial to bear in mind the two related issues of the contextualisation of agency and the strategic selectivity of structure. Any political action taken must be contextualised within the structural context in which it takes place. The structures identified are both enabling and constraining in that they define the range of potential strategies and opportunities available to actors. Structures impose a strategic selectivity. They provide resources and opportunities for the powerful while simultaneously constraining the powerless and subordinate.³

The purpose of recognising the constraints of structural factors is not to acquit the party of its role as an agent in the failure to maintain a successful youth organisation. Much of the responsibility rests therefore with the choices of the party leadership itself. At the level of agency, the main explanation for the failure of the Labour Party to sustain an effective youth organisation, despite the desire of many of the party's leaders to do so, rests with the preferences of the parliamentary leadership. Since Michels produced his *Iron Law of Oligarchy* there has been a widespread appreciation that power in social democratic political parties rests with the parliamentary elite.⁴ The main sources of this centripetal tendency are discussed in chapter two. A classic study of British political parties by McKenzie provides empirical evidence from the case of the Labour Party to support the proposition that power rests with the parliamentary leadership.⁵ A further classic study by Duverger reinforces the argument.⁶ Minkin also explores the issue.

While accepting the authority over party affairs wielded by the party leadership in parliament, he discusses the role of the various sections within the party such as the trade unions, the constituency parties and the women's sections. While personally an advocate of greater intra-party democracy, he recognises the ambivalent attitude of the leadership of the PLP to the influence that these sections might wield.⁷ The analysis of the power structures of the party and the relevance of the views of these writers is also undertaken in chapter two.

Many who have been involved in the Labour Party have sought to cling to a political myth that the party conference is the sovereign body and that as a so-called 'grass roots' organisation policy-making power rests with the rank and file membership. Many leaders who justified the abolition of youth bodies at various stages in the history of the party or who were anxious to deny the League of Youth and successor organisations any real autonomy actually invoked the sovereignty of the party conference.⁸ Despite attempts by the trade union movement to enhance their intra-party influence, the PLP has normally been able to assert its authority. The trade unions have often upheld the PLP's leadership but at other times, often with the purpose of protecting their historic independence from state regulation, they have challenged the PLP or managed to override its authority. This happened in 1969, when it overruled the Labour government's attempt to introduce legal limits on trade union power with the proposals contained in *In Place of Strife*.⁹ Equally, there have been efforts by more left-wing elements in the constituency Labour parties (CLPs) to increase the capacity of conference to control the PLP. In the early nineteen eighties, for example, the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD), through such mechanisms as the de-selection of MPs and the election of the party leader by an electoral college representing the different sections of the party, managed for a period to make members of parliament show some subservience to the rank and file. Despite these challenges, however, with the party organisation acting on its behalf in the proscription of individuals and organisations in the party that were deemed awkward, the PLP has generally managed to prevail over time.¹⁰ In the case of the trade unions, the election of Margaret Thatcher weakened their potential to create problems for the authority of the PLP. In the case of the constitutional changes achieved by the CLPD the devices soon failed to alter the asymmetrical power relations in the party, however, as the PLP re-asserted itself. Invoking the disaster of the heavy defeat in the 1983 general election subsequent party leaders such as Neil Kinnock and John Smith, and most notably Tony Blair re-established parliamentary control.¹¹ It is

also notable that the youth organisations played little apparent role in these challenges owing to its essential marginality within the party hierarchy.

The structural factors, which have made it difficult for the party to develop and maintain effective youth organisations despite the fact that many of its leaders have thought such an organisation desirable, as demonstrated by their recurrent desire to establish one, have clearly constrained the party. These include the changing socio-economic conditions in Britain from the nineteen twenties to the present day. Before the Second World War, the economic and social conditions in Britain were such as to nurture a radical socialism in the League of Youth beyond the readiness of the British electorate to embrace. It is argued in this dissertation that the party leadership exaggerated this problem and placed political and electoral caution above the patent need to promote and engage its youth. A further structural problem results from an inherent dilemma of left wing politics. Conservatives can engage in ideological conflict that can be enervating for the party. As a consequence of one such episode in the nineteen eighties, the leadership abolished a student organisation on the grounds that it was becoming an embarrassment.¹² This however, was uncharacteristic whereas the successive proscriptions of Labour's youth organisations suggest that such problems are more commonplace on the left of politics. While young people are not necessarily more likely to be radical than their parents in their political beliefs those who engage in organisations orientated to radical or socialist politics, provided that their membership is caused by political rather than social reasons, are incontestably more radical than their seniors as is evidenced by their behaviour, political demands and conference resolutions. This evidence is discussed particularly in chapters 5 to 7.

As a social democratic type of party, described by Miliband as a bourgeois party of reform,¹³ the Labour Party leadership had little involvement with Marxism and there has always been scope for debate within the party as to whether there is an ideological boundary between democratic socialism and Marxism. This debate has sometimes surfaced, as in the early 1980s, when the Labour Party under the leadership of Michael Foot was sometimes charged with effectively subscribing to Kerensky's judgement that there should be 'no enemies on the left'.¹⁴ More frequently, however, the maxim that the party arguably owes more to Methodism than Marxism has been appropriate.¹ The

¹ A quote usually attributed to Morgan Phillips but claimed by Lord Cocks of Hartcliffe to have been originally used by his father, Rev. Prof. Lovell Cocks. Obituary: *The Independent*. March 2001.

phenomenon of a lack of definition of the ideological parameters of the party led to infiltration of the League of Youth and later youth organisations by communists and Trotskyites. While the specific manifestations of this problem varied from one period to the next, the problem of infiltration has been endemic in the party and it is the perceptions of the leadership about the consequences of this ideological 'infection' which explains the reluctance to maintain youth organisations. It can be argued, however, that the Labour Party reacted too strongly to this issue and overstressed the dangers that this infiltration posed. These tensions between its youth sections and the leadership have bedevilled the relationship until recently.

Yet the question that must also be raised is why a youth organisation is deemed desirable? It is true on the one hand, that the party leadership might consider that all members of the party should place their party membership above their sectional interests based upon such criteria as age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality. A leading party figure such as Ernest Bevin, who had been general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, might differentiate trade union membership from other allegiances based upon personal characteristics since he believed, that the Labour Party was 'born out of the bowels of the trade union movement'.¹⁵ The trade union influence has been reduced in recent decades and they have become increasingly marginalised.¹⁶ The constitutional changes introduced after 1994 of One Member One Vote (OMOV) accentuated this tendency to focus on individual party members rather than trade union block votes.¹⁷ The 'labourist' characteristics of the party have not been entirely eradicated, however, and the trade unions remain a major source of party funding. Trade unions are not in an entirely analogous situation with other elements of the party, therefore, such as women, youth and CLPs although many in the PLP may often have regarded them as equally problematical.

There are many arguments in support of political parties desiring to create an organisation for their young adherents to join. It is true that a single form of identity does not define individuals, as individual party members possess a gender, sexuality and an orientation towards religion, for example, in addition to being a young person. Yet for many people one of their identities tends to prevail and young people will often feel a stronger link with their age group than with an older person with whom they share gender, social class or ethnic identity. If that is the case then the *raison d'être* for a youth organisation is as robust as that for a women's section. The women in the party were themselves the strongest advocates of the establishment of a League of Youth as

explained in chapter three. The party leadership considered that a youth organisation would draw young people into the party and improve its appeal to young voters. The evidence presented in this dissertation, however, demonstrates that it would have been more enthusiastic if the organisations had proved to be more quiescent. This is demonstrated in chapter 6 by the case of Hugh Gaitskell, who led the party from 1955 to 1963.

The focus on structural and agency factors provides one aspect of the theoretical framework of the dissertation. It is also appropriate to raise a related question of to what extent did the League of Youth and subsequent organisations prove to be functional or dysfunctional for the Labour Party. The League of Youth and the Young Socialists were unquestionably to the left of the leadership and subject to infiltration by sectarian organisations. This entryism, coupled with the genuine socialist values of most of the members, tended to make the League, if not a faction itself, prone to becoming a host organisation for ideological factions. Belloni puts forward the notion that the two main features of factionalism, dysfunctional divisiveness and functional unity, can exist alongside each other.¹⁸

Factions can be both positive and negative for political parties and this dissertation considers this question with reference to the League of Youth and subsequent organisations. There is evident scope for making contrasting judgements as to whether or not the League and its successor organisations were functional or dysfunctional for the party, and such judgements are necessarily influenced by the ideational frameworks which each of the individual participants adopted. While the argument of the dissertation is that, as Belloni asserts, both functional and dysfunctional aspects emerge as a result of factionalism, most party leaders viewed the requirements of parliamentary and electoral politics as dominant. They were strongly disinclined, therefore, to take the risks of permitting autonomy to a radical youth organisation, particularly one prone to allying itself with rival political groups.

Chapter 2 outlines the heuristic theories that the dissertation adopts to analyse the empirical evidence that it presents. There is an exploration of the debates about the power relations within the Labour Party in order to explain the context within which the League of Youth and its successor organisations were required to operate. The long-standing debates about the role of structure and agency in political life are examined to help determine the degree to which the actions of the Parliamentary Labour Party and

the leaders of the youth organisations were structurally determined rather than voluntarist in nature.

There is also consideration of the impact of the ever-changing social conditions in Britain from the nineteen twenties to the present day. Neither society nor politics are static but there is ample evidence of an asynchronous relationship between the two as far as Labour's successive youth organisations were concerned. There is a discussion of the theory concerning the functionality or otherwise of factionalism within political parties to form a view about how beneficial youth organisations have been to the party's development. Labour's youth organisations have contributed to factionalism by being a welcoming host organisation for ideologically determined factional and sectarian groups seeking to pursue their own ends. While this intellectual activity may help to avoid immobility, it can also be deeply divisive. Finally, there is a brief explanation of the concept of political socialisation to help demonstrate the sources of the ideas and beliefs to which the various actors involved have subscribed.

Chapter 3 explains the difficult birth of the League of Youth and demonstrates that in some respects the fact that it emerged at all was an achievement. **Chapter 4** captures the character of the League by explaining the perceptions and recollections of its members. **Chapter 5** examines the political role of the League of Youth. This chapter is seminal as it explores the ideological tensions and political dilemmas that have generally been a problem for the Labour Party as well as introducing an important individual who characterises these dilemmas, Ted Willis. It also demonstrates the problems that the party has encountered by its methods of recruitment. **Chapter 6** charts the attempts to revive the second League of Youth after World War Two in the apparently propitious circumstances of the 1945 Labour general election victory and goes on to explain why this second League also collapsed. Despite the overall failure of the League of Youth, it needs to be stressed that particular branches were more vibrant and successful. One such branch was in Huddersfield and it is fortuitous that the availability of records and the number of League members surviving from that period, who were prepared to be interviewed, enables a focus in **Chapter 7**. This helps to bring the League of Youth to life.

The second League folded in 1959. The leadership of the Labour Party still hankered after the idea of a youth section and, not without trepidation, set up the Young Socialists. After a couple of decades of strife, this too collapsed and after a period in which youth

activity appeared to be defunct, Young Labour was formed in 1994. Unlike the League of Youth, the period of Young Socialist activity from 1960 to the early 1980s has been written about elsewhere so there is only a brief summary of what occurred in that time. **Chapter 8** draws out the major contrasts and similarities between the League of Youth and Young Labour. **Chapter 9** pulls the arguments of this dissertation together and explains why the history of the youth organisations in the Labour Party can only be interpreted as one of failure.

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- ² Hay, 2002 pp 189-206
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Michels, 1962
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- ⁷ Minkin, 1978
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Foote, 1986 p 6
- ¹⁰ Tanner, Thane, Tiratsoo, 2000 pp 263-266
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Cosgrave, P. 1995. 'Peter Morrison: Obituary' *The Independent*. 15 July
- ¹³ Miliband, 1964
- ¹⁴ Acton, 1990 p 135
- ¹⁵ Taylor, 1987 p 1
- ¹⁶ Cronin, 2004 pp 265-66
- ¹⁷ Ibid., pp 344-45
- ¹⁸ Beller, Belloni, 1978 pp 440-42

Chapter Two: The Framework of Analysis

Introduction

The Labour League of Youth and successor organisations in the Labour Party are an integral, if neglected, part of the narrative of labour history in the United Kingdom. The Labour Party was created by an ad hoc alliance of trade unions and socialist organisations - the Fabian Society, the Independent Labour Party and the Marxist inclined Social Democratic Federation - and so developed as a loose confederation.¹ It became a formal federation in 1918 with a written constitution and an arrangement in which ostensibly decisions were made by an annual conference and implemented by a National Executive, which represented trade unions, socialist societies and constituency Labour parties. It was into this structure that the Labour youth movements were incorporated. This chapter explores both the theory and practice of intra-party democracy and of power relations within the party in order to place the role of Labour's youth movement in context. It argues that while the theory is that the annual conference prevails, power has tended, with brief interludes when it was challenged, to remain with the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP).

A related theme, which is also used to provide a further explanatory theoretical context, is that of the theory of factions. The fragmented structure of the Labour Party, which its federal structure compounds, makes it vulnerable to factional behaviour. As a party of interests and ideas, the Labour Party is particularly prone to the emergence of factions. This inevitably raises the question of whether the factionalism to which the League of Youth and the Young Socialists were especially vulnerable was advantageous and functional for the party, or conversely, was it disadvantageous and dysfunctional in its impact.

Members of the Labour Party regardless of age, gender or any other variable tend to have views, or, according to inclusive definitions of the concept, an ideological perspective on politics.² While the determination of the sources of these ideas and values is difficult to ascertain, the chapter makes use of the concept of socialisation to help explain why the attitudes of youth members were generally more radical than those of most of the leaders of the party. While there are many agencies of political socialisation the most directly relevant for this analysis is that of the historical time at which party members first acquired their political convictions. Older party members were necessarily socialised at an earlier period than were its younger members. This

is relevant for explaining the conflicting social and political attitudes to which the two types of members tended to subscribe.

The final theoretical concepts, which are introduced in this chapter, are those of structure and agency. As Marx expressed it, men do make their own history but not in circumstances of their choosing. The leaders of the PLP displayed an orientation to youth movements that profoundly affected their fate. The structure-agency debate in the social sciences is valuable in revealing that not all choices in political life are entirely unconstrained by structural circumstances. This perspective is adopted here to interrogate the question of the degree to which the behaviour and actions of both the PLP leaders and the membership of youth organisations were affected by structural rather than agency factors.

Power in the Labour Party

The issue of where power lies in the Labour Party is interesting for a number of reasons. First, there is a formal position, which claims the sovereignty of conference. This has degenerated into a myth that obscures the reality.³ Secondly, there is a paradox that the most significant organisation, which contributed to the formation of the Labour Party, was the trade union movement, and yet it is the parliamentary leadership whose will generally prevails. The trade unions have wielded undoubted influence at times, but have generally been of secondary importance in practice. Thirdly, the issue of the locus of power in the party has varied somewhat over time. This is because power can shift and move and it is necessary to be aware of the changing situation. Political events both within and beyond the party can influence the relative power of the different components

Michels states that when a socialist party is in its infancy there is little need for professional leadership as the party runs largely on enthusiasm and goodwill. As the party grows and develops professionalism and permanence are needed which is often taken up by educated individuals. This new leadership, often intellectually superior, accentuates the cultural differences between the leaders and the ordinary members.⁴ Because of paid and honorary posts within the party mechanism, a number of proletarians with an intellectual gift are then transformed into a petty bourgeoisie, which increases their superiority over the rank and file of the party. There is a tendency for this group, which now monopolises party representation in parliament, to lose solidarity with the class from which they have sprung.⁵ The Labour Party has a parliamentary aim and the experiences, knowledge and

competencies gained by those in power, in foreign, economic and political affairs renders them indispensable so long as the party continues to practice parliamentary tactics. Michels believes that this creates a security of tenure that conflicts with the principle of democracy.⁶ The masses, as a group, are incompetent in terms of political ability and understanding therefore giving the leaders more power. If the masses are incapable of looking after their own interests then it becomes necessary to appoint leaders to do so. If democracy is to be effective, it must assume the aspect of benevolent despotism. Only a small number of men therefore control the policy of the party.⁷ Duverger also argues that parties tend towards oligarchical leadership.⁸

McKenzie reflects this theory in relation to the early development of the Labour Party. He states that Labour began as a movement in the country that created a parliamentary party to give the working class a voice in the House of Commons. The gathering of hundreds of thousands of trade union and socialist society members came together for this purpose. By accepting all the conventions with respect to the office of prime minister and cabinet government, it ensured that effective power within the party would be concentrated in the hands of the leadership of the Parliamentary Labour Party. In opposition as well as in office the autonomy of the PLP and the authority of its leaders have been demonstrated beyond question. McKenzie states that from Keir Hardie onward Labour leaders have repeatedly refused to accept external direction.⁹ They take instead the view expounded by Morgan Phillips, the former secretary of the Labour Party, in a document entitled *Constitution of the Labour Party* that,

”The Parliamentary Party could not maintain the position in the country if it could be demonstrated that it was at any time or in any way subject to dictation from an outside body which, however representative of the party could not be regarded as representative of the country. In any event, constitutionally, the British Government is responsible to Parliament whether that Parliament votes along party lines or across them. Nothing can alter this.”¹⁰

The Labour Party’s formal constitutional arrangements in terms of extra parliamentary control were in principle more rigid than the informal arrangements, which tended to be the accepted practice. McKenzie states that the success of the informal arrangements, which secured the authority of the parliamentary leadership, depends on the subtle understanding between the chief parliamentarians and a few

leading trade unionists. This small group of individuals would be prepared to act as 'praetorian guards' protecting the parliamentary party from overt attempts by activist elements among the trade union and constituency parties to drive the PLP in directions it did not wish to go. Gaitskell, for example, was adamant that party conference should not try to dictate to future Labour governments exactly what it should do.¹¹ Similarly, in 1963 Wilson stated that he did not consider himself bound by the Labour Party conference resolution demanding withdrawal of the American Polaris base from Britain because the resolution had not been accepted by the PLP.¹² Richard Crossman emphasised the contradiction of inter-party democracy in 1963 when he said that,

“...since it could not afford, like its opponents, to maintain a large army of paid party workers, the Labour Party required militants – politically conscious socialists to do the work of organising in the constituencies. But as these militants tended to be ‘extremists’, a constitution was needed which maintained their enthusiasm by apparently creating a full party democracy while excluding them from effective power. Hence the concession in principle of sovereign powers to the delegates of the Annual Conference, and the removal in practice of most of this sovereignty through the trade union bloc vote on the one hand, and the complete independence of the Parliamentary Labour Party on the other” ‘.¹³

Minkin agrees with Crossman's view. The sovereignty of the annual conference, he states, was the primary expression of intra-party democracy. In principle, all party members were subject to the authority of the conference though there was always ambivalence in trade union attitudes towards conference sovereignty on the one hand and 'their own jealously guarded independence' on the other.¹⁴ Furthermore, the theory of intra-party democracy ignores the failure to participate of a large proportion of the membership, which results in the disproportionate influence of national officials of affiliated organisations. It is also the case that over time intra-party power shifts. The authority of the conference as the sovereign body of the party was laid down in the 1918 constitution, which stipulated that, 'the work of the party shall be under the direction and control of the party conference'. Minkin however draws attention to the fact there was flexibility in the relationship in the form of clause four, which later became a source of interpretive tensions. The scope for intra-party conflict was further widened when the party adopted socialism as its ideological goal. This stimulated factional alignment based upon right-wing parliamentarian and left

wing activist attitudes towards the party's aims. Minkin, on the other hand, makes clear that the conflict was never simply between the leadership and the rank and file. It was, he states, fought out in most institutions, organisations and forums of the party.¹⁵

Yet the conflicts over policy have often corresponded with divisions over the nature of intra-party democracy and the extent of the role of conference. Over time, the party has adapted to the parliamentary system and tended to shed the traditional view of the sovereignty of the party conference therefore allowing the leadership of the PLP to become the most important policy-making group in the party for most of its history. There were constraints upon the ability of the leadership to carry through policies in the potential veto of the trade unions, the main power source outside the PLP, especially when the party leaders failed to secure the aspirations of the party members. However, in spite of the growth in size of conference, attempts to impinge upon the freedom of the PLP were contested. A declaration by J. R. Clynes, which would be often repeated by leading members of the party, stated that there was 'no authority exercised over the parliamentary party by an outside body'.¹⁶ Nevertheless, this extreme view did not prevent shifts in the distribution of power as each political generation altered the balance of the relationship between the parliamentary party and the bodies outside of it. In the MacDonald era, the Prime Minister and the cabinet set government and party policy with the conference open to appeals by the leadership. When the party was in opposition, a further shift occurred and conference regained some of its lost power and influence. There are three examples of this renewed strength. First, in 1931, following the expulsion from the party of Ramsay MacDonald.¹⁷ Second, in 1970-74, when, across four conferences, the leadership was defeated in eight out of twenty-seven card votes, including the issue of public ownership. This marked the erosion of traditional loyal support for the party leadership.¹⁸ Finally, in 1979-1985, following a swing towards Tony Benn's left wing campaign to reduce the power of the PLP, when it was actually decided that the party leader would no longer be chosen by the PLP but by an electoral college.¹⁹

The 1945 Labour government was 'scrupulous in its respect for the authority of the party conference.'²⁰ Throughout the Attlee era, the government looked upon conference as an authoritative body for its annual vote of confidence. There was no suggestion, prior to the debates of that period, that the government would not be bound by the decisions of the party conference.²¹ After the Second World War, when conference did defer to the PLP, it was, Minkin argues, due to the 'praetorian guard'

of a hard core of trade union leaders of the six major unions, which formed a tight alliance with government ministers. The unions controlled a block vote, which meant that conference set its face against 'any advance of the left, real or imaginary'. The total conference vote at the party conference of 1955 stood at 6,773,000. Of this figure, 5,552,000 votes belonged to the trade unions of which 3,580,000 came from the six biggest unions.²² Of further significance, is the position of Bevan who, as representative of the left within the party, often adopted an ambivalent position towards the role of conference. Bevan held the view that while the leadership of the party should be bound by the decisions of conference this did not necessarily apply to backbenchers. When conference did not back his position on German rearmament, in 1953, Bevan sought independence. He believed that conference decisions could be disregarded when leaders had issues of conscience.²³

Desai also noted the contradictions in the relationship between the trade unions and the Labour Party leadership. During the nineteen fifties, the party leadership took advantage of the loyalty of the working classes and the discipline within the trade unions in order to sustain its power, first of Attlee, then of Gaitskell. Desai argues that in this period, union leaders justified non-interference in party and government by means of 'the longstanding parliamentalist division between political and industrial wings'. The common hostility shared by the party leadership and the unions towards the Labour left and the communists meant that the loyalty afforded to Attlee could readily be transferred to the 'revisionist intellectuals' surrounding Gaitskell. However, by exploiting this alliance, the Gaitskell leadership was also reinforcing the notion of the sovereignty of conference. The contradictions were apparent when Gaitskell failed to win conference support for his bid to excise clause four from the party constitution. Though Gaitskell managed to win conference back to his position on nuclear disarmament, it was at the expense of renouncing what had become 'a central tenet of the revisionist strategy', entry into the Common Market.²⁴

Miliband holds a yet stronger view that, out of all political parties claiming socialism to be their aim the Labour Party has been the most dogmatic about the parliamentary system, making devotion to it their fixed point of reference and the conditioning factor of their political behaviour. It became the method of choice in order to achieve the immediate gains of the working classes as well as the socialist reconstruction of society.²⁵ The parliamentary view of politics had been gaining strength in the decades running up to the formation of the Labour Party, which enabled Ramsay MacDonald, in 1909, to declare that '[s]ocialism is to come through a socialist political

party and not through a Socialist one'.²⁶ The leaders of the Labour Party have always rejected any kind of political action that they believe to fall outside the framework and conventions of the parliamentary system.²⁷ The party's rejection of the unity campaigns in the 1930s can be cited as an example of this. In an attempt to push for a more vigorous opposition to the government's foreign policy the unity campaign was launched by the representatives of the British left, the Socialist League, the Communist Party and the ILP. The Socialist League was immediately disaffiliated and its members informed that membership of the League was incompatible with membership of the Labour Party.²⁸ Whilst the Labour left displayed a certain amount of unease and misgivings toward the parliamentary system, it nevertheless broadly accepted it. The left-wing element, notwithstanding its ability intermittently to force concessions out of the party leadership, has always been in a minority and 'has never come near to capturing the labour movement's commanding heights.'²⁹ Miliband does not believe that the Labour Party in the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties was capable of turning into a socialist party, as it no longer was committed to the ideology necessary to achieve a socialist transformation. The leaders of the Labour Party 'may occasionally prattle on about socialism', Miliband states, but it 'lacks all effective meaning'. Revisionist thinking which, far from being an alternative to capitalism, represented an adaptation to it instead dominated the leadership.³⁰ Any attempt to persuade or compel the 'bourgeois politicians' to adopt socialist policies can be ignored when in office. Moreover, shifts to the left in the trade union movement should not be seen as an attempt to bring about sweeping changes in the leadership of the party or a suggestion that it would be able to do so. When Frank Cousins resigned from the Wilson government, in 1965, he refused the invitation by his successor to become a focal point for the left of the party. Miliband believes that this reflected the limited role that unions saw themselves playing in the Labour Party, that of representative of labour and not a rival to the party trying to capture control.³¹

The conflict between right and left, which had been contained when in government, began to resurface in the early nineteen fifties as demands grew for more radical policies at home and abroad. In 1951, after leaving office, the Labour leadership continued the policies of consolidation at home and bipartisanship abroad.³² At home, the conflict was focussed on nationalisation, abroad on the rearmament of Germany. Throughout the controversies on home and foreign policy, Miliband states, Bevanite parliamentarians occupied the limelight. Such was the support for Bevan from the left that it was assumed that the important policy battles were being fought in the parliamentary party. Miliband believes this to be a false notion. He argues that

the rank and file refusal to endorse the leadership's drift in policy, and its affirmation of the need for different policies, both pre- and post-dated Bevan's tenure of office. Furthermore, Bevanism, as far as it existed, posed less challenge to the leadership than the opposition of the rank and file and, as a parliamentary force, by 1952, had been decisively checked.³³ The success of Bevanite candidates in the 1951 NEC elections fostered a belief that they would be able to make a difference to Labour's policies and programmes. However, it was overestimated how much could be achieved and the Bevanites found themselves unable to match their opposition to policies with clear alternatives. Miliband suggests that throughout they fell back on the politics of manoeuvre and 'were regularly outmanoeuvred in the process'.³⁴ The left attributed Labour's defeat in the 1951 general election to its failure to put forward a bold socialist programme but as Miliband points out such a programme could only enhance the party's chances if it had been fought for by all sections of the party. The leadership was not prepared to be influenced by the Labour left in the nineteen fifties but the left itself, Miliband states, was unable to 'present either a clear diagnosis of the party's troubles or a solidly based argument for such policies as it wanted to see adopted'.³⁵ In addition to the challenges posed by the right and the left in the Labour Party, it is also necessary to acknowledge the centre of the party whose main purpose, Miliband argues, is to keep the Labour Party 'within the bounds of labourism', and 'whose main attribute is the invention of formulas that might be all things to all men'. The ensuing compromises only serve to provide 'a temporary lull in a battle to be resumed so soon as actual programmes and policies come to be discussed'.³⁶

The formality of conference grass roots democracy and the role of the trade unions as expressed in 1957, by Labour MP, Percy Collick, was patently unrealistic:

'The Labour Party ... is the political expression of the working people and of their Trade Unions. It believes in the social ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and each year at its Annual Conference it decides what is to be its practical policy to give effect to those principles. Decisions made are binding on the Party and become policy decisions'.³⁷

The Parliamentary Labour Party's relationship with conference and the trade unions, as well as the distribution of power between each group may have fluctuated but generally, the PLP prevailed. However, trade union influence was further undermined

in the nineteen eighties by a combination of their own declining membership and the Conservative government's hostile policies towards the unions. Electoral defeat in 1983 led to a reassertion of the power of the PLP under Neil Kinnock. Kinnock distanced himself from the unions and the union leaders themselves proposed a reduction in their share of the vote at conference. Two further election defeats in 1987 and 1992 paved the way for the introduction into the party constitution of 'one member one vote' for all decision-making. An increase in individual party membership by 1995 signalled further erosion in union influence at conference with the introduction of a straight fifty-fifty split of votes cast at conference between the constituencies and the unions.³⁸ The significance of this period is not only in the reduction of formal voting strength of the unions at conference but also in their informal influence in the policy making process. Reid makes the point that the Downing Street policy unit is run by individuals with little or no experience of employment and trade union issues and are young enough to have experienced 'nothing but decades of media myth-making on the subject'. Moreover, few leading figures in the party have any direct experience of trade union affairs.³⁹

The shifts in power and influence between the unions, the conference and the parliamentary party provided the structural reality within which the League of youth and subsequent organisations had to operate. The intermittent opposition from the unions toward the PLP reflected their labourist mentality and not the ideological socialism or Bevanism that most members of the League of Youth favoured. Subsequent chapters will discuss the extent to which the League of Youth often disregarded the structural constraints of the tendency towards PLP domination of the Labour Party. As a result and, in an attempt to achieve autonomous status, the League overestimated its capacity to change this constraint. Unlike most League of Youth members, Miliband argues that the PLP never believed that capitalism could even be challenged.⁴⁰

Factionalism

According to Sartori, political parties 'stem from passion and interest, not from reason and equity.'⁴¹ This led Bolingbrooke to argue that, 'governing by party always ends in governing by faction'. In addition, 'one cannot hope to exclude factions from a political organisation where the advantages of liberty are wont to be preserved'. In this case, factions must be rendered as harmless as possible.⁴² Cyr argues that factions are a significant element in the political process in that they perform a range of important functions. They represent the different sections and constituencies of a

political party and can have considerable influence on party leaders between elections. While in theory the leaders may have considerable authority to impose discipline, the reality is somewhat different. There occurs a constant process of give and take and mutual interaction and influence between the party members and its leaders.⁴³ Cyr observes factions within the Labour Party and describes them as well organised and highly ideological, largely held together by their members' devotion to different forms of socialism.⁴⁴

The Labour Party has always been prone to ideological tensions, which range from broad tendencies such as conflict between the left and right wings of the party or more highly organised factions such as the communists or Trotskyite elements. Belloni defines faction to mean 'any relatively organised group that exists within the context of some other group and which as a political faction competes with rivals for power advantages within the larger group of which it is a part.'⁴⁵ Factionalism can be described as one form of tension within a political party. Rose accepts Belloni's definition of faction and applies it to parties in Britain. Here he defines faction as a group of individuals based on representatives in parliament who seek to further a broad range of policies through consciously organised political activity. Factions are self-consciously organised as a body, with a measure of discipline and cohesion. Identification with a faction usually increases an individual's commitment to a programme. Rose asserts that the Labour Party, since its foundations, has been a party of factions. He argues that the ideological principles of factions have the capacity to cause shifts within the party and cites as an example the dispute over clause four in 1960-61. Bevan's resignation in 1951 showed how the emergence of a leader could crystallise a tendency into a faction. Similarly, Hugh Gaitskell's period as party leader, began by his accession to office as chief spokesperson of a recognized faction.⁴⁶ The majority of factions have tended towards the left and so, youth groups with socialist ideals have been easily drawn into internal conflicts by the influence of charismatic leaders and have regularly provided fertile territory for factions within the party. Duverger also argues that political parties by their very nature develop auxiliary movements such as youth groups, women's groups, sports clubs and artistic and cultural associations, which become pressure groups within the party.⁴⁷

The introduction of individual membership drew into the Labour Party individuals who were previously part of outside organisations such as trade unions and socialist societies but who now had to be embraced within the party. Seyd points out that prior to the party adopting its revised constitution in 1918, there had been strains between

the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary party and these were not assuaged by the new constitutional arrangements.⁴⁸ The ambiguity relating to the respective powers of the leadership and the conference led Michael Foot to argue that, 'many of the internal rows of the Labour Party, in modern or ancient times, have revolved around this anomalous, theoretically impractical, constitutional arrangement'.⁴⁹ From this period on, the Labour Party, as a matter of policy, has institutionalised sectionalism with regard to its trade union members, its women, and its youth. It is because these groups lack full legitimacy within a single party structure that they become prone to factional pressures.⁵⁰

Seyd believes that the structure and value system of the Labour Party facilitates factionalism. The party's structure affords the opportunity for factions to pursue their points of view at various levels. For instance, affiliated organisations such as trade unions and socialist societies provide opportunities for extended debate, which, in the case of the trade unions, can have considerable impact on the party's policy-making process. In addition, the individual membership is divided into groups within the constituencies and is granted separate representation at national, regional and local level. These elements, Seyd argues, provides alternative channels for the expression of factional opinion.⁵¹ Belloni describes the expression of factional opinion as 'the articulation of the varied interests of the broad-ranging constituency of the party' and would be in agreement with this view.⁵² Representation on the National Executive Committee did indeed provide a channel of communication directly to the leader, the cabinet and the parliamentary party but being outside the PLP, the various sections, of which the League of Youth was one, remained at best an internal pressure group.

The nineteen thirties were marked by struggles between the right and the left of the Labour Party as each attempted to secure the allegiance of the party's rank and file with the Labour left engaging in a series of factional fights.⁵³ The left continued to be a critical and determined faction in the post war period with conflict centred on policy and personal objectives. Seyd summarises the factional differences as being the contrast between the pursuit of transformation and amelioration of society, between the visionary and practical approaches to politics, between an emphasis upon class and nation, and between support for industrial militancy and industrial harmony.⁵⁴ Labour's defeat at the polls in 1951 resulted in a prolonged period of bitter infighting, which hardened into a left-right battle between the Bevanites and the revisionists around Gaitskell; a clash between those who favoured further public ownership and those who did not. Between 1949 and 1953, the public ownership issue was treated

as 'a division between the long and short shopping lists as promoted by the Labour left and right respectively.'⁵⁵ Public ownership remained the central feature of socialism for the Bevanite left in contrast to the Morrisonian perspective that it was merely necessary to consolidate the achievements of the 1945 Labour government. The left argued that, in order to control the 'commanding heights' of the economy, further industries needed to be nationalized.⁵⁶

Formal differences over policy were undoubtedly a significant factor in the split between Bevan and Gaitskell but Callaghan believes that the ferocity of the conflict requires further explanation. The right of the Labour Party leadership harboured global pretensions; supporting the Atlantic Alliance against the Soviet Union and international communism and, as ardent supporters of the British Commonwealth, continued to see Britain as a great power. Since the nineteen thirties, the hostility towards Marxism and communism afforded a shared bond between the revisionists in the party and the powerful trade unions. This alliance, Callaghan argues subordinated critics of party policy giving rise to frustrations and anger on the left, which were further aggravated by the apathy outside the party caused by the new affluence. The anti-communist effort was directed against the Bevanites who had been critical of the leadership's stance on the Cold War and more importantly, whose influence was growing in the constituencies.⁵⁷ As Campbell explains, Bevan attempted to lift the level of debate above teeth and spectacles to questions of rearmament, Korea and the Cold War, none of which, as far as the left was concerned, were receiving adequate attention by Gaitskell.⁵⁸

There was a consensus following the Second World War that Britain must retain her world power status in the face of Soviet threat and it was to this end that the Labour leadership looked towards America for assistance. That Britain would never be an equal partner in the Anglo-American Alliance was soon apparent in the conditions of the post-war loan to Britain. Britain's agreement to make sterling convertible resulted in the devastating depletion of British gold and dollar reserves and served to highlight Britain's dependence on her Atlantic partner. The reluctance of the Labour leadership to forego Britain's imperial influences also placed a strain on the country's finances. When Gaitskell demanded welfare cuts to finance military activities abroad, the Bevanite faction resigned in protest.⁵⁹ Howe believes that the most striking attempt to uphold Britain's super-power status was the Labour leadership's commitment to the nuclear weapons programme. In spite of opposition from such leaders as Cripps and Dalton, on grounds of cost, foreign secretary Bevin was determined that Britain

should '...have this thing over here, whatever it costs ... We've got to have a bloody Union Jack flying on top of it'.⁶⁰ This relationship with America was one of the issues to dominate the Labour Party's foreign policy in the nineteen sixties. Wilson was seen by his critics to be 'slavishly responsive' to American priorities. Aspirations towards British strategic independence and global might did not match the reality of Britain's heavy reliance on American goodwill to shore up her economy or the lack of influence over American policy towards Vietnam. Wilson echoed Bevin when he insisted that, '[w]hatever we may do in the field of cost- effectiveness we cannot afford to relinquish our world role...'⁶¹ Yet, Howe argues, military spending abroad was largely the cause of the balance of payments problems, which bedevilled the Wilson government.⁶²

The Labour Party had emerged as the accepted mouthpiece of the working class, yet the party leadership has found itself to be constantly in conflict with groups on the left who have felt that the party has not been sufficiently far-reaching in its aims and practices. By the nineteen-twenties, this situation had set in train an agenda of internal discipline that has been a feature of the Labour Party throughout most of its history and the youth wing has been but one group to find itself on the receiving end.⁶³ It is in this context that the relationship of the party leadership with its youth groups should be understood.

Factions can be both positive and negative for political parties. This dissertation explores the notion of intra-party activity and the degree to which tolerance of factional conflict occurred in spirit or reality. It also investigates the extent of organised factional activity within the youth movements and the extent to which these movements became prey to predator factions from inside and outside the party. It also examines the extent of dysfunctional divisiveness caused by such activity and whether any of the blame can be laid at the door of the youth movement. The question is posed of how proportionate was the party's response to the factional misdemeanours of the League of Youth in relation to the League's size and real influence. The League of Youth was only an expression rather than a cause of the intense ideological factionalism to which the party has been prone.

Socialisation

Political socialisation may be defined as 'the process, or set of processes, through which people learn about politics and acquire political values.'⁶⁴ There is a vast literature on the nature of socialisation encompassing different perspectives, which it

is beyond the scope of this work to discuss. It is however, the simplified account of socialisation that informs this work in which political attitudes are influenced by the 'agents of socialisation'; family background, religion, education and media.⁶⁵ It also acknowledges the significant impact of the period and the events through which each generation of individuals has lived as an aspect of the socialisation process.

Each agent of socialisation does not operate in isolation. Growing up in a 'labour' family with a socialist Sunday school education may be the initial socialising agents for an individual becoming a member of a Labour youth organisation and may provide norms and values that the individual will take through their lives if they remain in politics. Those members will however later be influenced by the views and attitudes of their peers in the youth movement as well as by the norms and rituals of the party and its related political institutions. Education of a political nature provided by institutions affiliated to the party, or through university, will also play a major role. This is not to suggest that an individual's views and attitudes are not open to change at any stage. The effects, direct or indirect, of such events as economic conditions or a war at home or abroad often lead to a re-appraisal of an individual's political position.

Socialisation is therefore an ongoing process in the life of an individual but an overarching determinant of a person's political attitudes is that of age. It is necessary to take into account generational and lifecycle effects. The views of a young person with few responsibilities outside their university setting will differ significantly from someone who has taken on the role of breadwinner, homeowner and parent.⁶⁶ The discord in attitudes between the ages of the party's youngest members and its leaders emerges strongly in this study. Similarly, the age at which major events or experiences occur is also a factor in determining political attitudes. Guttman's study shows that MPs are not simply divided by political party 'but also by the period during which they became MPs and by the events which cause them to form their political attitudes'.⁶⁷ Similarly, Minkin asserts that each member of the party brings 'to bear on the relationship between the parliamentary party and the extra-parliamentary party a set of attitudes significantly different from its predecessors'.⁶⁸ These insights are developed in the narrative sections of the thesis.

Structure and agency

The Labour League of Youth and subsequent youth organisations in the Labour Party have patently failed. It is tempting simply to direct blame towards the

Parliamentary Labour Party or the League members as main political actors. This would be to assume that it was the intentionalist or voluntarist behaviour of these political actors, which alone led to the historic failure. Such a view would be a simplistic interpretation based upon the explanation of political outcomes as simply the intentions of the actors directly implicated. Hay adopts Marx's notion that while agents do shape the world they live in, the context or circumstances in which this occurs affects their ability to do so. He accepts that Marx perceives a relational link between events and people or between structure and agency and believes that this better captures the essence of structure and agency than attempts to disentangle them as if they were conceptually polar opposites. Agency has been considered as if external factors in creating behaviour can be disregarded. Equally, structuralism has been considered as if habitat and inherited structural constraints ensure that political actors can make no difference and are simply carriers of pre-determined processes. These distinctions are considered too simplistic.⁶⁹ As Eagleton expresses it when referring to simplistic structural explanations, they are 'like halitosis', a condition suffered only by the other person. Such structural explanations marginalise actors and agency. Eagleton acknowledges his debt to Marx and goes on to argue that classes are 'historical agents; but that they are also structural, material formations. Structure and agency are in reality, therefore, intersubjective entities, and the problem is how to link the two aspects of them together.⁷⁰ In terms of understanding the failure of the League of youth, structure and agency need to be reconciled in order to provide an explanation of the manner in which political actors interpreted the context and circumstances in which they found themselves.⁷¹ This is because there is necessarily an interactive relationship between structure and agency. Individuals act on the basis of an appreciation of the constraints that the structures, which they perceive to exist, impose upon them.

Hay has developed this explanation in an early essay on the subject. He advances the view that structure and agency necessarily entail each other and that social and political structures provide both constraints and opportunities for political actors. He explains agency as involving the selection of objectives and the search for the most appropriate means of achieving those objectives within a particular context at a specific moment.⁷²

In his later and more comprehensive explication of structure and agency, Hay argues that structural explanations assume that political behaviour is ordered by context while agency refers to conduct. He recognises the existence of political opportunity or

constraining structures but also the capacity of actors, individual or collective, to be reflexive and not merely creatures of their environment. This assumes an inter-subjective and complex relationship between structure and agency.⁷³ It can be argued in the context of this dissertation, therefore, that Hay might claim that what was lacking by both the League of Youth and the PLP alike was a sense of inter-subjectivity. In assuming the inherent superiority of socialism and of reformism respectively as the necessary solution to the problems generated by capitalism, there was an absence of a real analysis of the extent of the entrenchment of capitalism and of the practicality of either removing or modifying it. Structures do not exist, therefore, in isolation from the human agency that has created them or from the ideational perspectives that agents have about them.

Berman also illustrates an example of ideational perspectives and how these can determine the actions and choices made by individuals. In her study of the Swedish and German social democratic parties, Berman discovered that the different actions taken by the respective parties were determined by their long held ideas and the distinct policy legacies those ideas helped to create. It was not just the structural and institutional variables that accounted for the choices they made but how the parties themselves shaped their own fate. While the historical, structural and institutional factors largely determined the situation that social democratic parties found themselves in, they did not govern how each responded to these situations. The decisions made by each party were constrained both practically and intellectually by the weight and consequences of their past behaviour. The Swedish social democrats, the SAP, having adopted a relatively flexible and undogmatic approach to the cause of democracy in the interwar years, retained a leadership position that led it to social hegemony. The German social democrats, the SPD, however, took an inflexible and orthodox view that left little room for human action. In other words, the SPD failed to seize the moment.⁷⁴ It is evident that the German and Swedish social democratic parties operated within a different ideational framework from the British Labour Party. Such differences can also be evident within the same political party as the examples of the PLP and the party's youth movement demonstrate.

Hay points to the intertwined nature of structure and agency in which agents are 'situated' within a structured context. At any given time, the ability of actors to realise their intentions is set by the context itself. Hay criticises the view of Archer, however, who insists that agency and structure can only be linked over time as they occupy different temporal domains. As such, the pre-existence of structure is a condition of

individual action. Hay's preferred manner of intertwining structure and agency is to advocate what he terms a strategic-relational explanation. He offers an analytical rather than a real distinction between the two concepts of structure and agency, as they exist in a mutually constitutive and dialectical relationship.⁷⁵ The actual distinction is therefore between the strategic action and the strategic context. Agents internalise an interpretation of their context when they select potential courses of action, therefore, and by their actions they also impinge upon that context. Actions are not entirely determined by structures, therefore, but by perceptions of structures which become objectified; but neither is pure agency paramount. This is because the context within which actions are selected is itself strategically selective in that it favours certain strategies over others. Hay provides the example that when politicians monitor the results of their previous strategic actions they can modify both their actions and intentions. He provides the illustration that while politicians may decide to engineer a pre-election economic boom as this has produced electoral victories in the past, politicians may also reflect upon their experiences and recognise that electors too can come to recognise the cynicism and short-termism of such economic manipulations. This can then lead to strategic learning in which politicians may become wary about this type of pre-election manoeuvring.⁷⁶

It can be argued, therefore, that the Parliamentary Labour Party in its relationship with youth organisations and even left-wing activists more generally was too ready to be fatalistic in the internal party debates of the nineteen thirties and so, to reify capitalism or to assume the inevitable moderation of the electorate it could not contemplate, therefore, challenging either. This encouraged the PLP to abolish the Leagues of Youth. Yet the reflexivity of the leadership also led them to attempt a second League in the nineteen fifties learning from their previous experiences that parties should possess a youth organisation; but they continued to adhere to the same fatalism about the political and economic context. It can also be argued, however, that by the nineteen seventies and nineteen eighties, the revolutionary politics advocated by the Militant tendency represented an implausible challenge to existing political and economic structures, and that the Labour Party as a parliamentary entity could not engage strategically with committed Trotskyites. This might shift the onus onto the Young Socialists of the period for their excessive voluntarism and neglect of patently entrenched structural constraints.

Social change in twentieth century Britain may be the product of human behaviour but it presents itself to political actors as a strategic context in which they must

operate. Again, however, perceptions intrude, and it is arguable that there has been a tendency by PLP members, reflecting their socialisation in an earlier period, to fail to understand the needs of their youth movements resulting from external social changes. Party organisations emerge and can flourish or decline as a consequence of the social conditions within which they operate. The generation of young people that had taken political cues from their parents was experiencing real social change and the success of the Labour Party in retaining its young members would depend on its ability to respond and adapt to the new circumstances. The 'generation gap', used to explain the differences in values and attitudes between the older and younger generations in the nineteen-sixties, is more appropriately interpreted as having its roots in the 'age of affluence' of the previous decade.⁷⁷

David Denver considered the view that young people are initially drawn to the Labour Party in significant numbers because of 'lifestyle' effect whereby they believe that there is an outlet for their idealism and desire for social and political change. Furthermore, each generation is dictated by the 'nature of the times', and thereby enters the electorate to be influenced by the political issues and events they see around them whether it be fascism, war, poverty, affluence or environmental issues. With age and responsibility however, there emerges an aversion to social change.⁷⁸ The social changes of post-war Britain were stark as a new generation of young people, unfamiliar with the poverty-stricken nineteen thirties, began to experience the benefit of improved wages, housing, education and the newly formed welfare state. Their role models were to be a redoubtable older generation who had lived through the privations of the previous decade. These circumstances merited an imaginative approach on the part of the leadership in order to manage and benefit from both the vigour and enthusiasm of the young rather than relying solely on the wisdom of the older members.

The League of Youth and successor organisations were also not immune from misperceptions about the interactive and inter-subjective nature of structure and agency. While structures leave scope for human agency many members of these youth organisations under-estimated the impact which their behaviour would have upon their elders as both sets of collective actors sought to interpret the structural and strategically selective context within which both were located. If older PLP leaders were often pessimistic about their potential to bring about radical change, the youth were unduly intentionalist and exaggerated the scope for their independent agency. In the political context, this view of agency is often more euphemistically

defined as political will. A tolerant debate about the political, economic, cultural and social context between the League and the rest of the party might have led to different conduct by both sets of actors.

This analysis demonstrates that the actors involved in this case study of the history of Labour youth may have either over-estimated their capacity to control their political context or alternatively capitulated in the face of what they perceived to be the inevitability of that context. It was a matter of choice that both sets of actors, leadership and youth alike, chose to retain their contrasting views about the strategically selective context in which they performed and that there was surprisingly little strategic learning on either side. The cause of the successive collapses of youth movements differed in detail on each occasion but their repetitive nature suggested habitual behaviour rather than strategic learning. What is apparent, however, is that in the actions that they pursued they appreciably affected that context. The impact was to render Labour youth movements virtually non-viable.

Having described the purpose of this dissertation and the theories and methods that are in place to interpret it, it is now possible to provide the narrative, commencing with the difficult birth of the first Labour League of Youth.

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Chapter 3: A Difficult Birth

Introduction

A recurring conflict between the Labour League of Youth and the wider Labour Party has been the party's reluctance to accede to the League's quest for autonomy within the overall party structure. This chapter demonstrates the origins and reality of that reluctance by discussing the League's difficult birth. Women in the party constituted one of the main influences on the party leadership to set up a youth organisation but there were also a number of other pressures. These pressures included the establishment of youth organisations within the ranks of Labour's party political opponents, the existence of youth organisations in social democratic and labour parties abroad and the perception that the education system and such bodies as the Scout movement were instilling values inimical to Labour's cause. The chapter briefly describes precursor youth organisations for young people in Britain, domestic and foreign models for youth organisations, and more extensively the role played by Labour women and the actions of the Labour Party itself.

Precursors

The broad and balanced curriculum of outdoor activities and education that the Labour Party so often espoused for its young people, and which became the glue that bound the League of Youth membership, had its origins in the previous century. The economic and social uncertainty, which characterised the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, contributed to the establishment of all the major British youth movements: the Boys' Brigade of the eighteen eighties, the Church Lads' Brigade of the following decade and the mass movement of the Scouts in 1908. These movements were all products of their era; moulded out of nationalism and militarism, offering 'an antidote to what could be seen, in a self-fulfilling way, as increasing signs of juvenile restlessness'.¹ Each movement was an assiduous attempt to answer the requirements and stipulations of the young while at the same time channelling their energies into the defence of the realm at home and abroad.² These groups succeeded in getting young boys off the streets and into meaningful open-air activities of which their parents approved.

The existence of the Woodcraft Folk is evidence of a precursor organisation that propagated some of the values that Labour activists could share. The Order of Woodcraft Folk with its emphasis on pacifism, socialism, internationalism and camp

life was set up, in the mid nineteen-twenties, as a left-wing alternative to scouting. Its aim was to challenge the prevailing social order that the scout movement had long conditioned its members to accept.³ The Woodcraft Folk believed that education was the road to Utopia and as such developed an education programme, still operating today, rich in socialist and co-operative content and accessible to boys and girls alike. The labour movement, however, failed to support these potential architects of an egalitarian society. Financial assistance from the co-operative movement and trade unions was limited and late while the Labour Party itself declined to help the organisation.⁴ The Woodcraft Folk was not without its critics. Springhall suggests that the organisation's progressive doctrines were more suited to the nineteen twenties than the nineteen seventies and concluded that the world of the Woodcraft Folk was 'introspective, rather self-enclosed and mutually admiring', which projected an image of 'a self-perpetuating, middle class family sect'⁵.

However, it could be argued that had the Labour Party embraced this infant movement it may have enjoyed a more fruitful relationship with its young members in the future as the Woodcraft Folk did not seek 'the dangerous confrontation with the established political order, or the risks of violence. Their rejection, their protest, took the form of a temporary escape to the open air, to the camp-fire circle, a new religion of the senses.'⁶ The Scouts, a movement supported by powerful political and military circles and the far-reaching publicity it generated could command a thirty thousand camping contingent spread across forty-two nations representing a two-million strong movement, which posed a structural constraint that the party leadership felt unable to surpass.⁷ This, in addition to the adventurous outdoor single-sex activities and a fundamental belief in God to which most parents still adhered including, according to Springhall, 'the most puritanical sections of the labour movement in the regions'.⁸ The party leadership, in the face of these structural constraints felt unable to act on the situation and thereby missed an opportunity to secure the loyalty of future potential recruits to the labour movement.

Domestic and foreign models

The knowledge that it was not only Labour youth which was beginning to display signs of seeking an organisational identity encouraged some in the party to consider the position. The Conservative and Liberal parties had established youth groups earlier in the century. The National League of Young Liberals was established in 1903 and the Junior Imperial and Constitutional League in 1906. The Communist

Party had formed in 1920 and, the following year, its own youth group, the Young Communist League was established. The ILP Guild of Youth was established in 1924 and was soon in direct competition with the Labour Leagues. The Guild of Youth enjoyed national organisation with an annual conference and by the end of 1926 was boasting one hundred and eighty two branches holding a total of nine thousand members. At the same time, university youth groups were also emerging on a substantial scale. The Oxford University Labour Club was set up in 1919, the National Union of Students in 1922, and the University Labour Federation, which had formed in 1921, merged with the University Socialist Federation two years later. The chair of the University Labour Federation, C.R. de Gruchy, in 1923, urged his members to make overtures toward the 'average Labour man'. He asked that allowances be made for 'the difference in our education and method of getting our living, and that we shall be treated as comrades pure and simple...'⁹

The evidence of greater vibrancy among youth in left-wing parties overseas was another influence on the Labour Party. Youth movements on the continent had been active since the beginning of the century. The German youth movement in particular, the Jungendbewegung, in which Labour women were actively interested, was formed in 1900 and though it was middle class in complexion, it was non-militaristic in character. By 1918, Germany had over two hundred thousand young people in a youth movement. The Young Workers International, reformed in 1921 and attended by British delegates for the first time in 1922, had one hundred and thirty thousand delegates from Germany, twenty thousand from Austria, thirty five thousand from Denmark, Holland and Sweden and an unknown but said to be flourishing contingent from Belgium and France. The Hamburg leader at the 1922 conference expressed the disappointment at the sluggish start from Britain.¹⁰

Several European countries had reconstituted the Young Workers International in May 1921. This was featured in *The Labour Woman* in an effort to encourage young people to follow in the footsteps of their European counterparts in protecting young workers from the three arch enemies of militarism and war, economic exploitation and ignorance.¹¹ No such organisation existed in Britain, but there was a determination to be involved. Visitors they may have been in 1922 but 'in 1923 our youth also will be not lookers-on, but participants'.¹² The Young Workers International was held in Nurnberg in 1923 where the British delegate suggested that participation may have been incremental when he reported that practically every

European country had sent a delegation though '[o]ne could have wished for a larger British section'.¹³

The Young Workers International was drawn into a wider network with the women's sections and trade union groups to form the Triple Alliance. The first step in the formation of this body took place at a meeting of the international federation of working women led by Dr Marion Phillips on the last day of the international peace conference in The Hague, in December 1922. The resolution, which was adopted unanimously, stated,

'That this meeting of women, teachers and young workers, delegates to the International Peace Conference, recommend that as a first step towards carrying out the educational programme of that Congress there shall be a Triple Alliance of the Mothers, Educators, and Young Workers throughout the world'.¹⁴

The British delegates to the peace conferences were impressed with the support that the European governments were giving to their young people. Of particular note was the German case, where youth groups had begun at the beginning of the century. A government department specifically devoted to youth issues provided shelters all over the country where young people could stay at little cost. It was probably not lost on the British delegates and womenfolk that at this time, the British government was providing nothing for its youth groups, either financially or otherwise.¹⁵ In many European countries, active youth organisations, with an emphasis on political education, were already well established. In Denmark, Sweden, France and Belgium, young people up to the age of twenty-five could join. The Belgian Association in particular had a strong anti- militaristic tendency, which Max Westphal, of the German SPD, stated 'for a time was so strong that all other work sank into insignificance beside it'.¹⁶

Labour women

The impact of the women's movement in the Labour Party was important in ensuring the emergence of the League of Youth. Women expended much energy in convincing the men in the party to promote the cause of a youth movement. Women played a role through the international federation of working women and the standing joint committee of industrial women's organisation, which acted as an advisory

committee to the National Executive committee, in ensuring that the issue of youth membership was discussed at the 1923 Labour Party annual conference.

Youth had been a consideration of the women's sections since the end of the previous decade, prompted, for the most part by wartime events. In May 1918, the women's publication *The Labour Woman* stressed the importance of the danger of militarism, either 'of spirit or curriculum' in the schools. It was keen to see that the training of young people should be for peacetime. World peace, it goes on to say, will remain only a dream if the education system, 'aims at the development of the individual as soldier first and citizen afterwards...'¹⁷

The National Council for Civil Liberties also joined the debate. At its conference of May 1918, the issue of young people and military training was considered. A resolution followed which declared opposition to the military training of children under the age of eighteen on the grounds that 'all such devices for the militarisation of the rising generation are a menace to the safety of democracy and to the future good relations of the peoples of the world'¹⁸ Not everyone supported these views. The correspondent M.H. Mason, for instance, felt that 'drill and discipline [were] physically as well as morally advantageous'.¹⁹ Nevertheless, there is a noticeable swing away from militarism and the wartime atmosphere and towards the benefits of outdoor life for young people. A correspondent to the letters page of *The Labour Woman*, Mina Console, agreed that military drill may be useful in 'curbing hooliganism' but '[b]y gymnastics, open-air games, gardening and walks with camping in the country we can secure all the beneficial results of military training without any of its deplorable drawbacks or dangers'.²⁰

The women ensured that the wider debate soon incorporated considerations of how to create, for the children, some form of junior Labour League. The women's sections of the London Labour parties held their meeting in April 1919 at the Workers Education Association Hall where the subject of juvenile sections was discussed. Wood Green Labour Party was one of the first to take up the idea and started proceedings immediately; a social event was held with one hundred and seventy nine children attending, forty of whom were enrolled as members of the League of Youth.²¹ What was noticeable was the clarity of purpose with which youth sections were taken up. A correspondent from 'a little village in Wales' insisted that juniors should be trained in how to hold their own offices of secretary, president and treasurer and they would be furnished with good quality reading material, taught

Labour songs and taken for rambles and picnics complete with botany and nature talks.²² In the summer of 1920, Barking, in its show of support for the outdoor life, arranged the first holiday camp for young people. It lasted four weeks and took almost fifty children, boys and girls. The following year, the camp had expanded to twelve weeks and included a camp school benefiting almost three hundred children from the area.²³ The momentum with which youth related activities took off was impressive yet revealed little evidence of support from the formal party itself as it was women who had largely taken the lead.

Advertisements for *The Young Socialist*, a monthly journal that was designed to provide a socialist education for young people, began to appear in the pages of *The Labour Woman*. By the beginning of 1922, the children's pages were featuring articles inviting their young readers to see their local party secretary to answer questions on government cuts in education.²⁴ Each month, the paper made available a range of activities in which young people could get involved. They were invited to write in on such topics as The Young Traveller, Politician, Councillor, and Worker, with prizes available for the best entry. They were also given the opportunity to learn political songs. "Yes we will not have tariffs" to the tune of the well known, "Yes, we have no bananas", was a favourite.²⁵

The confident air and unswerving commitment with which the women approached youth issues was in sharp distinction to the shyness displayed by the party itself. Within less than a year, *The Labour Woman* was appealing to the youth sections to attach young people from outside labour ranks also.

'If we are living witnesses to the faith in each of us a very large proportion will be convinced that our politics are right and will enter the party. Our sections must not act as filters to the party but as nursery grounds'.²⁶

The journal continued to devote a page to its young members offering advice, answering questions and keeping them abreast of issues and forthcoming events. Women organisers were aware of the discomfort felt within some areas by the youth sections, saying of the young that, '[t]hey are idealists without humbug' and that 'party officials may give welcome advice but they should take care not to fetter the sections by imposing their own stereotyped disillusion on them'. The article went on to make the case that the fraternal delegates can 'in a quiet way' stimulate good

influences but if they presume 'to run' the sections they are in danger of becoming mere meetings and will decline in interest and membership.²⁷ Women were not merely promoting the cause of youth in the party, therefore, but were also anticipating the furore that would break out as the League of Youth impatiently sought greater autonomy.

The role of the Labour Party

The Labour Party displayed an apparent ambivalence towards the formation of the League of Youth despite the many pressures to form such an organisation, which has been discussed. This is in sharp contrast to the nurturing role played by women. There were tentative steps towards the establishment of the League at the annual conference in 1924. A scheme for the organisation of youth was adopted at that conference which signalled the setting up of youth sections across the country, loosely referred to as Young Labour Leagues.

An early indication of a party's rationale in terms of its attitude towards its young people might be identified in the party's recruitment process. The Labour Party has had a chequered history in terms of recruitment in general and youth recruitment in particular. The Reform Act of 1918 had trebled the number of voters from roughly seven million to twenty one million. Prior to 1918, the Labour Party consisted of a political federation of affiliated organisations: socialist societies; trades councils; local Labour parties; cooperative societies and trade unions. There had been no provision within the structure of the party for individual members therefore little effort was made to recruit from outside these organisations. In order to capture the new mass electorate created by the Reform Act, the party, in 1918, launched its own constitution, which gave access for the first time to individual members and included the establishment of Labour parties at constituency level.²⁸ However, as Cline and KcKibbin suggest, even after the establishment of the new constitution, the development of an individual membership took on a low priority as it was assumed that men would belong to a trade union and would therefore become members indirectly. The Labour Party's only initiative was directed towards attracting newly enfranchised women, as most were ineligible to join the trade union and unlikely to join the rather sectarian natured socialist societies.²⁹ Following the defeat of the first Labour government in 1924, the party launched a national drive to recruit members. However, no special status was afforded to the newly formed Leagues of Youth. The main targets were the trade unionists already paying the political levy. This was the

first occasion since the creation of an individual membership in 1918 that the Labour Party went out to recruit men.³⁰

Yet, the effort to recruit male members was in contrast to an acknowledged absence of encouragement of youth involvement in party affairs. *The Labour Organiser* as late as April 1924, accepted that,

‘those who move in the constituencies appreciate how deficient is the Labour Party’s work in the direction of attracting and educating the young workers from the period of leaving school till he or she attains manhood or womanhood. There is a great work yet to be done’.³¹

In spite of this knowledge, there was little evidence that the party had any thoughts or ideas as to how these young peoples’ sections should operate. George Lansbury admitted that ‘on what lines this is to be attempted we do not yet know.’ He accepted that militarism needed to be removed from the organisation of youth but could still offer only the organisation of the Boy Scouts or Guides as a solution based upon the notion that, ‘children love uniform and drill’.³² The youth groups themselves were offering a way forward and the party was keen to seize it. The *Labour Organiser* was asked to feature the scheme set up by Colchester Divisional Labour Party and its Young Labour League as an example for others to follow. Colchester’s League was affiliated to its DLP with the objective of promoting the ‘political, social and economic emancipation of the people’. The League was given the power to elect its own officers and committee who could in turn develop their own rules as they thought necessary.³³ The party was therefore impelled towards action by the emergence of ad hoc groups of enthusiastic young people with an antipathy towards militarism, created by the war.

The scope and objectives of the fledgling youth movement were discussed further over the ensuing twelve months. The resulting ‘Organisation of Youth’ scheme was the work of a sub-committee of the National Executive, which had been asked to consider the question the previous year. The Labour Party did not intend the youth sections to exist as separate organisations. In 1924, therefore, the party agreed that as such the ‘organisation of youth should become part of the ordinary organising work of the party, in order that they should more readily and enthusiastically take their place in the labour movement as they reach adult years’. No alteration to the constitution was deemed necessary, though young people were to be given ‘the right

means of cooperation in the general work of the constituencies without forcing upon them responsibilities and duties which should only be borne by the organisations of adult members of the party'.³⁴

The scheme under which the youth organisations were set up determined membership between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one, each paying a minimum subscription of sixpence per year. Each section was to be governed by a committee of management elected from their own members. In addition, the general committee of the divisional party made two appointments to the committee of management, which included one representative from the women's section and the secretary of the Labour Party. The youth section in turn could appoint two members to represent it on the general committee, who could take part in the proceedings, but not to be allowed to vote. In this way, the youth sections were to be attached to and form part of Labour's growing network of constituency Labour parties. The representation of Labour youth on the general committee would, it was felt, 'enable the work of the young to be closer coordinated with that of the Labour Party and also would enable the young members to have the guidance of the people more experienced in the party's work'. There was also concern that full representation may lead to 'exploitation by either side whenever a disagreement occurred in the party' or to young people's sections having the final decision in the selection of candidates. The party sought to justify the limitations it had imposed on the power of youth by stating that if there was a desire by any member to exercise their full rights then, from the age of sixteen, the men's and women's sections were open to membership.³⁵

Caution was writ large in the scheme. It was made clear that in encouraging the work of the young sections, the Labour Party should take care 'not to over-emphasise their political side'. There were three main areas of interest for the youth sections. First, recreation, where, 'opportunity should be found for sports, music, dramatic societies and social intercourse. Second, education, where, 'all developments should be encouraged in the way of study circles, classes, debates, an understanding of the conduct of public work, all of which should be conducted in association with the local Labour Party. Third, participation in election work, where, 'every encouragement should be given for this and full advantage taken of the young people's energy and desire to serve'. For those under the age of fourteen, there would be sections of a largely 'recreational character' with no special plans to bring them into contact with the 'political side of the movement'.³⁶

The proposals recommended by the sub-committee and adopted by the National Executive, were based solely on replies to questionnaires sent out to local parties, as a preliminary to the committee investigation, asking for information on the present state of youth related activities across the country. Indeed, the sub-committee embraced information relating to youth groups in Germany and Scandinavian but not on those at home.³⁷ No evidence was gathered from the youth groups already in existence as to what they might actually want from a youth organisation in their name. It was not long before dissension appeared in the ranks. There was a sense of feeling straitjacketed by the lack of autonomy offered by the scheme.

Clapham Young Labour League, for instance, had been in operation since the beginning of the decade and had received no support from the party headquarters. Dr. W. MacGregor-Reid, speaking for this youth section, believed, 'they had a right to organise in their own way because the older members of the party were not able or not inclined to go in the ways of youth, and the youth had a great desire to possess some form of autonomy which would give them national power'. He felt that the party was underestimating the ability and talents of the young and were indeed taking them backwards with their emphasis on education and recreation when these groups were already involved in political campaigning. Clapham therefore wished to have control of its own method and organisation with autonomy as a national organisation and an age limit of twenty-five.³⁸ Another delegate felt that by not teaching politics, the scheme was missing an opportunity to counteract the imperialist tone of education. He discovered, after reading some of the exercise books of his own children, that they were being taught 'principles which were contrary to those laid down by the Labour Party'. He objected to young people having to learn about the value of the Union Jack and the glories of the empire as laid out under the old capitalist regime, still believing that Britain ruled the waves'.³⁹ There was further gloom at the absence of electoral rights and representation and the refusal to consider a national organisation for youth, which was to remain as sections of their local parties. At this stage therefore, the party did not seem to be offering their young members anything they had not already created themselves and in some cases less, which resulted in many members feeling they were better off organising themselves. The party had made its position clear with the comment that the organisation of youth gives promise of being, 'a splendid training field and recruitment ground for the senior ranks of the movement in the days to come'⁴⁰

However, by 1925, steady progress had been reported with one hundred and fifty branches in operation, rising to two hundred and six the following year. By 1929, national advisory committees had been established to provide a link between the work of the regions and the branches, and the first annual conference had been held in that year. This trend was to continue throughout the nineteen-thirties. Following the Second World War, Labour's youth organisation would peak at just over eight hundred branches in 1951, declining thereafter as recorded in the Labour Party annual reports. Although accurate figures for individual membership do not exist, anything from twenty to two hundred members may have belonged to a branch at a particular time. The pressure, internal and external, combined with the nurturing effect of the women's section proved greater therefore than the resistance of the Labour Party to establish finally a youth organisation.

The party chairman, Egerton Wake, expressed the reasons for the Labour Party's reluctance, in the first instance to establish a youth movement and then denying it autonomous status. It was feared that full representation could lead to young people being, 'used as a field for exploitation by either side whenever disagreement existed in the party and they might even be put in the position, in a matter for example of the selection of candidates, of having the final decision in their hands'. Did the Labour Party really fear its young people or was the reluctance a response to factors more fundamental to internal control?

The rise of such contentious issues as unemployment and the emerging signs of rank and file discontent among the party membership may have heightened the party's caution about the advisability of a youth movement. At the same time, trade union votes were being hardened into fewer and more substantial blocs as the larger unions merged. This further reduced the power and influence of constituency activists in the policy-making process. Their aggravation found various expressions. Many activists were drawn into the struggle between the ILP and the Labour Party leadership whilst others took part in the National Left-Wing Movement, a communist controlled body founded in 1925. Although this movement never became organised due to lack of support, it did lead to the disaffiliation by the National Executive committee of twenty-three local parties over an eighteen-month period.⁴¹

Unemployment had also been a serious problem throughout the nineteen-twenties with the total number of insured unemployed never falling below a million. By 1930, following the collapse of world markets, it had more than doubled to two and a half

million. Those who were employed had their own problems. In the mines and new mass production industries, the relationship between employer and employee was deteriorating in the face of low-paid, blind alley jobs. There were early signs that members of the League of Youth were feeling the pressure of the economic conditions and were eager to do something about it. A delegate to the 1924 party conference agreed that the League should have autonomous status but wished the party to go further. He suggested that 'a definite economic policy should be laid down for the youth sections of the Labour Party, which would aim at, among other things, a definite minimum wage for young workers and definite vocational training during working hours'. It was not reasonable, he declared, 'to expect these young people to continue their training after their day's work was finished'.⁴²

The League of Youth then remained a separate section of the Labour Party, unable to decide policy and with no direct representation on the ruling National Executive. The women's section, itself a group outside the main party, unable to decide policy and with no direct representation on the ruling Executive, was its most devoted sponsor. While it can be argued that the case for a women's section is more evident than that for a youth section, it is as likely that young people identify themselves as a group on the basis of age as do women on gender grounds. It is notable that women were fully conscious of the case for a youth section. This ambiguous role for Labour youth would be questioned in the years to come.

Conclusion

The unswerving commitment which women provided to the nascent League of Youth was in sharp distinction to the reserve displayed by the party itself. External pressures at home and abroad combined with the enthusiasm of the young people themselves and the nurturing of the women's sections ultimately proved greater than the resistance of the Labour Party to establish a youth organisation. The newly established League had a promising launch. The unmistakable tensions with the ever-powerful PLP, however and the difficulties that would result were already becoming evident.

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Chapter 4: What did you do in the League?

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the interaction between the political and social elements of the Labour League of Youth and to illustrate that the League membership revealed an enthusiasm and vibrancy which the Labour Party could have exploited much more effectively than it did.

The publication, by the Labour Party, in 1924 of the *Scheme for the Organisation of Youth* was immediately followed by the formation of new League of Youth branches. Within the first year, approximately two hundred branches had been set up, peaking at just over five hundred by 1935. The second League, established immediately after the Second World War, saw the formation of over two hundred branches in its first year, peaking, in 1951, at eight hundred branches totalling a membership of twenty five thousand. At branch level, membership fell somewhere between twenty and two hundred at any given time though the core of active members was probably nearer to the lower figure. As the branches grew, the higher membership numbers were to be found in the larger towns and cities, especially around London, where Young Labour Leagues had pre-dated the establishment of the League of Youth.¹ Branches in rural areas were often later in being set up and relied heavily on the organisational support of their counterparts in the urban areas. While there is no precise data on the breakdown between men and women, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that there was a balance between the genders.

‘An excellent marriage bureau’, is how Hettie Bower described the Hackney Labour League of Youth in the early nineteen twenties. Bower joined in 1923 at the age of eighteen as one of its youngest members.² John Kotz may well support the description as he met his first wife at Hackney when the League of Youth, of which he was a founder member, was re-established after the Second World War.³ Huddersfield member, Peter Wallace, joined the second League in the nineteen fifties, and confirms this notion when he reports that, ‘at the dances on Sunday evenings, there were no wall flowers, we all got a dance’.⁴

Labour Party support

The formation of new branches was soon followed by requests for information and advice on how to run them. This, along with the escalating number of activities and

the speed in which news was travelling from branch to branch, led to attempts by Transport House to provide some means of coordination within the Leagues. The vehicle for this was the League of Youth *Monthly Bulletin*, which was first issued in July 1929 by the Labour Party press and publicity department. Its purpose was to, 'satisfy the need for some means of communication between the advisory committees and the branches of the League of Youth to keep in touch with developments and activities taking place'. In addition, a handbook was published to guide members in the setting up of new Labour Leagues.⁵

The Labour Party offered further support through its affiliation to organisations such as the Youth Hostel Association and the National Workers' Sports Association. In 1931, the National Executive committee also agreed to affiliate, on the behalf of the League of Youth, to the International Union of Socialist Youth, 'so that our young people may have every opportunity of studying the movement abroad'.⁶ The senior party helped to assist therefore the growth of international development. This European dimension to youth activity proved very popular with many members. Huddersfield member, Gilbert Hanson joined the delegation to the youth conference held in Vienna in 1949 attended by over thirty thousand young people from around the world. 'We were all Europeans', Hanson recalled. He and his contemporaries believed that the European Union would become one state, a socialist state, within their lifetime; a view he later reflected to be somewhat starry-eyed.⁷ There were also delegations to Sweden and members of youth leagues from various countries were invited to speak at League of Youth conferences. In August 1930, Felix Kantz, Chair of Austria's Socialist Youth, spoke to Cambridge League of Youth. He was the first member of the Youth International to meet League members and this event led, the following year, to a return invitation to the Workers' Olympiad in Vienna.⁸ The international rally of socialist youth was held in 1934 and attended by a reported one hundred and seventy thousand young people who all marched on Liege. This too led to a reciprocal visit from Austrian and Swedish comrades.⁹ Similarly, Baroness (Shirley) Williams recalled her experience as a fraternal delegate to the first post-war meeting of the German Jungsozialisten in Hof, Bavaria, in 1947. She recalls being 'moved' by an address by Kurt Schumacher, leader of the SPD, who had spent some years in a concentration camp.¹⁰

Accommodation

The constant round of League of Youth activity led to a strong desire among members to establish a permanent home for each branch. John Kotz recollects with

enthusiasm the Hoddesdon socialist youth hostel, later known as the Clarion youth hostel, and indeed the first Labour youth hostel to be established in Britain. London members of the pre-war League of Youth set up this non-profit making venture in early 1934. They had contributed their unemployment benefit to a grant given to them by Stafford Cripps in order to renovate a semi-derelict Georgian manor house, 'The Geddings', in Hertfordshire. Within the first year, it had gas and electricity, indoor accommodation for eighty young people under the age of twenty-five, and unlimited outdoor capacity. *The Labour Magazine* of August 1934 reports, 'Hundreds of young people from all parts of the country came to Hoddesdon to live socialism.' The hostel, standing in ten acres of gardens and grounds, had its own management committee and warden, and claimed four thousand five hundred visitors, paying one shilling per week, in the first six months. Two meetings were held each week with an average of thirty young people in attendance along with dances, organised events, summer schools and an extensive library.¹¹ 'Down the Clarion', John Kotz remembered, 'we lived as socialists'.¹² The centre was advertised in several publications of the period and was well attended. In October 1933, H. V. Tewson, assistant secretary of the Trades Union Congress, visited the youth hostel to speak on the structure of trade unionism, and reported in *The New Nation* how greatly impressed he was with this group of young people. 'Youth – as keen as mustard. Youth – alive. Youth – a potential font of energy ...' He went on to say that he wished there were another hundred centres like it.¹³ The hostel continued after the war until the building was eventually placed under a compulsory purchase order to make way for industrial development.

The picture was similar across the country. In 1929, the Southgate branch of the League of Youth took over a disused army hut, which it turned into headquarters complete with sports ground and pavilion to which other Leagues were invited. In the same year, Normanton and Altoft branch acquired rooms sufficient to house a gymnastic club and a separate club for boys and girls.¹⁴ Gilbert Hanson recalls laying the dance floor with other League members at the rooms they rented in Station Street, Huddersfield. For Hanson, it seemed a natural thing to do for unemployed people with time on their hands.¹⁵

Social activities

It is intriguing to learn of the long-lasting marriages, friendships and associations, which had their roots in the Labour League of Youth. The range of available activities, which emerged in the life of the League, was phenomenal and particularly

significant was the urge to meet with other comrades. London, where there were thirty-six League of Youth branches, was the first to report in the new bulletin in 1929. The branch had held a summer camp on the edge of Ashdown Forest, which had been advertised to other branches at a fee of fifteen shillings, including the rail fair. League members from Shoreditch joined the members of Southgate at their open day and made their way through the streets of 'this respectable Conservative neighbourhood wearing red Tam O'Shanter hats and gold tassels, clearly indicating to which party they belonged'. The Leagues also made use of the resources available to them: Bedford branch of the League of Youth ran a river trip, including picnic to which they invited other Leagues.¹⁶ By 1931, weekend camping trips were being initiated, with Hugh Dalton opening the first permanent weekend camp in London.¹⁷

The social activities of the League of Youth are further illustrated by the comprehensive reports of life in the wards that make up the Newport constituency. Outdoor life for the Welsh Leagues enjoyed the same prominence as for their Scottish and English counterparts. A wide range of sports clubs and teams sprang up including football, cricket and a ladies skittles team, while cycling and rambling occupied many weekends during which twenty to thirty people were reported to have had 'an extremely enjoyable time'. Indoor activities followed the now familiar pattern of regular monthly socials ranging from dances with live bands to the more sedate 'lawn' dance accompanied by a piano loaned to the League by one of its members. Refreshments 'to include tea and mineral waters' could be obtained 'at the Cooperative Stores.' In addition, to the ever-popular whist drives.¹⁸

The arts also played a prominent role in League of Youth activities. Drama especially became popular with plays— sometimes for pure entertainment, often for political propaganda purposes – being staged around the country and many branches participated in the entertainment provided by the Unity Theatre. The Unity Theatre Movement, largely amateur, grew out of the agitprop street theatre in the East End of London in the early nineteen thirties. It became the inspiration for a national upsurge in drama based on social and political issues. The theatre's audience was drawn mainly from trade unions and organised labour movements, with support from eminent personalities such as George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells. During the Second World War, it sent out small groups of performers to factories and party meetings. Many well-known theatre people such as Michael Gambon, Warren Mitchell and Ted Willis, who later became the unofficial national leader of the League

of Youth, learned their skills in the Unity Theatre Movement. Indeed, it has been described as the most sustained and successful contribution made by working class people to British drama.¹⁹ Peter Wallace can remember being chosen for the leading part of a Unity three-act play, which was performed by the League of Youth branch in Huddersfield.²⁰ John Kotz, too recalled the visit by Unity Theatre to his branch, which led to play-reading sessions for branch members.²¹ The theatre was destroyed by fire in 1975 but had already begun to decline with the advent of licensing in the nineteen sixties after which mainstream theatres were able to meet the demand for radical, satirical drama.

No detail was too small in the League of Youth's social activities where the party felt support and advice were needed. Given that members of the League were effectively serving their political apprenticeships, the constitution of the Leagues mirrored that of the main party and the running of such important activities as whist drives was watched carefully. Maurice Hackett, Labour Party secretary, noted that most branches were running their own drives by 1929, and was concerned that care should be taken in moving players and checking scores so as not to bring the game into disrepute. It was suggested that the Leagues follow 'the system of moves, trumps, indication, checking, etc favoured by the party drives'.²²

Political activities

The social life of the Leagues did not stand alone. 'The joy of combining propaganda with pleasure' was how Eric Fisher in August 1929 described the linking of rambling and cycling with open-air meetings, leafleting and canvassing.²³ Jimmy Allan shared such experience. Allan, known to many of his comrades as 'Red Allan' and the only surviving member of a family of six children whose father had died in the Great War, began rambling with the League of Youth in the early 1930s at the age of sixteen, and continues to do so today. Rambling became the love of Allan's life, marred only by the death of his walking partner and wife Audrey whom he met, like many others, in the League. Unemployment took him and his friends to the hills. Having nothing else to do, they honed their political views over the moors of Huddersfield and further afield as a group of men – plumbers, painters, and joiners – all out of work but sharing a common interest. They were accustomed to long walks with sandwiches in pocket, looking for work.²⁴

Betty Boothroyd, retired speaker of the House of Commons, further noted the link between the social and political aspects of League of Youth activity. Boothroyd was a

League of Youth member in the early nineteen fifties. In her autobiography, she includes a photograph of herself with League of Youth members on Haworth Moor, describing it as 'politics and fresh air'.²⁵ The political apprenticeship supplied by the League of Youth, combined with the background of its members, were integral to many who went on to pursue political careers. Boothroyd has described her experience in the movement as providing her with a 'passport to a lifetime in politics and public service' and recalls the fun of meeting people of her own age at the League meetings. It was through the League of Youth that she attended study courses and lectures laid on by the party, thereby providing her 'first experience in front-line politics – and [she] relished it'.²⁶

However, such political apprenticeship also necessitated more cerebral activity. Writing in 1929, Eric Fisher believed, like many others, that knowledge was power and that the young should be 'thrashing out the problems of modern Britain' week by week through discussion groups, speakers and study classes. Only by the sparks set by such groups, he insisted, will 'the mighty flame of socialism continue to burn and spread'; only with an 'educated democracy' would Labour, as a movement be successful.²⁷ To give substance to such claims, one of the objects of the League of Youth, as defined in the *Rules for the League of Youth*, was 'to provide study circles, classes and debates in order to give understanding of the conduct of public work in association with the Labour Party'. It goes on to state that, '[a]part from amusement, discussions on party policy, and classes in connection with the same, are not only allowable, but encouraged'.²⁸ By 1935, one hundred and sixteen study groups had been set up around the country for which support materials were provided.

The League of Youth had, by 1934, affiliated to The National Council of Labour Colleges. As a movement, the Labour colleges was a more avowedly socialist organisation than the Workers' Education Association: a phenomenon symbolised by its Marxist influenced view that to receive state funding would jeopardise its independence and its socialist values. Labour colleges were not new at this time. The first Labour college was established in 1908, initiated by students at Ruskin College, Oxford, who, in opposition to the college's refusal to teach Marxism, set up their own organisation.²⁹ By 1922, they had spread across the country with the establishment of the National Council for Labour Colleges. These were less buildings than gatherings of Labour and cooperative members who had a desire to further their knowledge and understanding of social and political affairs. The colleges were successful and enjoyed the support of the trade unions and the cooperative

movement. In remembering guest speakers and lecturers from the Labour colleges, John Kotz recalled that he owed 'a lot to the League of Youth in my education', going on to say that he had 'a better education in the League of Youth than at school'.³⁰

The primary function of the Labour colleges was for

'the education of workers from the working class point of view, through the medium of colleges, classes and public lectures; the co-ordination and extension of this independent working class educational work; the issuing of leaflets, syllabuses, etc, for the assistance of class tutors and students'.³¹

There was free access to classes and one free correspondence course each year for each branch. Len Collinson, a League of Youth member in 1950-51, later went on to work for the colleges and recalls being the organisation's youngest lecturer.³² A 1933 advertisement in *The New Nation* for the colleges stated: 'He will be a smart policeman who will arrest the spread of ideas, but apathetic Labourists do it daily'.³³

Writers who embodied the early socialism of the Labour Party, such as Blatchford, Shaw, Cole, Suthers and Lansbury, were recommended in various publications as essential reading for League members. There was also the ILP Bookshop, the Left Book Club and the Fabian Library, which held at any one time about five thousand volumes. The League of Youth was able, as an organisation, to subscribe and for a fee of ten shillings a month borrow a box of twenty books for a period of three months. Indeed, South Hackney League of Youth established the Red Circle circulating library that included socialist and literary works that they hoped would also attract non-socialists. Jean Megahy recalls the day and weekend schools run by the National Council of Labour Colleges. One of Jean's diary entries for a weekend school in 1950 reads, 'Industrial History (Food, Population and The Colour Bar)'. There were also many debating competitions where some of today's prominent speakers learnt their trade.³⁴ To similar effect, the *Daily Herald* ran regular essay competitions in the 1920s. 'By such means', W Arthur Peacock insisted in 1929, 'it should be possible to train many of the party's future workers and to establish contact with the most suited for office in various organisations'.³⁵

The Newport League of Youth regarded political education as a vital activity and urged members 'to take their socialism seriously' and were actively encouraged to join the National Council of Labour Colleges, which provided 'the best form' of education. A range of speakers was invited to League meetings where they

delivered 'highly interesting and educative talks' on such subject matter as the economics of colonial exploitation. On one occasion, the League of Youth was 'favoured' by a Mr Lewcock, who took along a portable wireless set in order that members could 'greatly appreciate' a speech by Philip Snowden. In addition, the Leagues readily took up grants offered by the national youth officer to attend summer schools. For those who wished to display their debating or literary skills there were mock trials and essay competitions available.³⁶

The minutes of the monthly meetings of the Leagues of Youth suggest that if members did not impose their own procedures, formalities and keen sense of duty, they certainly did not shy away from them. Correspondence and literature sent to League branches from head office was generally read and discussed in detail and in many cases lead to debate. Lists of proposed rules were often drawn up by the Leagues themselves and each item 'read out separately and discussed.'³⁷ Setting up something as simple as a dance habitually generated 'a long and heated discussion.' while the suggestion that League of Youth meetings finish with a rendition of *The Red Flag* was the cause of 'a lengthy controversy'.³⁸ Furthermore, League of Youth officers themselves took procedural matters seriously and were often seen to take an equally disciplinarian attitude as their masters. Branch members whose subscriptions had fallen into arrears by more than four weeks were, in some cases, not permitted, by branch rules, to attend further meetings. Furthermore, high priority was given to regular attendance at branch meetings whereby failure to do so required a written statement and the case considered by a committee of the League.³⁹ In 1929, a League of Youth branch was urged to 'make itself really beneficial to the parent body', by one of its members.⁴⁰ Indeed, in some talks, there could be heard the voice of their forebears: In 1934, the League was reminded by one of its own members of 'the rough path the old socialists took to make it what it is today'.⁴¹

It is difficult to measure the extent to which the League of Youth shaped the political views of its generation. The movement was predominantly working class with its fair share of unemployed members. Many had a family background of political involvement or philosophy in the labour tradition.

Individual members

One such individual is Jimmy Allen whose family background is steeped in the values and traditions of the labour movement. At ninety years old, Allan did almost the whole

of the interview with the author from a standing position interrupted only briefly to make a drink of tea, having apparently lost nothing of the urge to deliver a speech from a soapbox. Allan has been a member of the Labour Party for over seventy years, although his involvement with both the co-operative movement and trade unionism means that he identifies himself more as a member of the labour movement than of simply the Labour Party. He and his friends decided that as individuals they were weak, but as a group, they stood a chance and it was to this end that the Huddersfield branch of the League of Youth was formed in the early nineteen thirties. A later chapter will provide a detailed study of the Huddersfield branch of the League of Youth. As such, Allan saw himself as a propagandist and agitator, prepared to campaign for almost any cause. Anti-fascism marches, aid for China and Spain, May Day rallies, anti-war marches – ‘any chance and you were out on the streets’. He can remember carrying a hand bell and chair around the streets and delivering a sermon until they were moved on either by the police or the neighbours.⁴²

Jim Mortimer, general secretary of the Labour Party in the nineteen-eighties, developed a strong interest in the labour movement as a schoolboy, due chiefly to family influences. Mortimer grew up in a working class family whose traditions encompassed mining, textiles, the early ILP and active trade unionism. He joined the Portsmouth North branch of the League of Youth at fourteen years of age and remembers, despite the meetings being well attended, the disappointment when no one spoke to him. Like many others, he also attended the National Council of Labour Colleges and it was here that he met a member of the Portsmouth Central branch, which had been recommended to him as being ‘politically very lively and left-wing’. He transferred his membership and recalls feeling very comfortable with fellow dockyard workers. Mortimer later joined Brixton League of Youth, a very strong and active branch with a prevailing mood he describes as being ‘strongly on the left’ and where meetings were often crowded and permeated with ‘strong political interest and activity.’ Activities involved mid-week and weekend events, open-air meetings opposite Lambeth Town Hall, leaflet distribution, dances and, of course camping at Hoddesdon youth hostel. He joined rallies and demonstrations in support of aid for Spain, solidarity with the India League and the China Campaign committee. It was at Brixton where he met Ted Willis who would later become the national leader of the League of Youth.⁴³

It would be difficult to find a more positive advocate for the League of Youth than Jean Goldie. Goldie joined the Sunderland League after the Second World War and

recalls the period as 'one of the most exciting and happy times of my life...' She clearly enjoyed being part of a large group of like-minded people with whom she shared 'a common cause, loyalty and a sense of belonging' and where she and comrades were inspired and encouraged by the Labour Party agent, Geoff Foster, himself a young man of twenty-eight. She recollects always being involved and interested in the Labour Party due to her father being an activist. It was in the League of Youth that Jean met her husband, David Goldie, who was secretary of the Paisley branch. The view, often held, that the youth movement should operate as a training ground for future generations with young members acting as foot soldiers is one with which Goldie would concur. Indeed, the opportunities afforded by the party to its young people; overseas travel, conferences, meetings with high ranking party officials, leads her to observe the League of Youth as 'the future of our party' whose influence throughout her life was 'immeasurable' She reflects,

'Even after more than half a century, I remember fondly the comradeship and fun we had and am grateful for the abiding friendships made in those years following the Second World War when young people in the League were filled with enthusiasm, wanting to change the old regime in a classless society with opportunities for everyone to reach their full potential, with full employment and a national health service to be the envy of the world'.⁴⁴

Lord (Frank) Judd also claims to have been heavily influenced by his home background where he recalls that political discussion was always lively. His mother was active in the Labour Party and had been a candidate in the 1945 general election and again in 1950. Lord Judd followed his sister Nan into the League of Youth and gained much from his position as vice-chair and later 'Prime Minister' in the local youth parliament. He remembers taking as their programme the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He later went on to the London School of Economics, where he became involved in student politics, and a distinguished political career.⁴⁵

Growing up with an 'air of socialism' all around was not always the motive for joining the League of Youth. Huddersfield born author Aileen Armitage grew up in such an environment. Armitage's grandparents, James and Annie Stott Armitage were involved in the Fabian and cooperative movements and were instrumental in setting up the Workers' Education Association. Her parents, she describes as being socialist all their lives, her mother, 'believing deeply in the Labour Party as the means to a better life for the ordinary man and woman'. It was at her mother's suggestion that

she joined the League of Youth in Huddersfield though it was not primarily for political reasons. Armitage admits that her education in an all girls school and having little contact with boys had some bearing on her decision. She goes on to say that throughout the year she spent in the League of Youth, before going on to university, she cannot remember doing anything political at all. For her, going to meetings was a social event though socialist themes would later be reflected in her novels.⁴⁶

Spen Valley Labour League of Youth operated from Keir Hardie Hall in Heckmondwike and was dominated for a time by Peter Thornton's family. Thornton, along with his cousin, Derek was a founder member of the Spen Valley League, which they began organising just before the end of the war. The branch was launched with a social in May 1946 attended by around two hundred young people followed, a month later by an inaugural meeting. The younger members were, he remembers, left to organise themselves although some senior members had less than positive recollections of the pre-war League and were reluctant to allow this freedom. Members were invited from neighbouring Dewsbury, an already thriving branch, to outline their activities. Thornton recalls 'two very presentable young ladies' who would later be known as Baroness Lockwood and Baroness Boothroyd. He took charge of most activities in the branch and indeed learned to dance through the many socials he organised. The first significant event was a rally and tea at the Keir Hardie Hall, with speakers from the National Council of Labour Colleges, to which every League of Youth branch in the region was invited. It was a huge success and repeated the following year. When he became too old to be a member, the party appointed Thornton as a youth organiser.⁴⁷

Granville Whiteley, a member of the Huddersfield branch of the League of Youth after the Second World War, believed he would not have entered politics without the experiences he had in the League. The League's socialist views were identical to his own and provided a meaningful outlet. It gave him the opportunity to meet people and organise them, the two things he enjoyed most. He was encouraged after listening to such eminent speakers as Clement Attlee and Harold Wilson. Such was the inspiration that Whiteley stood for and was elected to the council in 1956. His wife Barbara believed the League helped form her opinions, as prior to her membership she held few political views. Following branch meetings she would find herself arguing with her father, a Liberal, and him asking her where she got her ideas from.⁴⁸

For Gilbert Hanson, meanwhile, life in the League of Youth, which he chaired in 1949, was, above all, a means to have input into the Labour Party; the social scene was a welcome but secondary concern. Hanson saw the youth movement as mainstream, offering a voice within the party that groups on the far left would never have.⁴⁹

Tom Megahy was a member of the Lanark branch of the Labour League of Youth, which reportedly had the highest membership in Scotland. It was a vibrant League well supported by the constituency Labour Party and trade unions, in particular the National Union of Railwaymen, which funded several of the League's activities. Megahy describes the League of Youth structure in Scotland as thriving with a keen desire to be involved at both local and federation level and much competition for offices. He maintains that he owes his political skills to the Citrine school. Following the General Strike of 1926, Walter Citrine, along with Ernest Bevin, highlighted the need of trade unionism in safeguarding and improving the standards of working people within the existing social system, and more importantly, whatever government might be in power. Citrine concerned himself with all the characteristics of trade unions and the trade union movement. In particular, he had a gift for engaging in the problems of organisation, structure and administration.⁵⁰ As a student of Citrine, Megahy grew up on the language of procedure such as 'points of order' and 'amendments', where no one was allowed to monopolise a meeting or depart from the point of discussion. He believed that the procedures were essential, particularly where attendance at meetings was high but in general as a device to ensure that business was conducted effectively and efficiently and also to afford a safeguard to those present should any aspect of the meeting be challenged at a later date.⁵¹

If an apprenticeship were needed for electioneering, then those League of Youth members, who learnt from their elders the tricks of the trade that they would never forget, undoubtedly served it. Megahy for example, recalled League members being used to fill in time when candidates or speakers from the party had not yet arrived. Trying to keep a waiting audience interested or being placed on a platform at short notice to move a vote of thanks by the party was 'a marvellous experience in public speaking.' It was also one that would serve him well when he came from Scotland to Leeds for the finals of a debating competition, sponsored by the *Daily Herald* in 1952.⁵² Megahy went on to become the first leader of Kirklees Council and later Labour MEP for Yorkshire South West.

Youth rallies

In September 1949, an event was held which had an indubitable impact on the lives and experiences of League of Youth members. 'One crowded week of glorious life', was how Tom Driberg, in his column for the *Daily Herald*, described Labour's first, large-scale youth rally, held at Butlin's holiday camp in Filey, North Yorkshire.⁵³ The rally was the culmination of a recruitment campaign initiated by Len Williams, assistant national agent of the Labour Party and newly appointed national youth officer. Under Williams, a national youth consultative committee was set up with two members from each region. A. J. McWhinnie described the committee, which comprised of twenty-three members, as 'Britain's potential cabinet ministers of 1970.' The prediction was to remain unfulfilled, though the group nevertheless was invited to meet at Transport House where they sat around 'the U-shaped inlaid walnut table where the Labour leaders of today make their vital decisions'.⁵⁴ Such was the interest among the membership of the League of Youth nationally that it was able to take a block booking with a reported three thousand participants virtually taking over the camp for the week. Bruce Millan, later European commissioner, chaired the conference and was said to have 'rode the storm steadily.' A mock election was held for which Will Nally, later Labour MP for Bilston, was one of the candidates and whose supporters, Driberg, states 'devised stunts worthy of the early nineteenth century hustings...' Jean Goldie, then Urquhart, competed for the *Daily Herald Trophy* in the national public speaking competition and was described as an 'eager, charming redhead...easily the best of all eleven chairmen;' Driberg concluded with the comment that, 'coming out of such a week is rather - especially for the senile dodderers over twenty-five - like coming out from under an anaesthetic. The operation however, was successful; the patient is rejuvenated'.⁵⁵ Layton-Henry's view that, 'the rally was hardly a serious political meeting, but rather a mixture of a holiday outing and a weekend summer school',⁵⁶ does not seem to be a view shared by those recollecting their memories of the event. The rally took place again three years later.

By 1952, the League of Youth had another national youth officer, and a further recruitment campaign was initiated culminating in yet another rally at Filey. Len Collinson, a Filey attendee, described the event as, 'a defining moment'.⁵⁷ Molly Walton, now seventy-four and still serving the Labour Party in Kirklees recalls, 'All the big names were there – Nye Bevan, Barbara Castle, Ian Mikardo, Harold Wilson'. Mikardo and Castle were reported as deciding to end the last night with a

rousing rendition of *The Red Flag* and finding themselves up against the band, which was trying to drown them out with *There'll always be an England*. A march was organised around the camp, singing Labour songs though, as Molly recalls, not much of this was reported in the press. She remembers the camp being deserted when Bevan spoke in the Regency ballroom as such was his popularity everyone crammed into the ballroom, filling windowsills and staircases. Such events brought together many League of Youth members from different branches.⁵⁸ The rally was reported to be four to five thousand strong, leading Jean Megahy to reflect, 'Where would we get those numbers now?'⁵⁹

Conclusion

This chapter provides, in some cases a detailed picture, in others a snapshot, but generalisations can be made about the vitality, imagination, intelligence and commitment of the generation of young Labour activists who made up the League of Youth. It is the harnessing of the qualities that these young people demonstrated that was essential if the Labour Party was to maintain a successful youth organisation. The League balanced political and social activity and its members fused the two effectively. Few members joined for social reasons alone. Where their major motive was to engage with other young people however, there was always some political motivation in the background. For other individuals political commitment was paramount but they too participated in the range of social activities that developed. The nature of the social activities was very much a reflection of the period. The following chapters explore further the relationship between the party and its youngest members.

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- ²⁵ Boothroyd, 2002 p 76-77
- ²⁶ Boothroyd, 2002 p 44
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- ²⁸ *ibid.* February 1931
- ²⁹ Collinson, interview with author, 2003
- ³⁰ Kotz, interview with author, 2003
- ³¹ National Council of Labour Colleges from collection of J P M Millar. [online],
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- ³⁵ *The Labour Magazine*, 1929-30 vol. 3 p 448
- ³⁶ Malpas Ward League of Youth Minutes. August 1937 – December 1939
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- ³⁹ *ibid.*, January 1939
- ⁴⁰ *ibid.*, March 1929.
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- ⁴² Allan, interview with author, 2002
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- ⁴⁷ Thornton, P. Thornton, J. and Thornton, G., interviews with author, 2004
- ⁴⁸ Whiteley, interview with author, 2003
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- ⁵¹ Megahy, T., interview with author, 2002
- ⁵² Megahy, interview with author, 2002. Denis Healey judged the competition at which Betty Boothroyd was the main speaker for her team and went on to win.
- ⁵³ Tom Driburg, 1949, 'A good time was had by all', *Daily Herald*, September
- ⁵⁴ McWhinnie, 1949, '23 youngsters in the seats of the mighty', *Daily Herald*, 12 January
- ⁵⁵ Driberg, 1949, *Daily Herald*. September/October
- ⁵⁶ Layton-Henry, 1976 p 287
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- ⁵⁸ Walton, interview with author, 2005
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Chapter 5: The First League of Youth

Introduction

This chapter examines the political role of the first Labour League of Youth and explores the ideological tensions and key disputes that governed the period. The chapter highlights the major themes of age and autonomy, in particular the stance taken by the party in relation to these matters, and the subsequent effect on the relationship between the League and the party leadership. Also investigated is the impact on the members of the League of both foreign and domestic issues and the extent to which these contributed to the tensions between the party and its youth organisation.

The political backdrop

The period spanning the first League of Youth had all the ingredients with which to create a radical and vibrant youth movement. The extension of the franchise through the 1918 Representation of the People Act had opened up the party to individual members in the constituencies for the first time increasing the number of working-class voters. The rapid expansion of the Labour vote helped to transform the Labour Party into a national party of government. Following the decline of the Liberal Party in the nineteen-twenties, the Labour Party had become the second major force on the left of British politics. The Leagues formed the youth wing of this young political party expounding the socialist ideals of well-known left-wing thinkers as Blatchford, Shaw, Auden, Cole and Spender. It was the 'Red Decade', in which British politicians were preoccupied with the 'two great national anxieties, mass unemployment and the threat of war and finding it difficult to find an answer to either of them.'¹ In addition, in this decade, young people had access to such influential works as Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* and George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*, both writers were members of the League of Youth. There was access to Fabian Schools and the communist controlled Left Book Club, the growth of which had been stimulated by opposition to the Spanish Civil War, a conflict about which the youth movement felt strongly. Marwick saw the youth movement as a vehicle for the reinforcement of the ideas that had originated with older intellectuals.² In this atmosphere, the party's youngest members could be used as conduits for the spread of ideas coming from outside the party. In such a situation, the decision taken by the agency of the PLP to respond was going to be crucial.

James Jupp argues that the spectacular rise to power of the Labour Party in the nineteen-twenties came to an abrupt halt, betrayed by the leaders who had inspired

it. The trade unions were disillusioned by the General Strike of 1926, shackled by the Trades Dispute Act, and demoralised by the depression. The Marxists were isolated within the Communist Party, the ILP was ready to disaffiliate from the Labour Party and the Fabian Society was moribund. If the Labour Party was to recover intellectually from the collapse of MacDonald's gradualism and to build its local organisation, it needed support from radical intellectuals and from its youth.³

The decade was also characterised by the decline of major industries leading to high unemployment, poor housing and increased poverty. Many felt deeply uncomfortable with Britain's involvement in an 'imperial war'. Moreover, the crisis of 1929-31, during which Ramsay MacDonald had been accused of betraying the Labour Party to join a Conservative dominated coalition national government had an impact on the national conscience of a youth movement, which was already becoming strongly aware of the social and economic ills at local and national level.⁴ The effect of both domestic and foreign issues meant it was likely that the party's youngest members were not going to support the 'status quo'. As victims of the dire economic circumstances that marked the period, young people looked upon the Labour Party they had joined for some influence in policy-making and freedom of control over their own affairs. This was to prove a controversial issue throughout.

How old is youth?

If a party is to have attached to it a youth organisation then by necessity there will be attempts to define it by age. Arthur Marwick argues that youth, however it is to be defined, makes its first significant appearance as a political and cultural phenomenon on the British scene in the 1920s and had to wait until the nineteen sixties and the working through of the social and economic changes, which accompanied World War Two to acquire a positive role in society.⁵ Hobsbawm observed however that it was in the nineteen fifties that a youth culture emerged. This youth culture was, he noted, global in nature, and one in which young people were taking on an identity, characterised by rock music, fashion, new technologies and increased purchasing power, that was noticeable for how it separated the generations in a way not seen in the nineteen twenties.⁶ Marwick takes youth, the years of young adulthood, as having its 'pole' somewhere in the twenties. These articulate, self-conscious individuals, a small minority in the total age group at any one time he notes 'do not get up and make impassioned speeches on behalf of the status quo'.⁷ The point is supported by Hobsbawm who states that, '[y]outh groups not yet settled in

established adulthood are the traditional locus for high spirits, riot and disorder...’ and that, ...’revolutionary passions are more common at eighteen than thirty-five’.⁸

It is true to say that many of the disagreements surrounding the first League of Youth centred on the age limit imposed by the party on the membership of its youth sections. The word adult does not feature in the scheme for youth organisation, which states that, ‘boys and girls between the ages of fourteen and twenty one shall be eligible for membership’. There was some flexibility at the younger end of the age range as the Executive Committee made it clear that they did not ‘in any way discourage the formation of junior sections for children under fourteen mainly of a recreational character’ although they did not intend to bring these groups into contact with ‘the political side of the movement’.⁹ This proposal was anathema to those who had been active in the Leagues from 1920 during which time no one had shown any such interest in their age or any other aspect of youth organisation. Dr. W. MacGregor-Reid, representing Clapham, which in 1920 had been the first area to establish a youth organisation, relayed the message from its League of Youth that twenty-one was ‘not the best age limit’ and asked that it be raised to twenty-five. The proposals for the junior sections were less rigid but still did not satisfy everyone. There was surprise from one delegate that there were no plans to teach politics to the youngest members of the movement, as they were not deemed ready. What sort of education, he asked, were they going to give these young people, if it was not of a definite working-class character? He believed that the party itself should undertake the education of all young children. The delegate for Wimbledon, Merton and Morden LP went further in requesting an age limit of twenty-six.¹⁰

By 1926, the Young Labour Leagues and Young People’s Sections were under the uniform title of The Labour League of Youth and the upper age limit, though remaining at twenty-one, allowed for those up to the age of twenty-five to retain their membership provided that they became individual members of the party thereafter. This was less a response to the pleas of conference delegates than an exercise in offsetting the recruitment drive of the ILP on behalf of its youth organisation the Guild of Youth, which was established in 1924 in direct competition with Labour’s youth sections. As Layton-Henry points out, the NEC was responding to events rather than initiating change.¹¹

Age remained an issue into the nineteen-thirties and encouraged scorn from several quarters. In 1934, William Ridler of Ruskin indicts his elders in an article entitled *Youth's Bitter Criticism of Age* when he says that even after allowing itself to be involved in,

‘so gigantic a cataclysm as the Great War...’, ‘age still offers its pompous platitudes to youth. It describes its advice as the fruits of experience. All too often they are only sour grapes’. He concludes, ‘Age is no pilot to Utopia’.¹²

A resolution at the 1933 conference, to raise the upper age-limit from twenty-five to thirty, was defeated. The delegate for Leeds, spoke in favour of the resolution when he said that, ‘the years between twenty-five and thirty bring with them a certain maturity which the League of Youth presently lacks’. In the north, it was reported, the most active members were those over twenty-five.¹³ It was however the upper age limit that the party feared most. In 1936, concern was expressed that branches had become restricted in membership having ‘a preponderance of members between the age of twenty one and twenty five’. It was this age group, the National Executive decided, who should have been taking a more active part in the general work of the party but instead were regarding it as secondary to extending the autonomy of the League of Youth and being involved in party policy discussions. So strongly did the party feel that, at its 1936 conference, it proposed an alteration of the party rules. Provision was made for members of the League who were already twenty-one or over. ‘That at January, 1938, members then twenty-three years of age and upwards shall cease membership’ and, ‘that at January 1939, members then over twenty-one years of age shall cease their membership’.¹⁴ This act, a return to the original objects of the League, was intended to dispossess League branches of the bulk of their most active members.

There were many passionate appeals, which went largely unheeded. Dennis Winnard of the University Labour Federation felt that this step would ‘discourage the growth and impair the usefulness of the youth movement’ and asked for the proposals to be withdrawn. The delegate for Ealing moved a resolution that the maximum age for membership continue to be twenty-five. He felt that if the limit were restricted to twenty-one it would remove some of the most powerful members of the youth movement in the country, as seventy-five percent would be compelled to resign. He recalled the early days of youth organisation when it was this very group

of young people who 'modelled the organisation which we have today' and raised the point that these groups are in touch with the mass movement in the country and could pass this on to their younger comrades.¹⁵ Councillor Harris of Edmonton Labour Party seconded the resolution on the grounds that such action would take away the most experienced section of the movement in addition to the fact that if it were the responsibility of the local parties to question eligibility on the grounds of age then they would be unlikely to do anything about it, thus defeating the whole object of the proposal.¹⁶ Jimmy Allan, a League of Youth activist in Huddersfield in the nineteen-thirties, confirmed this point. He wrongly believed the upper age limit to be thirty and remained a member up to that age, which suggests the local party did not operate strict enforcement of the rule.¹⁷

Not all delegates opposed the Executive's aims. When Gilbert McAllister of Lanark North saw the speakers for the League of Youth he wondered if they were any older than he or whether they were adults 'who were not prepared to accept adult responsibility'. He accused the League of playing at being the Labour Party instead of getting down to the real work of organising girls and boys under twenty-one. The labour movement he bemoaned, 'has been without its Baden-Powell too long' and the recreational and health giving pleasures which the party is offering its young people will ensure they support the movement when they reach eighteen at which time it is right to be in the party rather than 'playing at being youthful politicians'.¹⁸ George Ridley MP, a member of the National Executive, spoke for the party when he said,

'We have always visualised youth sections, as we have visualised women's sections, playing their own part within the party machine. That has been the women's part, never wanting to do something separate, spectacular and theatrical, but loyally to serve the party within their own sections'.¹⁹

Jean Tait, of Glasgow Labour Party, had the last word on the issue of age in the first League of Youth, with comments that perhaps reflected the party attitude throughout but certainly bordered on the comic. She was horrified at the baldheads sitting in front of her when she addressed the League of Youth conference in 1938. She baulked at the audacity of those between twenty and twenty-five believing they are still young when it is traditional and acceptable to be married at sixteen.²⁰ The resolution from the Ealing branch was defeated.

Age, then was viewed by the party leadership less as an asset to the recruitment process than a stick with which it could beat its youth when feeling threatened by it. Those at the upper end of the age range were viewed with suspicion. They were never given the credit they deserved for being instrumental in establishing the branches in the first instance as well as continuing to offer their expertise thereafter. Frequent requests for an increase in the age limit were rejected while at the same time, the NEC sought to dominate by lowering the age limit therefore removing large numbers from the membership lists of branches. The Labour Party has shown more concern and less flexibility with age than its rivals in the United Kingdom and its counterparts abroad; few parties acknowledge an age limit in their constitutions, while twenty-five to thirty has often been a more common upper age limit.²¹ This chapter goes on to look at the reasons why the party and its youth sections found themselves in this position.

What sort of organisation?

The intent for recruiting young people to the Labour Party had been clear and consistent from the outset. The Leagues' sole purpose, as far as the party was concerned, was to enrol large numbers of young people who would study the party's policy before giving it their obedient support. They would keep themselves entertained with a social life that they themselves had created and financed and, when called upon, would 'render valuable service in the general activity of the party'²² by providing an army of foot soldiers capable of doing the everyday tasks of election work. In this sense, the League of Youth was functional as the range of minute books and interviews, relaying accounts of the copious fundraising and campaigning endeavours by League of Youth branches across the country can testify. In a later chapter, the Huddersfield case study is witness to the organisational skills of these young people who with sparse resources provided teams of canvassers with a consummate ability to make a campaign their own. There is also much evidence of the initiative taken by League members in such projects as renovating venues to provide a permanent home for the branches and the use of regional and national activities to draw together members from across the country.

The League of Youth however sought much wider involvement. Its members took advantage of the first opportunity available to them to state what kind of organisation they wanted and how they wished it to run. At the 1924 party conference, Mark Starr,

the League of Youth delegate for Wimbledon, Merton and Morden LP, moved the following resolution:

‘That this Conference urges the Executive Committee to invite Local Labour parties to set into being Young People’s Sections, on the same basis as the Men’s and Women’s Sections, with full electoral rights and representations, with a view to Sections co-operating to establish a national Organisation of Young Labour People; so that the National Organisation may collaborate with similar Socialist Youth Organisations abroad to constitute a Young Socialist International’.²³

The League of Youth, as far as the administration of its own section was concerned, sought full autonomy and freedom to associate with other youth groups at home and abroad. Another delegate seconded and expanded upon the motion arguing that many young workers were going from school into blind-alley occupations soon to become part of the country’s large number of un-skilled, low-paid workers. The delegate suggested that a definite economic policy should be laid down for the youth sections, which would embody a minimum wage for young workers and vocational training during working hours, rather than at the end of a long working day. Finally, it was recommended that the Young Communist League, being the ‘oldest youth organisation in the country’ be allowed to affiliate to the Labour Party.²⁴

The Executive, however, felt it had done more than enough to promote and support its young members. The chair declared that the party was prepared to encourage and assist its young people and to help in their education. However, ‘with the best will in the world’, could not see its way to granting the same representative rights as other adult sections in the party to participate in determining policy or in selecting candidates to trade unions and local parties. Neither was it felt necessary to have an autonomous organisation to linking with youth groups abroad. The Executive felt it was already giving sufficient support to its youngest members and was not prepared to make further concessions.²⁵

The League of Youth was gaining in confidence and saw itself as part of a wider youth movement. In 1926, a resolution was put forward requesting the affiliation of the Young Socialist League followed by an amendment for ‘other organisations’. The chair however was concerned about ‘over-sectionalisation’ of the movement for specific purposes, though he failed to specify what form these might take. He pointed

out that the Young Socialist League was an independent body and owed no allegiance to the party's associations and this would lead to a spasmodic and chaotic state of affairs. The resolution was lost.²⁶ By as early as 1927, many delegates to the party conference felt that attention to League of Youth branches was losing out to other labour initiatives, such as the trade union defence campaign and the agricultural campaign. Indeed, such feelings were compounded by the fact that a special conference of the League, scheduled to run alongside the party conference that year, was cancelled.²⁷ The number of branches had reached two hundred and twenty nine but the party did not feel this was sufficiently widespread to justify the cost of a League conference. The party failed to see that the holding of a conference, the first of its kind, could have been the springboard that the youth movement required to increase its membership. The decision was not well received. There was an air of desperation in trying to keep youth issues on the agenda. The delegate for Wood Green and Southgate suggested a one-day rally in London. Ernest Bevin, leader of the Transport and General Workers Union, concerned at the lack of attention paid to the young people, supported the call. He urged that money must be found if youth was to be harnessed to the Labour Party before they became prey to the influences of industrialists and employers. The League had some success with this request as it was agreed that the rally could go ahead but finances would not stretch to a conference.²⁸

The National Executive however was by now beginning to acknowledge the widespread dissatisfaction felt within the party as well as the League. Concerned that thwarting the enthusiasm of such a fledgling movement would not have placed it in a favourable light, the party agreed to the establishment of youth advisory committees to inform the Executive on youth organisation and agreed to hold a League conference, in London, in 1929. The model rules were altered in 1931 to enable branches of the League to appoint representatives with full voting powers to constituency and local Labour parties. The request for Executive powers for the advisory committees however was rejected along with the right to discuss party policy or the party constitution.²⁹

The regular expressions of frustration continued. At the 1930 party conference, the Executive was once again faced with a resolution dealing with the rights of the League to have voting rights on local management committees. Abraham Alman, a member of the national advisory committee of the League of Youth accused the conference of sending the resolution 'along the primrose path to the everlasting

bonfire'. Mr. J. Martin of South Tottenham District Labour Party attempted to inject some rational thought into the debate. He endeavoured to convince the conference that it would not be sacrificing any principle in allowing the League delegates to vote. He attempted to answer the hypothetical case of a League of Youth delegate having the casting vote on a fifty-fifty split on an important issue. 'If one irresponsible youth was capable of turning a vote, what about the other fifty persons who had voted with him? Were they irresponsible also?'³⁰

Labour Party limits on the activities of the League of Youth raised concern that the party's youth movement was falling some way short of its full potential. At the same time, there was no shortage of ideas as to how the organisation could best increase its membership, though these often were ignored. In 1933, Harry Wickham of Buckingham District Labour Party, insisted that 'without youth there will be no socialist majority. Youth is needed in the party and the trade unions'. For Will Nally, of the Mossley Labour Party, '[y]outh is the most precious possession of the socialist movement'.³¹ Cardiff's John Dugdale, meanwhile, complained that older members of the party did not help youth groups.³²

While the party was clearly adopting a hard line approach towards its young members, there was also some indication that it was taking note of their concerns. This came in 1933 with the first real efforts on behalf of the party to improve and extend its youth sections. Membership, although having revealed a steady upward trend since the establishment of the Leagues, remained paltry. There existed only three hundred branches with a possible core of twenty members from a potential recruiting ground of fifteen million young people. In comparison, Germany held one and a half million of its young people in youth groups.³³ A recruitment campaign was therefore launched, assisted by a full time youth officer, Maurice Webb, provided by the National Executive. In addition, at the request of the League of Youth members, a new monthly journal, *The New Nation*, replaced the *Monthly Bulletin*. The successes were immediate and rewarded still further with an ex-officio seat on the NEC for the chair of the League of Youth. He and one other could now attend the party conference as delegates.³⁴

The 1934 conference, held at Birmingham, reported the campaign year as 'one of greater activity than in any previous year and progress is reported everywhere'. Over four hundred special conferences and youth rallies had been held and there was a significant increase in the number of branches from two hundred and twenty nine to

four hundred and ninety two. The journal, *The New Nation*, had been enlarged and improved with monthly sales showing an increase from two thousand five hundred to six thousand five hundred. Further, it was agreed that the League of Youth should have the right to nominate delegates to the annual conference and to be represented on the NEC and be allowed to discuss party policy at their own League conferences. In addition, the Clarion youth campaign was established from which emerged a squad that would sell copies of *The New Nation* on the streets 'shoulder to shoulder with people selling *Fascist Weekly* or *Blackshirt*'.³⁵ There was also much evidence that League members were playing their part in maintaining the momentum. Malcolm Sanderson, a contributor to *The New Nation* acknowledged how difficult it was to sustain the interest of so many young people. He appealed to members to use the facilities available to them, the hostels, and the literature and to be aware of the movement nationally as well as locally but he spoke for many when he suggested that this effort was constantly aiming for the plateau without large-scale action from the Labour Party itself.³⁶

These efforts continued into the League conference of 1935, which was the largest held so far, with two hundred and sixty three delegates representing a hundred and thirty five branches. The number of branches now stood at five hundred and ten. By 1935, most members of the League of Youth were active in electioneering whilst many had been endorsed as party candidates or members of borough councils. This made a mockery therefore of the Executive's continued refusal to allow the League the right to discuss party policy.³⁷ The youth movement was reminded that it was not established to 'promote policy or institute policy'.³⁸ There was an attempt by the national agent, G. R. Shepherd to temper the negativity. He insisted that the party was not averse to the League of Youth discussing party policy but as was the case of other groups it must be within their local parties, not at its own conference and the local parties would then decide if the resolutions went to the Labour Party conference.³⁹

The New Nation from its inception had been cautioned that its editorial policy must be in 'harmony' with that of the party. Within months of its publication the editor was falling foul of this imposed restriction and using its pages to criticise the National Executive and party policy. It was believed that this stance was discouraging branches from supporting the journal and the NEC therefore felt compelled to act.⁴⁰ A memorandum was drawn up containing proposals for the future organisation of the League and circulated to all branches. The memorandum rejected calls by the

League to be independent of the control of the party and freedom to register hostile opinion towards its policies. This, the Executive felt, left little time for fulfilling the purpose for which the League was originally set up.

‘The real object of the League is to enrol large numbers of young people, and by a social life of its own, provide opportunities for young people to study party policy and to give loyal support to the party of which they are members. ...that branches have been used for the purpose of criticising the policy of the party, and that an atmosphere has been created which is not likely to attract young people and equip them for loyal service to the party’.⁴¹

It is of little surprise that the League of Youth, at its Manchester conference, rejected the memorandum in 1936. The League sought complete freedom for *New Nation* including the right to use it to criticise party policy. With a growing determination, the League went on to demand the right to reach decisions on policy matters, regardless of whether they were in ‘harmony’ with those of the party. Inflaming the situation considerably was a resolution carried in favour of a united front of all working class youth organisations.⁴² Significantly, on the day of the 1930 League of Youth conference, ‘an erstwhile member of the League who had seen the ‘red’ light and designated himself a communist’, had handed W. Arthur Peacock, a leaflet urging the League members not to be ‘hoodwinked’ by the leaders of the Labour Party. Peacock later wished he had taken this young man into the conference hall where he would have ‘quickly discovered that there is little chance of anyone ‘hoodwinking’ the members of the Labour Party League of Youth’.⁴³ This was in stark contrast to the suspicion shown at the 1936 League conference. Here, members of the Young Communist League were observed in the gallery during the conference. They were noted as having ‘maintained contact with delegates on the floor of the conference, including certain members of the advisory committee. They had circulated messages to delegates by having them placed on the seats before the session started, ‘undoubtedly with the knowledge of some of its members’.⁴⁴

Accordingly, the National Executive Committee which took the decision, that year, to disband the national advisory committee, cancel the League conference to be held the following Easter and suspend *New Nation*, in which League members were airing their views, showed the result of this breakdown in relationship. Arthur Jenkins, member of the NEC, believing for some time that the League was departing from its original purpose, stated emphatically that, ‘there can only be one authority in this

movement, if ever it is going to be effective, for coming to decisions on party policy, and that is this conference'.⁴⁵ After imposing these draconian measures, the NEC insisted that it was 'as anxious as ever for the development of a strong youth section of the party, based upon loyalty to the party and its conference decisions'. Consequently, the conference, acting on behalf of the PLP, instructed the League of Youth to reorganise in accordance with the new rules set out for it by the NEC.⁴⁶

To one individual in particular it had been obvious for some time that the left wing of the League of Youth needed national coordination. Ted Willis, later Lord Willis, joined and became chair of the South Tottenham League of Youth in the early nineteen-thirties and soon afterwards was accepted as the unofficial national leader of the League. Following the defeat of the Labour Party in 1935 on what he viewed as a moderate reforming programme favourable to respectable middle-class voters, Willis was evermore convinced that 'socialism would make no advance while the leadership of the party, both nationally and locally, was in such elderly and unadventurous hands'.⁴⁷ Willis honed his skills in large part at the Hoddesdon youth hostel where before long he came to be recognised as the leading spokesperson for left-wing views. He benefited from what he describes as the 'important cross-fertilisation of ideas' from a number of socialists who had come from different parts of the country but appeared to share his disappointment with the policies and performance of the official Labour leadership. When Willis first joined the League of Youth he described it as being largely dominated by George Brown, Alice Bacon and Will Nally all of whom tended to adopt 'a position of hostility towards the growing left-wing feeling of the rank-and-file'.⁴⁸ Willis and his comrades regarded *The New Nation*, the official League organ, as dull and reactionary and decided to launch a magazine of their own with a greater socialist bias. This was the start of *Advance!*, a left-wing rival to *The New Nation*, which was still officially controlled by the party. The editorial aims of the journal were to harness the left wing of the League in support of autonomous status and a united front with the communists. This was a discernible move to the left for the League of Youth.

It was not only domestic policies that disappointed Willis and his contemporaries. Younger party members were also inspired and deeply affected by international affairs, which were to occupy much of the government's time from the mid nineteen thirties. Electioneering was not enough for this new breed of left-wing activists. They launched into organising the peace ballot with the League of Nations union. Their declared enemies were Hitler, Mussolini and Franco and their fight against fascism

was taken to the streets. Having editorial control of a journal would give them the opportunity to put forward views on the issues that mattered to them. One such issue was the war in Spain.

The impact of the Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War of 1936, between the elected Spanish Republicans and Franco's Nationalists was a 'powerful and emotive element in the political education of young people'.⁴⁹ In general, as Tom Buchanan states, 'of all the foreign conflicts of the twentieth century in which Britain was not directly involved, the war in Spain made by far the greater impact in British political, social and cultural life'.⁵⁰ The Spanish Civil War occurred during a period of mounting international crisis, coinciding with the rise of fascist regimes abroad and the British Union of Fascists, led by ex-Conservative MP and Labour government minister, Sir Oswald Mosley and his Blackshirts, on the streets of Britain, culminating in the Battle of Cable Street in October 1936. The reaction to fascism came at grass-roots level. The Labour Party had instructed its branches to have nothing to do with anti-fascist organisations, mainly because such activity involved working with the Communist Party, but the appeal to members to become involved in anti-fascist activity was very strong. Buchanan points out a further attraction of the war. The Spanish experiment with democracy was seen by some to be superior to that in Britain. Therefore, it was not only a war against fascism, a term that socialists in the nineteen thirties tended to use to classify the Spanish regime, but also a war in support of democracy. In Britain, a Conservative national government was presiding over high levels of regional unemployment and was regarded by those on the left as 'dangerously sympathetic towards fascism'. Thus, Buchanan states, 'Spain during the civil war became the repository of the hopes and aspirations of all those critical of the national government, as well as appearing to provide the key to political change in Britain itself'.⁵¹

Many League of Youth members worked both in Spain and at home in support of the Republican government. One such member was Stanley Forman, communist and leading left-wing documentary filmmaker. Forman was fifteen years old when the Spanish Civil War broke out and recalls his heroes as those 'mates' who had joined the International Brigade and fought in Spain. He was 'rounded up' by Willis, then still in the League of Youth, at whose suggestion he joined the Mile End Young

Communist League, which Willis himself was to soon join. Forman, like many others recalls collecting milk, medical supplies and money for the Republican cause. The civil war and the comrades he made in the YCL, where he rose rapidly to become its cultural secretary in 1937/8, were the root of Forman's inspiration, providing the basic education, which would define the direction his life would take.⁵²

In 1937, Sol Frankel, of east-end Jewish origin, had also been initiated into the fight against fascism whilst a member of the League of Youth, during which time he had joined members in digging up paving stones to make barricades during the Cable Street Riots. Frankel's involvement in Spain was a direct result of his experiences working with Spanish refugees among whom three thousand Basque children were evacuated from their homes to the North Stoneham camp in Hampshire in July 1937.⁵³ One of the youngest surviving members of the International Brigade from Britain and a League of Youth contemporary of Frankel, is Charlie Matthews. Matthews had experienced fascism in action on the streets of London where he lived, as well as the harsh responses of the authorities towards those protesting against them. Before joining the Brigaders in Spain, Matthews was expelled from the League of Youth for demonstrating against the fascists at Hammersmith Town Hall and consequently became one of many who felt their fight against fascism would be better served as members of the Young Communist League.⁵⁴

Willis had been, from the outset, a leading activist in the League of Youth against fascism in Spain. There were many humanitarian efforts revolving around the collection of money, foodstuffs, clothes and medical supplies which were then sent to the Republican areas. Willis and his fellow members set up the Spanish Foodstuffs committee, which as well as the League of Youth, represented a wide range of youth organisations which set out to charter a ship of its own. Though this proved a little too ambitious, it was indicative of the drive and initiative present within the youth movement. Willis finds it difficult to convey what this period meant to him but never doubted the sincerity of the intentions of this diverse group of people. While there are no exact figures, it is true to say that, the League of Youth suffered its own losses during this conflict. One of Willis' friends, Frank Whitehead, a member of Tottenham League of Youth was one such person.⁵⁵ It was not however merely humanitarian activity on the ground, which motivated Willis and his contemporaries. Fascism was

the visible enemy and they saw the one-sidedness of the conflict, which they believed resulted from the policy of non-intervention.

The labour movement was racked with disagreement over the Spanish Civil War. There was no doubt on any side that this was an attack on a democratic government and the party declared its support for the Republic though it was unsure as to what its response should be. When it came, it was lacklustre. The party declared its political and humanitarian support but maintained a policy of non-intervention. Activists wanted to see fervent unremitting action in defence of the republic and as such, the policy of non-intervention was out of step with its members. The trade unions that saw their responsibilities primarily in humanitarian terms and in addition did not wish to alienate their loyal Catholic members heavily influenced the policy of non-intervention. The party failed to offer its support to rank and file initiatives such as Spanish Medical Aid. Only when the situation deteriorated and the Labour and Socialist International were contemplating joint action with the communists, did the Labour Party abandon its policy of non-intervention. The party's 1937 conference endorsed military aid to the Republic and a campaign on behalf of Spain was set up. There was unwillingness on the part of the Labour Party to confront the difficult questions posed by the Spanish Civil War and the League of Youth was by no means the only group frustrated by the party's inactivity. The Spanish debacle presented a cause and an opportunity for rank and file members, to which the League of Youth was aligned, to throw themselves into political campaigning at a time of impasse and dissatisfaction with domestic politics. The Labour Party underestimated the extent to which the Spanish Civil War had galvanised the young and did nothing to harness this activity.⁵⁶

Growing party discontent

The NEC, Willis accused, 'would rather have a small, politically pure youth movement safely tied to its apron strings, or even no youth movement at all, than the mass movement which could surely be built if young socialists were given more freedom and authority'.⁵⁷ The rallying cry of *Advance!*, self-government for the Labour youth movement, drew an immediate response from branches across the country. So powerful was the movement for autonomy that the 1937 League conference elected a full panel of *Advance!* supporters to the NEC followed by the election of Willis to chair the League of Youth nationally. Willis, through the editorial pages of *Advance!*, made it clear from the outset that the aims of the League of Youth were political with

the overall aim of achieving socialism. The political base of the League of Youth within the labour movement is to lead the workers in their demands for higher wages and better conditions. The social life of the Leagues should be of secondary importance to the political aim and there should be no division between 'political' and 'social'.⁵⁸

The Labour Party was concerned on several fronts: Willis and his *Advance!* supporters had a considerable following and went on to win a majority of the seats on the national advisory committee. The League conference adopted the policies of self-government and the right to discuss party policy and carried the motion for a united front of all working-class organisations, led by Cripps. The Socialist League, formed in 1932, and led by Cripps, drew support from the left of the party attracting increasing support from youth and student groups. The united front movement grew out of an open alliance between the Socialist League, the Communist Party and the ILP. Cripps was an influential leader of the left and had developed a protest movement against the restraints of Labour party policy. He was challenging the attitude of the party towards its members and on foreign policy, in particular, the party's slow response to fascism.

The Labour Party, in the nineteen-thirties, was clearly concerned about the factional united front bee, 'noisily buzzing in the bonnets' of some League of Youth members.⁵⁹ The national youth officer, Maurice Webb, held the unenviable Janus-like role of being a Transport House appointee whilst at the same time representing the party's rising adults. Webb was uneasy at the League leadership's movement towards a united front of the working classes and imparted a swift rebuke. Although he was anxious to credit those in his trust with 'integrity' and 'sincerity', Webb nevertheless felt compelled to make clear his view that they were 'a corroding and damaging influence', and described as absurd and illogical the assumption that the fundamentally opposed ideas of democratic socialists and communists could be fused into a common philosophy.⁶⁰

However, the source of the conflict, far from being a straight fight between the party and its youth, lay within the ranks of the party leadership itself. It was the views of Cripps and Bevan, on the pages of League journals, which had found favour with the League of Youth. Cripps was critical of the Labour Party's aim to regain power at all costs following the 1931 debacle after which,

‘[s]ome of those who were almost hysterically driven to regard decisive measures to socialism as an urgent necessity, have relapsed into a feeling of political security and a desire to return to what they regard as the easier path of reformism.’

He could see dangers in accepting the notion that the trade unions and the manual workers would support the party in any event and therefore the real problem was how to gain the support of the middle classes. This, Cripps argued, would lead to a compromise programme of socialism and reformism which he believed, ‘is worse than useless since it is inevitable that the capitalists will always use their extra-parliamentary power to turn such a government out of office before ever they can start upon the introduction of any real measure of socialism’.⁶¹ Appealing to ‘Middle England’ is nothing new in terms of Labour Party policy and neither are the criticisms of it by the membership. It was the reason, along with the inability to tackle poverty at home or fascism abroad that led, in Willis’ view, to Labour’s defeat in the general election of 1935. The consequence of the defeat provided the impulse for a decisive shift to the left by the leaders of the League of Youth.⁶²

Cripps was successful in appealing to the young in whose energy and thought, ‘all the urgent throbbing life of the future is concentrated’. He cleverly acknowledged their ‘spirit of self-sacrifice and devotion to the cause of humanity’ whilst at the same time recognising their frustration and impatience ‘with the slow methods which seem to bring, and indeed, have brought, all too little change in the past’.⁶³ Willis, the accepted leader of the League of Youth, was tired of the attitude of his own local party, with its expectation that the League should, ‘stick to [their] socials and dances and leave serious political matters to [their] elders and betters’. The campaign for a united front embodied the basic political issues that had long been a concern for Willis and his fellow members.

‘The creation of a united front of all working class parties and men of good will which would force the Chamberlain government out of office and replace it by a popular front government. Full support, including the supply of arms, to the Republican government of Spain. The creation of a system of collective security in Europe, in which Russia, France and Great Britain would be the principal partners with the aim of stopping Nazi aggression.’⁶⁴

Cripps understood the youth wing of the Labour Party enough to know that they had a following but the National Executive did not. Willis had joined Cripps and his alliance of Socialist League and communists on united front platforms and allowed the editorial pages of *Advance!* to be used to support its policies and activities. The NEC saw the extent to which the League journal, *Advance!* was winning support for the campaign, and Transport House suspended the Leagues' national advisory committee forthwith.⁶⁵ A youth movement, with the idealism that young people can often bring to political life, is susceptible to infiltration and, at local level, the Leagues were ideal vehicles for a communist breach. Throughout the nineteen twenties and – thirties, the Labour Party, anxious to be seen as an earnest party of government, had consistently refused Communist Party affiliation and punished local parties for failing to expel communist members. It could be argued that the leadership had good cause: The idea of popular fronts with other parties, which had dominated the inter-war years, had after all originated with the Communist International.⁶⁶

This significant move to the left within the League and fear of communist infiltration greatly concerned the party leadership and Willis was invited to meet with Morrison with a view to resolving the issue. The NEC agreed to reinstate the advisory committees and accept *Advance!* as the official organ of the League of Youth. The editors would be allowed to advocate whatever policy they pleased provided it was within the framework of the party. The League was not however to associate with communists. If this was the right time to offer more to the League to keep it 'in house' then the party leadership did not see it that way. The issue of autonomous status was not under consideration.⁶⁷

The *Advance!* group did however decide to cooperate as Willis saw the party offer as 'half a loaf if not more,' Later in an open letter to all League of Youth members Willis stated clearly that the policy of *Advance!* advocated a self-governing League, united with the Young Communist League in one working-class youth movement but working as a consistent part of the labour movement, this being the only way to win a majority of the youth of Britain to Labour.⁶⁸ For a short time, it looked as if the Labour Party might also have been considering the possibility of exploiting the factionalism. The party leadership was aware of the impact that the *Advance!* faction was having on the rest of the League of Youth. Willis and his cadres had a clear policy of self-government for the youth movement, which had gained significant support and resulted in the election of a complete panel of *Advance!* supporters to the national advisory committee at the 1937 League of Youth conference, defeating the right wing

of the movement. This prompted Herbert Morrison, then Labour MP for Hackney South and later Deputy Prime Minister in the 1945 Labour government, to invite Willis to a meeting at the party offices in order to discuss his future. However, the meeting appeared more to do with Morrison's concerns about the party being taken over by university educated intellectuals than an attempt to build up the relationship between the League and the Labour Party. Willis left, unclear whether Morrison was making a bid for the support of the League of Youth or whether he was warning him about his associations with the united front movement.⁶⁹ Following the disbandment of the national advisory committee, the League of Youth had continued to operate unofficially and had retained the support of the vast majority of the membership. Once again, the party appeared to consider the prospects of a working relationship with the *Advance!* faction. Incentives were given in the form of reinstatement of the Leagues' national advisory committee and freedom to advocate policy albeit within the framework of the Labour Party. In return, the party demanded that the League disassociate itself from the communists. This action led to a considerable amount of good will on the part of the League of Youth and they immediately embarked on a membership campaign.

Willis described the newly launched recruitment campaign as a 'spectacular success'. For a short period after the suspension of the Leagues of Youth national advisory committee in 1936, affairs appeared to improve for the youth movement. John Huddleston had been appointed as national youth officer and the League conference was revived in the hope of stimulating interest. A League of Youth song, *Ours is the future*, was adopted and published. *Advance!* was at last recognised as the official organ of the League of Youth. In the space of a year the number of branches had more than doubled from a hundred and seventy in April 1938 to three hundred and sixty eight by April 1939.⁷⁰ For the first time in its history, Willis believed, 'it seemed that the Labour Party was at last going to have the support of a really mass movement'⁷¹

However, the League's involvement in the Spanish youth food ship committee and the British youth peace assembly, in addition to its support of Stafford Cripps continued to cause concern for the party. The movement for a united front had not enjoyed lasting support but in 1939, Cripps was still advocating the idea of a popular front movement to combat the threat of fascism. Although Willis had struck a compromise with the party leadership and agreed to work within the party framework, he was not willing to abandon his intentions of a merger with the Young Communist

League and therefore continued to support Cripps. This relationship between Cripps and the youth movement contributed to the attack on Cripps, by the party leadership, which led ultimately to his expulsion. Cripps perhaps understood the severity of the situation better than the League leadership and advised Willis not to inflame the situation.⁷² It was however, advice Willis chose not to take. The League of Youth opposed Cripps' expulsion from the party and condemned it through the letters page of *The Manchester Guardian* newspaper.⁷³ There was no attempt to make concessions this time round and Willis left the League of Youth of which he had been a passionate member and joined the Young Communist League taking others with him, among them Shoreditch League member, Frank Chappell, who later became Lord Chappell of Hoston, and a prominent right wing trade union leader.

If the Labour Party were so frightened of the communist influence, it seemed to do little to stop Willis and his supporters from leaving the League of Youth and joining the Young Communists in 1938. The national advisory committee had been once again suspended and the League annual conference cancelled. When Willis finally left the League of Youth to join the Young Communist League, the Labour Party believed its fears had been vindicated. Willis believed that, though small in numbers, the Communist Party influence was 'great enough to give continuous concern to both the government and the Labour leadership.' However, he also acknowledged, unlike the Labour Party, that the Young Communist League, in spite of many leaders of the League of Youth and some of the rank and file following his lead, did not increase in number. It was, Willis recalls, 'a mystery, rather like Pharaoh's dream of the seven thin cows who ate the seven fat cows and grew no fatter'.⁷⁴ Willis was somewhat offended that the Labour Party could, 'dismiss such basic upsurges of opinion as mere communist manipulations', which, for him, revealed on the side of the party, 'a short sightedness which amount[ed] almost to blindness'.⁷⁵ A short sightedness without which, it could be argued, Willis would not have been pushed, in the first instance, into forming the *Advance!* faction. The Labour Party, by displaying 'more concern with combating communists than the Conservatives',⁷⁶ had missed the opportunity to bring a potentially divisive faction into a functional role within the party.

The legacy

The League of Youth did not simply accept the parental discipline imposed by the National Executive Committee although it was effectively powerless to resist. Cyril Lacey, chair of the League of Youth advisory committee in 1936, acknowledged that

the movement was set up largely on a social and recreational basis, but nevertheless suggested that the NEC had not taken the impact of economic changes since 1929 into account. Unemployment and 'blind-alley' jobs had politicised youth, he informed the party conference, leaving them to look for a political basis from which to operate. If the terms of reference were too rigid within the Labour Party, he warned, then the youth would look elsewhere. The delegate for Garnsworthy put it more succinctly: 'If the NEC want to run the League of Youth like a glorified Sunday school then it simply will not attract youth'. He believed that if the young were deemed worthy of going into the trenches and to bomb other countries then they had the right to self-determination as a movement.⁷⁷

There were instances, it is fair to say, when the gap between the generations was acknowledged and an attempt made to understand it. The situation in 1939, amid the scenes of popular front activity, was one such example. It provides an illustration of agency being aware of the provisional nature of structure as constraints as referred to in chapter two. NEC member George Ridley concedes that,

'If our party is to grow and expand, it must be able to draw upon the abundant reservoir of youth, and if we are to draw on that reservoir, age must learn its lesson as well as youth... I am sometimes tempted to wonder whether we remember our youth, whether we remember that we were ever young, and indeed I am sometimes tempted to wonder whether some people ever were young'.

He remembers his own 'exaggerations and extravagances' and urges others to remember theirs, and to avoid being 'too easily scandalised by the extravagances of youth'. Having granted all this however, Ridley does warn that there are obligations on the part of youth also and declares that in that period, 'we have been unable to harmonise those obligations'. He therefore felt it necessary to state clearly that the League of Youth, while welcome to shape party policy, programmes and the constitution, could only do so through the party machinery and not through the medium of the League of Youth itself. Similarly he was not able or willing to allow 'the clouding and obscuring of our own identity and the blurring of party lines' as a result of the League wishing to join forces with other youth groups, 'with whom they have no affinity at all except the affinity of youth, in some sort of cumbrous incongruity.' Ultimately, Ridley's own sense of party discipline outweighed his acknowledgement and understanding therefore eluding an imaginative solution.⁷⁸

Moreover, several individuals in the Labour Party believed the functionality of a youth movement went beyond the recruitment of young people as election fodder. Alice Bacon was a Labour candidate for Leeds North East constituency in the nineteen thirties and had closely observed the activities of the young party members. Bacon was on the right of the party, and although her position was to alter before the collapse of the League of Youth, she was, in this period, one such individual who believed she had the solution. The Labour Party, she stated, must be prepared to spend some time, money and energy on its League of Youth. She agreed that the tasks of distributing literature door-to-door and organising social functions could be carried out by the young members but argued that it was not sufficient on which to build 'a really good strong organisation of young people who will have to carry on the work of the Labour Party in future years'. She felt it necessary to remind conference that many people in the front ranks of the party had begun their careers in the youth movement. Bacon believed that the party leadership should concentrate on the ordinary members of the League and not the 'irresponsible people who are inside the League of Youth not to advance the Labour Party, but to advance particular points of view and isms which they cannot get across inside the Labour Party itself'. She went on to cite the influence of the Socialist League and popular front movements.⁷⁹

Ultimately, the enforced disbandment of the League of Youth advisory committees, the cancellation of its conference and the reorganisation of the League under new, more stringent, rules, all endorsed by the block vote of the trade unions, remained in place. This coupled with the subsequent defection of Ted Willis and his supporters to the Young Communist League had a critical effect on the membership of the League. While most formal party activity was suspended between 1939 and 1945 because of the Second World War, it is nevertheless true to say that the above events played a major role in the disintegration of the first Labour League of Youth.

Why did such a dismal end befall Labour's first youth movement? It would be improbable to suggest that the collapse of the first League of Youth was exclusively a result of the failed relationship between the party and its youth sections or indeed a consequence of young men and women moving to the left. There were other compounding factors in the form of pressure groups battling with Transport House, which appeared to make it difficult for the party to deal with its youth sections. One such well-organised and ideological faction, which was closely in touch with rank and file opinion, was the Constituency Parties Movement. The organisation, set up in the

early nineteen-thirties, emerged out of the animosity towards the rigid and disciplinarian style of the party, which allowed a trade union block vote while failing to recognise the growth of constituency parties and their desire for comparable influence in party affairs. Individual party membership had risen in this period and the number of local parties increased; a development that members felt the party had not acknowledged.⁸⁰ Many desired collective and greater influence for the constituencies and a more favourable balance between trade union and individual members. To further this end, Greene set up the Association of Constituency Labour parties after the 1933 Labour Party conference. The aim of the organisation was to establish regional federations, reduce the power of the trade union block vote and generally to organise constituency opinion toward greater involvement in party affairs.⁸¹ The National Executive realised that the organisation was rapidly becoming a national entity, responding to the outgrowth of local feeling with demands that were deemed to be attainable and as such had a mandate to speak for the rank and file. It was feared that, if taken over by the left wing, the movement would undermine the party's policy declarations. Consequently, the NEC refused to discuss the issue and rejected all the organisation's demands. The party had no desire to disturb the balance maintained by the union block vote and therefore resisted any change to the constitution. The constituency parties movement did eventually fade away but the party's obduracy ensured that the resentment of its leaders remained.⁸² As with the League of Youth, the constituencies party movement had benefited from the support of such notables as Cripps, who was now immersed in the united front campaign.

At home, the Labour Party's failure to organise the unemployed had frustrated many party activists leading them to join the rapidly growing National Unemployed Workers Movement, (NUWM). The movement, led by Wal Hannington and Harry McShane was influential in depressed areas of Britain, South Wales, Lancashire and Scotland. After 1930, unemployment increased which gave the movement further support, claiming fifty thousand members by 1932. The unemployed were encouraged to look upon the NUWM as a 'trade union of the unemployed'. Essentially a political movement, working with the Communist Party and the ILP, the NUWM was behind the hunger marches of the early nineteen thirties. The TUC had attacked it as a communist-dominated movement and felt so intimidated by it that it set up the Unemployed Association in 1930 to counteract it.⁸³

Local Labour parties were ideal vehicles for communist infiltration and much feared by the party. The Communist Party attempt at affiliation in 1924 was rejected,

communist members were excluded from local parties where they could be found and, by 1928, forbidden to attend conferences, even as trade union delegates. It was natural therefore that the party leadership should view with suspicion any group appearing to support them. The National Minority Movement, an attempt to set up a communist controlled trade union council and the National Left Wing Movement set up in 1925 with the aim of reversing the decision to exclude communists from local Labour parties, tended to attract dissident Labour Party members.

These attempts by rank and file movements to become more involved in the policy-making process were largely feared by the party. The views of the organisations, critical of the party leadership and verbalised by passionate individuals, have often gained broad support among young people who did not believe their leaders were recognizing their concerns. This, coupled with the communist influence behind the groups, particularly within the constituency Labour parties, encouraged the party to maintain a tight control of its youth organisation.

Socialism, the Labour Party and the League of Youth in the 1930s

The Labour Party had the challenging task of accommodating the disparate views of how socialism could be achieved within a capitalist society whilst at the same time seeking to appeal to a mass electorate. The Labour government of 1924, despite its minority administration and short duration, offered proof that the party was capable of governing the country. However, according to Adelman, it was 'good government' by conventional standards only and had failed to introduce socialism or produce any great breakthrough in a major aspect of national policy. Moreover, Adelman continues, the Labour Party had failed to come to grips with the greatest domestic problem of the inter-war period – unemployment.⁸⁴ The reformism of the party leadership in the late nineteen twenties and nineteen thirties advocated the improvement of living standards for the working classes by the more efficient regulation and organisation of capitalism.⁸⁵ It was the nature of and the speed at which this regulation and organisation would take place that could not find agreement and consequently produced a split between the left and the right in the party. The split was further exacerbated by questions of foreign policy, which led ultimately to the united, and later, popular front movements headed by Cripps and supported by other left-wing parties and groups. These movements were to act as magnets to members of the League of Youth and soon after would be implicated in its downfall. The dissension towards which the party now had to divert its energies rendered it

unable or unwilling to appreciate the depth of feeling within the League of Youth, towards events at home and abroad. The rigidity of the party structure and the scheme, under which the youth sections were set up, prevented an outlet for these views and concerns, pushing the Leagues towards other groups, outside the party structure, in a plethora of rallies, demonstrations and committees, frowned upon by the party leadership. The League of Youth's association with groups on the left became a self-fulfilling prophecy for the Labour Party, fuelling their already exaggerated fears of entryism, which then provided the National Executive with the circumstantial evidence for disbanding the party's first youth movement.

From the mid nineteen-thirties, to the outbreak of the Second World War, foreign policy was a key consideration and proved to be a continuous draw for some young working class people, susceptible to the movements of ideas and protest springing up throughout the period. Willis recalls that the period 'all seemed very clear and simple' in which the enemy had a face: Mussolini, Hitler and Franco. Likewise, the social injustices, particularly unemployment, at home were easier to define and therefore easier to attack. Willis, like many others, believed that the party was terrified that, given autonomous status the League of Youth would become a forceful appendage of the left within the labour movement.⁸⁶

The united front was a divisive issue among the British left and within the Labour Party. The party leadership was clear in its rejection of the united front initiative and took a strong line against its dissidents. Willis' defeat of George Brown in the League of Youth leadership contest in the nineteen thirties while marking a shift by the League to the left was also a move against a right-wing dominated League advisory committee, which had been viewed by many in the League as dull and restrictive.⁸⁷ Moreover, while it is true that the policy of *Advance!*, with Willis as its editor, stipulated a self-governing League to be united with the Young Communist League in one working class movement, it also declared that the only way to win a majority of youth to Britain was to work as a constituent part of the labour movement. This made little impact on the attitude of the party leadership.⁸⁸

There is evidence that the party exaggerated the threat that the League's attachment to the united front would create. To view the controversy from the perspective of the PLP, the united front initiative, whose communist influence the party so feared, was victorious only in the party's youth movement and not in the Labour party as a whole.

Even Willis, as chief protagonist, did not hold a Communist Party membership card and makes the point that the membership of the Young Communist League did not rise noticeably following the defection of he and his supporters from the League of Youth.⁸⁹ The party leadership would also have been aware that support for Cripps and the popular front movement against fascism was not uniform across all League branches. Many branches had shown their support for the party in turning down invitations for united front activity.⁹⁰

Relations between elements of the left and the Parliamentary Labour Party had never been smooth. James Jupp describes the emergence, in the nineteen thirties, of an identifiable 'left': a body of individuals, strengthened by the fluid political situation of the decade, acting together in opposition to the national government and critical of the Labour Party's failure to express that opposition more strongly. The decade of the nineteen thirties was one marked by what Pimlott describes as the most bitter battle between the left and right for the loyalty of Labour's rank and file who were discontented with parliamentary practices and institutions. The Labour Party did not appear to have the solutions to the deep economic problems affecting the country's youth.⁹¹ The petitions of the left were always more attractive than those of the party and were more readily seen as the natural home of the young political activist.⁹²

The Labour left was not ideologically or organisationally coherent and had always been fragmented between the Parliamentary Labour Party, the trade unions, socialist societies, women's groups and the constituency parties.⁹³ The disparate industrial and political organisations were expressed within the local Labour parties. While many young people may not have been politicised in the nineteen thirties, those who were attracted to join the League of youth clearly aligned themselves with the left of the party therefore providing an easy target for any group trying to increase its membership and influence within the party.

Conclusion

High unemployment and a visible enemy abroad acted as magnets to political activists. The way in which the Labour Party leadership dealt with these issues contributed to the internal conflicts, and resulted in a political straitjacket, which prevented the party from trying new approaches at critical times.⁹⁴ The Labour Party leadership viewed its own youth organisation with suspicion. From the outset, the party had acknowledged its own fears of the possibility of its youngest members being influenced by groups inside and out of the labour movement. In the eyes of the

party leadership, under the particular influence of one of the factionalised left wing groups or organisations, the League of Youth was a threat to the political stance that the party leadership was presenting to the British electorate. This involved a risk the party was not prepared to take.

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Chapter 6: The Second League of Youth

Introduction

This chapter chronicles the revival of the Labour League of Youth after the Second World War in the ostensibly auspicious circumstances of the 1945 Labour general election victory. It goes on to explain why this, the Labour Party's second attempt to establish a youth organisation, also ended in failure.

The political context

It was to youth that Herbert Morrison appealed in 1945 as the July 5th polling day advanced. Anxious that Churchill's popularity and the public's gratitude towards him would rob Labour of victory, Morrison made a direct appeal to, 'young men and women in uniform and out of it', to consider from where the spirit of youth and energy within the party would come. 'Will it come from the party of privilege or the party of the people?' he asked, and warned that young voters must not make their vote merely one of thanks but 'a vote in the confidence of [their] youth', if they wished to secure a future as a democratic peoples' country. Finally, he urged youth to 'look forward, not back'.¹

Garner and Kelly noted that public opinion at the end of the war was increasingly sympathetic towards 'centre left' or social democratic ideals of economic planning, public ownership and greater public spending, and the Labour Party successfully articulated this mood resulting consequently in its landslide victory in the general election of 1945.² With a manifesto pledge to create full employment, a tax-funded universal national health service and a cradle-to-grave welfare state, Clement Attlee, the Labour leader, had taken the Labour Party to victory with nearly fifty percent of the national vote and three hundred and ninety three seats in the House of Commons. A distinction had been made in the manifesto between the two post-war periods. Although the British people had achieved victory in the First World War, 'they had lacked a lively interest in the social and economic problems of peace, and accepted the electoral promises of the leaders of the anti-Labour parties at their face value'. Attlee was determined that the 'hard-faced men' who had done well out of the first conflict would be cowed after the second; they would no longer control the banks, mines and industries.³

In 1945, young people had contributed considerable support toward the Labour Party both during the election campaign and at the polls. The end of the Second World War

and the Labour Party victory in 1945 provided an opening to look once again at the whole question of youth organisation within the Labour Party. The first League of Youth, notwithstanding its disbandment in 1938 by the Labour Party National Executive Committee, would without doubt have folded on the outbreak of hostilities, but there was now an opportunity to bury its grievances and mistakes with the detritus of war. Those young people attracted by the victory of the Labour Party in 1945 began to reform new Leagues of Youth at the first available opportunity. The manifesto promises and the subsequent reforms put into effect by the party in government provided the 'vision' for which members, like Jean Megahy of Yorkshire, felt they could work.⁴ Yet, by the mid-nineteen-fifties, the support of this very group was ebbing and would, as the general election of 1959 approached, be highlighted as an area of concern.

The political context of the nineteen-fifties made it a bleak decade as far as the youth movement of the Labour Party was concerned. The architects of Labour's post-war achievements were, by 1951, a predominantly ageing political generation. The harmony displayed by the central characters in the 1945 Labour government immediately after the war turned into discord following the defeat of 1951. Bevan and Gaitskell in particular, seen as representatives of the new leadership, were now pitted against each other in a battle between 'fundamentalists' and 'revisionists' respectively. The younger generation of voters were at the hub of the changes in society yet the Labour Party was making no discernible attempts to appeal to them.

Campbell states that when Bevan resigned from the Labour Party in protest at Gaitskell's imposition of prescription charges in 1951, he found himself at the head of a substantial dissatisfied minority within the party, which had hitherto lacked either a leader or legitimacy.⁵ Bevan had come to signify everything that appealed to Labour youth. In supporting Bevanism, which represented a 'distinct culture, a way of life, and an approach to politics', the League, in supporting him was opening itself up as a channel for the expression of factional opinion.⁶ Betty Boothroyd recalls, as a League of Youth member in the nineteen fifties, that 'nobody who heard Bevan speak could fail to be impressed by his wit and passion' and remembers that, 'he almost knocked us off our feet with the strength of his convictions'.⁷ Similarly, Molly Walton reflects that the League of Youth saw Bevan as the keeper of its socialist principles and supported him, against the right of the party, on the issues of further nationalisation and against the rearmament of Germany.⁸ These characteristics as well as leading the majority of the League to declare themselves as Bevanites, also attracted other

groups on the left, which fed the long-standing fears of the party leadership of communist infiltration. In addition, the emphasis placed by the party structure upon the formality of voting meant that personal ambition within the party also provided an obvious opportunity for factional campaigning. A reflection of this was the contest between Bevan and Gaitskell for the post of party treasurer in 1954. Gaitskell's victory did not end the conflicts.⁹

Grass roots momentum and the party response

In comparison to the first League of Youth, of which there were only a handful remaining, and which had been largely promoted and supported by women's groups, the new Leagues were sprouting 'quite spontaneously and without prompting from head office.'¹⁰ In the first year, two hundred and fifty branches had been established and in some areas, such as Surrey, Hertfordshire, West Midlands and the North, enough branches had been created to make possible a further layer of the political machinery with the shaping of advisory committees and regional committees. Reg Underhill, Labour Party national agent, in an article entitled *How the League stands today*, a year on from the end of hostilities, reported a varied and balanced programme of activities within the branches and urged that full scope must be given to political and educational work as well as social and recreational activity.¹¹ This was a significant change of emphasis to the pre-war League of Youth where the accent had been on the educational and social aspects of the movement.

The Labour Party National Executive committee responded to the rapid rise in the number of League branches by providing the apparatus to support the work of its young members and to link them with their regional, national and international counterparts. As the first League of Youth branches began to emerge, the Labour Party provided a journal, *Young Socialist: the Organ of the Labour Party League of Youth*, the aim of which was to 'print all the news of the League and express the views of its members'. The first edition enabled Prime Minister Attlee to acknowledge the significant part played by the younger generation in the general election victory. He reiterated the pride the Labour Party had in its ability to attract young people to its ranks and recognised the hard work they had undertaken for their local parties.¹²

As general secretary of the Labour Party, Morgan Phillips had a great deal of contact with the League of Youth. Phillips had begun his political career in the ILP and the Labour Party in South Wales but, along with his wife, came into contact with the

League as party agent in West Fulham. The West Fulham League of Youth was considered one of the best in the country. His involvement straddled both the first and second Leagues and he acknowledged that the first had been 'something of a war casualty' in that members had gone straight into uniform or become involved in other areas of work relating to the war thus making it difficult to hold the organisation together. Now, he wanted the League of Youth to put that all behind them and 'help to build up the most effective and largest youth movement attached to any British political party'.¹³

One plank of this new drive was an agreement by the National Executive to organise and fund the first national conference of the League of Youth, which was to be held in the spring of 1951. The event was staged at Beaver Hall in London over the Easter weekend and deemed so successful that it was immediately agreed to repeat the event the following year. The conference was important for the development of the League as it provided the opportunity for offices to be elected to the various committees. Advisory committees began to re-emerge consisting of members nominated from within the Leagues' own ranks, their role being to advise the regional councils on the coordination and development of League of Youth activities. Two members from each region would then go forward to sit on the League's national consultative committee, which was to hold quarterly meetings and make recommendations to the party NEC. The party also allowed the Leagues, through a regional executive committee, to take charge of campaigns in their own areas. The area federations discussed in an earlier chapter also began to resurface. By 1950, there were forty-four in existence, supporting the formation of new branches and helping to sponsor social and political events.¹⁴

Various initiatives were put in place or supported by the party nationally. Initially, the upper age limit for membership of the League of Youth remained at twenty-one, its pre-war limit. In 1948, Ian Mikardo, Member of Parliament for Reading, moved a resolution to raise the limit to twenty-five on the grounds that just as members are getting into leadership mode, they are called up for military service, which halts the continuity of both leadership and membership.¹⁵ An amendment to the resolution to raise the upper limit to thirty on the grounds that those between the ages of twenty-five and thirty are able to educate and stabilise the activities of their young comrades and give coherence to the whole structure', was defeated though Morgan Phillips did accept the lower limit of twenty-five.¹⁶

The second League of Youth: growth and tension

In 1946, Bangor hosted the first in a series of summer schools laid on by the Labour Party to which League of Youth members were invited to attend. By 1949, the schools had provided the party with nearly three thousand members and trade unionists. In 1949, as part of a national recruitment and promotion drive led by the NEC, the Butlin's holiday camp at Filey played host to 'probably the biggest event of its kind ever organised by a political party in this country'.¹⁷ Five thousand young people, mostly of League of Youth age, of whom around one quarter were actual members, attended the rally and took part in mock elections, speaking competitions and an array of social and political functions. For its part, the Labour Party awarded seven hundred and fifty scholarships to the event, many of which were taken up by League members. The camp had an international dimension, including students from Africa, West Indies, Malaya, Sweden Denmark, France and the United States. It was at this event that later to be well known political figures such as Betty Boothroyd honed their speaking and debating skills.

Bruce Millan was such an attendee and is one example of the League of Youth acting as an agent of recruitment for future political leaders. Millan has served Scottish politics for over half a century. He was Member of Parliament for Glasgow for nearly three decades from 1959 to 1988, during which time he rose through the Scottish Office under the Wilson and Callaghan governments of the nineteen sixties and seventies to become secretary of state for Scotland. In 1988, he became European commissioner, a post he held until his retirement in 1995. Millan recalls taking part in the 1949 rally as a member of the national consultative committee of the League of Youth. The committee elected him to chair the rally and act as speaker for the two mass demonstrations held during that week.¹⁸ A contemporary and close friend of the Scottish politician, Jean Goldie, can also lay claim to a worthwhile career in Scottish politics that had its roots in the League of Youth. Like Millan, Goldie, a Labour Councillor for the Elderslie ward in Renfrewshire until her death in 2006, served on the League's national consultative committee as one of the two delegates from the Northeast of England. She recalls the Filey rally as 'an amazing and fabulous event'.¹⁹ She and Millan played an active role in the recruitment campaign, appearing on the front cover of a leaflet, *Teamwork's the answer*, inviting young people to join the 'best team of all'.

‘Yes, Sir! Teamwork’s the answer. Whether it’s a crack cup-winning combination moving smoothly over Wembley turf; or even ballroom champions gliding gracefully with perfect rhythm and understanding. They all know the meaning of working together or helping the weaker ones in the side, of sharing equally in the contest’. The party is portrayed as a family: ‘take our family for instance. We work together for the good of the whole team, not for what we can get out of the home and family personally. We all pull together in good times and bad because it’s common sense, because it’s right and because we owe it to each other to do so’.²⁰

Len Collinson did not choose to join the Labour Party as part of ‘some grand intellectual notion’. Rather, he admits to having ‘bit onto the drug’ from the time, in the late nineteen twenties, at five years old, when he was required to deliver teapots to Labour Party meetings where he would listen in to conversations between his mother and such people as Constance Kay, the national women’s officer, whom he knew as ‘Aunty Constance’. Len ‘joined’ when his mother sent him along to the branch as a young teenager. He did however choose to maintain his links with the movement in two significant roles: as the National Council of Labour Colleges’ youngest lecturer in the nineteen fifties and sixties and latterly as a trustee of the museums that now hold most of the Labour Party archives.²¹

Similarly, the privilege of being a member of the League of Youth was made clear to Eric Lawson when, in 1948, together with five shillings he was ‘joined’ to his local branch as a fifteenth birthday present by a family friend. Eric has remained a member ever since, serving as a councillor, firstly in Stockport in the nineteen sixties, the area to which his father, an anarchist, had moved the family in order to take a job, ending fourteen years on the dole, and latterly in Kirklees in the nineteen nineties.²²

For those new members still inebriated by victory in war and politics there would have been little disagreement with John Kotz that ‘it seemed that the sun was always shining’ in the League of Youth and that the future was ‘absolutely glistening’.²³ The members of the second Labour League of Youth believed they had signed up to a new dawn, a fresh start.

However, in a study of the recruitment of the Parliamentary Labour Party during the period 1931 to 1955, Tanner contradicts the often-repeated notions that the 1945 Labour government was either the byword for a new kind of socialism or a break from the past. He denies that there was a complete renewal of the Labour elite in 1945

and goes on to suggest that the majority of the Labour MPs and candidates were taken from those who were recognised in the party before the war. The party had expanded and developed considerably in the inter-war period and this was reflected in the new post-war government. It is estimated that approximately one third of the Parliamentary Labour Party had been in parliament before the war; a further third had either stood as candidates or been selected as such by 1939, and most of the rest were seasoned Labour campaigners or trade union officials. The cooperative movement along with the National Council for Labour Colleges and the Workers Education Association retained their socialising roles and were a greater influence in this period than either the League of Youth or the Labour Students Organisation. Tanner states that the graduate recruits to Parliament were a consequence of local parties' desperation for candidates during the war and were not expected in many cases to be elected. It was not the values and aims of these new recruits that were forming the policies of the new Labour government but rather those belonging to the party's past. In other words, the Parliamentary Labour Party of 1945 was a product of the mass Labour Party of the nineteen-thirties.²⁴ The new generation of youth recruits then was to find itself joining a well-established cadre of officers at national and local level, who had been viewed by their predecessors as 'old timers' whose role it was to, 'go and find out what League of Youth is doing and tell them not to.'²⁵

For those who had been involved in the first movement, and who believed that its failure centred on the restrictions of the NEC imposed constitution, then the great future that Morgan Phillips, in 1946, had predicted for the League as an integral part of the Labour Party was already on shaky foundations. If members were in any doubt then the *Labour Youth Sections Handbook* spelled it out clearly enough under its 'composition and objects'. The League of Youth was 'an avenue through which it is hoped to attract young people to the Labour Party. It is not a separate organisation'. The members were expected to 'promote the policy and programme of the Labour Party, in fact 'every item of party policy may be expounded by speakers. Study circles, classes and debates were provided and 'under this object, apart from amusement, discussion on party policy and classes in connection with the same, are not only permitted but encouraged'²⁶

When the Labour Party had felt threatened by the activities of its young members, it had used the age margin as a stick with which to beat them. Having failed to secure the Leagues' docile support, in 1936, the party had reduced the age limit to twenty-one and there it remained, ten years later, in the new constitution. Although the NEC

had accepted Mikardo's resolution to raise the limit to twenty-five, the defeat of the amendment put forward by the Northampton delegate to raise it to thirty was a significant one for the League in this period. Both the Young Communist League and the Young Conservatives had upper age limits of thirty and the Young Conservatives in particular were growing rapidly, out numbering the Labour League of Youth in both membership and number of branches. In 1949, the League had just over three hundred branches with an average age of eighteen;²⁷ in contrast, the Young Conservatives could boast two thousand three hundred branches with a combined membership of hundred and sixty thousand.²⁸ A delegate from Leeds asked what chance the League of Youth had in debates when the opposition had the advantage of extensive experience.²⁹

When Ian Mikardo, in 1948, had put forward a resolution in support of the development of the League of Youth, he had requested more than just the raising of the upper age limit: he had also called for a democratic structure and the appointment of its own staff. In echoes of the women's groups of the nineteen-twenties, he warned the NEC that 'they will go wrong if they start to do things *for* our young people instead of *with* our young people'.³⁰ Others shared Mikardo's concerns. There was a realisation of the changing face of society, which many did not feel the party had acknowledged. Some were concerned that the picture of rising membership and burgeoning activities may have been 'over painted'. The delegate for Hendon South Labour Party questioned whether there had been a rise in the membership at all; pointing out that the number of branches may have increased but doubted that the actual membership was much above twelve thousand. He informed the Labour Party conference that, '[o]ne can no longer rely upon the bitterness of those who have known the evils of unemployment and near starvation'. The threat of the dole queue had become undermined by the provision of social security benefits and full employment so becoming a historical fact and 'historical facts do not necessarily carry with them the power to convince people'. A Labour Party youth programme, democratically worked out, was called for and the vehicle was to be an annual delegate conference of the League of Youth.³¹ It had long been a cause of disagreement within the League of Youth that its members did not have a platform of their own from which to air their views and discuss policy. It was pointed out that women's groups within the Labour Party, as well as trade unions had their own conference whilst the League had to squeeze their business into an already over-stretched party conference agenda.³² The League of Youth began to use the political mechanism that the party had provided it with and through its national consultative

committee put forward a resolution for an annual delegate conference with the power to elect its own national executive, accordingly becoming the policy-making body of the League of Youth.³³

Morgan Phillips possibly believed that appeals by and on behalf of the League of Youth were misdirected toward the national party when they would have been better concentrated towards the local parties. It was felt that, nationally, the party had supported its young members well: it had given direction through the loan of its national agent and allowed the League to take charge of much of its own work through directly elected bodies.³⁴ There was some support for this view from within the League. A national consultative committee report had noted that 'where positive activity can be obtained on behalf of the League by local party organisations, there is every possibility that new branches can be created.' The county of Cumberland was cited as an example where there had been a significant increase in the number of branches over a short period of time largely as a result of a special county conference at which 'positive proposals designed to support the League were adopted'. It was a 'matter of regret that some parties appear to discourage efforts to establish new Leagues'.³⁵

However, Phillips knew he was not alone in being able to recall the ghost of communism, which had hovered over the 1938 League of Youth conference and was therefore circumspect when urging the local parties to do more for their young members. Allowing a democratic structure and an administrative staff, in the NEC's view, would be accepting a youth movement that was a separate organisation within the party and that was a step too far. Furthermore, he feared that independent youth officers had a tendency to become propagandists for the branches and was therefore only prepared to allow an officer based at Transport House. The Executive did however agree to a special conference of the League of Youth to be held as 'an experiment', in 1951, following which Phillips hoped members would be able to put the past behind them.³⁶

Some immediately dubbed this 'experiment' to be 'a meagre victory' with no guarantee of further conferences and no resolutions on youth policy to be accepted. Furthermore, delegates and resolutions had to be approved by the constituency Labour parties, which were already being criticised for turning down the resolutions that voiced the opinions of their Leagues. Strength of feeling was high as members complained of being treated as though the League was some kind of 'corrective

training camp' where they could ask for concessions for 'good behaviour'. The comparison was drawn between the 'experimental' character of the conference and the draconian nature of being called up for military service. Appeals were made, on the run up to the conference, for a nationwide campaign towards a socialist youth programme, opposition to the preparation for a third world war and acceptance of the demands of the National Status movement.³⁷

The National Status movement was centred on the southern region from where much of its support came. Its demands, at the League of Youth conference for, among other items, autonomous status for the Leagues, were largely supported by all League members. However, the organisation had not managed to penetrate all parts of the country and many, suspicious of the movement's motives, managed to persuade the conference that the National Status movement was a crowd of party wreckers and saboteurs. Nevertheless, where the organisation was active, and where perhaps its intentions were better understood, it did have support. Subsequent impressions of the conference showed that, although the National Status movement was defeated, when the same resolutions and points were separately proposed by non-aligned delegates, they were largely accepted. This led to the conclusion, by the London based Leagues that those delegates who voted against the movement had been influenced by the 'red-scare' tactics from the platform and did not wish to appear disloyal toward the party.³⁸ A contributor to *Tribune* highlighted the dilemma in which the League of Youth found itself and the inability of the National Executive to find common favour with its young members. The problem for the League, he declared is the 'delay and procrastination' of Transport House.³⁹

The Second World War had only served to postpone the fears of the party towards communist entryism. The 1945 government saw little change in terms of leadership and in the Labour Party's first year of office, Herbert Morrison, who only a few years earlier had expressed concern at the Willis faction, moved an amendment to the party constitution designed to provide some means of control over factionalism within the party. The amendment of 1946 determined that, 'political organisations ... having their own programme, principles and policy for distinctive and separate propaganda, or possessing branches within the constituencies ... shall be ineligible for affiliation to the party.'⁴⁰ Therefore, when, in 1946, the Communist Party made yet another attempt to affiliate to the Labour Party on the back of its support for the wartime coalition, the old fears were once again brought to the fore and the application was overwhelmingly rejected by the party conference of that year. The Communist Party

changed its tactics and began a programme of secret infiltration at local level. In Surrey for example, Douglas Hyde, news editor of the communist *Daily Worker*, organised a takeover of his local party and worked secretly as a communist group within the Labour Party and the Trades Council. Surrey was just one of many examples that vindicated the Labour Party in its proscription, not only of the Communist Party, but also of anyone who openly associated with it.⁴¹

The Labour Party's concerns about the influence of communism were not without foundation. The early years of the League of Youth saw an increase in fascist activity under Mosley for which the Labour Party did not appear to have any noticeable legislation or campaign. This, Eadon and Renton, state, left a gap on the left that could be filled by the Communist Party. The League of Youth provided an audience for radical anti-war ideas and the Communist Party had an open policy of entryism into both the Labour Party and the League in the early years of the Second World War. However, Communist Party strength and influence was generally falling in the 1945-51 period; its membership had peaked in 1948 and decreased thereafter. Besides, its tendency to zigzag from right wing to ultra left wing politics, in Eadon and Renton's view, militated against it being a threat to the Labour Party.⁴²

Many Leagues, it is true to say, were either unaware or simply unfazed by the communists in their midst. During her time in the League of Youth, Winifred Wheable, whose brother Will Nally had played a prominent role in the League in the nineteen-thirties until his defeat at the hands of the *Advance!* group, was confident that any potential threat of communist infiltration would soon be thwarted by the watchful eye of people like her father: She recalls her father 'keeping an eye' on the young members when he thought there may be an infiltrator in the midst.⁴³ In other words, they did not last long. Indeed, Tom Megahy believed the idea of far left influence to be more to do with interpretation than reality and wondered to what extent it was exaggerated by the definition individuals held of left wing views in general.⁴⁴ Cole and Postgate are not alone in concluding that, 'disproportionate energy and time were spent upon the wrangles over this infiltration: it baulked far larger than it deserved in the thought and writings of the time'.⁴⁵

Clive Soley, Member of Parliament, until 2005, for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush and now Baron Soley of Hammersmith, acknowledges that the relationship between the adult party and the League of Youth was one of instability. The youth sections were perceived to be a potential route for entryism in the nineteen fifties,

and Soley recalls Transport House officials paying visits to local parties to ask questions of people they were 'worried' about. He too however questions the perceived danger because had the League ever had the organisation to become revolutionary, it would have probably missed the event because they were having a pint in the pub!⁴⁶

In Stockport, it was indeed the local pub that provided the venue for League member Eric Lawson, who recalls joint meetings and education sessions with the Young Communist League in the early nineteen fifties. Stockport League of Youth was funded largely by the local branch of the Amalgamated Engineering Union and encouraged 'in a paternalistic sort of way' by the local party. Lawson does however recall that although he and his counterparts viewed themselves as political, 'all the adventure was verbal' as the branch was more concerned with process than outcome. Moreover, the CLP was 'inward looking and incestuous' and neither knew nor cared about the League's social and political associations.⁴⁷

Few would disagree that the real purpose for the Communist Party lies in infiltrating the Labour Party to promote its own policies and therefore further extend its influence. However, the party leadership, through the issue of its list of proscribed organisations had imposed its own structural constraints, which 'set the contexts and define[d] the range of possibilities' of the League of Youth.⁴⁸ The Labour Party had underestimated the extent to which political issues, especially of an international kind could galvanise young people as a cohort, regardless of their political affiliation. Denis Healey was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party at the same time as he chaired the Oxford University Labour Club. His affiliation to communism was, he maintains, a reaction to Nazism and states that any man who was interested in stopping the war in that period became a communist at Oxford.⁴⁹ Similarly, working side by side did not mean everyone was a communist or influenced by communist ideals. Indeed, in the nineteen fifties, Harold Wilson also added his voice to the inflated danger of communism. He believed that hunger posed a far greater threat to the world order than communism.⁵⁰ There were however other tensions in this period which were clearly a threat to the unity of the Labour Party.

The memory of communist infiltration and the desertion of Willis and the *Advance!* faction of the League of Youth to the Young Communist League, barely registered with the new intake of League members, but remained the spectre in the wings for their seniors. In 1948, therefore, Morgan Philips felt that the Labour Party had made

a more than adequate contribution to the general direction of its youth movement by providing much the same level of provision as before the war. It had made available the structure and personnel at both national and regional level in support of the Leagues' campaigns and activities and felt that it was now the turn of the local parties to sustain their young members. Philips knew this was not a simple request and in urging local parties to develop their youth organisations he was acknowledging a reluctance borne of the memories of the pre-war League of Youth. He requested that they put it all behind them.⁵¹

The decline of the second League of Youth: 1951-59

The special League of Youth conference of Easter 1951 saw the pinnacle of Labour youth membership. Since its re-establishment in 1948 with two hundred and sixty branches, the League had enjoyed steady growth and by the end of 1951, in spite of the disruptive effects of national service, reported a four-fold increase to eight hundred and six League of Youth branches. A decline set in however, which subsequently proved to be irreversible and by the time the 1952 Labour Party conference reported there existed a fifteen percent fall in branches to six hundred and seventy. Again, the party ignored the requests for autonomous status with increased representation, and instead suggested further membership campaigns and a restyling of the League of Youth journal, *Socialist Advance*.

The Labour Party's annual conference report on the League of Youth habitually demonstrated a thriving organisation but all too often belied what was really happening on the ground. The League, having waited so long to establish a conference, discovered, in 1952, that it was to be sandwiched with the Filey rally. The reasons for the change were financial, it being cheaper to combine two events for which the party was providing the funds. However, on the run up to the conference, objections to this arrangement on the grounds that it did not allow for the desired range of discussion were overruled and only included in response to the growth in criticism after the event.⁵²

There was often a sense that League of Youth members considered their aspirations had been thwarted. The League's national consultative committee, which was generally reported as having met on 'several occasions', had, in fact, had lengthy gaps in between meetings, leaving some members feeling 'that they [were] being rather ignored and left out in the cold'. The delegate from Walsall complained that decisions taken at the national consultative committee meetings were, 'in the majority

of cases not implemented and not followed'. Similarly, some members saw it as somewhat patronising to be asked to discuss the contents of pamphlets when in many cases they were more active than were the adults in these matters. Moreover, Transport House rarely acknowledged their views on such materials. It was concluded that, 'They might just as well have stayed at home'.⁵³

One medium in which the League of Youth could be expected to be able to air its views would be in its own journal. For most of its active life, the League had access to a paper of one sort or another through which the branches and federations could inform each other of their progress and the events they were holding. The desire however was to be able to discuss party policy and make decisions on matters relating to youth. The difficulty arose as a result of the fact that the journals were published, financed and, for the most part, edited by Transport House, which, it was often felt, used the journal to further its own views instead of those of its younger members. In some areas, the League bypassed the party altogether and published its own monthly periodical, which gave them the editorial freedom they desired.

Audrey Brown, a member of the Edmonton League of Youth, published the pamphlet *Socialist Youth*. It was distributed as far as Durham where it was 'received with an appreciable amount of enthusiasm', and Lancashire whose members thought it to be 'the best possible way of bridging the gap between Leagues'. In such publications the League members could compensate for what they saw as party propaganda. Jack Dipple, of the Tottenham branch of the League of Youth, parodied the title of an article in the official *League of Youth Bulletin*, 'The army gave me a new look', which was seen as 'a disgusting attempt to recruit for slaughter'. Dipple was able to expose what he, during his time in the Forces, saw as 'the revolting conditions suffered by the colonial peoples'. This was the kind of reporting the League felt necessary in order to balance the 'official prostitution of socialist ideals'.⁵⁴

Similarly, Birkenhead League of Youth published its own journal, *Rally for Socialism*. Following the first conference of the League of Youth, its editorial was asking why 'have our leaders put a gag on discussion of politics, or rather, anything which might be considered critical of the official policies of the Labour government?' Editorial opinion suggested that young people were the most affected by the major political and economic issues of the period and therefore had a right and duty to be able to discuss them.⁵⁵

When the Labour Party held its fifty-second annual conference at the Winter Gardens in Margate, in 1953, its youth movement had further reduced to five hundred and thirty eight branches. Additionally, there were difficulties in maintaining the continuity of the national consultative committee owing to the frequent number of changes to its membership. Of the twenty two signatories to the 1953 League consultative committee report only six remained on the committee by the end of the year and at least four were expected to have retired prior to the June 1954 committee meeting.⁵⁶ As a result, out of the twenty-two representatives at that year's meeting, only seven had held office for twelve months or longer resulting in an inexperienced consultative body. The party had no solutions to offer and instead went on to report the number of new branches that had emerged throughout the year.

The delegate from Garston, Liverpool immediately challenged the conference report that a hundred new branches had been created and informed the conference that it had failed to mention that the new branches almost immediately had a declining membership.⁵⁷ The NEC had ignored the League's own consultative committee report which had stated the rate at which new branches had been formed did not, particularly in the latter part of the year, keep pace with the rate at which pre-existing branches had become defunct.⁵⁸ There was a consensus among the members of the League of Youth that its decline as a functioning organisation was due to the dissatisfaction and disillusionment of its most active members with lack of progress towards an alteration of its structure and the failure to produce the democratic movement its members desired. There was a marked variance between what the League's constitution stated and what was happening on the ground; local parties and regional committees were often taking too much of the operational responsibility in for instance proposing delegates to the League conference instead of allowing League members to do so themselves.

In the midst of a declining membership, the National Executive still failed to offer the League of Youth any glimmer of hope with regard to its status. The repeated requests to be able to examine party policy and forward resolutions to the party conference continued to be rebuffed. A dispensation to allow discussion of policies that had already passed through the party's study group system failed to impress League members.⁵⁹ There was to be no meeting of hearts and minds on the subject of discussing party policy and the situation had now gone beyond the point where a recruitment campaign and a revamped journal could quell frustration.

The approach of the 1955 general election had temporarily stemmed the haemorrhage of League of Youth membership and produced a short-lived revival of its fortunes. New branches were established but no further interest was shown toward the League journal. The League conference, set for 1955, had to be cancelled on the advice of the League's own consultative committee owing to lack of interest.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the 1955 internal inquiry into party organisation made no recommendations for expanding numbers. Harold Wilson chaired the inquiry into the state of party organisation, which produced a damning report on the party's methods and called for an end to the 'penny farthing' party machine.⁶¹ The report defined the membership purely in terms of its effect on electoral outcomes and failed to develop strategies to recruit additional members. In fact, in the late nineteen fifties the party leadership exhibited little disquiet with declining membership generally and not simply among young people.⁶² Recruitment in this period was more a response to electoral disaster than recruitment for its own sake. The youth sections clung onto the coat tails of the party's various recruitment drives in the absence of other initiatives. There was a distinct sense of desperation in the air as the delegate for Lewisham moved the resolution:

'That this Conference calls upon the NEC to inquire into means by, and the principles on which, we can develop the League of Youth in all constituencies and to direct a national campaign to influence and politically educate young people in Socialist principles and to enrol them in the Labour movement'.⁶³

On behalf of the NEC, Alice Bacon, who had been involved with the League of Youth over a number of years, and for the most part had commended its members on their hard work, concluded that the party had done all it could to help administer and finance its youth movement but that 'the national organisation of it all had become a super-structure without any foundation'. A tired commitment was made to examine how the movement could be further developed but for the present time the Leagues would revert to youth sections under the auspices of their local parties.⁶⁴

Social change

Political and electoral trends cannot be fully understood without reference to social change. Although the League membership declared itself to be in the main Bevanites, Brivati suggests that it was Hugh Gaitskell, in the nineteen-fifties who was seen as the person most likely to take the Labour Party in the direction it needed to

go in order to harness its youth.⁶⁵ Gaitskell was one of a small group within the Labour Party who believed that young people should be nurtured and indeed gave a considerable proportion of his time to the League of Youth, joining them on rambles and giving talks at their meetings. More importantly, Gaitskell was conscious of the rapidly developing social and cultural change pervading post-war Britain and the impact this would have on the country's young people. It was essential, in order to be able to harness the vitality and enthusiasm of youth, that politicians understood and embraced these rapidly developing social and cultural changes. Hugh Gaitskell, Brivati believed, understood the situation. In 1959, Gaitskell stated that, '[c]ompared with pre-war, most people are a good deal better off...There are signs of the breaking up of traditional political loyalties'.⁶⁶

Williams reinforces Brivati's view. In his political biography of Gaitskell, Williams mentions that, 'the most distinctive feature of Gaitskell's candidature was his lavish attention to the Labour League of Youth. He was known to join the youngsters on midnight rambles and lead many political discussions.'⁶⁷ Gaitskell was genuinely concerned at Labour's failure to develop a strong youth movement comparable to those on the continent and was mindful that the new prosperity would erode class-consciousness.

The party however was blind in the face of the evidence and signally failed to heed the warnings from its own members. As early as 1953, the number of League of Youth branches was in decline having fallen from five hundred and thirty eight to one hundred and thirty two. Despite the National Executive's attempts, at that year's party conference, to put a gloss on the situation by claiming the setting up of a hundred new branches each year, Labour's subsequent defeat was attributed, in part, to the lack of support from the youngest members of the electorate. In the long term, improved economic and social conditions were placing a strain on the party loyalty that the leadership still believed could be relied upon to provide a guaranteed membership. However, as Rose points out, there are conditions that must be met for an individual to maintain the same party loyalty as their parents. He found, in this period, that less than half of British voters came from homes where both parents shared the same party identification. Furthermore, those who change their vote from one election to the next come predominantly from families where no cue is taken from parents. This high proportion of voters who are not 'delivered at birth' should

have served to provide the Labour Party with an incentive to seek recruits, and once acquired not take them for granted as inevitable life-long supporters.⁶⁸

In addition, a survey by Abrams on the social and political values of the electorate revealed that in the eighteen to twenty five age group, thirty percent believed that the Conservative Party were genuinely interested in the young but only ten percent thought the same of the Labour Party. The survey concluded that 'fifty two percent of young people today are Conservatives, forty three percent are Labour supporters and five percent are Liberals'.⁶⁹ As Haseler points out, 'this was devastating news for a so-called radical party of the left'.⁷⁰

If as Butler and Rose suggested in 1959 that electoral trends cannot be understood without reference to the social trends of the period then remarkably, the attention given by the Labour Party to this phenomenon was noticeably absent.⁷¹ There were some in the party who were willing to be influenced and guided by the findings of market research but others preferred to rely on their 'political nose'. Indeed, Bevan had complained in the late nineteen fifties, after the Labour Party had arranged for some private polling, that it was 'taking the poetry out of politics'.⁷² Bevan's view did not assist the party in seeking out the impact of social change on political attitudes. The post-war voting pattern summarised by Abrams shows that roughly two-thirds of the working class vote Labour, while three-quarters of the middle class vote Conservative⁷³. The fact that the Conservative Party is identified with the better-off section of society and the Labour Party with the less privileged has implications for an electorate, only half of which could have voted in a pre-war general election.

During the inter-war years, unemployment and poverty were instrumental in drawing together numbers of young people as kindred spirits into a League of Youth and, in the absence of commercial leisure activities; they provided their own, predominantly cost-free entertainment. The economic circumstances also shaped natural leaders such as Willis, which served to create an additional sense of being part of something exciting and of its time. By the time the second League of Youth was established, and in spite of the undisputed efforts of its organisers, the choirs, drama clubs and nights around the piano singing socialist songs had been snubbed in favour of activities that were more commercial. While many League members were still keen to take part in the education provided by the Labour colleges, it was as much part of 'what we did' as a desire to better themselves. Therefore, as recent studies point out,

when the Labour Party tried to increase the role of internal education, it met with lack of interest. There was a cultural and political gulf between those who wished to convey Labour's wider intent and those whose interests they hoped to represent. In other words, the Labour thinkers misunderstood the role of leisure, particularly popular leisure, in working life.⁷⁴ The party leadership, between 1945 and 1951, mistakenly believed that the social and political attitudes of the electorate had become transformed because of the war and failed to recognise that most people remained preoccupied with their own private spheres, preferring instead a return to pre-war days but without the insecurities. This inability on the part of the leadership to interpret accurately the moment allowed the Conservatives to realise the potential of leisure as a political issue.⁷⁵

What Jimmy Allan and others could sense in the nineteen fifties was given clarity by some commentators. The social revolution of the nineteen-sixties had its roots in the 'age of affluence' of the previous decade, which Allan holds responsible for young people no longer needing to go on long walks.⁷⁶ Brian Brivati puts the point into context. 'Youth', he states, had broken into the national consciousness manifest in groups such as the Teddy Boys, the Chelsea Set and new designers for instance Mary Quant, all of which lead to a reassessment of the nation's cultural life. He goes on to say that in 'popular music, art and literature and in social attitudes new generations and new ideas were beginning to break through the grey mist of post-war austerity'.⁷⁷

The 'undeniably grim' working class towns of back-to-back housing had, many interviewees would claim, fashioned social loyalties and voting behaviour which in turn had provided safe Labour seats. This situation had remained virtually unchanged throughout the period of the first League of Youth but by the nineteen-fifties, this traditional community-spirited, working-class, Labour base that had fed the membership of the League of Youth was being eroded as it was beginning to make way for newly built houses and flats with which came new touchstones of ambition. Significant increases in real earnings; an increase of more than twenty percent for industrial workers between 1951 and 1958, and additional family members going out to work buoyed working class households financially. Many young people no longer had to necessarily settle for the 'blind-alley' jobs of the nineteen-thirties as the 1944 Butler Education Act had provided increased opportunities in secondary education qualifying more young people from working-class backgrounds for jobs which had until now been the preserve of the middle-classes.⁷⁸

Added to this genuine increase in wealth was also a general sense of economic well-being fostered by the mass-production of consumer goods advertised through the new media of independent television and magazines. It can be argued that privatisation and individualisation of leisure began in the nineteen twenties, with such activities as cinema, but the tendency intensified during the nineteen fifties. As televisions and cars entered working class homes for the first time, there was less need for those outside agencies such as branch and union meetings followed by dances, chapel, cooperative outings or charabanc trips. Similarly, the fundraising dances, debating circles and drama clubs, which the Labour Party had naively viewed as 'improving' pastimes, which promoted the values necessary for the building of socialism, were making way for more commercial 'escapist' entertainment.⁷⁹ This had implications for the survival of the League of Youth as well as for the party as a whole as social, political and educational life was inextricably linked.

Although Labour's defeat in the general election of 1955 and the subsequent Wilson report steered many to recognise that there was a need for change, the recruitment of young people into the Labour Party was not however the most pressing priority. The need to include the party's youth sections in any future strategies had to wait a few more years by which time the situation was also being played out prominently in the national media.

On the eve of the 1959 general election, Labour voters awoke to some unpalatable facts, in the first of a series of articles in *The Manchester Guardian*, on Labour's attitude to its youth sections. Only two hundred and sixty eight of the six hundred and thirty parliamentary constituencies could claim to have a youth section. This was a worrying situation when set alongside the party's own research into its chances in the forthcoming election, which showed that three million of those who had contributed to Labour's victory in 1945, would be dead by the time parliament was dissolved. Anthony Howard, the author of the article, entitled *The Ageing Labour Party*, could have been writing today. He notes the marked absence of anyone under thirty in Labour Party rooms, rooms that were filled with long rows of trestle tables 'flanked on each side by tired, grizzled men and grey-haired care-worn women'. The party had only reluctantly accepted Labour students as part of the youth movement of the party and it is the treatment of the National Association of Labour Students that Howard singles out as being indicative of the reason why the 'nominally progressive and anti-

Establishment party had failed to capture the imagination and the allegiance of rebellious young people'. He concludes that the Labour Party is frightened of its youth movement and what it might do.⁸⁰

The Manchester Guardian continued its assault by accusing the Labour Party of having 'no cheese on the political trap'. The 'simple unsophisticated pleasures' and the 'satisfaction of self-improvement' that belonged to the socialist Sunday schools and the Clarion cycling club no longer reflected the aspirations of the younger generation. The Labour Party, if it were to win the 1959 election, had to find ways to attract young people 'whose wardrobes are often larger than those their parents have built up in a life-time and whose pay packets are perfectly able to compete with the strident demands of hire purchase'. The blame went further than the party itself. At local level, there appeared at best a reluctance to encourage young people into the fold, a view reinforced by the remarks of the Member of Parliament for Islington. 'You know people mustn't think that they have any more right to join their local Labour Party than they have to join their local golf club'.⁸¹

With only a matter of months to the general election, *The Manchester Guardian* issued a further criticism by requesting a 'contemporary décor' for 'Labour's outmoded nursery'. The party had little time to put its 'nursery' in order and if it failed to do so, it may find that 'its whole house tumbles about its head'. The present signs were that, in the event, there would be no one young and active enough to help rebuild it.⁸² Hugh Gaitskell responded to *The Manchester Guardian's* view that he, 'living very much in the present' was the one to extirpate the 'strand of puritan austerity' running through the party, by instigating the establishment of a youth commission to supplement the NEC working party which would examine Labour youth organisation. In terms of the 1959 general election, however, it was too little too late. The Labour Party lost the election, a defeat blamed partly on the failure to attract the youth vote. What could have been a positive policy initiative, therefore, instead became part of the post-mortem following the Labour Party's defeat.

While economic and social status may not entirely determine political ideas, the traditional working class foundations of Labour Party strength were being eroded. This proliferation of middle-class values and aspirations had been positively promoted by the Conservative Party with which the new prosperity was being associated.⁸³ Gaitskell recognised that this newfound affluence had played a part in the erosion of class-consciousness and that the election of 1959 would be the

decisive test in respect of meeting the demands of the youth wing of the party without betraying the loyalties and principles of the older members.⁸⁴ However, with regard to the treatment of its young members, Gaitskell remained in a minority within the party. By the time the NEC had begun to discuss the impact of social change on the younger generation, the 1959 general election had been a defeat for the Labour Party and the second League of Youth had followed the same fate as its predecessor.

The results of 1959 suggested an undermining of the tendency to vote from habit.⁸⁵ This was an important factor in terms of garnering the youth vote as the factors that had fostered this voting habit; family background, environment and straitened economic circumstances, were being diluted by social change. Consequently, the Labour Party suffered heavy losses among the twenty one to twenty nine age groups, those most likely to consider politics in post-war terms. Richard Crossman shared Gaitskell's concerns when he reflected:

'In this era of Tory prosperity a Labour opposition has to run very fast in order to stay where it is. Each year which takes us further, not only from the hungry thirties, but from the austere forties, weakens class consciousnesses.'⁸⁶

In 1959, Gaitskell concluded that young people were,

'repelled by what they feel to be fusty, old-fashioned working class attitudes of the people who run the Labour Party'. He asked, 'How can one meet the demands of these young people without seeming to betray all the ideals of the old people?'⁸⁷

This deduction led, in 1959, to the founding of a party youth commission to study the problems of the fifteen to twenty-five age groups and to find ways of improving the appeal of Labour politics to young people.⁸⁸ By the time the commission had positioned itself the dismantled League of Youth was simply limping along as youth sections attached to their local parties, a position from which they had emerged thirty years previously. The commission's findings would herald the birth of a new youth organisation but would be too late to salvage the Labour League of Youth, whose number of branches now stood at a paltry two hundred and sixty two. As the appointees of the commission took to their seats, the sun set on Labour's youth movement for the second time in its history.

Conclusion

To lose one youth group may be regarded a misfortune, but to lose both looks like carelessness.⁸⁹ The victory in 1945 had buoyed Labour's confidence in the prospects of socialism and there was now a belief by party members that the Second World War had shifted the public mood sufficiently toward Labour and that the transition from capitalism to socialism had begun.⁹⁰ A new generation of young people, swelled by the hopes and aspirations that victory in war and politics can bring, and unfamiliar with the poverty-stricken nineteen-thirties, began to experience the benefits of the new post-war affluence. Yet, though the historical context in which the second League of Youth operated may have been of a different complexion to that of its predecessor the reasons for its failure are relatively consistent.

The changes wrought by the Second World War were many but so far as the structure and character of the Labour Party is concerned, were more perceived than real. The constitution under which the first League had been established was rolled out unchanged for the second thereby immediately fostering disputes around the issues of recruitment, autonomous status, freedom to discuss party policy and associations with groups outside the party. While there are several examples, by senior party members, of the recognition of the importance of youth to the future of the party, they lacked consistency drive and purpose. There was an inability on the part of the party leadership to understand the significance of the youth vote to the party's success. Therefore, the series of recruitment drives were no more than a response to electoral defeat and diminishing membership.

The factions supporting the two leading individuals deemed best placed to advance the cause of youth, Gaitskell and Bevan, were locked in battle throughout the period. The nature and speed of the possible transition from capitalism to socialism, and even the nature of socialism itself culminating in a ferocious campaign between the Bevanites and the revisionists, remained unsettled.⁹¹ The Gaitskellite vision of social democracy intensified the split in the party, which created the Bevanite faction that drew the party's youngest members. Bevan's version of socialism appealed strongly to most League of Youth members. Gaitskell appreciated the importance of attracting youth to the party but his favourable attitude toward the youth movement was never likely to be translated into a programme that delivered what the League of Youth had for so long demanded. Gaitskell had joined the League of Youth on several of its social occasions but his interest in the organisation, Williams noted, was 'as an educator concerned about his young friends not because it offered an organisational

springboard'. Gaitskell saw the activities of the League as a diversion from the serious politics of the party and always suspected that the party would soon curb the enthusiasm of the youth movement. Indeed, he told Willis who had led his own faction out of the first League of Youth and into the Young Communist League that he would have nothing to do with the factional disputes in the Labour League of Youth.⁹² Gaitskell's view had not changed during the period of the second League.

The Labour Party's inflated concerns surrounding entryism resulted in the failure to allow individual League branches themselves the opportunity to contain the infiltration, thereby bypassing the chance to demonstrate its faith and trust in its own youth movement, preferring instead the 'ritual provision of martyrs'. This had the opposite outcome to that which the NEC had hoped to accomplish.⁹³ Therefore, infiltration perceived or otherwise, continued to be used by the party as grounds for refusing requests by the youth movement for autonomous status. The Labour Party had over-estimated the strength of the League of Youth and underestimated the inhibiting nature of its own structure and organisation. It naively believed that its youth groups could influence or change policy without the support of the women who had nurtured them, the local parties on whom they depended for financial support, or the trade unions whose power was the greatest of all.

However, the pre-eminent influence in shaping the minds and attitudes of the young, and one that the Labour Party failed to address adequately, was the social change brought about by the new affluence of the post-war period. It is generally true to say that increasing affluence in the period following the Second World War marked out the second League of Youth from the first. The social changes in the nineteen forties were stark and the Labour Party was in need of an imaginative approach between the end of the first League of Youth and the beginning of the second. The structural restraint of a rapidly changing society was bearing down on the Labour Party's relationship with its youth movement.

The party leadership cannot be held responsible for the natural desire among working class people to enjoy the fruits of this new affluence. However, it is here that structural explanations overlap with those of agency in that the new circumstances invited a response. The party can be held to account for the way in which it acted, or failed to act, in this situation. There was a tendency to try to change rather than support the way working class individuals spent their leisure time by dictating what

the young members wanted or needed. There was a view that the Labour Party should continue to provide a political education and not 'opportunities to jive'.⁹⁴

The same group of individuals had carried over the unyielding attitude of the party leadership towards its youth into the post-war period. The new generation of League of Youth members found themselves contending with a redoubtable older generation who could remember all too clearly the hardships of the previous decade and were in some cases finding it difficult to move forward. Furthermore, those young people less than thirty years of age in the nineteen fifties, who had played a part in the victory of 1945, were not being specifically encouraged to play an active role in the party they had been inspired to join. The PLP interpreted what Hay termed the strategic relational position in which it found itself in such a manner as to fear a vibrant youth organisation.

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Chapter 7: The Labour League of Youth in the West Riding of Yorkshire including a case study of Huddersfield.

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to show in detail the intellectual and organisational life of one branch and its impact across the wider region. The availability of primary source material and the number of League of Youth members surviving from the period, combine to demonstrate the significance of the Huddersfield branch of the League of Youth. The chapter explores the factors that led to the rise of the Huddersfield League, whose success determined its key role in the support and development of League branches across the West Riding of Yorkshire.

Political and economic background

The Labour League of Youth in the West Riding of Yorkshire was born into a 'Labour heartland' where, in the inter-war years, the upsurge of socialist feeling was more evident than anywhere else in the country.¹ Laybourn and Reynolds discovered during the inter-war years, a fertile political environment in the West Riding; one in which could be expected the successful development of a federation of Labour League branches. Their local party leaders had usurped the Liberals and had been at the centre of every major national and international event of the inter-war years. The demographic and economic trends of the West Riding had favoured the growth of the Labour Party. The three major industries of the West Riding, textiles, coal mining and engineering, were experiencing unemployment of around twenty-eight percent of the insured workforce, a figure that would not fall below nine percent until the level of demand was raised by the advent of war. Furthermore, the region had stopped growing: the woollen and worsteds industry lost twenty-four percent of its jobs between 1923 and 1935, general engineering lost fourteen percent and coal mining, the worst affected with losses of around forty six percent. In addition, the reduced purchasing power of the population, itself growing at only three percent, discouraged industrial revival in new fields of innovation. The bleak economic environment was compounded by immigration to areas with improved job prospects and a fall in the annual birth rate due mainly to the general anxiety about the economic future. This, Reynolds and Laybourn maintain, was a bitter pill to swallow for a region of considerable economic and political importance, which had experienced significant growth out of the industrialisation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which had seen significant increases in population throughout the second decade of the twentieth century.² In the West Riding, Labour was only two seats behind the

government parties with ten seats to twelve and appeared to be little affected by the 1931 crisis. Leeds Labour Party took control in 1933 and 1934 and in Wakefield, Labour held control from 1934 to 1938. This improved electoral performance gave the Labour Party the opportunity to put in place a programme of social and economic reform based around education, housing and jobs.³ At international level, there was plenty to occupy the minds of impressionable youth: the rise of fascism, the Abyssinian conflict, the Spanish Civil War, and impending war.

In the two decades prior to the formation of the Huddersfield Labour League of Youth, the Labour vote in Huddersfield had shown a consistent increase. In 1910, 12,737 people had voted Labour; by 1918, when the new constitution of the Labour Party had allowed provision for individual membership, the number had risen to 15,673. This increase continued at 17,430 in 1922 to 19,010 by 1924. Philip Snowden, in October 1927, described Huddersfield as 'unique in many respects'. Owing a large number of public services, the first town in Great Britain to run a publicly owned tram system and one of the few to own the freehold of the land upon which it stands. Yet, although Labour held the parliamentary representation of the borough, it had little representation on the borough council, which, Snowden says, makes Labour 'more backward than it was twenty years ago'. He remarked that Keighley, Bradford, Leeds and Sheffield had increasing Labour representation on local councils and in some cases a majority. 'There is no other town, Snowden complains, 'where there is a strong labour movement where Labour has not a considerable representation on the local council'. The main reason for this state of affairs, he believed was that those who voted Labour in parliamentary elections did not put in the same amount of effort to win municipal elections or perhaps did not realise that it is just as necessary to control local bodies, as it is to control Parliament.⁴ For 1927, read the present day. This was the political face of Huddersfield into which the League of Youth would be born, just over a year later.

Politics and personalities in the region

The region could boast a number of talented individuals, who would be later renowned for eminent office and illustrious careers, whose political backgrounds are rooted in the labour movement and whose early experiences began in the Labour League of Youth.

Betty Boothroyd was one such individual. She was born and grew up in a back-to-back terraced house in the 'undeniably grim' working-class district of Eastborough in

the West Riding textile town of Dewsbury. Her parents had met and worked in the mill, her father having suffered long stretches of unemployment in the inter-war years.⁵ Boothroyd went on to become the first female speaker of the House of Commons, later taking up her seat in the House of Lords as Baroness Boothroyd. In 1992, she was invited to return to the town where she had, forty years earlier, chaired the Dewsbury League of Youth and seen its membership increase under her stewardship, to be awarded the freedom of the borough by Kirklees Council.⁶

One of Boothroyd's contemporaries in the early nineteen-fifties was Tom Megahy. Megahy chaired the Labour League of Youth in Lanark, Scotland from where, in 1952, he travelled to the West Riding to represent the Scottish team in the National League of Youth speaking contest run by Labour's paper, *The Daily Herald*. Boothroyd went on to win with Megahy gaining second place. It was here that he met his future wife, Jean, the founder member of Mirfield League of Youth and delegate to the West Riding federation. From Mirfield, Megahy was accepted to Ruskin but later returned to the West Riding, which was to become his permanent home. Here, in 1974, he became the first leader of Kirklees Council and Huddersfield's first member of the European Parliament, representing Yorkshire South West in 1979, a post he held for the next two decades.⁷

Family background and participation were key determinants in the establishment and success of the Labour League in the West Riding of Yorkshire. From the early years of the Labour Party, the Thorntons and the Crossleys, linked by marriage, had been active in Spen Valley labour politics. Peter Thornton recalls his two uncles leading his father away from 'the ignorant lumpen working class Liberals of the West Riding into labour politics and trade unionism. This move set him on a future in labour politics where his first contribution was towards the establishment of Heckmondwike Labour League of Youth, where he met his wife Jean who became the branch's secretary. Spen Valley labour politics flowed through the veins of the Thornton family and remain in evidence in their offspring; most noticeably, daughter, Glenys, who began her own political career in youth politics, and is presently a Labour peer in the House of Lords.⁸

Jim Mortimer had an illustrious career at the heart of national labour politics. Although he served his time in the League of Youth further south in Portsmouth and Brixton, his roots are firmly in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Mortimer grew up in the shadow of Manningham Mills in Bradford where, as a schoolboy, he developed an

interest in the labour movement which, now in his eighties, he has retained to the present day.⁹

The West Riding of Yorkshire provided literary as well as political inspiration for its League of Youth members. Aileen Armitage, 'Yorkshire's Catherine Cookson', was brought up in Huddersfield where her father's family had lived for four hundred years. The author recalls a background rich in socialism: her grandfather was a life-long enemy of John Barleycorn, her father a 'quiet and reserved' socialist; her mother, a 'tireless worker' for the Labour Party. Armitage's membership of the League of Youth was less a political experience than a welcome respite from the girls' school, which she attended. She drew on her political background and West Riding roots to become a well-known writer of historical romances, gothic novels and family sagas, many set in the West Riding of Yorkshire and based on the experiences of those for whom her family spent their lives fighting.¹⁰

The successes of those mentioned above are well documented. However, the West Riding of Yorkshire was also home to many less well-known though equally important individuals, some of whom will be mentioned later in this chapter, who went on to a life-time in labour politics, some taking high office in local councils, others remaining active as party workers in their local area.

The birth and growth of the League in Huddersfield and the West Riding

The official inauguration of the Huddersfield Labour League of Youth took place on Saturday 2nd February 1929 in the schoolroom of the Unitarian Church at Fitzwilliam Street, accompanied with a dance. The initial proposal to set up a Young Labour League in Huddersfield had been put forward in the previous June. Elon Whitwam had sent a letter to 'Our Postbag' at *The Huddersfield Citizen* stating,

'In view of the fact that in perhaps less than twelve months time we shall be in the midst of a general election, the most important election that has yet occurred, it is of the utmost importance that no time should be lost in making preparations for that event'.¹¹

It was intended that the League of Youth be officially inaugurated on Wednesday July 25th at eight o'clock provided that a sufficient number turned up. The initiative was further promoted in '*Party Notes*' by the secretary and agent for Huddersfield Labour

Party, Arthur Gardiner. The movement was to be open to both sexes between the ages of fifteen to twenty-five.¹²

The Huddersfield Citizen was the 'Organ of the Labour Party' and had its offices in Fitzwilliam Street. The editor was James H Hudson MP, for whom the newly established League of Youth would be campaigning. When the first edition of the paper was published on December 10th, 1926, Huddersfield had only one Member of Parliament and had not previously had a 'Labour' press. Eminent individuals such as Philip Snowden, a regular contributor, and Ramsay MacDonald, regaled its readers with articles. The paper also organised visiting lectures provided by, among others, A. J. Cook of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain.¹³ Ten thousand free copies of the *The Citizen* were distributed each month.¹⁴ It is probably true to say that initial interest was sluggish as the intended July inauguration did not take place and further advertisements were placed the following December and January; this time with the added selling point of such events as dances and rambles and 'any other form of social enjoyment that the League might desire'.¹⁵

Until the establishment of the Labour League of Youth in Huddersfield, there was no discernible effort on behalf of the local party to involve its young people. *The Citizen* had tried to engage its young readers through 'The Children's Corner' run by 'Uncle Will' who regaled his 'nephews and nieces' with such questions as 'Can you write a slogan?' or 'How would you decorate your school?'.¹⁶ As the 1929 election drew nearer there was advice available from the 'Children's Corner' on 'how to behave at the general election'. 'Googlie Splooters', presumably a colleague of 'Uncle Will', warned boys not to dream 'rosy dreams of marching through the streets banging drums and blowing trumpets'. Instead, it was suggested, they should baby-sit their siblings or offer to do the washing-up while mum and dad are out. They should also 'be as pleasant as they can about it'. The older ones could of course go along to their local ward secretary and offer to deliver leaflets. 'Green-Bearded Gerald' had the last word, advising the youngsters that should they get involved in election arguments at school they must, 'gently and firmly inform [their] schoolfellows that Mr Hudson will be returned once more to Parliament on May 30th, so there is no need to get excited'.¹⁷

Snowden's vision was somewhat wider. He made a dramatic plea to young people to join Labour's ranks. He believed that the Labour Party was the party of 'young men and women who have their lives before them'.¹⁸ The view was often offset by the

attitude of party stalwarts such as Wilfred Whitely, MP for Ladywood, who felt it necessary to give the League of Youth a history of the Labour Party 'mentioning its stalwarts and outlining its principles in a delicate manner'. However, the wry smiles and gentle impatience of League members could almost be detected when it was reported that the 'tender manner' was said to provide a complete contrast to 'the exuberant hilarity of the former speaker'.¹⁹

Once a core group had been established, Huddersfield's first Labour League of Youth began well enabling *The citizen* to report 'a splendid gathering of young people' with more than a hundred members being admitted. The League's first business meeting was held in the party rooms at Westgate, supported by Arthur Gardiner, Huddersfield Labour Party agent, who took charge of the function. Member of Parliament, James Hudson also attended and addressed the meeting at the interval.²⁰ In the following months, further advertisements were placed resulting in a membership, by July 1929, of two hundred and rising with an attendance at ordinary business meetings of more than a hundred members, leading *The Citizen* to remark that, 'the success of the Huddersfield Labour Party League of Youth has been astonishing'. It was already being suggested that larger accommodation was needed.²¹ The flourishing membership of the Huddersfield League of Youth mirrored that of other branches across the country and coincided with the decision by Transport House to provide some form of coordination through a monthly bulletin. The first edition of July 1929 was appreciated by, 'the goodly number present who crowded the room and flowed down the stairs'.²²

Those who joined the Labour League of Youth in Huddersfield would soon become familiar with the names of the early office holders. Ernest Aldridge and Frank Burley took up the posts of president and treasurer respectively; two names which would dominate the Huddersfield scene throughout the interwar years and subsequently, along with Harold Halstead, Stanley North (League president in 1935, often referred to as 'Jesus Christ' and the League's intellectual), and Phylis Payne. Indeed some members retained their links with both Huddersfield and the Labour Party until their deaths several decades later. The members of Huddersfield League of Youth came predominantly from working-class backgrounds and, in many cases, of limited education. They were, nevertheless a politically aware and intelligent group of young people who took advantage of the plethora of organisations, social, educational and political, which had grown up around them. A typical month at the Labour Party rooms in Fitzwilliam Street was filled with debates, talks, discussions, film shows,

dances and hikes. Talks varied from national and international affairs to personal experiences.

There were also ingenious ways of encouraging the members to participate in speaking events. At the start of a meeting or event, attendees were each given a number, a selection of which was called out and the holder invited to speak for a total of three minutes from a choice of subjects. There was also a desire to learn from each other and to explore concepts and policies. Such was the growth in confidence of the Huddersfield League of Youth that, in August 1929, a suggestion was made that the branch should engage speakers from within its own ranks.²³

Jimmy Allan was one of the few members who could claim to straddle the pre- and post-war periods of the League of Youth. In contrast to the long queues of unemployed young men of the nineteen-thirties, which provided the recruiting ground for the first League, the youth movement of the post-war period looked to major local employers for its membership. It was on the shop floor of Brook (Electric) Motors that Huddersfield Labour League of Youth was raised from the ashes of war in 1944, bringing together young labour activists such as Gilbert Hanson, Granville Whitely and Peter Burnham.

The post-war League of Youth continued to enjoy the support of party agent, Arthur Gardiner, who very soon placed an advertisement for a new League of Youth in *The Huddersfield Daily Examiner*. Jimmy Allan and Harry Sykes, a traveller with the Coop provided the welcoming committee for new recruits and an introduction to what the League of Youth was all about. Granville Whiteley soon recognised that the views on the post-war world order put forward by Sykes and Allan were identical to his own and that the League of Youth would be 'a wonderful outlet for [his] views and discussions'. Evident again, is the propensity that Huddersfield had for producing enthusiastic and talented individuals. Whiteley's skills as 'a brilliant organiser' soon became apparent as he took on the role of minute secretary, then secretary and, before long, branch organiser. He had a reputation within the branch and indeed across the West Riding federation for being a good organiser. His wife Barbara said of him, 'He got people to do things'. Indeed, his interest in photography served the League of Youth well. It was an expensive hobby then but Whiteley had taken it up and built up a fine collection of photographs of League members from across the West Riding on their rambles.²⁴

This group of young people were also quite independent of the local party when it came to taking a lead on an issue. Champions of 'women only' shortlists in the Labour Party may view the approach of individuals such as Whiteley and Allan as being ahead of its time. Both were keenly aware of the need to bring women into politics and made efforts to recruit women to the Huddersfield branch. A formal welcoming committee was established which drew in people such as Whiteley's future wife Barbara, and the early female members were then occupied in the task of increasing female membership. What began as a small group of male activists soon grew into a thirty-plus membership equally balanced between the genders.

The organisation of the League of Youth mirrored that of the party and as such a number of League federations were created covering the same geographical areas. The West Riding federation of the League of Youth incorporated three geographical regions: federation area 1, which covered the Leeds area; federation area 2 covering the two South Yorkshire towns of Penistone and Sheffield; and federation area 3, Huddersfield. Huddersfield began as one of the early League of Youth branches in the late nineteen-twenties and, due to its growth and success, became the geographical centre of area 3, which initially included Brighouse, Slaithwaite, Sowerby Bridge, Halifax, Todmorden, Hebden Bridge, Colne Valley and Spen Valley. Meetings rotated between the areas and endeavours made to establish a joint commitment to political and social activities. The success of the Huddersfield branch of the League inspired the establishment of further branches throughout the region and those early founders were frequently called upon to assist in getting new branches off the ground. In fact, Huddersfield League of Youth members could be relied upon to swell the numbers of social, political and educational events across its own federation and those of other regions.

The membership and organisation of each branch varied from region to region therefore being part of a federation provided a sizeable forum in which information and views could be shared and support given to fledgling branches. The economies of scale provided by the grouping of branches in this way enabled Leagues to organise a range of activities such as weekend schools and debating workshops to which they could invite speakers. This provided access to a variety of views and opinions. There were ready-made numbers and venues with which to organise events such as rallies and demonstrations on a wider scale. The federation began enthusiastically. A youth demonstration was set for September 1933 at the Albert

Hall followed by proposals for an anti-war demonstration to be held at Saville Park, Halifax in May 1934. Events were organised with a wider audience in mind. Social events such as dances were often opened up to branches across the different federations. As was the case nationally, politics, education and social activities were all bound together; surviving photographs show rambling outings attended by League of Youth members from the different federations.

Rambling, as mentioned earlier, was a major activity in the League of Youth but particularly thriving within the West Riding. Like most of the Labour Party's activities, rambling was organised through committees and elected officers. One such officer was Jimmy Allan, a Huddersfield member and life long Rambler up to his ninetieth year. Allan was conscious of the need to draw as many people as possible into the movement and extended the rambling outings to include branches across the federation. As the movement continued and grew, this keen Rambler began to build up a collection of slides, which he showed at federation meetings to encourage participation. Through his efforts, he came into contact with Barbara Betts, later Castle. The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 formed part of the Labour government's post-war reconstruction initiative and followed a series of reports beginning in 1931. Allan had watched these events with interest and recalls proudly the occasion when Betts joined him and League of Youth members on rambles across the West Riding.²⁵

Members of the West Riding federation were kept busy in other ways: Jean Megahy recalls with amusement attempts by the Mirfield branch of the League of Youth to establish itself as a concert party, which travelled round the branches of the federation, entertaining the members with songs from the shows.²⁶ Drawing members together appeared to be a constant theme running through the West Riding federation. Granville Whiteley played a prominent role in the West Riding federation as its treasurer. He recalled travelling to different areas to attract interest and made use of such facilities as Tong Hall in Bradford. The hall was a cooperative owned facility but was run by a League of Youth member.²⁷ The size of membership created by the federation enabled Tong Hall to play host to a number of League of Youth events to which were invited many eloquent speakers, among them Harold Wilson. In political education also, the West Riding found itself at the centre.

When election time comes around, young people are undoubtedly a valuable resource for stuffing envelopes, leafleting and door knocking. There is little evidence

however to suggest that the members of the League felt that they were simply campaign fodder. When Molly Walton joined the Huddersfield League of Youth in 1949, activities were dominated by the 1950 general election and the campaign to re-elect the Member of Parliament for Huddersfield East, J. P. W. Mallalieu. She was therefore immediately put to work.

Local party commitment to the League of Youth

The commitment to self-education and the thirst for knowledge was supplemented by way of access to a wide range of literature intended to promote a socialist education. To be found on many bookshelves in Huddersfield houses would be such material as Kautsky's *The Class Struggle* and Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England* and *Defence of Bottom Dog*, published by the Clarion Press of which Blatchford was editor. Many knew by heart the traditional songs of revolt of the British Isles as well as the workers' songs of different countries. The Workers' Music Association in collaboration with the Left Book Club Musicians' Group, produced *The Left Song Book*, an array of time-honoured songs of rebellion from *The Red Flag*, France's *Marseillaise*, Italy's *Bandiera Rossa* to the *Tsarist Funeral March*, *The Wearing of the Green* and *Cym Rhondda*.²⁸ League of Youth members have fond memories of nights gathered round a piano, of which there always seemed to be one available, working through each song by heart. Such events were well attended and supported by older party members.

Members of the League of Youth in Huddersfield and the West Riding of Yorkshire identify the National Council of Labour Colleges as instrumental in their political education. The region was particularly fortunate in having individuals who were committed not only to the labour colleges but also to the party's youth wing. Trade unionist, Joe Madin, was a co-founder of the Sheffield labour college in 1919 and became, as a young man, its first organiser. The wider labour college movement, later known as the National Council of Labour Colleges, was founded on the Sheffield college initiative.²⁹ When the TUC later took over the labour college movement its base was established in Leeds, where Len Collinson, a former League of Youth member became its youngest lecturer. The Trades Council Hall, in Huddersfield, played host to the National Council of Labour Colleges to which the Huddersfield League of Youth, by 1934, had thirty affiliated members.

Jimmy Allan's memories of National Council of Labour Colleges lectures remain vivid. He recalls the topic '*Materialistic Conception of History*', delivered by Fred

Shaw. Known to the branch as 'Our Father',³⁰ this much-respected figure had a long history in the labour movement, which began with the Clarion cycling club as early as 1905. He joined the Huddersfield Socialist Party at the beginning of 1910 and used it as a platform to conduct anti-militaristic meetings across the country, as well as 'flooding' Huddersfield with pamphlets by Marx, Engels and Kautsky.³¹ Although he openly declared himself a communist, the Longwood ward had no qualms about electing him to the Huddersfield Borough Council. Shaw's keen interest in the labour colleges resulted in his appointment as full time organiser for the Yorkshire area in 1924.³² He also believed it essential that young people understood how 'the financial side of town affairs was conducted' and toward this end, he delivered lectures on municipal finance.³³ His apparent liking for the 'outdoor part of politics' made him an easy supporter of the League of Youth. Several League members possess photographs of Shaw on their League of Youth outings sporting the Hammer and Sickle flag. By the time Shaw retired in 1928, he had given over thirty years continuous service to the Labour Party.³⁴

The speakers enjoyed by the League of Youth were, mainly well-read individuals and their subject matter comprehensive; L G Edwards gave a talk entitled, 'Germany under Hitler'. Dr Montgomery explained the 'Douglas Credit Scheme', a 'social credit' movement based on monetary reform, which was gaining ground in this period. The minutes of the addresses were detailed and the style of the report showed a good understanding of the subject matter by the league members.³⁵ By the time Huddersfield League of Youth member, Jimmy Allan, had received his certificate for elementary English in 1944, nearly 22,000 certificates had been awarded. Huddersfield had thirty members affiliated to the organisation by 1933 who met at the Trades Club in Northumberland Street. So many groups were interested in speaking that it was suggested that a year's syllabus be set out.³⁶

As well as being keen to educate the young, there was also a sense of general paternalism towards the League of Youth in some quarters. Arthur Gardiner was a figure that the members of the Huddersfield League of Youth held in high esteem. A trade unionist, Gardiner had been active in the Labour Party since the general election of 1906, and had taken over the role of party agent from Wilfred Whitely. There was initial doubt that Gardiner would settle to what was seen essentially as an office job after spending much of his youth carrying the 'fiery cross' through the countryside but he was reported to have 'made good' since being appointed.³⁷ He was, 'looking forward to the time when the younger members would undertake the

work which the older ones would be obliged to drop'.³⁸ Gardiner undoubtedly realised the potential of young people as an army of labourers at election time and often addressed League of Youth meetings on the importance of forthcoming municipal elections, urging all those who were at all interested to give whatever help they could, either in addressing outdoor meetings or in performing the more humble but essential work indoors. Gardiner also took on a more fatherly role. He acknowledged the potential of youthful enthusiasm to overtake common sense and the resulting likelihood that the League of Youth would, from time to time, fall foul of the authorities. League members recall examples of this: Gardiner was often called upon to aid the release from police cells of young members who had found themselves on the wrong side of the local police following a march or demonstration.³⁹

J. P. W. Mallalieu was also a figure respected by members of the League of Youth in Huddersfield. Mallalieu had been adopted as prospective parliamentary candidate for Huddersfield and became, in 1945, Huddersfield's first Labour MP. In 1939, in an attempt to improve the political education of Huddersfield Labour Party's youngest members, Mallalieu established a scholarship whereby League of Youth members had the opportunity to attend a summer school at which they could develop their knowledge of the labour movement, trade unions and local government.⁴⁰ In addition, he also made available to League of Youth members, his London flat to enable people like Jimmy Allan to attend a wider range of events and activities that they would otherwise have been unable to afford.⁴¹

The socialist Sunday school movement had played a vital role in the political and social development of League of Youth members in Huddersfield and the West Riding and was supported and encouraged by senior party members. *The Citizen* stated that, 'the future hope of the Labour and Socialist Movement lies in the young people'.⁴² John Topping, in an article entitled *An appeal to Labour supporters* in December 1929, warned, 'with the lowering of the franchise age we cannot afford to leave young people until they have a vote to use before doing something towards placing the facts of life before them, the injustice of the system under which they live'. Topping had felt that until the recent growth in the youth movement attention to the needs of young people had been neglected, and often opposed for several decades and welcomed the fact that the 'official side of the movement' was at last doing something about it. He could see the importance of a 'logical sequence of development from childhood to maturity beginning with socialist Sunday schools and believed that if children are catered for before adolescence then their minds will not

be open to opponents.⁴³ Mary Townend concurred with this view: She met her husband, Eugene, when he was eighteen years old and already a member of the Huddersfield League of Youth. Eugene's entry into the League of Youth was a direct result of the history of radicalism within his own family though his emergence as 'a real, true socialist', he always believed, was due to his early experiences at Lockwood Socialist Sunday School where he was christened.⁴⁴

The theoretical, non-theological education upon which the socialist Sunday schools were based, had perhaps achieved its aim of turning out 'thinking, conscientious socialists of no particular colour' in that League of Youth members were more than able to withstand religious debates. Indeed, the first debate to be held by the Huddersfield League of Youth, in 1929, covered the question: *Is Christianity the true religion?* In 1933, the Reverend W. V. Tremboth put forward *The Christian approach to our present-day problems*. His views were reported as being 'advanced' but it was noted that the Reverend 'was unable to convince members, who showed in the discussion afterwards that they considered the Christian approach was starting at the wrong end of the stick and that the only way out was through socialism'.⁴⁵ The socialist Sunday school philosophy was reflected in the League of Youth when Arthur Fitton addressed the Huddersfield branch on *The necessity for atheism*. His faith, he told the gathering, was in 'the efforts and achievements of mankind itself through its own struggles against the blind forces of nature without any supernatural help or hindrance'.⁴⁶

The content of socialist Sunday school lessons was then social and political and laced with the songs favoured by Labour Party activists of J. Conell, Keir Hardie, Gustav Spiller, J. Bruce Glasier, Robert Blatchford, William Morris and Longfellow. Jimmy Allan's *Socialist Sunday School Song Book*, issued to him at the Lockwood Socialist Institute, and containing his favourite song *The Red Flag*, is a prized possession.⁴⁷ Along with his wife Audrey, Allan was christened at Lockwood, where he remembers the Socialist Ten Commandments being fixed to the walls. The fourth commandment, 'Honour good men, be courteous to all men, bow down to none', was a continuous mantra for him and one to which he sought to adhere all his life.

The relationship between League of Youth and the local party

A significant factor in the success of League of Youth branches is the nature of their relationship with the local party. Recollections of this relationship are on the one hand largely uncritical whilst on the other highlight the independence shown by members in their approach to League activity. Allan unhesitatingly acknowledges the paternal nature of such individuals as Arthur Gardiner and Fred Shaw. He does however remain convinced that he and his fellow League members were so passionate in their endeavours and held such a strong belief that the League of Youth, as a unit within which they could all work together, was the way forward. Consequently, they were all 'happy to get on with it', without the help of the party.⁴⁸ Granville Whiteley too recalls little in the way of interference from the local party and though he sensed that older members did not always take seriously the views and opinions of him and his peers, this never stood in the way of Whiteley's ambitions as a young politician and League member.⁴⁹

Similarly, Molly Walton, a League of Youth member in Huddersfield in the nineteen-fifties, remembers a mature and intelligent membership with 'a distinct lack of political poseurs', which, she believes, partly explains the success of the League of Youth as an entity and the low level of friction between it and the local party. 'We canvassed in all local elections, she recalls, 'usually going into a ward in a group – today's lot think they invented targeting'. When Douglas (Dougie) Clegg, a League member and contemporary of Walton's, was selected to fight the Longwood seat, she recalls the League of Youth treated it as 'our own election rather than the party's'.⁵⁰ Clegg introduced Peter Wallace to the Labour League of Youth in 1949, where he met, and later married, Doreen, the daughter of 'a staunch labour man'. The Wallaces viewed their role in the Labour Party as somewhat 'restricted' and frequently had the impression that they were not expected to 'dip into Labour Party territory'. Again, this did not deter their activities as Peter Wallace believes it was the politics that held the branch together, and he recalls very politically minded people, a working unit, all of whom were socialists.⁵¹

The League of Youth appeared to operate its own checks and balances. Eric Ryder, a prominent League member, in an address entitled *The League and the Labour Party* considered that the League should work on the adage, 'children should be seen and not heard' as he considered that the League was not in a position to discuss policy and furthermore should concentrate on propaganda 'pure and simple'. Although, A. E. Aldridge, secretary of the League reported that Ryder had many

other 'peculiar ideas' which members endeavoured to correct when question time came around', he concluded kindly that 'with all its faults it was a very interesting and well-delivered address.'⁵²

The League of Youth had become increasingly competent in its understanding and use of committee procedures. In order to send resolutions to the National Executive the League had set up its own drafting committee composed of three members, Eric Ryder, Arthur Fitton and Giles Ramsden. The League felt its opinion should be taken into account on domestic and foreign matters. The question of the upper-age limit for League members and the right to run its own affairs had dogged the relationship between the national party and the League throughout its existence. Huddersfield joined its contemporaries across the country in submitting a resolution to the National Executive committee of the party:

'That this conference feels that the League should have greater say in determining its own programme, and that resolutions passed at annual conference should be part of the programme'.⁵³

There can be detected a growing sense of maturity in the relationship between the Huddersfield Labour Party and its League of Youth. The general management committee received the League's demands and requests with a good spirit. For example, the upper age limit of League membership, which the Labour Party had often feared to be a subversive influence, was not an issue in Huddersfield.⁵⁴ Indeed the opposite appeared to be the case. It was from those members at the older end of the age range that the sense of responsibility seemed to come. Gilbert Hanson remained a member of Huddersfield League of Youth for some time after he reached the upper age limit. He had a reputation among League members of being a steady and sobering influence on those younger than him. Hanson often felt that the League, nationally, was trying to wag the tail of the dog and believed that the party, in the period after the war, was trying to portray a sensible and responsible image and therefore its youngest members should do nothing to mar this.⁵⁵

The League of Youth had a firm stance on the topic of war and its causes.

'That this conference, representing members of the Labour Party League of Youth, believing that capitalism is the sole cause of war, will refuse to fight in

any future wars in support of a capitalist government, and will exert all its efforts to overthrow the present system and so end the basic cause of war'.⁵⁶

This resolution did not cause the dismay that it may have done in other parts of the country. Anti-war sentiment was a far-reaching phenomenon in Huddersfield. Cyril Pearce found that objection to war in Huddersfield was not limited to a few individuals but was part of wider movement backed by the local community. Pearce states that in almost every area of working class social and political life the anti-war elements were in charge – in the local parties, the socialist Sunday schools, the socialist clubs and the major trade union branches in the town. Arthur Gardiner was a leading figure in this movement. Already revered by the youth in the party and much admired by his comrades, he was a conscientious objector in the First World War.⁵⁷

Huddersfield League of Youth members took seriously the threat from fascism and found once again that their views were not at odds with their local party. They made an early and organised response to the visit by Oswald Mosley to be made in the autumn of 1934 though it was made clear that there was to be 'no disorder'. A leaflet was to be put out with carefully chosen contributions that would best illustrate the views of the League of Youth as well as 'selected questions' which would be asked at the end of the meeting. In the event Mosley and the British Union of Fascists decided to come earlier than expected, a challenge to which the League rose effectively, with the support of Arthur Gardiner who, in his role as party agent, approved a hastily written leaflet. At the meeting, which was held in the Temperance Hall, League members placed themselves strategically, and a range of questions, covering the purpose of the British Union of Fascists' private army to the emancipation of women, were prepared. It was emphasised that 'secrecy was essential to the success of this first fight with the fascists'.⁵⁸ League members, loyal to the local party, acting as self-appointed stewards, kept order.⁵⁹

The apparent ability of the Huddersfield Labour Party to find common ground with its youth section did not mean that the relationship was free from tension. The struggle continued for representation on the National Executive committee. Resolutions continued to be passed for a greater voice in the League's own programme. There was also a request for influence on the local Labour paper, *The Huddersfield Citizen*; where League members had asked for representation on its controlling board.⁶⁰ It was not only within the party that the League felt it was owed some influence. Frank Burley protested that the selection committee of the Labour Party and Coop was not

treating the League of Youth fairly in that the League should have stronger representation than the mere fraternal delegacy which the Coop had afforded it. It was resolved that the matter be discussed when next the Coop sent a speaker to address the League.⁶¹ The West Riding federation did not escape the misunderstandings and disagreements, usually surrounding procedural points, which dogged many of its counterparts elsewhere. A common issue was the use of venues. Permission had to be sought from the local party for the hire of rooms for meetings and functions and it was always on the understanding that if the local party required the room for any political activity, they would 'at all times and in all cases have preference'.⁶² Resentment was also displayed by Huddersfield Labour Party Executive at 'League of Youth discourtesy', the latter being guilty of 'pursuing public activities without notifying the Executive committee', notably the setting up of the peace council. A reproving resolution was put forward stating, 'that the Labour League of Youth be asked to furnish the Executive committee of the party with notification of future projects and that due notice be given of any public activity'. To which the League of Youth replied, admitting the 'oversight'.⁶³

These procedural clashes were repeated wherever a branch of the League of Youth existed. Though often trivial in their nature, they, or more significantly, their outcomes, served to emphasise just who was in charge. However, they alone were not sufficient to account for the decline of the West Riding federation. As might be expected from young socialists, the demand for political change is urgent and sweeping. The League of Youth in Huddersfield shared the same frustrations as their fellow members across the country, particularly their London counterparts, in the perceived slowness of pace in which the Labour Party was moving towards its socialist goals.

Links with communists

In June 1930, a speaker expressed his dismay to the Huddersfield League members that there seemed to be an inability on the part of the Labour Party to change the capitalist system. A member of the audience responded with the suggestion that if the present party had forsaken its socialist principles then the speaker should join a party that supported 'bottom dog', 'as he himself had been seriously thinking of doing so'.⁶⁴ This does not however appear to represent the majority opinion. Some had tried the move and found it to be wanting. In February 1932, Arthur Gardiner, as Labour Party agent was forced to take disciplinary action against a League of Youth member, Harry Haigh, who had been accused of 'subversive action' in trying to get

League members to form a branch of the Young Communist League whilst he himself was still in the League of Youth. Haigh admitted the charge but asked that he be allowed to stay in the League on the questionable grounds that 'while the Labour Party had certain faults, the Communist Party had worse ones'. His continued membership of the League of Youth was carried unanimously and no further action was taken.⁶⁵

The widespread nature of federation activities often brought League of Youth members into contact with other youth groups, in particular the Independent Labour Party's Guild of Youth and the Communist Party's Young Communist League. In June 1934, the federation conference invited to its weekend school, delegates from both the Guild of Youth and the YCL. They were invited to put forward their positions on the issue of a united front. This caused consternation in some areas. Indeed, Halifax Labour Party declared as unconstitutional the decision of the federation conference. The Halifax Labour Party agent, A. J. Heald, declared he would contact head office about the matter and further, if necessary disaffiliate its League of Youth from the federation altogether if it went ahead with the decision. The matter was referred to the executive committee of the federation, which reaffirmed the annual conference resolution and referred the matter back to the Leagues for a referendum, the result of which would be the final decision on the matter. Ernest Aldridge, the Huddersfield member who had put the original conference resolution, gave notice of a further resolution calling for the disaffiliation from Area 3 of the West Riding federation of the Huddersfield branch. Aldridge's branch comrade, Albert Mowbray, seconded the resolution and inserted an amendment that the weekend school should be altogether divorced from the federation and run for the benefit of federation members as a private school thus giving it the freedom to choose speakers without party permission. The resolution was in fact defeated but resulted in the calling in of the national youth officer to mediate on the issue. It was finally declared that the choice of speakers to the weekend school was not unconstitutional but, as a way forward, suggested that all the socialist parties, including the Labour Party, should be invited to participate. The League of Youth accepted the compromise and invited a speaker from the National Council of Labour Colleges. The Halifax Labour Party however now had the bit between its teeth. The leadership insisted that its League of Youth should play no part in the weekend school, an attitude which invited members of the Huddersfield branch to complain that this was a 'gross attack on the civil liberties of the League' and sent a resolution saying as much to the Halifax Labour Party.⁶⁶

Activities involving far left organisations or groups continued to draw the attention of the Labour Party. Many League members sought involvement in international politics though not all concurred with the Labour Party's position on some issues. Spen Valley League of Youth member, Peter Thornton, set up his own peace group in opposition to the Korean War, a conflict with which he vehemently disagreed. He helped to organise a rally in the area during which a thirty-name petition was raised. Although Thornton's friends and comrades shared his antipathy towards the 1950 conflict, many in the Spen Valley resigned the peace movement in order to retain their party membership, which the party had threatened to revoke. However, Thornton took a principled stand and refused; a decision which cost him his membership and immediate expulsion. The party's action pushed him in the direction of the Communist Party, which, he says he would never have joined had it not been for his expulsion by his own party.⁶⁷

A similar fate almost met Jean Megahy. Although she was a League of Youth member, Megahy agreed to attend the peace committee as a Communist Party delegate. On being alerted to this, the party secretary, stated clearly in a letter, that if she continued her involvement she would have to leave the party. This was enough to ensure her resignation from the peace committee.⁶⁸ Like Megahy, Molly Walton's brief links with the Communist Party did not escape the notice of the Labour Party and its long list of proscribed organisations. Walton, now a long-serving Labour councillor in Kirklees, recalls her involvement with the communist run peace committee:

'The local Communist Party paid for me to go as a delegate to their conference...On my return, Jim Madden (the local party secretary) moved my expulsion from the party but couldn't get a seconder'.⁶⁹

Similarly, the Sheffield conference of the youth anti war committee was also a target of the Labour Party's opprobrium. The party had informed the national advisory committee of the League of Youth that the anti-war council, to which branches had been sending delegates, was a subsidiary of the Communist Party and as such requested that the Leagues play no part in the conference.⁷⁰

Huddersfield was one of the many venues at which Sir Stafford Cripps spoke on the issue of a united front of all working class organisations and the League of Youth, like its peers elsewhere, had passed a resolution:

‘That considering the state of affairs in the world at present, - a world in which capitalism becomes desperate and seeks to crush all working class movements through its organised fascist forms, a world in which war becomes amore and more imminent, - we call upon the Executive Committee of the Labour Party to close the socialist ranks in England, to form a united front in military opposition to war and fascism, to any worsening of working class conditions, and restrictions to freedom of speech and action.’⁷¹

Jimmy Allan, sympathetic towards the idea of a united front, recalls the meeting at which Harry Pollit, secretary of Communist Party, shared a platform with Cripps. The notion of a united front did not create an immediate and unanimous upsurge of antipathy in Huddersfield. Indeed, the League was given some encouragement by Mallalieu’s criticism of the party’s attitude towards a united front and the fact that he failed to see anything unconstitutional in the idea.⁷² However, though they shared the Leagues’ disapproval of Cripps’ expulsion, the majority of the Huddersfield Labour Party Executive believed the proposals contained in Cripps’ memorandum on a united front to have been ‘a serious source of distraction to the Labour Party and would, if pursued, tend to weaken the movement and strengthen the national government and the forces of capitalism’⁷³. Ultimately, they expressed dismay at the Leagues’ resolution, stating that they did not believe working-class unity to be dependent upon the affiliation of all left-wing parties and asked that the League rescind the resolution. Although four members of the League of Youth resigned in protest at the party’s position and joined the Young Communist League, the incident did not appear to have adverse effect on the branch.⁷⁴ In fact, in 1936, when the Labour Party was in the throes of disbanding the youth movement, due mainly to infiltration by communists, the party in Huddersfield was in no hurry to take action against its own young members.⁷⁵

The Huddersfield Labour Party had either not inherited its national counterpart’s fear of communist infiltration or found ways of dealing with it. As one of Huddersfield’s best known activists in the inter-war League of Youth, and one of its few surviving members, Jimmy Allan was known by his comrades as ‘Red Allan’.⁷⁶ Gilbert Hanson, a friend and contemporary, once described him as an agit-prop, a term ‘Red Allan’

would not disagree with.⁷⁷ He was a self-confessed left-wing rebel whose belief in sharing what one has and working together is embodied in his pro-Soviet beliefs and his membership of the Soviet Friendship Society, of which the Huddersfield Labour Party was aware. He continually complained at Labour Party meetings of employers allegedly keeping known communists or sympathisers out of jobs. There is no evidence that the party leadership at local level was concerned about these views while his clear commitment to his League branch and its members earned him the loyalty of comrades.

Those who feared a communist element in their midst soon had their fears allayed or were given short shrift. Miss Pat Dutton was most concerned about 'the subversive communist propaganda' and wanted to know what the Huddersfield Labour Party was going to do about it. She felt so strongly that she had to leave the League of Youth. Ernest Aldridge dealt with the matter effectively when he questioned her right to attend the League Executive meeting if she was no longer a member.⁷⁸

In the West Riding of Yorkshire in general and Huddersfield in particular, it is argued that the Communist Party of Great Britain did not pose a serious challenge to local party organisation. Indeed, it attracted very little sympathy in the region. D. A. Wilson, a leading Bradford communist, recorded that the Communist Party was somewhere in the background whose roots seemed to be in Shipley because some of the most important members live there'. The party did however only win two seats in the West Riding, in Todmorden in 1929 and 1933.⁷⁹

Decline of the League of Youth in Huddersfield and the West Riding

The onset of war in 1939, unsurprisingly, had a debilitating effect on the Labour League of Youth in the West Riding as nationally. The young were despatched to the front or into industry and minds were generally focussed elsewhere. As Gilbert Hanson remarked, 'you can only live one life at a time'.⁸⁰ The social and economic changes in post-war society created a different set of circumstances, which labour activists would later use to greater or lesser degrees to analyse the condition of the labour youth movement. For the immediate period, following the end of the Second World War young people could join a socialist Labour Party which was elected on a landslide majority on a manifesto providing cradle to the grave health care, houses for all and expanded education.⁸¹ Jean Megahy captured the mood of the period: There was, she recalled, 'a vision to work for, a belief'.⁸² The success however of the League of Youth in the West Riding proved to be varied and short-lived.

The nature of party procedures and the dim view taken by the party of the company its youth was keeping may have had a straitjacketing effect on the youth movement in the West Riding. There were however other challenges in trying to keep afloat a federation of Leagues of Youth. Rates of success varied from one League to another and it is true to say that several Leagues folded in their infancy while others were resurrected or resuscitated with the help of the better-established and more confident branches. This state of affairs presented tests, which proved, by 1933, too great to prevent the onset of the demise of the West Riding federation.

By the end of 1933, the West Riding federation was reported to be 'in a very bad condition' financially.⁸³ It had been, by and large, a hand-to-mouth existence with constant appeals for money and a continuous round of fund-raising initiatives. The League itself disbanded the federation at the end of 1936 by which time there had been a decreasing number of branches reporting to it. In 1938, the national youth officer, John Huddleston initiated a membership drive in order to offset the negative effects of the government memorandum on the position of youth. Following the success of *Crusade for Youth Week*, an attempt was made by members of Sowerby Bridge League to reform the West Riding federation.⁸⁴ The local party half-heartedly took up the suggestion, which led to the formation of a new body comprising Leeds, Halifax, Hebden Bridge, Sowerby Bridge, Horsforth, Penistone, Brighouse, Shelf and Barnsley. The reformed organisation managed to meet in April of 1939 before the intervention of war sealed its fate. Following the war, League of Youth involvement at regional level constituted the sending of delegates to the Yorkshire Regional Council of Labour. From this body, a new West Riding federation of Leagues of Youth was established. The Executive officers were drawn from a cross-section of the federation.⁸⁵ The organisation however did not become fully rooted and was wound up in 1950 in favour of a South Yorkshire federation.⁸⁶

Conclusion

The Labour League of Youth in the West Riding in general, and Huddersfield in particular, made the most of its assets. It emerged on the crest of a strong Labour presence in the region and enjoyed the support of many visionary individuals in the labour movement. The League itself could boast an intelligent and committed group of young members who used their immediate geographical environment and combined efforts to counter their lack of financial wherewithal. They were supported,

politically and educationally by the genuine paternalism of such individuals as the party agent Arthur Gardiner and the town's MP, J. P. W. Mallalieu.

Yet, in spite of these advantages and the best labours of the League of Youth itself, the constraints that had been writ large in the founding scheme of 1924, and which had beset the long-term viability of Labour's youth movement nationally, were now being felt equally by League members in their own region. The ability of the members of the Huddersfield League of Youth to maintain a prospering youth section is undeniable, but to sustain, as a lead branch, a whole federation, with its challenging geography and lack of funds could only be achieved with the full and continuing support of the Labour Party at national level. In the event this was found wanting.

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Chapter 8: Young Socialists to Young Labour

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to complete the time-line of Labour's youth movements in order to draw out the major contrasts and similarities between the Labour League of Youth and its successor organisations. In 1959, following the demise of the second League of Youth, the Labour Party set up a youth commission to investigate ways of improving the appeal of Labour politics to young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. The findings of the commission led to the party's third attempt to establish a youth movement. The Young Socialists was launched in 1960. It remained in existence until the establishment, in 1994, of the Labour Party's most recent youth section, Young Labour.

In contrast to the League of Youth, the period of Young Socialist activity has been more widely studied. It is not therefore the intention of this chapter to add new material, but to provide a brief account of the period in order to investigate further the relationship between the Labour Party and its youth organisations. In drawing comparisons between the Labour League of Youth and Young Labour, the chapter seeks to highlight the notion that the strengths and weaknesses of 1926 remain present, eight decades later.

The birth of the Young Socialists

The Labour Party was defeated in the general election of 1959. The Conservative Party won three hundred and sixty five seats, a majority of one hundred and seven over Labour.¹ Increased prosperity had resulted in over seventy percent of the electorate being able to follow the 1959 general election on television through news bulletins and feature programmes with discussions and debates. The Labour Party, however, had failed to capitalise on the national features of elections² in that it failed to secure those voters under thirty who were too young to remember the 'hungry thirties'.³ This issue was to form a major part of the discussion at the 1959 Labour Party conference. The party's National Executive committee immediately adopted a defensive tone by harking back to those initiatives that many believed had now outlived their usefulness. The numbers attending weekend schools was once again held up as a measure of the efforts the NEC had put into the League of Youth. Roy Jenkins, as former chair of the Fabian Society, had suggested that such events should be discontinued as they had a diminishing appeal in the changing society of

the nineteen-fifties. The party leadership however did not take this advice and continued to run them for several more years until falling attendance forced closure.⁴

Nevertheless, the issue of youth recruitment was on the agenda during the debate on the general election. Bevan was well disposed in principle to the idea of mobilising the party's youth. He had a message for the young members.

'And we are going to get the youth! Let them start. Do not let them wait for the Executive, for God's sake! Start getting the youth clubs, go in and start now! Go back and start them and we will give you all the help we can.'⁵

The party provided staff at national and regional level, established a national journal, *New Advance*, and launched a network of branches, federations, committees and conferences. Transport House produced a model constitution, *How, when and why*, in which it was stated,

'The future belongs to the youth of today. Labour wants youth to occupy a key position in its ranks. It wants the voice of youth to be heard and heeded wherever policies of the future are discussed and decided. In the Young Socialists the youth of Britain will be treated with respect to the benefit of all.'⁶

Gaitskell too played his part. The fondness he had for sharing the company of the party's youngest members had begun in the League of Youth period, during which time he frequently joined them on rambles and attended League events. Gaitskell's attachment continued into the early years of the Young Socialists. Huddersfield Young Socialists was reported to have enjoyed his company at their annual ball which he not only attended, but drove himself to the venue and declined expenses.⁷

Some groups needed little encouragement. A group of young Labour members in Liverpool wrote in their journal, *Rally*, that 'it is only through the marriage of the enthusiasm and energy of youth with the mighty strength of the labour movement that our future can be assured'.⁸ Eagerness from both sides resulted in initial rapid growth. The number of youth sections had risen from two hundred and eighty eight in December 1959 to six hundred and eight by October 1960.

Early signs of discontent

In some areas, there were immediate doubts as to the viability of the newly established youth organisation. Richard Clements, left-wing journalist and editor of *Tribune* commented, 'Long live the Labour Party youth. But I don't think they will'. The reason for this pessimism was that the Young Socialists were operating within the same existing structures as their predecessors and relying on the same handouts from the party leadership. Clements stated that 'this is just the sort of thing that young people with any political guts in them hate'. He pointed out that youth branches would get more attention than their predecessors but not of the sort they desired. 'There will be assistance and advice available from head office and at regional levels, in which there will be full time officers primarily concerned with youth organisation'. The conference formula, which had been a source of criticism in the League of Youth, remained. He concluded with the comment 'Long live the Young Socialists. But I doubt they will'.⁹

The initial energising of the youth movement was soon in decline and the list of grievances held by the Young Socialists was familiar. Mike Coggins, a prominent member of Gloucester Young Socialists in the mid nineteen sixties, believes that, while there was a general positive response from all sections of the party towards the establishment of the Young Socialists, many were concerned at some of its features. 'From the beginning, Coggins states, 'it was obvious that the regional youth officers intended to strictly control the branches in their areas'.¹⁰ Many Young Socialists would have accepted this in the early stages of the movement but as they gained experience, they expected the officers to take a back seat and allow the members to run their own affairs. Funding also soon became a controversial issue when it was realised that almost three quarters of the party's grant to the Young Socialists was being used to pay the salaries of the regional youth officers.¹¹

The most contentious matter however remained that of their predecessor bodies, the ability to discuss party policy. The issue of most interest to the party's youth movement in 1960 was defence. The establishment of the Young Socialists coincided with the debate within the Labour Party on the issue of unilateral nuclear disarmament. The majority of Young Socialists, many of whom had been involved in CND, were sympathetic towards unilateral disarmament and wished to express their views within the party. The members however found themselves bound by the same structural restraints as their predecessors. The NEC had ensured that the federations, which in 1960 were the only potential channel for debate, dealt only with

organisational procedures and were not a platform for the discussion of party policy. When the Young Socialists were granted a national conference the following year, they were unable to submit either delegates or resolutions without prior scrutiny by their local parties, leading one Young Socialist member to complain,

“What a bloody farce! If the Young Socialists is to be a separate wing of the party, as it is claimed, then why do our resolutions have to be examined by local general management committees and party officers? If we are going to be allowed emergency resolutions for the conference then we should all shout our heads off about being able to run our own affairs. It's the sort of thing worth going blue in the face for.”¹²

Moreover, the youth journal, *New Advance*, was to continue the unhappy tradition of its predecessors in fighting for editorial control. Many Young Socialists believed that the new dawn of youth organisation would provide freedom of expression through its own journal, but they were to be disappointed. The editor, who, as a concession by the party, could be of Young Socialist age, would remain an employee of Transport House. Roger Protz, a left wing and relatively unknown socialist, was appointed to the post of editor. He soon concluded that, ‘the NEC is editor of *New Advance*, not me. I carry out their wishes. They have produced a paper FOR Young Socialists, not OF Young Socialists.’ The much ‘safer’, forty seven-year old Reg Underhill replaced Protz.¹³

However, the constitutional wrangles between the Young Socialists and the NEC, ‘paled into insignificance against the internecine strife which plagued the movement from its beginning’.¹⁴ Soon, factions emerged, around the meaning of socialism and the best way of achieving it, a conflict that was conducted in the Young Socialist journal and a range of other rapidly emerging unofficial publications. Layton-Henry’s study is a grim portrayal of the movement’s first two years during which it had splintered into major and minor factions. The ‘highly disciplined, aggressive Trotskyite group’ organised around the journal *Keep Left* and associated with the Socialist Labour League, and their chief protagonists, the broader left-wing group centred around the journal *Young Guard* continuously vied for influence and power until the ‘vitality of youth,’ Layton-Henry states, rapidly proved all too ebullient and soon threatened to be a self-destructive force. The different factions held socialist ideals that were impracticable within a Labour Party framework, and, as the various groups fought for control, the movement tore itself apart.¹⁵

The view from within the Young Socialists also reflected this account. The 'electric atmosphere', which had symbolized the 1961 Young Socialist conference at Beaver Hall, London had all but disappeared in Scarborough in 1963 where feelings could be judged from the fact that twenty-eight resolutions critical of Transport House were submitted and none in support. The editor of *Young Guard* wrote in the post-conference issue that, 'gone was the tremendous enthusiasm and excitement of the first conference. In its place was an air of suspicion, tension, even of foreboding'.¹⁶ The differences between the various left-wing groups, which had long existed, by the time of the Young Socialists Scarborough conference, in 1963, could no longer be contained. The conference had elected a majority of *Keep Left* supporters to the national committee. The result was, Coggins states, 'that factionalism became rife and the combined influence which the left could have projected was lost.'¹⁷ By 1964, the deteriorating relations between the NEC and its youth sections, exacerbated by the further splintering of *Young Guard* into Militant, were comparable in gravity to the events that led to the disbandments of 1938 and 1955 as the youth movement increasingly rejected Labour Party policies. There followed a series of expulsions and confrontations, some violent, until finally the *Keep Left* group broke with the Labour Party confirming the long held suspicions that the intentions of the Socialist Labour League was to infiltrate the party's youth movement.¹⁸

The inability of the different factions within the Young Socialists to solve their political differences resulted in the movement turning in on itself instead of outwards towards recruitment, giving rise to declining membership, which by the mid-nineteen sixties stood at no more than six thousand. The party's attempts to distance what it saw as the more moderate elements of the youth movement from the *Keep Left* group, by creating the Labour Party Young Socialists, only added to the weaknesses. The continual strife had led to stagnation within the youth movement whilst the internal problems and political differences had taken on an importance that had prevented the members from concentrating on recruitment. Coggins reflects on the early days of the Young Socialists in order to pinpoint the movement's reversal of fortunes. Membership expanded rapidly in those salad days when political differences and organisational tensions were as yet undeveloped. In addition, the unilateralist victory at the Labour Party conference of 1960 ensured that the Young Socialists could swell their numbers with a readily available pool of activists from Young CND. There was considerable interest from large numbers of young people who were themselves fresh to politics. Within a short space of time these factors had been substantially

reversed leaving Coggins to conclude, as did his predecessors in the League of Youth, that until there could be achieved an autonomous Young Socialist movement with full internal democracy, the enthusiasm of young people would not be recaptured.¹⁹

The Young Socialists did report a brief reprieve that had been denied their predecessors. The Simpson Committee, of 1968, which had been set up to review Labour Party organisation had reinstated a democratically elected national committee to the Young Socialists and the Labour Party National Executive had further strengthened their status by granting full editorial control over their new publication, *Left*. The more liberal constitution and apparent increasingly tolerant attitude on the part of the NEC had given the Young Socialists 'sight of the promised land' but their ideological extremism had by this time isolated them from the mainstream of the party, which was increasingly distancing itself from its own youth organisation.²⁰ The dominant voice of Militant in the youth movement went surprisingly unchecked for over a decade until the mid nineteen eighties. In the ferocious battle for control and command of the NEC, a more determined effort was made to root out the Militant tendency.

In 1983, there were four hundred and ninety five LPYS branches. By the time of the Miners' Strike of 1984, there existed an unprecedented five hundred and eighty one. However, under the supervision of Tom Sawyer as chair of the NEC's youth committee, there was little evidence of the youth section being encouraged. Sawyer was unduly influenced by the work of two ex-student activists, John Mann and Phil Woolas who condemned the LPYS as 'moribund' and 'insignificant'. Mann and Woolas recommended mass collective activity and political education for the youth organisation. The Labour Party, they said, should aim its youth activities almost exclusively at teenagers and stage large-scale cultural and social activities. In addition, they argued that the age limit should be reduced from twenty-six to twenty one, local structures abandoned and more power held at the centre. Sawyer followed the recommendations with the result that LPYS branches fell from five hundred and eighty one to a meagre fifty-two by 1990. By the 1993 party conference, there remained only eighteen sections. This led Kimber to conclude that,

'Unfortunately for Labour, in the process of saving the innocent youth section from the hands of the 'unrepresentative extremist', the leadership also destroyed it.'²¹

Militant

Michael Crick had first hand experience of the impact of Militant on the Young Socialists. Crick had established the Young Socialist branch in Stockport where, less than two decades earlier, Eric Lawson recalled a relatively unremarkable branch of the League of Youth. Crick, having established the Young Socialists branch, 'watched with a mixture of annoyance and admiration as Militant carried out its operation'. He realised at that point, 'that Militant was more than a newspaper'.²² The Labour Party may have over-estimated the menace of communism, but that of Militant proved a greater threat to the party and one that it was far slower in dealing with.

Crick's study describes the ease with which Militant infiltrated and then completely took over branches of the Labour Party Young Socialists and the tardiness of the party leadership in reacting to events. Militant succeeded in the nineteen-sixties because no one else in the Young Socialists was able to offer a credible alternative. The growth of Militant's influence within the branches went largely unmentioned and little support was given to those who tried to stem its onslaught. Neil Vann, appointed full-time national youth officer in 1969, described his time battling against Militant while at the same time trying to encourage non-Militants into the branches, as 'a matter all the time of sticking your fingers into holes in the dyke'.²³ Until the mid nineteen-seventies, Militant had not met with any significant or determined opposition in the Labour Party. As Crick reports, the Young Socialist branches had been taken over with little resistance, the seat on the Executive endorsed the group's operations, as did the abolition of the proscribed list in 1973. Militant's confidence was growing, as were the sales of its newspaper and it seemed increasingly unlikely that it would be ousted from the Young Socialist branches.²⁴

Militant had also made inroads into the students' body and by the mid nineteen-seventies, had virtually taken over the National Organisation of Labour Students (NOLS). The winning back of the organisation over a two-year period was a result of sheer doggedness and commitment on the part of the students themselves with little support from the party leadership. Baroness (Glenys) Thornton, a member of NOLS in 1973, recalls her own efforts and those of her contemporaries, John Reid and Charles Clarke in trying to fight Militant in this period. Their appeal to Ian Mikardo to encourage the party to stand up to the threat was largely ignored.²⁵

Although NOLS was retrieved by its members from the influence of Militant, the long-term effect for the Labour Party's youth sections was negligible. NOLS was, by definition, a student body, university oriented and middle-class. Its sympathies did not extend to the more working class Young Socialists. Militant believed they could achieve something within NOLS but considered the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS) to be beyond salvation. The sole *raison d'être* of the LPYS was to fight Militant beyond which they had little in the way of policies and often appeared to resort to the same kind of sectarianism that they had previously fought. In spite of the growing evidence and concern surrounding the activities of Militant, the party leadership, as on so many occasions in its dealings with the youth sections, reacted to events instead of taking a lead. The party was forced into holding an inquiry following the widespread coverage by the press of the controversial appointment of 'Red Andy' Bevan, a known Trotskyite, as national youth officer. The expulsions of the nineteen-eighties did little to prise away Militant's grip on the Young Socialists and when Militant did finally get into difficulties, it had little to do with the action of the Labour Party and more to do with its own internal factors and wider political currents.²⁶

Jim Mortimer's experiences of left entryism into Labour's youth movement straddles all the party's youth organisations. As a member of the League of Youth in the nineteen thirties, Mortimer had survived his associations with Willis and the *Advance!* group and followed Willis into the Young Communist League, later returning to the Labour Party. He did however become a victim of the list of proscribed organisations when, in the nineteen fifties, he joined the British-China Friendship Association, an alliance which cost him his membership of the Labour Party. Ironically, thirty years later, as general secretary of the Labour Party, he would establish a similar list, the list of approved organisations, in an attempt to stop the rise of Militant.²⁷ Mortimer believed many of this group to be dedicated socialists but disagreed with them on 'certain fundamentals of philosophy and policy'. He believed that they were acting as a party within a party with their own secret structure, full-time organisers, finance, publishing house and international connections, all of which fell foul of the constitution of the Labour Party.²⁸

Bob Labi was at the heart of these events. Labi joined the Labour Party Young Socialists on his fifteenth birthday, in 1966, and remained a prominent activist until the age of twenty six, in 1977, during which time he held a seat on its national committee and edited its official national paper, *Left*. He paints a somewhat rosier

picture of the involvement of Militant in the affairs of the Labour Party Young Socialists. Labi believes that Militant achieved what the Labour Party had failed to do throughout its history; develop a thriving, active youth organisation. The relationship, he believes was mutually advantageous in that Militant helped to swell the numbers of the Labour Party Young Socialists whilst the latter helped Militant to grow from a small group to a force that he reckons is still influential in its Socialist Party guise, today. It is with regret that Labi reflects on the events of the mid nineteen-eighties, when the Labour Party, under the leadership of Neil Kinnock moved, in his view to the right of the party and intensified its attack on Militant and the Labour Party Young Socialists. The LPYSs, he maintains, could have been saved as an independent youth movement if Militant had not been 'too slow in drawing conclusions from the changes taking place within the Labour Party'. One of the reasons for this failure is that Militant were too absorbed in the mass movement against the Poll Tax.²⁹

Reasons for failure

The most remarkable feature of the Young Socialist episode is that it was allowed to happen at all. Having concluded on two separate occasions that its League of Youth had become dysfunctional in terms of their role within the party, resulting in the most draconian of punishments and subsequent disbandment, the Labour Party not only retained the framework for a youth section in its constitution, but also allowed, in 1959, for the establishment of a new youth wing. Therefore, notwithstanding the disparity of attitudes and expectations the National Executive acknowledged that there was a necessity to retain a youth movement. However, as Anderson states, within only four years of its existence, the Young Socialists had 'reached its nadir of demoralisation and disintegration'. He believes that 'the dismal failure of the Young Socialists is not an isolated or fortuitous failure', but rather 'a continuation of an unbroken sequence of debacles stretching back over forty years'.³⁰

While it is historically naïve to identify the ultimate failure of the Young Socialists with that of the two Leagues of Youth there were similarities. The Socialist League and the Militant tendency were neither ideologically identical nor entirely similar in their methods of infiltration they both ensured that the League of Youth and the Young Socialists were organisations which acted as hosts to intra-part factionalism. It can be argued that the Militant tendency was a more lethal threat to the party, and that its backers had no intentions of becoming orthodox politicians unlike for instance Sir Stafford Cripps who became a cabinet minister in the 1945 Labour government. The Parliamentary Labour Party and the party leadership in the nineteen seventies and

nineteen eighties, however, took some of the posturing of the young members of Militant as a more sinister threat than was truly warranted. The Labour Party's proclivity for proscribing organisations, which Gaitskell started, was not always the most prudent way of nurturing young activists for a possible future role but remained potent.³¹ Indeed, Neil Kinnock's later assessment of the period includes the view that Andy Bevan, Young Socialist youth officer, was probably too nice and too intelligent to be the mindless revolutionary that he had often been portrayed.³²

Young Labour

It is noteworthy that in Harmer's companion to the Labour Party, covering almost a century from 1900 to 1998, a period which saw the establishment of four youth organisations, a reference is made only to the establishment and activities of the Young Socialists.³³ No reference is made to Tom Watson's motion, at the 1993 Brighton conference, to set up the party's fourth youth organisation, Young Labour.³⁴ Thus far, Young Labour has been in operation for over a decade, about the same length of time enjoyed by both Leagues of Youth before their disbandment and longer than the Young Socialists before infiltration and reorganisation marked their deteriorating relationship with the party. Young Labour appears to have avoided being cast as a potentially disruptive element or as playing host to factions within the party. Indeed it is little reported for anything at all.

This section will investigate the similarities and differences between Young Labour and its early predecessor the League of Youth. It will demonstrate how the members of Young Labour are no less a product of their background and environment than their predecessors and the extent to which this affects the nature of Labour's fourth youth organisation.

The initiative to set up the Labour Party's fourth youth organisation began immediately after Labour's defeat in the 1992 general election. The Young Socialists was now moribund with only a handful of branches operating across the country yet there remained a desire by young members to retain a youth movement. The challenge, however, was in convincing the party leadership, which had only recently gone to great lengths to expel Militant, that a youth movement was once again viable. Clare Ward, presently Member of Parliament for Watford, was central to this initiative. Ward was elected to the National Executive Committee as youth representative in the early nineteen nineties and immediately set about the task of consulting groups of young people from various organisations such as trade unions, socialist societies,

universities and the party itself. The outcome was a new constitution that broadened the age range from fifteen to twenty-seven but restricted elected offices to the lower range of twenty-three. This was, Ward says, 'a good compromise' that would get the new organisation off the ground while at the same time reduce the chance of it being taken over by militant elements. It took a period of two years to assess the situation, to consult all relevant groups and create the new constitution. However, the cost of establishing the new youth movement was, Ward recalls, greater than the party was prepared to pay and it relied therefore on the financial support of the trade unions. Neither did the party provide a full time youth officer. The Labour Party's fourth youth movement was established in 1994 therefore, as a result of the efforts of the trade unions and the party's young members.

Views of Young Labour activists

In 2004, the Young Labour website provided profile interviews, 'Young Labour faces', of a section of its membership. Scanning the class of 2004, 'Young Labour faces', out of twenty-two individuals, eleven men and eleven women, two cite family background or a tradition of Labour activism in the family as the reason for joining the party. Two thirds of the group, half of them women, are university educated and have, in most cases become involved in Labour politics during their time at university. Political activity among Young Labour members, therefore is not necessarily linked to the communities from which they have originated.³⁵

Young Labour face, Rachael Saunders, like many of her counterparts in the League of Youth, went into politics to 'change the world'. She would however prefer to do it in fine weather.³⁶ Saunders lists canvassing in rain, snow and hail as the least enjoyable part of her role in the Labour Party. She might find it difficult to relate to the experiences of Jimmy Allan, described elsewhere. Allan recalls he and a group of unemployed League of Youth members following a round of canvassing with a ramble on the Yorkshire moors in winter. The men were highly amused to find that the jingling sound, which had followed them around the hills, turned out to be icicles attached to the long hairs on the legs of one of their number. Likewise, it is doubtful whether Jessica Asato would share the view of League member John Kotz in recalling that in the League of Youth, 'it seemed the sun was always shining'.³⁷ Whilst realising that to change the world for the better, she would need to 'be fully engaged with the democratic process', Asato would choose not to campaign when it is rainy and cold. Alex Belardinelli, the youth representative on the regional national policy forum, went so far as to warn anyone who might consider taking up a role in

the party that 'politics isn't always glamorous' due to the 'long evenings and weekends delivering leaflets in the rain snow and wind'.³⁸ It would be more likely to hear the phrase, 'we were out in all weathers' spoken as a point of pride by a League member as opposed to a complaint and there is little evidence that those early activists sought 'glamour'.

A noticeable aspect of Young Labour is the apparent separation of social and political life. Unlike many of his antecedents, Parmjit Dhanda's social life is not in the Labour Party and he dislikes the fact that 'the social life does take a knock with a job like this'. Indeed many of his friends, he says, are non-political and try to ensure that he has a 'hinterland' by meeting up with him away from the political scene at football and rugby games.³⁹ Having almost half its membership in university education means that 'spare' time is often taken up with study. When Peter Wallace took elocution lessons it was in order to join his League comrades in a three-act propaganda play portraying the ills of working class life – not as a break from the drudgery of canvassing.⁴⁰ Equally, when Bedford League of Youth organised a river trip complete with picnic, it was not 'to get away from it all' but to draw League members together and raise money for their campaigns.⁴¹

The minutes of League of Youth branch meetings will often show a long sequence of correspondence relating to the organisation of events, in particular that of invited guests and speakers. Given the competition for the post of secretary, as recalled by several League members, it could be assumed that the task was not seen as too onerous. Not so in the days of word processors, photocopying machines and advanced tele-communications. Toby Philip Candler, chair of University College of London Union Labour Society, whilst enjoying organising events and seeing them come together, is not alone when declaring he dislikes 'writing lots of letters to speakers'.⁴² In fact, out of the class of 2004, around seventy-five percent listed as their dislikes, the bureaucratic nature of meetings, administrative tasks, leafleting and canvassing in poor weather or missing out on a social life.

The conduct of business at Labour Party meetings is viewed by Chris Wellings, a Young Labour activist from Walsall as 'endless age old procedures', which 'constrain the amount of time available for real discussion of policy'. Wellings argues that approaching a debate 'in a more head-on fashion is probably one of the major advantages of Young Labour groups'.⁴³ A further Young Labour member, Jonny Reynolds, equally makes the case that young people are not falling over themselves

to join political parties 'whose structures have remained the same for over a hundred years'.⁴⁴ Reynolds feels it is often necessary to point out that the society inhabited by Young Labour is 'very different to that which existed at the time of Keir Hardie'.⁴⁵ For those young people living in London, Alex Guite, secretary of London Young Labour invites them along as 'a great way to meet like-minded young members from across London in a relaxed and sociable atmosphere, away from the excessive bureaucracy found in other parts of the Labour Party'. At the 'All Members' Event', at City Hall, sponsored by the deputy mayor, potential and existing members will be expected to do nothing more challenging than to 'mingle with one another'.⁴⁶ The top ten aims and objectives of Young Labour, adopted by branches such as Bo' ness, include a commitment by its members to 'help young Labour Party members play a full and active role within the Labour Party'. However, they do not believe that they can do it without changing 'the culture, particularly the meetings culture, of the Labour Party at branch and constituency level'.⁴⁷

Some politicians, whose careers have spanned the time of both the League of Youth and Young Labour, believe these changes are already happening. Tom Megahy, retired Member of the European Parliament, is progressively more disturbed by what he views as the ever-increasing lack of organisation and adherence to the rules during meetings. Many Young Labour members do not share Megahy's view that procedures enable a more effective conduct of business and, more importantly, act as a safeguard should anyone later challenge the outcome of a meeting.⁴⁸

Mark Ewington has experience of being a Labour student in the first four years of the New Labour government in addition to his post of youth officer in the Huddersfield Constituency Labour Party. CLPs recognised the potential advantages in electing a university undergraduate to the position of youth officer and the University of Huddersfield was known to provide speakers at party meetings. Ewington, however, found the task of forging links between his fellow students and comrades in the Labour Party an uphill struggle from the outset. In order to qualify for funding from the student union, groups had to be recognised as an official club, an obligation that required a minimum of fifteen signatures. Therefore, the National Union of Students but not their own student union, acknowledged the group of only eight or nine members that came out of the Freshers' Fare. Looking at the broader picture, Ewington accepts that it is often more difficult to recruit young people when the party is in government as students in particular like to kick against the establishment and he did sense a general blanket of apathy. However, he believed that the student

union was actively working against the idea of political societies and therefore unwilling to encourage participation of any kind. When he stood as candidate for the union presidency, Ewington recalls only a few hundred people voting out of several thousand students. One of only four candidates and the only one standing on a political ticket, he found himself competing for votes against the candidate promising to, 'reduce beer queues at the student union bar.' Though the latter lost to 'a non-political girl who was popular in the halls of residence', concern for the length of beer queues was important enough to ensure that the candidate amassed more votes than Ewington himself.

A case study of Young Labour activism at regional level

Young Labour Connect South Yorkshire, established in 2002, is a South Yorkshire organisation, made up of the region's constituency Labour parties that represent the four metropolitan boroughs of Sheffield, Rotherham, Doncaster and Barnsley. The CLPs of Rotherham, Wentworth, Rother Valley, Don Valley, Doncaster Central and Doncaster North, as well as the area's MEP, Linda McAvan sponsor the organisation, which represents a network of young Labour Party members across the area. All party members aged between fifteen and twenty-seven routinely become members of Connect, along with trade union members under the age of twenty-seven who register with the group.

The rallying cry sounds familiar. Connect South Yorkshire believes that a robust Young Labour presence can provide the South Yorkshire region with a strong voice at all levels of the party and across the movement as a whole. There is much concern amongst the organisation's activists about the impact of falling party membership, voter apathy and, more crucially, the disengagement of young people from the political process. The aim of the organisation is, therefore, to make politics more accessible to young people by raising with them the issues and ideas of the party. Individuals with initiative, not in need of direction from the party at national or local level, lead the enterprise. Social functions have helped the organisation to take root and its members have actively participated in a wide range of events, which have taken place in the region bringing together young party members for the first time. Evaluations of the group's first year in operation mirror those of the League of Youth in bemoaning the difficulties of getting some sections of the party engaged, in this case the trade unions, and the challenges involved in being able to organise and attract new members. Encouragement from the surrounding CLPs has not spread to

ward level where 'no headway into the prevailing culture', has been made, especially on the subject of funding.⁴⁹

By the second year in office, there was a perceptible growth in self-assurance. Connections had been established at local, regional and national level. Invitations had been extended to party members, council leaders, authors, advisors and the media. Such was the depth and detail being established by this new body that visiting Member of Parliament, Nick Raynsford, minister for local government, had cause to draw breath.⁵⁰

The leading figures behind Connect South Yorkshire are aware that young people who have no tradition or indeed knowledge of voting need readily obtainable and straightforward information that explains the options available to them. In their attempts to reach out to younger voters, the organisation's campaigners have produced a campaign pack of possible resources to target first-time voters, which they share with the agents and candidates across the area. On the run up to the 2005 general election, potential first-time voters were regaled with leaflets, letters and website information. Work continued after the election with booklets, posters and online consultations on such issues as the *Youth Green Paper*, the government's plans for reforming youth services. There are further echoes of the League of Youth in the Connect South Yorkshire's sponsorship of events such as the gathering in Doncaster town centre with Member of Parliament, Ed Milliband, bringing young members into contact with their MPs. Similarly, in 2005, with a trade union movement of a vastly different character to that of League of Youth days, the commitment of some young people to the future of trade unionism is evident in Young Labour members' desire to establish and maintain links.⁵¹

As with the League of Youth it is, by members' own admission, difficult to quantify objectively the success of a Young Labour group. Chris Read however, as chair of South Yorkshire Connect declares himself proud of the continued staging of events and increased personal contact and direct communication between the members. In the year between November 2003 and September 2004, against a backdrop of falling national membership, Connect managed to achieve a six percent increase. Read has presided over the introduction of innovative ideas such as a booklet entitled, '*Why join Labour?*' thought to be the only document of its kind containing information about how the Labour Party works and the different membership subscription rates. This

has been made available to all members free of charge and appeals have been made to branches and constituencies to promote the materials.⁵²

In the same way that the League of Youth federations forged a link between the branches through shared activities and campaigns, South Yorkshire Connect is committed to bringing as many young people together as possible. The noticeable distinction is in the links with the universities. Young Labour is enjoying a noticeable shift in attitude toward university-educated individuals in the party. Its members have not had to withstand the insults of such prominent figures as Lord Pembroke who, in 1923, stated that university socialists were, 'if possible even more objectionable than their proletarian comrades'.⁵³ The importance of the labour movements in the universities was felt then as now. C. R. de Gruchy, chair of the University Labour Federation, in the early nineteen-twenties stated that, 'The business of the Labour club is to get people interested and to bring them over to Labour',⁵⁴ the same institution, eighty years later, could, it is believed 'play an important role in reversing the decline in youth membership and activism'.⁵⁵ De Gruchy recalled being introduced to a labour audience as 'one of the new type of men in the labour movement'. Yet, whilst he himself may have believed that university people possess an ability 'to express [themselves] without difficulty and to think in general terms' he did acknowledge the challenges ahead in connecting the University Labour Clubs with the constituency Labour parties. Chris Read may find amusing de Gruchy's appeal to 'the ardent Labour worker': whom he asks 'neither to look upon [them] with suspicion nor to treat us as superhuman beings from another planet who are conferring a great honour on the movement'.⁵⁶ Young Labour activists in South Yorkshire did not need to employ their energies in overcoming suspicion and moreover, through hard work and determination, appear to have used their university links to strengthen successfully the movement as a whole. Moreover, its members have the confidence to write and adopt their own constitution embodying a comprehensive set of aims and values that concentrate heavily on establishing a voice for its members. The emphasis is to 'work with' established labour institutions at branch and regional level, 'to ensure that Young Labour is at the heart of party leadership and decision-making', and not waste time and effort trying to change the culture, thereby alienating those whose support is vital.⁵⁷

Connect South Yorkshire may not be representative of the Young Labour movement across the country. Chris Read, in his third annual report to its stakeholders, believed

that the organisation had staged more events and had built up stronger links between its members than 'almost any of the other few Young Labour groups in the country'.⁵⁸

Signs of discontent

For some, the seeds of discontent had been sewn almost immediately following the Labour Party victory of 1997. Eleanor Jupp of Exeter Constituency Labour Party writes, that the decline in youth membership could be explained by the party's failure, once in power, to develop the 'talent, energy and effervescence of the droves of young members' who joined the party to help create a better Britain. Jupp believes that, 'Thatcher's children wanted to see what would change under Labour' only to be left with a 'sense of redundancy' created in part by the lack of national activity within Young Labour but also by the lack of institutional change at branch level, where the 'Blair revolution has yet to reach draughty Labour clubs outside London'.⁵⁹

Other Labour activists are in accord with this view. Gavin Hayes and Kiran Ramchandani are adamant that 'In the near future, the party and the leaders of Labour's youth and student activists will have to wake up and make some decisions on the future of the youth and student wing'. The reasons for this are several. One of the major lessons to be learnt from the general election of 2001, they believe, is that there was a failure on the side of all political parties to engage their youth, a situation that the Labour Party in particular should be worried about as young people have traditionally been important to Labour's core vote. The results were of no surprise to Hayes and Ramchandani 'given the lack of resources and respect given to Labour's youth and student wings in the first four years of the government'. Like their League of Youth comrades, they believed they had the answer: The key to a healthy, vibrant youth and student movement is, they argue, strong internal democracy, which means autonomous status with the liberty to operate their own office. Internal elections should be allowed to proceed without pressure or intrusion from other outside parties therefore permitting activists to determine their own policies on matters that concern young people and the country as a whole.⁶⁰

Ewington believed that, nationally, the party did no more than it was paid to do in terms of supporting Labour students. Out of the handful of recruits from the Freshers' Fare, he was soon left with a core group of four or five. Though the 'freebies' available at a fare were often a bigger draw than the policies of the party, he recalls the embarrassing task of giving out 'sycophantic pictures of our leader'. He does however accept that there are other factors, to do with personality and image, which

ought to be considered. At twenty-seven years of age, Ewington was already at the upper age limit for New Labour membership and though Huddersfield Constituency Labour Party may still have considered him to be an acceptable choice as youth officer, at university, he was conscious of the age difference. Furthermore, his socialist working-class roots and Marxist thinking was, he felt too much for the apolitical middle-class students who happened to make up the class of 1999.⁶¹

Claire McCarthy had done well out of the New Labour government. After only four years of party membership, she had attained a seat on the National Executive as youth representative, bearing testimony, she believes, to the legitimate aspiration throughout the party to engage its young people. However, McCarthy has observed that at some levels the apparent commitment is 'tempered by a desire to defend the current balance of power and, at others, by a reluctance to create a relationship where young members may demand authority and respect, as well as deliver leaflets and smile for the camera'. She struggles between defining the current structure of Young Labour as 'genuine empowerment' or 'embarrassingly tokenistic'.⁶²

The NEC comes in for considerable criticism. The election for the position in 2001 of a youth representative on the NEC 'was enough to put any young activist off for life'. To those on the conference floor it looked like nothing more than 'a shoddy stitch up', with a number of trade union delegates holding the balance of power.⁶³ Attempts to establish internal democracy were being made on the run up to the 2006 Labour Party conference. Young Labour Democracy, 'a campaign for an open and accountable movement' is focused on a process of democratisation within Young Labour as a precursor to remedying the inactivity of the movement as a whole. It requests that the membership appoints and holds to account its own executive as a basic step towards democracy.

Currently, an NEC appointed national officer, adopting the role of ex-officio member, oversees Young Labour's national committee, which governs the youth section. In addition, the regional office selects one young member from each of the party's English regions, and those of Scotland and Wales. Those trade unions affiliated to the party are invited to send five young representatives, along with one from the Young Fabians and three from the National Organisation of Labour Students. The youth representative to the NEC may be elected at the Young Labour conference though the NEC must endorse the representative to the national policy forum. The cause of disagreement arises from the fact that it is from the national committee that

the Executive of Young Labour is taken whereas the Young Labour conference, which is the largest and most representative body of Young Labour, is allowed to elect only the NEC youth representative.⁶⁴

The democracy question had been rumbling for some time and was finally brought to a head on the subject of the 2006 NEC elections. Exception had been taken to the attempts by the chair of the national committee of Young Labour to recommend, in an official mailing, a slate of candidates in the forthcoming elections, a slate that appeared to reflect no more than the chair's personal opinion. It was questioned whether Young Labour, as an official body of the Labour Party should at all be supporting candidates in internal elections but moreover that a vote for specific candidates denied members the opportunity of expressing more diverse political opinions and therefore encouraging greater participation. This seemed to typify the reasons why the Young Labour Democracy movement felt compelled to propose a rule change that would assign to the Young Labour conference a direct role in electing the Executive, the body that would be responsible for its day-to-day operation between the biannual conferences. Only this, the 'democracy' activists argue, will provide the grassroots membership with the power to hold its Executive committee to account while still recognising the position of the constituent organisations on the national committee.⁶⁵

The changes called for by the democracy movement, however, do little to address what many believe is one of the challenges facing Young Labour. Its introduction in 1994, itself hardly a memorable event, established rules deliberately intended to allow local groups to eschew the party machinery. Each branch opts for its desired form of organisation on a town-by-town, seat-by-seat or region-by-region basis. There are no rules preventing individual branches from adapting their key objectives provided they do not fall foul of the party locally or nationally. This view was behind the revival of London Young Labour where Matt Huggins, a twenty-one year old activist, blamed the current structure for allowing Young Labour branches to be formed by cliques who then wither away as people move on or become too old to be a member. The remedy he feels is to revert to the more formal footing from which many of his contemporaries were turning their backs.⁶⁶

Mel Whitter, a Young Labour activist and women's officer for the National Union of Students in Wales, in 2004, believed that, 'Labour is the only party that seriously engages with its young members, affording an input both into setting the priorities of

the party and implementing them when decided'.⁶⁷ Matthew Storey, constituency youth officer for Stockton Labour Party, does not share Whitter's faith in the party's commitment to its youth organisation. Storey had long been frustrated at the party's failure to provide consistent access to the Young Labour website which, according to Storey, had been non-operational since 2001, an issue that 'really gets [his] back up'. As a result, Storey created the website, *Young Free and Labour: The unofficial Young Labour website*. Stockton Labour Party funds the site. It has twenty-six registered users and is subscribed to by Young Labour branches in Stockton, Wolverhampton, Chesterfield, South Yorkshire, London, Bo' ness and Cannock Chase, as well as the University Labour clubs of Oxford and Manchester.⁶⁸

Similarly, the national youth officer, of whom young people are invited to ask information, is somewhat elusive. The telephone number, as printed in the guide to *Youth Matters*, the government Green Paper was, like the website, not functioning.⁶⁹ The front-line contact at central office believed Labour students and Young Labour to be 'the same people' and no group was able to provide figures for the number of Young Labour members as they do not appear to be counted separately – anyone under the age of twenty-seven is classed as Young Labour but are essentially members of the Labour Party. It is difficult to track the fortunes of the class of 2004 or to uncover further developments in Young Labour groups. The link to Young Labour from the main Labour Party website, no longer introduces 'Young Labour faces'. As with the League of Youth, it is often concluded that the Labour Party is not offering the provision and encouragement that members feel they deserve while the success of the various branches is often a result of the hard work and enthusiasm of the Young Labour members buttressed by the paternalistic nature of their local parties.

Party response

When Richard Crossman, in 1961, expressed his disappointment at Labour's signal failure to organise a youth movement he may not have expected to hear his words repeated over four decades later by another Labour cabinet minister. Peter Hain, in 2004, acknowledged that the Labour Party has historically 'neglected the importance of a clear youth strategy, striking a positive note towards younger voters in the run-up to elections, but ultimately failing to demonstrate a commitment to giving young people a voice'. Hain's comments were made in response to falling numbers of voters in the eighteen to twenty-five age ranges, which stood at less than four in ten in 2001. This evidence of disengagement, Hain maintains, 'is also reflected in the declining number of young people joining the Labour Party'⁷⁰.

As a newly elected member of Labour's National Executive Committee, actor and broadcaster Tony Robinson decided to see for himself the impact of young people on the labour movement. The results were not encouraging. Out of forty constituencies, only one, a university town, had more than four members under the age of thirty. The same pattern was observed in the trade union movement as a brief scan of the TUC conference indicates. Echoes of the far left spectre which led to the disbandment of the first League of Youth in the nineteen thirties are in evidence when Robinson accuses the party of viewing Labour students 'as potential Trots who must be firmly managed'. Once again, the problem appears to lie at branch and constituency level where he believes, in order to attract young members the party stalwarts may 'have to relinquish the committee position [they've] held for the last decade, or be forced to rethink how, when and why [they] do the things [they] do on that committee'.⁷¹

An example of the difficulties in changing the mind-set of some members is the comfort that they often take from the existence of familiar structures of Labour Party meetings. Jennifer Gerber mocks herself as a party member. 'We Labour Party members want to change the world – as long as we can minute how we do this and then discuss these minutes in three consecutive meetings lasting three hours'. She sees it as routine for a 'token young person' arriving at their first meeting being subject to 'looks ranging from suspicion to wonder to lust'. Whilst accepting there is a need to find a balance between talking about an issue in a meeting and actually taking action about it, Gerber does feel it would be sad to abandon the meeting traditions. She reflects, 'I like the raffles, the coffee breaks and the sense of community – and I occasionally enjoy reading the crazy motions that pop up from the man in the cardigan and the woolly hat. In a world of constant change, a bit of consistency isn't always a bad thing'.⁷²

Certainly, there existed areas of promise. Tony Robinson's study uncovered flourishing Labour students groups, some well-organised and active Young Labour branches and TUC-led initiatives. The last, in a bid to boost the membership of the trade union movement, established an organising academy through which young people could spend a year with a sponsoring union to become the new generation of paid union organisers. By 2005, the academy had trained two hundred and fifty such organisers.⁷³ However, whilst Robinson is cautiously optimistic about the future of young people in politics he considers there to be an urgent need to change the

political structures that have outlived their usefulness and no longer match up to people's expectations.⁷⁴

Attempts by New Labour to appeal to youth

It could be argued that New Labour, under the leadership of Tony Blair, believed it could appeal to young people without recourse to its own youth movement. In the mid to late nineteen-nineties, attempts by the party to link to the values of young people are evident in its associations with Britpop, a national, cultural movement linked to popular rock bands of the period such as Oasis and Blur. In 1997, the year New Labour was elected to government, these bands became the focus of the larger British cultural movement known as 'Cool Britannia', a term used by the media to describe contemporary culture in Britain.⁷⁵ Blair talked of Britain as 'a young country' and was seen to be youthful in comparison with previous party leaders.⁷⁶ He had himself, as a student, entertained ambitions to become a rock star. Damon Albarn, lead member of the band, Blur, was a favourite; having being invited to the House of Commons for gin and tonic with the Prime Minister and the deputy leader John Prescott. Albarn, however, later became one of Blair's fiercest critics following the invasion of Iraq and went on to become a leading anti-war campaigner. Other preferred celebrities were the Gallagher brothers, front men of the group Oasis. Noel Gallagher had used the Brit Awards as an opportunity to extol the virtues of the Labour leader as the person to give hope to the youth of Britain, after which he was invited to a Downing Street reception. Gallagher was brought up in the Labour tradition and, like many of his contemporaries, 'was euphoric when [New Labour] got into power'. The rock singer, while believing that Britain is a better place under Labour stewardship, is however no longer a supporter of Tony Blair or the Labour Party. Gallagher claims,

'We all got carried away in 97. Once the veneer wore off – even taking the Iraq debacle out of the equation – we've all just given a massive shrug. I think the Labour Party's crowning achievement is the death of politics. There's nothing left to vote for.'⁷⁷

However, recent attempts by the Labour Party to associate itself with the cultural values of young people have proved to be a failure. The courting of celebrities has provided photographic opportunities and tabloid headlines but by its very nature can only be a short-term phenomenon and is fraught with potential hazards. Continuous

endorsements by celebrities that are no longer at the forefront of their scene can soon make a party look old and jaded. Furthermore, young rock stars often depend for their image, on acts of rebelliousness, which does not always sit easily alongside support for the party in government. This overlap of rock and politics is chronicled in the work of John Harris. In *The Last Party*, an account of New Labour's associations with Britpop, Harris states that 'Cool Britannia was finished by the hard realities of government'.⁷⁸ The Labour Party is not alone in both trying to connect with young people through popular culture and failing miserably in the process. Well-known examples would be Kenny Everett's presence at the 1983 Young Conservatives youth rally in which he was filmed shouting, "Let's bomb Russia," and the Green Party's association with David Icke who generated controversy with his announcement that he was the Son of God. As Brian Wheeler reports, British political history is littered with celebrity endorsements that have backfired.⁷⁹

This is not to argue that cultivating links with celebrity is completely without merit. The choice of celebrity can have a positive effect on a party's image. Writer and political journalist, Jo-anne Nadler, recalls her time as a Young Conservative. She had noticed how, in the mid nineteen-eighties, comedian Harry Enfield's portrayal of 'Tory Boy' had proved enduring and personified the perceived nastiness of the Conservative Party. Nadler also acknowledged the popularity of Labour's Red Wedge, a group of socialist minded musicians, in contrast to the 'tasteless', 'sick making' and 'clapped out' Conservative Party supporters of that period.⁸⁰ However, the prolific output of protest songs in the nineteen eighties did not change the status quo: the Conservative Party remained in power for a further decade. Celebrity endorsement is transient and fickle and in itself is unable to alter electoral realities.

Single issue politics

The new affluence, which many cite as undermining traditional political allegiances, was also responsible for a different kind of politics that had been emerging. Political campaigning or political support based on one fundamental political idea is not a new phenomenon. In a conversation with MP Kenneth Younger, in the early nineteen fifties, Hugh Dalton had spoken of, 'the much more interest taken by many young people in Africans, Indians, etc.' Younger believed the explanation lay in the rising affluence at home. The moral indignation 'that used to find a natural vent at home' was now directed abroad.⁸¹ Similarly, Richard Crossman had observed the interest

young people were showing towards international affairs, in particular South Africa's Apartheid regime.⁸² This interest was also reflected in Young Socialist literature, which was increasingly focussing upon international issues.

There is clearly a dilemma for the Labour Party in terms of its commitment towards young people and their level of involvement in the political process. In the 2005 general election, Labour secured its third successive election victory but saw its share of the vote fall from forty-one percent in 2001 to thirty five percent and its Commons majority fall from a hundred and sixty five to sixty six. In addition, a 'potentially alarming figure' of fifty-five per cent of eighteen to twenty four year olds failed to vote; a figure that represents a drift that had begun in the nineteen-sixties.⁸³ This trend reinforces Russell Dalton's conclusion that 'for many young people politics is a remote world'. As individuals age, he observes, 'they take on social responsibilities that increase their motivation to develop political interests'. In other words, people become taxpayers, homeowners and parents, and find that government programmes can affect their lives.⁸⁴ Prior to taking on these worldly responsibilities, the young are more likely to be involved in single-issue campaigning if they are involved at all. Dalton argues that age is among one of the strongest predictors of unconventional activity resulting from a combination of generational and lifecycle effects. Youth is quite naturally a period of enthusiasm and rebellion that leads to groups of young people with free time, often concentrated in university settings, participating in protests and other unconventional activities. Set alongside this, a new style of participation has been adopted whereby political sophistication and increasing education levels are producing support for direct action techniques.⁸⁵

Global issues remain a sphere of activity for the young as well as a pointer for the Labour Party. In 2006, Labour Party chairman, Ian McCartney recognised the need to adapt to a changing society. He impressed upon the party that,

'If we are to ensure a successful third term Labour government and to build a solid foundation for a fourth term Labour government, we need to acknowledge that the Britain of 2009 or 2010 will be very different from the Britain of 1997'.

McCartney recognised the growth in single-issue campaigning and counselled that if the party is to be sustained as 'a broad-based progressive force for change', then it must be willing to respond to the shifting environment. In the wake of the 2005 'Make

Poverty History' campaign, the government established a Labour supporters network. Its aim is to bring into contact with the party those people who are politically active but prefer to engage in single interest groups, in the belief that many of them, if not already members of the Labour Party, will at least share the same values. McCartney believes that the challenge for the government is to inspire and engage the new generation of young voters and young members. Like Morgan Phillips in an earlier period, the party chair believes the responsibility should not be borne by the national party alone but should be the responsibility of each section of the party. He argues that in order to encourage young people to get involved in the party, its structures must be reformed; the amount of business should be reduced and a less formal approach adopted at meetings during which the chair should be asked to stop and explain jargon or procedures.⁸⁶

Dawn Butler, Member of Parliament for Brent, also noted the participation of young people in the 2005 poverty campaign and believed the party should build on it. Central to the renewal of the Labour Party is its re-engagement with the public of which, Butler considers; the most urgent group is the young. Her experiences of young people show that, far from being uninterested in politics, they have 'a strong interest in political issues and action' and are 'articulate in the process'. Like McCartney, she favours a reform of party structure at local level that will dispose of the 'rigidly, bureaucratic and stale' nature of proceedings and suggests that 'Westminster jargon' should be avoided in favour of 'terms that young people can understand'.⁸⁷

The 2005 Green Paper, *Youth Matters*, indicates an understanding within the Labour Party of the need to engage young people in the political process. It stipulates that 'Young people are central to the future success of our country'. The consultation document seeks the views of young people on key themes relating to the communities in which they live and how they can play an active part in the delivery of services. The document invites Young Labour to present its responses to the paper to Beverley Hughes MP, 'who is the minister responsible for turning these ideas into real laws and real action in your community'. Once again, the Labour Party finds itself responding to events in youth matters as an alternative to leading them. Furthermore, the findings of the Electoral Commission on the 2005 general election may call into question the validity of pursuing the single-issue campaigner. The Electoral Commission report concludes for instance that the war and occupation in Iraq, while

having some impact on Labour votes in 2005, had no effect on voter turnout and the position taken by individuals on the war had no effect on their decision to vote.⁸⁸

Affluence has undoubtedly changed the preoccupations of many people, for whom politics is no longer chiefly about economic issues. Some sections of the post-affluent society have rejected the politics of old class-based parties, in particular, politically inclined young people who, a generation ago, would have joined the Labour Party are now joining campaigning groups, which have grown at an unprecedented pace in the post-war period. Caution needs to be exercised however when responding, as McCartney argues the Labour Party must, to this shifting environment. It could be argued that campaigning on a transient single issue is idealistic and can become a fashion rather than a commitment, which can often take the place of political ideology. It can often appear to be more interesting to try to save a rainforest or help the starving in Africa than to get involved in local party politics. Michael Moran argues that the proportion of the population unaffected by economic issues tends to be a relatively small, well-educated middle-class group, such as those who might join anti-nuclear or environment campaigns. Moreover, these groups have little to offer in the area of recruitment to political parties, being merely a small number of enthusiasts for a common cause. In trying to attract this section of society, often media and celebrity led, or backed by large organisations, the Labour Party may be in danger of bypassing those who perceive their lives as being largely untouched by the new affluence but who are nonetheless involved in single-issue campaigns. This could apply to young single parents who are living in poverty or young black people living in the squalor of inner cities. Similarly, care must be taken not to over-estimate the level of sophistication and political interest among young people. The riots of the nineteen eighties, in Brixton and Toxteth were little to do with the post-affluent society but more an outburst from the very poor. These local protests, it could be argued, are an alternative to the Labour Party's claim to represent the interests of the working class as a whole.⁸⁹

In the first instance, this may not be a cause for concern for the Labour Party as Dalton's study also suggests that protest politics is disproportionately the domain of the left, coupled with the 2005 Report for the Electoral Commission, which concludes that protesters are more likely to be voters than non-voters. However, as mentioned earlier, the younger cohorts are less likely to vote than their older counterparts. There is 'a distinct socio-demography of non-voting', the main driver being age.⁹⁰

The future for Young Labour

The functional need for partisan cues to guide voting behaviour, evaluate political issues, and mobilise political involvement is decreasing for a growing sector of society. Dalton uses the process of cognitive mobilisation, to explain the growth in the public's overall level of political sophistication. The consequence of education and media exposure has created a group of politically interested and well-educated voters who orient themselves to politics. This process has increased voters' political sophistication and their abilities to deal with the complexities of politics. The political skills of this group enable them to organise effective citizen-action groups, citizen lobbies, protest demonstrations and other unconventional activities. This group is likely to increase owing to the processes of socioeconomic change but more importantly, it is concentrated among the young. Dalton cites evidence that fewer voters now approach elections with standing party predispositions based on either social characteristics or early-learned partisan ties. This decline in cleavage politics is being offset by the rise in issue voting. As modern electorates have become more sophisticated and politically interested, and as the availability of political information has expanded, Dalton believes many citizens can now reach their own voting decisions without relying on broad external cues such as social class or family partisanship.⁹¹

It remains however that the theory of issue voting shares the stage with other traditions of voting behaviour: Evidence remains of party loyalty and of significant sections of the electorate forming their detailed opinions in order to fit a pre-existing alignment. For this reason, Dunleavy and Husbands argue that citizens, in deciding their views, remain heavily dependent on the political parties as well as the mass media and other institutions.⁹² The reasons given by members of Young Labour for joining the Labour Party and what they hoped to achieve within it, demonstrate similarities between Young Labour and the League of Youth. Just as the economic deprivation of the nineteen-thirties and the austerity of the war years impacted on the political and social consciences of those who joined the League of Youth so too did events of the period on those who joined Young Labour.

The early members of Young Labour have known only Conservative rule and were affected by the poverty and inequalities they witnessed whether at first hand in the communities in which they lived or on the television screens. Jonny Reynolds grew

up in Sunderland, an area he describes as being 'on the sharp end of Tory rule' in which the closure of traditional industries such as shipbuilding cost thousands of jobs and unemployment reached levels of over ten percent. Similarly, Karim Palant observed 'injustice and poverty every day in Liverpool', seeing at first hand the large numbers of people 'left on the scrap heap by an uncaring Tory government'. The impact was not just felt in the north. Living in London, Ellie Reeves, a university Labour activist, was aware, as she grew up under a Conservative government, of the inequalities between those who lived in large houses and those who lived in run-down council estates, and remembers some of her schooling taking place in huts due to overcrowding and shortage of funds.⁹³

It would be easy to decry some of the factors that brought individuals into Young Labour. Indeed, when Chris Wellings exchanged the left back position for constituency activist, he did so to fill the void after losing his place in the Sunday League football team.⁹⁴ Iain Bundred, of Leamington Spa, initially viewed politics 'as a fun game to play during [his] spare time'.⁹⁵ It is not difficult to find equally flippant reasons among those who joined the League of Youth: such as Aileen Armitage's search for a League member of the opposite sex during her time at a girls' school,⁹⁶ or Vesta Rock's pursuit of the local Labour candidate's handsome son, Michael.⁹⁷ However, in the main, those who found themselves part of the Labour Party's youth movement, whether it is the League of Youth or Young Labour, had common concerns and though the language may vary, the key areas of unease are the same: poverty and inequality in all its forms.

Soley acknowledges the constant dilemmas and contradictions associated with youth sections of political parties but believes the solution lies at a more basic level. The challenge is in striking the right balance between the social and political elements of youth activity: If excessive emphasis is placed on social activities, then the group becomes too light on politics; similarly, if the group is viewed as overly political it can act as a deterrent to potential recruits. Soley attributes the failure of Labour's youth organisations to the party's somewhat 'schizophrenic' approach to youth recruitment. The party accepts that without a youth organisation it would die, but at the same time regards it as 'more trouble than it is worth'. This state of affairs also contributes to the pessimistic view Soley holds on the future of Young Labour. If a youth organisation is to perform a functional role, he argues, the party needs to be more realistic in its expectations of young people. He advocates a 'free thinking' approach

to politics, whereby young people enter a political environment free of any party machinery.⁹⁸

United Kingdom Youth Parliament

Soley is not alone in this view. The United Kingdom Youth Parliament (UKYP), launched in 2001, was set up to provide just such a milieu where young people who are interested in politics have the opportunity 'to dip their toe in the water.' The organisation, which comprises of four hundred democratically elected members between the ages of eleven and eighteen, provides the non-party political environment that Soley believes to be healthy for the development of young people. The main objective of the UKYP is to educate young people about the political system in which they operate and to give them a voice, 'which will be heard and listened to by local and national government, providers of services for young people and other agencies who have an interest in the views and needs of young people'.⁹⁹

Kate Parish, co-founder of the UKYP, believes the organisation reaches out to those young people who are turned off by party politics and provides a forum at which they can gain experience and be allowed to make mistakes 'in a safe and supportive environment'.¹⁰⁰ The members themselves are also ample testament to the benefits of joining such an organisation, from people like Melody Hossaini, who believes she can give the people of her home town a voice through the youth parliament, to Karim Ibrahim, who declares that 'If it hadn't been for the UKYP, I'd probably be in prison, or even dead'.¹⁰¹ Though there are no accurate figures available, Parish believes that many have joined a political party as a result of being involved with the UKYP.

While this organisation provides a forum for the views of young people and educates them in civic and political matters, the status of the UKYP as an independent, non-party political alternative requires scrutiny. The organisation was created with government backing, and is further supported by individuals who hold a range of political views and interests. In addition, it is to MPs that its members turn for support; for visiting speakers; or to protest on an issue. Moreover, the government provides the funding, which may call into question its independent status. Despite its non-party political credentials, the youth parliament does find it difficult to access potential avenues of private funding, as many perceive it to be a political organisation. A year

after its establishment, the UKYP Manifesto was received favourably by Ben Bradshaw, MP who told the members that the manifesto had 'made an impact across government departments'.¹⁰² This, one could argue, leaves the organisation open to criticism of being little more than a type of pressure group on behalf of youth. How might the Labour Party respond to this challenging set of circumstances?

Peter Hain believes that the long-term health of the Labour Party rests on its ability to attract young members by adopting a long-term recruitment strategy. Those who become involved and active at a young age, Hain claims, 'are likely to remain committed to the party into the future, thereby broadening the membership base and bringing in new blood'. Hain cites several reasons why people may feel less sympathetic towards the Labour Party: being in government, military action in Iraq and the party's proposals for higher education funding. However, he believes the fundamental problem is that too many young people see joining a mainstream party as pointless. Therefore, better structures are required if young people are to be mobilised within the party. Hain advocates closer links between Labour students and Young Labour to form a single youth wing whereby stronger links with the party would be retained when students move from one part of the country to another after leaving university. He is also mindful of the 'sectarian tradition' of Labour youth politics but nevertheless understands that this could be avoided if the party is seen to take its youth movement seriously. Hain emphasises resources and accountability as key factors in winning back young people to the Labour Party:

- More resources should be made available to the youth wing to help young people set up local Young Labour branches around the country.
- The party should create a position for a full-time, elected sabbatical support officer responsible for providing organisational support for young members who are not in full time-education.
- The party should consider how the youth representative on the National Executive Committee is integrated into the new youth section.
- The party's youth section should be fully autonomous and accountable, with an elected executive, and greater freedom to champion policies that appeal to young people.

- The youth section should have a guaranteed slot at the party conference on topical debates.
- There should be an annual youth conference, which all young members would be allowed to attend.

The most important element in these recommendations is the issue of autonomy. Hain argues that the party should maintain a position of 'scrupulous neutrality in the relation to the affairs of its youth section'. The youth section, he believes 'should be encouraged to reach independent positions on policy issues that matter to its members, even where this is at variance with the policy of the party as a whole'. Hain concludes that the Labour Party will not be successful in attracting young people if it continues to see the youth wing 'merely as cheerleaders for the government'¹⁰³

Conclusion

The body of young people who, for over three decades, made up the first youth movement of the Labour Party would barely recognise the world inhabited by their successors in the new millennium. The contrast could not be starker between some aspects of the Labour League of Youth and Young Labour. The one, made up largely of unemployed individuals, housed in makeshift premises, for whom the activities of canvassing and campaigning, recorded meticulously in leather bound notebooks, was the life-blood of the movement. The other, largely university educated members of a technology-led society where the preferred method of communication and campaigning is by computer, and where 'receptions' can be held in London's Living Room overlooking the capital's skyline with officers representing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups.¹⁰⁴

The majority of the League of Youth membership was working class and had a family tradition of involvement in the labour movement. For many there was little doubt, or in some cases choice, about their political baptism. Unemployment and lack of opportunity resulted in many members remaining in their neighbourhood and therefore adopting political loyalty to it. Social change, brought about by the affluence of the post-war period meant that the inextricable link between political and social life, which had marked out both Leagues of Youth, was weakening. Political campaigning and social activities, in the case of Young Labour were becoming increasingly separate entities.

It is true that the present generation of Labour activists have not experienced the horrors of war at home and are, through social security, somewhat cushioned from the economic effects of depression. It is doubtful whether the class of 2004 will ever eagerly await the top off a boiled egg, as Jimmy Allan and his siblings did, when the precious commodity was only afforded to the member of the family going out to work in order to keep up his strength for the day.¹⁰⁵ The effects of poverty, however, are viewed and measured by the time and place in which individuals live and as such, the effects of unemployment during the nineteen-eighties in places such as Liverpool and the North East had an equally profound effect on many young people as the unemployment of the nineteen-thirties did on its generation. Both generations joined the Labour Party with the objective of creating a fairer and more just society. Young Labour had learned to overcome the constraints that had bedevilled its predecessors by pre-empting the party's fears and the action it would inevitably take. The new constitution with its safeguards against entryism was a practical move on the part of the Young Labour founders. However, the moderation and flexibility shown by the members of the new youth section was not enough to obtain from the party a significant commitment in terms of financial and organisational support. Young Labour's loose organisation, coupled with the party's advice to, 'avoid bureaucracy at their meetings',¹⁰⁶ invited the conclusion by Ben Leapmen in an investigation for the London Evening Standard, of the overall effect as being 'an outfit which is informal to the point of being ineffectual.'¹⁰⁷

The comments of party members such as Robinson and Hain are an echo of the pleas made by the women's groups in the nineteen twenties and although the counsel is as valid today as it was eight decades earlier, it remains unheeded by the leadership of the party. The Labour Party's tendency to court youth, 'a notoriously fair-weather friend'¹⁰⁸, through one-issue, celebrity-led campaigns do not provide a solid foundation for youth participation. The party leadership, in its tendency to expand the central party machine has ignored the important role played at local level in creating a successful youth organisation. The central offices of the party have swelled in terms of finance, personnel and complexity of organisation in order to manage media relations and national issues. This has been at the expense of activity at a local level.¹⁰⁹ Although some members of Young Labour have been initiated into politics at university and are perceived by some to be politically sophisticated, their success at branch level is nevertheless reliant upon the support and good will of local party members.

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- ¹⁰⁷ Leapman, 2002, 'The Young Ones', *Progress: Labour's Progressives*, May-June 2002 [online]
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p 219
- ¹⁰⁹ Dunleavy, *Husbands*, 1985 p 18

Chapter 9: Conclusion

The emergence, in 1923, of the Labour Party's first youth movement, the League of Youth, was the result of a combination of youthful eagerness and the nurturing support of the women's section of the party. The Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) showed little enthusiasm for the initiative but considered it had to respond to the growth of youth sections in other parties, in particular the Young Communist League and the ILP's Guild of Youth, as well as youth organisations on the continent. The leadership was therefore reluctantly obliged to respond and found itself unable to avoid the responsibility of maintaining the organisation once it was established. The PLP was also aware of the positive image that young people can confer on a party and, therefore, as each of the youth sections disintegrated, it felt compelled to accept a successor organisation, often with a new title.

Those who did support the youth organisation in its endeavours were often in disagreement as to the role it should play. Throughout its life, however, the League did manage to balance political and social activities. It was in its exclusively political role that it encountered most difficulty. Len Collinson, a member of the first League of Youth, mused, '[w]e thought we'd conquered the world, but the world wasn't very interested'.¹ Certainly, there was an inability on the part of the Labour Party at both national and local level to raise the profile and status of youth to a higher plane. The relationship between the party and its young members was conditional in that the League was expected at all times to support the policies of the PLP and to accept its dependent status within the party organisation. Annual conference reports are testament to the notion that the party desired a trained supply of foot soldiers for election times. In between elections, a social and educational programme under the control of the local parties would occupy them. By adopting this authoritarian parental position, the party allowed its young members to become disillusioned. Those young people who had been attracted by the party's socialism, and in some cases, its charismatic leaders, were later to find that its customs and traditions were a disincentive. These traditions and procedures were part of the inherited structural constraints that the party felt unable to abandon. Alarmed by the possible electoral consequences, the PLP's continued inability to allow the youth sections an autonomous role robbed the Labour Party of the vigour that the League could bring to the party and ignored the political motivation of the majority of the League membership. As Hain expressed it, the PLP has essentially desired that its youth organisations be mere 'cheerleaders' for the party.

The discord, which led to the disbandment of the first League of Youth, ensured that subsequent attempts to establish a youth organisation were made in an atmosphere of 'recrimination, demoralisation and dissolution'.² Each League was established in changed times and the members were therefore products of the social, economic and political environment in which they lived and the hegemonic ideas of the time into which they had been socialised. While the PLP was aware of the need to appeal to young people, there were, however, common strands running through the relationship between the party and its youngest members that led to the subsequent failure of each youth section. A rigid constitution and an ageing and cautious leadership continuously obstructed the League's desire for autonomous status and a significant role in the policy-making process. The different periods of socialisation experienced by the older and younger members were allowed to become a cause of dissension rather than a beneficial resource.

The first League of Youth looked towards its party leaders to realise the socialist ideals that would alleviate the high unemployment and low wages that had blighted its members. The majority did not however believe that these would be achieved by what they viewed as the diluted form of socialism advocated by the more dominant and moderate faction of the PLP. The League leadership opted instead for a broad front with the communists, which pitted it against the mainstream faction of the PLP, leading subsequently to its disbandment in 1938. There were some in the League who believed that the youth section was trying to be 'the tail that wagged the dog',³ but they were in the minority. The majority of the membership demonstrated their political affinities with Cripps. This affinity undermined the standing of the youth section with Attlee's pragmatic leadership. Influenced by the charismatic leadership of Ted Willis, a number of League members later left the League of Youth to join the Young Communists.

Agency played a significant role in the demise of the first League of Youth. The PLP and the League were undoubtedly constrained by the structures of the time. It was agency that prevented those structures from being turned into opportunities, however, as the leadership of both groups appeared to occupy different ideational universes. This led the League of Youth and the PLP to interpret the structural constraints in markedly different ways. Willis was uncompromising in his belief that the only way to win the majority of the youth of Britain to Labour was to establish a self-governing League, united with the communists in one working class movement.

Similarly, like some of the socialist intellectuals whose views Willis espoused, the League could not offer a solution as to how socialism was to be achieved. The PLP however, in its desire to appear politically respectable, ignored the initially conciliatory mood of the League leadership, which had agreed to remain and work within the framework of the party. The PLP had always tended to exaggerate the threat from communists and others on the far left. Both sides had missed an opportunity for compromise. However, in their position as adults and leaders of the party, it was the role of the PLP to adopt a skilful approach to these issues. Had it done so, the ensuing debate may have led to more effective programmes of political action instead of the disillusionment that followed. The dominant moderate faction within the PLP was convinced that the structural constraints imposed by the economic and political circumstances could not be challenged.

The second League of Youth was led by individuals who had been socialised during the period of austerity and war. Leaders of the PLP in many cases felt more at ease in that setting. Once again, the issues influencing the period, the Cold War, nuclear disarmament and how to achieve socialism, led to ideological splits within the party with the League of Youth showing its support for the Bevanite faction. There also remained the issue of entryism, this time of the Trotskyite strain. However, the political differences between the League of Youth and the party leadership played a less significant role in the League's downfall than the generation gap. There was a failure on the part of the leadership to recognise the effects, particularly on young people, of the new affluence and the developing youth culture that led to the growing self-confidence and assertiveness of young people. This lack of understanding laid the foundations for the conflicts of the Young Socialist period. Each side exaggerated the extent to which the structural context in which they were operating was entrenched.

The significant role that can be played by agency in the party's youth organisation is clearly demonstrated where branches of the League of Youth have been, at least for a time, successful. The members of the Huddersfield League appear, in their behaviour and attitude, to be typical of their contemporaries across the country yet managed to run a successful branch, and play a leading role in the regional federation, in both the first and second League of Youth. The explanation for the success of the League of Youth in Huddersfield is rooted in agency. Of central importance is the existence of key individuals who were able to earn the trust and respect of League members by playing an enlightened paternal role, often being

prepared to overlook party rules, while at the same time allowing the young members a degree of autonomy and freedom. Arguably, if the PLP had not possessed the power to control the party in the way it did in this period, this more flexible approach to youth organisation could have been adopted at national level to the benefit of the Labour Party and its youth movement.

When the Young Socialists was established in 1959, the party leadership had relinquished none of its control of its youth organisation. The existing structures remained while the party retained control over the finances and the content of the youth journal. It is no surprise therefore that the continuities between the fate of the two Leagues of Youth and their successors were becoming apparent. The infiltration by the Trotskyite Militants was of a more endemic and organised variety than previously though the party had initially ignored the concerns that some youth members had brought to the attention of the party leadership. The attraction of the Young Socialists to the far left, particularly the Bennite faction, in the nineteen seventies and nineteen eighties, was to be its undoing. Having taken advantage of the divisions in the party leadership to attack government policies, a resumption of full PLP power under Neil Kinnock, resulted in the Young Socialists being undermined and their charismatic leader, Andy Bevan, surreptitiously removed. Once again, the party's youth movement had become an unwelcome spectre at the feast, and its dysfunctional nature for the party as a fertile territory for factional infiltration prevailed over its perceived value.

The desire by young people to eradicate poverty and enhance social justice had not disappeared in 1994 but Young Labour represented a different kind of youth politics in which traditional state socialism has less appeal. The difficulties in persuading the party of the merits of yet another youth organisation resulted, for the first time in the history of the party's youth movement, in a significant change in the constitution. The result however, is a much more docile and compliant organisation. The interest shown by young people in international affairs and single-issue politics had been evident at various stages of Labour's youth movement. This tendency was encouraged by the growing predisposition to individualism and consumerism, which was developing in society. The policies of Thatcher and Blair reinforced these tendencies. Tensions over the nature of socialism have become somewhat esoteric to Young Labour and less significant to its survival than the changing social environment. As throughout the history of the youth movement, in trying to attract those involved in single issues such as celebrity-led poverty campaigns, the Labour

Party has responded to events instead of setting the agenda for youth recruitment. Arguably, the interest of a political party in a single issue could have an adverse effect in attracting young people to the party. League of Youth members joined the International Brigade in its fight for democracy in the Spanish Civil War out of conviction and in protest at the policies of the Labour Party towards Spain. In contrast, it is convincing to view the involvement by the present generation in single-issues as gesture politics or even faddism. Even such contentious recent events such as the Iraq conflict did not feature significantly in Young Labour literature.

Most League of Youth members had parents already in the party and were familiar with the formula and procedures of branch meetings. What is often now disparagingly termed the bureaucracy of meetings did not deter young people from putting themselves forward for offices. As fewer young people have become reliant on political cues from their parents, and university education has tended to take them away from their communities, they often find the procedural elements of meetings less a benefit than a restrictive idiosyncrasy. New Labour, in responding to the structural pressure of wider social change had encouraged this view. This has provoked criticisms of Young Labour as an incoherent and vague organisation, ineffectual in terms of recruitment to the Labour Party.

The fact that the Labour Party does not provide formal legitimacy for factions in the decision-making process results in the League of Youth, which itself is not a faction, and subsequent youth organisations, being prey to factions within the party.⁴ While it may be possible, as Belloni has asserted, for dysfunctional divisiveness and functional unity to co-exist,⁵ the influence of sectionalised groups inside and outside the party have encouraged factionalism within the youth organisations resulting, at times, in dysfunctional divisiveness being the greater force. This could questionably have been avoided if the party leadership had been more willing, as Hay's argument implies, to allow structure and agency to interact and facilitate dialogue and mutual understanding rather than the simple re-iteration of incompatible attitudes. The party leadership had confined itself to structures that it believed could not be contested - the structures of capitalism, the cultural conservatism of the British electorate, the prevailing ideas about Britain's role in the world and the bias against socialism by the British media. The structural constraints had almost become a reality limiting the freedom of political actors. If the PLP had recognised the energies and experiences of their young members, these qualities could have been exploited to the benefit of

the party. Had the youth organisation been drawn into the political process it might have been more ready to recognise that the structural constraints were not completely fictional and that agency or political will can be naïve unless pursued intelligently and realistically.

Willis is a quintessential example of the energy, organisation and initiative prevalent in the Labour Party's youth organisation. He is also, however an illustration of the opportunities passed up by the PLP to exploit the talents of the young people who sought to belong to a vigorous youth organisation allied to the Labour Party. Such structural constraints as those mentioned earlier, and the party's inflated fear of communism resulted in the PLP trying to diminish Willis's influence in the youth organisation instead of nurturing and developing it. When the party did decide to court the League, it was an attempt, by individuals such as Herbert Morrison, to stem the flow of university-educated politicians⁶ as well as a response to criticisms of the party's neglect of youth recruitment. Young people who engage in left wing politics have tended to be idealistic and radical. Nevertheless, young 'stormy petrels' do change and for this reason, the party need not have reacted so fearfully to their calls for autonomy. Willis moreover, later acknowledged that his generation was not as radical as the party believed it to be. He believed that the League had a political duty to support proletarian dramatists,⁷ but he also recognised that by the late nineteen fifties the views of such intellectualists as Osborne, as espoused in the radical play *Look Back in Anger*, was certainly not representative of 'what six and a quarter million of our younger generation were thinking'.⁸

If only the party been able to operate in a more flexible and transparent mode, the PLP may have been able to share Willis's conclusion that,

'We were, in short, creatures of our time, tattooed by all its faults, neither saints nor sinners. Our failure rate was high, but when the final balance comes to be struck, perhaps there will be this said for us: we tried'.⁹

The burgeoning impact of structural, agency and social factors, at times a combination of all three, has resulted in the story of Labour youth being one of abject failure. The Labour Party, in reality, is not the federal party that its various component parts, the trade unions, women's sections and constituency parties, for example, would suggest. It is ultimately a centralised parliamentary party of moderate reform

and without a flexible approach towards its relationship with its youngest members, it is improbable that the Labour Party can ever develop a flourishing youth organisation.

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- ¹ Collinson, interview with author, 2003
 - ² Anderson, 1965 p 253
 - ³ Hanson, interview with author, 2002
 - ⁴ Seyd, 1987 p 8
 - ⁵ Beller, Belloni, 1978 pp 440-442
 - ⁶ Willis, 1970 p 163
 - ⁷ Willis, in Laing, 1986 p 98
 - ⁸ Willis, 1970 p 153
 - ⁹ Ibid., p 197

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Appendix

In the course of this research, approximately thirty individuals have been interviewed. This appendix outlines the research methodology in relation to the interviews undertaken in support of the thesis.

The author acknowledges the view of Richards that 'interviews are one of the major tools in qualitative research...', and recognises that the interviewer needs 'to know his/her subject thoroughly, and be prepared to be flexible in an interview situation'.¹ Flexibility has been a key requirement in the interviews carried out for this thesis and is particularly important when interviewing elderly subjects. Often, the hospitality and eagerness to uncover memorabilia, as well as, in several cases, the enjoyment of another person's company, can often result in straying from the point, in addition to making a taped conversation difficult to sustain. A good example of this would be the interviews the author held with Jimmy Allan, a member of the Huddersfield Labour League of Youth in the nineteen thirties. Jimmy's period in the League of Youth was marked by his passion for rambling, an activity in which he involved most League members. As a result, the first interview included an impromptu and very enjoyable slide show complete with refreshments.

King suggests that a qualitative research interview (semi- or unstructured) is most appropriate, 'where individual historical accounts are required of how a particular phenomenon developed...'² The author decided therefore that the average age of the interviewee and the focus of the study determined that unstructured and semi-structured, sometimes taped, interviews to be the most suitable form.

This approach allows the interviewee more flexibility of response than a fully structured interview. In addition, questions can be added or omitted as deemed appropriate by the interviewer and the wording of questions need not be uniform. Initial interviews tended to be unstructured whereby the interviewer adopted an informal approach and allowed the conversation to develop within the general area of the Labour League of Youth and the Labour Party itself. Follow-up interviews adopted a semi-structured approach, often with questions and explanations.³

The work of Dargie, though aimed at observation in political research, proved useful in supporting the early stages of the study. Dargie found that access and cooperation was gained more easily if the research was of immediate interest to the subject. This proved to be the case for the majority of the subjects interviewed for this thesis. Many remarked that they had not previously been asked about their experiences in the

Labour League of Youth and were eager to share their recollections. Dargie advises an initial contact to present the researcher to the subject. Where the subject, for example in the Huddersfield case study, previously knew the interviewer a personal visit or telephone call was judged appropriate. Where the interviewee was unknown, as, for instance in the case of members of the House of Commons and House of Lords and Len Collinson, a trustee at the Labour History Archive in Manchester, a formal letter was sent. The author identifies with Dargie's observation that subjects were encouraged by the fact that similar research had been carried out with other individuals and organisations.⁴ In most cases, however trust was established through introduction by third parties as shown below.

Molly Walton, the author's mother and initial inspiration for the thesis, was a member of the second League of Youth in Huddersfield in the nineteen fifties. The *Daily Herald* speaking contest of 1952 brought Molly into contact with League contemporaries and two of the author's early subjects, Tom and Jean Megahy, Chair of the Scottish League of Youth and founder member of the Mirfield League, respectively. The author's home town of Huddersfield and local Labour Party branch of Newsome provided access to Gilbert and Joyce Hanson and Peter and Doreen Wallace. Gilbert Hanson acted as a third party contact for Jimmy Allan, and Denis and Eileen Chilvers. The Chilvers in turn introduced Granville and Barbara Whiteley, Granville being responsible for most of the surviving photographs of League members in Huddersfield and the West Riding federation. Author, Aileen Armitage was also a member of Huddersfield League of Youth and contemporary of the above names. The conferring of an honorary degree upon Aileen by the University of Huddersfield, in 2002, provided the opportunity to exchange telephone numbers and email addresses. Members of the Huddersfield Constituency Labour Party provided the contacts with Vesta Sheila Rock, member of Stroud League of Youth, Eric Lawson, member of Stockport League, and Mark Ewington, a member of Young Labour and Labour Students at the University of Huddersfield. A Kirklees councilor offered the name of Peter Thornton. Peter Thornton introduced the author to his ex-wife Jean and daughter Baroness (Glenys) Thornton. The Thorntons were founder members of Spen Valley Labour League. All of the above agreed to be interviewed by the author.

The *Daily Herald* speaking contest had brought Tom and Jean Megahy into contact with Betty Boothroyd whose autobiography is one of the few to contain references to the League of Youth. The Megahys introduced the author to League contemporary

and long-time party colleague, Stan Newens, who began his political career in the Stoke on Trent League of Youth. Stan was able to supply useful documents as well as introducing the author to John Kotz of Suffolk, one of the founder members of South Hackney League of Youth. An additional contemporary of Tom Megahy's was Bruce Millan, retired EU Commissioner. Although Bruce admitted to a failing memory in relation to the period, he acted as a third party contact for Jean Goldie, Labour councillor for Renfrewshire. Bruce and Jean were both members of the League of Youth national consultative committee. Their spouses were also League members.

On some occasions, information came from unexpected sources. A published article by the author in *Socialist History* journal led to contact with Jim Mortimer, previously general secretary to the Labour Party and a trustee of the Socialist History Society that produces the journal. Jim was a League member and contemporary of Ted Willis. Similarly, the director of the Labour History Archive, made Len Collinson, a trustee, known to the author during a research visit. Further contacts were made following requests placed by the author in the local newspaper and the International Brigade Newsletter. Mary Townend and Winifred Wheable, respectively, provided useful information. The above network is an example of what Richards terms the 'snowball effect'.⁵

A number of 'elites' were contacted during the course of the research though not all were able or willing to contribute to the study. 'Elite' interviews, which Richards accepts are inevitably smaller than non-elite, therefore form approximately twenty percent of the total. The author has recognised Richards' definition of 'elites', as being 'a group of individuals, who hold, or have held, a privileged position in society'⁶ and adapted it for purposes of this thesis to mean those who hold, or have held, prominent positions, national or international, in politics or elsewhere. Richards states that one of the functions of elite interviewing is to provide the interviewer with a subjective analysis of a particular episode or situation. Views on youth and the attitude of the Labour Party toward its youth movement, provided by Baroness (Glenys) Thornton and Clive Soley MP, satisfy this function.

Introductory letters or emails to elites requested an interview or answers to questions, the latter option avoiding the need to make a further request in the event of an interview being turned down. A small number however did decline. The refusal by some elites to contribute has not been to the detriment of the thesis though their contribution may well have enhanced the material already used. In particular, the

author would have been interested in the views of Gwynneth Dunwoody in her capacity as daughter of Morgan Phillips. Phillips himself was a member of the League of Youth and, later as general secretary, had substantial dealings with the League. Roy Hattersley may have been able to give his perspective on his time in the League as a young man from a relatively middle class family. In the event, neither of these elites felt they could spare the time to contribute. Betty Boothroyd did not feel she could add to what she had already said in her autobiography though her views on the Labour Party's attitude towards its youth would have been welcome. Nevertheless, the author was encouraged by her best wishes for the success of the PhD. Lord (Kenneth) Morgan did not feel his memory was lucid enough but very helpfully suggested Lord (Frank) Judd who, with his sister Nan, were members of the Sutton and Cheam League of Youth. Baroness (Shirley) Williams also sent a positive and useful response.

The author experienced few of the problems cited by Richards when interviewing 'elites'. It was unlikely that the interviewee would, 'have the problem of confusing what they can actually remember of events, with what they have later read on the same subject',⁷ as very little has been written about the League of Youth since its demise. Richards also suggests that elites 'may also adjust their interpretation of an event in order to avoid being seen in a poor light or, in some cases, they may have an axe to grind'. In none of the cases did the author detect that the subjects felt constrained by their position. He goes on to advise that elite interviewing 'is probably more productive in the latter stages of [the] work'. Having been granted a half-hour interview with Clive Soley, the author adopted a semi-structured approach, using an aide memoir,⁸ though accepts that an interview conducted later in the study may have resulted in a more detailed discussion.

The Internet provided a valuable source of contacts, especially for the more recent period. Matthew Storey, the creator of the unofficial Young Labour website, Kate Parish, coordinator of the Youth Parliament in the United Kingdom, Bob Labi, an activist in the Young Socialists and Claire Ward, MP for Watford, all undertook interviews by email in support of the study. Several Young Labour members were contacted but failed to return the communication.

The author is aware of the issue of age-related memory and the potential vulnerability of elderly subjects. Where events, dates and personalities were discussed, they could, in most cases be verified by written records in the party

archives. In addition, as the experiences of League of Youth members were similar, the author found that each interview, while adding further evidence to the account also served to confirm the details given by the previous subject. In most cases, well-regarded third parties had already established trust with the subjects, though the author felt it appropriate to place the interviews on a more formal footing. Subjects were therefore given a consent form, produced by the author, which detailed the research establishment, the names of the supervisors, the names and addresses of the author and the subject, the date the interview took place and a signed agreement that the information given could be used in the thesis. In the case of Jimmy Allan, the oldest of the subjects, at ninety years of age, the author made it known to the supervisors that an interview was taking place and was also given the opportunity to make herself known to family members and friends at an open day held for the subject's ninetieth birthday. Jimmy Allan was also invited to view the university's archive which provided a further opportunity for questions. In some cases, the request to use information given was made in emails or letters.

As the larger part of the thesis concentrates on the Labour League of Youth, the greater proportion of those interviewed come from that period. Five interviewees relate to the Young Socialists, Young Labour and Labour Students, being directly involved or qualified to comment on the period. A list of the interviewees is included in the bibliography.

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² King. 1994 pp 16-17, in Robson, 2001. *Real World Research*, 2nd edition. Oxford, Blackwell. p 271

³ Robson, *Ibid.*, pp 269-270

⁴ Dargie, 1998, 'Observation in Political Research: A Qualitative Approach'. *Politics*, vol 18, no.1, pp 65-71.

⁵ Richards, 1996

⁶ Richards, *ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*