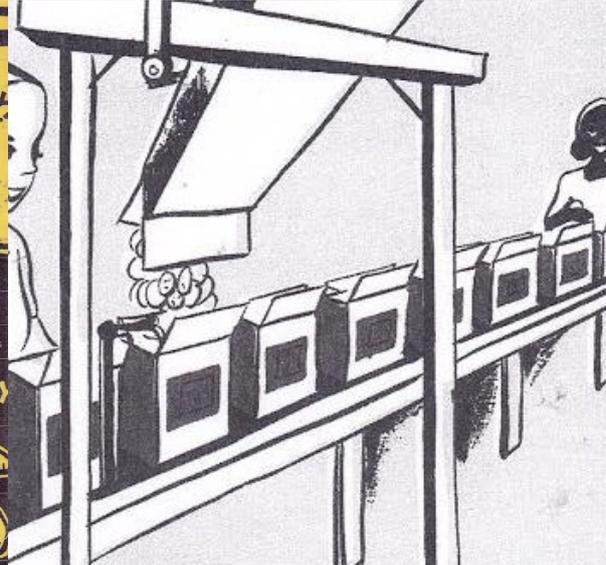


Britain at Work

London project newsletter issue 25 March/April 2017



LET ME TELL YOU

'LET ME TELL YOU the story of a strange thing that is happening in America. I tell you the story in pictures so that even you children who cannot read the honey poison speeches of the destroyers of your schools; so that even you men and women who work in the shops and the factories... and perhaps have no time for the luxury of reading... may read as you run your lathe, as you wash dishes... as you march on the picket line... so that you may know what is happening in America.' L Lerman, 'Winter Soldiers: The Story of a Conspiracy against the Schools' (1941). (continued on page 2)

Pictures left to right (1) 'The Children's Train' by Richard Floethe for 'Palaces on Monday' (1937). (2) Lewitt-Him from 'The Football's Revolt' (1939) about a football that goes on strike by refusing to come down from the sky (both published in the UK). (3) Lydia Gibson from the story 'Why?' (1925) about a boy who keeps asking why injustice exists in the world. (4) Jeanne Bendick from 'The Lollipop Factory and Lots of Others' by Mary Elting (1946).

The inter-war years in Britain and the United States witnessed a huge surge in working-class education and creativity. In Britain, the development of the IWCE/Plebs through the National Labour College movement brought thousands of young workers into contact with socialist economic doctrines, political ideas and cultural frameworks including the syndicalist activities of the International Workers of the World (IWW) in the United States. This is reflected in the extract from an autobiographical account of Eddie Collins who was a miner at Denaby Main, a pit near Doncaster which developed a long tradition of militancy. In these decades, this movement was also being reflected in writing for children as the Popular Front in Britain and the United States sanctioned a turn towards avant-garde techniques in literature for children, particularly to be found in the illustrations in children's books. Some American writers saw themselves as 'progressives', believing that the Russian Revolution held the key to fulfilling 'the

"I know what this Bolshevism means, Bill-it means us" (The Liberator, July 1919).

Looking Back at the Russian Revolution in 2017: Do you remember reading EH Carr's 'History of the Russian Revolution' or Isaac Deutscher's biography of Trotsky? Did you go to endless meetings on the Bolsheviks? Were you a 'state cap' or a 'bureaucratic collectivist'? Whether you did any of these things or none, you will have been influenced by the Russian Revolution and its outcomes. Why not let us know your own personal experiences?

Write to dave@britainatworklondon.com or 15 Wellington Road, Norwich, NR2 3HT (250 words max). We will put them in the newsletter and on our website.

History Acts radical history forum

History Acts is a radical history forum, affiliated to the Raphael Samuel History Centre, and based at the University of London, bringing together radical and left-wing historians with contemporary activists. We want to find new ways to engage as academics with contemporary struggles, to learn from activists, and to see how we can use what expertise and institutional resources we have to provide active solidarity.

In the academic year 2016/17, we have organised a series of workshops connecting campaigners on a range of issues with historians working on relevant topics. The sessions are led by activists, who open the workshop with a short talk about their or their organisation's work. Historians are then invited to respond, before opening it up to group discussion.

Workshops are held on the third Tuesday of every month during term-time, at Birkbeck, University of London. So far we have discussed the Labour Party

promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' and, even when disillusioned with the Soviet Union, were not deflected from the goal 'of trying to make life better, fairer, more equitable, more decent, more honest for everyone.' Progressives turned to children's literature and asked 'How do we educate our children so that they will be anti-fascist, and not fascist?' This movement continued into the 50s, then faced with the onslaught of the Cold War, and included the work of the Children's Music Center in Los Angeles (1953), with the slogan 'Children Need Music to Grow'. The Center carried a catalogue on Black History and Spanish Americans and records and books by Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Langston Hughes, Mary Elting and Pete Seeger.

Two useful books: Julia Mickenberg, 'Learning from the Left' (2006) and Kimberley Reynolds 'Left Out: The Forgotten Tradition of Radical Publishing for Children in Britain 1910-1949' (2016).



and Momentum, gender violence, forming new trade unions, and migration. Our next session, on Tuesday March 21, will discuss housing, with activists from the Autonomous Nation of Anarchist Libertarians (who are currently organising homeless shelters in squatted properties in Belgravia), Digs (a private renters' organisation), and Focus E15 (East London housing activists). Jerry White is confirmed as a responding historian.

All sessions are free, and open to any historian, history student, or member of the public interested in how history can work for social and political change. We have had academics and activists travel from around the country to attend, both as speakers and audience members. In the future we are looking to expand History Acts both geographically (by helping to seed groups outside of London), and by taking on larger projects with concrete activist outcomes. Find out more at www.historyacts.org and on Twitter @HistoryActs. Steffan Blayney & Guy Beckett

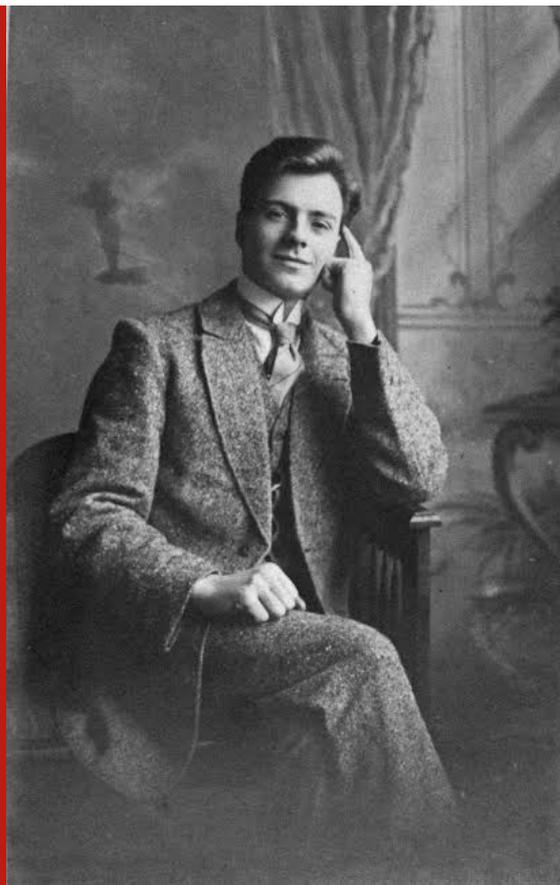
Eddie Collins coal miner

An extract from the notes of Eddie Collins who was a miner in Denaby Main, a pit near Doncaster (with thanks to Robin Stocks and Doncaster Archive)

When I was 17 or 18 my father had me going to evening classes in mining, learning mining science and mathematics. Anyway, it was mining science I was mostly interested in. When I sat my examination I passed with distinction in mining science but failed miserably in mathematics. The mining science classes proved useful on pit inspections. The other workmen's inspectors used to ask me if I would test for gas in the stall or heading. I was the one that used to do the testing for gas. I started WEA classes at Denaby after a man—I'm trying to remember his name—came and spoke to us at the Large Hall, and they decided to have a WEA class then. Arnold Freeman became the class lecturer but the man who came first, I'm nearly sure, became somebody high up down in the London area. He might have become the Archbishop of Canterbury or something, I can't just remember the name now. There were scores of us there in the meeting, and above a dozen joined the class. I was the youngest lad to join. I also went to Bangor University in 1914, for 3 weeks, and I came across the South Wales Revolutionary Socialists. It was them that caused me to start to think differently. I went back to Bangor the following year, in 1915, but I could only have one week there because the war was on.

Later on I invited various people to come and speak at Denaby, Tom Mann and Harry Pollitt, just after the first world war. You see, I was chairman of the Minority Movement in Yorkshire, and we had meetings every month. There weren't many of us. I arranged for Tom Mann to come, and took the chair for him at Denaby and at Wombwell. The meetings in Denaby were on the Craggs, in the open air. We had AJ Cook, Secretary of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, and he came to the Denaby branch meeting afterwards. Noah Ablett came, but he only stayed for the meeting. I think he spoke against The Drum, the Big Drum, the Denaby Main Hotel. I was chairman, of course. I can't remember whether there were any other members of Denaby branch who were members of the Minority Movement. I think there were one or two, but I can't remember their names.

The National Labour College movement was going, and I became a member, in fact I was the secretary in Denaby of the Labour College class. We had quite a number coming along, and I was secretary for it whilst it lasted. We had lectures for between 2 and 3 years, and then it faded away. You see, I was a member of the Socialist Labour Party then and a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Labour College, that was the educational side, well, I felt that that was more linked up with the Socialist Labour Party and the Industrial Workers of the World. More linked up



than, say, the WEA. We had Wally Hannington of the Unemployed Workers over to speak once; I think he was one of the main leaders of the Unemployed Movement.

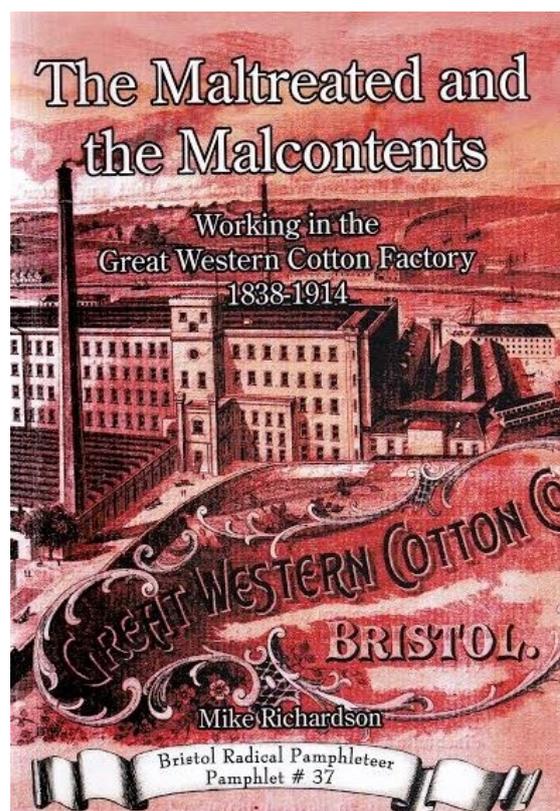
I was a founder member of the Communist Party because I was in the Socialist Labour Party when it amalgamated, but I left the Communist Party after about six or seven months after it had been formed. My wife was having our second boy and she was having a bad time, and I didn't like to leave her to go to a meeting, and I felt, if I can't attend the meetings I don't want to be a member. I must be at each meeting when it was held, you know. So I resigned from the Communist Party but I told them that they'd no need to worry: that they could always rely on me supporting anything that was in the workers' interest. I joined the Labour Party in 1922 and the Minority Movement when it was formed, and I was expelled from the Labour Party in 1929 for refusing to leave the Miners' Minority Movement.

After 1929 I usually had a Labour man put up against me in urban district and county council elections. A feller called Saxton, the Labour Party put him up against me, but he was defeated easy. I was a representative of the North Ward in Denaby on the Conisbrough Urban District Council for 29 years, from 1926 to 1955, then I left the district, you see, and went to Barnsley. When I came back they wanted me to stand again, but I was between 66 and 67 years old and I said, 'No, I think I'm too old to run.'

The Maltreated and the Malcontents

Most recent 'popular' accounts of the Industrial Revolution (I'm thinking here of Jeremy Paxman's TV series) touch on the terrible conditions in the mills and factories, wring their hands and swiftly move on to the great 'achievements'. Mike Richardson's book on working conditions in the Great Western Cotton Factory in Bristol doesn't do that. Instead, he highlights in detail the servitude that workers endured, their resistance to it and the liberal ideology that was used to justify this wage slavery. The factory is described through over 70 years from 1838 to 1914. In 1835, the British cotton industry as a whole employed over 258,000 workers with the Bristol factory employing nearly a thousand by 1840. Right from the start, labour relations were fractured as workers were sacked after complaints over being stopped pay for 'losing half a minute' or being charged for broken panes of glass. The Factory Act was regularly breached and cotton operatives became involved in Chartism. So, right from the start, the Great Western factory workers were connected to local communities and politics outside the workplace.

As unions did not emerge at the factory until the 1880s, the workers simply had to take whatever action they could to resist, and there was plenty of it. Sports Direct might have copied the works' manager here in devising a system to search women and girls leaving the factory and delaying them by up to half an hour in 1852. The result was a situation that was described as 'riotous in the extreme' as the manager tried to force the women to go through a small wicket gate. Women were beaten and drenched with fire hoses. By the 1860s, laissez-faire, free-labour ideology was supplanting the older paternalistic conceptions of employment in Britain, and the factory was quick to impose a wage cut affecting several hundred operatives including carders, winders, mule spinners, throstle spinners and weavers. A strike ensued with picket line women 'flourishing cabbage stalks and pieces of wood' at the scabs. The class war raged throughout the next decades as workers died or were injured in preventable accidents and the employer used wage cuts and lay-offs but the new factor was the rise of national trade unions and the local presence of political groups like the Bristol Socialist Society and the Bristol Labour League. The operatives had established a militant and unofficial tradition of industrial action which did not easily fit into the mould of 'official' trade unionism. Nevertheless, Bristol Trades Council, the Gas Workers' Union and the National Federation of Women Workers all supported the workers in the early years of the 20th century in the aftermath of another strike in 1889.



The history of this factory shows us in graphic detail how cotton operatives, especially women weavers, fought pay cuts, bullying and poor working conditions. As Mike points out in his conclusion: 'it cannot be said that the working conditions in the textile industry had changed significantly for the better' by the beginning of the 20th century. At the same time, these workers had built a tradition of militant industrial action, largely unofficial trade unionism and would turn towards a new political consciousness in the 1920s after the closure of the factory in 1923. 'The Maltreated and the Malcontents' by Mike Richardson. Bristol Radical Pamphleteer #37, 2016. www.brh.org.uk

Britain at Work London Group secretary Dave Welsh
chairman John O'Mahony treasurer Jan Pollock
outreach/IT Rima Joebear newsletter editor Tom Vague
contact dave@britainatworklondon.com
Please visit www.britainatworklondon.com featuring an
interview with John McDonnell, information about our
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