ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Ernest Bevin

Peter Weiler

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First published in 1993, this book presents a biography of a central figure in the development of both the labour movement and British politics in the first half of the twentieth century. This highly accessible account of Bevin's life and career was the first to make use of documents pertaining to his activities during the Second World War and bring together numerous secondary studies to posit an alternative interpretation. The book is split into chronological sections dealing with his early years, his time a trade union leader from 1911 to 1929, the beginnings of his involvement in the labour party during 1929-1939, and his time in office as Minister of Labour and then Foreign Secretary.

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To Kathleen, Sarah and Emma with love

Preface

To anyone familiar with the history of the British labour movement in this century, Ernest Bevin needs no introduction. Shortly after the First World War, he founded the Transport and General Workers' Union, which was long the largest trade union in Britain. He was, with Trades Union Congress General Secretary Walter Citrine, largely responsible for the direction that the British trade union movement took after the General Strike of 1926. After the financial crisis of 1931, he played a significant role in the reshaping of the Labour Party's policy that became the basis of the programme enacted by the 1945 Labour government. In 1940, aged fifty-nine, he began a new career, overseeing the wartime government's labour policies and in the process contributing to the creation of the postwar welfare state. After the war, in what to many contemporary observers seemed the most surprising move of his long career, Bevin served as Foreign Secretary in the 1945 Labour government, helping to shape the international order that prevailed for the next forty years. In short, Bevin's career was centrally important to the development of both the British labour movement and British politics in the first half of the twentieth century.

A biography necessarily imposes order on the complexity that is any individual's life. In this instance, while trying to do justice to the multifaceted nature of Bevin's career, I have employed two related concepts, labourism and corporatism, used by many other historians to explain the shape taken by the British labour movement. When Bevin began his career in the labour movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, the direction that movement would take was not fixed. Although predominately moderate in outlook, the movement contained tensions between a visionary desire to transform capitalist society and a need to make an accommodation with that society for the sake of immediate economic gains. The drive towards accommodation, which nevertheless went along with a strong sense

of class consciousness and class solidarity, has been called labourism. John Saville has defined it as 'a theory and practice which [accepts] the possibility of social change within the existing framework of society ... [and emphasises] the unity of Capital and Labour'.[1]

These contradictory impulses toward transformation and accommodation also marked the life of Ernest Bevin, particularly his early career. Bevin was deeply conscious of his own subservient position within British society and filled with a corresponding anger at its unfairness. This anger led him at times to a vision of a 'socialist commonwealth' but more often towards a desire for acceptance by society. Bevin's dominant concerns derived from his work as a trade union leader to protect the living standards of his followers and secure recognition of the trade union movement. To accomplish these goals, he became a proponent of a particular labourist strategy that has come to be called corporatism, the arrangement in which trade union leaders explicitly accept the limits of the capitalist economy and work to secure a partnership with capital and the state, trading labour peace for recognition and influence. After the General Strike of 1926, Bevin played a crucial role in turning the labour movement toward a corporatist path and away from direct action, the use of organised working-class power to secure political changes, and the syndicalist ideal of direct workplace democracy.

Since Alan Bullock has written a three-volume biography of Bevin, why write another one? One reason is that Bullock's biography is so massive that only specialists read it. There are no other scholarly biographies of Bevin, only journalistic accounts. Moreover, although Bullock's impressive biography remains definitive as a narrative, it is written very much from Bevin's point of view, since Bullock shared the labourist and corporatist ideals of his subject. Bullock's stance is that of a Labour loyalist from a generation for whom Bevin was a hero.

A second reason is that documents about Bevin's life are now available, particularly for the Second World War, which were still closed when Bullock was writing. In addition, numerous new secondary studies about the period during which Bevin lived have provided additional data for most of the key moments in his career. All of this new information makes possible alternative interpretations of Bevin's life and work. For the sake of brevity, however, I have neither cited all the scholars whose work I have used nor

indicated how I have entered into a number of historical debates about the British labour movement and British political developments. Specialists will recognise both my intellectual debts and the historiographical arguments; for others, it would be an unnecessary distraction.

This is a biography of Bevin's public life. Like most members of the working class, Bevin left no diaries and few personal letters; in fact, we know very little about his early years. Although I wish I had been able to describe the interaction of Bevin's inner emotional concerns and desires and his public life, I have not been able to do so. I do make judgements here and there about Bevin's personality, but by and large I have had no choice but to focus on the public man.

For analytic purposes I have introduced an artificial distinction into Bevin's life. Chapter 2, which discusses the period from 1911 to 1929, focuses on Bevin as a trade union leader, while Chapter 3, which discusses the period from 1929 to 1939, focuses more on Bevin as a social democrat. I found that this division made it easier to show the coherence of Bevin's trade union and political views. It also made sense since Bevin took an active role in Labour Party affairs only after 1929. However, readers should bear in mind that although Bevin was always first and foremost a trade unionist, he was also always a democratic socialist and supporter of Labour. His political and trade union concerns were never totally distinct.

I am very grateful to the friends and colleagues who helped me with this biography. I had an informative discussion about Bevin with Regan Scott, who gave me access to Transport and General Workers' Union records. Richard and Rachel Boulton, Jennifer Davis, John Field and Virginia Hjelmaa provided me with hospitality, helping to make my research trips to England both easy and pleasant. At Warwick University's Modern Records Centre, Alistair Tough was unfailingly patient and helpful. Rodney Lowe pointed me to some interesting Ministry of Labour files. Dick Lourie provided much sound editorial advice. Jon Schneer commented helpfully on Chapter 2. Carolyn Eisenberg, Bob Hannigan and Melvyn Leffler did the same for Chapter 5. Nina Fishman made a number of useful suggestions on the first four chapters. Paul Breines, Jim Cronin, Denis MacShane, John Saville and Deborah Valenze read the entire manuscript in draft. Their perceptive criticisms greatly strengthened

the book. I hope they forgive me for not accepting all of their suggestions. David Howell was a model editor, never impatient and always helpful. Once again, my greatest debt is to my family. My daughters, Sarah and Emma, reminded me about what is really important in life. My wife Kathleen was both my best critic and my strongest support. The dedication only hints at what they mean to me.

Bevin addressing the TUC in 1930

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1 Early years

The entire world noted Ernest Bevin's death in 1951. As the founder and first General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union, he had long been one of the best known trade union leaders in England. In the last decade of his life he had also achieved national fame as Minister of Labour in the wartime Coalition government and world fame as Foreign Secretary in the Labour government of 1945. His ashes were buried in Westminster Abbey. That someone from obscure origins should manage to secure admission to the pantheon of British statesmen, along with Churchill and Pitt, is striking. But although rags to riches stories are unusual, they are not unheard of. What is more interesting to consider is that the socialist Bevin was at the end celebrated as 'mirroring the soul of the English people', as one of his biographers commented, or reflecting 'characteristically British qualities – courage, frankness, shrewdness, and practicality', as *The Times* put it in his obituary.[1] Thus there are two stories to relate here in discussing Ernest Bevin's life. One is about a remarkable man who rose from humble circumstances to great power. The other is about how Bevin's life came to be understood as exemplifying the changes undergone by British society in the first half of this century.

Born in the Somerset village of Winsford on 7 March 1881, Ernest Bevin was the youngest of seven children. His mother, Diana Mercy Tidboald, had married an agricultural labourer, William Bevin, in 1864, when she was twenty-three years old, and moved with him in the early 1870s to South Wales. They were part of a general migration from the economically depressed English countryside that characterised the last decades of the nineteenth century. In 1877, however, Mercy Bevin returned alone to the village, accompanied only by her six children. Thereafter, she listed herself as a widow. Ernest was illegitimate and never found out who his father was, his mother having left the man's name off the parish register.

All we know is that he must have been a big man, since Ernest, though short, was barrel chested, with a massive head and hands so large that they were later described as looking like 'a bunch of bananas'.[2]

Doing what work was available for a single woman in the village, Mercy Bevin just managed to support Ernest and the other children still at home. She served as a midwife, did domestic work both at the village inn, the Royal Oak, and for those of her neighbours who could afford to hire her, and occasionally supplemented her income with relief from the parish. There is no record of what Ernest's life was like in these years, except that it was marked by poverty and insecurity. 'I'm sure', one village contemporary recalled, 'there's no one in this wide world was ever poorer than he and his mother'.[3]

Nine miles from the nearest railway line, Winsford was relatively isolated from the rest of England. Ernest's main contact with the larger world came from his attendance at the village school, although his Methodist mother may not have been pleased that it was run by the Church of England. Independently minded, she passed on her religious nonconformity to her son, whom she sent from an early age to Methodist Sunday school. Ernest was only eight years old when she died of cancer in 1889 at the age of forty-eight.

In spite of her own difficulties, Mercy Bevin seems to have provided an emotionally supportive home for her youngest son, laying the basis for the self-confidence that later made it possible for him to work on equal terms with men who had been bred to command people of his station in life. Her ability to live on her own points to a woman of strong character, as does perhaps her reputation for keeping a 'spotlessly clean' house.[4] It may be the case that Bevin's own sense of order – 'You must have a thing tidy', he was fond of saying – derived from these years. He always kept a picture of his mother on his desk.

After his mother died, the young Ernest moved to Devon where he was taken in by his twenty-five-year-old half-sister Mary and her husband, George Pope, who worked on the railway. For the next three years, he continued his schooling, one year more than required by law. Then, like any other boy of his social class, Bevin had to go to work, in his case for a neighbouring farmer who paid him sixpence a week plus room and board for doing a variety of odd jobs: clearing stones, cutting up turnips for cattle food, mending

fences, etc. The next year he went to work for more money for another farmer, who turned out to be less congenial. Bevin soon quarrelled with him – there are varying accounts in village lore – and left to live in Bristol with his eldest half-brother Jack. Ernest was thirteen years old.

Having to leave school at the age of eleven was for him a source of both bitterness and regret. 'I know the joy that knowledge can bring', he later said. 'When I realise what a higher conception of life knowledge means if rightly used, I hate to think that the Church, the State, the Master Class, the Landlord Class are not content with taking from us the fruits of our toil, but that they must withhold knowledge from us and our forefathers. I hate them for that more than for anything else.'[5]

It seems reasonable to speculate – and since Bevin did not like to discuss these years that is all we can do – that the absence of a father, the early death of his mother and the various moves he made afterwards had a profound influence on him. All we can say is that Bevin made use of these harsh circumstances to build up his own self-confidence. This faith in his own ability grew eventually into a tremendous egotism, often articulated as anger at the traditional wielders of power for not acknowledging his abilities or those of other workers. He later said that the deprivation and imposed deference with which he was raised – 'I had to work at ten years of age . . . and was taught to bow to the squire and touch my hat to the parson' – produced an 'intense hatred' in him that led him to 'direct [his] mind to a policy to give to [his] class a power to control their own destiny and labour'.[6] Perhaps we can also say that his ability to endure, to fight back against life's blows and remain confident of his own ability exacted a price – in the form of a somewhat solitary nature, an increasingly work-driven personality, and a harshness to those who disagreed with him.[7] Although Bevin could be generous to those who worked for him, he was not a kind or easygoing man.

Besides Jack, another of Ernest's half-brothers, Albert, also lived in Bristol, training to be a pastrycook. Albert secured Ernest a job in the same bakehouse, where he was paid 6 shillings plus meals for working at odd jobs for seventy-two hours a week. Ernest soon tired of this work and drifted into a series of other jobs over the next few years, working for the longest period of time for the tramway company. He made no attempt that we know of to acquire

any specific skill or to apprentice himself to a skilled trade. But in 1900 he settled down as a mineral water delivery man, a job that must have provided him some satisfaction since he maintained it for all but one year until 1911. The job allowed him to work outdoors at his own pace, and although the hours were long, the pay was relatively good, 18 shillings a week plus a commission to start. Through extra work, he was able to build up his income to almost £2 per week.

The most significant developments in Bevin's life during these years came not at work but in his growing political concerns and in his personal life. In these years he married Florence Townley, the daughter of a Bristol wine taster, a change that may have made him a shade less serious. Henceforth, he attended music hall performances on Saturday night, rather than a sermon or political lecture. His marriage seems to have been a perfectly conventional one. Florence Bevin stayed at home, tending the house, of which she was quite proud, and their only child, Queenie, who was born in 1914; she was not active in any of her husband's political or trade union causes. His brothers, whom one might have expected to remain of some importance in his life, 'gradually lost touch with him'.[8]

Throughout this period, Bevin maintained his attachment to the nonconformist religion first instilled in him by his mother. Eventually, he joined the Manor Hall Baptist Church, becoming baptised by full immersion in January 1902. He remained an active member of the church until 1905, distributing tracts and often speaking at its open air meetings. As with so many in his generation of labour leaders, chapel-going clearly exerted a formative influence. In the dominant view, a natural hierarchy ran from God through the local squire or business owner to the vicar and down to the lowly labourer. In place of this, nonconformity taught the equal dignity of all men, and the worthiness of the humble. Although in many ways quite conservative politically, stressing an individual moral response to social problems and opposing any form of political radicalism, it did provide a basis of self-respect for workers. In the chapel, they could control their own spiritual lives, independent of traditional leaders, and arrive at their own understanding of life's travails. For some, too, and certainly for Bevin, the chapel provided an initial forum, a place where they could learn to speak in public and to respond to the often unspoken needs of their audience.

Gradually, however, and in ways that we do not know in any detail, Bevin came to find nonconformity inadequate, particularly as a response to the injustice that characterised a society in which a third of the working class, even measured by the most strict standard, lived in poverty; where unemployment was a constant fear; and where 10 per cent of the population owned virtually all wealth in the country. One source of this expansion of his horizon was his own self-education. Throughout these years, Bevin attended different adult schools and discussion classes, such as those conducted by the then famous pacifist minister James Moffatt Logan. He also read what he could on his own: Jack London's *People of the Abyss*, Leo Chiozza Money's *Riches and Poverty* (a critique of the maldistribution of wealth in Edwardian England) and Bryce's *English Constitution*. But we do not know what else Bevin read or how exactly he came to find nonconformity inadequate. What we do know is that he began to attend meetings of the Bristol Socialist Society during these years and eventually joined it, abandoning at the same time his membership in the chapel, though not his religious faith.

The Bristol Socialist Society, which was inspired by a variety of socialist thinkers, including William Morris and Edward Carpenter, was an eclectic affair, providing a home, according to its historian, for 'all socialists, by whatever path they had arrived, Marxist, Fabian, Christian, Secularist'.[9] By the time Bevin joined, it had affiliated to the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the most explicitly Marxist of the small socialist societies that had grown up in Britain in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Given his later views, Bevin's membership in the SDF had a number of ironies. The SDF distrusted trade unions as hopelessly compromised and unlikely to form the basis of a socialist revolution that it believed could be achieved only through political action. Although in practice the SDF worked with some success within the existing political system, and had a number of trade unionist members, it tended to preach a purist socialism that had no place for the new, still non-socialist Labour Party. Eventually its principal heir, the British Socialist Party, merged into the Communist Party. The mature Bevin completely disagreed with the SDF's idea of socialism and the best way to attain it. But the young Bevin, coming to socialism out of a nonconformist religious background, seems to have been attracted

by the idea of the 'co-operative commonwealth', the secular equivalent of the spiritual transformation promised by his nonconformist religion. The card inviting membership in the Society's Sunday school stated: 'Socialism is a religion teaching Morality and the Brotherhood of Man as taught by Christ and others. Its central principle (its God) is Love – Love of Humanity.' In his own Preface to the society's history, Bevin would later write that 'the outstanding feature [of the society's history] is not only of the work, but the record of those who found expression for their faith in the Socialist Movement'.[10]

Bevin's membership in the Bristol Socialist Society led him to his first public political activity. Through the initiative of the Society, a Bristol Right-to-Work Committee was formed in 1908 with Bevin as secretary. Responding to the worst unemployment of the entire decade, the Committee passed a resolution, introduced by Bevin, condemning the 'inaction of the Government with regard to the Unemployed', and demanding 'immediate legislation for the purpose of settling the question on national lines, which shall have justice as a basis, and not inadequate almsgiving'.[11] In part, the Committee wanted the government to utilise the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905 that had created local distress committees with the power to provide work to the unemployed at wages below the existing market rate. But the Committee also made the broader demand that the government should recognise a right to work, a notion strongly supported by the young Labour Party in Parliament.

Bevin played an active role in the campaign of the Bristol Right-to-Work Committee, leading deputations, organising demonstrations and speaking in public. In his most memorable action, Bevin, as part of a drive to enlist the support of local clergy, organised a demonstration of the unemployed who marched into Bristol cathedral one Sunday in November 1908 to stand as silent examples of the consequences of unemployment. For Bevin, this whole campaign was an education. It made him familiar with methods of organising and strengthened his belief in the need for 'a complete social and economic revolution . . . to solve the problem [of capitalism]', as he told the annual meeting of the Bristol Committee in December 1908. 'We must feed the people in order that men may be strong enough physically and mentally to carry out that revolution which will come at no distant date.'[12] One of Bevin's most firmly held

views – that the working class by virtue of its contribution to society had a right to a minimum standard of living – clearly arose out of these struggles. 'It was the right to live they wanted', he told the Committee. 'They had no right to starve the industrial army of the country because the capitalists had not enough work for them to do, any more than they had the right to starve the Army or Navy because there was no war at any particular time.'[13]

When the authorities failed to respond to these demands, Bevin ran for city council in 1909 as a socialist. He told the electors: 'Think! last winter in Bristol there were 5,000 heads of families out of work, 20,000 human beings suffering want and chaos, misery and degradation brought upon us by the private ownership of the means of life. I claim that Socialism, which is the common ownership of those means, is the ONLY SOLUTION OF SUCH EVILS.'[14] His slogan, 'Vote for Bevin – Down with poverty and slums', elicited some support but not enough to defeat the better financed Liberal candidate. His defeat and the consequent campaign of local businessmen to have him fired by boycotting the mineral water he delivered produced a crisis in his life. He briefly contemplated becoming a missionary, an indication of the continued connection in his mind between his religious and political interests. But his employer stood by him, and his thoughts of retreating to the nonconformist ministry were displaced by other concerns. In 1910 he became involved in a Bristol dockers' strike through which he found the path to his life's work.

2 Trade union leader

Because of his public sympathies for the unemployed and his experience as an organiser, Bevin was asked in June 1910 to co-ordinate relief efforts for striking Avonmouth dockers. Shortly thereafter Harry Orbell, a leader of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside, and General Labourers' Union, asked him to organise the carters as a branch of the Dockers' Union, as it was known. In August 1910, Bevin, who still earned his living by delivering mineral water, called a meeting at which the Bristol carmen's branch of the Dockers' Union was formally established. Within a year, the branch had achieved remarkable success: over two thousand members, recognition from the employers, and an agreement that gave carters 26 shillings for a 67-hour week. Clearly, Bevin had flair as an organiser. Proud of his accomplishment, he kept his framed membership certificate, dated 27 August 1910, over his mantelpiece for the rest of his life.

Apprenticeship

In 1911, Bevin, now thirty, gave up his job delivering mineral water to work full-time as a regional organiser for the Dockers' Union at £2 per week. Doubtless he welcomed the chance his new job afforded him to expand his own horizons as well as to continue the work he had started three years earlier on behalf of the unemployed. But his job also provided the same spiritual satisfaction that he had found first in nonconformist religion and later in socialism, the vision of a transformed world. Bevin would always regard the trade union movement as something more than a practical instrument to improve workers' conditions.

> If I thought that the trade union movement existed [to get wages only], I would go out of it [he said in 1920]. I am in it because I believe, with

> its great collective force and the fundamental principles on which it is based, it is destined to replace the old order and bring in a new, not merely political democracy, but economic democracy – a Promised Land of which we have already gained the Pisgah . . . A new life of liberty and love will take the place of the master-class oppression; men and women will walk in a newer and purer world.[1]

Bevin's outlook as a trade unionist was deeply influenced by his coming into the movement just as it was taking the shape it would retain for the next half century. In the mid nineteenth century, only a small part of the British working class had been organised into trade unions, mainly in those trades that required a craft skill – the engineers, the tailors, the stonemasons and so forth. These 'old' unions sought to restrict entry to their trade as a way of maintaining their bargaining position and ensuring that their wages and working conditions remained secure. Because they were able to function with some success, they tended to support certain aspects of Victorian capitalism. In particular, they rejected any state intervention in the economy, even on behalf of the working class, and urged co-operation with employers.

This situation began to change dramatically in the early 1870s. Responding to changes in industry itself – the increased use of machines and more concentrated forms of ownership – the trade union movement between 1870 and 1914 grew to exceed four million members; by 1920 it had reached over eight million, a majority of the adult male working class. This growth, however, was neither even nor smooth. Much of it occurred in three periods – 1871–73, 1888–92, 1910–14 – during each of which there was an explosion of working-class militancy. In particular, the emergence in 1889 of the 'new unionism', as it was known, marked what Eric Hobsbawm has called a 'qualitative change in the British labour movement and its industrial relations'.[2] In part, what was 'new' was the new unionism's attempt to organise workers like the dockers who had never been organised before. And although most growth in this period actually took place in the older unions, that was because they now extended their membership to include unskilled workers. Henceforth, trade unions tended to become national rather than regional, and more general in organisation, no longer restricted to a particular craft or trade. Some, moreover, were now led by socialists who wanted to use the state to aid their cause and who

thought about organising not just a craft but the working class in general.

Bevin found his vocation just as this new unionist impulse surged through the trade union world again in 1910–14, a period highlighted by a series of massive strikes and the establishment and expansion of general unions. Bevin's optimistic sense over the next decade that trade unionism was an invincible force apparently derived from this expansive moment. Certainly, his view of trade unionism was a new unionist one, regarding almost all workers as potential recruits to his union. 'I went into a conference once', he later said, 'and an employer said to me: "You are a docker; what are you doing in our trade?" I said: "In one town I organise the midwives, and in another the gravediggers, and everything between is the Transport Workers."'[3] As an organiser for the Dockers' Union, Bevin recruited not only dockers and related trades – coal and grain porters, flour millers, bargemen, etc. – but also other trades. The dockers particularly relied on the Welsh tinplate workers, who, because they enjoyed relatively stable employment and higher wages, increased the size and financial resources of the entire union, providing much-needed support for the more vulnerable and erratically employed dockers.

Like a number of other socialist leaders of new unions, Bevin tended at this point to see the relationship between employers and workers as fundamentally antagonistic and to speak in terms of class conflict: 'The more wealth there is, the more bitter is the struggle of our class', he said. Or again: 'There is only one language the present governing class understand; there is only one method of reasoning they will bow to. It is only power they will yield to, and that is the power of organised labour in its economic capacity.'[4] In part, his socialism led him to see the particular struggles of the dockers or other groups that he organised as part of a wider struggle against a capitalist ruling class. But this view also grew out of his own experience with employers in these years. As he put it some years later, employers 'will beat us until we are too strong for them to beat us any longer'.[5] Many employers were willing to accept trade unions, but only on their own terms. In particular, they refused to accept the closed shop, the key to union power for the dockers, for without it and the job preference it brought, men had little reason to remain in the union. 'Take any dock in the country',