



Routledge Studies in Modern British History

THE INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY, 1914–1939

**THE POLITICAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF A
SOCIALIST PARTY**

Keith Laybourn



The Independent Labour Party, 1914–1939

Historians of political history are fascinated by the rise and fall of political parties and, for twentieth-century Britain, most obviously the rise of the Labour Party and the decline of the Liberal Party. What is often overlooked in this political development is the work of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which was a formative influence in the growth of the political Labour movement and its leaders in the late nineteenth century and the early to mid-twentieth century. The ILP supplied the Labour Party with some of its leading political figures, such as Ramsay MacDonald, and moved the Labour Party along the road of parliamentary socialism. However, divided over the First World War and challenged by the Labour Party becoming socialist in 1918, it had to face the fact that it was no longer the major parliamentary socialist party in Britain.

Although it recovered after the First World War, rising to between 37,000 and 55,000 members, it came into conflict with the Labour Party and two Labour governments over their gradualist approach to socialism. This eventually led to its disaffiliation from the Labour Party in 1932 and its subsequent fragmentation into pro-Labour, pro-communist and independent groups. Its new revolutionary policy divided its members, as did the Abyssinian crisis, the Spanish Civil War and the Moscow Show Trials. By the end of the 1930s, seeking to re-affiliate to the Labour Party, it had been reduced to 2,000 to 3,000 members, was a sect rather than a party and had earned Hugh Dalton's description that it was the 'ILP flea'.

In the following monograph, Keith Laybourn analyses the dynamic shifts in this history across 25 years. This scholarship will prove foundational for scholars and researchers of modern British history and socialist thought in the twentieth century.

Keith Laybourn is the Diamond Jubilee Professor at the University of Huddersfield within the Division of History, where he has previously been Professor of Modern British History. He is also President of the Society for the Study of Labour History.

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The Independent Labour Party, 1914–1939

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Keith Laybourn

First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-29400-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-23177-8 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

This book is dedicated to the memory of Jack (John) Reynolds (1915–1988), an historian of medieval and local history, and author of a book on Titus Salt, who taught me about the Independent Labour Party when I was a student at the University of Bradford between 1964 and 1967. My early writings on the ILP were jointly authored with Jack.



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Contents

<i>List of tables</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xii
Introduction	1
1 The Independent Labour Party and the Great War, 1914–1918	17
2 Should we stay or should we go? The Independent Labour Party and its new role, 1918–1922	50
3 Clifford Allen, the ‘Red Clydesiders’ and ‘Socialism in Our Time’, 1922–1928	70
4 Conflict with the Labour Party and Labour government, and disaffiliation c. 1928–1932: reasoned debate or emotional suicide?	98
5 ‘The ILP flea’: the rapid demise and factionalism of the Independent Labour Party in the early and mid-1930s	126
6 A mass of contradictions: internationals, communism, the Labour Party and war	148
7 Voices from the ranks making the most of moment and form: a distillation of the essence of the cultural and political life of ILP branches, federations, divisions and their members, 1914–1939	176
Conclusion	204

viii *Contents*

<i>Epilogue</i>	208
<i>Appendices</i>	211
<i>Bibliography</i>	221
<i>Index</i>	232

Tables

2.1	Organising grants to divisions decided in the financial year ending in February of each year, and affiliation fees, 1910–1919	64
3.1	The decline in ILP income and branches, 1926–1929	92
3.2	Excess of ILP expenditures over income, 1926–1929	92
3.3	Decline in affiliation fees, 1927–1929	92
5.1	Divisional branch numbers for the Independent Labour Party at various dates between 1922 and 1935	128
7.1	The number of ILP Members of Parliament from 1918 to 1930, indicating the number of seats in Scotland, Glasgow and Yorkshire	197

Acknowledgements

All academic publications owe a debt of gratitude to the generosity of others, and this book is no exception. My colleagues and ex-colleagues at the University of Huddersfield have been very supportive, and these include Sarah Bastow, Barry Doyle, Rob Ellis, Rebecca Gill, Katherine Lewis, John Shepherd, David Taylor and Paul Ward. I would also like to thank the support of Brendan Evans, and Chris Ellis and Neil Pye, two of my former students. In fact, Neil sedulously digitised some of the ILP branch records for me. I would also like to thank Peter Gurney, Professor of History at the University of Essex, and Joan Allen, recently retired from the University of Newcastle, for their support and help in my study of Labour history over many years.

A considerable amount of the research took place at the British Library of Political Science at the London School of Economics, and I would like to thank the staff of that research archive, and particularly Anna Towlson, for allowing me access to the ILP National, Head Office and branch records they hold. Darren Treadwell, of the Labour History Archive & Study Centre of the People's History Museum, Manchester, was particularly helpful, allowing me to access the records of the communist party, Labour Party, the Middleton Papers, some ILP records, the *Labour Leader* and *New Leader*, ILP pamphlets and ILP Annual Reports. I would also like to thank Lynette Cawthra, of the Working Class Movement Library, Salford, particularly for access to copies of *Labour's Northern Voice* and the ILP Annual Reports and pamphlets. Heidi O'Brien and Barbara Neilson, of the Glasgow City Archives (Mitchell Library), were particularly helpful in providing the records of the ILP Glasgow Federation Minutes (TD 1693/1/1/1), and even more so when I faced unexpected difficulties. Dr. Heidi Egginton and Alison Mitchell, curators at the National Library of Scotland, gave me permission to use various ILP collections in their possession, as did David Smith of the Heritage Quay of the University of Huddersfield. The archives of Manchester Library, Information and Archives Local Studies Department gave me permission to quote from the Manchester Central ILP records. Gina Birdsall and Caroline Brown also provided me permission to quote from the Keighley ILP records in Keighley Local Studies Library. Last but not least, I would like to thank the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationary Office (Norwich) for permission to quote from government records in The

National Archives at Kew, the right to quote being automatic as long as proper attribution is made.

Every effort has been made to avoid any infringement of copyrights, and the publishers' guidelines on secondary printed works have been observed. However, I apologise unreservedly to any copyright holders whose permission has been inadvertently overlooked.

Finally, my dedication, as is clear, is to Jack Reynolds, who first taught me about the Independent Labour Party in his third-year special subject at the University of Bradford between 1966 and 1967. I had the privilege of writing an article and two books on the ILP and Labour politics with Jack Reynolds in the mid-1970s and the 1980s, before his untimely death in Italy in 1988. His help and inspiration are much missed.

Abbreviations

BLPES	British Library of Political and Economic Sciences
BSP	British Socialist Party
BTLC	Bradford Trades and Labour Council
BWL	British Workers' League
CI	Communist International (Comintern or Third International)
CO	Conscientious Objector
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
DORA	Defence of the Realm Act
IBRSU	International Bureau for Revolutionary Socialist Unity
IE	Inner Executive
FAU	Friend's Ambulance Unit
ILP	Independent Labour Party
ISP	Independent Socialist Party
IWUSP	International Working Unions of Socialist Parties (often referred to as the Vienna Union, or International, and the Three and a Half International)
LSE	London School of Economics
LRC	Labour Representation Committee
LSI	Labour and Socialist International
NAC	National Administrative Council (of the ILP)
NEC	National Executive Committee (of the Labour Party)
NCF	No-Conscription Fellowship
NGL	National Guilds' League
NSP	National Socialist Party
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
POUM	Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista
RPC	Revolutionary Policy Committee
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SDP	(German) Social Democratic Party
SL	Socialist League
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
SPGB	Socialist Party of Great Britain
SSIP	Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda

SSP	Scottish Socialist Party
TI	Third International
TNA	The National Archives
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UDC	Union of Democratic Control
WEWNC	War Emergency: Workers' National Committee
WMF	Workers' Municipal Federation
YCI	Young Communist International
YCL	Young Communist League



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Introduction

Historians are fascinated by the rise and fall of political parties and, most obviously for early twentieth-century Britain, the rise of the Labour Party, the decline of the Liberal Party and the amazing political revival of the Conservative Party from its political malaise on the eve of the Great War. However, smaller political parties have often been ignored, or marginalised, in the volatile political landscape of the early twentieth century, none more so than the Independent Labour Party (ILP), a democratic reformist socialist party that exerted a formative influence on the growth of the early Labour Party, supplying many of its leaders, such as James Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, and helping to shape social democracy, socialism and parliamentary socialism in Britain. Both before and during the ILP's decline from the mid-1920s, and its disaffiliation from the Labour Party in 1932, it clearly exerted considerable influence upon the democratic and radical politics of Britain. Indeed, Fenner Brockway, a long-time leading figure within the ILP, suggested in his book, *Inside the Left*, that it was the powerhouse of intellectual thought and debate in the early 1920s, the place where political ideas were fermenting and where politicians needed to be.

The ILP was responsible in those days, The Labour Party was rising to the crest of its strength and wealthy converts buzzed around us, on a course to be adopted as candidates, proffering contributions in the hope of securing rewards after the manner of the old parties.¹

The ILP experienced the highs and lows of political power and influence, enjoying two periods of significant expansion (1893–1914 and 1918–1926) and enduring two periods of serious contraction (1914–1917 and 1927–1975) between its formation as a national body in 1893 and its demise as a political party in 1975. Emerging from a plethora of socialist parties and labour unions, it had been formed as a national organisation at Bradford in January 1893 and subsequently developed under the leadership of James Keir Hardie, James Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden and J. Bruce Glasier, to play a major role in the formation of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) in 1900, the alliance of socialist parties and trade unions which renamed itself as the Labour Party in February 1906. The ILP continued to influence the growth of the Labour Party at both the

2 Introduction

national and local levels, frequently controlling local Labour politics – as it did in Bradford, Leicester, Glasgow, Clydeside and other areas – until the early 1930s. However, during the Great War (1914–1918), the ILP dramatically lost support and influence owing to the public perception that it was a pacifist organisation, though it actually practiced liberty of conscience for all its members who were deeply divided on the Great War, despite the decision of its 1915 ILP Annual Conference to pass a pacifist resolution. It lost about a third of its membership between 1914 and 1916 but recovered much of that lost membership when the Peace Campaign began seriously in 1917. However, it lost its primacy as a socialist parliamentary party when it had its birth right ‘filched’ by the Labour Party, which adopted the famous Clause Four (3d) in its 1918 Constitution, committing it to public ownership of the means of production.² Thereafter the ILP bitterly debated its future – some of its members supporting the Third International (TI) or Communist International (CI) because of the emergence of the Soviet Union, others intending to wind up the Party and move entirely into Labour, whilst yet others wished the ILP to continue in a new form. Indeed, David Howell has written that ‘within the remodelled [Labour] party the ILP was an anomaly. . . . The fundamental anomaly was rather that the ILP was a potentially discordant element because of its thorough and separate structure’.³

Debating its own future, the ILP emerged in 1922 with a new Constitution and under the direction and influence of Clifford Allen – a middle-class Conscientious Objector (CO) of the Great War and a famous internationalist who sought to make the ILP both a think tank and a practical political party – before it was stymied by the formation of the Labour minority governments of 1924 and 1929–1931, whose failures to push forward with socialist policies weakened the ILP faith in the pace of the forward march of Labour, and encouraged it to further develop its guild socialist policies, adopted in its 1922 Constitution. Its new guild view of society saw the individual both as a consumer (making political and economic decisions) and as a producer (determining how those decisions would be achieved) in a harmonious relationship within a new structure of society. The 1922 Constitution, which went beyond a mere commitment to parliamentary socialism, was seen as a vital component in dealing with the main conundrum facing the ILP: how was it to achieve a permanent state of socialism in Britain whilst maintaining its belief in the will of the people operating through a Parliament returned at general elections by a vacillating electorate? It was a question which divided those such as Fred Jowett of Bradford, who believed in parliamentary and municipal democracy, from those such as Dr. Carl Cullen, who was the chairman of the London Poplar branch of the ILP, who favoured some type of democratic centralism through the dictatorship of the proletariat, or some variety of communism.⁴ Control by committees, as exercised in local government, rather than Cabinet government, was famously suggested by Fred Jowett as a means to achieving democratic control over Parliament and governments, his driving ambition being to make parliamentary politics work for the working class, whilst others suggested of guild socialism, or even of a Labour government legislating for socialism. Yet others, as already

suggested, eschewed social democracy and radicalism altogether in favour of democratic centralism.

Eventually, the ILP foundered in the face of internal conflicts, particularly between the 'Clydesiders' (including Jimmy Maxton and John Wheatley), whose focus was more about Glasgow and domestic politics than that of internationalists, such as Clifford Allen and his supporters. This was at a time in the 1920s when some of its prominent early leaders, such as Philip Snowden and Ramsay MacDonald, were drifting away from the ILP and into the Labour Party. The ILP's 'Socialism in Our Time' campaign, a Hobsonian under-consumptionist type of policy, begun in 1926 after several years of discussion, was driven by the gradualism of the 1924 Labour government and was taken over from Allen and his middle-class supporters and revolutionised by Jimmy Maxton and the ILP Clydeside MPs, in the process, becoming a conflicting set of policies aimed at promoting better conditions, child allowances and a 'living wage' for the working classes at the same time as offering the prospect of revolutionary social change. This conflict became more pronounced when Maxton was elected Chairman of the ILP at the Annual Easter Conference held at Whitley Bay in 1926. Was the programme about offering palliatives to tackle poverty or one of stressing the need for slow, but revolutionary, change? The debate over the intention of the Cook-Maxton Pact of 1928 to form a new party containing the ILP and communist members, sparked by the heated debate in the National Administrative Council (NAC) in June 1928 about whether or not the ILP should be an academic propaganda group or a political party, exacerbated tensions within the ILP.⁵ John Paton, general secretary of the ILP from 1927 until 1933, and very much a Maxton supporter, considered resigning over the pact, but since 'there was no conscious breach of Party or personal loyalty', did not do so. And the National Administrative Council of the ILP concurred for, whilst Emanuel Shinwell, Fred Jowett and Patrick (P. J.) Dollan were hostile to the pact, Dollan's motion against it was defeated by seven votes to five.⁶ Nevertheless, the decline in membership speeded up and the ILP disaffiliation from the Labour Party at the end of July 1932, ostensibly over the imposition of the Labour Party's Standing Orders to restrict the freedom of MPs in their votes, speeded up the decline of the ILP.

The loss of about a third of ILP members in the immediate wake of disaffiliation, and a steady decline, thereafter, doomed it to political oblivion as it effectively became a lens for all of the major disputes that dominated the Left in Britain during the 1930s. Many of its members, MPs and councillors remained with the Labour Party after disaffiliation in 1932, whilst some joined other socialist societies or simply left the ILP altogether without further trace. Dollan formed the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), which took a substantial part of the membership of the important Scottish Divisional ILP outside Maxton-dominated parts of Glasgow, and E. F. Wise formed the National Affiliation Committee which joined with G. D. H. Cole's Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda (SSIP) to form the Socialist League. In the mid and late 1930s the ILP's remaining stalwarts were torn into at least a five-way split between the communist party, whose British membership was considerably smaller than that of the ILP in 1932; the London-based

4 *Introduction*

Revolutionary Policy Committee (RPC); the Lancashire-based Unity Group; the Trotskyist Marxist group, largely based in London and led by C. L. R. James; and those wishing to continue membership in the ILP under the leadership of Jimmy Maxton and Fenner Brockway. The last of these groups wished for continued unity to sustain the ILP as an independent and broad-based party defending social democracy, parliamentary in the case of Fred Jowett, but advocating a nebulous form of 'revolutionary socialism' in the 1930s. The Unity Group of members from Lancashire, East Anglia and London failed to get the revolutionary policy of the Party overturned in 1934 and left to form the Independent Socialist Party; and, soon afterwards, the RPC, also failing to get the 1934 ILP Conference at York to agree to join the Communist International and the Communist Party of Great Britain, left the Party.

The ILP courted the communist party in the early 1930s and also occasionally gained prominent recruits, most famously George Orwell, who joined the ILP after having fought alongside the 25 or so ILP recruits who joined the anarchist organisation, Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista (POUM), during the Spanish Civil War.⁷ Despite the ILP's brief reversal of its traditional pacifist and anti-war policy in this conflict, it continued to decline and was involved in negotiations about joining the Third International in the late 1930s and then in re-affiliating with the Labour Party up to the eve of the Second World War. Thereafter, the ILP opposed the Second World War, before gently fading into obscurity, becoming a rapidly diminishing force within British Labour politics. It eventually ceased to exist as a political party on 1 May 1975, before re-emerging as Independent Labour Publications and re-associating itself with the Labour Party. In the early 1990s there was a flutter of interest in reviving it as a political party, partly initiated by Barry Winter; through this initiative and its intended vague, almost 'will o' the wisp' policies, it never came to fruition.⁸

The ILP was always identified with community influence, guild socialism in the inter-war years and freedom of opinion, generally rejecting the democratic centralism which shaped the thinking of Marxist organisations. Throughout its history, it supported inner-party democracy to the point of allowing liberty of conscience to its members to ignore party policies and emphasising such freedoms for its MPs as it, for instance, promoted national government by Fred Jowett's idea of rule by parliamentary committee rather than by Cabinet. It supported internationalism throughout the world, devolution within Britain and women's rights from the time of the early suffrage campaigns to the winning of full female franchise in 1928. It opposed imperialism, fought against the empire and for a Socialist Commonwealth. Above all, it was a great defender of socialist democracy in the turbulent and volatile politics of the inter-war years as the political Right and fascism won support in both Britain and Europe; yet it opposed the Second World War.

Writing the history of the ILP

It is perhaps not surprising, from this brief overview, that the history of the ILP has often been divided by historians into sharply contrasting periods of historical

development. For the years prior to 1914, it has often been presented as a major participant in the heroic growth of the Labour Party, acting as its intellectual god-parent, spawning its main leaders and shaping its commitment to social democracy and socialism.⁹ In contrast, after 1914 it has usually been seen as a marginal, sometimes irresponsible, socialist organisation playing little or no part in the so-called forward march of Labour, if there ever was such a thing. A. J. P. Taylor, the famous historian, once suggested that it was composed largely of combative groups of working-class socialists aiming to launch a social revolution and also acting as ‘a refuge for middle-class idealists’.¹⁰ David Howell has seen its role slightly differently in stressing that there was no great forward march of Labour, in his book, *MacDonald's Party: Labour Identities and Crisis 1922–1931* (2002). To him MacDonald's Labour Party struggled between a variety of competing identities and forces – such as trade unions, the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and socialist parties – in which the ILP, with its emphasis on local community, internationalism and social democracy maintained a nuanced relationship with Labour in which it ultimately lost out to the increasing influence of the competing political pressure groups.¹¹ Nevertheless, to many active Labour supporters it remained, almost nostalgically, the moral conscience of the Labour Party until disaffiliation in 1932. Gidon Cohen has asserted that, even after that date, it played an important, though diminishing role, in Labour politics.¹² Indeed, it continued to play the role that it had always played, of being an agency of socialism, operating within a society that was clearly not socialist and contributing to the radical politics of the age.

Despite the ILP's decline during the inter-war years, it was active in an age of intense political conflict where progressive, Marxist and socialist ideas came into conflict with the challenge of the Right and fascism, both in Britain and in Europe. Until disaffiliation in 1932, about half of the MPs in the PLP were members of the ILP at parliamentary elections, though nominally attached rather than actively involved since they were not financially supported by the ILP. Most of these MPs left the ILP following the disaffiliation crisis in 1932; only four of the five ILP MPs returned in the 1931 general election, and considerably fewer of the 37 returned at its height in 1922. Yet there is no doubt that the ILP had helped to shape the Labour Party's parliamentary approach to socialism in its early years, though it was always more focused upon the politics of the community than on national politics and guild socialism, though it flirted with revolutionary politics and democratic centralism in the 1930s. It even played a small part in opposing fascism during the Spanish Civil War, capturing the interest of George Orwell, who wrote of the Spanish Civil War in his passionate and committed account of events in his *Homage to Catalonia* (1938).

The early history of the ILP has been the subject of considerable research, and most obviously there is a collection of essays edited by David James, Tony Jowitt and Keith Laybourn entitled *The Centennial History of the ILP* (1992), and David Howell's monumental tome, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888–1906* (1983).¹³ There have also been several PhDs dealing with regional histories or specific policies.¹⁴ However, the vast majority of this plenitude of

6 Introduction

published research focuses on the years before 1914. In comparison, the Great War and, to a much greater extent, the inter-war years have attracted much less attention, with some notable, though now sometimes dated, exceptions. R. K. Middlemass, *The Clydesiders: A Left Wing Struggle for Parliamentary Power* (1965) provided a detailed study of the Clydeside group, dubbed the 'Awkward Squad', and their role in national politics during the inter-war years as they moved the balance of the ILP briefly away from international and towards domestic politics and moved the focus of ILP activities from London, Lancashire and Bradford to Glasgow to the Clydeside constituencies.¹⁵ To Middlemass, the ILP did 'commit suicide in a fit of insanity' by disaffiliating from Labour in 1932 and had only a small part to play in the political Labour movement after 1932. R. E. Dowse, in his book, *Left in the Centre: The Independent Labour Party 1893–1940* (1966) also provided a wide-ranging, if thinly evidenced and now largely dated, national study of the ILP, although it set up the idea of the post-war revival of the ILP under Clifford Allen's leadership, its swift demise under the leadership of Maxton and the Clydesiders and a 'lack of identity' after 1932.¹⁶ More recently, Gidon Cohen's monograph, *The Failure of a Dream: The Independent Labour Party from Disaffiliation to World War II* (2007), offered a new perspective, new research and a synthesis of existing work, studded with local examples of the history of the ILP from 1932 to 1939. Indeed, Cohen, whilst focusing upon the national events, attempts to move away from a purely national history of the Party in the 1930s to the local level. His book also offers a fascinating glimpse of the Lancashire-based Unity Group and the attempt to build up Anti-War Councils and Tenants' Defence Committees, suggesting that the ILP had many different local identities.¹⁷ More recently, Ian Bullock has published, *Under Siege: The Independent Labour Party in Interwar Britain* (2017), essentially a very detailed national history of the ILP during the inter-war years which presents the ILP as a major defender of the social democratic tradition in Britain, faced with a decline in its status as the Labour governments of 1924 and 1929–1931 were formed. However, according to Bullock, its efforts could never find an answer as to how to create a permanent socialist state within a democratic system.¹⁸

These broad-based national histories have been complemented by a small number of more focused regional studies. Alan McKinlay and R. J. Morris edited a collection of essays entitled *The ILP on Clydeside 1893–1932: From foundation to disintegration* (1991), which alight upon the years when it appeared to have political impact and assume that the ILP had little influence in Scotland after 1932. In contrast, Richard Stevens has written on the 'Rapid Demise or Slow Death? The Independent Labour Party in Derby, 1932–1945' (1997), indicating that, against the national trend, the ILP branch in Derby increased its membership after the disaffiliation crisis of 1932.¹⁹ There has also been only one significant attempt to bring the grass roots of the political Labour movement to the fore. Matthew Worley has edited a collection of essays entitled *Labour's Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members, 1918–45*.²⁰ This reveals the diversity of Labour's grass roots development, which was often underpinned by trade unionism, but also reveals that other forces, such as the ILP,

were at work amongst members whose lives were often shaped by an endless round of money-raising socials, jumble sales and, the almost ubiquitous, whist drives. Indeed, Gidon Cohen's contribution to this collection very much focuses upon how and why the ILP performed well in Glasgow and Norwich.²¹ Success in Glasgow is hardly surprising, since that was the centre of national, as well as local, ILP activity from the early 1920s, although by the mid-1930s, it was down to about 10 per cent of the 4,000 members it once boasted in the 1920s. What is more surprising is that Norwich also, like the Derby and Nottingham ILP branches, burgeoned rather than declined immediately after the ILP's disaffiliation from the Labour Party in 1932. Norwich was to become the largest ILP branch in the 1930s, doubling its membership to around 800 to 900 members in the late 1930s, driven on by the vitality of its club life and its involvement in sustaining Keir Hardie Hall, though also influenced and dominated by some of the leading figures in the ILP.²² Yet other issues emerge, for whilst the English and Scottish ILP histories have been well served in the past, those of Wales have been neglected until the recent work of Martin Wright, *Wales and Socialism: Political Culture and National Identity before the Great War* (2016), although this obviously does not deal with the ILP in the Great War or the inter-war years, and Daryl Leeworthy, *Labour Country: South Wales 1835–1985* (2018).²³ These books raise the issue of Welsh nationalism, examine the work of Robert Jones Derfel, a Welsh Baptist nationalist turned socialist, who operated through the ILP from the 1890s until the turn of the century, and the promotion of Welsh nationalism through the revival of the Welsh language rather than through politics itself, eschewing the idea that nationalism was somehow the language of the Right rather than the Left and luxuriating in a belief that both nationalist and internationalist ideas could be represented through the ILP.

To these studies may be added many local and regional studies of ILP and Labour movements, often dealing with labour and radical movements. Cyril Pearce has written of the strength of pacifism and the anti-war movement in Huddersfield in the Great War in his *Comrades in Conscience* book, whilst Keith Laybourn has challenged the existence of such support for peace in the textile district of the West Riding in Yorkshire, and in Bradford and Huddersfield in particular.²⁴

Clearly, local and regional issues sustained the ILP in the 1920s, and its remnant rump in the 1930s, just as much as the national and international events it responded to at the national level. This raises a number of questions. How did these regional and local branches, and their experiences, shape the national ILP and its view of the wider political developments of the inter-war years? How did the branches view the prospect that the British democratic parliamentary system, as adopted in 1918, would never permit the creation of a permanent socialist state, as highlighted by Ross McKibben in his book, *Parties and People: England 1914–1951*?²⁵ Where did these activities place the ILP within the competing identities of MacDonald's party, examined so perceptively in Howell's nuanced study, *MacDonald's Party*? Indeed, where did grass roots opinion fit within the increasingly sectarian, fractured and impotent socialist politics of the 1930s which Ben Pimlott analysed in his book, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (1977)?²⁶

8 Introduction

Autobiographies and biographies have provided vital details on the political machinations of the ILP, but again they are firmly focused upon the narrative of national and personal events, and some are blatantly self-serving. Gordon Brown's study of *Maxton* (1986) and other studies on Maxton by J. McNair and I. Wood, David Kirkwood's *My Life of Revolt* (1935), and John Hannon's *The Life of John Wheatley* provide detailed information on the events of the Scottish ILP leaders. Fenner Brockway's *Socialism Over Sixty Years: The Life of Jowett of Bradford 1864–1944* (1946) and his *Towards Tomorrow: The autobiography of Fenner Brockway* (1977), itself an updated version of his *Inside the Left*, and Arthur Marwick's *Clifford Allen: The Open Conspirator* (1964), all provide valuable insight into the national, and even local, developments of the inter-war ILP. David Marquand's biography, *Ramsay MacDonald* (1977), also provides enormous insight into the early political career of MacDonald in the ILP from 1895 until the mid and late 1920s, when this political emphasis changed from ILP to Labour Party politics.²⁷ Yet not one of these autobiographies and biographies is sufficient, in itself, to furnish a full picture of the activities of the inter-war ILP.²⁸ In some respects Brockway cornered the market on the heroic study of ILP leaders, writing biographies on Fred Jowett and Alfred Salter, whilst John McNair's study of Maxton is little more than a worshipful biography, hagiography in the worst sense of the word. Such a heroic perspective limits the value of McNair's book.

Primary sources

In 2017 the National Register of Archives listed only 84 collections of ILP branch and regional records, only 54 of which deal with the Great War and the inter-war years, and many often briefly and tenuously. Most of these collections are to be found in the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the London School of Economics (LSE), in the archives collections of Glasgow Archives, Manchester Archives, The National Library of Scotland (in Edinburgh) and West Yorkshire Archives (Wakefield), although some are found in other scattered collections.²⁹ Many consist of only a few brief financial statements, and the dozen or so collections of minutes that survive usually cover only a few years and are for a random collection of branches such as Bilston, Bo'ness, Edinburgh Central, Ilford, Shettlestone, Southall, Manchester Central, and West Bromwich. These are the paltry, fragmentary and random remains of more than 1,000 branches of the ILP that existed at various times in the inter-war years.

The ILP collection in the British Library of Political and Economic Science, which constitutes more than a third of the surviving ILP branch and regional material listed by the National Register, is both intriguing and inviting, demonstrating the range of issues which local members wove into the fabric of their culture. It contains the Head Office circulars from 1919 to 1939, which indicates the extent to which local branches were being drawn into the discussion of the national politics of the party on such issues as participation in the Vienna Union, an international organisation in the early 1920s which aimed to unite both the

Second International and the Third International (or Communist International or Comintern), in what Richard Collingham Wallhead, ILP and Labour MP for Merthyr from 1922 until his death in 1934, referred to as an ‘all-Inclusive interest’. These circulars also deal with the way in which the whole party was involved in the development of the guild socialist ILP Constitution of 1922, the local selection of parliamentary candidates, ‘Poplarism’ in London, the divisive nature of ‘Socialism in Our Time’, Disaffiliation’ and other contentious issues. Indeed, they also provide an entry into the culture of the ILP, providing details on such developments as the Northampton ILP Boot Society, a co-operative subsidiary to the Northampton ILP organised by boot makers, and details about the ILP Cinema at Morley Street in Bradford and divisional summer school conferences. The Ilford ILP minute books deal with the raising of money to purchase a Labour Hall in its minutes of February 1924.³⁰ They also record a lecture given by George Lansbury in connection with the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1919, which indicates the intention of local branches on the extent of international matters.³¹ The London and Southern Counties Divisional Council Minutes (1927–8) particularly emphasise the need to create factory groups to ‘develop Party influence in the workplace’, perhaps in response to a similar development being undertaken by the communist party at this time.³² In both 1927 and 1928 it was concerned that branches such as Hackney were still associated with constituency Labour Party branches which had been ejected from the Labour Party because of communist connections, and one of its reports, of 25 May 1927, suggested that ILP branches should ‘keep clear of Labour Party squabbles and not allow difficulties among them to interfere with our work’. In 1933, the Hackney branch was deeply involved with the London District of the CPGB in holding meetings to organise ‘a great campaign to build the united front of London workers in support of the German workers’ fight against Fascism, against war and the attack of the National Government, on the standards of the working class’. This goes beyond the attempt at forging a ‘United Front against Fascism’ and offers a new dimension to the study of ILP and CPGB relations at the local and regional levels in a detailed report of the negotiations between the two London divisional and district organisations of the two parties on 23 March 1933. The London ILP Division normally contained five or six federations which also reported on their own social and political activities. On 14 August 1932 the Shettleston ILP (on the Glasgow East side) greeted, with acclamation, the report on the Bradford Conference which had led to the disaffiliation of the ILP from the Labour Party, though many other branches took the opposite view.³³

Clearly, there is a rich seam of, admittedly fragmented, evidence about the attitudes of the rank and file to the national developments within the ILP. The Halifax ILP minute books (1923–1953) indicate an obsession with maintaining the viability of the Socialist Hall.³⁴ These can be further supplemented by the records of the RPC, which are to be found in the Communist Archives in the People’s History Museum in Manchester, which reflect upon the 1930s negotiations between the ILP and the CPGB, and upon communist activity within the ILP, although they are extensively covered in pamphlets published by the ILP.

There are also numerous other collections of papers relevant to the topic, including the Clifford Allen Papers at the University of South Carolina at Columbia in South Carolina (which was not directly consulted); the Richard Rees papers at the University College, London; the Jimmy Maxton Papers at the Mitchell Library, Glasgow; the Patrick Dollan and Jack Gibson Collection of Glasgow University Library; the Jock Haston Papers at the Brynmor Library of the University of Hull; the Frank Bunnewell and David Gibson Papers at the Imperial War Museum; as well as various papers of value at the National Archives.³⁵ Apart from the Edinburgh Central ILP Papers 1911–1934, which more or less end in 1922, the National Library of Scotland holds the papers of prominent ILP figures such as Emrys Hughes, Arthur Woodburn and David Murray. The Francis Johnson Collection of ILP correspondence at the British Library of Political and Economic Science (at the London School of Economics) provides insight into the attitudes of ILP leaders, at a library which also includes the NAC minutes and records of the ILP. In other words, there is a plethora of material, much of which has not been used, except briefly, in narrowly focused studies.

Certainly, most of the local materials, except that for the Clydeside area, have barely been touched beyond the occasional reference to give local colour to national studies. In addition, many of the surviving papers of the national ILP were deposited at the Working Class Movement Library in Salford, along with many pamphlets (referred to in the Bibliography); the spare copies of some of these have also been deposited in the Heritage Quay, the archive of the University of Huddersfield. Part of the purpose of this book is to examine a wide variety of local and national sources and to link their stories with the more obvious (though often rarely used) collections of material in The National Archives (TNA), such as the KV special branch material on Fenner Brockway, and other political figures, and the records of parliamentary debates, our Party in the 1930s?

The Times, and many other national newspapers, of course, reported on the major events in ILP history, which contended with other major events for news space, and often commented on the ILP with a sense of bafflement. Much more central to the ILP's history was its own paper, the *Labour Leader*, which became the *New Leader* in 1923, and later, other journals such as *Controversy*, *Left*, *The Internationalist* and *Between Ourselves*, that encouraged discussion within the Party. To these might be added the *Bradford Pioneer*, which published between 1913 and 1935, at various times under the editorship of Fred Jowett, Willie Leach and, towards the end, Franks Betts, the father of Barbara Betts (later Castle), and the *Dewsbury Citizen*. In Lancashire the main organ was *Labour's Northern Voice*, whilst in London it was *Revolt* that reflected ILP thinking, and in Scotland there was the *Scots New Leader* and the widely read Glasgow *Forward*, edited by Emrys Hughes, and the Edinburgh paper, *The Labour Standard*, which, whilst acting as the organ of the whole Labour movement in Edinburgh was very largely focused upon ILP activity, especially during the Great War.

Debates and questions

Debates revolving around the history, growth and decline of the ILP between 1914 and 1939 have largely focused upon four major themes or questions. The first has been the ILP's brief loss of support in the Great War, when it was perceived to be a pacifist organisation opposing all wars. Yet, to what extent was the ILP a pacifist organisation, and how far was this responsible for its changing political position between 1914 and 1918? To many authors, including Cyril Pearce, the ILP, with the British Socialist Party (BSP) was the engine of pacifism which combined with Quaker, Liberal progressive, and trade union opposition to oppose the war. However, to Tony Jowitt and Keith Laybourn, this was a myth sedulously circulated by the right-wing press to damn a party whose members in the ILP hotspots of Bradford, and other areas, as a proportion of their numbers, volunteered in large numbers for the voluntary Derby Scheme before military conscription was introduced in January 1916.³⁶ Indeed, Marcus Morris has recently suggested that the pro-war and the anti-war socialists within the ILP and the wider socialist and Labour movement were largely committed to both peace and an Allied victory on the basis of maintaining Britain's democratic tradition, much as Paul Ward argued in his book in the late 1990s.³⁷ The end of the Great War also saw the ILP challenged by the Labour Party's new 1918 constitution, which contained the socialist clause 3d, which committed the Labour Party to public ownership. As a caveat to the issue of war and peace, was it the Labour Party's new constitution that filched the role of the ILP as a socialist godparent to the Labour Party and ensured its future as an increasingly diminishing force within Labour politics?

Secondly, Dowse and Marwick have placed enormous emphasis on ILP's post-war revival from 1918 onwards, but particularly after 1922, when it convinced itself of the need to continue as a defender of social democracy under the leadership of Clifford Allen and with a commitment to guild socialism. However, despite this development, it is clear that the internationalism of Allen clashed with the domestic-community approach of many ILP branches and particularly those in the Glasgow Clydeside. What then allowed the Clydesiders to prevail in turning a growing internationalist socialist group into a more narrowly nationally focused sectarian body? Indeed, does the parochial, working-class and community approach of Clydeside partly explain the declining appeal of the ILP from the mid-1920s onwards?

Thirdly, there is the dominating question of why did the ILP disaffiliate from the Labour Party in 1932? Was it, as I have previously argued, because of the growing conflict between the ILP and the Labour Party resulting from the slow pace of social change towards socialism in Britain?³⁸ Alternatively was it because of the rising debate over its policy of 'Socialism in Our Time' and 'The Living Wage', which was seen as both an irrational and contradictory document by many in the Labour Party? Were these tensions simply provoked by the demand that ILP MPs should follow the Labour Party line, by observing the Labour Party's new Standing Orders of 1929, particularly after the defeat of the Labour government?

12 *Introduction*

Alternatively, was disaffiliation the product of a considered and long-thought-out, coherent, logical and reasoned debate, which Gidon Cohen feels it to have been on the basis of a lengthy discussion which culminated in the Special Conference at Bradford on 30 and 31 July 1932?³⁹ In what respect, then, was disaffiliation the product of the fact that many ILPers realised that a permanent state of socialism was not possible under the parliamentary system of democracy and elected local government, which the Labour Party endorsed?

Fourthly, there is the final question of what did the ILP feel that it was offering to the British people by operating outside the Labour Party in the 1930s? For Cohen the ILP offered a grand dream of the imminence of socialism that made it as important as the communist party, and other socialist parties, as it appealed to different identities that had helped to create it.⁴⁰ Yet, to Cohen, the factionalism, poor organisation and divisions over policy ensured that to some extent 'the ILP was the architect of its own decline'.⁴¹ In other words, it offered a realistic vision of what was possible but one that was destroyed by internal conflict in the 1930s. This contrasts with the views of other historians, most markedly Dowse, Middlemass, and McKinley and Morris, who saw the disaffiliation as a fatal blow to the ILP, which may have been considered to be 'suicide during a fit of insanity', and that because 'they had very little political power the main history of the ILP should end in 1932'.⁴² Therefore, is disaffiliation in 1932 the realistic end of the ILP, or did it have political resonance after that date?

Vital to an examination of these debates are the views of the grass roots membership of the ILP. It is easy to establish why many left, but why did some stay throughout all its tribulations from 1914 onwards? Perhaps it was its identity with the past as a formative influence upon Labour politics. Possibly, as Ian Bullock argues, it retained the reputation of being the true defender of social democracy.⁴³ It is also possible that the ILP was sustained in its decline by a core of ILP supporters committed to living the life of a socialist as they saw it in the way William Morris had advocated in the 1880s and 1890s, offering a form of democratic localism in the face of the centralisation of the Labour Party, making more of moment than form.

The book, the methodology and the argument

The ILP's inter-war history demands an analysis that seeks to integrate the experience of the ILPer at the grass roots level with the events at the national level. This book seeks to do this and to provide a clearer picture of what the ILP stood for and why the ILP survived locally, with vibrancy in some areas, from the late 1920s onwards when political decisions at the national level seemed to determine its rapid demise in national, regional and local politics where it had once had a dominating presence.

It offers a comparative historical analysis of primary evidence that attempts to place the grass roots of the ILP, where possible, alongside the national developments. It therefore necessitates the use of two methodological approaches. First, it examines the surviving national records of the ILP, many of them now lodged