

The ILP and the Living Wage

Ian Bullock finds strong historical precedent for a living wage

Paul Salvesson (*Chartist*, 255) is 100% right. To dismiss the Independent Labour Party (ILP) as 'vague and sentimental' is either ignorant or prejudiced - very likely both. To start with we should remember that in 1932, when it disaffiliated from the Labour Party, the ILP had more than five times as many members as the CP, as Gideon Cohen points out in *The Failure of a Dream*. True, size is not everything. But the ILP in the 1920s had policies that are still relevant, in a general if not a detailed way, to the British Left in 2012.

Chief among them is the 'Living Wage' policy - also known as 'The Living Income' and 'Socialism in Our Time' - adopted in 1926. It has stood the test of time rather well. David Marquand in his biography of Ramsay MacDonald called it a 'milestone in the history of the British left.' Former leading ILPer, Fenner Brockway, in his 1977 memoir *Towards Tomorrow* thought it 'extraordinarily relevant as I write fifty years later.'

There was nothing new about the idea of a living wage. Jane Willis in *Soundings* (Summer, 2009) traced its origins back to the 1870s and before the First World War. Philip Snowden wrote a book, *The Living Wage* and another Labour MP, Will Crooks, demanded 'A living wage for all' in a speech in the House of Commons. The phrase was used a lot. But what the ILP adopted in 1926 was more complex and interesting

The initial inspiration came from Clifford Allen, first national treasurer and then chair of the ILP in the mid-20s. He argued for 'A national charter of individual welfare'.

The 'charter' became the Living Wage report which took 18 months to prepare and was approved almost unanimously by the ILP annual conference in 1926. It was drawn up by H.N. Brailsford, editor of the ILP weekly *New Leader*, who took the main

responsibility for publicising and explaining the policy, J A Hobson, A.Creech Jones and E.F. Wise. Hobson's 'underconsumptionist' economic theory was, and is, well known as was his groundbreaking *Imperialism*, which Lenin among others drew on. Arthur Creech Jones was a national officer of the T&G, while Wise had been a senior civil servant during the First World War, first as Assistant Director of Army Contracts and later as Second Secretary to the Ministry of Food. The report is well worth reading.

ILP Strength

Its strength lay not in its individual features but in their combination into a coherent strategy that the ILP would offer as a programme that could be pursued by the next Labour government, by which it would 'stand or fall' whether it had a majority or was, as in 1924, in a minority. That industry should pay to all engaged in it 'a living wage' was the report's starting point. This, it said, had 'become in our generation an ethical principle, accepted as one of the foundations of our civilisation. Neither of the capitalist parties venture to dispute it.' The goal of an adequate income for all would lead by the logic of what had to be done to secure it to the public control of credit and public ownership of the major banks and of industries. The living wage was to be augmented by family allowances.

Much to the frustration of the ILP the Labour Party failed to take the policy on board - MacDonald was particularly dismissive - and the unions were wary about child allowances fearing that their position as negotiators of wages and conditions might be undermined. The ILP continued to press the policy on Labour for the next five years. Sometimes, they seemed to see at least a chink of light at the end of the tunnel as when prime minister MacDonald told the 1929 Labour Party conference that



Old and new: we must not forget that Living Wage campaigns have their traditions rooted in ILP history

'The Labour Party is committed and has been committed to the living wage policy.' In the end it turned out to be not light but the 'Bankers' Ramp Express' hurtling towards them.

Two key features of the Living Wage report seem particularly relevant today, particularly since the advent of the London Citizens Living Wage campaign in 2001 and the worldwide spread of the demand. One is the crucial importance of getting a proper democratic grip on the finance sector. Brailsford's 1931 pamphlet *The City or the Nation* might just as well refer to the current situation.

The other, and most crucial of all, is the importance of starting from a position with wide support and using its pursuit to convince an initially sceptical public of the need for radical change in order to achieve it. Brailsford, again, explains it best in this passage from his 1925 book *Socialism for To-day*.

'To begin by demanding a gen-

une living wage would, I believe, be sound strategy. Hitherto Socialists have argued in their propaganda that if industry and the land were nationalised, the consequence would be an increase in our national wealth, and a fairer distribution of the national income. The happy result looked to the average man rather remote, and preliminary processes did not grip his attention. There is much to be said for reversing the order of thought and action. Let us rather begin by demanding the fairer division of wealth; let us insist, first of all, on the elementary human claim to a living wage and then enforce the wide economic changes by which alone it can be realised and secured. The fixing, whether by combined trade union action, or by a Royal Commission, of any adequate figure, would drive us at once into big political changes. The demand is a battering-ram levelled at the present system.'

To some extent Maxton, who took over from Allen and became the virtual leader of the ILP for most of the interwar period, somewhat lost the plot. He failed to make the starting point of the drive towards socialism a position one that had already a wide acceptance and, as the great Left orator of his age, he concentrated

instead on trying to rouse working class support for the package as a whole. He did, early in 1931, use success in the ballot for private members' bills to launch 'The ILP Living Wage Bill'. It provided for the determination of what should constitute the living wage within three months by a committee composed of three working class housewives, three union representatives and three representatives of the co-operative movement. By that time the ILP had long been at odds with the rest of the Labour Party over its 'gradualism' and the restrictions imposed by the standing orders of the parliamentary party.

Unsurprisingly, though the bill passed its second reading by 122 to 51, there was not the remotest chance that MacDonald's government would give it the necessary time and support to go any further. Brockway reported in the ILP weekly the *New Leader* that 'Those voting for the Bill included, of course, many who desired to register support for the principle without any belief in its immediate application. No Cabinet minister voted, but the Chief Whips, five junior Whips and five Under-Secretaries voted with the ILP' That now seems quite impressive – especially in the circumstances where there was much resent-

Ian Bullock's book *Romancing the Revolution. The Myth of Soviet Democracy and the British Left* was published last year. He co-wrote *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement - 1880-1914* with Logie Barrow and co-edited *Sylvia Pankhurst, From Artist to Anti-Fascist* with Richard Pankhurst. He is currently working on a book on the inter-war ILP

ment of the ILP in the other parts of the Labour Party and it was already discussing the possibility of disaffiliation.

Let's return finally to the point highlighted earlier. The sexist language of the period apart, can we now really quarrel with Brailsford's argument in a *New Leader* article 'Socialism in Our Generation. The Living Wage as Lever' early in 1926? 'Strangers who watch our movement often liken it to 'religion'. The analogy is 'dangerously true', he wrote. The living wage was 'a simple human demand, which must carry with it, if we can stir the ambitions and stimulate the thinking of the average worker and his wife, assent to all the rest'. The reaction to proposals for giving priority to, for example, bank nationalisation, were likely to be 'cold, bewildered and sceptical'. This point was reiterated in the Living Wage report

'This policy has the merit of making a simple and concrete appeal to the average worker and his wife. Family Allowances and a Living Wage touch them in their daily experience of life. Once their attention is concentrated on these things, the rest of the scheme will enlist their defensive instincts'.

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J C Kenworthy - From Bondage to Brotherhood 1894

Kenworthy was a Christian communist anarchist and the leading English proponent of the views of Leo Tolstoy. Born in Liverpool and influenced by his reading of Ruskin, a university graduate and poet who worked at the Mansfield House settlement in Canning Town in East London, he became secretary of the Land Colonisation Society. He was a regular contributor to the *Anarchist Freedom*. He then joined the Brotherhood movement, established by the Georgist congregationalist minister John Bruce Wallace. Wallace had established non-doctrinaire Brotherhood churches in Southgate, Forest Gate and Walthamstow in north east London, which, according to their entry in the 1896 *Labour Annual*, sought 'to apply the principles of the Sermon on the Mount literally and fully to individual and social conduct, which they interpret into action by efforts to found industries and businesses on what may be described as Socialist Co-operative lines'. In 1894, Kenworthy established a Brotherhood Church in West Croydon, together with a co-operative store and a communal Brotherhood house. Besides poetry, he published *The Anatomy of Misery* (1893), a series of lectures on Christian economics, *The Christian Revolt* (1893), *From Bondage to Brotherhood - A Message to the Workers* (1894) and *Tolstoy: His Life and Works* (1902). His work is covered in Bevir's: *The Making of British Socialism*,

reviewed in *Chartist* 255.

"Cease from following after those who dangle before you new Laws, new Acts of Parliament, who ask you to do nothing but - vote! The Law has been framed by oppressors: neglect it, let it die. In place of it, by the power of Brotherhood, will come up the true Democratic means of Government - unfettered Public Opinion, which is the Will of the People. Keep away from lawyers, judges; on your parts, let the Law perish. But give heed to those who tell you that the first change needed is in your own hearts, in your own ways of looking upon life and upon each other; who can help to marshal you in industrial regiments, and show you the peaceful way to win back all whereof you have been robbed. Those who understand the power of the commercial machinery, know, past doubt, that if you workers so willed, the General Strike and General Co-operation would gain England for you in a week, and turn it into Paradise in a twelvemonth. This is fact, and no fairy tale. The winter is yet with us, but He who sends the spring to the land, prepares also a spring time for the soul of man. Groans of men, sobs of women, and cries of children are calling us. Sisters, Brothers, let us go about our work."

