

Three Anglo-American Radicals, and the Dilemmas of Syndicalism and Social Democracy

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Three Anglo-American Radicals, and the Dilemmas of Syndicalism and Social Democracy

John H.M. Laslett

Melvyn Dubofsky, *'Big Bill' Haywood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

Paul Davies, *A.J. Cook* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

Anthony Wright, *R.H. Tawney* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

THESE THREE BOOKS are part of a welcome new series of short, pithy biographies of leading figures in the European and American socialist and labour movements, written by scholars who have been drawn from both sides of the Atlantic. There are some methodological differences between them. *'Big Bill' Haywood* is a lively synthesis written by a senior scholar which draws only on previously published work. Paul Davies' *A.J. Cook* is based on the author's PhD thesis, and on other original documents. Anthony Wright's *R.H. Tawney* is the work of a political scientist who reevaluates Tawney's intellectual contributions to the English — as opposed to the German, or continental — version of social democracy. All three provide excellent introductions to their subjects for college students, as well as for the general reader who wishes to know more about the historical development of the Anglo-American labour movement.

Using biography as a medium, the books focus on the rise of the Labour Party in Britain and the Socialist Party of America between the turn of the century and the 1920s; on the differing forms of apolitical syndicalism that developed in both countries; and on the tensions that grew up within and between these two strands of socialist endeavor. They also illuminate the divergent paths which the British and American labour movements took after World War I. They show us how, on the one hand, the Red Scare which accompanied this upheaval fragmented the US Left, effectively neutralizing it until the 1930s; and how, on the other hand, the social crisis created by the war breathed fresh life into the British Labour Party, helping to bring it to power as the First Labour Government of 1924.

World War I also represented a turning point in the lives of the three men being considered. For the young Tawney, who served as a sergeant on the Western Front,

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the glaring contrast between the democratic ideals for which Britain fought and the strife-ridden actuality which prevailed at home, prompted his lifelong search for "the proper rules of social and economic conduct"¹ which was to make him into one of the most influential intellectuals in the British Labour party. Rejecting Marxism because of its materialism, and Fabianism because it assumed that making capitalism more efficient was sufficient to make it more just, Tawney provided an intellectual rationale for the kind of ethical socialism which had earlier inspired Keir Hardie, and which would also have been familiar to Eugene Debs. In subsequent years Tawney refined his ideas both in his political work, and in his two most famous works of socialist theory, *The Acquisitive Society* (1921) and *Equality* (1931).

For IWW Secretary William D. Haywood, and for coalminers' leader Arthur Cook, the war and the Russian revolution that accompanied it had more serious personal consequences. Their situations were not dissimilar. Having been trailed by a Home Office agent, in the spring of 1918 Cook was jailed for two months for anti-war speeches, and for objecting to the 'comb-out' of the British mines, a tactic which removed large numbers of miners from reserved occupations, and which enabled the British government to increase its number of conscripts. A few months later, in September 1918, Haywood, along with virtually all of the IWW's other leaders, was arrested for promoting draft resistance, conducting strikes in the copper and other war industries, and for criminal conspiracy. In a patent attempt to destroy the IWW, Haywood and his colleagues were sentenced to twenty years in prison. This was a far more severe sentence than was meted out to Cook, or to any other British anti-war protester. His health already undermined by excessive drinking and incipient diabetes, the prospect of prolonged incarceration led Haywood to jump bail and leave the country. He spent the last seven years of his life as a disillusioned exile in the Soviet Union. By contrast, although Arthur Cook remained unpopular with the British government because of his radical views, he went on to become General Secretary of the Miners Federation of Great Britain in 1924, and helped lead it through the 1926 General Strike.

Cook's light treatment compared to the savage sentence meted out to Haywood signalled the greater virulence of the Red Scare in the USA compared to Britain in 1919-20. Whereas all of the leading figures of the SPA and the IWW were incarcerated (including Debs, Adolph Germer, and Emma Goldman as well as Haywood), in England only a few dozen antiwar activists were imprisoned, and then for only a short period of time. In turn, this helps explain the greater strength of the Labour Party in 1918. One reason for the greater severity of the repression lay in the Socialist Party of America's more-principled opposition to the war, compared with that of Britain's Labourites. Although both parties divided over the issue, in 1916 Labour's majority faction, led by Arthur Henderson, accepted positions in Lloyd George's coalition government, thereby bringing the party a

¹Wright, 14.

degree of respectability that the American Socialists never attained. Another reason was the more-ready identification of immigrant American socialists with pro-German sentiment, a stigma that was less marked in Britain. Despite his New England birthright, Haywood could not avoid being scorned as 'un-American' in the same way that Austrian-born Victor Berger was, despite the fact that the IWW was a thoroughly North American movement. This difference was in part a by-product of the much higher proportion of immigrants in the American working class compared to Britain, where it was much more difficult to identify anti-war sentiment with a fundamental rejection of society's values. Canadian historian Kenneth McNaught has also suggested that this lack of tolerance was one of the overall reasons for the greater weakness of the US Left.²

R.H. Tawney's life certainly manifested the "aristocratic tradition of eccentricity and intellectual discipline" that McNaught suggests the United States lacked,³ and this helped win acceptability for the Labour Party among left-wing Liberals and the British middle class. Born to an imperial family in India at the turn of the century, Tawney left Oxford's Balliol College with the combined passion for historical scholarship and for promoting social justice that guided the rest of his life. After spending 1903 at Toynbee Hall in the London's East End enquiring into the condition of the poor, in 1908 Tawney began part-time lecturing for the Workers Education Association. He did this in the belief that an educated working class was an essential prerequisite for a socialist society. Despite his subsequent distinguished career as professor of economic history at the LSE, Tawney never abandoned political activism. From the Fisher Act of 1918 to the Butler Act of 1944, Tawney's hand is writ large in the history of British educational reform. Along with Sidney Webb, he also represented the trade-union side on the Sankey Coal Commission of 1919, causing Beatrice Webb to note in her diary that with his personal charm, his quiet wisdom, and his rapier-like intellect, Tawney had been "the great success of the Commission."⁴ Analogues to people like Tawney did exist in the United States. One can cite men such as Henry Demarest Lloyd and Reinhold Niebuhr. However, until President F.D. Roosevelt's 'brains trust' during the period of the New Deal, intellectuals in America were not accorded the same degree of political recognition as their peers in England. The access which intellectuals like Tawney and the Webbs secured to the highest reaches of English society during World War I was one of the factors that helped transform the British Labour party from a minor irritant on the Liberal Party's left wing into a potential party of government.

This was not, of course, the only reason for the greater success of the British Labour Party compared to the Socialist Party of America after 1918. More important reasons for the Labour Party's success were the Liberal Party's inability to deal

²Kenneth McNaught, "American Progressives and the Great Society," *Journal of American History*, 53 (December 1966), 504-20.

³*Ibid.*, 506.

⁴Wright, 24.

with the exigencies of total war; the weakened state of postwar British capitalism; and the strengthening of the Parliamentary Labour Party's alliance with the Trades Union Congress.⁵ Ever since the AFL repudiated the SLP in 1894, no such alliance had seemed likely to emerge in the United States. In Britain, the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1918 also added several million new male workers to the franchise. This was a crucial development, because coming at a time of industrial turmoil it galvanised most of the new voters into voting for the Labour Party. In America, by contrast, despite the massive strike wave of 1919, the Left emerged from the war weak, divided, and politically suspect. A further element in the equation was the hostility toward parliamentary action displayed by the syndicalist movement in both Britain and the United States, even though it took different forms in each country. Much of the interest in Dubofsky's and Davies' books revolves around the different way in which Bill Haywood and A.J. Cook dealt with the issue of syndicalism vs political action.

Despite the absence of personal papers left by either Cook or Haywood, Dubofsky provides a much richer and more suggestive biography than does Paul Davies in the case of Arthur Cook. Perhaps this is due to Davies' relative inexperience as a writer. His book is also full of spelling and other editorial lapses. Dubofsky, in contrast, writes well. He places Haywood clearly within the social movements of his time. And he gets to the essence of his subject when he describes Haywood as "an American original: a man whose radicalism flowed more from popular conceptions about the meaning of the American Revolution, abolitionism, the Civil War, Populism and the dignity of labour than from Socialist or Syndicalist treatises."⁶ The Western Federation of Miners was the core of the early IWW, and its syndicalism grew more out of the open class-war that developed over the control of metal production on the American mining frontier — at Coeur d'Alenes (1899) and Cripple Creek (1903) — than it did from intellectual conviction or a careful reading of the works of Georges Sorel. Although he was a working miner, Cook's syndicalism, unlike Haywood's, seems to have come out of his association with Noah Ablett and the other South Wales worker-intellectuals who authored *The Miners Next Step* (1911). The inspirational document for much subsequent British syndicalism, this celebrated pamphlet rejected mine nationalization and the parliamentary course then being pursued by Mabon and other South Wales miners' MPs. It called, instead, for a militant industrial union of miners "that will [make use of the strike so as to] ultimately take over the mining industry and carry it on in the interests of the workers."⁷

Nevertheless, there was much cross-fertilization between the British and

⁵For further reflections on the reasons for the emergence of the British Labour Party as a major political force after 1918, compared to the decline of the SPA, see Stanley Shapiro, "The Passage of Power: Labor and the New Social Order," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 120 (December 1976), 464-74.

⁶Dubofsky, 114.

⁷Davies, 15.

American syndicalist movements. Initially, the English branch of the IWW grew out of the British Socialist Labor Party, which had strong links with the DeLeonite party of the same name in the United States. In 1909, the British syndicalists organized under a new name — the Industrial Workers of Great Britain. The IWGB secured its greatest successes in cities like Glasgow, which had much the same kind of ethnic diversity as Lawrence, Paterson and other American industrial centers where the IWW was influential. Besides skilled Scottish engineers and Irish laborers, the Glasgow area in 1900 contained Poles and Lithuanians working in the mines, as well as some Scandinavian shipbuilders and Italian shopkeepers. (Much the same might be said of the Canadian cities in which One Big Unionism flourished.) In 1911 Tom Bell, a leading figure in the British SLP who helped found the IWGB, claimed 4000 members in one factory, the Singer Sewing Machine works at Kilbowie, Clydebank. This was an American-owned firm whose use of scientific management techniques to increase production led to a strike against wage cuts very similar to the steel dispute that had occurred in McKees Rocks two years earlier.⁶

The IWW's influence on the British Left culminated in Haywood's visit to Europe in 1910-11. Industrial unrest swept Britain that year. Strikes by seamen and firemen in Southampton crippled every port in the country by June 1911; the following month, further strikes brought out the dockers, coal fillers and carters. The high point of Haywood's tour was his visit to South Wales during the bitter Cambrian Coal Combine struggle of 1910-11. This was also a formative event in Arthur Cook's life, although there is no evidence that the two men met. Haywood approved of the coal hewers' decision to force the engine winders, pump operators and pony drivers, who belonged to other unions, to quit work in support. He thereby lent his weight to the movement for 'amalgamation,' or advanced industrial unionism, which to some extent was already present in the United Mine Workers of America, and which was to be imitated by Cook and others of the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) Unofficial Reform Committee after 1917.

Dubofsky gives due weight to Haywood's international travels. He also draws an interesting parallel between the careers of Haywood and Tom Mann, the British 'new unionist' leader who carried the message of direct action to Australia and New Zealand at the end of the 1890s. This comparative approach drives another nail into the coffin of the Commons school of labor historians, who saw the American labor movement as a uniquely US phenomenon, and restores it to its proper place as one of the most internationally-minded labor movements in the world. Yet surprisingly, for so experienced a scholar, Dubofsky's breezy style sometimes leads him into errors of fact or interpretation. Early in his book, for example, he asserts that the IWW's rejection of political action in 1908 "placed the IWW where the AFL had been since 1895" — by which he means that both of these

⁶For a brief description of the activities of the IWW in Great Britain, see Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: The Story of Syndicalism in the United States* (New York 1968), 221-5.

two labour federations repudiated independent political action.⁹ This is a misleading statement, since it implies that they did so for the same reasons. In point of fact, the IWW turned to syndicalism because it believed socialist politics to be either ineffective or corrupting, while the AFL rejected independent labour politics because it believed it could secure labour legislation more effectively by lobbying the Republicans and Democrats. At one point in his text Dubofsky also draws too rigid a distinction between the theoretical bases of socialism and syndicalism. Both stemmed from a similar analysis of capitalism. It was over the means by which capitalism should be done away with, and the nature of the post-revolutionary society, that they disagreed.

Instead, it was over the question of means, rather than ends, that the British and American syndicalists disagreed most fundamentally. As Dubofsky points out, throughout Haywood's career as leader of the IWW, which lasted on and off from 1908 to 1917, he adhered to a policy of dual unionism. This was the tactic of repudiating the AFL entirely as a corrupt, class-collaborationist body which had gone beyond redemption, and which needed to be replaced root and branch. Haywood did this despite the repeated admonitions of internationally-minded radicals such as W.Z. Foster and Tom Mann that such tactics only succeeded in isolating syndicalists from the rest of the trade union movement. On the other hand, A.J. Cook, and the 'ginger group' of radicals on the left wing of the Miners Federation of Great Britain who became known as the Unofficial Reform Committee, followed the more traditional European syndicalist policy of 'boring from within.' At the same time, Cook maintained a personal revolutionary philosophy which drew him into the Communist Party for a brief period after World War I.

How significant were these diverging tactics? Would it have made any difference to the fortunes of the American IWW if it had followed the British syndicalists' strategy of 'boring from within'? Such a question can never be answered fully. It is unlikely, for example, that such an approach would have mitigated the ferocity of the attacks that were mounted against the American IWW by agents of the US Department of Justice during the 1919 Red Scare. Yet instances can be cited of the opportunities the Wobblies lost by cutting themselves off from the mainstream of American labour. One example was the repudiation of the IWW by the United Mine Workers of America — the US equivalent of the MFGB — whose ranks contained many potential syndicalists. Another was the IWW's inability to exploit its potential for growth among railroad machinists and other metal workers during the course of the shop-craft strike on the Harriman railway lines between 1911 and 1915. This strike failed in part because of the lack of an industrial union that could effectively unite machinists, boiler makers, steel plate workers and other skilled craftworkers into one amalgamated body — a gap which the IWW might well have filled had its dual unionist policy not brought it the enmity of the AFL unions which conducted the strike.

⁹Dubofsky, 55.

Cook's attempt to maintain his position as a revolutionary syndicalist, while at the same time shouldering an increasing share of the responsibility for pragmatic decision-making as MFGB Secretary during the British coalmining industry's postwar crisis, constitutes the major focus of Paul Davies' book. The chapters in which he describes Cook's efforts, along with his fellow radicals, to transform the Unofficial Reform Committee into an instrument for revolutionary change, make compelling if sombre reading. Before World War I, and for a brief time after it, the 'boring from within' tactic seemed to pay off handsomely. It resulted in the establishment of the Triple Alliance, a grouping of Miners, Railwaymen and Transport Workers, many of whom were imbued with syndicalist ideas. In 1921, and again for a brief period in 1925-26, the Alliance seemed capable of exerting a stranglehold on British industry. But on Black Friday in April, 1921, and again in the General Strike of May 1926, the unity of the trade union movement broke down, and the Miners were left alone to fight two crippling and disastrous strikes. For six months in 1922, and again for almost a year after the collapse of the General Strike, only the contributions of fellow workers from all over Great Britain and from abroad saved many miners' families from destitution.

Arthur Cook paid a personal and ideological price for these defeats, which in its way was no less severe than the price extracted from Haywood when he jumped bail and fled to the Soviet Union. Cook's initial advocacy of syndicalism and of rank-and-file militancy made him a thorn in the flesh of more orthodox MFGB leaders like Frank Hodges. Yet when the Triple Alliance proved itself a broken reed, and when the once-mighty MFGB was brought low by unemployment, by TUC pusillanimity, and by the political manoeuvres first of Lloyd George and then of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, Cook found it impossible to avoid compromise. Slowly abandoning his syndicalist fervour in favor of a political solution, Cook ruined his health with heroic but futile, round-the-clock tours to save the miners' strikes. At the end of the 1922 and the 1926 stoppages, he found himself forced to recommend acceptance of the mine owners' disastrous terms. As a result, he was attacked from the Left as a class traitor, and from the Right as a zealot who had brought disaster to the miners. It was small wonder that in January 1928, as he was struggling to regain his health, Cook ended a private letter to Arthur Horner, his fellow radical in the MFGB leadership, with the words, "Love to all from one in a lone struggle."¹⁰ The effort to recover his health failed. Arthur Cook died of cancer in November 1931, at age 47, three years after Haywood. R.H. Tawney, by contrast, lived on until 1962.

Save in the case of Davies' biography of Cook, which adds a hitherto neglected figure to the pantheon of the Left, these works contribute little that is new or startling to our fundamental knowledge of the history of the Anglo-American labour movement. Nor, save in the case of a few brief references in Dubofsky's book to western working-class culture, do they make use of the insights of the new

¹⁰Davies, 146.

social history. Yet viewing them as a trio points up, once more, the many interesting parallels that existed between the British and American labour movements during this crucial period of their development. It is a pity that the editor of the series has not seen fit — so far at least — to include any Irish, Scottish or Canadian labour leaders in his series of biographies. Had he done so, he would have provided some new building blocks for a work that still needs to be written: a synthetic history of the North Atlantic labour movement considered as a whole.

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