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'Eldred Hallas: Birmingham's first Labour M.P.'

Eldred Hallas moved to Birmingham from Yorkshire in 1906. He was a socialist who became a trade union leader for the white collar Birmingham Municipal Employees Union, was elected to the Council and then as a Member of Parliament. He lived at 1 Institute Road, Kings Heath, later moving to Edgbaston Road [East] where he was living when he died in a Moseley nursing home in 1926.

Setting the scene:

In 1867 20% of the population of Birmingham had the vote. Prior to this reform only 3% had done so. The 20% with the vote equated to the 20% of the population in middle class occupations. Women who were householders could vote and 10% of the electorate was female. However prior to 1914 only 3 women had been Councillors, and nearly all the Aldermen and Councillors were from the wealthy strata of society. Most of the mayors, lord mayors and committee chairmen were from a few well-known families – such as the Chamberlains, Nettlefolds, Cadburys, Kenricks. When Neville Chamberlain became Mayor in 1915 he followed in the footsteps of 10 previous members of his family.

The diaries of Beatrice Webb give an insight into Chamberlain family life at Highbury during the period when Birmingham was judged to be 'the best governed city in the world' thanks to the efforts of Joseph Chamberlain and colleagues. But the cost of being a mayor – around £3,000 p.a. in entertainment costs – restricted the number of people interested in taking on the role.

Although in 1882 the property qualification for standing as a local councillor was removed, but it was not until 1948 that expenses were paid, and so it was extremely difficult for working men to become councillors. Nearly all councillors were business men or professionals such as lawyers, estate agents and medical men. William Bowater who was mayor on 4 occasions was a dentist.

Politics in Birmingham was always intensely party political. In 1838 following the first local election, the first council of 48 councillors sat – all of them Radical Liberals even though the Tories had contested every Ward. The Birmingham Caucus had a total grip on the Council and Joseph Chamberlain could later claim that all the then 64 councillors were Radical Liberals of his persuasion.

In 1886 the Liberal Party split over Irish Home Rule, Chamberlain's group merging with the Conservatives and Unionists. He then set out to purge the Council in Birmingham of all Liberals. The Liberals turned to the labour movement for reinforcements, trade union secretaries providing a new source of energy. George Cadbury helped pay the political expenses of labour men to enable them to become involved in politics. The 1880s saw a revival of labour politics and by 1914 around half of the workforce had been unionised. In 1900 the Labour Representation Committee was formed, soon to become the Labour Party. Birmingham Trades Council was one of the first to affiliate to the Labour Party although the party was disappointed by the lack of radical solidarity in Birmingham, compared with the mining and cotton weaving areas of England.

From the 1880s a great many different socialist societies had emerged amidst a ferment of radical ideas and attempts to make socialism respectable. However socialists stood no chance of election to the Council in Birmingham, always coming bottom of the poll. But by joining the Lib/Lab group the first workers' representatives were elected as Councillors in the 1880s and 90s.

Eldred Hallas:

He was a trade union leader but one outside of the Lib/Lab consensus. He was undoubtedly a socialist.

He arrived in the city from Stainland near Halifax. His father and grandfather, both textile workers, had been Chartists. They were not well-paid but were not deprived. He had grown up in a family with books and a passion for music. Eldred was a singer and flautist.

He left school at 14 and had no further education, but was an autodidact who attended evening classes and undertook much private study. He produced a great many publications – not of great interest – on ethics, politics and literature. In 1914 he published a romantic novel, 'Josie', about an opera singer.

His interest in ethics almost led him to become a Congregational minister, but he abandoned this idea for an interest in psychics and phrenology, both very popular at the time. In 1906 this interest brought him to Birmingham as the resident lecturer at the Birmingham Ethical and Psychical Society which was supported by people moving away from religious and towards secular groups. There was even a Birmingham Labour Church attended by socialists who wished to show that although not religious, they were not immoral. But in 1908 the wealthy backer of the Birmingham Ethical and Psychical Society withdrew his funding and Eldred needed to find new employment.

It is not clear how, but by 1910 he was the leader of the Birmingham Municipal Employees Union, which was not affiliated to the Birmingham Trades Council.

His political career.

The Birmingham Municipal Employees Union, through a series of amalgamations, soon became a much larger, general union. Eldred Hallas was clearly a very good organiser, and also a good attender at socialist meetings. There were a great many different groups – and he attended many of them, often being a speaker or chairman. He continued to write a great many pamphlets and to edit journals, most of proved to be ephemeral.

He advocated municipalisation which was relatively uncontroversial, and nationalisation which was extremely contentious. Socialists foresaw a utopian golden age. One strand was internationalism, and there was an international socialist pledge to stop war. They thought that by calling a general strike and stopping any movement of trains, troops could not be moved and so war could not start. But Eldred Hallas thought this a conspiracy by the SPD – the German Social Democrats, accused of being anti-Slav racists and other internationalists.

He was attracted to the vision of a socialist Merrie England propounded by Robert Blatchford, by the Clarion choir movement and by cycling clubs.

In 1911 the Greater Birmingham Act led to a doubling of the size of the City, Birmingham becoming the second city to London. The city boundary moved out to include Moseley and many other surrounding villages, the population increasing from 500,000 to 800,000. Ward boundaries were redrawn and the whole, new City Council elected. So in 1911 Eldred Hallas was elected to represent the Ward of Duddleston and Nechells. The Birmingham Trades Council had campaigned against him, possibly because of enmity between white and blue collar workers. Nevertheless he came top of the poll in the Ward. Socialists made a great effort and the effect was some dilution of the ruling oligarchy of the city [although the Chamberlains retained power] by creating what Asa Briggs describes as 'a bridgehead'. 6 of the 120 Councillors were socialists and Hallas one of the 6, the group being led by George Shann, a protégé of George Cadbury.

The Council was the largest employer in the City and Eldred Hallas was the spokesman for their employees. He campaigned for better pay and an end to casual labour. It was said that he was the most effective spokesman that municipal workers had ever had. He tried to establish a minimum wage and his enquiries led to the collection of information on wages – which revealed that although not well paid, Birmingham workers earned more than those in the Black Country.

1914-18 War

The Liberal and Labour parties were riven with dissention by the war, leading to the split between Asquith and Lloyd George in 1916. The Quaker elements in the Labour Party were anti-war.

The trade union movement was broadly in support of the war, although as it dragged on attitudes changed. Hallas emerged as a super-patriot. During 1916 many splits occurred over conscription, Hallas and others forming the British Workers' League [BWL] which supported the Government and the war. This brought Hallas into contact with Government ministers, especially Lord Milner, and Lord Astor offered financial support to the BWL. The Birmingham Trades Council was split over the issue of conscription, with Hallas and others leaving to form a new Trades Council. In 1918 Lord Milner wanted to keep these labour men on board as a new act of parliament transformed the electorate. Whereas in 1911 the electorate of Birmingham was 70,000, by the 1918 elections it was 400,000. The BWL became the National Democratic and Labour Party and Hallas was an obvious candidate for a parliamentary seat.

Birmingham Municipal Bank

Throughout the war he was acting as a local Councillor. In 1915 Neville Chamberlain became Lord Mayor. He was extremely active. He founded the CBSO and then the Birmingham Municipal Bank, in the face of resistance from bankers in London and from trade unionists. [Most working men never told their wives what they earned and they thought a bank would reveal this.]

Neville Chamberlain wanted peoples' savings to support the war effort so he needed Hallas' help to visit factories and to encourage workers to join the bank. Hallas designed coupons that workers could buy and stick in savings books. There is a plaque to him in what was the Balsall Heath branch of the Municipal Bank. In this way he became Chamberlain's ally and a joint founder of the bank.

Election to Parliament

The 1918 election was known contemptuously by Asquith as the Coupon Election, because so many candidates had a letter of endorsement, or 'coupon', from Lloyd George. Neville Chamberlain was elected as MP for Ladywood and he was the boss of the Unionist machine in the City. Neville Chamberlain persuaded the Unionist Party in Duddleston and Nechells to support Eldred Hallas as their candidate and he was duly elected.

However once in Parliament he was quickly disillusioned. He thought MPs wastrels, spending too much time in the House of Commons bars. He felt out of place – a lackey of the Lloyd George coalition which collapsed in the face of inflation. Within a year he took the Labour whip, offering his resignation to his constituency. However it was agreed that he should remain as the MP for Duddleston and Nechells until the next General Election which came in 1922.

The General Strike

In 1926 he was a member of the trade union Emergency Committee formed to direct the General Strike. Oswald Mosely and others were taking over the Birmingham Labour Party. However when the Emergency Committee appeared in court and each member was fined £10, Eldred Hallas was not amongst them. He was too ill to attend court and on 13 June 1926 he died in a Moseley nursing home. He was buried at Brandwood End cemetery where his grave can be seen. There was a large turn out at his funeral, and although the local press was largely Unionist, he received a very complimentary obituary, especially in relation to his work for the Municipal Bank and his conspicuous service to his country during the Great War.

Professor Ward is still searching for personal papers – there are none in the records but he hopes that there may still be family members with personal papers belonging to Eldred Hallas. If you can help, please contact the Society who will put you in touch.