**Keir Hardie Centenary**

This year the 26th September will mark the 100th anniversary of the death of James Keir Hardie, a man widely regarded as the founding father of the Labour Party. A Lanarkshire miner who had begun work at the age of eight, and secretary of the Scottish Miners’ Federation, he had first sought parliamentary representation as a Liberal. He become convinced however, of the need for independent working class representation in Parliament, and in 1892 he was elected as the first labour MP for West Ham, in London. He alarmed other MPs by turning up in his ‘work-a-day clothes’, escorted by his constituents and a brass band. He went on to make his mark by demanding that more be done to help the unemployed.

The legacy of Keir Hardie has been contested by many in the Party. So what did he stand for? Firstly he was a staunch advocate of independent working class representation. He believed that the Conservatives and the majority of the Liberal Party, as representatives of capital were the enemies of labour. In 1893 he assisted in the formation of the Independent Labour Party, which he hoped would replace the Liberal Party for ever, as the political party of the working class. As an MP he campaigned for an eight hour day to help the unemployed. He supported what he saw as the rightful struggles of the trades union movement, although he was never a syndicalist and saw political action as the way forward.

In 1895 Hardie along with other labour representatives lost his seat in Parliament, but he was elected again for Merthyr in 1900, a seat which he was to retain until he died. By this time he had made his mark as an anti-war campaigner, calling the Boer War a ‘foul crime’ whose only aim was to secure an outlay for capital and markets. He was savagely attacked by the capitalist press for being pro-Boer and a ‘wild socialist’. He reportedly never lost his temper or responded to these attacks, saying ‘that the traveller who stops to cast a stone at every cur which barks at his heels will be a long time reaching the end of his journey.’

In 1906 Hardie was elected first leader of the Labour Party. He was criticised by other Labour MPs such as Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowdon for allegedly failing to keep the parliamentary Party together. He was more at home addressing mass rallies throughout the country, than dealing with parliamentary procedures. Once asked by a House of Commons policeman if he had come to work on the roof, he replied that no, he had come to work on the floor.

He was an internationalist, widely travelling overseas to meet with socialists and trades unionists throughout the world. He also whole-heartedly embraced the cause of women’s suffrage, giving practical help to suffragettes who were being imprisoned and forcibly fed.

In 1909 the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain affiliated to the Labour Party, ending its long standing support for the Liberal Party. The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants had been supportive of the Party after the Taff Vale Judgement in 1901. Now seeing the Labour Party as a threat, the capitalist press, backed by the Anti-Socialist League moved into top gear, viciously attacking Labour MPs, including ‘moderates’ such as Snowdon and MacDonald. In 1909 a court ruling, the Osborne Judgement tried to ban trades unions from using their funds for political purposes, an attack on the funding of the Labour Party.

1911 saw the great industrial unrest when the number of strikes soared. During a railway strike the Liberal government sent troops to Liverpool and Llanelli in Wales where two railway workers were shot dead. In response Hardie wrote his famous pamphlet *Killing no Murder*.

When Hardie died in 1915, Britain was already at war with Germany. He opposed the First World War, saying that British workers had no quarrel with German workers. Sadly his message of peace and international solidarity was to be temporarily drowned out by nationalism. Members of trades unions supported the War, and even in his constituency of Merthyr he was to face hostility, being shouted down at rallies. The War split the Labour Party, and Ramsay MacDonald, also an opponent, had to step down as leader. Hardie died at a time of deep despair for himself and others who opposed the War. However his legacy was to live on in the unfinished history of the labour movement. In a year when we have seen a general election defeat, followed by a leadership campaign which in many ways has taken the Party back to its roots, enthusing members and supporters, old and new, there can be no more fitting moment to celebrate the memory of Keir Hardie.

*For more information, visit the Keir Hardie Society Website on:* [*http://keirhardiesociety.co.uk*](http://keirhardiesociety.co.uk)

Barbara Humphries