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ASPECTS OF SOCIALISM SOUTH OF MERTHYR AND IN TAFF BARGOED IN THE 1890s: A WINDOW ON LABOUR'S PRE- HISTORY

by Martin Wright

Merthyr holds an iconic place in the history of modern British socialism. The site of Keir Hardie's electoral breakthrough in the General Election of 1900, it was perceived by socialists thereafter as 'the first field reaped in the dawn'.¹ If Hardie's constituency was a field, however, it was complex and variegated, comprising not only Merthyr and Aberdare, but also the valleys of the Taff and Taff Bargoed that are the primary focus of this volume. Separated by the upland spine of Merthyr Common and Cefn Merthyr, these valleys contain the settlements of Troedyrhiw, Aberfan, Merthyr Vale, Treharris, Trelewis and Bedlinog: communities that were growing rapidly in the late-Victorian period, as industrial development – principally in the coal and rail industries – attracted a new, young and vibrant population into the area. Along with the people came new ideas, and it was in the communities of Taff Bargoed and those to the south of Merthyr town, particularly that of Treharris, the 'ugly modern township of collier cottages and the Ocean Company's deep pit' (as one contemporary observer put it),² rather than in the main urban centre of Merthyr itself, that one of the most influential of all ideas – the ideology of modern socialism – first took root in the south Wales coalfield. It was, indeed, in Treharris (not Merthyr) that the first branch of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) was established in the south Wales coalfield. A study of the emergence of socialism in this south-Wales valleys seedbed has the potential to illuminate our understanding of the wider growth of the movement. What it reveals is that to thrive, socialism depended upon a complex dynamic driven by ideas, people, organisations and

¹ John Bruce Glasier in *South Wales Labour Annual* (1903), p. 74.

² G.A.H. Samuel in *Labour Leader*, 17 December 1898.

events – a dynamic that produced a movement universal in its nature yet attuned to local influence and circumstance. This was the secret of socialism’s success in the valleys.

The idea of socialism, in its modern form, came into Wales in the 1880s through various channels. The newspaper press played a role in familiarising people with the new ideas, even if, for the most part, it wasn’t sympathetic to them. The press allowed socialist ideas to enter the private sphere where they could be considered at the family hearth and the breakfast table alongside other current affairs. In addition to this, leaflets, tracts and pamphlets published by the various socialist groups that had established headquarters in London in the 1880s presented a more detailed and positive account of socialism. Socialists had a great belief in the power of the printed word, and their propaganda, such as Robert Blatchford’s *Merrie England*, published in 1893, simplified complex ideas, making them accessible to a wide readership. Despite its title, Blatchford’s book was widely read and well-received in Wales, and its influence crossed the language barrier when it was translated into Welsh (as ‘Cymru Ddedwydd’), in the columns of the Aberdare newspaper *Tarian y Gweithiwr* in 1896.³ Socialists were convinced, as one of their Aberdare activists put it, that ‘once people begin to read about Socialism their ultimate conversion is certain’.⁴

Word of mouth, too, was important: literary and debating societies, political organisations and even the chapel vestry offered an arena in which socialism could be examined and debated, even if at the end of such debates, motions were almost invariably passed in opposition rather than support of socialist ideas. It is difficult to trace the spread of an idea through a population, but what can be said with some certainty

³ *Tarian Y Gweithiwr*, 9 January – 3 December 1896. See Martin Wright, *Wales and Socialism: Political Culture and National Identity Before the Great War* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), pp. 101-2.

⁴ Aberdare Public Library, PY4/10, Circular letter from W.W. Price to Aberdare Valley ILP, 7 November 1907.

is that by the end of the 1880s the communities in Wales where socialism had established some sort of ideational critical mass were in the larger, more cosmopolitan urban areas along the south Wales coast. Of principal importance to our current purposes was the nascent socialist movement in Cardiff, which at the end of the 1880s comprised a small group of young enthusiasts who were busy studying texts such as the *Fabian Essays in Socialism* and organising lectures and meetings.⁵

It was enthusiastic individuals like the Cardiff Fabians that took the seeds of socialism and planted them in Welsh soil. This process began in the early-1890s, when, with growing confidence in their own abilities to propagandise, members of the Cardiff Fabian Socialist Society began to travel up Taff Vale in their spare time and preach socialism in the first communities that they reached. Chief among them was a doctor, by the name of David Rhys Jones. The Welsh-speaking son of a Cardiganshire tenant farmer, Jones had come to socialism through studying ‘*pwnc y tir*’ - the land question - with which he fused his Christian beliefs and the influence of gradualist Fabian socialism to produce a form of socialism that could appeal directly to Welsh Liberal-Nonconformist sensibilities. His command of the Welsh language enabled him to reach across a language divide that had made it difficult for propagandists from outside Wales to penetrate Welsh communities.

Jones was therefore able to act as a guide for socialist speakers from outside of the region, and was instrumental in opening up valleys communities to socialist ideas. In September 1895, for example, he accompanied James Sexton, the leader of the Liverpool dockers, and Jesse Butler, of the Manchester ILP, on a visit to Treharris, where he spoke on platforms alongside them in Welsh.⁶ Sam Hobson, another

⁵ For the Cardiff Fabians, see Wright, *Wales and Socialism*, pp. 35-58.

⁶ *Labour Leader*, 14 September 1895.

prominent Cardiff Fabian, also visited Treharris to spread the socialist message.⁷

The pioneering work of the Cardiff Fabians opened the way for other socialist speakers. J.S. Hamilton, of the London Fabian Society, gave a series of lectures in the region in 1895.⁸ The Bristol solicitor-socialist, Hugh Holmes Gore, also visited Treharris several times in the mid-1890s,⁹ as did Tom McCarthy and the Christian socialist speaker Fred Brocklehurst, whose meeting there in February 1896 was chaired by David Rhys Jones.¹⁰ On this occasion, Jones spoke from the chair in both English and Welsh, and Brocklehurst spoke on the topic of ‘Socialism and the Future’ to 160 people, to whom he appealed on the basis of their Welsh identity: ‘Are you going to oppose the ILP, he asked, and thus brand yourselves reactionists? He did not believe that of progressive Wales.’¹¹

Some of the speakers were prominent national figures. Tom Mann, for example, one of the leaders of the Great London Dock Strike of 1889 and, by the mid-1890s, a key figure in the ILP, spoke at Treharris in the summer of 1896.¹² Jim Connell, composer of the socialist anthem *The Red Flag*, was another visitor to Treharris,¹³ as was the Bristol socialist, Enid Stacy.¹⁴ However, the most famous socialist to visit was Keir Hardie, who spoke there in September 1896, at what was the first of a series of meetings in south Wales. A local Methodist Minister, R. Roberts, acted as chairman – an obvious attempt to win over local

⁷ *Merthyr Express*, 7 September 1895.

⁸ *Labour Leader*, 5 December 1896.

⁹ *Labour Leader*, 30 November 1895; *Merthyr Express*, 23 November 1895.

¹⁰ *Labour Leader*, 7 December 1895; *Merthyr Express*, 7 December 1895, *Clarion*, 22 February 1896.

¹¹ *Merthyr Times*, 20 February & 5 March 1896.

¹² *Merthyr Express*, 4 & 11 July 1896.

¹³ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 1897.

¹⁴ *Labour Leader*, 27 February 1897.

Nonconformist opinion.¹⁵ A good crowd braved dreadful weather, and the meeting opened with a labour hymn ‘sung to the good old tune of Gwyr Harlech’ with Hardie leading. Hardie spoke for an hour, during which his argument that ‘An independent party must be formed with the sole and supreme object of fighting the workers’ battle’ was ‘listened to with the closest attention’.¹⁶

Hardie’s visit was but one episode in his quickly developing relationship with south Wales - a relationship that served to pull the region into an ever closer relationship with the wider British socialist movement.

Perhaps the most eye-catching socialist incursion, however, came in the form of the *Clarion* Van tours that went through the south Wales valleys in 1897 and 1899 respectively. The *Clarion* Vans, organised by the popular *Clarion* newspaper, began touring Britain in the mid-1890s. They manifested as a horse-drawn cavalcade of socialist enthusiasm, the mission of which was to take the socialist message into the most remote parts of Britain. The *Merthyr Express* described the novelty of a visit from a *Clarion* van in 1897:

The *Clarion* Van is a veritable home on wheels, and is neatly fitted up with sleeping bunks, side benches, with lockers underneath for literature and clothes, a marvellous sliding table which draws out and vanishes mysteriously when it is no longer required, while a cooking stove and patent wash stand, in addition to a food cupboard and clothes press, complete the indispensable furniture. When the Vanners are numerous or the ground permits, a tent is pitched for use as a sleeping place of the men, the van itself being appropriated for the ladies’ use ... A feature of the van tour is the amount of free literature which is distributed in all places through which the van passes while actually en route.¹⁷

¹⁵ *South Wales Echo*, 24 September 1896.

¹⁶ *Merthyr Times*, 24 September 1896.

¹⁷ *Merthyr Express*, 28 August 1897.

In the late-summer of 1897, a van visited Troedyrhiw, Merthyr Vale and Treharris, where the ‘vanners’ held meetings and distributed socialist propaganda.¹⁸ At Treharris, the experience of the van’s activists was typical of Welsh propaganda outings. They organised an open air meeting on the steps of the Public Hall, but this was quickly disrupted by a heavy rainstorm. After succeeding in securing space indoors, the socialists spoke to a full meeting, after which they had an encounter with some of the local nonconformist clergy that might serve as an apposite illustration of the wider encounter between the socialists and the chapels that was afoot in the Wales of the 1890s:

When the speeches were over questions and discussions were invited. None of the questions asked had any reference to the speeches of the evening, and a determined effort was made by two members of the local Dissenting ministry to introduce a discussion on Theology. One reverend gentleman even went so far as to turn the audience into a congregation for the space of a minute and a half, when he was pulled up by the chairman who reminded him that as Socialists were endeavouring to gain for the workers the full value of their labour, he was a little beside the point ... After a little further discussion in which the reverend gentlemen rather lost their tempers ... the meeting terminated with an almost unanimous vote in favour of and three cheers for Socialism.¹⁹

The van’s encounter with religion at Treharris was not, however, wholly fruitless. A fortnight later, after the van had moved up to Pontypridd, it was reported that ‘Comrades from Treharris came over in force’, and among them was a Reverend Williams, who had clearly been won over.²⁰ Thus, socialism became a presence in the daily life of those living in the valleys.

¹⁸ *Clarion*, 7 August – 18 September 1897.

¹⁹ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 4 September 1897.

²⁰ *Clarion*, 18 September 1897.

Given the intensity of socialist activity there in the mid-1890s – in part, perhaps, a result of its geographical position– it isn't perhaps surprising that the first formal socialist organisation to be formed in the south Wales valleys was established at Treharris, where the ILP began to put down roots in 1895. Individuals in the town had been attracted to the ILP before the mid-1890s, and by 1895 they were making their presence felt by writing to the local press, arguing that 'we as Independent Labourites, and as a political party in this country have come to stay'. The ILP, they claimed, was 'the front horse of the labour movement'.²¹ By October 1895, a group reportedly known as the 'Labour Party of Treharris' was meeting at the town's Coffee Tavern Rooms.²² They reported regularly to Keir Hardie's newspaper, the *Labour Leader*, and, 'after a month's work', were feeling 'encouraged and very much strengthened'. They were particularly gratified that the local branch of the railwaymen's union had declared for independent labour representation.²³

By March 1896, what had now become Treharris ILP claimed a branch of thirty members - three times more than the number of ILP members in Merthyr itself!²⁴ Their activities also consistently stimulated frequent debate in the letters pages of the local press, ensuring that socialism became part of the town's intellectual landscape.²⁵ So, the claim of Treharris to be the birthplace of independent labour politics in the south Wales valleys would appear to be a strong one.

The structural nature of socialism at its grass roots was, however, a complex matter in the 1890s, as different socialist groups competed for membership. Those planning on joining the socialist movement had a choice of two main organisations: the Independent Labour Party (ILP),

²¹ *Merthyr Express*, 7 & 14 September 1895.

²² *Merthyr Express*, 12 October 1895.

²³ *Labour Leader*, 5 October 1895.

²⁴ National Library of Wales, Thomas Jones C.H. Papers X2, Benjamin Evans to Thomas Jones, 1 March 1896.

²⁵ E.g. see *Merthyr Times*, 29 January, 13 February, 5 March, 10 September and 1 October 1896.

which offered a relatively flexible, non-ideological form of ethical socialism, and the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), which offered a more strident, Marxist-inspired form of the socialist creed ostensibly committed to the ‘class war’. In practice, although the two groups often often sniped at one-another from the columns of their respective newspapers, at a local level activists often struggled to differentiate between the two parties, and there was a substantial grass-roots movement in the 1890s agitating for what was known as ‘Socialist Unity’: a fusion of the two organisations. The Treharris socialists were well aware of these debates and were open minded about their affiliations.

In early 1896 they were in favour of replacing the existing socialist factions with one ‘Socialist Political Party’.²⁶ Although affiliated to the ILP they kept good relations with the SDF and received a box of books from the Salford branch of the SDF in February 1896.²⁷ They supported the ‘Socialist Unity’ campaign orchestrated by the *Clarion* newspaper in the late 1890s, and in 1897 they initiated a Jubilee Day celebration at Caerphilly Castle to which all socialists, regardless of affiliation, were invited from across the region.²⁸ Factionalism was, however, never far away. At the Caerphilly Castle meeting in July 1897 a contingent sympathetic to the SDF ensured that they were photographed separately from the ILPers,²⁹ and in 1898 there seems to have been an outbreak of factionalism at Treharris itself when the socialists there severed their connections with the ILP and affiliated to the SDF (an arrangement which seems to have been temporary). The somewhat counter-intuitive reason they gave for this defection was the SDF’s putative support for ‘fusion’ with the ILP.³⁰

²⁶ *Labour Leader*, 1 February 1896.

²⁷ *Labour Leader*, 15 February 1896.

²⁸ *Labour Leader*, 3 July 1897.

²⁹ *Justice*, 10 July 1897.

³⁰ *Justice*, 19 December 1898.

Regardless of the occasional expression of factionalism, it was from Treharris that socialist ideas and, crucially, the establishment of ILP branches was organised in the central valleys in the 1890s. Members of the Treharris ILP were instrumental, for example, in assisting the establishment of an ILP branch at Merthyr at the end of 1895.³¹ In the summer of 1896, they organised an extensive lecture campaign by J. W. Wood, who spoke on the 'Religious Aspect of Socialism' at Cilfynydd, Nelson, Bedlinog, Llanbradach, Pontypridd, Merthyr, Merthyr Vale, Troedyrhiw, Maescymmer, Mountain Ash and Aberdare. They claimed an attendance of up to 2,000 at some of these meetings, and distributed 10,000 assorted leaflets and copies of the *Labour Leader* and the *Clarion*.³² Thus the growth of socialism developed its own internal dynamic – increasingly independent of outside influence – in the coalfield.

An essential aspect of early socialism, and the key to its survival in hostile conditions, was the political culture that went with it. Socialism in late-Victorian Britain was essentially a counter-cultural phenomenon, half-bohemian and half-puritan. Being a socialist involved becoming part of what was in effect an alternative community, despised by many in wider society but nourished by a range of social and educational activities, the purpose of which was to create social coherence and develop the human capital of socialist organisations. In the parlance of the time, socialists aimed 'to build the new world in the shell of the old'.³³ The socialism of the region was typical of the wider socialist movement in this respect. The Treharris ILP held a weekly

³¹ *Labour Leader*, 7 December 1895.

³² *Labour Leader*, 15 & 22 August 1896.

³³ For discussions of socialist political culture see Stephen Yeo, 'A New Life, The Religion of Socialism in Britain 1883-1896', *History Workshop Journal*, Autumn 1977, pp. 5-56; A.J. Ainsworth, 'Aspects of Socialism at Branch Level, 1890-1900', *Bulletin of the North West Labour History Society*, vol. 4, 1977, pp. 6-35; Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture*, 1880-1914 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), and in Wales, Wright, *Wales and Socialism*.

debating class on Tuesday evenings, at which members were prepared for the potentially hostile world of the street corner and the meeting hall.³⁴ The key text in this educational effort was Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England*. 'Merrie England is a byword', the branch reported to the *Labour Leader* in 1895.³⁵ Oliver Jenkins, the Secretary of the Treharris ILP, claimed in 1897 that he had personally distributed over a thousand copies of the book.³⁶ In early 1896 a *Merrie England* class, which rotated around members' houses on successive Sundays, was established in Treharris. Members studied a chapter of Blatchford's text each week, carefully examining its arguments and learning to counter the arguments of opponents.³⁷

The political culture of socialism was, however, by no means all work and no play. It was joyous as well as educational, and music played an important part in this. Socialists would customarily end meetings by singing socialist anthems, such as Edward Carpenter's *England Arise*, which, despite its title, seems to have been enjoyed as much in Wales as in England. The socialists of Treharris were at the forefront of socialist music in the valleys, when in 1897 they established a socialist string band.³⁸ When not singing, the socialists of the 1890s could often be found either rambling or cycling. The bicycle, which was becoming cheaper and more easily available to working class people in this period was the perfect socialist machine, representing freedom on the one hand, and, on the other, offering the opportunity to cover ever more ground distributing propaganda. Newspapers like *The Clarion* covered cycling affairs in detail, and at least some of the Treharris socialists seem to have been involved in the socialist cycling craze, attempting in 1897 to form a *Clarion* cycling club.³⁹

³⁴ *Labour Leader*, 19 October 1895.

³⁵ *Labour Leader*, 9 November 1895.

³⁶ National Library of Wales [Microfilm], Francis Johnson Correspondence, 1897/55. Letter from Oliver Jenkins to Tom Mann, 18 August 1897.

³⁷ *Labour Leader*, 1 & 15 February 1896.

³⁸ *Merthyr Express*, 26 June 1897.

³⁹ *Clarion*, 4 & 11 September 1897.

The key to success in translating the abstract ideas of socialism into a political culture and political organisations was the involvement of charismatic and influential local figures who were already embedded in their community. In Treharris the most important of these was Dan Osborne. Keir Hardie described him as ‘well to the fore all the time’ and placed him ‘an easy first amongst the pioneers of Socialism in South Wales’.⁴⁰ The son of a Treharris shoemaker, Osborne had left the town as a young man to work as an electrician in southern England and then Spain, but had returned by the 1890s to re-establish himself in Treharris as a photographer and music teacher. By 1894 he was performing publicly alongside his music students, and had formed a band in Treharris, much to the approval of the *Merthyr Express*, which opined that his involvement assured that the ‘public will be afforded a novel musical treat’.⁴¹ His musical and photographic work brought him into contact with most elements of the local society and ensured that he was well-liked and respected across Treharris and its locality.⁴² Well connected locally, he was involved in the South Wales Photographers Association, and at various times the local Primitive Methodist Connection, the local Spiritualist movement and the Theosophist society. His photographic studio in Mary Street became ‘a popular rendezvous for young men and adults holding Bohemian views’ and a lecture room for socialist and other causes in which he was involved.⁴³

Among other curiosities there, he kept a ‘weird, uncanny fetish-box styled a phonograph’, into which he recorded the voice of the *Labour Leader’s* reporter, ‘Marxian’ (G.A.H. Samuel) in 1898.⁴⁴ Osborne was

⁴⁰ *Labour Leader*, 9 July 1898.

⁴¹ *Merthyr Express*, 30 December 1893; *Merthyr Express*, 17 November 1894.

⁴² He is to be found, for example, taking retirement photographs at Quakers’ Yard Station (*Merthyr Express*, 19 October 1895), gifting oak framed photographs at a local marriage (*Merthyr Express*, 19 June 1897), providing music at the Grand Bazaar of Saron Wesleyan Chapel in John Street, Treharris (*Merthyr Express & Glamorgan Free Press*, 31 July 1897).

⁴³ *Merthyr Express*, 20 July 1935 (Osborne’s obituary).

⁴⁴ *Labour Leader*, 17 December 1898.

also an innovative propagandist. He pioneered the use of the magic lantern, a new and exciting propaganda tool, in the region. In 1899, for example, he delivered magic lantern shows at Merthyr Vale and Nelson, narrating the life of Gladstone, illustrated with limelight views and sound recordings of both Gladstone's and Lord Salisbury's voices.⁴⁵ The success of socialist propaganda in Treharris, and the musical nature of its attendant culture, no doubt owed a great deal to Osborne's influence.

Osborne was supported by a local cast, including the railway signalman, Oliver Jenkins, who served at various times as secretary of both the Treharris ILP and the Quakers' Yard branch of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, until he left the region in the late-1890s.⁴⁶ It was Jenkins' influence, no doubt, that attracted the local railwaymen to the ILP in 1895. A little way up the Taff Bargoed valley, in Bedlinog, another prominent local figure, Joseph Sparkes, emerged as the key socialist influence. A Welsh-speaker, originally from the Newport area, Sparkes was well-aware of his radical heritage. He was a great grand-nephew of the Chartist leader John Frost, of whom he possessed a portrait. Originally employed as a miner, Sparkes was forced out of the mining industry in the 1890s as a result of his socialist activities, and set himself up as a meat salesman and grocer – a role (like that of Osborne's) which put him beyond the reach of employer victimisation. He gathered a group of socialists around him, including a cobbler, Humphrey Owen, whose workshop became the centre for Bedlinog's socialist activities.⁴⁷ During the coal strike of 1898 he was highly active in promoting the ILP, being described by Keir Hardie in the *Labour Leader* as 'ubiquitous'.⁴⁸ Dedicated individuals like Osborne, Jenkins

⁴⁵ *Merthyr Express*, 4 March 1899; *Glamorgan Free Press*, 18 February 1899.

⁴⁶ *Labour Leader*, 30 November 1895, 27 February & 28 August 1897.

Methry Express, 12 January 1895.

⁴⁷ South Wales Miners' Library, AUD/213, Transcript of Interview of Edgar Evans (Broadhaven, Pembrokeshire) with D. Smith and H. Francis, 14 July 1973.

⁴⁸ *Labour Leader*, 3 September 1898.

and Sparkes were crucial to the fortunes of socialism within their communities yet we know little about them. They in turn were supported by a cast of characters who delivered leaflets, donated to party funds, and argued the merits of socialism on street corners, in chapel and pub, and about whom we know even less.

Mention of the 1898 coal strike reminds us that in addition to ideas, organisations and individuals, the development of socialism in the Wales of the 1890s was also driven by events. The most dramatic of these was the coal strike of 1898. The six month strike (or lock-out, depending on one's perspective) catalysed political developments in south Wales dramatically. It drove a wedge between employers and employed and ushered in an era of industrial discontent that lasted well into the twentieth century. The defeat of the miners also undermined the position of the moderate Lib-Lab miners' leaders who had taken their members into the strike, and provided an opportunity for socialists to spread their message. In particular, the strike provided a platform for the most prominent socialist in Britain, Keir Hardie, who visited south Wales several times in 1898, laying the foundations for his later election victory in Merthyr Boroughs.⁴⁹

The settlements of Taff and Taff Bargoed were central to socialist involvement in the strike. Willie Wright, the ILP's full-time paid organiser, who had been appointed just before the outbreak of the strike, visited the area several times during 1898 to liaise with local socialists and recruit to the ILP. Wright attended numerous meetings in the Treharris area, including those organised by women in support of the miners, at which, he reported, the speeches were 'excellent'.⁵⁰ It was the Treharris stoneyards, however, where striking miners were engaged in stone-breaking in return for poor-relief, that were a particular focus of attention.

⁴⁹ For a full discussion of the impact of the strike on socialist fortunes see Wright, *Wales and Socialism*, pp. 105-122.

⁵⁰ *Labour Leader*, 6 August 1898.

In June, Willie Wright was in attendance at a 1,000 strong ‘semi-sacred concert’ at the Treharris stoneyard. After a solo rendition of ‘Down in the Valley’ by one of the miners, Wright told the assembled crowd that ‘they had been down in the valley and shadow of death long enough; the time had come when they should be on the hilltops of life and enjoying the substance, not the shadow’.⁵¹ It was, however, Hardie who attracted most attention. In the same month, he was the star of a mass meeting of 5,000 miners at Troedyrhiw, in anticipation of which the surrounding villages had been decorated with bunting and streamers to welcome him. Five colliery bands led delegations from Plymouth Colliery, Merthyr, Dowlais, Treharris and Merthyr Vale to hear him, despite pouring rain.⁵² By the end of 1898 socialism, and in particular its leading acolyte Keir Hardie, had become a cause celebre in the upper Taff valley.

To conclude, this brief investigation of socialism’s early years in the region is far from exhaustive. It does, however, demonstrate that the spread of socialism and the organisation of independent labour politics – long considered by most historians to be a later development in south Wales – was well under way by the 1890s. By the middle of the decade, socialist politics – first developed along the urban south coast – was being transplanted to the south Wales coalfield. The primary site of this transplantation was south of Merthyr Tydfil and centred on the community of Treharris. Socialism developed there as the result of a fertile interaction of ideas, organisations, individuals and events, and by the end of the 1898 coal strike it was irreversibly a part of the region’s social, cultural, intellectual and political life.

The dominance of Labour in twentieth century south Wales was built upon a colourful and eventful pre-history into which the study of

⁵¹ *Labour Leader*, 28 May, 4 & 18 June 1898.

⁵² *Labour Leader*, 9 July 1898. *Merthyr Express*, 2 July 1898 supports the attendance figure of 5,000, although the less sympathetic *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 30 June 1898, reports 4,000.

communities like those in the Taff and Taff Bargoed valleys offers an illuminating window. It is the task of the local historian to draw back the curtains and let in the light.