Plymouth Labour Party in the 1920s

Jonathan Wood

The 1920s was a pivotal decade in the history of the British Labour Party. Before 1924, it had been a small party, much of whose electoral success was due to its 1903 electoral agreement with the Liberals. In the 1920s, it replaced the Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservatives. The first Labour government – a minority government dependent on Liberal support – took office in January 1924. In the 1929 general election, Labour became the largest single party for the first time and formed the second Labour government.

The development of Plymouth Labour Party paralleled the national trend. Prior to the First World War, Labour's electoral progress in Plymouth had been limited. In the 1920s, the Labour Party became the main alternative to Conservatism in Plymouth. Jimmy Moses, a Labour councillor, became Plymouth's first Labour mayor in 1926 and its first Labour MP in 1929.

In this essay, I will outline the evolution of the Plymouth Labour Party before and during the First World War to illustrate the background to my main subject: Labour politics in the city during the 1920s. I will examine the distinctive features of the Plymouth Labour Party and explore the policies it advocated.

Plymouth's Political Culture in the Interwar Period

Labour's development in Plymouth in the 1920s should be put in the context of its prewar history and the city's political culture.

The Amalgamation of the Three Towns

In the 1920s, the political structure of the modern city of Plymouth had only been in existence for a few years. Until 1914, Plymouth, Stonehouse and Devonport, which physically coalesced to become a single conurbation, remained separate towns in political

and administrative terms. Plymouth and Devonport were county boroughs, while Stonehouse was an urban district council responsible to Devon County Council.

There was a campaign, supported by the Labour Party, for the amalgamation of the three towns. This proposal was approved in a referendum and the three towns amalgamated to form the county borough of Plymouth in 1914.[1]

When the new unitary authority was elected in November 1914, Devonport had fewer councillors than Plymouth. There was resentment that Plymouth had eclipsed Devonport as a result of the amalgamation. In January 1929, the executive committee of Plymouth Central Labour Party criticised the election address produced by St. Aubyn's ward Labour Party in Devonport because 'a grumble about the amalgamation of the Three Towns' featured prominently in it and the address demanded 'special consideration for the special interests of Devonport', even though Plymouth Labour Party had supported the amalgamation.[2]

The Importance of Defence and the Power of the Admiralty in Plymouth

Plymouth was a 'garrison town'. The city's role in the defence of Britain shaped its economy, society and politics. The Royal Naval Dockyard in Devonport was by far Plymouth's largest industrial employer and Devonport's *raison d'être*. In the interwar period, 25 per cent of the city's workforce were employed in the dockyard and 14 per cent were members of the armed forces.

The Royal Navy's importance to Plymouth's economy meant the Admiralty had great political influence in the city. The Admiralty's priorities were Britain's military and strategic needs, and these sometimes conflicted with Plymouth's economic interests. It was concerned that the dockyard should be able to recruit the skilled workers it needed without having to pay high wage rates, which would increase public expenditure. It consequently used its political influence to prevent commercial developments that might compete with the yard for skilled workers and push up wage rates. In a speech he made in 1929, Plymouth's then mayor, Alderman James Churchward, commented on the Admiralty's opposition to potential

[1] Mary Hilson, *Political Change and the Rise of Labour in Comparative Perspective: Britain and Sweden 1890–1920* (Nordic Academic Press, 2006), p. 88; Crispin Gill, *Plymouth: A New History* (Devon Books, 1993), p. 244.

[2] Plymouth Archives Reference 667/2 Plymouth Central Labour Party minute book, 'Election Addresses', Monthly Executive Committee meeting, 1 February 1929; Gill, ibid.

competition for Labour, 'when we were attempting to make an alteration so far as our commercial facilities were concerned it was vetoed by the Admiralty'.[3]

The Labour Party in Plymouth Before 1914

Attempts by the Plymouth Labour movement to achieve its own political representation independent of the existing political parties began in the late nineteenth century. In 1892, a Trades Council was formed in the city. Members of the trades council proposed it should run its own candidates in the council elections. This was opposed by other members of the council and the ensuing dispute caused the break-up of the body.

The Trades Council was re-established in 1897 and it hosted the Trade Union Congress (TUC) conference held in Plymouth in 1899. The congress passed a resolution instructing the TUC's parliamentary committee to invite socialist, trade union and other Labour organisations to cooperate in convening a congress with the aim of increasing Labour representation in Parliament. This led to the founding conference of the Labour Representation Committee, which became the Labour Party in 1906.

In Plymouth, a Labour Representation Association (LRA), which was not affiliated to the national Labour Representation Committee, was established in 1902. In 1906, the LRA established a joint committee with Plymouth Trades Council, which affiliated to the national Labour Party. The LRA concentrated on local politics. Labour did not contest Plymouth's parliamentary seats until 1918. Prior to the First World War, Labour's electoral achievements in Plymouth were limited. It contested only small number of council seats, and only a few Labour councillors were elected. [4]

[3] Julia Neville, '"Putting On the Top Hat": Labour Mayors and the Local Press in Interwar Plymouth', *Southern History*, 31 (2009), pp.102–3; Hilson op. cit., p. 71; 'Broad Vision of Plymouth: Views at Insurance Dinner' in *The Western Morning News and Mercury*, 11 November 1929, p. 6 (Plymouth Archives Reference 3405); Scrapbook of James Churchward, Mayor of Plymouth, 1929–30.

[4] Hilson, op. cit., pp. 85, 110, 129, 144–8; Plymouth Archives Reference 3642, Plymouth and District Trades and Labour Council Souvenir of the Trades Union Congress, Plymouth (1923), pp. 3–5; Plymouth Archives Reference 3642/573, Plymouth and District Trade's Council, Souvenir of the Sixty-Eighth Trades Union Congress in Plymouth (September 1936), pp. 41, 43–44.

The Formation of the Plymouth Labour and Cooperative Representation Association

The Plymouth Cooperative Society had become the largest working-class organisation in the three towns of Plymouth, Stonehouse and Devonport, and by 1914 it was the second-largest retail Cooperative Society in England and Wales. It had adhered to the cooperative movement's traditional policy of political neutrality, but wartime developments caused both the Plymouth Society and the national cooperative movement to abandon this policy.[5]

In 1915, the government introduced the excess profits tax, which imposed tax on all profits in excess of the pre-war standard. This tax treated the trading surpluses of cooperative societies as profits that would be liable for tax if they exceeded pre-war levels. Since making profits was not the goal of cooperative societies, the tax was regarded as grossly unfair and it threatened to place a heavy financial burden on the Plymouth Cooperative Society. Plymouth Cooperative Society vigorously opposed the tax and challenged it successfully in the courts. Legislative changes in 1917 meant cooperative surpluses would not be liable to tax.[6]

Another issue helped to convince Plymouth Cooperative of the need for political representation. The need to regulate wartime food supply necessitated the creation of local food control committees. The Cooperative Society, despite its importance as a provider of food in Plymouth, found itself grossly underrepresented on the local food committee. This – together with the controversy over the excess profits tax – persuaded many Plymouth co-operators that their society needed political representation at both national and local levels.[7]

The national Cooperative Society voted to end its policy of political neutrality and seek political representation at its congress in Swansea in July 1917. Plymouth Cooperative Society independently made the decision to abandon neutrality and intervene in politics to defend its interests. Local trade unionists and the Plymouth Cooperative Society's management committee agreed to form a new local body that would secure political representation for the Labour movement.

[5] Hilson, op. cit., pp. 108, 114.

[6] Hilson, op. cit., pp. 137–8.

[7] Hilson, op. cit., pp. 139–43.

A conference of delegates representing local trade unions and Plymouth Cooperative Society voted to establish the Plymouth and District Labour and Cooperative Representation Association (LCRA), which was set up in August 1917.

The LCRA's membership was composed of delegates from Plymouth Cooperative Society and Cooperative Guilds, local trade unions and other local Labour and socialist organisations. Its aim was to elect representatives of the working -class to public bodies. In December 1917, the LCRA affiliated to the national Labour Party.[8]

The Importance of the LCRA to Plymouth Labour Party

The existence of the LCRA, which could call on the resources of the local Cooperative Society, enabled Labour to mount a much more ambitious electoral campaign in Plymouth than it had been able to do previously. Ward committees were established in every one of Plymouth's wards and LCRA candidates stood in all the city's wards. Labour candidates stood in two of the city's parliamentary constituencies in the 1918 general election; the first time Labour had contested parliamentary seats in Plymouth. In July 1918, the LCRA appointed a full-time organising secretary, James Turner.[9]

The Electoral System in Post-First World War Plymouth

Before 1918, Plymouth was divided into two borough constituencies, each of which returned two MPs. These were replaced by three parliamentary constituencies (called divisions at the time): Sutton, Drake and Devonport, each one being represented by a single MP. The Labour Party set up three Divisional Labour Parties for the three parliamentary divisions. Labour's activities across the whole of Plymouth were coordinated by Plymouth Central Labour Party, which comprised delegates from the three Divisional Labour Parties, local trade unions and other organisations affiliated to the Labour Party.[10]

---

[8] Hilson, op. cit., pp. 144–47.

[9] Robert Briscoe, *Centenary History: A Hundred Years of Co-Operation in Plymouth (Manchester Cooperative Press Limited*, 1960), p. 74; Plymouth Archives Reference 3642/691, Official Souvenir of the Annual General Meeting of the NUR in the Cooperative Hall, Courtenay Street, Plymouth (16–20 June 1919), p. XLV.

[10] Hilson, op. cit., p. 15; Gill. op. cit., p. 249.

The Increase of Labour Support in Post-War Plymouth

The 1918 general election was the first occasion on which Labour had contested parliamentary seats in Plymouth. Labour candidates stood in two of the three parliamentary constituencies. William Gay (who was employed by the local Cooperative Society as a footwear manager) stood in Plymouth Sutton, and Fred Bramley (a trade unionist) was the Labour candidate in Devonport. Both came a distant second, with Gay receiving 20.6 per cent of the vote and Bramley achieving 19.3 per cent, though they succeeded in pushing the Liberal candidates into third place. Labour Party members were not disappointed by the results and believed their party had performed creditably in its first parliamentary elections in Plymouth.

Waldorf Astor (Conservative MP for Sutton) entered the House of Lords, which resulted in a by-election in his constituency in November 1919. His wife, Nancy Astor, was the Conservative candidate, while William Gay again represented Labour. Nancy Astor won, becoming the first woman to take her seat as an MP in the British Parliament.[11]

Labour's most impressive advances were in the local elections. Jimmy Moses, one of the leaders of the shipwrights in Devonport Dockyard, had been a Liberal councillor on Devonport Town Council since 1911 and, after the amalgamation of the three towns, a member of the unitary authority. In 1918, he joined the Labour Party. In the Plymouth Council elections in November 1919, nine more Labour councillors were elected. Never before had so many Labour councillors been elected in Plymouth.

Labour also won seats on the Plymouth and Devonport Boards of Guardians. These Boards were responsible for administering public assistance for the poor. Ten Labour supporters were elected to the Devonport Board of Guardians and six to the Plymouth Board.[12]

[11] Hilson, op. cit., pp. 151, 160, 165; Table 5.1 Parliamentary Election Results in the Three Plymouth Constituencies, 1918.

[12] Len Stephens, *The Life and Times of Jimmy Moses* (Old Plymouth Society, 2010), pp. 8–10; Plymouth Archives Reference 3642/691, Official Souvenir of the AGM of the NUR, June 1919; 'Municipal Elections: Result of Contests in the West Labour Fortunes', *Western Morning News*, 3 November 1919.

The Labour Party in Plymouth During the Early and Mid 1920s

Labour continued to make gains in the early and mid 1920s. In the local elections of 1920, two more Labour councillors were elected.

Table 1: Political affiliation of Plymouth Council members, 1919–23[13]

Year	Conservative	Liberal	Labour and Cooperative
1919	44	24	10
1920	43	21	12
1921	48	15	11
1922	55	16	4
1923	53	16	7

Although the number of Labour councillors fell from its high point in 1920, the Labour group on the council benefited from containing several prominent local trade unionists: Bert Medland, secretary of the influential Devonport Dockyard branch of the Amalgamated Engineering Union; James Churchward, president of Plymouth Trades Council; and Richard Oke, a leading figure in the local branch of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR).

The preeminent figure in Plymouth Labour Party in the 1920s was Jimmy Moses, a dockyard shipwright and a member of the National Executive of the Association of Shipwrights and Ship Constructors. In 1923, Moses ran as the Labour candidate in the Plymouth Drake constituency and reduced the majority of the Conservative MP, Sir Arthur Shirley Benn, to fewer than 500 votes.

[13] Figures from Table 5.3: Political Affiliation of Council Members, 1914–1924, in Hilson, op. cit.

Table 2: Plymouth Drake in the 1923 General Election[14]

Sir Arthur Shirley Benn (Conservative)	12,345
James Moses (Labour)	11,849

The Conservative vote increased in the 1924 general election, but Moses again performed well. In 1923 and 1924, he secured a higher percentage of the vote than had ever been achieved by a Labour candidate in previous parliamentary elections in Plymouth.

Labour Establishes Itself as the Main Opposition Party on Plymouth Council

The 1925 local election produced a major expansion in the Labour group on Plymouth City Council, which was joined by several new Labour councillors. Bert Medland recalled this in an article he wrote: 'In 1925 we had a key accession to our strength. I think about six or seven. Then we became a real opposition'

From then on, Labour councillors outnumbered Liberal ones, and Labour became the main opposition party on Plymouth Council. The table below shows the changed balance of forces on the city council.

Table 3: Party Allegiances of Plymouth Councillors and Aldermen Following the November Elections[15]

Date	**Conservative**	**Labour**	**Liberal**
November 1925	49	17	13
November 1926	47	19	13
November 1927	46	23	11
November 1928	42	24	12
November 1929	36	30	14

[14] Stephens op. cit., p. 20; Alderman H. M. Medland, 'They Called Me 'Stormy' in *Christmas Cheers* (Magazine of the Plymouth Guild of Social Services, 1961), p. 8; Plymouth Archives Reference 3642/5523 Cornish and Devon Post Obituary of R. R. Oke 'Launceston-Born Man was Lord Mayor of Plymouth'.

[15] Medland op. cit., p. 9; Neville op. cit., p. 104.

Until the mid-1920s the Conservatives and Liberals had together decided the allocation of committee chairmanships and aldermanic seats, and the mayoralty rotated between these two parties. The expanded Labour group demanded recognition of the fact that it had become the official opposition on the council, with the award of committee chair and aldermanic seats to Labour councillors and the opportunity for Labour councillors to become mayor.

There was conflict over this issue. In a discussion about the allocation of aldermanic seats at a meeting of Ford Ward in Devonport Division in November 1921, several members criticised what they described as 'the dictatorial attitudes of the Tory leaders'. By November 1925 the leaders of the Conservative and Liberal parties had acceded to Labour demands for representation on the council committees, but Labour members were dissatisfied because there had been no pledge about Labour rights to make nominations to the mayoralty. They resolved to nominate Jimmy Moses for the position if no reply was forthcoming.

Labour's demands were eventually met. It was agreed that the allocation of committee membership and chairmanships would be in proportion to the number of councillors belonging to the different parties. Jimmy Moses became chair of the estates committee, James Churchward chaired the special works committee, Oke was allotted chairmanship of the libraries committee, and Bert Medland that of the public health committee. In 1926, Moses became Plymouth's first Labour mayor, and Labour shared the right to nominate the mayor with the two other parties in a three-year rotation. In 1927, agreement was reached on the aldermanic seats.[16]

The Labour Party was demanding change in the existing system of local government in Plymouth to reflect the party's increased electoral support. It was campaigning for change in the established political system but it was also adapting to it. They challenged the Conservatives and Liberals but also made agreements with them. Labour councillors were acquiring the skills and knowledge required in local politics. Plymouth's Liberal leader, Sir Thomas Baker, advised and mentored Labour councillors. Medland referred to his debt of gratitude to Sir Thomas because the latter insisted Medland learn about civic finance.

[16] Plymouth Archives Reference 667/7 Plymouth Labour Party, Devonport Division, Ford Ward minute book, January 1921 to May 1925; Special meeting held College Road, 11 November 1921; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/2 Plymouth Central Labour Party minute book, August 1923 to July 1925; 'Mayoralty' special delegates meeting held at 12 Treville Street on 15 October 1925; Minutes of special delegate meeting held at 12 Treville Street on 3 November 1925.

Medland also received valuable advice and tuition from the borough treasurer, Henry Hoare.[17]

The General Strike and the Miners' Strike of 1926

The severe crisis in Britain's coal-mining industry led the mine owners to demand the miners accept reduced wages and longer hours. When the miners' leaders rejected these demands, the coal owners threatened to lock out their employees. The miners' union appealed to the TUC General Council for help, and the General Council – while supporting attempts to negotiate a settlement – made plans for sympathetic strike action. The lock out of the miners began on 1 May 1926. The government withdrew from the negotiations, and throughout Britain workers responded to the General Council's call to take action. The General Strike began on 4 May 1926.

In Plymouth, transport workers, printers and other sections of the working class joined the strike but the workforce of Devonport Dockyard, the city's largest employer, worked normally throughout the dispute. The General Council had not called on workers in the Royal Dockyards to join the General Strike, and dockyard workers did not down tools.

Plymouth Trades Council converted itself into the Central Strike Committee, which mobilised support for the General Strike and the striking miners. Labour councillor James Churchward, who chaired the Trades Council, became chair of the Central Strike Committee, and the headquarters of Plymouth Sutton Labour Party in Treville Street was one of the places where strike bulletins were posted. Railway worker and Labour councillor Richard Oke was a leader of striking rail workers in Plymouth and Cornwall during the General Strike.

The General Strike was called off on 12 May 1926, but the miners remained on strike until poverty and hardship forced them to return to work in November 1926.

A joint committee of Plymouth Trades Council and the workers' side of the dockyard's Whitley Committee (an industrial council that brought together management and workers)

[17] Medland op. cit., p. 8; Gill op. cit., p. 177.

was created to raise money for the striking miners and their families. Councillor Medland chaired this committee, which gave nearly £5000 to mining communities.[18]

Plymouth Labour Party's Relationship with the Local Press

In the 1920s, the relationship between Plymouth Labour Party and the local press was frequently one of mutual suspicion and, for a long time, antagonism. Dr Julia Neville, in her article 'Putting on the Top Hat: Labour Mayors and the Local Press in Interwar Plymouth' describes the animosity between the local press and the Labour Party, which existed for much of the 1920s. The local papers, *The Western Morning News and Mercury* and the *Western Evening Herald*, were owned by Sir Leicester Harmsworth, who ensured that the editorial views of his papers were generally pro-Conservative. The influential editor of the *Western Evening Herald*, W. O. Mills, was a close friend of leading Tories, including Conservative council leader Lovell Dunstan. In an editorial he wrote in October 1926, he urged his readers to vote against Labour candidates.[19]

Resentful of press bias, Plymouth Labour often refused to cooperate with local journalists. In July 1921, members of Ford ward Labour Party voted against admitting a *Western Morning News* reporter to their ward meeting. In December 1923, the Labour Party organised a protest meeting in reaction to what they regarded as the unfairness of the press during the general election.

Relations between the press and the Labour Party in Plymouth deteriorated further still after the General Strike. At the annual delegate meeting of Plymouth Central Labour Party in May 1926, anger over the reporting of the General Strike by the local press resulted in many of the delegates calling for a boycott of the *Western Morning News*. The paper's reporters were excluded from Labour meetings, which the paper publicised in articles in June 1926. In September 1926, the executive committee of Plymouth Central Labour Party discussed whether to give reports to what they called 'the local Capitalist press' and urged Labour Party members not to provide any news to the local papers. However, the antagonism diminished

[18] Plymouth Archives Reference 3642573, Plymouth Trades Council Souvenir of the Sixty-Eighth T.U.C, p. 46; Plymouth Archives Reference P368 3642/852 H. B. Williams, 'History of the Plymouth and District Trades Council from 1892 to1952', pp. 22–24; 'Shipping Delay at Plymouth. Newspapers Nearly Normal', *Western Morning News*, 7 May 1926, p. 3; 'Preparations for Strike', *Western Morning News*, 3 May 1926, p. 3.

[19] Neville op. cit., pp. 105–6, 124–5.

towards the end of the decade with the once vehemently anti-Labour W. O. Mills praising the manner in which Labour mayors Jimmy Moses and James Churchward performed their duties.[20]

The Watchman

In 1924, Devonport Divisional Labour Party established its own newspaper, *The Watchman*. Its first editor was a committed Labour activist, Mr Bull. *The Watchman* invited the Divisional parties and the Central Labour Party in Plymouth to publish their election manifestos and other campaigning material in its pages. In its early years, *The Watchman* enjoyed enthusiastic support, and its circulation exceeded the expectations of its founders. The bulk of its readership was in the Devonport division. A letter from the secretary of Devonport Divisional Labour Party revealed 2,000 copies of *The Watchman* were sold in Devonport each month, while sales in the Sutton and Drake divisions were only 400 copies each.

Until 1927 the circulation of *The Watchman* remained stable, but from July 1927 its sales steadily declined. Mr Bull told the quarterly meeting of Devonport Divisional Labour Party that there had been an above-average drop in the paper's sales. In 1929, Bull became a councillor and resigned as *The Watchman*'s editor. In January 1930 his successor as editor, H. Middleton, resigned and *The Watchman*'s management committee was ready to recommend ending publication of the paper unless a new editor could be found.

A new editor, Armand Northcott, was appointed, but the decline in the paper's circulation and the consequent fall in revenue continued. The paper had ceased to be self-financing and its management committee didn't want *The Watchman* to become a financial burden on the

[20] Neville op. cit., pp. 124–5; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/7 Plymouth Labour Party, Devonport Division, Ford Ward minute book, January 1921 to May 1925; Minutes of Ward meeting held at College Road School, 20 July 1921; Plymouth Archives, minutes of Plymouth Central Labour Party, August 1923 to July 1925; Minutes of Executive Meeting held at 12 Treville Street on 21 September 1923.

Divisional Labour Party. The executive of Devonport Divisional Labour Party decided the paper's December 1931 issue would be its last. No further issues were published.[21]

The 1929 General Election

In 1929, the Labour Party nationally and Plymouth Labour Party achieved their greatest electoral success in the interwar period. Jimmy Moses, who had polled well in the Drake Division in the general elections of 1923 and 1924, was the natural choice as Labour candidate in Drake in 1929. In Plymouth Sutton, William Westwood, a Scottish trade unionist, was the Labour challenger to the Conservative incumbent, Lady Nancy Astor. In Devonport – whose MP was the Liberal, Leslie Hore-Belisha – the Reverend Donald Fraser, a Unitarian minister, represented Labour.[22]

The 1929 Plymouth Drake Election Campaign

Drake Divisional Labour Party adopted Jimmy Moses as their parliamentary candidate. He chose as his election agent a fellow dockyard worker and trade union activist, Councillor Bill Miller, a man of mixed-race heritage and Plymouth's first Black councillor. Bill Miller had been Moses's election agent in the general elections of 1923 and 1924. Councillor Harry

[21] Plymouth Archives Reference 667/2, Plymouth Central Labour Party minute book, minutes of executive committee of Plymouth Central Labour Party, held at Treville Street on 28 August 1924; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/2, Plymouth Central Labour Party minute book, August 1923 to July 1925; Minutes of executive committee of Plymouth Central Labour Party held at 12 Treville Street on Tuesday 25 September 1924; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/11, Plymouth Labour Party, Devonport Division minute book, July 1925 to 10 October 1931; Minutes of the quarterly meeting of the Devonport Divisional Labour Party, held in the Homeward Bound on Tuesday 24 July 1928 'Report'; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/11, *Watchman* report in minutes of the quarterly meeting held at the Homeward Bound on 22 January 1929; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/11, 'Statement re *Watchman* in minutes of special meeting of the divisional executive in the Exmouth Hall on Sunday 5 January 1930; Plymouth Archive Reference 667/22 *The Watchman* (Plymouth Labour and Socialist Organ); 'Future of *The Watchman*' in *The Watchman* 85, January 1931; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/22 'It Had its Day and Ceased to Be' in *The Watchman* 95, December 1931, p. 2; Plymouth Archives 667/22 Current Comment 'Conclusion' in *The Watchman* 95, December 1931, p. 7.

[22] Plymouth Archives Reference 88/23/1, The Plymouth Election Petition Drake Division, Transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 1, pp. 3–4.

Mason was a member of the Plymouth Drake election committee and Councillor Medland also played an active role in Moses's election campaign.[23]

Moses was also backed by a wealthy philanthropist, Albert Casanova Ballard, who financed and organised charitable work among disadvantaged boys in Plymouth and ran popular boys' clubs in the city. In 1928, he opened the Ballard Institute, which provided recreation, physical training and educational opportunities for large numbers of boys and young men. Moses was mayor when he first met Ballard. He was favourably impressed by Ballard's work with boys and became a keen supporter of him and his activities. Moses was surprised when Ballard offered to donate £50 to the Labour Party's Fighting Fund because Ballad was a lifelong Conservative, but Ballard considered his work with boys much more important than party political loyalties and backed Moses because the latter had championed his boys' clubs. As he said in a letter to Moses, 'I am supporting you absolutely irrespective of party and I have voted Conservative all my life.'

On 13 May, Ballard sent Moses a laudatory letter, which he wished to distribute to every voter in the Drake constituency. Bill Miller warned that if Ballard was responsible for the distribution of election propaganda it would be a breach of election law. Moses persuaded Ballard that he and Miller should take responsibility for distributing the letter. 5,000 copies of the letter were distributed to the boys at the institute and another 10,000 copies were printed as a circular, with the words 'Follow Mr Ballard's advice' on the back. Ballard originally supported Moses, Lady Astor and Hore-Belisha in Devonport but Moses convinced him to transfer his support to Astor's Labour opponent, William Westwood.[24]

Appeals to Female Voters

In the 1929 general election, female voters were more important than ever before. The 1918 Representation of the People Act had given women the vote for the first time, though their political rights were still not equal to those of men. The Act gave the vote to all men over 21

[23] Plymouth Archives Reference 88/23/1, volume 1, part 1, pp. 3, 5, 15–18, 348–53; Plymouth Archives Reference 88/23/1, volume 1, part 2, pp. 44–8, 50–7, 337–49; Plymouth Archives Reference 439/18/8, biographical particulars of Alderman Henry George Mason; Mr W. A. Miller, 'Leader of City Homes Drive Dies,' *Western Evening Herald*, 22 December 1970.

[24] Plymouth Archives Reference 88/23/2, Plymouth election petition, Drake Division transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 2, pp. 44–8, 50–7, 337–49.

but only enfranchised women who were over 30. However, in 1928, the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise Act) extended the vote to all women aged over 21.

Recognising the importance of the female vote, the Labour Party in the Drake election campaign put much effort into appeals to female voters. Drake Divisional Labour Party's Propaganda Society organised a meeting for 'new voters' in the Guildhall, whose aim was to introduce new female voters to the Labour Party's aims and principles.

The Women's Section of Drake Labour Party organised a meeting for women voters in Kent Unity Hall, which Moses addressed, emphasising Labour's record in advocating political rights for women. He said, 'in the coming election the women are going to play a very important part.' He portrayed Labour as the party which had championed women's rights 'During the coming election the Labour Party was essentially the party which had the right to claim the women's vote. Labour had been fighting for "votes for women" for years, when other parties regarded the cause as unpopular.'[25]

Ballard and the Campaign in Drake

Labour's election campaign in Drake benefited from Ballard's endorsement of Moses, but Ballard's impulsiveness and political naivete caused problems for Labour. Bill Miller, Moses' election agent, discovered Ballard intended to place an electoral advertisement campaigning for Moses in the papers and realised that if Ballard paid for such an advert without written authority from Miller, it would infringe election law. Miller, Moses and Mason tried to get the advert withdrawn but were unsuccessful. Moses later raised his concerns but Ballard argued he was solely responsible for the advertisement and, as it was his name on it, he thought there wouldn't be any legal difficulties.[26]

[25] Joan Robinson, *Hearts and Minds, The Untold Story of the Great Pilgrimage and How Women Won The Vote* (Doubleday, 2018), p. 291; Plymouth Archives Reference 88/23/1, Plymouth Election Petition Drake Division transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 1, pp. 287–8; Plymouth Archives Reference 88/23/1 Plymouth Election Petition Drake Division, transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 2, pp. 3–4.
[26] Plymouth Archives Reference 88/23/2, Plymouth Election Petition Drake Division, transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 2, pp. 389–91.

Jimmy Moses is Elected as Labour MP for Plymouth Drake

The general election was held on 30 May 1929 and Jimmy Moses was elected as Labour MP for Plymouth Drake

Table 4: Figures For Votes Cast in Plymouth Drake Division in the 1929 General Election

Jimmy Moses (Labour)	16,684 votes
Sir Arthur Shirley Benn (Conservative)	14,673 votes
Mr Pratt (Liberal)	6,301 votes

Jimmy Moses was not only Plymouth's first Labour MP but the first Labour candidate to be elected in any south-west English parliamentary constituency, west of Bristol.[27]

The Drake Election Petition

Moses had little time to enjoy his election victory because in June 1929, two electors in the Drake constituency – John Revington, a retired RAF lieutenant, and Andrew Easterbrook, a retired civil servant – submitted a parliamentary election petition that called for Moses's election to be declared null and void. An election petition was a procedure for challenging the result of a parliamentary election. Moses was the first Labour MP to face an election petition. The most serious charges in the petition were that Moses was guilty of corrupt practices and that an agent of his had been involved in actions that infringed the provisions of the 1918 Representation of the People Act. The alleged agent of Moses against whom the most serious allegations were made was Albert Ballard.

Two of the charges in the petition concerned the use of private hire cars and taxis to transport Labour voters to the polls, which was an offence under election law. It was also claimed Bill Miller, Moses's election agent, had omitted a number of expenses from his return of Labour's

[27] Plymouth Archives 88/23/1, Plymouth Election Petition Drake Division transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 1, p. 3; 'West's First Labour MP Mr Moses Wins Drake,' *Western Morning News*, 31 May 1929.

expenses for the Drake campaign and was accused of knowingly making false claims about Labour's election expenses.[28]

The Trial of the Drake Election Petition

The trial of the Drake election petition was held in Plymouth's Guildhall between 17 and 25 October 1929. The petition was heard in a special court presided over by two judges sitting without a jury. Moses was fortunate that Sir Stafford Cripps, a distinguished lawyer who had recently joined the Labour Party, led his legal team.

By the time of the trial, there were no longer any personal charges against Moses. The most serious charges concerned corrupt practices and bribery, which had resulted from the activities of Albert Ballard who – the prosecution alleged – had acted as Moses's agent in the election campaign. The prosecution argued that by paying for an advertisement, Ballard aimed to win votes for Moses and had committed a corrupt practice. They also claimed that he had made promises to boys attending his institute to induce them to persuade their parents and neighbours to vote for Moses, which was bribery.[29]

Moses's election agent had not authorised Ballard's newspaper advert, and the cost of the advert had not been included in the return of election expenses, which was corrupt practice. If Ballard was proven to be Moses's agent it would be a corrupt practice that Moses had committed through a corrupt agent, which would mean Moses's election would be declared null and void. The two crucial questions in the case were whether Ballard was acting as Moses's agent and whether his actions amounted to bribery of the voters.[30]

The prosecution team relied heavily on evidence from young boys who attended the Ballard Institute, but this proved a weakness because of the shortcomings of the boys' testimonies. Ballard had addressed large meetings of boys who were so noisy it was often difficult to

[28] Plymouth Archives Reference 88/23/1, Plymouth Election Petition Drake Division transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 1, pp. 10–14, 125, 131, 135, 147, 159–60, 195, 215, 220–3, 229–31; Plymouth Archives Reference 88/23/2, Plymouth Election Petition Drake Division, transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 2, pp. 357–66; 'Sensational Sequel to Drake Election. Petition Lodged Against the Return of Mr J. J. H. Moses,' *Western Evening Herald*, 27 June 1929.

[29] Plymouth Archives 88/23/1, Plymouth Election Petition Drake Division transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 1, pp. 4, 10–14, 22–9, 246–51, 413–8; 'Drake Election Petition Judges Selected to Hear Evidence,' *Western Morning News*, 28 September 1929; Chris Bryant, *Stafford Cripps: The First Modern Chancellor* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), pp. 79–80.

[30] Plymouth Archives 88/23/2, Plymouth Election Petition Drake Division transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 2, pp. 13–15, 16–24, 317–8, 420–38.

make out what was being said. Cripps was able to demonstrate that the testimony from the boys was confused, inconsistent and contradictory.

The judges gave their decision on the petition on 25 October 1929. Both agreed the petition had failed and had to be dismissed. Local elections were held shortly after the end of the trial and Labour gained five seats on Plymouth Council, mainly at the expense of the Conservatives.[31]

The High Point of Plymouth Labour in the Interwar Period

The year 1929 marked the zenith of Labour's strength in interwar Plymouth. Jimmy Moses was the city's first Labour MP, Councillor James Churchward was Plymouth's second Labour mayor, and fellow Labour Party activist Richard Oke was his deputy. After Labour's success in the 1929 city council elections, there were thirty Labour councillors on Plymouth Council; more than at any previous time. Labour did not win control of Plymouth Council, but it had more than twice as many councillors as the Liberals and had established itself as the main opposition to the Conservatives.[32]

Distinctive Features of Plymouth Labour Party

Previously, I have described Plymouth Labour Party's electoral advances in the 1920s. In this section, I will explore the composition, attitudes and beliefs of the party and discuss the occupational background of Labour's elected representatives and activists, the role of women and the influence of religion. This will be an examination of Plymouth Labour's political culture in the 1920s.

[31] Plymouth Archives 88/23/2, Plymouth Election Petition Drake Division transcript of proceedings, volume 1, part 2, pp. 420–38; 'The Talk of the City,' *Western Evening Herald*, 26 October 1929; P Bull, 'The Drake Election Petition Trial,' *The Watchman*, November 1929; Plymouth Archives 186/18/32 Lady Astor's Press Cuttings, October–December 1929; 'Current comment,' *The Watchman*, November 1929.
[32] Plymouth Archives 3642, 'Launceston-Born Man was Lord Mayor of Plymouth,' Obituary of R. R. Oke in *Cornish and Devon Post*; 'City's Second Labour Mayor: Alderman Churchward at Plymouth,' *The Western Morning News and Mercury*, 24 September 1929; Neville op. cit., p. 121.

The Occupational Backgrounds of Plymouth Labour Party's Councillors and Officials in the 1920s

Plymouth Labour's electoral gains in the 1920s changed the social composition of the city's councillors. Dr Julia Neville, in her article in *Southern History*, 'Putting on the Top Hat: Labour Mayors and the Local Press in Interwar Plymouth', noted an important characteristic of the Labour group on Plymouth Council in these years – over half (eighteen out of thirty-three) of the Labour councillors elected to Plymouth Council in the 1920s and early 1930s were skilled manual workers employed in Devonport Dockyard. The majority of the Labour group's leading figures were dockyard workers: Jimmy Moses; James Churchward; joiner and first vice-president of the Dockyard's Whitley Council, Bert Medland; another vice-president of the Dockyard's Whitley Council and leader of the Labour group from 1926, Harry Mason; and a boilermaker. A. N. Stroud, who had been elected as one of Plymouth's councillors in the early twentieth century and worked in the dockyard as a chargeman fitter (chargeman was a supervisory position).

Dockyard workers predominated in the Labour group but railway workers were also represented. Two examples are Richard Oke, who worked for the Great Western Railway as a traffic inspector, was prominent in the local branch of the NUR and became deputy mayor in 1929, and E. Perry, chairman of the joint committee of the NUR branch and senior vice-president of Plymouth Central Labour Party.

Dr Neville points out the social difference between the interwar Labour mayors and their Conservative and Liberal counterparts. While the latter came from affluent backgrounds, Moses and Churchward were manual workers with much more limited financial resources. In 1929, Moses described his election campaign in Plymouth Drake as the 'rising of a class'. This phrase encapsulated the way in which Labour's increasing strength in the 1920s made it possible for elected representatives from working-class backgrounds to have a much bigger role in Plymouth's politics.[33]

[33] Neville op. cit., pp. 104, 107–8; Briscoe op. cit., p. 55; Plymouth Archives Reference 3642/692, Plymouth and District Trades and Labour Council, Souvenir of the Trades Union Congress Plymouth, 1923, p. 17; Plymouth Archives Reference 3642/573 Plymouth and District trades and Labour Council. Souvenir of the Sixty-Eighth Trades Union Congress Plymouth, September 1936, pp. 15–17; Plymouth Archives Reference 3642/5523 Obituary of R. R. Oke.

Female Activists in Plymouth Labour Party

The 1918 Representation of the People Act had enfranchised the majority of adult women, and the 1928 Representation of the People (Equal Status) Act established equal voting rights. The Labour Party had to respond to the growing importance of the female vote and, as we have seen, Jimmy Moses and his campaign team issued appeals to female voters in the Drake election campaign. Despite the changes in the franchise, the culture of the Labour Party remained patriarchal but some of Plymouth Labour Party's female members became councillors or election candidates.

By the 1920s, each of Plymouth's three Divisional Labour Parties had its own women's section. In 1923, a resolution from Labour's finance sub-committee invited the three women's sections to meet representatives of Plymouth Central Labour Party's central executive committee to discuss the relationship between Plymouth Labour and its women's sections. In February 1927, the Women's Committee of Plymouth Labour Party devised the rules for a committee, called the Plymouth Labour Women's Joint Executive Committee, which would coordinate the activities of the women's sections. The committee would comprise delegates from all three women's section, including the president and secretary of each section. At a meeting of the Joint Women's Committee in February 1929, Mrs Townley (Women's Organiser) argued the Women's Joint Executive Committee was a controlling body that had power to act.[34]

Women members of Plymouth Labour were willing to make criticisms of the Labour government elected in 1929. In September 1929, a joint meeting of delegates from the three women's sections expressed concern about proposed amendments to the Labour government's Widows, Orphans and Old Age Pensions Act and called on the government to implement a non-contributory scheme for all widows. Kate Spurrell, who had acquired a reputation as an outspoken radical, addressed the meeting and told the delegates that party members should be critical of the Labour government. She expressed dissatisfaction because Arthur Greenwood, the minister responsible for the Act, had left certain widows out of the scheme. Another well-known female party member, Councillor Marshall, commented that the

[34] Plymouth Archives Reference 667/4 Plymouth Labour Party minute book, 1922–23; Minute book of the Executive Committee of Plymouth Labour Party, March 1922 to August 1923; Minutes of the Finance Sub-Committee held on 23 April 1923; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/9 Plymouth Labour Party Women's Committee, 24 June 1926 to 13 January 1930; Minutes of special meeting held at 12 Treville Street, Wednesday 23 February 1927.

Labour government – though it retained the faith of party members – still needed to be pressured.[35]

Three of the most significant of Plymouth Labour Party's female members in the 1920s were Sarah Louise Simpson, Jacquetta Marshall and Kate Spurrell.

Louise Simpson was the wife of a doctor and, in 1898 became the first woman elected to Plymouth's Board of Guardians. She was an active member of the Three Towns and District Branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies before the First World War. In the 1919 council elections, Mrs Simpson stood in Stoke ward as a Labour-Cooperative candidate and was elected, becoming the Labour Party's first female councillor in Plymouth. However, her career as a Plymouth councillor was relatively short because she and her husband left Plymouth in June 1921.

Jacquetta Marshall was born in Cornwall and moved to Plymouth in 1905. She was a member of Plymouth Cooperative Society and active in the Cooperative Women's Guild. Mrs Marshall was one of the first members of Sutton Divisional Labour Party and, in 1925, was elected Labour councillor for Sutton ward. In 1927, she became Plymouth's first woman alderman. Her most notable achievement occurred much later when, in 1950, she became Plymouth's first female Lord Mayor.

Kate Spurrell was the most radical and controversial of this trio of Labour women. She was a teacher and gained the post of president of the Plymouth branch of the National Union of Teachers in 1922. In 1918, she joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP), a socialist organisation that had played a substantial part in the creation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 and was an affiliated society of the Labour Party, and she was elected to the ILP's National Administrative Council for South-West England in 1929. In 1924 and 1929, she stood as Labour's first parliamentary candidate in Totnes.

Kate Spurrell was a popular public speaker and a vocal advocate of radical policies. She was, as mentioned above, a committed member of the ILP, which became more left wing and increasingly disaffected with the policies of the Labour leadership in the 1920s. Local right wingers denounced Kate Spurrell. In 1925, she was libelled by the *Kingsbridge Gazette and South Devon Advertiser*, which accused her of being an atheist revolutionary who spread

[35] Plymouth Archives Reference 667/9 Plymouth Labour Party, Women's Committee minute book, 24 June 1926 to 13 January 1930; Minutes of meeting held on Monday 11 February 1929 and Minutes of Joint Women's Meeting held Treville Hall on Monday 23 September 1929, Discussion of resolution on pensions.

Bolshevik propaganda. She took legal action against the proprietor and publisher of the paper and was awarded damages. In 1926, the Plymouth Ratepayers' Association asked Plymouth Council to demand Kate Spurrell's resignation as a teacher because of her political views. The Associations' call was rejected overwhelmingly by the city council.[36]

Religion and Plymouth Labour Party

Many Plymouth Labour Party members in the 1920s combined political commitment with religious faith. Julia Neville, in her article, notes that all four of interwar Plymouth's Labour mayors were practising Christians. Jimmy Moses had been a lay preacher; Kate Spurrell was a Sunday school superintendent and gave religious instruction to children; Labour's parliamentary candidate in Devonport in the 1929 general election was the Reverend Donald Fraser, Unitarian minister; and Councillor Harry Mason saw himself as a Christian Socialist.[37]

W. G. Hoskins, in his classic history of the county of Devon, argued that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, support for Devon liberalism came from those who attended chapels, non-conformists, while members of the Church of England voted Conservative. To a considerable extent, Plymouth Labour inherited this tradition. It did have some adherents in the Church of England – two of interwar Plymouth's Labour mayors were Anglicans – but many Labour Party members came from non-conformist backgrounds, particularly Methodism.

In an interview, the late Len Hill – a former Labour councillor and notable figure in Plymouth's Labour movement – spoke of the religious dimension of Plymouth Labour, saying 'There were quite a few people in Plymouth Labour Party who came from a Methodist background […] Labour councillors came from the Methodist and other non-conformist backgrounds.' Joe Pengelly, respected local journalist and oral historian, also considered Methodism a major influence on Plymouth Labour Party, quipping that Methodist Central Hall was Plymouth Labour Party at prayer.

---

[36] 'The Interests of Liberty. Plymouth Association and Miss K. Spurrell' in *Western Morning News*, 8 June 1926, p. 5; 'Municipal Elections. Result of Contests in the West. Labour's Fortunes,' *Western Morning News*, 3 November 1919; Background material on Louise Simpson by Anne Roberts; Research noted on Kate Spurrell by Sarah McCarthy; Material on Kate Spurrell's libel case in June 1925 from Anne Curry.

[37] Stephens, op. cit., pp. 7–8.

Many of Plymouth Labour's leaders and activists were Methodists. Jimmy Moses and Harry Mason had been Methodist lay preachers. Louise Simpson and Kate Spurrell were both Methodists. Harry Wright – Labour councillor, secretary of Drake Divisional Labour Party and eventually Lord Mayor – had a long association with Ford Methodist Church.[38]

Mount Gould Christian Socialist Church

One example of the intertwining of socialist politics and religious beliefs was the Mount Gould Christian Socialist Church, which had its origins in a dispute among Plymouth Methodists in 1926. As mentioned earlier, the miners' strike continued for months after the end of the General Strike, and mining communities suffered severe hardship. Forest Charles Ackland and his wife, Maud, were active members of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Mount Gould and held collections to raise funds for the miners' families outside the Church. These activities were opposed by Church officials, and the Acklands left the Wesleyan Methodist Church and founded the Mount Gould Christian Socialist Church, which initially met in Forest Ackland's house.

The Acklands propagated the doctrine of Christian Socialism and emphasised the connections between Christianity and socialism. They invited Labour Party members to their Christian Socialist meetings. Richard Davies, the Labour Party's prospective parliamentary candidate for Tavistock, was vice-president of the Church. One of its ardent supporters was Dr F. G. Bushnell, who for a period was one of Plymouth's Labour councillors.[39]

I will now turn to Plymouth Labour Party's policies towards major political issues in the city: housing and health, poverty and the Poor Law, and defence and disarmament.

---

[38] Plymouth Archives Reference 3642/5525, Westcountry biographies, Newspaper Cuttings Volume VI; 'Alderman Wright. Plymouth's New Knight' *Western Evening Herald*, 12 July 1965; ' Alderman H. E. Wright to be Lord Mayor. 25 Years on City Council,' *Western Morning News*, 19 March 1952; Sarah Louise Simpson, background material from Ann Roberts; Kate Spurrell libel case, 11 June 1925, Material from Ann Curry; Interview with Len Hill on 15 July 2011; Interview with Joe Pengelly on 1 July 2011.

[39] 'Christian Socialists. Mount Gould Church's letter to Wesleyan Conference,' *Western Morning News*, 27 July 1929; 'Wesleyans and the Miners. Mount Gould Christian Socialists' Views,' *Western Morning News*, 31 July 1929, p. 5; 'Christian Socialist Church' in *The Watchman*, Plymouth Labour and Socialist Organ, Number 89, June 1931, p. 5; 'Christian Socialist Church. The Passing of Mr Ackland,' *The Watchman*, Plymouth Labour and Socialist Organ, Number 90, July 1931, p. 3.

Housing and Health

By the twentieth century, poor housing had become Plymouth's main problem. Slums and overcrowding were widespread in the city. The 1921 census revealed that nearly 28,000 people in Plymouth were living in overcrowded dwellings and it was estimated that there were over 40 acres of insanitary and overcrowded houses in the city. Overcrowding in Plymouth compared badly even with conditions in Liverpool and the East End of London. A quarter of working-class families in Plymouth lived in overcrowded conditions and one-third of the local housing stock had reached the end of its useful life and needed to be replaced. At the same time, rents and rates accounted for a higher proportion of family income than in other major port cities.[40]

The city council's efforts to improve this situation were constrained by financial considerations. The priority of the Conservative leader on the Plymouth Council, Lovell Dunstan, was to keep the rates down. In 1925, the council housing committee undertook slum clearance, but to reduce costs, chose reconditioning instead of rebuilding and only built blocks of flats in slum areas that had to be cleared.[41]

Plymouth Labour Party condemned the Conservative council's housing programme as inadequate. One of Labour's main arguments was that slum housing and overcrowding caused ill-health, claiming that it was a major factor in the prevalence of tuberculosis in particular. In March 1923, a resolution drafted by Plymouth Central Labour Party's Executive Committee for submission to the mayor and the council's public health committee referred to the 'terrible overcrowding' in Plymouth, which resulted in the spread of tuberculosis and other diseases. It declared that Plymouth should have a sanatorium and urged 'immediate attention to the demolition of the slums which are one of the primary causes of tuberculosis'. The same point was made in a resolution passed by the executive committee in April 1923, which expressed surprise that the mayor and council officials had not announced 'their proposals for relieving the terrible overcrowding which still exists with all its attendant

[40] Brian Chalkley and John Goodridge 'The 1943 Plan for Plymouth: War-Time Vision and Post-War Realities ' in Brian Chalkley, David Dunkerley and Peter Gripaios (editors) *Plymouth: Maritime City in Transition* (David & Charles, 1991), p. 66; Plymouth Archives 667/22, 'War on Slums. Conference at Plymouth,' *The Watchman* 84, January 1931, p. 4.
[41] Gill op. cit., p. 246.

results of tuberculosis and other diseases'. Labour wanted a more ambitious and comprehensive housing programme. In the council elections in November 1926, Plymouth Central Labour Party advocated the creation of a council housing department that could build and maintain houses using direct labour.[42]

Plymouth's Labour activists had long believed that the building of more municipal housing was being prevented by powerful vested interests who benefited from the status quo – builders, property-owners, landlords, contractors, lawyers linked to these groups – and that many local councillors belonged to such groups. This was claimed by leading figures in Plymouth Labour in the 1920s. In February 1925, Alderman James Churchward spoke of the misdeeds of landlords:

> One noble lord in Plymouth recently had said the slums could not be cleared because it would not be profitable. There were scores of houses owned by prominent men which had not been repaired for many years […] they were told that (although) these individuals had received enormous rents for the last 30 years, the Corporation must clear the slums. That was the policy of their opponents in the ward today'.[43]

Dr Bushnell

These claims about slum housing's deleterious effects on public health seemed to be corroborated by Dr F. J. Bushnell, assistant tuberculosis officer in Plymouth Council's medical department, who was convinced slum housing and overcrowding were major causes of tuberculosis and other illnesses. Bushnell was a Labour supporter who had stood as the Labour candidate for the University of London in the 1924 general election and was a member of the advisory committee on public health matters to the TUC.

[42] Plymouth Archives 667/7 Plymouth Labour Party, Devonport Division, Ford Ward minute book, January 1921 to May 1925; Minutes of meeting of Ford Ward, 7 November 1921; Plymouth Archives Plymouth Central Labour Party, 30 July 1925 to 10 February 1927; Minutes of meeting of Executive Committee of Central Labour Party and municipal candidates held on 10 September 1926; Plymouth Archives 667/4 Minute book of the Executive Committee of Plymouth Central Labour Party from 2 March 1922 to 20 August 1923; Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Central Labour Party held on Thursday 15 March 1923; Minutes of the Executive Committee of Plymouth Central Labour Party held on Thursday 12 April 1923.

[43] Mary Hilson, 'Continuity and Change in the Rise of Labour: Working-Class Politics in Plymouth, 1890–1920', *Uppsala Papers in Economic History*, 1991, p. 28; 'Ministry and Dr Bushnell. No Authority to Review Decision. Issue at Mutley Ward Election,' *Western Morning News*, 19 February 1925, p. 3.

In January 1925, Plymouth Council gave Dr Bushnell three months' notice of the termination of his employment. Members of Plymouth Labour Party responded angrily to the doctor's dismissal. Criticism was increased by the council's refusal to provide a public explanation of the reason for Dr Bushnell's dismissal. Local Labour organisations sent resolutions to the town clerk and the Ministry of Health asking for either an inquiry or the doctor's reinstatement. It was alleged Dr Bushnell had been victimised because he was a Labour Party member and had exposed conditions harmful to public health. One councillor, Mr Hodge, noted that Dr Bushnell, in his capacity as tuberculosis officer, had campaigned for additional equipment to deal with the disease: 'it was because Bushnell had made himself objectionable to certain interests represented in the Council that he had been discharged'.[44]

Plymouth Labour Party organised a meeting in the city's Guildhall to voice opposition to Bushnell's dismissal. The meeting voted unanimously for a resolution protesting against the council's treatment of the doctor and demanding the council minutes referring to his dismissal be made public. Labour members contacted the Ministry of Health but were told the Ministry would not intervene in the case. Petitions condemning Bushnell's treatment gained numerous signatures. In May 1925, Bushnell, thanking the Labour Party for their support, applied for membership of the Central Labour Party. Later in the year, he was Labour candidate in Valletort ward and was elected to Plymouth Council, and in 1929 he was prospective Labour candidate in the Birmingham Moseley Division.[45]

Plymouth Labour Party, Poverty and the Poor Law

Poverty in Plymouth was widespread in the 1920s. The impact of the international economic recession was exacerbated by major reductions in the workforce of the city's largest employer, Devonport Dockyard. The number of dockyard workers decreased from 15,803 in

[44] 'Ministry and Dr Bushnell Authority to Review Decision. Issue at Mutley Ward Election' *Western Morning News*, 19 February 1925, p. 3; 'Dr F. G. Bushnell,' *Western Morning News*, 7 October 1924, p. 10; 'Dr Bushnell's Dismissal. Demand for Cause of Notice. Protest Meeting at Plymouth,' *Western Morning News*, 25 February 1925, p. 3.

[45] 'Labour Candidate Dr Bushnell, of Plymouth, at Moseley' *Western Morning News*, 9 April 1929, p. 7; 'Plymouth Municipal Elections List of Present Candidates,' *Western Morning News*, 5 September 1925, p. 3; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/2 Plymouth Central Labour Party minute book. August 1923 to July 1925; Minutes of the Executive Committee held on Thursday 28 May 1925 'Dr Bushnell'; Plymouth Archives reference 667/2 Plymouth Central Labour Party minute book, August 1923 to July 1925; Minutes of the Central Executive meeting held on Thursday 30 April 1925, 'Dr Bushnell'.

1918 to 11,670 in 1930. In Plymouth, as in other dockyard towns, alternative economic opportunities for discharged dockyard workers were limited and by the early 1920s, 6,000 people were unemployed in the city.[46]

Poor people who were either not entitled to unemployment benefit or had exhausted their entitlement to benefit were dependent on the public assistance provided by the Poor Law. The Poor Law was the system of social welfare which had evolved to provide assistance for the poor and needy. It was based on the principle that each parish was responsible for helping the poor in its area. Responsibility for administering the Poor Law had been taken over by the Ministry of Health in 1919.[47] In each area, management of the Poor Law was the responsibility of the local Poor Law Board of Guardians. The Guardians were elected by local ratepayers.

The poor and the Labour movement regarded the Poor Law as harsh and degrading. The ethos of the Poor Law continued to be influenced by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which had stipulated that the living standards of the poor in workhouses should be lower than those of the poorest labourer outside of the workhouses. One of the aims of the Poor Law was to deter all but those who were totally destitute from claiming poor relief. Originally, able-bodied workers would only be granted poor relief if they agreed to enter a workhouse and accept its regime of hard labour and strict discipline. In the 1920s, there was more use of test work or labour test work, which meant the able-bodied poor had to undertake manual work to receive poor relief.

For those claiming poor relief in Plymouth, the Poor Law provided meagre financial help under stringent conditions. To obtain this, they had to go into the workhouse or perform manual work at rates well below the average working wage. When Councillor Bert Medland, having become chair of the council's public health committee, visited the city's workhouse for the first time, he found conditions that resembled those in a prison:

> Walking from ward to ward, doors were unbolted and bolted behind us, Every section of that damned place had walls in it and we began by knocking them down... There were walls

[46] Hansard Navy Estimates 1920–21, Volume 126, debated on Thursday 18 March 1920, Mr Robert Young Column 2502, Lieutenant-Colonel Malone Column 2537.
[47] Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse Encyclopaedia* (History Press, 2012), pp. 11, 187; Noreen Branson *Poplarism, 1919–1925. George Lansbury and the Councillors' Revolt* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), pp. 114–15.

between wards, between the sexes, walls enclosing the 'idiots' (mentally disabled people) as they were described.

For those trying to claim poor relief in Plymouth, test work was offered as an alternative to going into the workhouse. Able-bodied men needing poor relief were sent to the Dumps at Prince Rock to do test work; a system that Labour candidates for the Devonport Board of Guardians opposed, describing it as demoralising.[48]

Labour candidates for the Boards of Guardians in the city observed that economic depression and continuing discharges of workers from the dockyard made it essential to have Guardians sympathetic to those applying for poor relief.

While the three towns had amalgamated into the county borough of Plymouth; Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse continued to have their own separate Boards of Guardians. The Labour Party wanted its supporters on the boards and its chances of success were improved by electoral changes which increased the number of people able to vote in the elections for Guardians. Before 1918, those in receipt of poor relief were not eligible to vote in the elections of Guardians, but this restriction was abolished in 1918, expanding the number of potential voters sympathetic to Labour.

In the 1919 Guardian elections, Labour won six seats on the Plymouth Board of Guardians and ten on the Devonport Board.

Table 5: Analysis of the Voting for the Boards of Guardians in Plymouth and Devonport[49]

Plymouth Board (42 seats)		**Devonport Board (45 seats)**	
Coalitionists	18	Coalitionists	35
Conservatives	12	Labour	10
Labour	6		
Liberal	6		

[48] Election Address to the Electors Molesworth Ward, from Labour candidates standing in the Board of Guardians elections in the Molesworth Ward, quoted in Stephens op. cit., pp. 16–17; Medland op. cit., p. 10; Higginbotham op. cit., pp. 118–20, 147–48; Branson op. cit., pp. 114–15.

[49] Figures taken from the analysis of the vote for the Boards of Guardians, published in the Plymouth Archives Reference 3642/691 Official Souvenir of the AGM of the NUR in Plymouth, June 1919, pp. XLIV–XLV; Election to the Electors of Molesworth Ward from Labour candidates for the Board of Guardians in Stephens op. cit.

Bert Medland stood in Molesworth Ward and was elected to the Devonport Board of Guardians. He recalled the impact of the newly elected Labour Guardians:

> '…I stood for Molesworth Ward in an election for the Board of Guardians and six of us got elected …We were the first Socialists on the Board and our advent was electrical …At the first meeting we declared war on the Poor Law'[50]

Labour members of the boards strove to improve the treatment of those applying for poor relief but experienced difficulties with other Guardians and with the Ministry of Health. By 1925, Labour outnumbered the Liberals on the Plymouth Board of Guardians. The precedent was that the party with the second-largest number of elected representatives on the Board of Guardians was entitled to appoint a vice-governor, but the Conservative Guardians ignored this precedent and backed the appointment of a Liberal vice-governor, thus denying Labour the right to choose a vice-governor. The Labour Guardians were ready to refuse to serve on any of the board's committees as a protest and the Conservatives threatened to fill any position that became vacant because of a boycott by Labour. The dispute bore a resemblance to the conflict in the council over the right of Labour councillors to be committee chairs and take part in the selection of mayors. Labour Guardians complained they had been treated unfairly over officer positions and appointments to committees and refused to serve on the committees until they had what they regarded as their rights.

A special delegate meeting in April 1926 instructed the Labour group of Poor Law Guardians to refrain from sitting on board committees unless their negotiations over the appointments of committee chairs, deputy chairs and members produced satisfactory results. Board elections had resulted in all the officers and committee chairs being Conservative.

The Labour Party continued to be discontented with its representation on the various board committees. The party's quarterly delegate meeting in November 1926 instructed Labour Guardians on the Plymouth Board to secure adequate representation when the next elections for places on the board committees occurred. An amendment to the original motion told

[50] Medland op. cit., p. 8

Labour members of the board to report back to the delegate meeting if they were unable to achieve fair representation.[51]

Labour Guardians' opposition to test work, required from the able-bodied claiming relief, led to friction with the Ministry of Health. The Labour Party pointed out the practical difficulties in operating a policy based on test work because the available facilities made it difficult to provide test work for all able-bodied claimants.

The Boards of Guardians in Devonport and Plymouth offered outdoor relief to able-bodied unemployed, rather than requiring them to go into a workhouse. The Minister of Health wrote to the two boards about this and informed the Devonport Board he would not approve outdoor relief for the able-bodied unemployed unless:

1. Hours of test work were increased.
2. In each case of relief for able-bodied single men without dependents, a special report was submitted to the Ministry of Health for its approval.
3. The relieving officer's staff was increased.

Plymouth Board of Guardians received a similar letter.

The Labour Guardians on Devonport Board voted against these proposals, but the board as a whole accepted longer hours of test work in principle and referred the issue of more relieving officers to the finance committee. The executive committee of Plymouth Central Labour Party instructed the Labour members of the Devonport Board's finance committee to oppose any increase in the relieving officer's staff. The Devonport Board decided not to increase the hours of test work until forced to do so by the Ministry of Health and opted to defer the question of more staff for the relieving officer until after the general election. By July 1929, the Devonport Board had approved a programme of test work at Prince Rock, but the Plymouth Board remained opposed and a meeting of the Labour Party's executive committee

[51] Plymouth Archives Reference 667/2, Plymouth Central Labour Party minute book, August 1923 to July 1925; Minutes of a Delegate Meeting on 14 May 1925 'Plymouth Guardians'; Plymouth Archives reference 6672 Plymouth Central Labour Party minute book, August 1923 to July 1925, Minutes of the Central Executive Meeting held on Tuesday 30 April 1925, 'Plymouth Board of Guardians'; Plymouth Archives Plymouth Central Labour Party minute book, July 1925 to February 1927; Minutes Special Delegate Meeting held on 15 April 1926; Plymouth Archives Plymouth Central Labour Party minutes, July 1925 to February 1927; Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee with Guardians held on 25 April 1926; Plymouth Archives, Plymouth Central Labour Party minutes, July 1925 to February 1927; Minutes of the Quarterly Delegate Meeting held on 11 November 1926.

and Labour Guardians instructed the Labour Guardians on the Plymouth Board to maintain their opposition to compulsory test work.[52]

At the end of the 1920s, government legislation enabled Plymouth Labour to mitigate the rigours of the Poor Law and transform the forbidding Plymouth Workhouse. In 1928, Neville Chamberlain, who was then the Conservative government's health minister, introduced the Local Government Act, which abolished the Boards of Guardians and transferred all their powers and responsibilities to local councils. Parliament passed this Act in March 1929.

In Plymouth, the town clerk produced a scheme for transferring responsibility for Poor Law administration to the council. This was discussed at a special meeting of the Central Labour Party's executive committee, councillors and Labour Guardian on Thursday 27 June 1929. The meeting decided that every function of the Guardians that it was possible to transfer to council committees should be transferred, and that a special Public Assistance Committee should be set up to take responsibility for poor relief.[53]

The new legislation enabled Bert Medland, chairman of the Public Health Committee, to implement dramatic changes in Plymouth Workhouse. On his first visit to the workhouse, accompanied by the medical officer of health, he had seen the regimented and demeaning conditions endured by workhouse inmates and had said to his companion 'We'll alter this'. This he did, accomplishing what he called, 'The best job I ever did, transforming what we now know as Freedom Fields, the old workhouse, into the City Hospital.' The grim workhouse became Plymouth's modern hospital.[54]

[52] Plymouth Archives, Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee and Guardians held on Sunday 23 September 1928; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/5, Plymouth Labour Party minute book, September 1928 to April 1931; 'Devonport Board' and 'Plymouth Board' in meeting of Executive Committee and Labour Guardians, 24 March 1929; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/5 Plymouth Labour Party minute book, September 1928 to April 1931; Meeting of Executive Committee and Labour Guardian on Sunday 21 April 1929, 'Devonport Board Test Hours', 'Relieving Officer Staff', 'Test Work Hours'; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/5, Plymouth Labour Party minute book, September 1928 to April 1931, Meeting of Executive Committee and Guardians, Sunday 21 July 1929, 'Test Work'.

[53] Higginbotham op. cit., p. 213; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/5 Plymouth Labour Party minute book, September 1928 to April 1931, Plymouth Central Labour Party Special Meeting of Executive Committee, Councillors and Guardians re. Transference of Poor Law administration, Thursday 27 June 1929.

[54] Medland, op. cit., pp. 9–10.

Defence and Disarmament

Plymouth's economic dependence on the armed services and the dockyard meant defence and disarmament were highly contentious issues. The Labour Party at national level contained pacifists and vocal opponents of militarism and in the 1920s was suspicious of defence spending, but national defence had a pivotal role in Plymouth' s economy and society.

Nonetheless, Plymouth Labour activists did advocate some measure of disarmament. William Gay, Labour candidate in the Plymouth Sutton parliamentary by-election in November 1919, declared in his election leaflet that Plymothians knew how much 'the prosperity of Plymouth depends upon a well-staffed Dockyard'. However, Gay, for whom war and militarism were anathema, argued that it would be 'absurd and even wicked to demand that wars and rumours of wars should be necessary to create a busy dockyard with regularly employed workers'. His proposals for protecting dockyard employment were similar to the recommendations from the Colwyn Committee set up to contemplate the dockyard's future – the dockyard should undertake work for civilian use to maintain employment. Gay called on the government to form a 'joint committee of workmen and government representatives to examine suggestions regarding the kinds of productive work that… may be executed (and) … whether the mercantile vessels so much needed could be built in the yard or not'.[55]

In November 1925, Plymouth Central Labour Party's annual delegate meeting passed a resolution calling for the abolition of submarines. Only a few days before the meeting, the M1 submarine had sunk off the coast of Devon, with the loss of its entire crew and the resolution referred to this tragedy. This incident was seen as confirmation of the delegates 'view that submarines were very hazardous but party members also regarded the use of submarines as a barbaric form of warfare'. The resolution wanted the British government to support the League of Nations' plan of convening a world conference aimed at abolishing submarines. The meeting also called on 'all people of goodwill' to work for the total disarmament of all nations. A meeting of the executive committee of Plymouth Central Labour Party in June 1926 passed a resolution for the Labour Conference that included a

[55] Plymouth Archives Reference 3642/3290, Election leaflet from W. T. Gay in the Plymouth Sutton parliamentary by-election, 15 November 1919.

proposal that Britain's dockyards and service establishments be converted to the production of peaceful civilian goods.[56]

However, because national defence was so essential to Plymouth, the local Labour Party had to be circumspect in its advocacy of disarmament. Labour's parliamentary candidates in the 1918 general election had not served in the armed forces during the war and this was used in the election campaigns to discredit them. Both men were accused of being pacifists, and criticism of William Gay was especially vitriolic because he was a member of the ILP, which had opposed the First World War. The *Western Morning News* believed Gay represented:

> an extreme […] section of the great Labour Party – the ILP which never […] commanded any considerable measure of support […] in Plymouth, and certainly not during the war, when the pacifist edge of its character became so discreditably prominent.

After the local elections of November 1920, the *Western Morning News* reported that in the military establishments in the Devonport wards, it seemed voters 'were Conservatives invariably; in any event they were against Labour'.[57]

In this political environment, Labour was reluctant to choose candidates who were vocal advocates of disarmament. This was an important consideration for the executive committee of one ward Labour Party when deciding their nomination for parliamentary candidate. They chose to nominate Bert Medland rather than Kate Spurrell because they felt 'his experience and knowledge of dockyard affairs would make him a more suitable candidate than Miss Spurrell'. Councillor Bull, a ward member, also said 'Miss Spurrell being an official of the Independent Labour Party and in view of their policy regarding disarmament he did not think she would make a suitable candidate for Devonport'.

In September 1930, a ward Labour Party meeting discussed the policies they wanted the delegate from their Divisional party to support at the forthcoming Labour Party Conference. The meeting considered the ILP's policies, including the ILP's proposal for 'disarmament by

[56] Plymouth Archives Reference 667/3, Plymouth Central Labour Party July 1925 to February 1927, Minutes of Annual Delegates Meeting on 19 November 1925; Plymouth Archives Reference 667/3 Plymouth Central Labour Party, July 1925 to February 1927; Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee held on 17 June 1926; 'HM Submarine M1' in *Grace's Guide to British Industrial History*, http//www.gracesguide.co.uk/HM_Submarine _M1 [accessed 22 July 2024].
[57] Hilson, op. cit., pp. 156–59; 'Conservative Gain. Labour and Liberal Slump', *Western Morning News*, 2 November 1920, p. 7.

example', which meant Britain should disarm unilaterally, irrespective of what other countries did. Though several members of the ward were in favour of this policy, the majority of the membership voted for 'disarmament by agreement', that disarmament had to be achieved by agreement between the different nations. The concept of disarmament by example failed to win over the majority of Labour members in Plymouth.[58]

Conclusion

When Jimmy Moses died in 1946, Bert Medland's tribute included a political slogan used in Moses's 1929 general election campaign, that the Labour campaign was 'the rising of a class'. This phrase captured an important aspect of Labour's political success in Plymouth in the 1920s. Labour councillors were predominantly skilled manual workers, particularly those employed in the dockyard, and their socio-economic background contrasted with that of Conservative and Liberal politicians, who mainly came from more affluent and privileged backgrounds.

Labour councillors and Poor Law Guardians protested against the status quo on the council and in the operation of the Poor Law. Labour councillors objected to not being awarded key positions on committees or given the opportunity to become mayor, while Labour Guardians resented their exclusion from the committees of Boards of Guardians and the inhumane treatment of the poor. But it was not the aim of the Plymouth Labour Party to overthrow or subvert the existing political system but to win a level of political influence commensurate with their increased electoral strength. Eventually, agreement was reached between the parties, which gave Labour a satisfactory share of positions on the city council.

The conversion of the workhouse into the City Hospital was one of Plymouth Labour's biggest achievements in the interwar period, but legislation passed by a Conservative government made it possible. In the 1920s, Labour councillors and activists forced Plymouth politics to change to reflect the post-1918 balance of political forces, but they themselves adapted to acquire the political skills they required. Bert Medland and other Labour councillors elected in the 1920s were willing to accept the tutelage of experienced Liberal

[58] Plymouth Archives Reference 667/6, Plymouth Labour Party minute book, June 1929 to June 1933, Ward meeting held 11 April 1930, 'Ward nominations for parliamentary candidate'; Ward meeting held on 22 September 1930, 'Disarmament' on 'Agenda of Labour Party Conference'.

Councillor Thomas Baker. New Labour councillors gaining knowledge and experience of local government was one aspect of the Plymouth Labour Party.

In the 1920s, the Labour Party, which had a marginal role in Plymouth politics prior to the First World War, became a major force in the city's political life, and several of those first elected as Labour councillors in that decade – Bert Medland, Harry Mason, Harry Wright, Jacquetta Marshall and Bill Miller – were leading political figures during Plymouth's reconstruction after the Second World War.