

1935 - when angry Welsh protests forced a government u-turn

Geoff Jones

On 4 February 1935, Ceridwen Brown of Aberdare led an army of women, some carrying babies, to Merthyr Tydfil Unemployed Assistance Board (UAB) offices. They broke into and wrecked offices, burning papers and smashing telephones despite the local Labour MP trying to dissuade them.

At the same time, there were massive demonstrations including a school students strike in Blaina in the next valley where the UAB offices were only saved by massed police baton charges. These battles followed a day of mass protest in the South Wales valleys where around 300,000 people across the area of the Welsh Coalfield had marched.

What caused this near insurrection? The 1929 crash and the ensuing slump hit industrial areas in South Wales particularly hard. The big steel works along the heads of the valleys all closed, as did most coal mines.

The town of Brynmawr claimed an unenviable record of 90% of insured men on the dole. Merthyr Tydfil had so little money to run its services that it was proposed to remove its borough status.

In the City of London, investors rushed to withdraw money and argued that only cuts in government spending could save the situation. This meant cuts in benefits to the unemployed.



Poverty conditions in South Wales were made worse by unemployment

A 'National Government' comprising Conservatives, Liberals and some right-wing members of the Labour Party, came to power in 1931 with a huge majority - their first action was to cut Unemployment Benefit by 8% and tighten up 'means testing' for benefits.

Anyone out of work for more than six months could have their 'assets' examined by inspectors who had the right to enter homes. Not only 'luxuries' such as cooking pots were considered but also the earnings of anyone else who lived in the house.

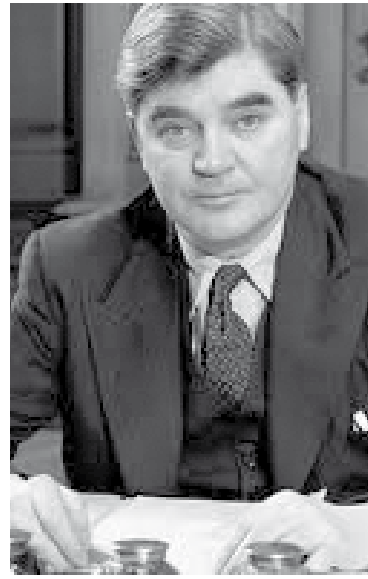
How did people survive? Families had to rely on Public Assistance Committees (PACs) financed and run by local councils - "taxing the poor to pay for the poor". These

committees had to use the hated means test but were under the control of local councillors who in South Wales were often unemployed themselves.

In areas such as South Wales, the PACs refused to employ the means test rigorously and 'anomalies' were exploited. Nevertheless, in the Rhondda in 1935, 15% of children were malnourished according to a government report.

Huge demonstrations

But those cuts did not appease City investors. Local PACs were seen as 'too generous' and the Unemployment Benefit Act 1934 aimed to set up statutory Unemployed Assist-



Aneurin Bevan

ance Boards which would have no leeway for 'generosity'. It was this final blow that sparked the huge demonstrations of 1935.

Dramatically on 5 February, the day after the eruption in South Wales, the government announced that implementation of the measures would be put off for a year and a half and much modified.

This was one of the few cases where popular movements (supported by parliamentary protests led by Aneurin Bevan, MP for Ebbw Vale) caused a government climb-down.

This climb-down was certainly not caused by the wrecking of a benefits office in a town that no government member had even set foot in. But it marked the breaking crest of a

growing wave of organised people's protest.

Even in those days, the Labour Party, which then claimed the allegiance of most workers, refused to support direct action. 'Left' Labour MP, SO Davies described the Merthyr demonstrators as 'scum'. In South Wales the lead was taken by the Communist Party and the Independent Labour Party (a left-wing group which broke from the Labour Party in 1932) in the National Unemployed Workers Movement. These parties had many failings but they were prepared to lead the workers' fight.

More cuts

Although working people have today won a standard of living that their grandparents in the 1930s could only dream of, City of London investors still bay for cuts to push us back into destitution. Even worse than then, Labour presents no alternative and even supports cuts.

As in the 1930s, women and young people are in the forefront of opposition. But if, back then, a coalition with a majority of 500 could be pushed back, how much easier should it be to defeat today's shaky Con-Dems?

As well as a mass movement it is vital to build up a new leadership for working class people to rally behind, one that will point the way forward to a new mass party of the working class to deal with the City parasites and their parliamentary hangers-on.

1915 - How strikes and rent strikes won gains for Scottish tenants

In this article Sinead Daly from Socialist Party Scotland shows how working class families resisted rent rises and appalling housing conditions in Glasgow nearly 100 years ago.

"It is a misnomer to call the situation in Glasgow a strike - this is a Bolshevik uprising," claimed Robert Munro, Secretary of State for Scotland in 1919. This 'situation' became known as Red Clydeside and included the powerful movement of rent strikes.

Living conditions in Glasgow were appalling with mass overcrowding of families in small flats. Thousands slept rough every night. Cholera, typhoid, smallpox and TB were rife. In 1871 almost one in five did not survive infancy. Mass industrialisation in Glasgow and Clydeside in the 19th and 20th century resulted in huge population growth. Glasgow alone grew from 112,000 in 1801 to over a million people in 1871.

Outbreak of war

The outbreak of war in 1914 saw tens of thousands of working class men joining the army leaving the women to struggle on lower wages, to feed and clothe their children and pay the bills and rent.

Thousands of other families were drawn into the city to provide the workforce for the munitions industry that was expanding rapidly due to the British army's demands. With housing demand outstripping supply landlords, hungry for more profits, set about increasing rents.

Families, unable to meet these



The 1915 Glasgow rent strike

rent rises, were threatened with evictions. By 1915 the stage was set for a social explosion against the rent increases and threatened evictions. The rent strikes began in Govan, in the heart of Glasgow's shipbuilding industry and quickly spread.

Key organisers of this campaign included John MacLean, Willie Gallacher, Andrew McBride of the Independent Labour Party (ILP - a workers' political formation which came out of 'new unionism' in the late 1880s) and John Wheatley who later became an ILP MP in Glasgow.

However, it was Mary Barbour of the Women's Housing Association, whose name became synonymous with the rent strikes and working class resistance. In May 1915 a joint meeting of Glasgow Labour Housing Committee and the Women's Housing Association called the first rent strike.

The aim was not to withhold the entire rent, but only the increased rent. Meetings were held in the backcourts, in the streets and wherever people could be brought together. Apart from the local meetings, city-wide demonstrations were organised including one in George Square in October 1915 where an estimated 25,000 people gathered to support the rent strikers' cause.

The women of the housing schemes were to the forefront of this movement. Whenever landlords' agents and sheriff officers came to carry out evictions, word quickly spread. Pots and pans were banged together, flour bombs, bricks and anything else that came to hand were used and the invaders were driven out.

No quarter or compromise was given by the women and the agents had to very quickly conclude that

their days of evicting non-payers were over.

Rent strikes were not unique to Glasgow. Significant movements took place in other major Scottish cities including Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen. John MacLean then put out the call for a complete rent strike in Glasgow and posters went up on windows and lamp-posts declaring: "We are not paying increased rent!"

Faced with this new tactic landlords were forced to pursue those in work through the courts, not for eviction warrants, but for arrestment of wages. They thought this would break the strike - how wrong they were!

Debt court

18 working men were due to appear in the small debt court on 18 November 1915 to have a wage arrestment order made against them. Mrs Barbour and other leaders within the Women's Housing Association mobilised the women from all the working class areas to march to the sheriff court.

One man summoned was an engineer, James Reid, from the Dalmuir shipyard. This spurred workers from Dalmuir, Fairfield, Stephens and other shipyards and factories in the city to down tools and march with the women.

The streets around the court house were jammed and all traffic stopped as upwards of 10,000 people protested. The mood was electric. John MacLean demanded that the prime minister, HH Asquith, introduce legislation preventing any increase in rents for the duration of the war. MacLean warned that a failure to do

so would result in a general strike on Monday 22 November.

Against the backdrop of these movements, home secretary David Lloyd George was forced to agree to immediately introduce a "Rent Restrictions Act". This victory boosted the confidence of Scotland's working class for future struggles.

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