

The Lessons of Keir Hardie

Scottish trade unionist and Labour Party founder Keir Hardie was born on this day in 1856. Today, as the country faces down new crises, Hardie's vision of a united labour movement fighting for change is as vital as ever.

Keir Hardie (1856-1915), Scottish trade unionist and one of the founders of the Labour Party. (Hulton Archive / Getty Images)

The scale of our current economic turmoil—with the cost energy, fuel, and food bills far outstripping falling real wages—is exactly the kind of crisis that originally made possible the establishment of political representation for the trade unions and the working class. The experience of workers back in the nineteenth century—of fluctuating wages imposed at the whims of business owners, and then of the industrial militancy of ‘new unionism’ in the 1880s and 1890s—made it clear that the working class also needed a political voice.

So the Labour Representation Committee was formed, delivering Labour MPs to Parliament. Key to this success was one Keir Hardie, the pioneering socialist from Scotland who organised miners in the Lanarkshire and Ayrshire coalfields before representing working-class voters from East London and later the Welsh Valleys in Westminster.



Keir Hardie addressing a tailors' rally on May Day in Hyde Park, London. (Topical Press Agency / Getty Images)

Hardie was born on 15 August 1856 in Scotland's Lanarkshire coalfield, as the industrial revolution gathered pace and accompanying industrial disputes over wages and conditions developed. Just a year after his birth, hundreds of miles from where he was growing up, coal miners in Aberdare and

Mountain Ash, in the Cynon Valley in South Wales, went on strike to fight a wage cut imposed by mine-owners. Hardie would dedicate his life to the industrial organisation of workers like those in Cynon Valley—and would end his years as MP for the same place, the seat of Merthyr, then including Aberdare and Mountain Ash.

Many of Hardie's parliamentary interventions are ones that still ring true more than a century down the line. In his maiden parliamentary [speech](#) in 1893, following his election as MP for West Ham South, Hardie condemned the economic situation that left millions in unemployment and destitution, stating:

For ten percent of the population no provision is made to enable them to earn for themselves and those dependent upon them the necessaries of life... it means that 4,000,000 of the inhabitants of these islands are without visible means of subsistence, not because of any fault on their part, but because our present land and industrial system denies them the opportunity of working for a living.

Later, in the period known as 'the great unrest' between 1910 and 1914, trade union militancy battled hard against falling wages as prices rose. Concern at the role of profiteering in industries essential to the life of the country but run under private ownership in driving down wages and general wellbeing spread then as it is now, and Hardie rightly diagnosed the problem. In a Commons debate on industrial unrest in May 1912, he [noted](#):

disturbances ... are caused by a deplorable insufficiency of wages, which has persisted notwithstanding a great expansion of national wealth and a considerable increase in the cost of living, and shows the necessity for preventing the continuance of such unequal division of the fruits of industry by legislation securing the right to work, a maximum eight-hours' working day, a minimum living wage, and the nationalisation of railways, mines, land, and other monopolies.

In his speeches Hardie also condemned pay differentials based on geography—in one instance, where Post Office wages were lower in Aberdare and Merthyr Tydfil compared to those in Cardiff—[asserting](#) that the cost of living in both locations required that workers should be paid the same. And in a debate on the deployment of the military to deal with the national rail strike in August 1911, he [condemned](#) the use of scab labour by private rail companies and the support offered to those companies by the government of the day, including through use of the military:

the Government said to the directors, "If a strike takes place, you get in your blackleg labour, carry on your restricted service, refuse to recognise the men's unions, and we will turn out every soldier in the country to assist you in your efforts to beat the men and keep wages low."

Many of these conflicts—from low wages to the government assault on trade unions, from enforced destitution to privately-managed public services—are ones that remain prevailing political issues in 2022. The need then for voices like Hardie's, speaking out for the working class and articulating a vision for something better, has in no way diminished in the intervening decades between his life and ours.



Keir Hardie was born in Legbrannock, in Lanarkshire, and worked in a coalpit from the age of 10. After working as a journalist he turned to politics. (Hulton Archive / Getty Images)
But those continuities do not undermine the case for hope. The current cost of living crisis pressing down on people across the country has already shown signs of being accompanied by a rise of new trade union militancy—from rail and postal workers to staff in the NHS, in hospitality, and in retail, to name only a few sectors. There is no doubt that such economic conflict requires supportive political representation, and a serious economic crisis requires radical measures.

Like the crises of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this is not a crisis for everyone. The Conservatives are chattering among themselves while allowing privatised natural monopolies to rack up obscene profits and corporate leaders to pay dividends to the tune of many millions. A record number of billionaires in this country control astronomical levels of wealth. To win this fight, a united labour and trade union movement must make clear the alternatives to the status quo immiserating so many—change is possible, as the work of Keir Hardie made clear, over one hundred years ago.