3

The struggle for control of the Durham Miners' Association, 1890s–1915*

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Introduction

This chapter offers a case study from the era that saw the emergence of the Labour Party. It focuses on the various forms of division and cleavage that impacted on the functioning of the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) as political activists sought to control it. This affords insights into three major forms of disunity: intra-organisational, inter-organisational and that between labour organisations and 'spontaneous' working-class protest. It explores two crucial themes: first, the diversity and complexity of disunities; secondly, their importance in explaining historical outcomes.

Several characteristics made this miners' union worth fighting over. The first was its longevity. Founded in 1869, by the turn of the century the DMA had already weathered several serious industrial storms. These included significant downturns in the coal trade – the bulk of Durham coal was exported

and particularly susceptible to fluctuating prices on the international markets – changes in how miners' wages were calculated and a county-wide strike in 1892. Organising in one of the country's largest coalfields, by 1910 the DMA was the second largest miners' district union after the more recently established, and less cohesive, South Wales Miners' Federation. Its size afforded it tremendous resources, including an impressive headquarters on Durham city centre's North Road, replete with statues of its pioneers overlooking passers-by. By January 1912, the DMA had over 120,000 members and almost £0.5m of funds. This history and size equated to prestige and, more tangibly, considerable regional and national influence in both the industrial and political spheres (Mates, 2016a).

The DMA had been a divisive influence outside the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) until it finally voted to affiliate in November 1907. The union soon began to exercise a powerful influence on the politics of the miners and, once the MFGB affiliated to the Labour Party in 1908, in wider Labour politics as well. Locally, too, the main DMA agents (full-time officials) wielded significant political clout, throwing their personal weight, and the union's resources, firmly behind the Liberals in the county from the mid-1880s, when most working-class men exercised the franchise. This working class liberalism fed from the region's prevalent nonconformism. DMA leaders like Wesleyan Methodist John Wilson (general secretary from 1892) endorsed coal owner paternalism and the notion of shared interests between masters and men in ensuring the well-being of the industry (Espinasse, 1972).

Leaders v. led ('rank-and-file'): the historiographical debates

There was a basic tension between the conciliatory, moderate, Liberal miners' agents and many union members who went on strike, not only in the 1892 county-wide action but also in numerous local disputes. These were often spontaneous and, because they were therefore not officially sanctioned, received no central DMA support. Indeed, localised unofficial strikes often brought the local lodge (union branch) leaders engaged in them into direct conflict with the agents over issues of procedure or solidarity. This basic potential 'disunity' between moderate leaders and a 'militant' rank-and-file has been explored in approaches influenced by Marxism and/or anarchism, particularly those pioneered by the New Left in the 1960s, most notably by E. P. Thompson (Eastwood, 2000).

Most directly pertinent is *Pit Life in County Durham*, written by young Durham pitman Dave Douglass while studying at Ruskin College, and specifically the product of Raph Samuel's *History Workshop*. Douglass focused on militant lodges and their conflictual relations with local coal owners and union agents from the 1870s to the 1930s. He concluded: 'there were the men, the owners, and firmly between them the full-time agents who negotiated on their behalf but came to totally unsatisfactory agreements and then spent the bulk of the time trying to ram them down the throats of the men' (Douglass, 1972: 81). Published in 1972, *Pit Life* came at a crucial time of increasing rank-and-file militancy, particularly of miners, who embarked on the first of two successful struggles against the Heath government in that year. *Pit Life* thus offered a contextualisation and, perhaps more importantly, a normalisation of contemporary events by pointing to a long history, evident even in the apparently historically moderate Durham coalfield.

A critique was quick to emerge, however. Frank Webster attributed the 'thesis that the union officials were the constant betrayers of their members' to Douglass (Webster, 1974: 24). Webster asked why, if there was so much rank-and-file dissatisfaction, the agents were never removed by lodges and were very rarely even formally challenged. Why, too, did lodges not simply elect militant agents in the first place? And, thirdly, how could the agents possibly be out of touch given the high levels of rank-and-file union activism that Douglass explored (Webster, 1974: 25–30)? Roy Church (1986: 711) made strikingly similar remarks about Keith Burgess's (1975: 188–90) work on British industrial relations, and this debate played out more generally, too, in the 'rank-and-filist' controversy (see this book's introduction).

Nevertheless, Douglass's work was important in placing intra-union divisions firmly on the research agenda. *Pit Life*'s impassioned prose revealed that the history of institutions could be human and rendered much more engaging than the rather dry institutional studies that Douglass criticised. While Douglass necessarily focused on rebellious lodges, it is clear in both his and Webster's accounts that there was no simple and uncomplicated rank-and-file/leadership split in the DMA. Rank-and-file Durham miners were keenly divided in terms of industrial and political militancy and activist commitment, even before the advent of a full-blooded, organised socialist challenge in the coalfield in the late 1890s.

Leaders v. led: the empirical material (1890s–1909)

With the founding in 1893 of the nominally socialist Independent Labour Party (ILP) came a new and partly ideologically driven challenge to the Durham coalfield's apparently hegemonic liberalism. From the late 1890s to 1908, the clearest disunity in the union was between ILP rank-and-file activists and the Durham agents, and the fluctuating coalitions of support they could respectively marshal from among the union's membership. Effectively, this conceptualises the struggle as one between 'rival factions of would-be leaders, each seeking to present themselves as the authentic spokesmen for the interests of their members', albeit that the agents, in controlling the union's machinery and resources, occupied the strategic high ground (Zeitlin, 1989: 53). Conducted largely inside the DMA but between activists of two different political parties, this deepening disunity was both intra-organisational and inter-organisational.

By the late 1890s, Durham ILP activists were emerging in some collieries – often, but not invariably, the larger, newer concerns – as lodge leaders and officials. Armed with the votes their lodges held in the DMA's decision making processes – to a limited degree allocated proportionally – they began to advance their counter-positions to the agents inside the union and outside of it through the rank-and-file movements they established periodically from the turn of the century. The ILP activists' central demands until 1908 revolved around several core themes. The first was wages and, in times of rising coal prices (such as 1899–1901 and 1907 when rank-and-file movements emerged), the need for them to keep pace. This was often coupled with calls to raise the 1879 'basis', the point from which all wage increase percentages were calculated. A higher basis meant any percentage increase in wages would be

greater. Intimately related were claims about the inadequacies of the Conciliation Board. ILP activists tended to regard it as another version of the sliding scale it replaced. The Conciliation Board was a 'peace at any price institution' because it calculated wage awards only in relation to coal prices (*Durham Chronicle*, 30 March 1900). Even then there were occasional excessive delays before new wage awards were paid; and, as far as the miners were concerned, the increments offered were frequently inadequate. ILP activists thus periodically proposed the Conciliation Board's reform or, more drastically, its abolition. Fundamentally, endeavouring to break the traditionally accepted link between wages and coal prices – and to advance one of the MFGB's central aims – they also called for a miners' minimum wage. On occasion, they demanded that a new, higher basis should also constitute this minimum (Mates, 2016a: 76–8, 82–4).

A second major campaigning theme surrounded the DMA's industrial and political affiliations. The ILP wanted the DMA to affiliate to the MFGB as they shared two of the Federation's founding aims: the minimum wage and the eight-hour day. The union had only experienced a short and abortive spell inside the MFGB in the early 1890s as the Durham leadership rejected these self-same Federation aims (Mates, 2013a: 50). Both were reckoned to place too heavy a strain on the economics of the older Durham collieries in the west of the county, mostly, by this time, working small, difficult and therefore comparatively unprofitable coal seams. The eight-hour day was also regarded as undesirable as it apparently threatened to *increase* the hours of Durham's hewers, the numerically dominant elite of actual coal-getters who often worked under seven hours per day. ILP activists attempted to advance their

political project directly inside the DMA. But their efforts to secure the union's affiliation to the Labour Representation Committee from 1900, and the Labour Party itself, that emerged after the 1906 general election, met with no lasting success before 1908. The eight-hour day was equally difficult to promote: 71 per cent of Durham miners voted against it in June 1903. The issue then dropped until the new reforming Liberal government introduced an Eight Hour Bill in 1906 (Webster, 1974: 227–9, 245–6).

While many ILP initiatives failed to garner sufficient lodge support at DMA council, considerable numbers did not even make it to a lodge vote. This was thanks to the implacable hostility of the agents, and particularly general secretary John Wilson. There is no 'conspiracy theory' (Church, 1986: 711; Webster, 1974: 26) in recognising that Wilson was a master manipulator: of those less experienced and adept than himself on the executive, and of the DMA's rulebook. As the ILP-controlled lodges grew in number, and coalesced in an informal 'radical lodge alliance' within the DMA, so issues around democratic control of the union assumed more salience. Consequently, a third major theme of ILP activism focused on efforts to democratise the DMA's organisation and to enable the lodges and their memberships to exercise more power over their executive representatives and agents. There were calls, for example, for the abolition of the executive's power to keep lodge motions off the agenda. Before 1908, all democratising proposals were rejected by lodges or successfully countered, deflected or nullified by the wily Wilson. Even extensive alterations to the union rulebook in December 1902 changed very little in practice. Wilson argued over the fine meanings of new rulebook wordings to engineer his desired outcomes. In December 1905, he even

managed to change the rules to make changing the rules in the future much more difficult (Mates, 2016a: 77–85).

There was a further significant facet to the basic dynamic of disunity inside the DMA between the agents and ILP rank-and-file activists. Several lodge nominated elected representatives sat on the DMA's Executive Committee for twelve-month periods. These were increasingly leading ILP activists like Jos Batey, elected to the executive for the first time in 1901 (Mason and Nield, 1974). In one respect this was positive for the ILP, as it was both a consequence and, by connection, a cause, of growing influence within the lodges. Yet the executive's decisions suggest clearly that Wilson and his fellow agents remained firmly in control and able to contain any challenge his less experienced and short-term opponents on the executive could hope to muster. Indeed, ILP lodge-elected executive members ran the risk of being implicated in executive decisions that worked against the agenda of their own party's radical lodge alliance. Similarly, lodges could nominate and vote for members to sit on bodies like the Conciliation Board as well, with the same attendant potential problems for any ILP activists elected. In practice, it is difficult to discern ILP executive members being blamed for unpopular executive actions – even in the extreme circumstances of 1910 discussed below – perhaps precisely because it was widely recognised that the executive was Wilson's plaything. In terms of disunities, however, it remains important to distinguish between the fulltime agents and short-term (twelve months) lodge representatives sitting on the executive in the period before 1908.

The lines of disunity within the union threatened to alter radically after

the passing of the Liberal government's Eight Hours Act. The Act itself, of course, provoked continued disunity. While Wilson maintained hostility, there was by no means a unified response even from Durham's socialist miners. They complained that the legislation was opaque and that, while it would shorten underground lads' working hours by around a fifth, it threatened to reduce their piecework wages as well as to lengthen the hewers' shifts. Furthermore, the legislation excluded surface workers (usually paid a day-rate), whose shifts would have been shortened considerably had it applied to them. Other socialists, however, proposed new models of shift patterns which, they claimed, could accommodate a lads' shorter working day and ensure that hewers had to work no longer (nor work an extra third shift) while maintaining – or at least not significantly reducing – coal output and therefore profits (Mates, 2016a: 85–8).

Nevertheless, with the national eight-hour day in coal mines now inevitable, the argument for Durham staying outside of the MFGB – recognised as a potentially powerful instrument in terms of bargaining with coal owners – was fatally weakened. In December 1907, DMA members duly voted about 5:2 in favour of MFGB affiliation, an event that had appeared remote only nine months previously (*Durham Chronicle*, 6 and 13 December 1907). Soon, the ILP's 'political' project also appeared more tenable when, in early 1908, the MFGB invited its members to vote over affiliation to the Labour Party. In May 1908, Durham's northern neighbours, Northumberland, voted to affiliate and their 'Lib-Lab' miner MP announced his intention to retire rather than stand as a Labour candidate at the next election (Satre, 1999). The disunities in the miners' union appeared to be simplifying. Formally, at least, all

miners in the union were also now part of the same political party: Labour. Wilson, however, was diehard. He claimed that any Durham ballot on Labour affiliation contravened a DMA rule that, ironically enough, radical lodges had introduced some years before as a way of *preventing* the union supporting Liberals (*Durham Chronicle*, 15 May 1908). Wilson then secured lodge agreement that the membership leave the whole issue in the executive's hands which, naturally, meant his own. Unsurprisingly, the executive then ruled out holding a Labour Party affiliation ballot in Durham (Webster, 1974: 251). But Wilson could not block the ballot in other coalfield districts, and they endorsed the Federation's move to Labour. Accordingly, DMA agent and erstwhile Liberal William House converted to Labour in 1908 (Saville, 1974).

This development added another layer of complexity to the intra-organisational divisions between Durham miners, who were now all formally part of the Labour Party (see below). Yet Wilson's canny manoeuvring allowed him to refuse the Labour whip, and radical lodge efforts to remedy the constitutional impasse in December 1909 by amending the rules proved futile. Wilson simply defied the new rule that the DMA run parliamentary candidates exclusively in line with Labour's rules and constitution, and stated his expectation that Durham miners would again foot his election expenses. In the January 1910 general election, Wilson stood (uncontested) once again as a Lib-Lab, but really a Liberal. Formal inter-organisational political disunity and confusion between Liberals, 'Lib-Labs' and Labour remained among Durham miners even after the 1908 MFGB Labour affiliation vote (*Durham Chronicle*, 17 December 1909).

Leaders v. spontaneous working-class protest? The Eight Hours Agreement disputes (1910)

Wilson's re-election in January 1910 was, however, a mere side-show in the conflict that suddenly convulsed the coalfield and the union. It resulted from the Eight Hours Agreement (hereafter simply 'Agreement'), which stipulated how the miners' eight-hour day would apply in Durham. The Agreement's most controversial sections were the lifting of restrictions on coal-drawing time – which threatened to flood the market with cheap coal that would then depress wages – and its acceptance of the three-shift system. Seventy-five per cent of Durham hewers were working a two-shift system. Adding a third hewers' shift meant a massive extra domestic burden on the shoulders of miners' womenfolk, as well as impacting negatively on the social lives of hewers themselves. The third hewers' shift also rendered mine safety maintenance more difficult. The agents did not consult the lodges over the Agreement before signing it on 13 December 1909 and its full terms were not publicised until a week later, just days before Christmas. This left time for some lodges to hastily organise protests, but very little to consult with their employers and insufficient time to submit the legally required fourteen days' notice to strike before the Agreement came into force on New Year's Day 1910 (Mates, 2016a: 102–3).

The resulting situation was about as close to 'spontaneous' working-class protest as could be achieved in a coalfield workforce that was 80 per cent unionised by 1910. Miners revolted against their agents and the owners, with lodge leaderships tending to reflect the prevailing feeling at their colliery. In the confusion, many lodges went on strike immediately, or after briefly trialling

the three-shift system. Ninety lodges were represented at a protest conference on 12 January. Of these, fifty-one were on strike and the rest either operating the three-shift system 'under protest' or working their strike notices (*Durham Chronicle*, 14 January 1910). In total, 1.28 million working days were lost in Durham due to disputes over the Agreement in 1910.

Spontaneity was evident in the violence that subsequently erupted. On 17 January, up to 10,000 Durham miners from the South Moor area marched on Gateshead to protest at DMA agent John Johnson's role in the Agreement as he stood for re-election to Parliament. Around 400 protestors attacked Marley Hill colliery en route and, marching back from Gateshead, another group attacked a colliery in Birtley. Three days later there was violence between the police and miners raiding Murton colliery coal heaps. Then, on the evening of Wednesday 26 January, the most serious rioting of the dispute broke out in Horden. Miners attacked the Horden colliery manager's residence and, the following day, looted and razed the social club. In both Murton and Horden the owners were trying to use the Agreement to implement even more onerous four-shift systems (*Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 18, 27 and 29 January 1910). These riots point to a remarkable feature of events that also suggest spontaneity and a purer manifestation of the 'full-time officials v. rank-and-file' model. Some Liberal lodge leaders, hitherto uninvolved in the radical lodge alliance, were suddenly at the forefront of the agitation. A significant example was John Reece (Morrison lodge), who initiated and led an ultimately unsuccessful legal challenge to get the central DMA to pay all lodges lock-out allowances (to part-compensate members for wages lost during the disputes). This prominence meant that Reece was among the nominees standing against

the DMA's agents in December 1910. Ordinarily the agents' re-elections were an uncontested formality. Indeed, Reece received nominations for four of the five agent positions, more than any other individual, and other Morrison and South Moor lodge officials predominated among nominees against the incumbents (*Durham Chronicle*, 21 January 1910; 4 February 1910). One reason why all the incumbent agents retained their positions must have been the strength of underlying loyalty among the union's membership, something from which Wilson was to draw, with diminishing returns, for the rest of his tenure. The agents had weathered an incredibly difficult year, surviving a 'no confidence' vote in February in part by delaying it sufficiently to take just enough of the edge off their members' hostility. By December 1910, while tensions remained, their intensity had diminished somewhat from the levels of eleven months earlier (Mates, 2016a: 112–14, 122).

It was equally important, however, that only Wilson himself faced a single opponent (Reece). All the other agents, including those most associated with defending the Agreement (Johnson and William House), had multiple candidates standing against them. This split the opposition vote, thereby aiding the incumbents. It also revealed how politically divided the rebellious 'rank-and-file' (meaning lodge officials as well as 'ordinary' union members) were.
Indeed, Reece himself explained some four years later that he did not hold Wilson responsible for the Agreement. Reece defended his liberalism in a lengthy and increasingly personal exchange with a socialist official of another lodge, pointing out that most of the DMA executive who signed the Agreement were ILP men. Reece would brook no implied criticism of Wilson, who was 'such an honourable man' (*Blaydon Courier*, 14 March 1914). The party-political

dimension was evident during the 1910 Gateshead riots as well. Protesting miners paraded the streets of Gateshead chanting slogans against Johnson – standing for the first time as a Labour candidate – and in support of his Liberal opponent. Johnson lost but, taking the January 1910 general election results in Durham mining seats together, perceived close personal association with the highly unpopular Agreement was a more significant variable in explaining defeat than the Labour label itself (Mates, 2016a: 111–12).

Nevertheless, the violence indicated another more fundamental division among the DMA's rank-and-file. The attack on Marley Hill, which included miners looting and smashing windows for around an hour, occurred because the colliery was working normally. Similarly, the assault on the Birtley colliery later the same day saw striking miners engaging in brutal hand-to-hand fighting not only with a contingent of one hundred police, but also with other miner employees of the Birtley Coal Company, who were ready and waiting for the protestors. In fact, the Agreement did not affect every Durham colliery in the same way. Between eighteen and twenty-five newer, larger collieries operated three-shift systems before January 1910, and most of these made only minor modifications to accommodate the underground haulage workers' shorter shift. Four of these collieries did strike against a new four-shift system but were content to maintain their already operating three-shift systems. A much smaller group of collieries, for various reasons, retained (modified) two-shift systems. Overall, while at least 118 collieries experienced some kind of stoppage related to the Agreement, around thirty of these did not become involved in the formal protests against it. And there remained over fifty other Durham collieries – more than a quarter of the total – that implemented a

new three-shift system without any form of protest or stoppage (Mates, 2016a: 104–5, 112–13). Spontaneous and widespread though the anti-Agreement protests were, they did not unite the clear majority of the union's rank-and-file against their full-time leaders. The latter's survival of the 'no confidence' vote testified to that.

Not only did the Agreement fail to completely unite the rank-and-file (Liberals, Labour/ILP and non-aligned) in opposition but it also partially divided the pre-existing ILP-led lodge alliance. This was because most of the collieries operating the three-shift system before 1910 were among the most active in the radical lodge alliance. As such, it was only mildly surprising that these lodges often found themselves on the other side of the argument from their erstwhile two-shift lodge allies in 1910. Yet there was even division *within* this small group of pre-1910 three-shift system radical lodges. Dawdon, for example, protested against the Agreement and nominated opponents to the incumbent agents, while Ryhope supported them in December 1910. The only uniform rank-and-file consensus was that the four-shift system was unacceptable. Individual radical lodge responses to the Agreement, its implications and what to do about them, were often inconsistent and varied over time. This suggests some internal struggle within lodges between various factions and illustrates the labyrinthine complexities of the issue. Lodges were torn between loyalty to central leaders (either the agents, ILP members of the executive, or both), the needs of their own specific members and those of wider Durham miner solidarity that often demanded diametrically opposed (or sometimes not obvious) courses of action (Mates, 2016a: 125–8).

Unsurprisingly, this disunity and confusion was equally evident among leading ILP activists. As John Reece pointed out, several of their names were appended to the actual Agreement. The twelve-month terms of half of these representatives ended in December 1909, meaning that later calls for the executive to resign included, rather unfairly, miner representatives who had played no part in formulating the Agreement at all. This offers at least part of the explanation for how the executive won the 'no confidence' vote: the agents and ILP activists on it were lumped together. This notwithstanding, it is highly unlikely that lodge representatives on the executive had had any real say in the negotiations with owners over the Agreement anyway, which explains why most of those who *had* signed it were subsequently re-elected to the executive. This is probably why there was only one example of an ILP executive signatory of the Agreement trying immediately to defend it, on the grounds that the executive had 'done its best' (*Durham Chronicle*, 31 December 1909).

Other ILP activists in the same awkward position maintained rather lower profiles, as did many of their hitherto most prominent comrades whose names were not on the Agreement. More obvious were the several ILP lodge leaders who voiced the anger of their members at the Agreement, and who did not defend the principle of the eight-hour day nor suggest ways in which it could be amended to render it more acceptable. The topics of ILP branch meetings in 1910 generally eschewed the Agreement, the three-shift system and the eight-hour day, which was remarkable at a time when, until the minimum wage was taken up again, it was by far the most pressing issue for the county's miners. For the most part, it fell to national ILP leaders like Keir Hardie to

defend the Eight Hours Act in Durham. Speaking at the summer 1910 Durham miners' gala, Hardie reminded the largely demoralised crowd that the Act had reduced the working hours of every underground South Wales miner (*Durham Chronicle*, 19 August 1910).

Seven essential 'disunities' (1911–1915)

The events of 1910 left the ILP in Durham mining areas beleaguered, many of its activists confused, subdued and apparently impotent. But the party's Liberal rivals among the agents had suffered similarly, their credibility tarnished permanently by the deeply flawed Eight Hours Agreement and the strife and ongoing bitterness brought about by the proliferation of the three and four-shift systems it fostered. In fact, in 1915 two leading ILP coalfield activists, Jos Batey and W. P. Richardson, replaced Wilson as union agents. This represented a startling achievement that would have been almost inconceivable only five years earlier (Martin and Saville, 1976). Batey and Richardson's victories in 1915 were also due in considerable part to a mass rank-and-file movement (hereafter simply 'movement') that emerged in summer 1911 around renewed demands for a miners' minimum wage. Seven essential 'disunities' taken together explain this movement's birth, development and ultimate success, as well as its weaknesses.

The first disunity was an aspect of the 'full-time leaders v. rank-and-file' model: that between the 'Labour' figures on both sides. The key example of a Labour union agent was William House, who, though a self-styled socialist who rebuked Durham miners for 'sending rich capitalists to Parliament', was curiously accommodating towards the Liberal government itself (*Durham Chronicle*,

19 August 1910). In July 1912, for example, House praised recent Liberal legislation relating to mining and national insurance that had brought, or was about to bring, considerable discord to the Durham coalfield. Unsurprisingly, such sentiments found no echo in the rhetoric of leading rank-and-file ILP activists. Indeed, as the ILP-led movement for the minimum wage grew after summer 1911, so the annual Durham miners' galas became increasingly excruciating. In July 1912 and 1913, Labour agents like House and ILP movement activists serving on the executive and sharing the gala platform exchanged barely disguised insults (Mates, 2016a: 195, 207–10, 273–4). The second disunity evident after 1911 was the generational cleavage within Labour between the former Liberal House (born 1854) and the leading figures of a younger ILP generation: Jack Lawson (born 1881) and W. P. Richardson (born 1873) (Bellamy and Martin, 1974). Between them were ILP activists like Jos Batey (born 1867), still House's junior by thirteen years. Batey's cohort led all the major ILP-inspired rank-and-file initiatives before 1911. But the post-1911 movement was initiated by a new cohort of younger activists growing up in already changed times, when the ILP had become a more potent force on the ground and therefore a more obvious choice for political activity from the outset. Lawson, the younger of the two leading ILP coalfield figures after 1911, had had the very unusual experience of studying at the trade-union sponsored Ruskin College, Oxford, for two years (Lawson, 1944). As he and Richardson took up the cudgels in 1911, so the older cohort of ILP activists fell away. Some retired, while others were elected into full-time positions. A significant group of this older cohort of ILP activists were, however, openly hostile to, or sceptical of, the minimum wage itself. Indeed, Batey was unusual in being involved in the post-1911 campaigns, albeit only in the second rank

of a movement led by younger and less experienced – but certainly energetic and dedicated – activists (Mates, 2016a: 164–6, 285). The reward for Batey's long-standing rank-and-file activism, including working closely with Lawson and his younger comrades after 1911, was election as an agent in 1915.

The third disunity was between institutions and ideas within the left challenge to the Liberals: between the reformist, State-based socialism of the ILP and the revolutionary syndicalists who sought to harness working-class power by either transforming existing trade unions or forming new, revolutionary ones from scratch (Holton, 1976). In the Durham coalfield, the Socialist Labour Party's (SLP)'s presence was enhanced from 1909 when George Harvey returned to agitate in the coalfield after being radicalised at Ruskin College (Douglass, 2011). Harvey was in Lawson's cohort at Ruskin. By autumn 1912, Harvey was joined by a second revolutionary, Will Lawther, himself radicalised after a year at Central Labour College in London, which was established as a Marxist split from Ruskin in 1910 (Smith, 1976). While both Harvey and Lawther began their political lives in the ILP, they were the exception in Durham. Precious few Durham ILP activists left their party for syndicalism. While some did, on occasion, praise syndicalists and their aims, they regarded the doctrine as impractical when miners' urgent grievances demanded immediate action and tangible results. Indeed, Jack Lawson – who corresponded with at least one revolutionary he met at Ruskin – peddled a militant, class-based rhetoric that embraced several key syndicalist themes and demands, including an aggressive industrial policy, union democratisation and industrial unionism. Yet this was but one facet of the ILP-led movement's two-pronged

industrial and parliamentary strategy that effectively outflanked and marginalised the syndicalist challenge. While ILP activists operated at a considerable advantage – their robust coalfield organisation pre-existed and dwarfed that of the syndicalists – also crucial was the movement leaders' intelligent strategic positioning of their politics (Mates, 2013b).

A fourth disunity, within syndicalism, played a further part in explaining its comparative marginality. Harvey's rhetoric aped that of the SLP's leading intellectual Daniel de Leon, who was fiercely sectarian towards those who ostensibly had most in common with him politically (Mates, 2016b). Doctrinal divisions between Durham syndicalists were most obvious in October 1912, when they appeared to be attempting to act in unison through their 'Durham unofficial reform movement' (DURM) (an effort to replicate its South Wales equivalent that had famously produced the syndicalist classic *The Miners' Next Step* the previous January). At a DURM organised meeting in Chopwell, Lawther spoke first, arguing for South Wales miners' syndicalism, to an audience full of ILP movement activists. Harvey then addressed the meeting from the floor, which itself did not augur well in terms of the DURM's unity. Harvey dubbed Lawther's syndicalism 'a halfway house' when miners 'must go to the higher pinnacle of organisation'; in other words, Harvey's brand of revolutionary politics (*Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912). It became clear in the subsequent discussion that syndicalism's opponents could exploit the doctrinal differences among the syndicalists to their advantage, while those interested but new to the ideas could be excused for their apparent confusion at the competing versions presented to them. Lawther, though moving towards anarchist syndicalism in 1913, did continue to support Harvey, and the two

appeared together at the Durham miners' gala in 1913. But the DURM itself did not last into 1913 and with its passing went the opportunity for the union's syndicalists to combine under an umbrella banner that could have maximised the impact of their relatively small numbers. It might also have helped to side-line some of the doctrinal specifics of both camps that did not appear particularly applicable to the Durham mining context. Harvey's advocacy of dual unionism – essentially starting new revolutionary unions from scratch – seemed irrelevant in such a heavily unionised coalfield, while Lawther's complete rejection of political action was hard to sell to miners steeped in traditions of mainstream political participation. Lawther's principled refusal to stand for union positions denied him an important platform to influence his fellow miners (Mates, 2013b).

These four disunities all explain outcomes. The importance of the fifth disunity, political differences between the ILP movement leaders and the national leadership of the party, was that it did *not* seem to impact negatively on events on the ground. That national Labour leaders regarded syndicalism as a threat was clear when the Webbs and Philip Snowden, a regular speaker at the Durham miners' gala, published critiques of it. So too did Ramsay MacDonald, who dubbed syndicalism the 'impatient, frenzied, thoughtless child of poverty, disappointment, irresponsibility' (MacDonald, 1912: 71). As seen above, this antipathy did not preclude Durham movement leaders from a much more open, creative and ultimately successful engagement with syndicalism.

The coalfield movement also received significant support from Labour's national institutions. The national ILP published Lawson's (1912)

pamphlet on the minimum wage, and the party's national paper *Labour Leader* provided another vital mouthpiece. With the movement leaders' growing advocacy for a strong parliamentary Labour Party, aims and objectives overlapped with the national leadership. That the national party was prepared to contest seats against Liberals in the coalfield in two by-elections (in 1913 and 1914) must also have placated eager grassroots ILP activists, despite their party's third place finishes in these contests (Pugh, 2010: 95–6). Certainly, local ILP leaders were not publicly critical of Labour's parliamentary performance in this period. Instead, they used movement platforms to talk-up Labour MPs' achievements during the minimum wage debates in 1912, and repeatedly emphasised the putative benefits of having more Labour representatives in Parliament (Mates, 2014).

The sixth disunity was within the movement itself. No movement that could mobilise over half the Durham coalfield could hope to be always entirely united. This disunity itself subdivided into, first, tensions between movement leaders and militants and, secondly, between the lodges involved. Tensions between movement leaders and led – the first subdivision – were manifest over its aims and remit. This was evident in January 1912, when Lawson's mention of the three-shift system from a minimum wage movement platform prompted cries of 'stick to the minimum wage' (*Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 22 January 1912). This specific source of disunity was easily dealt with, however: problems associated with the Eight Hours Agreement were simply dropped from the movement's agenda.

But disunity between the movement's leaders and led was also evident in

a more fundamental way: over if, how and when to use industrial action on the minimum wage issue. Movement leaders had called for national strike action to secure the minimum wage in spring 1912. Durham miners duly obliged, with a two-thirds vote in favour. Subsequently, movement leaders intermittently threatened a strike over grievances with which the Minimum Wage Act had not adequately dealt. Chief among these was that the law had not included the specific figures the miners had demanded: the so-called '5 and 2 [shillings]' for adults and children respectively. Matters came to a head in October 1913 when Durham miners responded with fury to their minimum wage being effectively frozen at an already very unpopular low level, while their actual wages had grown appreciably. Movement leaders reported that 'all over the County great difficulty was being experienced … to prevent their men from striking against the [new] award' (*Durham Chronicle*, 31 October 1913). Even without official DMA and MFGB support, at least five collieries struck at this time, whether in line with their officials' advice or not. The new minimum wage award was a contributory factor (if not the sole cause) in all these disputes. Jack Lawson moved from advocating a legal challenge to the minimum wage award to, four weeks later, threatening a long protest strike. Yet, while some collieries continued to strike piecemeal on issues around the minimum wage in 1914, the movement itself began developing the political side of its strategy, simultaneously de-emphasising the strike option. This appeared to resolve – or at least paper over – this specific disunity in the months leading up to the outbreak of the Great War (Mates, 2016a: 231–4).

The second subdivision of the sixth disunity was between the larger and smaller lodges active in the movement. It explains why the movement's apparent

considerable size to some extent belied its effectiveness inside the DMA. Before 1910, the larger and more modern collieries were foremost in the radical lodge alliance. DMA rules meant these lodges were effectively underrepresented in the union's decision-making machinery. This was important as lodge votes determined all the main aspects of union policy. The degree of this under-representation grew with the growing memberships of the largest lodges. Addressing this under-representation was an obvious aim in terms of democratising the union. Yet, while many of the largest lodges were active in the movement after summer 1911, all efforts to deal with the lodge underrepresentation question occurred outside of the movement's specific union democratisation programme. A likely direct consequence was that all proposed rule changes on this issue failed to win majority support when they were voted on at union meetings. This apparent failure was almost certainly because the main movement leaders from summer 1911 were based in the lodges of smaller collieries and therefore effectively over-represented inside the union. Any move to redistribute votes more proportionately among the lodges would have diminished their own influence, despite its promise to augment the movement's overall voting power. Even then, the movement managed, in December 1913, to secure individual member voting to elect new agents – to replace lodge votes – and a rulebook commitment from the DMA to exclusive support for Labour candidates at elections. Nevertheless, a degree of ongoing disunity between the large and smaller movement lodges precluded more significant constitutional victories inside the DMA. The vagaries of the increasingly outdated rulebook clearly benefited some (leaders) inside the movement, but arguably at the expense of the movement as a whole (Mates, 2014: 324, 333–4).

The seventh disunity operated at the micro level, between the main movement leaders, though there was no significant public rancour between them. Indeed, 'difference' is probably more accurate than 'disunity'; but this category demonstrates the extent to which a movement owes its nature and impact to the activism of particular individuals. While aiming to avoid a 'great man' approach to history – albeit at a grassroots level – it is clear that Jack Lawson was central to understanding the tone and energy of the post-1911 movement, notwithstanding his own rather modest (in two senses) account of his involvement (Lawson, 1944: 17). Most movement meetings had several speakers, drawn both from its own officials – elected after it became more formalised into the Durham Forward Movement (DFM) in May 1912 – and from widespread involvement of grassroots activists, most of whom were lodge officials as well. In terms of numbers of speaking appearances, however, Lawson was only really run close by W. P. Richardson, his fellow DFM official. It was Lawson who provided the most sweeping and aggressive rhetorical moments as well as authoring a brilliant minimum wage pamphlet (Lawson, 1912). The movement without Lawson would surely have lacked a certain vigour and drive, and not have achieved quite as much as it did. Indeed, there is even a hitherto unrecognised 'disunity' in terms of Lawson's own political career, between his early militancy and later moderate labourism. The main interpretations of Lawson have suggested his later politics characterised his ideology from the outset, when the reality is far more complex and interesting, revealing a complex and fully three-dimensional activist (Bellamy and Martin, 1974; Bythell, 2016).

Conclusion: unity, disunity and outcomes

A crucial starting point in understanding political processes inside the labour movement is recognising the multiple disunities that run through institutions and between activists in organisational and ideological terms. To achieve their political aims, activists themselves need to recognise these disunities. They can then seek to enhance divisions that serve their ends and to overcome those they need to build coalitions of support sufficient to form influential movements. In the Durham coalfield, a mostly younger generation of ILP activists did just this from summer 1911, through the rank-and-file movement they built around the minimum wage. In so doing they had to tackle another fundamental 'disunity': that within the coalfield's highly diverse and specialised workforce; between the oldest and youngest workers, the infirm and the physically fit, surface and underground workers, day-wage and piece workers. In practice, the movement struggled to provide a consistent appeal to all these grades of miner, their task rendered even more difficult by unyielding legislation, a minimum wage board that managed to divide-and-rule by offering comparatively generous terms to selected grades of workers some of the time and not to others, by coal owners who responded in different ways to the minimum wage, and by their own agents' opposition. Indeed, the solid two-thirds majority the movement helped to secure for a national minimum wage strike in 1912 was about as close as we get in the coalfield to the basic 'leaders v. led' model (Mates, 2013a).

Though far from perfectly unified, the generally younger ILP activists managed to forge a movement with sufficient coherence to undermine the Liberal agents, whose own stubbornness was self-defeating, and to outflank the syndicalists; a movement that permitted them to present themselves as the

union's future leaders. They reaped the benefits when these self-same movement activists – many of whom were unknown before 1911 – dominated the elections for new DMA parliamentary candidates in 1914, and then the 1915 agent elections (when Batey and W. P. Richardson were elected to replace Wilson). With the balance in the struggle for control of the DMA's immense prestige and resources now decisively swung in the socialists' favour, their next step, to secure miners' votes for Labour, could be that much more concerted and effective. Indeed, the movement was already developing this strategy in 1914, based around the reasonable assumption – the DMA's parliamentary candidates were now almost exclusively movement leaders – that Liberal candidates would have less knowledge and be less supportive than their miner Labour counterparts towards proposals to amend the Minimum Wage Act in 1915 (Mates, 2016b: 258–61, 270). In developing a dual industrial and political strategy during these years, the movement had – despite the strategy's potential and actual inconsistencies – managed to transcend yet another fundamental disunity that was so troubling to the Labour Party's national leaders: that between the industrial and the political spheres of experience.

Note

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The Durham Miners' Association 65

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