Questions of Gender: Labour and Women

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Labour historians have been accused of ignoring women and evading questions of gender. There is an element of truth in this; traditionalists who recount the story of Labour's elite miss women out by their choice of subject matter, as do others who concentrate on the analysis of a male social world. The records of paid up, trades union or Labour Party members yield a preponderance of men, because men were more likely than women to have longer – term, full time employment and thus the opportunity and finance necessary for membership. As Brian Harrison justly wrote, there was a demographic reason for the greater numbers of Labour Party men, who outnumbered women in the coal and steel towns where Labour was strong. The problem of the missing women is magnified because leaders were drawn from the paid-up membership; when one recounts the history of leaders, one deals most often with men.

Nonetheless, I argue that, at the end of Labour's first century sufficient literature exists to refute the 'missing women' argument. Reflecting their role in its development and activity, women have been included in Labour's history. Finding them has been an historical adventure, involving the use of oral history and less orthodox events such as 'history days'. For instance, Derby South constituency women discovered their history by displaying and discussing extant Women's Council minutes along with leaflets, banners, photographs and other memorabilia. Such events have their own history; in 1934 the pageant of labour at London's Crystal Palace included scenes from the Matchgirls' strike and the Rochdale Pioneers. Labour Heritage was founded in 1981 to study and preserve Labour history and its women's research committee was set up in answer to the over-confident assertion of an Iron and Steel Trades' delegate that trades union men founded the Labour Party. Including women by such diverse means has lead to a broader and richer history that has taken account of membership groups and ad hoc activity. This broader approach has meant writing outside the confines of the parliamentary party, or rather ignoring the artificial boundaries that traditionalist historians had imposed on the Labour Party structure.
This wider approach is doubly justified: first, to use an accurate, popular metaphor the Labour Party has been a 'broad church', including affiliated socialist societies and trades unions. Sarah Perrigo, referring to Labour's 'complex system of representation and delegation' has described its federal structure; labyrinth might be a better description. For Labour Party women federalism was institutionalised from 1916 to 1952 in the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial/Working Women's Organisations (SJC) which had Labour Party, trades union and Co-operative women under its wing. Second, Labour Party women have explicitly interrelated their political, industrial and consumer-oriented activity. For instance, life-long Labour activist Florence Davy wrote:

When I was eighteen I joined the Labour Party ... we were talking about setting up a League of Youth and I went along and came out secretary ... that was in 1931 and I have belonged to the Labour Party ever since. I joined the London Co-operative Society in 1937: in the League of Youth they argued for this, it was all part of 'three-winged approach'. I joined my trade union when I was sixteen ... the Union of Post Office Workers. Within two years I was its representative ... I was also an organiser for UPW. The unity of the Labour Party, the trade union movement and the Cooperative Movement is essential for success.

Also a long-standing Labour Party member, Joan Davis was a minute secretary of Kensington Co-operative Party in the 1950s, and belonged to the Co-operative Trading District Committee; she also joined the League of Youth and was on the general committee of North Kensington Labour Party.

The current need is less to restore to Labour history the experience of such women (although complacency here is a danger) than to address the question of gender their history reveals. In addition, Labour's identity as a white, Anglo-Saxon party has been insufficiently appreciated. For instance, Ann Leff, a Jewish woman who joined the party after many years in the Communist Party, wrote of her entry into the latter.

For the first time in my life I felt confident with Gentiles, confident I would not hear anti-Semitic remarks. I never did, unlike the Labour party.

More surprisingly, class issues within the Labour Party are undertheorised. These peculiarly British failings impact on the discussion of gender by obscuring difference between women. Abroad, links between gender and class activity, the impact of ethnicity and locality are more explored. Instances are the North American Labor history conferences, the Austrian-based Internationale Tagung der Historikerinnen und Historiker der