



Will Thorne (1857-1946)

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*"It is my earnest hope that the war has taught us all its uselessness and that we shall learn the lesson of talking peace and of using peaceful methods to settle our international differences in future."*

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Will Thorne was one of the leading Trade Union figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and established the largest union of its time, the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers. He was a founding member of the Labour Party and achieved major reforms and improvements for workers in industrial Britain. He was elected as MP and Mayor for West Ham and served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Volunteer Battalion of the Essex regiment during the First World War.

Thorne's upbringing was forged in the poverty and brutality of industrial England. Born in Birmingham in 1857, his father was a bricklayer but also a very heavy drinker. In 1864 in a drunken fight with a horse dealer, Thomas Thorne was killed by a blow to the head. Will was to spend his remaining childhood as the main provider for his family, working from the age of six to help feed them. As noted in his book *My Life's Battles*, it was "days of hunger for all of us, especially on a Tuesday, when both bread and money ran out."<sup>1</sup>

In 1881 Will moved to London and formally became active in politics, joining the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) the first organised socialist political party in Britain, led by H. M. Hyndman. Members were to include William Morris, George Lansbury, Eleanor Marx (daughter of Karl) and George Bernard Shaw.

Thorne took up a leading role in organising campaigns and propaganda in the West Ham area and was to later become the Secretary of the SDF. His position in the party brought him into contact with many leading socialist and progressive figures. This included Charles Bradlaugh, MP for Northampton, who as an atheist was subsequently imprisoned for refusing to take the mandatory religious Oath of Allegiance needed to sit in the Commons.

Thorne was aware that such ideas and policies would not necessarily resonate with workers and most would not see the relevance of politics in their daily lives. His initial thoughts were of optimism with a realisation that "it would take a long time to make our cause popular in the country."<sup>2</sup>

However, his strategy was now for bigger rallies in key locations around London and targeting the docks and factories. The authorities and police had become alarmed about the rise of socialist activity and implemented a policy of restricting and banning large scale meetings and rallies. Many speakers were imprisoned for 'inflammatory' remarks and causing public disorder. There were two massive demonstrations organised by Thorne at West India Docks (Sep. 1885) and at Trafalgar Square (Feb. 1886) where rioting broke out. This new breed of left wing politics also gave its support to Irish Home Rule. Charles Stewart Parnell MP, one of the leading Irish Nationalist politicians, was to fire up the passions of workers at a rally in November 1887. The large police numbers coupled with a fervent crowd, led to riots, with numerous casualties on both sides.

Thorne's mind was now focused on fighting his campaign on two fronts both with the creation of a strong Union and setting his sight of Parliamentary representation for the working class,

*"Something could be done by Parliament I thought, but not as it was then constituted, with every interest except labour adequately represented."*

He also saw the bigger picture in terms of democratic rights and began campaigning for universal suffrage both for men and women, regardless of class and background.

However, a key catalyst was to propel Thorne into ever more decisive action to improve the rights and conditions of workers on the workshop floor. The introduction of new technology and

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<sup>1</sup> P.16, *My Life's Battles*, Will Thorne MP, George Newnes Ltd (1998 edition)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, P.56

machinery by factory owners led to a reduction in the number of workers employed and the weekly rate they were paid. For those workers who kept their jobs, it meant longer hours and fewer breaks to service the 24/7 machines.

It was very much a cross-roads for the workers and Thorne led and organised a mass meeting at Canning Town Hall. This resulted in the creation of the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers on 31 March 1889. It was to become one of the biggest unions of its time in the world. Their slogan was "One Man, One Ticket, and every man with a Ticket."

The sheer speed and scale of workers joining the Union took the Gas Work Corporation by surprise. There were about 800 men joining every day and within 6 months numbers had swelled to over 20,000. Will Thorne was elected to the position of General Secretary and he was also aided by many others such as John Burns, who would go on to be a MP and the first Cabinet Minister from a working class background.

The Gas Light and Coke Company could no longer ignore this collective power and were to cede to all demands put forward. This included a new 8 hour working day, scheduled daily breaks and Sunday as a day of rest. It was a key moment in Union history.

The Gas Workers' Union was also progressive in its outlook and was one of the first Unions to allow women to be elected to its Committee. Eleanor Marx-Aveling was elected to the Committee in 1889 and her contacts with the socialist movement were to be of great assistance to the Union. As Thorne commented.

*"It was Eleanor that helped me more than anyone else to improve my very bad handwriting, my reading and general knowledge. One day they asked me to come along to their flat to meet the very young Jean Longuet, who later became a famous member of the French Senate and the able and devoted lieutenant of the great Jean Jaures."*

Frederick Engels later sent him a personalised copy of *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*.

Will Thorne was elected as MP for West Ham South (1906) and he held the seat (later renamed Plaistow) until 1945. He had previously attempted to win the seat in 1900 but was spurred on by memories of Keir Hardie's significant victory in the same seat in 1892,

*"After his election I rode with Keir Hardie to the Houses of Parliament in a waggonette, followed by a band and a procession of his supporters. He wore a cloth cap, and his entrance to the chamber in his unconventional headgear was regarded by many old and dignified members as an impertinence and slight on the House."<sup>3</sup>*

Upon the outbreak of war, Thorne enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> Volunteer battalion of the Essex regiment and was appointed a lieutenant-colonel. Aged 57, Thorne was not posted for front line duties but was to play a role in the Shell Crisis of 1915. As the General Secretary of a powerful union, he was in regular contact with other union leaders who resented the far-reaching and significant restriction of workers' rights during WW1. Thorne was to meet with Lord Kitchener several times at the War Office and in the House of Commons to discuss the Shell Crisis.

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<sup>3</sup> P.202, Ibid

The Munitions of War Act (July 1915) was passed as a result of the lack of armaments and supplies to the front line. The Act required all private companies who supplied the military to fall under the control of the new Ministry of Munitions. The ministry had the power to control wages, hours and employment conditions. It was now an offence for a worker to leave his current job without the consent of his employer. In practice, however, it was virtually impossible for workers to exercise this 'right'.

This understandably caused great unrest in industrial areas, most notably in Glasgow with the establishment of the Clyde Workers Committee (CWC) led by Willie Gallacher and John Muir. The CWC sort to rally against the Act and despite David Lloyd George and Arthur Anderson the Labour Party Leader personally meeting both leaders, they were unwilling to relent. In 1916 both Gallacher and Muir were subsequently jailed for an article in *The Worker* criticising the war, an offence under the Defence of the Realm Act of 1914. Both Muir standing for the Labour Party (Glasgow Maryhill) and Gallacher for the Communist Party (West Fife) were later elected to Parliament.

Matters were to escalate further when landlords increased housing rents in Glasgow, forcing thousands of families out of their homes. Helen Crawford, a suffragette and anti-war campaigner, Jessie Stephens, Mary Barbour and Mary Laird of the Women's Housing Association led rent strikes that started in May 1915 in the industrial area of Govan. Violent confrontations were to break out with police and soldiers drafted in, as tenants refused to pay the increases and staged mass demonstrations against evictions. These protests were replicated across industrial towns and cities in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

In 1917 Thorne was asked by the Coalition Government to visit Russia in order to outline British support for the Russian military effort and ultimately convince them to stay in the war against Germany. The February 1917 revolution at Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) had recently broke out in which industrial workers were to strike over factories conditions and a lack of basic food provisions to feed themselves and their families. Lenin had also just published his *April Theses* outlining the directives for the workers' councils to take power.

The journey to Russia was itself a dangerous voyage as German U-boats patrolled the North Sea, sinking numerous merchant and civilian ships. Upon arriving in Petrograd (accosted by Russian secret agents) he visited the Workers' and Soldiers' Council and then soldiers at the Petrograd military barracks who had mutinied and refused to fire on rioting crowds. The event ultimately led to the abdication and arrest of Tsar Nicholas II. Having travelled to Minsk he then returned to Petrograd and was to witness first hand Lenin stirring up the crowds with his oratory skills. The Bolshevik leader had just returned from exile in Switzerland and by October his party seized power in the capital.

Upon returning to London, Thorne was to receive the devastating news that his eldest son Will had been killed in battle at Ypres whilst fighting for the Essex regiment. Despite such loss, Thorne was throughout this period behind the war effort and commented that "as soon as the war broke out I wanted to take my share in the work that had to be done."<sup>4</sup> This position caused considerable tensions and disquiet amongst other leading socialist figures including Ramsey MacDonald, Philip Snowden and Bertrand Russell. All three individuals were to play a leading role in the Leeds Convention of June 1917, which saw well over a thousand anti-war socialists and pacifists gather, many from the Independent Labour Party. They convened to lobby the Government for a negotiated peace settlement in order to prevent further slaughter at the front.

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<sup>4</sup> P.197, Ibid

However, ultimately Thorne's assessment at the end of the war was to be a damning one:

*"The horrors of war, its futility and waste, were driven home to me both in my military life and everyday life. Though we won the war we are still paying very dearly for our victory. Poverty, unemployment and misery among large masses of people are still as rampant as ever, and if anything worse than before our victory."*

As General Secretary of a large union, Thorne was often a representative at International Conferences, discussing and campaigning for better conditions for workers. In 1918 he visited New York for a Conference and as part of the agenda he was to visit the packing houses of Chicago. What he witnessed, echoed the book, *The Jungle* (1906) by Upton Sinclair, laying bare the horrific conditions migrant workers suffered in the meat industry:

*"In the slaughter-house I saw cattle being pushed into a narrow gangway. At the end of the gangway were the killers, armed with hatchets, with which they hit the bullocks on the head as they passed. As they were hit they fell down a chute.*

*I was told that over two thousand animals had been killed that day. It was a sight that has left a distinct mark on my memory by its gruesomeness."<sup>5</sup>*

Following the General Election of 1918, significant social changes and legislation were passed including the Representation of the People Act 1918. The Act allowed for most women over the age of 30 to vote and a separate Act allowed women over the age of 21 to stand as a MP. Nancy Astor was to become the first female MP to take her seat in 1919 but wasn't entirely welcome in the Commons chamber. This included games from figures such as William Joynson-Hicks (later Home Secretary) refusing to make space for Astor to sit in the chamber. Will Thorne along with other Labour colleagues ensured she had a seat to make her presence felt.

Thorne was to continue his Union and political activity for the next 30 years and was prominent in raising issues ranging from child labour, unemployment benefits, Mussolini invading Abyssinia and the rearmament of Germany under Hitler.

He was particularly vocal during the passage of the Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act 1927, which curtailed the rights of workers to strike and gave the Attorney General the power to confiscate the funds of any union involved in unlawful strikes. Thorne accused the Attorney General (Sir Douglas Hogg) of lying in the Chamber when he asserted that the Union movement was attempting to replace the authority of Parliament and Government with a proletariat dictatorship.<sup>6</sup>

Thorne died of a heart attack in his constituency and home at 1 Lawrence Road, Plaistow, West Ham, on 2nd January 1946. He was buried in the East London Cemetery and survived by his fourth wife and 12 children.

In his memoirs he hoped to be remembered in the following light:

*"It is towards this great discrepancy between those that have and those that have not that I have always tried to direct my efforts with a view to bringing about a more equal distribution of the necessities and good things in life.*

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<sup>5</sup> P.167, Ibid

<sup>6</sup> HC Deb 02 May 1927 vol 205 c1310

*"I can never forget the horrors of my childhood days and the misery and suffering I have seen, and if I can leave the world a better place than I found it, I shall die content."*