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**POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE LABOUR
MOVEMENT: A COMPARISON BETWEEN
POPLAR AND WEST HAM 1889-1914**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis compares two areas of East London, Poplar and West Ham, that ultimately became strongholds of the Labour Party. The thesis attempts to answer the crucial question of why, prior to 1914, it seemed as if Labour had succeeded in South West Ham but had failed to achieve similar representation in Poplar. This thesis considers that although contemporaries had identified similar social and economic problems in both Poplar and West Ham in the early twentieth century, more detailed analysis reveals differences as well as similarities in the underlying economic and social structure, which had implications for political outcomes. The difference in attitude of local trade unionists and councillors was crucial as was the behaviour of the political leadership. The reason for this, it will be shown, lay in the characters of the individuals who led their respective activists, as well as in the social and economic structure of the two boroughs. Using the theoretical model of social movements and political parties it is hoped that an understanding may be reached as to why socialist politics in these two boroughs, apparently so similar, achieved different outcomes in the years prior to 1914.

The initial chapters outline the social and economic conditions in the boroughs and the national attitudes to their problems. Chapters Three and Four consider the left wing activists and their leaders, exploring their differing attitudes to the social and economic problems and their different styles of political activity. Chapter Five discusses the difficulties experienced by activists in achieving local and national representation so as to effect social and political change. Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, by considering the issue of unemployment, the campaign for women's suffrage and the history of the Great Unrest, exemplify the main argument of this thesis.

Thus by assessing economic factors, employment patterns and trade unionism, problems with the franchise and elector registration, the quality of local party organisation and the different attitudes and aspirations of the local activists, this thesis will test the hypothesis that the reason for the difference in political fortunes in these two boroughs was that left wing activity in Poplar was more characteristic of a social movement and that of West Ham was more representative of a political party.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants	ASRS
British Socialist Party	BSP
Charity Organisation Society	COS
General Federation of Trade Unions	GFTU
Independent Labour Party	ILP
Labour Representation Committee	LRC
National Administrative Council	NAC
National Transport Workers Federation	NTWF
National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers	NUGW&GL
Poplar Labour Electoral League	PLEL
Poplar Trades and Labour Representation Committee	PT&LRC
Social Democratic Federation	SDF
Social Democratic Party	SDP
West Ham & District Trades & Labour Council	WH&DT&LC
Workers Supply Association	WSA
Women's Social and Political Union	WSPU

INTRODUCTION

This study arose out of a personal interest in the protagonists of the development of the Labour Party in the East End of London.¹ It has subsequently developed into an enquiry as to how and why two similar boroughs, Poplar and West Ham, where there was considerable labour and socialist activity before 1918, had seemingly different political fortunes. Although much has been written about the development of socialist and Labour politics in the East End of London, no study has directly compared these two boroughs. On the one hand, West Ham South had a Labour MP from 1892 until 1895, a majority on the local council from 1898-9 and again from 1910-12, with the support of the Progressives, and a Labour MP, Will Thorne, from 1906. On the other hand, Bow and Bromley, one of the two Poplar constituencies, had a Labour MP from 1910-12 but did not achieve continuous national Labour representation or a majority on the local council until after the First World War. This thesis will look at the history of the two boroughs to try to ascertain whether the difference is more apparent than real, based as it is on national criteria of Labour Party success rather than local implementation of Labour and socialist policies. It will also consider the social and cultural differences between the boroughs, if any, to ascertain whether these had any effect on the development of Labour Party politics.

The initial chapters of the thesis contextualise the argument. The introduction discusses the literature on the history of labour politics both from a national and a local perspective and also outlines the main thread of the

¹ Joseph Banks, the Secretary of the Poplar Trades and Labour Representation Committee, was my grandfather.

thesis, arguing that in parliamentary and local politics it is necessary to look beyond the development of the Labour Party in this period and location as given fact and use alternative theoretical concepts to explain the difference in political outcomes. Chapter One discusses the economic and social structure of the boroughs of West Ham and Poplar, highlighting their similarities and differences and the effects that these factors had on the political culture and development. Chapter Two takes one of the main social issues identified in Chapter One, that of poverty, and explores the various contemporary national solutions, including those of the main socialist groups. Thus it will be shown how the contemporary situation and the attitude of the élites affected the development of left wing political solutions to problems. It will also be argued that the attitude of the leaders was crucial in determining the outcome and so the final chapters focus on the left wing activists in the two boroughs and their attempts to gain power in order to effect policies that would, they believed, alleviate poverty and unemployment. Therefore, by combining consideration of political and economic factors this thesis contributes to the debates on the development of the Labour Party in the localities.

Before considering the local histories of Poplar and West Ham, it is necessary to put them in the context of national histories of the Labour Party to see whether the views of general histories can be applied to this locality or whether the events in this part of East London will mean a revision or amendment of theories of the development of the Labour Party nationally. Histories of the left wing politics of the period tend to fall into several groups. One, the ‘inevabilist’ school, emphasises the role of the trades unions. Others regard the achievement of the Labour Party in replacing the Liberal

Party as possibly due more to the latter's failure than the former's success.

Later historians use more complex analysis of language, class and culture to explain the development of labour politics during this period. Explanations of historical events tend to reflect the current interests of the historians. Thus historians writing during the 1950s and 1960s were concerned to portray the development of left wing politics as a continuum from the nineteenth century left wing movements and found the basis of the later success of the Labour Party in national politics in the socialist and labour movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They argue that once the working classes realised their power through trades unions and the enlarged franchise, a process that gathered pace in the latter half of the nineteenth century, they determined to increase their influence on the state. This they sought to achieve by electing their own men to positions in local and national government. Initially this was done under the aegis of the Liberal party but, these writers argue, as the working classes gained confidence they developed their own party structure. Thus the development of the Labour Party had a certain inevitability.

Henry Pelling's studies of Labour party history, written initially in the 1950s, form the standard version of the 'inevabilist' school of Labour historians. He argues that changes in the franchise, the increasing solidarity and class consciousness of the working class and the inflexible attitude of the Liberal Party to these changes, led to demands for independent working class representation at local and national level. This then gave rise to the Labour Representation Committee [LRC], formed in 1900, which in turn became the Parliamentary Labour Party. He places great importance on the role of the

trades unions in this development writing that ‘the whole strategy of the [Independent Labour] party from its foundation in 1893 was based on the conception of collaboration with trades unions, with the ultimate object of tapping into trade union funds for the attainment of Parliamentary power’²

Pelling argues that the working class was, as a group, anti-establishment in that it did not support the legal system or organised religion, believing that these were irrelevant to the lives of working men.³ Nowhere does he consider women in this argument. He also notes the fact that socialism was not regarded as an acceptable political theory by many within the Labour movement. However, he also asserts that the socialists were the only group in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to provide a coherent political programme.⁴ Pelling regards the Independent Labour Party [ILP] as the precursor of the Labour Party and he minimises the contribution made by the Social Democratic Federation [SDF] in furthering left wing politics and does not consider its electoral successes relevant to the development of the Labour Party itself. He notes the lack of ILP and working class support for socialism yet does not investigate whether this could be a factor in the lack of support for Labour in London. It could be argued that one of the reasons for the failure of the ILP was that the SDF was more active in both West Ham and Poplar. The Bromley Branch of the ILP was only founded by George Lansbury in 1906 after his disillusionment with the SDF.⁵ However, the more extreme views of the SDF may have alienated potential moderate Labour

² Pelling, H. *Origins of the Labour Party*, Oxford University Press, 2nd Edition, 1965, pp. 219-220.

³ Pelling, H. *Popular Politics & Society in Late Victorian Britain*, Macmillan, 1968, p. 5.

⁴ Pelling, *Origins*, p. 216.

⁵ Thompson, P. *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: the Struggle for London 1885-1914*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967, p. 229.

Party support and helped to maintain the dominance of the Liberal Party in some constituencies. It will be shown that this could certainly have been a factor in the success of Liberals in Poplar and North West Ham. Pelling talks of the rise of working class consciousness, which he attributes to increasing urbanisation and industrial concentration. Pelling assumes that position in society determines political stance, writing that ‘social class is the principle determining factor of politics,’ arguing that once the franchise expanded to include a working class vote, the development of a Labour Party became inevitable.⁶ However, he also writes of divisions within the working class which seems to imply a lack of solidarity but does not pursue this apparent contradiction.

In a later book, *Popular Politics and Culture*, published in 1968, Pelling addressed the problem of working class conservatism and its lack of support for the Labour Party, arguing that members of the working class who were not in a union were not interested in social reform, regarding it as middle class interference in their lives.⁷ However, another factor in working class conservatism, which is not considered by Pelling, was patriotism and this, rather than middle class interference, affected the outcome of the General Election of 1900.⁸ Although the Tory vote increased nationally by 1.3%, in the two boroughs the situation was complicated. Support for the Conservatives increased in North West Ham but fell slightly in South West Ham. In Bow and Bromley their support fell but rose slightly in the

⁶ Bealey, F. and Pelling, H. *Labour & Politics 1900-1906*, Macmillan, 1958, p. 6.

⁷ Pelling, *Popular Politics*, pp. 4-6.

⁸ Pugh, M. *The Making of British Politics 1867-1939*, Basil Blackwell, 1982, p. 85.

constituency of Poplar in the south.⁹ Many contemporary writers also note that the poorest members of the working classes, who were often unemployed or only casually and irregularly employed, were not interested in politics or religion except in so far as they provided entertainment.¹⁰ It was, according to contemporaries, the unionised and skilled artisan who was politically active and supported programmes of social reform.¹¹

Another historian who supports the idea that the trade union influence on the Labour Party's development was crucial is McKibbin. He notes that the trades unions contributed men, money and organisational skills to the new party and emphasises the importance of the role of the Trades Councils particularly in local politics.¹² However, as McKibbin points out and, as will be argued in this thesis, the role of the local Trades Council could also be divisive, both locally and nationally, as its members sometimes differed with the National Executive.¹³ However, McKibbin also believes that the development of the Parliamentary Labour Party owes less to national politics and more to social and economic change in the localities arguing that:

The emergence of the Labour Party as an increasingly large Parliamentary force was not anyway a function of Westminster politics but of broad social and economic changes whose political consequences were apparent initially in the country and only later in Parliament.¹⁴

This argument is weakened, however, by his emphasis on the

⁹ Pelling, H. *Social Geography of British Elections*, originally published 1967, Gregg Revivals 1994, p.43. For a discussion of the importance of this to the thesis see Chapter Five.

¹⁰ Mudie-Smith, R. *The Religious Life of London*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1904, p. 29.

¹¹ Pelling, *Popular Politics*, p. 59.

¹² McKibbin, R. *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 10 and 19.

¹³ McKibbin, *Evolution*, p. 33.

¹⁴ ibid. p. xiii.

importance of national and local party organisation to the success of the Party and the importance of union support.¹⁵ He argues that the lack of this organisation could be a reason for the disappointing national results in 1910 after the promise of earlier elections. As with Pelling, McKibbin assumes a unity of interest and personnel between the Labour Party and the working classes.¹⁶ He writes as if the social complexity of London's working population was an organisational problem rather than one of differing political views arguing that; 'the very size and social complexity of London made for an unusual variety of political organisations.'¹⁷

This view is supported by John Belchem who contrasted the development of the English Labour Party with the Social Democratic Party in Germany, the formation of which preceded and controlled the development of working class associations. He wrote that it was difficult for the labour movement to establish a united party in England as there were so many working class associations in this period.¹⁸ As in much of England, in West Ham and Poplar there were several left wing groupings. As well as the SDF and the ILP there were also radical clubs and socialist Sunday schools and at times splits occurred within these organisations as well between them, adding to the complexity of the political landscape. This tends to confirm Belchem's reasoning that these different associations added to the difficulties of local activists in establishing a coherent party in opposition to existing political parties. However, it will be shown that West Ham and Poplar differed in their

¹⁵ ibid. p. 19.

¹⁶ ibid. p. 240.

¹⁷ ibid. p. 29.

¹⁸ Belchem, J. *Industrialisation & the Working Class: The English Experience 1750-1900*, Scolar Press, 1990, p. 228.

response to these divisions and complexities. In West Ham the SDF, which had many trade union members, eventually joined with the Trades Council to promote left wing candidates. On the other hand in Poplar, despite the efforts of the local Trades Council to promote unity on the left, it will be argued that the activists did not have the same coherent strategy as West Ham. This thesis will explore whether the more important contributory factor in this difference was style of leadership or trade union organisation.

McKibbin concludes that the difficulties of organisation of the local labour movement played a crucial part in Labour's success or failure. As will be seen, the differing economic and industrial structure of West Ham and Poplar led to different types of trade union organisation and affected the political development of local labour parties. West Ham had by far the larger branches of the various trades unions and, McKibbin argued, this should have made organising political activity easier. While this certainly was a factor, McKibbin also writes as if once the organisation was in place the working man would inevitably vote Labour. McKibbin also emphasises the importance of the apparent failure of the Liberal party to fulfil the aspirations of the working classes. However, again the concept of class is not analysed in any detail as he does not distinguish between the skilled worker who wanted to be included in the political process in order to have some control over his life and the casually employed labourer who wanted regular and adequately paid work and, rarely, any direct political influence. As Walter Southgate wrote of his life in the East End in this period, 'what the cockney craved in his drab and miserable surroundings, and alternate periods of toil and idleness,

was entertainment and decent housing'.¹⁹

Both McKibbin and Pelling have a centralist view of politics and write about the Labour Party nationally and as such their accounts are selective on local detail. Paul Thompson's book, on the other hand, is a detailed account of the London Labour movement during the period. He saw the rise of the Labour Party as inevitably following on from the decline of the Liberal Party but he does not analyse the appeal of the Labour Party to its constituents and appears to criticise it for failing to compromise in order to achieve power.²⁰ The reasons he gives for the slow development of the Labour Party prior to 1914 include the differences between the ILP and the SDF and the survival of Liberal radicalism and reform.²¹ While this may have been a factor in Poplar, it was less important in West Ham. He seems to assume that the development of the Labour Party into a national party was not only in the best interests of the working class but also actively wanted by all of it. But in this book he does not introduce any detailed research on the attitudes of the working class to political changes. He claims to be writing a local history but his perspective means that he is concerned to show how the national Labour Party was affected by local strengths and weaknesses. Like Pelling and McKibbin, Thompson believes that the Labour Party's development was inevitable once the working classes realised the advantages of independent labour representation and the benefits of uniting in one party, representative of their class.

Whereas Paul Thompson alludes to the decline in the Liberal Party's

¹⁹ Southgate, W. *That's the Way it Was – a working class autobiography*, New Clarion Press, 1982, p. 9.

²⁰ Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals & Labour*, p. 110.

²¹ ibid. p. 263.

appeal in his account of Labour's rise in London, Clarke, in his study of Lancashire during the period prior to the First World War, argues that the decline of Liberalism as both an ideology and a political party has been overstated. By the early twentieth century the Liberals had taken on board the need for social reform measures. The fact that they did not aim to be a party based on class but on shared values, according to Clarke, did not preclude their continued success as a party in government, both locally and nationally. For Clarke, the Liberal Party based their appeal on community issues and cultural status rather than the more narrow sectional interests of trade unionists.²² Clarke, however, argues that by 1910 it was becoming apparent that political allegiance was being influenced by class allegiances.²³ The Liberal Party's policies based on social justice, state interference and alliance with labour had enabled them to have a measure of success in 1906 but Clarke believes that it was the desire for independent representation that gave the Labour Party its appeal rather than its social policies. According to Clarke, this need not have meant the demise of the Liberal Party had it changed sufficiently to meet this challenge; both North West Ham and Poplar had Liberal MPs throughout this period. They were respected and worked with the 'labour' political activists which seems to confirm Clarke's analysis. However, the policies of social reform the 'new Liberals' pursued as, for example, Progressives on the London County Council, were based on an assessment of working class needs rather than independent working class representation.

²² Clarke, P.F. *Lancashire & the New Liberalism*, Cambridge University Press, 1971, p. 238.

²³ Clarke, *Lancashire*, p. 17.

As the London Trades Council *Gazette* wrote in 1907:

They [the Progressives] are supposed to take up a Collectivist Policy and municipalise all the services, but they have attempted this in such a fainthearted way they have estranged those who gave them the vote.... when he (the voter) turns to the housing policy of the Progressives he finds they provide him with a rabbit hutch in a back street at a higher rental than the capitalist.²⁴

The Labour Party appeared to satisfy the need for independent working class representation as it portrayed itself as ‘by’ rather than ‘for’ the class it represented. For Clarke, it was the Liberal Party’s failure to appreciate fully the changes in political attitudes that contributed to their decline.

In line with the historical trend towards recognising the importance of cultural history, other historians argue that social class and culture are more relevant than simple party political allegiance when looking at the changes in the political landscape and for these writers the outcome is not inevitable.²⁵

At each stage in the development of Labour politics they aver, there could have been a different outcome. Not all the working classes supported the new developments and this had an effect on the success, or not, of local Labour politicians. Individual localities had their specific cultural, economic and political conditions and these all affected political outcomes. As this thesis will demonstrate, the eventual success of the Labour party was by no means assured even in those areas that one would consider most likely to support a working class party.

Duncan Tanner, for example, argues that political allegiance is more

²⁴ London Trades Council, *Trades & Labour Gazette*, March 1907, quoted in Pennybacker, S. D. *A Vision for London 1889-1914*, Routledge, 1995, p. 154.

²⁵ Kirk, N. *Change, Community and Class: Labour in British Society 1850-1920*, Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. 5-11.

influenced by social and cultural factors such as religion, location or occupation than by political theory and that class politics are not an adequate basis for understanding the political developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁶ The allegiances formed by such religious affiliations, employment and location factors form ‘unstable coalitions of ideological groups with different interests and aims’ rather than stable political parties.²⁷

If this approach is correct it could be one explanation for the apparent lack of unity shown by the various socialist and labour groupings in Poplar and West Ham during the period. Tanner’s discussion of this period emphasises the fragmentation of the labour movement and the lack of a homogenous working class cultural identity.²⁸ This fragmentation is confirmed by Robert Robert’s memoir of Salford in the early twentieth century. He describes the working classes as forming communities linked by occupation and residence, rather than by ideology, arguing that the majority were politically illiterate and inherently conservative.²⁹ However, as with Pelling and McKibbin, Tanner’s book concentrates on national politics and although he uses local examples, he does not give a detailed analysis of local government. As he writes in a later article, more research is needed on the relationship between social factors and Labour’s electoral performance, in particular at local levels.³⁰ This thesis hopes to rectify this omission for two localities, at least, by looking in detail at local party activists and activity.

²⁶ Tanner, D. *Political Change & The Labour Party 1900-1918*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 15.

²⁷ ibid. p. 13.

²⁸ ibid. p. 420.

²⁹ Roberts, R. *The Classic Slum*, Manchester University Press, 1971, p. 133.

³⁰ Tanner, D. ‘Political Change & the Labour Party,’ *Labour History Review*, Volume 55, no. 3, Winter 1990.

Another historian who has questioned the traditional view of class based politics is Patrick Joyce. In his book based on research into factory culture in nineteenth century Lancashire and Yorkshire, Joyce argues that working class participation in politics was more symbolic than real in the late nineteenth century. In the towns he researched the two party status quo was maintained by the allegiance of shopkeepers and small factory owners and it was the development of unions that transformed the political landscape and allowed the rise of independent working class political activists. He argues that as semi-skilled work increased and with it increased unionisation, a consciousness of difference in aims and objectives developed based on a uniformity of experience.³¹ This consciousness was developed by organisations and institutions into political forms. According to Joyce in his later work, *Visions of the People*, the core values of the labour movement were based on trades unions and, although an element of redistribution of wealth was included ‘the capitalist social and economic systems were for the most part unquestioned.’³² In his area of research Joyce noted that the strong sense of community based on working for one staple industry could lead to compromise with employers as well as conflict.³³

Applying this to Poplar it is apparent that the hypothesis is less relevant since Joyce based his argument on employment in a compact area with a stable population and relatively regular employment in established industries. The patterns of work and population in Poplar were very different as they

³¹ Joyce, P. *Work Society & Politics: The Culture of the Factory in later Victorian England*, Harvester Press, 1980, pp. 268 and 291.

³² Joyce, P. *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class 1848-1914*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 76.

³³ ibid. p. 139.

were largely based on a variety of industries, many in small workshops or, in the case of the docks, a large pool of casual labour. However, in West Ham larger firms had developed. In the case of the large industrial complexes in West Ham such as the railway maintenance yards in Stratford and the Beckton Gas Works in East Ham, these industries were comparatively new. This, together with a large increase in the population mainly due to immigration from outside the borough, could have made it difficult to establish the community and cultural cohesion that Joyce argues was fundamental in establishing independent working class politics but it will be shown that here the role of the trades unions was crucial.³⁴

The main issues for the labour movement in these boroughs were the question of unemployment, and consequent poverty, and the difficulties of achieving a strong union base from which to develop labour politics. One of the main differences between the two boroughs was the size of the firms and the different kinds of trade union membership and activity. The greater success of West Ham activists in achieving success in labour representation may be due to this difference in trade union membership.³⁵ However, it will be argued that this was not the only reason for the difference in outcome. Other factors such as leadership were also vital. Thus Joyce's analysis is important in that he emphasises the importance of looking at contemporary cultural factors in the development of the Labour Party rather than, as McKibbin and Pelling, looking at the later Labour Party and seeing its development as inevitable.

In contrast to Joyce, Mike Savage argues that the concentration on

³⁴ Joyce, *Work Society & Politics*, pp. 288-9.

³⁵ See Chapter Three for a discussion of local trades unions.

working class culture is unhelpful because it is difficult to determine the nature of working class consciousness at any given time and political practice is related to strategy and action, not cultural issues.³⁶ Savage sees the main problem for the working classes, defined as ‘those people separated from their means of subsistence,’ as the insecurity that results from this separation.³⁷ Therefore, for Savage, the main interest of the working classes is to ensure that ‘wages are not derived from the market value of labour but from the powers of workers to force employers to pay more’.³⁸ The outcome of this for Poplar and West Ham were what Savage calls ‘statist’ practical politics and the development of mass trades unions, which he sees developing in urban labour markets such as the East End of London. Savage argues that:

Where problems of collective action can be overcome in such labour markets, clear advantages accrue to workers who force the state to intervene to restructure the labour market in situations where they do not have the capacities to do so themselves and cannot rely on the internal labour markets of capitalist enterprises.³⁹

To achieve this security it was necessary for different working class groups to coalesce and the most successful outcomes were where compromises increased this unity. This would imply that trades unions were not the only means by which workers could improve their conditions. It will be seen that in Poplar and West Ham the Labour movement had the most impact on the economic and social structure when it not only was unified within itself but when it also achieved a measure of unity with other political groups, in this case principally the Liberals. As Savage concludes:

³⁶ Savage, M. *The Dynamics of Working Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston 1880-1940*, Cambridge University Press, 1987. p. 2.

³⁷ ibid. p. 17.

³⁸ Savage, M. *Dynamics*, p. 17.

³⁹ ibid. p. 50.

Political parties are also constrained by the fact that they have to operate among the capacities and practical struggles which exist outside themselves: while these are crucially important in forming these into a programme they cannot create practical policies themselves for these arise from people's practical negotiation of their immediate environment.⁴⁰

Thus for Savage, political parties cannot work against the wishes of the electorate, they have to reflect the issues that concern them. It will be shown that in both boroughs left wing political activists were constrained by an electorate that was not able to support a socialist programme wholeheartedly as it did not seem to offer immediate improved living conditions.

All the writers previously cited discuss the history of labour and the Labour Party in terms of the working classes' attitude to their situation. Pelling and McKibbin argue that increasing urbanisation leads to increased organisation in trade unions and thus demands for independent national representation. Paul Thompson applies this argument to London and suggests that weak trade union organisation was one reason for the slow development of the Labour Party there. Clarke, Tanner and Joyce consider cultural and social factors as well as economic in their analyses. However, they do not indicate how far the Liberal support for reform was due to late Victorian middle class social conscience or fears of a revolt by the working class. Contemporaries argued that the parlous state of industrial Britain was due to the unbridled liberalism of the industrial revolution. Beatrice Webb in her autobiography published some forty years later wrote of this period as one when arose

⁴⁰ ibid. p. 190.

.... a new consciousness of sin among men of intellect and men of propertythat the industrial organisation which had yielded rent, interest and profit on a stupendous scale had failed to provide a decent livelihood and tolerable conditions for the majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain.⁴¹

Langan & Schwartz, among others, have identified a ‘crisis of liberalism’ when the state’s role was transformed from laissez faire individualism to ‘collectivist’ forms of social regulation.⁴² This crisis of liberalism, they argue, marked a discontinuity between the early and mid Victorian period and the later Victorian and Edwardian periods and contributed to the crisis of the Liberal Party.⁴³ However, as Schwarz and Hall demonstrate, Liberalism was able to adapt to the new social forces by developing policies to absorb the new mass democracy that resulted from the extension of the franchise and to quell the demands for dramatic economic change by instituting gradual social reform. Thus the aim of the ‘new liberalism’ was to mobilise ‘middle’ opinion to counter extremes.⁴⁴ An alternative viewpoint put forward by John Marriott, N. H. Buck and Leon Fink in their studies of West Ham in the period was that this ‘accommodation’ was in fact a domination by the middle class and capitalist hegemony in the borough to maintain the status quo.⁴⁵ This thesis will argue that it was as much a failure of the left to convince or organise its assumed supporters, as it was the success of the middle classes in maintaining their position that

⁴¹ Webb, B. *My Apprenticeship*, first published 1926, Cambridge University Press 1979, pp. 179-180.

⁴² Langan, M. and Schwartz, B. Editors, *Crises in the British State*, Hutchinson, 1985, p. 16.

⁴³ Hall, S. and Schwartz, B., ‘State & Society 1880-1930,’ in Langan and Schwartz, *Crises*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ Sutton, D. ‘Liberalism, state collectivism & the social relations of citizenship,’ in Langan and Schwartz, *Crises*, p. 74.

⁴⁵ See Fink, L. ‘Labour Politics and Culture: West Ham 1898-1900,’ BA. Harvard Massachusetts, March, 1970; Buck, N. H. ‘Class Structure & Local Government Activity in West Ham 1886-1914,’ PhD., Kent, 1980; and Marriott, J. W. ‘London over the Border: a study of West Ham during rapid growth 1840-1910,’ PhD., Cambridge, 1984.

contributed to the slow development of left wing politics.

Also, according to Schwarz & Durham, from 1906 it had become clear that reform could be enacted through state action. Socialists and other reformers had become involved in the state apparatus via representation on various councils and local authority bodies.⁴⁶ However, Perkin argues that many national socialist leaders of the period were in fact middle class intellectuals who wanted to develop a state administration based on expertise rather than mere wealth and influence.⁴⁷ They sought a more professional society rather than one based on universal suffrage. This increased the debates surrounding reformist policies and may help to resolve the issue of why the Labour Party did not become anti-state or revolutionary. This thesis will argue, based on council minutes and political speeches, that most Labour activists in these two boroughs were very loyal to the state and while wanting radical changes did not, in general, seek to overthrow the state machinery in its entirety. Rather they argued for a fairer distribution of resources by such measures as nationalisation and taxation of land values. Whether they regarded middle class socialists as assisting them is open to question, however. It will be seen that George Lansbury was very scathing about some of them and it is apparent that the largely middle class socialists of the Fabian Society were not very influential in South West Ham either.

As a further complication in an already complex analysis, all the previously cited historians discuss the rise of the Labour Party as marking a shift in political life in the late nineteenth century, whereas Biagini and Reid

⁴⁶ Schwartz, B. and Durham, M. 'A sane & safe labourism; socialism & the state 1910-1924,' in Langan & Schwartz, *Crises*, p. 128.

⁴⁷ Perkin, H. *The Rise of the Professional Society in England since 1880*, Routledge, 1989, pp. 130-131

in their collection of essays assert that it is incorrect to talk as if there were such a dramatic change. They emphasise the ‘continuity of radicalism’ through the long nineteenth century [1815-1918] as well as the ‘religion of socialism’ and the ‘ideology of labourism’.⁴⁸ They disagree with E. P. Thompson’s view that the Labour Party was the direct result of the New Unions that were founded in the 1880s and 1890s.⁴⁹ They agreed with earlier historians of trades unions that the successful New Unions were those that adopted the practices of the traditional craft unions.⁵⁰ However, this argument is weakened when one considers Will Thorne’s new General Labourers Union which was expressly founded to be inclusive and not dependent on craft skills.

John Shepherd argues that the working class MPs elected after 1885, who supported the Liberals in Parliament, form a link between the radical tradition and the later Labour Party.⁵¹ These Lib-Labs, as they became known, were all men from trade union, non-conformist backgrounds who supported the idea of representation of working men but also the new Liberal reforms. They did not want a separate ‘Labour’ party and did not support the new Labour Representation Committee. Shepherd argues that it was only when their numbers were reduced by death that the way was clear for the Labour Party.⁵² This seems an unsatisfactory and contradictory argument. As will be argued later in this thesis, although initially the Liberals were supportive of the new labour movement, many socialists and labour activists

⁴⁸ Biagini, E. F. and Reid, A. Editors, *Currents of Radicalism. Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour & Party Politics in Britain 1850-1914*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 15.

⁴⁹ ibid., p. 12.

⁵⁰ Clegg, H.A., Fox, A. and Thompson, A.F. *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889, Volume 1, 1889-1910*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1964, p. 96.

⁵¹ Shepherd, J. ‘Labour and Parliament: The Lib-Labs as the first working class MPs, 1885-1906,’ in Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 190.

⁵² ibid. p. 207.

became critical of Lib-Labs as they considered that they did not promote the working class interests as a whole but merely a section of the working classes.

Shepherd argues that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century marks the change in role of MPs from men who promote the interests of the nation as a whole to men who represent the sectional interests of property and labour.⁵³ This idea is developed by Pat Thane who argues that acceptance of the need for social reform, especially in the areas of housing and employment, stimulated a debate as to the exact relationship between central and local government.⁵⁴ After the 1888 Local Government Act local authorities were able to have a much greater influence in local affairs. The franchise for elected local bodies was also wider than the Parliamentary (for example property owning women and tenants of lower value houses were able to vote) so that more working people were able to put themselves forward for election to School Boards, the Guardians and local councils. According to Pat Thane the perceived need for social reforms and the increase in local accountability meant that public ownership of utilities and transport was seen as less threatening by local industry. This in turn meant that contemporary socialist and labour campaigns for municipalisation of utilities could have wider appeal.⁵⁵ It could also explain the success of the Liberals in maintaining their position in Poplar and North West Ham as they took on board the necessity of reform without the accompanying socialist dogma.

My thesis will examine this argument in relation to West Ham and Poplar in an attempt to explain the role of the Labour Party and the socialists

⁵³ ibid. p. 197.

⁵⁴ Thane, P. 'Labour & Local Politics: radicalism, democracy and social reform, 1880-1914,' in Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 244.

⁵⁵ ibid. p. 245.

in local government as well as national. It will be argued that in both Bow and Poplar (the two Parliamentary constituencies of the Borough of Poplar) the blurring of the distinction between socialism and New Liberalism was a factor in the lack of success of overtly socialist candidates. As will be seen, this lack of distinction did not apply in South West Ham where the socialists in general refused to work with the Liberals at all.

Before comparing the development of labour politics in these two boroughs I shall first consider what has been written previously about them individually since no direct comparison exists. Mention has already been made of the three detailed studies of West Ham in the period: Fink, Buck and Marriott.⁵⁶ All three emphasise the industrial nature of the borough and the poverty and poor housing of the working population. They argue that the rise of labour politics was due to the rise in class consciousness of the working man and his desire to improve his condition via socialism. They attribute the failure of this endeavour to the strength of middle class hegemony and capitalism in the borough. However a table included by Buck shows that the number of working class councillors remained steady (at eight or nine out of forty-eight) from 1895 until 1913.⁵⁷ Since the council had a majority of Labour voting members from 1898-99 this must mean support from some councillors who were not working class which weakens the argument of middle class hegemony preventing Labour success. However, this leftist intelligentsia or professional support was always in the minority and did not prevent the vast majority of the middle classes adopting increasingly anti-socialist policies. The effect of this can be seen in the differing development

⁵⁶ Fink, 'Labour Politics,' Buck, 'Class Structure' and Marriott, 'London over the Border.'

⁵⁷ Buck, 'Class Structure,' Appendix 7.2.

of labour politics in North and South West Ham where the former had a larger percentage of middle class voters than the latter. Fink, in contrast, describes a fragmented socialist movement reflecting the differing characteristics of the Borough. He argues that the successes of 1898-99 could be ascribed to the failure of the existing council to recognise the ‘threat’ of the socialists who were very active in their campaigns. Once the opposition was better organized, therefore, the Labour Party lost overall control. However, none of these writers makes any connection between local, London-wide and national politics as they all concentrate on local government. In addition they concentrate on the period prior to 1900. This thesis intends to continue the story until 1914 as this illustrates a different analysis of Labour success or failure.

Turning to Poplar, there has been a great deal written about this borough but it has mainly concentrated on the period just prior to the First World War, the development of the phenomenon of local government called ‘Poplarism’ and the later events of the 1920s. Poplarism was the name given by its opponents and in the local Press to the administration of Poor Relief in the borough instituted by George Lansbury and his socialist allies when on the Board of Guardians in the early twentieth century. They interpreted the rules to favour the poor and thus moved away from the spirit of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. This caused considerable conflict both with other political parties in the Borough and with the London County Council. Julia Bush in her study argues that, despite the conflicts between the different strands of socialist and labour groupings, the influence of trades unions and the development of socialist societies in the borough meant that Labour was well

placed after the War to take control.⁵⁸ However, as with the histories of West Ham, Bush does not consider how the relationship between national and local politics may have helped or hindered the development of Labour. Also it will be shown that this analysis does not place sufficient emphasis on the role of George Lansbury both in promoting socialism in the borough and in the difficulties caused by his principled outlook. She also ignores Poplar in the south and the contradictory role played by Will Crooks and his Liberal allies.

None of the writers of these local histories looks at events in neighbouring boroughs to compare or explain outcomes and all assume the inevitable success of the Labour Party. This thesis will compare the two boroughs by looking at the evidence in a new way. Instead of seeking to understand how and why the Labour Party came to be the second party and replace the Liberals from the standpoint of writers who know the outcome, it will concentrate on contemporary attitudes to attempt to ascertain ‘how things actually were’ in Von Ranke’s classic phrase.⁵⁹ Thus, by assessing contemporary data such as newspapers, council minutes, pamphlets and letters it is hoped to gain some critical sense of the place and period under review. When one looks at such data, it becomes apparent that there were fundamental differences in the way political activists viewed their role in these two boroughs. Martin Pugh argues that Labour’s strategy in the East End resulted in there being virtually two parties; one in Poplar, a radical socialist group led by George Lansbury and in West Ham, a more populist and patriotic party led

⁵⁸ Bush, J. ‘Labour Politics & Society in East London during the First World War’, PhD., London, 1978.

⁵⁹ Tosh, J. *The Pursuit of History*, Longman, Third Edition, 2000, p. 5.

by Will Thorne.⁶⁰ Although Pugh is overstating the case in describing Thorne's group as both populist and patriotic, I would argue that to define Lansbury's adherents as a political party is incorrect prior to 1914. I would rather characterise the difference between Poplar and West Ham by using the theoretical concepts of social movements and political parties.

Charles Tilly in his major article 'Social Movements & National Politics,' describes a social movement as:

a sustained series of interactions between power holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support.⁶¹

According to Paul Byrne, Tilly developed this idea into a theory of social movements which focussed on the political process, rather than outcomes, and the exclusion of the disenfranchised. Byrne identifies three theoretical categories of social movements which are relevant to the period under discussion. They are classical, whereby individuals spontaneously protest as a result of rapid uncomfortable social change, resource mobilisation, which concentrates on forming networks and group ties and thirdly, new political opportunities which open up new routes to political power and influence.⁶² This is especially relevant in the late nineteenth century when it was apparent that the industrialisation had led to major social problems. According to both Tilly and Byrne, social movements develop when existing political and social forms are unsatisfactory. However, in order

⁶⁰ Pugh, M. 'Rise of the Labour and the Political Culture of Conservatism 1890-1949,' *History*, October 2002

⁶¹ Tilly, C. 'Social Movements & National Politics', in Bright, C. and Harding, S. Editors, *State Making & Social Movements*, University of Michigan Press, 1984, p. 303.

⁶² Byrne, P. *Social Movements in Britain*, Routledge, 1997, p. 35.

for them to succeed, there needs to be an opportunity created by the élite. In the case of Poplar and West Ham in this period, as well as in Britain generally, it could be argued that this opportunity came about with the extension of the franchise. This accords with Duverger's analysis of the development of modern political parties. He argues that parties developed at the point when the extension of the franchise and the secret ballot meant that opposition to the state no longer required rebellion.⁶³

In developing Tilly's theories, Tarrow identifies four characteristics of social movements, all of which it will be shown can be applied to both West Ham and Poplar. They are collective challenge, common purpose, solidarity and sustained collective action. He also argues that the motives for joining a social movement include personal advantage, group solidarity and principled commitment.⁶⁴ These characteristics distinguish modern social movements, (from the late nineteenth century), from the more spontaneous rebellions of earlier times which tended to have specific targets and be more short lived.⁶⁵

But these characteristics can apply equally well to political parties and trade unions so Jupp takes the argument further, writing that some social movements develop into political parties with the key aim of controlling political institutions. Since social movements seek to influence rather than control the political process this, for Jupp, marks the distinction between them. It will be shown that in Poplar the radical craft trades unions resisted the idea of direct party political power, for example by refusing to affiliate with the LRC. In contrast the 'new' mass trades unions that were influential

⁶³ Duverger, M. *Political parties: their organisation and activity in the modern state*, Methuen & Co., 1954, p. xxiv.

⁶⁴ Tarrow, S. *Power in Movement*, University of Cambridge, 1994, p. 66.

⁶⁵ Tilly 'Social Movements,' in *State Making*, p. 303.

in South West Ham did call for more political control to effect economic change. Jupp also argues that this development, of organised political parties with links between legislature and electorate, was necessary to legitimise authority in the modern state, since so-called divine authority, which had resulted in aristocracy or tyranny, was no longer supreme.⁶⁶ Political parties also enable the élites to channel discontents into the machinery of government and thus prevent social disorder. In this he is supported by Coxall who argues that in seeking power, political parties also aim to formulate policy and therefore they canvass and mobilise the electorate in order to achieve this.⁶⁷

Thus both political parties and social movements are part of the repertoire of collective action and are not mutually exclusive.⁶⁸ In effect both repertoires may be seen within the same group of people and one is not necessarily a development of the other, although it may be so. Social movements are defined by their goals, by the fact that they involve mobilising individuals into collective action and by their organisational characteristics. They are distinct from political parties in that their aims are based on unchanging beliefs and principles whereas the *raison d'être* of a political party is political power and they will amend their aims in order to achieve or maintain that political power.⁶⁹

Although contemporaries identified similar social and economic problems in both Poplar and West Ham, more detailed analysis reveals differences as well as similarities in the underlying economic and social

⁶⁶ Jupp, J. *Political Parties*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, p. ix.

⁶⁷ Coxall, W. N. *Political Realities: Parties & Pressure Groups*, Longman, 1986, p. 13.

⁶⁸ Tilly 'Social Movements', in *State Making*, p. 315.

⁶⁹ See Scott, A. 'Political Culture & Social Movements', in Allen, J. Braham, P. and Lewis, P. Editors, *Political & Economic Forms of Modernity*, Polity Press, 1992, p. 132.

structure. These differences had implications for political outcomes. The difference in attitude of local trades unionists and councillors was crucial, as was the behaviour of the political leadership. The reason for this, it will be shown, lay in the characters of the individuals who led their respective protesters as well as in the social and economic structure of the two boroughs. Using the theoretical model of social movements and political parties it is hoped that an understanding may be reached as to why socialist politics in these two boroughs, so apparently similar, achieved different outcomes in the years prior to 1914.

The methodology used by Jon Lawrence in his study of Wolverhampton will be useful here.⁷⁰ He stresses that it is important to know how social and economic factors influence the political concerns of the activists and those with power locally, as well as the constraints placed upon such people by the central government.⁷¹ It is also vital not to assume that inter class tensions inevitably led to an independent Labour Party. According to Lawrence, many socialist and labour activists were keen to emphasise the classless nature of their political programme.⁷²

Use will be made of contemporary council minutes, minutes of the Boards of Guardians, and press reports, bearing in mind the fact that these will inevitably be selective and/or prejudiced. The language used in editorials, for example, can give an idea of the degree of respect, or not, that an individual politician might command. The attitude of one individual SDF member may

⁷⁰ Lawrence, J. *Speaking for the People: Party, Language & Popular Politics in England 1867-1914*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 128-134.

⁷¹ ibid. p. 64.

⁷² ibid. p 36

not represent the whole.⁷³ Also critical use will be made of letters, minutes of labour and socialist organisations as well as biographies and autobiographies. The Lansbury archive will be very important in this study, as will his writings and pamphlets. Another important source of information is the newly available enumerators' notebooks for the 1901 census of England and Wales, enabling a greater understanding of the social and economic nature of the two boroughs as well as providing valuable biographical data.

Although much of this information was available and used by previous writers of histories of these two boroughs, it will be considered here in a new way. Instead of a linear history of the Labour Party, comparison will be made between two areas that ultimately became strongholds of the Labour Party. The thesis tackles the crucial question of why, prior to 1914, it seemed as if Labour had succeeded in South West Ham but had failed to achieve similar representation in Poplar. Initial chapters will outline the social and economic conditions in the boroughs and the national attitudes to their problems. Chapters Three and Four will consider the left wing activists and their leaders, outlining their differing attitudes to the social and economic problems and their different styles of political activity. Chapter Five discusses the difficulties experienced by activists in achieving local and national representation so as to effect social and political change. Chapters Six, Seven and Eight will, by considering the issue of unemployment, the campaign for women's suffrage, together with the increased trade union activity after 1910 exemplify the main argument of this thesis. Thus, by assessing economic

⁷³ See Hunt, K. *Equivocal Feminists: the Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question*, Cambridge University Press. 1996. p. 16 and Cherry, S. *Doing Different? Politics and the Labour Movement in Norwich 1880-1914*, Centre for East Anglian Studies, 1989, pp. 6-7 for discussion of the use of the press as evidence.

factors, employment patterns and trade unionism, problems with the franchise and elector registration, the quality of local party organisation and the different attitudes and aspirations of the local activists, this thesis will test the hypothesis that the reason for this different outcome was that left wing activity in Poplar was more characteristic of a social movement and that of West Ham was more like a political party. The first task is however to consider the social and economic conditions in the two boroughs in order to place the development of labour activism in the context of place and time.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY OF POPLAR AND WEST HAM

Before considering the political situation in West Ham and Poplar in the period 1880 to 1914, it is necessary to place it in a socio-economic context.

Only then can the actions of political activists begin to be understood and assessed. As has been said in the introduction, contemporary commentators had identified many social problems in the East End of London and this chapter seeks to explore the conditions at the time. The newly available Census of 1901 is particularly valuable in this regard as it will enable one to determine to what extent the boroughs were socially and economically homogeneous or whether there were structural differences within each borough. Thus one can consider the effect that this may have on political outcomes. In order to make a meaningful comparison four wards from each borough were selected, two from the north and two from the south, based on the average number of households in each ward. The two wards closest to the average were chosen in each constituency. Their occupational structure was analysed using a random sampling technique. The detail of the methodology and full results are contained in the appendix.¹

The metropolitan borough of Poplar was created under the 1899 London Government Act out of the three parishes of St Mary, Stratford le Bow, St Leonard, Bromley and All Saints, Poplar. The area totalled 2327.7 statute

¹ Appendix F.

acres.² These parishes, in turn, formed the Poplar Union, which administered the Poor Law and were also used as the administrative boundaries for the census. It was represented by two members of Parliament, one from Bow and Bromley in the north of the borough and one from Poplar in the south.³

Urban development in Poplar began with the opening of the new docks; the West India in 1802 and the East India in 1804. This development continued and accelerated with the opening of railway links from 1840 which encouraged the building of factories near the new wharves and docks. From 1845 speculative builders such as Thomas Cubitt built houses in the area for the workers in the new factories and wharves and with the opening of the Millwall Docks in 1868 the transformation of a mainly rural area into a heavily urbanised and industrialised one was complete.

The opportunities created by the new docks and factories meant that the population of the area increased dramatically from 8,278 in 1801 to 168,822 in 1901, the sharpest increase recorded between 1841 and 1881, that is after the coming of the railways.⁴ The population then remained stable even recording a slight drop to 162,442 in the 1911 census. This increase in population resulted in an increased density from 20 adults per acre in 1851 to 71 in 1891 and 75 in 1901.⁵ According to the Heads of Households analysis while 20.6% of Poplar's population was born in the borough, 37.8% came from other parts of London. As Poplar's first borough librarian wrote in his memoirs, when he moved to Bromley in 1855 it was a 'a sweet country place' but by 1919 he

² *Census of England & Wales 1901 – County of London Summary*, 1902, Table 9.

³ See Appendices A and B for maps.

⁴ Bédarida, F, 'Urban Growth & Social Structure in Nineteenth Century Poplar', *London Journal*, 1, November 1975, p. 167.

⁵ Rickman, G. *Fly a Flag for Poplar*, 1974 p. 9 and *Census*, London 1901.

considered that ‘the development of the half century controlled by ignorance, selfishness and greed, has on the whole been deplorable.’⁶

Considering the population of Poplar by age and marital status it is apparent that in 1901 the majority were aged between twenty-two and forty and of those 88.3% were married.⁷ This is not very surprising given the industrial profile of the borough and the rapid development. However, the number of factories did not guarantee regular work, as much of it was seasonal or subject to trade fluctuations, exacerbated by the decline of the shipbuilding industry in the late nineteenth century and the change from shipbuilding to ship repairing.⁸ One of the main characteristics noted by contemporaries was the high number of men employed on a casual basis and the consequent insecurity and poverty.⁹

The borough of West Ham, which was twice the acreage of Poplar, also consisted of two Parliamentary constituencies, West Ham North and West Ham South, and formed part of the West Ham Poor Law Union. Thus, unlike the borough of Poplar, the Poor Law administration and the council jurisdiction did not coincide in West Ham. The Poor Law Union consisted of the seven parishes of West Ham, East Ham, Walthamstow, Leyton, Woodford, Wanstead and Cann Hall. In 1898 there were thirty Guardians on the board.¹⁰ One of the problems of the Poor Law administration was that it was financed by a precept levied by the Boards of Guardians based on rateable values. This had an adverse effect on the rates as greater amounts were needed during

⁶ Fairbairns, W.H. *Recollections of Poplar, Bow and Bromley*, Manuscript, dated June 1919.

⁷ See Appendix E for comparison of population spread. Figures taken from *Census of England & Wales*, 1901.

⁸ Marriott, J. ‘London over the Border,’ p. 25.

⁹ Booth, C. *Life and Labour*, 1st Series Volume IV, p. 25, and *East End News*, 1st September 1905. See also Stedman-Jones, G. *Outcast London*, Penguin, 1984, Part 1.

¹⁰ *Stratford Express*, 19th February 1898.

periods of high unemployment to pay either for the increased amount of relief or for increased public works. High rates were always being cited by opponents in both boroughs as one of the main damaging effects of left wing policies. An additional difference with financial implications was that during this period West Ham was in the County of Essex and outside the jurisdiction of the London County Council. Boroughs in London could borrow money at more favourable rates of interest and for a longer term than those outside and this had a detrimental effect on the West Ham's ability to develop road and transport links with central London as well as delaying other municipal reforms.

Like Poplar, West Ham developed dramatically in the nineteenth century with some thirty-two manufacturing companies established from 1830 to 1870 and fifty from 1870 to 1893. Howarth and Wilson in their survey of 1907 believed that the growth of West Ham was due to the availability of cheap land for building and the relative laxity of the bye-laws against polluting industries.¹¹ These firms together with the establishment of the railway building and repair yards at Stratford New Town in 1847, the building of the Royal Docks in the 1880s and the railway links to the massive Beckton Gas Works, located in the neighbouring borough of East Ham, in 1874 meant a great many employment opportunities in the borough. In contrast to Poplar the Heads of Household analysis shows that only 6.5% of the population was born in the borough, 36.5% came from other parts of London but 53.3% came from elsewhere in the British Isles. The population of West Ham grew from 6,485 in 1801 to 204,903 in 1901 but unlike that of Poplar, continued to grow

¹¹ Howarth, R.G. & Wilson, M. *West Ham: a Study in Social & Industrial Problems*, London, 1907, reprinted Garland Publishing, 1980, p. 143.

until 1921 when it reached 300,860.¹² As in Poplar, the majority were aged between twenty-two and forty and of those 89.4% were married. However, unlike Poplar, the population density continued to increase from 43.7 persons per acre in 1891 to 57.1 in 1901 and 61.7 in 1911.¹³ The fact that this is a lower overall density than Poplar may be accounted for by the acreage covered by the large railway yards, gas works and by Thames Iron Works and the less dense areas of residential housing in the north of West Ham.

One of the effects of the continuing growth of West Ham from immigration throughout this period was that its population had fewer older residents than Poplar. According to the 1901 census 14% of the total adult male population of Poplar was classified as pensioners, that is without any means of support, whereas in West Ham the corresponding percentage was 6.7%.¹⁴ As will be seen, this had implications for the politics of Poplar, as it will be argued that the more stable population was less open to change and ‘new ideas’. West Ham, on the other hand, had the greater number of young children, which confirms the profile of the population as being mainly young families and may also be a factor in the development of the new ideas. The age of the population also had implications for the rates when the Education Act was passed in 1902 and responsibility for schools passed from the School Boards to the local authorities. This problem was more acute in West Ham as Poplar, being a London borough, did not pay the education budget directly. A higher number of children of school age meant that the new schools cost more in West Ham. As a local Labour activist, Terrett wrote in a letter to the press

¹² Powell, W.R. *Victoria County History of Essex*, first published 1903, William Dawson and Sons Ltd., 1997, Volume VI, p. 44.

¹³ London Statistics Volume XXII, 1911-1912.

¹⁴ 1901 Census of England and Wales, Table 35, Occupations.

in response to accusations that the Socialists when in power had caused the rates to rise, the situation could no longer be blamed on their policies as the government had been instrumental in imposing the education burden on the local authorities without allocating the necessary funds.¹⁵

The perception of increasing levels of poverty in late Victorian Britain gave rise to concerns about the stability of the social order among the élite classes. This anxiety resulted in the collection of statistics to pursue the 'facts' surrounding social issues. As well as government statistics many voluntary societies also collected data on poverty and employment.¹⁶ Charles Booth, a wealthy Liverpool businessman, who was concerned with issues of poverty and unemployment, was a member of one of these societies. He was 'moved and fascinated by the lives of the working poor'.¹⁷ Despite his abhorrence of socialism as a political creed, he attended SDF meetings in an attempt to understand whether poverty was an individual problem, as many believed, or whether it was the result of structural failings. The investigation was also used to assess the SDF claim in the *Pall Mall Gazette* that one in four Londoners lived in poverty and Booth was surprised to discover that this was an underestimate.

In order to conduct his investigation into poverty in London, Booth used School Board visitors and clergymen asking them to complete notebooks with details of family structure, income, expenditure, housing and employment. He also spent time lodging with families in East London so as to gain first hand experience of their lives. Once these investigations were complete the

¹⁵ *Stratford Express*, 10th June 1905.

¹⁶ Englander, D. & O'Day, R. Editors, *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914*, Scolar Press, 1995, p. 10.

¹⁷ Englander & O'Day, *Retrieved Riches*, p. 14.

population was categorised according to eight classes, based on the social status of the head of the family, as defined by his trade or employment. These classes were from A, the poorest, to G, the wealthiest. Booth claimed that these categories were scientifically valid but since the commentaries concerning the personal attribute of each category were based on the attitude of the middle class investigators they reflected their concerns and prejudices. A further problem was that Booth based his survey on families. Widows and single men were not generally represented unless they lived with another family. In addition Booth seemed to assume that these categories were fixed when in fact they could change with a change in economic circumstances. The composition of society was far more fluid than acknowledged by Booth's investigators. Nevertheless, despite these weaknesses, the results provide a valuable impression of the lives of the poor in London in the period.

According to Booth 45.2% of the population were in Class E, the most financially secure. They enjoyed regular, standard earnings of 22s to 30s per week and 'very few of them are *very* poor, and the bulk of this large section can and do lead independent lives, and possess fairly comfortable homes'.¹⁸ Booth also states that this class 'is the recognised field of all forms of co-operation and combination,' which has implications for political and social action.¹⁹ Although not a direct comparison, the Heads of Household survey confirms Booth's analysis. The percentage of skilled artisans in the four wards in Poplar sampled averaged 33.9%.²⁰

Both Booth's notebooks and the Heads of Household analysis of male

¹⁸ Booth, *Life and Labour*, p.37.

¹⁹ ibid. p. 37.

²⁰ See Appendix F.

occupations also confirm that the social composition of the borough of Poplar was very mixed. The Head of Household survey records a similar percentage of the population in each occupational category throughout the borough. For the three wards of Bow North, Bromley South East and Cubitt Town the percentage of unskilled labourers ranged from 26.1% to 36%. The only exception is the ward of Bromley North East where unskilled labourers formed 44.4% of the heads of households. One possible explanation for this apparent anomaly may be that the Bromley Gas Works, Bromley Maltings and several saw mills were situated in this ward at this time.²¹ However, throughout Poplar more generally small shopkeepers and factory owners lived alongside artisans and the very poor, casualised labour force. The percentage of clerks and shopkeepers was broadly similar throughout the borough ranging from 16.3% in Cubitt Town and 8% in Bromley South East to 11.7% in Bromley North East and 12.3% in Bow North. The needs and expectations of these various groups were very different and meant that developing a community or party allegiance was very difficult, factors which have implications for the political culture explored in this thesis.

According to Booth, it was the competition for work and the insecurity of income that was the main cause of the poverty of the East End.²² Thus although he categorised the bulk of the population as ‘not very poor’ the insecurity of income meant that the risk of poverty and destitution was very real and affected the majority of the working classes. The situation in Poplar worsened after 1900 due to continued employment insecurities particularly

²¹ Old Ordnance Survey Maps, The Godfrey Edition, London Sheet 53, Bow, Bromley and West Ham 1914.

²² Booth, *Life and Labour*, p. 154.

with the opening of the new docks further down river at Tilbury and the failure of Thames Ironworks, which was threatened from 1906 and finally occurred in December 1912.²³ Throughout this period the main concern of the councillors was that of obtaining regular work for the men of the borough and thus reducing their dependence on Poor Relief.²⁴

A survey similar to that of Charles Booth, though less well known, was conducted into social conditions in West Ham in 1907 by Howarth and Wilson.²⁵ While it was not so detailed it also paints a picture of a borough suffering great poverty and insecure employment. This survey concentrated on housing and industry in the borough and was not, unlike Booth's, specifically trying to ascertain the level of poverty.

Unlike Poplar, in West Ham the division between poorer and wealthier areas was more marked at this time, the northern wards of Stratford, Forest Gate and Upton contrasting with the poorer districts of West Ham, Plaistow, Canning Town and the poorest districts of Tidal Basin, Custom House and Silvertown. Custom House was described by Howarth and Wilson as being occupied by, 'chiefly casual dock labourers, costers and hangers on, a class of tenant whose rents are difficult to obtain'.²⁶ In contrast in Upton Park is described as a much richer area away from the river, 'practically the whole population of the ward belongs to the middle class, and a large proportion has some unearned income. The few artisans and labourers are for the most part in constant work'.²⁷ The Heads of Household occupational analysis confirms

²³ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 26th November 1906 and 16th January 1913.

²⁴ See Chapter Six for a fuller discussion of this point.

²⁵ Howarth & Wilson, *West Ham*.

²⁶ Howarth & Wilson, *West Ham*, p. 57.

²⁷ *ibid.* p. 32.

the difference. In the south 45.7% were unskilled labourers but they were only 10.5% of the population in the north. Similarly, only 11.0% of the population of South West Ham were shopkeepers or clerks whereas the corresponding figure for the north was 35.1%.

All contemporary writers stress the numbers of people who lived in the East End and West Ham and also the fact that the houses were overcrowded and kept to a poor standard. Houses of four to six rooms originally built for one family were by 1905 being converted to accommodate two or more. This Howarth and Wilson argue was because the area was still being developed as new factories were still being built which led to an increase in the population and put great pressure on housing demands.²⁸ This account of sordid housing and transient population is echoed by C.F.G. Masterman, later the Liberal MP for North West Ham. In his book, *The Heart of the Empire*, published in 1901 Masterman wrote that:

In West Ham I have myself seen during the past year the erection of hundreds of houses of so cheap and nasty a character that not only are they hideous to look upon, but are even at the start very doubtfully fit for human consumption - yet no-one raises a finger to prevent this state of things.²⁹

Even the residents of the boroughs were aware of the poor standard of many of the houses. At the Town Council Meeting on 29th January 1901 the Mayor of West Ham moved a resolution extending sympathy to the Royal Family on the occasion of the Queen's death. Councillors Scott and Godbold, both members of the ILP, immediately moved the following: 'and it desires

²⁸ ibid. p. 58.

²⁹ Masterman, C.F.G. Editor, *The Heart of Empire*, 1901. Reprinted Harvester Press, 1973, p. 80.

also to express its sympathy with all those families living in single rooms in West Ham who have members of their families dying of consumption'.³⁰

Although this was carried as an additional motion rather than an amendment, it indicates the council's awareness of the problem even if it did not seem able to solve it.³¹

However, looking at the contemporary Ordnance Survey Map of West Ham, it is evident that houses in the northern wards with large gardens were far more prosperous than in the southern wards. There were also large areas of public parks.³² This division in the borough was reflected in the electoral results and eventually had the effect that in the municipal elections the southern wards were rarely contested and the left wing activists did not put as much effort into the northern wards. Such a clear-cut division did not happen in Poplar. There the more mixed electorate favoured the Municipal Alliance, a conservative group of candidates, and the Liberals.

Howarth and Wilson point out that many families were forced into these shabby badly built houses and were often compelled to share because of high rents not because of shortage of accommodation. A Housing Committee report to the council in 1904 reported that forty-one tenements built by the council were still unlet and recommended a rent reduction from 8/6 to 7/- per week as 'this had solved the problem in Eve Road'.³³ This was a further indication of the insecurity and low levels of income. Also houses built by private contractors were often houses poorly built and badly maintained and the council did not always enforce the bye-laws because of difficulties of

³⁰ West Ham Council Minutes, 29th January 1901.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *Old Ordnance Survey Maps*, The Godfrey Edition, London.

³³ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 12th January 1904.

inspection. Howarth and Wilson reproduce an interview with a surveyor on the London School Board who believed that in fact the bye-laws are too strict and so the Council did not enforce them.³⁴ However, even the Council had difficulties balancing the housing books since, as well as not being able to borrow money at the same advantageous rates as Poplar, it also was initially not able to receive funds from the Central Unemployed Body, which gave grants for relief works. In 1904 the Council ceased its house-building programme after it was unable to let the houses at affordable yet economically viable rents.³⁵ As a contemporary writer put it ‘rates and rents are the Scylla and Charybdis on which the best of schemes are apt to founder; where rents are kept low at the public expense, the rates rise in proportion’.³⁶ In both these boroughs the issue of high rates affected the rents charged and caused many problems for those politicians on the left who wished to improve the standards of living but were unable to raise the necessary money.

Another difficulty for both boroughs was the licensing of lodging houses and the necessary inspections to check if they were overcrowded or insanitary. Poplar Borough Council regularly reported the number of overcrowded rooms. A typical report lists fifteen properties, of which eight were in Rook Street. To give some idea of the meaning of overcrowding the inhabitants of number 4 Rook Street, a small terrace house of four rooms. Alfred Elgrim, a labourer aged fifty-nine, and his wife Harriet, aged fifty-two, lived in one room as did Cornelius Long, a stevedore aged fifty-nine, his wife Anne, a garment machinist, aged forty-eight, and their son Frank, aged four. The other two

³⁴ Howarth & Wilson, *West Ham*, p. 18.

³⁵ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 26th January 1904.

³⁶ Kaufman, M. *The Housing of the Working Classes*, T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1907, p 39.

rooms were occupied by Charles Mitchell, a dock labourer aged thirty-four, his wife, Jane aged thirty-two, and their three sons, aged thirteen, nine and three and two daughters aged eleven and six. All three men were listed as the head of their respective household but the census does not record whether or not they were all individual tenants or whether the house was sub-let.³⁷

However, even when the Public Health Act of 1899 and the local bye-laws were enforced, no alternative accommodation was provided for the unfortunate people evicted. There is a poignant report in the Poplar Borough Council minutes of the 15th January 1903 from the Medical Officer of Health, W. C. Young, concerning a tenant who went to the magistrate's court to evict a lodger who had falsified the number of children she had. According to the report the occupants of the room (which had a cubic capacity of 1,265 feet) were the mother, daughters aged twenty-two and four, boys aged eighteen, fourteen, ten, eight and six and two babies. Mr Mead, the magistrate in the Police Court on 16th December 1902, commented on the seriousness of the deception and fined the mother £2.00 per day that they remained in the room. On 22nd December the case was reviewed and as the room was still occupied an additional fine of £1.00 a day was levied with the option of twenty days in prison for the mother. She chose prison. Her daughter appeared before the court with her baby and was told to go to the workhouse. There is no record of what happened to the other children or how they spent Christmas. This can hardly have been an isolated case and illustrates the heritage of Victorian liberalism and individuality in the attitude of the authorities to the problems of housing and other social concerns. The council does not appear to have

³⁷ Census of England and Wales 1901, Enumerator's Notebook for Poplar West Ward.

thought it their responsibility to assist this family and others like them.³⁸ The report was accepted by the Council without any comment even from the left wing members.

It was recognised by contemporary commentators and politicians that poor housing led to poor health and consequently, in the early 1900s there was considerable concern about what was seen as physical degeneration of the working population. In particular concern was raised as to the quality of recruits for the Boer War in 1900. Many statistics were collected to support this view. This resulted in an Interdepartmental Committee which published a Report on Physical Deterioration in 1904 which in turn led to the setting up of clinics and health visiting schemes in poor areas.³⁹ These schemes were very difficult to administer, as the Local Government Board, the government department which approved and financed local council spending, would not support the salary of more than one Health Visitor. Although volunteers were recruited to assist at the various health clinics and with visiting they found their task very difficult as reports to the Council show.⁴⁰ The work of the Midwives and Health Visitors was a mixed blessing. Ellen Ross has shown in her study of mothers in the East End that the inspections and reforms suggested by health officials often resulted in extra expenses for mothers. For example, any illness or defects found, such as short sight, often meant expensive trips to hospital.⁴¹ The working classes saw many medical procedures as an invasion of privacy and this is particularly evident in the

³⁸ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 15th January 1903.

³⁹ Ross, E. *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 200.

⁴⁰ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 16th September 1909.

⁴¹ Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 210.

debates surrounding the immunisation of infants against smallpox. George Lansbury was prosecuted and fined for failing to have his children immunised. He argued that the system was open to abuse as doctors were paid for immunising children.⁴²

Both West Ham and Poplar collected statistics on death rates and infant mortality rates as well as numbers of incidences of zymotic diseases. These were the infectious diseases common at the time such as measles and diphtheria. These statistics show that the population of both boroughs was very vulnerable to disease and that death rates were higher than in the rest of London. The Council Minutes give monthly reports of death rates. For example on 3rd January 1900 the death rate for the previous month in Poplar was 7.4 per 1,000 and in West Ham 7.01 per 1,000. They also recorded higher death rates than the rest of London for the infectious diseases and the Medical Officer of Health for West Ham cites as the reasons; a young population with more children, the building boom which resulted in shoddy housing and the overcrowding making isolation of infected individuals very difficult.⁴³ All these problems were exacerbated during the smallpox epidemic of 1901-2. A report from the Medical Officer of Health presented to Poplar council told of

some of the rooms stripped after the cases of smallpox had 18,15,12 and 10 papers on their walls. The amount of pent up filth in such walls must be enormous, and it is not reasonable to expect tenants to cleanse such rooms by stripping paper off the walls, so that if the tenant has to cleanse such rooms the so-called cleansing will only be carried out by pasting on another paper.⁴⁴

In the case of smallpox, both Councils did take some responsibility by

⁴² *East End News*, 25th February 1899.

⁴³ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 3rd January 1900.

⁴⁴ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 21st November 1901.

isolating the families affected and disinfecting their houses. However, Poplar went further and provided alternative accommodation and food for those unable to work. This was despite not having any statutory authority to do so.⁴⁵ This would also prevent the disenfranchisement of voters which was the result of receiving help from the Guardians.⁴⁶ An attempt by Walter Godbold, a Labour member of West Ham Town Council to urge that borough to do something similar was unsuccessful.⁴⁷

However, even when in work the wages were often not adequate and they certainly did not allow for any provision for a ‘rainy day’ such as recommended by the Health Visitors. Booth’s details of family budgets show out of an income of between 25/- and 30/- a week nearly all was spent on food and rent.⁴⁸ Solvency was only possible if work was regular and no-one needed the doctor. When looking at these figures it is interesting to note that even the poorest include a weekly payment for insurance. This was to pay for funeral expenses and prevent the ultimate shame of a pauper’s funeral. The problems of poverty were increased in old age when work became impossible. There are numerous examples of small payments of around 8/- per week to ex-council employees but these were called ‘sick pay’ until the passing of the Pensions Act in 1908.⁴⁹ Even after the Act a recipient had to be over the age of seventy and of ‘good character’ to qualify.⁵⁰ There was no entitlement to money if one did not work, for whatever reason. In West Ham the Labour

⁴⁵ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 19th December 1901.

⁴⁶ See Chapter Five of this thesis for a discussion of franchise restrictions.

⁴⁷ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 23rd April 1902.

⁴⁸ See Appendix I for details.

⁴⁹ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 9th May 1901.

⁵⁰ Pugh, M. ‘Working Class Experience and State Social Welfare 1908-1914: Old Age Pensions Reconsidered,’ *Historical Journal*, 45, 4th December 2002, p. 777.

group had established the principle of pensions for council employees but they were not automatic. For example pensions of 10/- and 7/6 were granted in January 1899 to two council workmen who were unable to continue working because of their age. The difference was due to length of service.⁵¹ However, in December 1900 when Labour was no longer in the majority Thorne's proposal to increase pensions for all council employees to 20/- per week was decisively defeated.⁵² Later attempts to increase individual pensions for council employees were also unsuccessful.⁵³

Although the occupational structure of the two boroughs in this period was similar, research shows that there were some significant differences between them, which had an effect on the development of Labour politics. In Poplar the 1901 Census Tables of Occupation show that the greatest percentage, 25.9%, of males over fifteen years worked as carriers either generally or in the docks or on the railways. The next largest categories of employment were the iron and steel trades (15.6%) and general labourers (14.7%). This latter would include unskilled dock labourers who were not necessarily counted separately. In West Ham the picture is similar with carriers forming 23.9% of male workers, iron and steel trade 13.4% and general labourers 12.4%. One difference between Poplar and West Ham was the number employed in the building trades. In Poplar the figure was 8.7% and in West Ham 11%, which reflects the amount of new building in the latter borough.⁵⁴ However, both shipbuilding and house building were in decline after 1902 as the Admiralty placed contracts in the north where wages were

⁵¹ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 24th January 1899.

⁵² ibid. 12th December 1900.

⁵³ For an example see West Ham Town Council Minutes 28th November 1905.

⁵⁴ See Appendix J.

lower and there was less need for new houses in West Ham.⁵⁵

Comparing the lists of rateable values of the two boroughs it is evident that the spread of firms differs. In Poplar and Bow although firms are concentrated in the south, near the river and docks, there were a number of small firms spread all over the borough. Apart from No1 and 2 Districts, which were in the south of the borough near the docks, each of the areas had at least ten and fifteen firms with rateable values over £300 per annum in 1910. No 1 and No 2 Districts had sixty-six firms that were rated above £300 per annum. It is notable that apart from Bryant and May, match makers, at £3680; Clarke Nicholls and Coombe, confectioners, at £3800; and Spratts Ltd, bakers at £5808; most of the firms had rateable values of under £500. These were the numerous companies involved in paints, chemicals, varnish, jam, soap and flour mills. The non-manufacturing businesses connected with the docks such as wharves and warehouses were also rated highly but the individual firms were not large and employment, which was often on a casual basis by the day or even the hour, was fragmented between the various dock and warehouse masters.⁵⁶

When one considers the rateable values of firms in West Ham it is clear that this borough had a less fragmented industrial pattern. Looking at the Ordnance Survey map of 1914 one can see that industry and population is concentrated in the south of the borough. In contrast to Poplar, of the seventy three firms with rateable values over £300 recorded by Howarth and Wilson only nineteen had rateable values below £500 and six, which included the docks, the Great Eastern Railway and the Gas Light and Coke Company, were

⁵⁵ *Stratford Express*, 18th September 1909.

⁵⁶ See Appendix G.

valued above £14,000.⁵⁷ A contemporary history confirms this by listing twenty large firms which had opened on the river frontage since the Albert Docks opened in 1880. These firms specialised in the ‘noxious trades’ of chemicals, creosoting, and chemical manures as well as sugar boiling products.⁵⁸ In fact as Archer Crouch, a contemporary commentator, writes approvingly:

The small town of 18,000 inhabitants in 1850 has become a prosperous borough of 300,000 inhabitants in 1900. We are accustomed to hear of the rapid growth of cities in America and the colonies yet few can equal this marvellous development which has been going on at home beneath, as it were, our very eyes.⁵⁹

However, this industrial development was bought at a price of the increased polluted atmosphere of the borough. The Council Health Committee spent many hours recording the smoke nuisances emanating from these factories and their poor hygiene (even by the contemporary standards) but was unable to improve matters.⁶⁰

Another price for the rapid development was the working conditions of labourers in both boroughs. Beatrice Potter, in her contribution to Charles Booth’s enquiry, wrote of her horror at the condition of men in the docks, emphasising that although the workers saw the luxury goods they were not able to enjoy them which led to petty thieving and resentment. She considered her role to inform ‘the fine lady who sips her tea from a dainty cup, and talks sentimentally of the masses, [since she] is unaware that she is tangibly connected with them, in that the leaves from which her tea is drawn

⁵⁷ See Appendix H.

⁵⁸ Crouch, A.P. *Silvertown & Neighbourhood – A Retrospective*, Thomas Burleigh, London, 1900, pp. 84-88.

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p. 92.

⁶⁰ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 14th February 1905 & 15th March 1906.

have recently been trodden into their case by a gang of the great unwashed'.⁶¹

Beatrice Potter has sympathy for the dockworkers, realising that although they were hardworking they were victims of irregular employment and thus in poverty but that 'decay breeds parasites. The casual by misfortune tends to become the casual by inclination.'⁶²

In their discussion on the management of the docks, Howarth & Wilson provide detailed information as to the wages and the methods of work. They comment that the dock owners were not very concerned how the foremen obtained the labour and that the system of 'calling on' was very unfair. Men were herded together in a shed with iron bars at either end and the foreman marched up and down, choosing men for work on a daily or hourly basis. Ben Tillet's description of this daily occurrence is an impassioned plea for reform:

The last remnants of strength were exerted in an effort to get work for an hour, a half hour, for a few pence. Such struggles shoutings, cursings, with a grinning brute selecting the chosen of the poor wretches. At the cage, so termed because of the iron bars made to protect the caller-on, men ravening for food fought like madmen for the ticket, a veritable talisman of life ... Coats, flesh and even ears were torn off, men were crushed to death in the struggle, helpless if fallen. The strong literally threw themselves over the heads of their fellows and battled with kick and curse, through the kicking, punching, cursing crowd to the rails of the cage, which held them like rats – mad human rats – who saw food in the ticket.⁶³

Howarth and Wilson, who were, however, more concerned about the efficiency of the dock industry, also describe the demoralising effect of casual labour and the calling on system as it applied in West Ham.

⁶¹ Booth, *Life and Labour*, p. 17.

⁶² ibid. p 29.

⁶³ Ben Tillet quoted in McCarthy, T. *The Great Dock Strike 1889*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988, p. 39.

Sometimes foremen will shirk the selection of the whole number to be required and when they have given out a certain number of tickets will hold the rest in their hands to be snatched by whoever can get them.

Such a fight was seen by the writers who were informed it was by no means an isolated incident. The brutalising and demoralising effect on the men requires no comment.⁶⁴

Once in work it would be equally brutalising. Twelve-hour shifts were common and six day weeks. For example, in September 1906 Poplar Councillors Lansbury and Darby attempted to ensure that the employees of the Council-run Water Board would be paid 30/- for a 48 hour week with a guaranteed one day's rest in seven but after several votes were taken the measure was not approved.⁶⁵ In West Ham, the Town Council Public Health Committee received a letter from:

We the undersigned Sewermen of West Ham Borough [who] respectfully beg to ask that the three days' holiday allowed to us be extended to one week with pay. We would respectfully point out that three days' holiday does not allow us to be away long enough to get the sewer gas out of our system and we think the extra time would enable us to do so.⁶⁶

The Council did not agree and the acceptance recommended by the committee was overturned in full Council. Work was equally hard in the numerous factories. Will Thorne initially campaigned to reduce the eighteen-hour Sunday shift at Beckton Gas Works after a change in work practices brought increased hours. As he pointed out, the majority of the workers came from Poplar and Canning Town which meant a walk of around four hours as well as a working day.⁶⁷ As Standish Meacham commented 'one emerges from the mass of evidence with two perceptions: the first, of the bone weariness with which most workers must have returned home night after

⁶⁴ Howarth & Wilson, *West Ham*, p. 200.

⁶⁵ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 20th September 1906.

⁶⁶ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 25th July 1905.

⁶⁷ Radice, G. & L. Will Thorne, *Constructive Militant*, George Allen & Unwin, 1974, p. 28.

night. A second perception is of the readiness on the part of management to think of workers as a different breed, less sensitive to dirt and unpleasantness than others.⁶⁸

Irregular male employment meant that women's contribution to the family income could be vital. According to the 1901 census, the adult population of West Ham included 29.6% women between the ages of fifteen and fifty of whom 67.8% were married or widowed. The figures for Poplar were broadly similar except that the percentage of women was less at 19%. The percentage of married or widowed women was similar at 66.7%. The larger number of women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five in West Ham reflects the younger population of West Ham that has already been noted.⁶⁹ Traditional histories of the labour movement have tended to ignore this population. Hobsbawm's famous book was entitled *Labouring Men* and he acknowledges his deficiency in this regard in his later article in *History Workshop Journal* entitled 'Man and Woman: Images on the Left'.⁷⁰ K. D. Brown's *Labour and Unemployment* makes no mention of women in paid employment at all.⁷¹ Although later historians have rectified this there is no detailed study of women's work in these two boroughs and the effect this may have had on the development of Labour politics in this period.⁷²

The census of 1901 records at least 46.4% of all unmarried women in full time employment in West Ham and 52.1% in Poplar and hints at further

⁶⁸ Meacham, S. A. *Life Apart. The English Working Class 1890-1914*, Thames & Hudson, 1977, p. 133.

⁶⁹ 1901 Census, Table 35 for West Ham and Poplar.

⁷⁰ Hobsbawm, E.J. *Labouring Men*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1964 and *History Workshop Journal*, 1978, reprinted in *Worlds of Labour*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, pp. 83-102.

⁷¹ Brown, K. D. *Labour & Unemployment 1900-1914*, 1971.

⁷² See, for example, Harris, J. *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*, Penguin Social History of Britain, 1994, Chapter 5 and Gleadle, K. *British Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Palgrave, 2001, pp. 95-104.

ways in which women could add to the family income. Married women and widows record a much lower economic contribution to working class family life. Charles Booth pays tribute to the contribution made by working class women's ability to manage very small amounts of income. He also notes that 'the men have a good time compared to the women, who lead fearfully hard and almost slavish lives.'⁷³

The census enumerators often listed married women as wives rather than in paid employment, even when it appeared that they were making some financial contribution to the household. This particularly applied to women who lived, as it were, 'above the shop' whether as boarding house keepers or shopkeepers. The 1901 census details the family of John Wright and his wife, Emily, who live at 7, Clyde Road, Custom House in West Ham, with three boarders aged between fourteen and thirty nine, who all work in the chemical factory or the sugar refinery. The wife is listed as unoccupied but she must have contributed to the household income by caring for the boarders.

Similarly at number 16, Clyde Road, Albert Smith's wife, Annie, looked after her young son aged two and three boarders, one of whom was a widow of seventy and no relation. Annie too is listed as unoccupied. However, Elizabeth Spase, a widow of 3, Chobham Road in New Town, West Ham, is listed as both the head of the household and a landlady working on her own account. Rather than a labourer, her lodger is Reverend Arthur Green, a Church of England clergyman. Number 1, Eastward Street in Bromley lists Edward Spicer and his son, aged twenty, as general dealers working from home with his wife and three daughters as unoccupied, that is not

⁷³ Booth, C *Life and Labour*, Final Volume, 1903, p. 86.

economically active. However, at 17 Willis Street, nearby, the head of the household is one Catherine Brody working on her own account as a shopkeeper. It would appear that if there was a man in the household his employment was given precedence and his wife's contribution minimised or ignored.⁷⁴

Women's work, like men's, was often causal and irregular but whereas men would be classified as general labourers whether they were actually working or not women's casual employment was rarely recorded unless they were actually employed at the time of the census.⁷⁵ The use of the word 'unemployed', new even for men, was rarely used for women in this period. This reflects the received view that women should not take up paid employment once married, or even unmarried if the household could afford it, as it would reduce the total number of jobs available and reduce wages, women almost always being paid less than men.

This made the position of widows very difficult. The work provided for recipients of outdoor relief was only suitable for male workers consisting as it did of road cleaning or stone breaking.⁷⁶ Widows without independent means were often forced either to work, even if they had young children, or they had to go into the workhouse where they could be separated from their children. This was despite the prevailing view that women should not work if at all possible, especially if they were mothers. In Poplar pensions to widows whose husbands had been Council employees could be paid but they were

⁷⁴ All these examples are taken from the Enumerator's notebooks of the 1901 Census for West Ham and Poplar.

⁷⁵ Gleadle, *British Women* p. 96.

⁷⁶ Millman, M. 'Women & Politics in the East End of London 1900-1914: the formation of the East London Federation of Suffragettes', MA, University of Essex, 1980, p. 22.

discretionary and usually only if the husband had died in an accident or as a result of proven industrial illness. They ceased if the woman remarried and were also limited as to the total amount to be paid. They were not guaranteed for life.⁷⁷ There does not seem to have been a comparable system in West Ham.

With the above caveats it is still possible to determine how women over fifteen, (the greater proportion of whom were unmarried), earned their living in West Ham and Poplar in 1901.⁷⁸ A large number were employed in the textile and clothing trades, 35% in Poplar and 31.6% in West Ham. It is not clear whether this was in a factory or workshop or as outworkers in what were called the sweated trades. This was work which could be fitted around other domestic responsibilities and children could often be called in to help. The Women's Industrial Council initially formed to try to improve the lot of women workers produced a report on the home workers of London in which they emphasised the low pay and difficulties of home working. They noted, however, the highest earnings go to women whose husbands are in work and the lowest to those entirely dependent on home working such as the single and widowed. As home workers had to pay for materials and fares to and from the collection points, their meagre earnings were reduced still further.⁷⁹ Included in the list of trades is shirt making, tailoring and making children's clothes. Other trades included fur pulling, matchbox making and artificial flowers and the report noted that 'neglected and dirty homes are the rule when the mother

⁷⁷ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 27th July 1905.

⁷⁸ See Appendix K for details.

⁷⁹ Home Industries of Women in London: Women's Industrial Council Report, 1897.

of a family takes in work at home'.⁸⁰ Howarth and Wilson in their investigations in West Ham published in 1907 report a similar picture. They were concerned that Factory Acts obliging firms to list home workers and regulations concerning the cleanliness of premises were not enforced. They also emphasise that the work was irregular and poorly paid with deductions for inferior work. The importance of home working as a contribution to the family economy is stressed but it is very difficult to estimate how many women were involved.⁸¹

The other main employment open to women was as indoor domestic servants, either resident or going into the house on a daily basis and living elsewhere. This may well have involved travel out of the borough and thus extremely long hours. The figure of 24.2% of women in Poplar over fifteen listed as indoor domestic servants and the corresponding figure of 30.5 % for West Ham may reflect the more prosperous nature of North West Ham as it seems unlikely that women would travel all the way from West Ham to the West End of London for domestic work.⁸²

One other employment opportunity for women was teaching in elementary schools. Prior to the Education Act of 1902 a system was in place whereby pupils who achieved the necessary standard could become trainee teachers working in local schools. Dina Copelman's research in London has discovered that these teachers came from working class families who were instable if low paid work.⁸³ The fact that again there was a higher percentage in

⁸⁰ ibid. p. 9.

⁸¹ Howarth & Wilson, *West Ham*, pp. 225-260.

⁸² See Appendix K.

⁸³ Copelman, D. M. *London's Women Teachers: Gender, Class & Feminism 1870-1930*, Routledge, 1996, p. 34.

West Ham (6.3%) than Poplar (2.4%) also confirms the relatively higher incomes of families in the north of that borough. After 1902, however, this system was gradually phased out and all teachers had to be college trained which restricted the numbers of poorer candidates.⁸⁴

Surprisingly, relatively few women were employed in the factories although the figure for food workers (8.8% for Poplar and 5.8% for West Ham) may be for both food shops and food factories. Carolyn Malone has argued that all women's work was opposed because it interfered with their reproductive role and this opposition was reinforced by the scientific discoveries of the dangers of such things as lead poisoning. This led to increased protective factory legislation.⁸⁵ Such legislation inevitably reduced opportunities for women and reinforced the stereotype of the women's role as homemaker and mother. This overview of women's employment seems to indicate that, unlike the patterns of male employment, there do not seem to have been any significant differences in the types of paid work done by women in the two boroughs in this period. However, the fact that women's work was fragmentary and irregular had implications for trade union membership and the labour movement generally. These implications will be explored in the next chapter.

Another factor in the social structure of both boroughs which had political implications was the lack of a resident managerial class. The census of 1901 reflects this lack of professional residents. In West Ham in 1901 there were twenty-seven solicitors, one hundred and ten physicians and nine

⁸⁴ Census of England and Wales, 1901 Summary, Table of Occupations, Table 35.

⁸⁵ Malone, C 'Gendered Discourses and the Making of Protective Labour Legislation in England 1830-1914', *Journal of British Studies*, 37, April 1998.

hundred and fifty four merchants and accountants. Poplar, with 50% fewer people, recorded five solicitors, seventy-one physicians and four hundred and thirty merchants and accountants.⁸⁶ However, the division between north and south West Ham is apparent in the distribution of the professional and managerial class. They form 7.4% of the population in Upton but only 0.5% in Custom House and 0.8% in Canning Town. In Poplar the distribution is more even, averaging 1.2% throughout the borough. This lack of a large professional or managerial class gave opportunities to men to become involved in politics who might otherwise have kept silent. That this was realised by contemporaries is confirmed by correspondence printed in the Poplar Council Minutes dated 19th June 1902 between Will Crooks, then Mayor, and the Carnegie Library Trust. Will Crooks described the population of Poplar as of ‘the artisan class, largely mixed with the casual labourer ... although there are large manufactories, no residential people of any wealth are to be found.’⁸⁷ A similar pattern can be found in parts of West Ham. Dr Pagenstecher in his *History of East and West Ham* written in 1908 for use in schools wrote that, ‘most of the employers of labour who draw their wealth from the teeming factories have left the neighbourhood to dwell in more fashionable quarters’.⁸⁸ Although this may appear to conflict with Howarth and Wilson’s analysis of parts of West Ham being occupied by the middle classes, it is certain that central and south West Ham was not a pleasant place to live. The cheap cost of land and the not so rigorous bye-laws against ‘noxious’ trades helped to make south West Ham a heavily polluted and

⁸⁶ Census of England and Wales, 1901 Summary, Table of Occupations, Table 35.

⁸⁷ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 19th June 1902.

⁸⁸ Dr Pagenstecher, *A History of East & West Ham*, Wilson & Whitworth, Stratford, 1908, p. 102.

crowded district reinforcing the division of the borough.⁸⁹

The underlying cause for the misery and poverty in both West Ham and Poplar was recognised to be irregular employment and the sense of helplessness of the population to alleviate the situation. However, the different economic structure led to differing political behaviour. As will be seen in the following chapters, the smaller firms in Poplar meant that any organisation of the workforce and the enforcement of regulations concerning wages and conditions was more difficult than in West Ham. There the larger firms meant that regulations could be enforced if the Council so wished. In theory, at least, men should have been easier to organise.

So, the social conditions outlined here were of great concern to the authorities, social reformers and political activists. The question of how to ensure employment and thus alleviate poverty and how to care for those who were unable to work, gave rise to debates about responsibility and state intervention. As will be seen, Poplar and West Ham differed in their response to these debates, the former following a more liberal/ radical tradition while in West Ham the marked division between north and south was reflected in a difference in politics. The greater social cohesion in South West Ham also aided Labour activists when they were trying to engender a sense of community and class unity. The following chapters will consider contemporary national and local responses to these problems and outline the efforts of local activists to find a way to ameliorate the situation. Thus it will be possible to explore the effect that economic and political differences had on efforts at social reform.

⁸⁹ Dr Pagenstecher, *A History*, p. 104.

CHAPTER TWO

POVERTY, PHILANTHROPY AND POLITICS

The previous chapter outlined the social and economic conditions of Poplar and West Ham in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All contemporary commentators agreed this was an area that suffered great social evils. This chapter seeks to explore the various ways by which concerned individuals and organisations attempted to ameliorate the social problems in Poplar and West Ham while working within the existing economic framework and social structures.

Before considering the socialist and labour approaches to social and economic reform it will be useful to consider other perspectives as this may help explain some of the difficulties experienced by the labour and socialist movements in achieving their goals. It is important to realise when comparing the two boroughs that not only were there differences in employment, trade union structure and residential patterns, there were also differences in the tradition of charity work and poor relief administration. It will be argued that Poplar's left wing activists followed a more traditional route to alleviating poverty, attempting to improve the current system by changing the moral attitude of both the poor and the rich. As Poplar was closer to the West End than West Ham, many charity workers chose to work there and its strong Liberal-Radical tradition enabled the established charities to continue working which made significant changes in methods of delivering help to the poor more difficult. Left wing activists in West Ham, on the other hand, were more likely to call for a complete change in the current system, based on a more

straightforward economic socialism.

Before considering in detail the beliefs and efforts of social reformers it is important to realise the effect that attitudes to class and position in society had on social reform. Class, as a social organising concept, has been greatly contested but this thesis is not going to debate the various theories in detail. One point that is worth emphasising, however, is that categories of class were always gendered and based on the perceived status of men. As already discussed in Chapter One many people in late Victorian Britain were becoming concerned as to the risk that the increasing levels of poverty were causing the social order and both local and national government collected statistics to help inform social policy in order to maintain the existing social structure.¹ Those who differed either because of their poverty or their paucity of education, it was argued, should be ‘reformed’ so that they became ‘acceptable’ members of society as defined by those in authority. Part of this acceptability was indicated by religious, and specifically Christian religious, practice. This can be called a moral view of society, which as David Cannadine argues means that class as an economic division, that is merely based on levels of income such as used by Booth, should be replaced by the concept of social order or hierarchy.² A clear example of the dominance of class ideas determining social roles is shown by the attitude of the press towards the mayoralty of Will Crooks, a working class cooper from Poplar. In an article in the East End News the editor argued that

Whatever doubt may have existed twelve months ago as to the capacity of Mr Crooks to undertake the position of mayor has been dispelled, and

¹ Englander & O’Day, *Retrieved Riches*, pp. 10-14.

² Cannadine, D. *Class in Britain*, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 120

all parties, irrespective of the political persuasion, are now admitting that he has risen admirably to the occasion.³

Nevertheless at the next council meeting after a considerable debate as to the fitness of Mr Crooks as ‘a working man’ to be mayor, John Bussey, a local business man, was elected. Party allegiances did not appear to be an issue, according to the press reports.⁴

This attitude to appropriate behaviour and social place was also reflected in classic nineteenth century economic theory that considered that poverty was a self-inflicted condition caused by personal inadequacy rather than the result of structural economic faults. The Poor Law Reform Act of 1834 was designed to ensure that only those who were too sick or too old to work would receive help from the state, financed from local rates. Anyone who was out of work and thus poor was thought to be either between jobs, asking for too much in wages or merely idle and lazy. In fact ‘poverty’ was seen as a natural and inevitable condition of a system of wage labour, ‘a vital incentive to industriousness and good behaviour.’⁵ As a further incentive, anyone who was out of work and seeking help would be sent to the workhouse where conditions were deliberately designed to deter. In addition to the workhouses, however, there existed the tradition of private charities and by the 1860s there were a great number in East London many of them staffed by middle class female volunteers. It was one of the few ways they could influence society and spend their time usefully. However, this work while benefiting the charity worker was considered by some to be counter productive. Helen Bosanquet, a

³ *East End News*, 21st October 1902

⁴ *ibid.*, 11th November 1902

⁵ Langan, M. ‘Reorganising the labour market: unemployment, the state and the labour movement 1880-1914,’ in Langan & Schwarz, *Crises in the British State*, p. 106.

prominent social reformer, quotes an essay by J. R. Green as part of his *Stray Studies Series* which, although written in 1867, reflected the attitude of many intellectuals later in the century.

A hundred different agencies for the relief of distress are at work over the same ground, without concert or co-operation, or the slightest information as to each other's exertions, and the result is an unparalleled growth of imposition, mendicancy, and sheer shameless pauperism. Families avowedly refuse to 'lay by' in summer because they know that with winter money will flow down from the West. What is really being effected by all this West End liberality is the paralysis of all local self-help. There are few spots in the East of London where some large employers are reaping enormous fortunes from those very masses of the poor whom they employ. Upon them, primarily, should rest the responsibility of relieving this distress.⁶

This quotation while confirming the Victorian conception of poverty as an individual problem of mismanagement also indicates another factor; that of the belief that the relief of poverty should be a local concern. This attitude was in direct contrast to the views of men such as the minister Andrew Mearns who wrote that 'we shall be pointed to the fact that without State interference nothing effectual can be accomplished upon any large scale.'⁷ He argued that the relief of poverty should be a national responsibility, which would then reduce the rate burden in areas with large numbers of poor claiming relief. George Lansbury in Poplar, along with many other socialists, also adopted this aim although he was never able to succeed in changing the system of local rates to pay for local poor relief despite many votes in the Council approving the idea of a rate equalisation all over London. This had the effect of blurring the distinction between those who thought poverty an individual matter and

⁶ Green, J. R. 'Pauperism in the East of London 1867' in *Stray Studies*, quoted in Bosanquet, H. *Social Work in London 1869-1912*, first published 1914, Harvester Publications Reprint, 1973, p. 12.

⁷ Mearns, A. *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, first published 1883, Leicester University Press reprint, 1970, p. 69.

those who wanted a national or at least metropolitan system of poor relief. However, despite a similar burden of poor relief, in West Ham the Town Council were not able to call for a policy of rate equalisation since they were in Essex and not London and unless the policy was adopted nationally there would be unlikely to be any benefit.

In order to reduce the confusion caused by the number of different charities in London the Charity Organisation Society [COS], originally called the London Association for the Prevention of Pauperism and Crime was founded in 1868 by, among others, Canon Samuel Barnett, the vicar of St Jude's Whitechapel from 1872, his future wife Henrietta Rowlands and Octavia Hill, all of whom had been involved in charity work in London. Its original title emphasised the Victorian belief in the moral implications of poverty as a cause of crime and prostitution. The society was organised in several local committees, who supervised the distribution of charity monies to ensure they would go only to 'suitable' recipients, which again reinforces the idea of hierarchy and social order. The COS, along with many other social commentators, did not initially consider that there might be underlying structural reasons why some people would never be able to rise out of poverty. Poplar's committee was founded in 1873, which was early in the organisation's history. In West Ham the Relief Committee only became a Chapter of the COS in 1900, possibly because of the distance from central London.⁸ It is notable that the majority of the workers in the East London Committee listed by Helen Bosanquet as an example were not resident in the

⁸ Howarth & Wilson, *West Ham*, p. 395.

locality coming mainly from West London.⁹ Members were also represented on several other local committees concerned with public welfare, including the local Distress Committees, which were responsible for aiding the unemployed.

One of the main problems identified by charity workers as a cause of poverty was the misuse of alcohol. Again the idea of moral character was emphasised. If the applicants for charity, whether unemployed or not, were habitual drinkers then assistance was always refused. Many contemporary writers agreed with the COS that the main lubricant of working class activity was alcohol. Booth called beer the ‘primordial cell of British life’.¹⁰ In February 1899, when Labour had a majority, West Ham Town Council received a letter from the Bodmin Poor Law Union asking it to join in its petition to Parliament to make it illegal to sell alcohol to children under thirteen since ‘excessive consumption of intoxicating drink is one of the most fruitful sources of pauperism and crime.’¹¹ This the council agreed to do.

However, on the other hand, Poplar Borough Council, which had a Municipal Alliance majority at the time, made itself unpopular by banning alcohol at the local hospital fund raising fete. The organisers argued that this would reduce the takings dramatically as the previous year’s fete lost £65 because of a similar prohibition. It must be noted, however, that the fete organisers were the East London Friendly and Trade Societies and Greater London Licensed Victuallers.¹² The fact that the council were prepared to upset such a large group of voters just prior to the annual council elections,

⁹ Bosanquet, *Social Work in London*, p. 104.

¹⁰ Booth, *Life and Labour*, Volume 1, p. 96.

¹¹ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 14th February 1899.

¹² Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 11th September 1902.

held each November, indicates how important restricting the sale of alcohol had become. The balance of alcohol and revenue was also discussed at a conference of London local councils in Hackney in October 1910. An increase in excise duty had reduced the number of ale-houses which had had a direct adverse effect on the rates. Poplar sent three councillors to represent them and to argue for increased government funding to recompense the Borough for the loss of revenue. They were not successful.¹³

Labour activists also acknowledged that drink could be a problem. Claimants were urged when approaching the Guardians for help not to arrive drunk, as this would reduce the effectiveness of their cause.¹⁴ However, it was recognised that this problem would continue while men who were casual workers, particularly in the docks, continued to be paid in pubs. As D. J. Davis, chairman of the local West Ham ILP, claimed at a council meeting, it was not the drink that made men wretched, it was because they were wretched that they drank.¹⁵ Howarth and Wilson list 221 licensed premises in West Ham in 1907 with 116 Off Licences, that is one per 895 adults.¹⁶ Licensed premises in the outer East End, which included Poplar, Mile End Bethnal Green and Hackney, listed by Charles Booth numbered 778.¹⁷ These premises provided a welcome haven from the poor homes in which many people lived. During this period also it became more common for women to enter pubs which reinforced the alcohol culture of the poor.¹⁸ The more affluent could always drink at home.

¹³ *East End News*, 4th October 1910.

¹⁴ *Stratford Express*, 15th July 1905.

¹⁵ *ibid.* 28th September 1904.

¹⁶ Howarth & Wilson, p. 396.

¹⁷ *Booth Life and Labour*, Appendix Volume VI, Third Series. As a contrast Booth lists only 107 churches in the same area.

¹⁸ Rickman, G. *Fly a Flag for Poplar*, p. 23.

Even Canon Barnett, despite being very concerned about the poverty in his parish at Whitechapel, continued to believe giving charity indiscriminately could harm the recipient. As his biographer, his wife Henrietta, wrote during the 1880s when the winters were very harsh, she would have forgone the principles of the COS to feed the poor but Samuel, at that time, remained firm for:

He saw without a shade of reservation from pity, that a man's soul was more important than a man's suffering ... Believing that all misery was the result of wrongdoing he thought to relieve it without reforming the character which had caused it was but to interrupt God's method of teaching mankind.¹⁹

To that end Canon Barnett founded a University Settlement Association in July 1884 with the express purpose of providing 'education and the means of recreation and enjoyment for the people in the poorer districts of London and other great cities, to inquire into the condition of the poor and to consider and advance plans calculated to promote their welfare.'²⁰ These settlements were 'a colony of members of the upper classes, usually undergraduates, formed in a poor neighbourhood, with the double purpose of getting to know the local conditions of life from personal observation, and of helping where help is needed.'²¹ It was hoped that by bringing together educated men and those of the poorer classes divisions could be blurred and the lot of the poor improved.²² They taught by example and as part of their work they conducted lectures and debates on subjects such as literature, political economy and art. There were free libraries available and many of the settlement residents gave

¹⁹ Barnett, H. O. *Canon Barnett: His Life Work and Friends*. London, 1918, Volume II, p.235.

²⁰ Evans, R. A. 'The Universities and the City: a socio-historical study of the East End Settlements 1884-1914 with special reference to Toynbee Hall,' MA., Kings College, London, 1980, p. 54.

²¹ Picht, W. *Toynbee Hall and the English Settlement Movement*, Bell & Sons, 1914, p. 1.

²² Worrall, B. G. *The Making of the Modern Church*, SPCK, 1995, p. 53.

free legal advice to those who attended the settlement. Although Toynbee Hall was founded by an Anglican it was politically Liberal and not particularly religious in character. The aim was to reform society on rational and efficient lines rather than emphasise religious ideals.²³ However later settlements were more overtly religious in character. The best example was Mansfield House in Barking Road, West Ham which was founded by Mansfield College, Oxford for;

practical helpfulness in the spirit of Jesus Christ, in all that affects human life. We war in the Master's name, against all evil, selfishness, injustice, vice, disease, starvation, ignorance, ugliness and squalor, and seek to build up God's Kingdom in brotherhood, righteousness, purity, health, truth and beauty.²⁴

There were also women's settlements specifically for working girls, again mainly run by clergymen and middle class women volunteers. Many were short lived but the Canning Town Women's Settlement founded in 1892 lasted until the 1930s. The club was run for factory girls, office girls and domestic servants and offered such entertainment as drama and music.²⁵ In a similar vein the Stratford Girls' Mission was established in October 1873 'as a place of resort, harmless and suitable recreation and religious and moral training for the thousands of young girls employed in the factories'.²⁶ As with the clubs for men and boys the 'emphasis was largely on the need for the improvement of the character of the girls, for them to imbibe middle class values within the existing structure'.²⁷ However, as the press report continues 'it is not easy to get them to attend for as a rule they shrink from even the mild

²³ McLeod, H. *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914*, Macmillan Press, 1996, p .21.

²⁴ Picht, *Toynbee Hall*, p. 222.

²⁵ Dove, I. 'Sisterhood or Surveillance: The Development of Working Girls Clubs in London 1880-1939', PhD., University of Greenwich, 1996, pp. 98-9.

²⁶ *Stratford Express*, 4th May 1901.

²⁷ Dove, 'Sisterhood or Surveillance,' p. 203.

discipline which obtains'.²⁸

The settlement movement was an attempt to bridge the gap between the middle and working classes, in order to inculcate middle class values and thus 'improve' the poor, and as such was not concerned with radical social change; their role was more palliative. This is probably the reason why George Lansbury was so critical of their ethos although he was a good friend to many of their supporters as individuals. This contradiction in Lansbury, one of many, will be explored more fully in Chapter Four. As will be seen, Lansbury was aiming for more fundamental changes in society than merely befriending the poor as a way of improving their situation.²⁹ In his autobiography he stated that Toynbee Hall was merely a 'training ground for middle class administrators' and that the poor were not treated as individuals.³⁰

By the early 1890s Canon Barnett, who had originally believed that friendship between rich and poor would eventually achieve the moral reformation of society, had became increasingly disillusioned with the COS's dogmatic opposition to state aid and subsequently came to believe that the poor were not always totally responsible for their own situation. As he wrote to his wife in 1893 'the East End was despair creating this morning as I walked to Bethnal Green. ... The sight drove me to Socialistic remedies. How can the people rise, crushed in such tombs of streets foul with death?' ³¹ Accordingly, he resigned from the Society in 1895 and continued his social work in the East End without their support. According to Beatrice Webb; '[T]hey [Canon Barnett and his wife] had discovered for themselves that there

²⁸ *Stratford Express*, 4th May 1901.

²⁹ Worrall, *The Making of the Modern Church*, p. 53.

³⁰ Lansbury, G. *My Life*, 1928, pp. 130-1.

³¹ Barnett, *Canon Barnett*, Volume II, p. 231.

was a deeper and more continuous evil than unrestricted and unregulated charity, namely, unrestricted and unregulated capitalism and landlordism.³²

This view was also shared by Booth and Howarth and Wilson who all believed that irregular work was the main cause of the poverty in the East End.³³

By the early twentieth century even the COS was coming to the same conclusion. It had appointed a Special Committee, which included E. G. Howarth, to look at the dossiers of the West Ham Distress Committee, which dispersed monies to the unemployed, for the years 1905 to 1906 and to take evidence from employers as well. Among the conclusions reached were that irregular employment and the habit of daily payment was responsible for a lack of thrift and poverty. They argued for a greater degree of organisation in the labour market to make it more efficient.³⁴ Although the COS did not analyse the cause of lack of regular work the local press and leaders had their own ideas. In 1900 the *Stratford Express* editor remarked that the war in Africa had so reduced trade at the docks that few men were employed.³⁵ Howarth and Wilson argued that unemployment was increased by the large numbers of men who came to West Ham seeking work.³⁶ A local trade union activist, who later became the first woman in the Cabinet, Margaret Bondfield, considered that it was the government's failure to control the natural fluctuations in industrial demand that led to men being laid off, arguing;

³² Webb, B. *My Apprenticeship*, First edition 1926, reprinted Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 203.

³³ Howarth & Wilson, *West Ham*, p. 399.

³⁴ Bosanquet, *Social Work*, p. 367.

³⁵ *Stratford Express*, 6th January 1900.

³⁶ Howarth & Wilson, *West Ham*, p. 348.

We do not perfectly know the causes of the cyclical fluctuations of trade, but we can arrange a compensating balance. Then there are the seasonal fluctuations – which are due to failure to ‘dovetail’ the trades. The problem of Casual Labour is due to wrong systems of employment and can be attacked by changing the system.³⁷

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, intellectuals and politicians were looking at new ideas and remedies for solving the problem of endemic poverty in the East End of London. The traditional concepts of individual help and self-improvement had been found inadequate to solve the social problems caused by structural difficulties. The old liberal ideal was failing and this led to intellectuals seeking alternatives. One such group was the Rainbow Circle, founded in 1894 and which met at the Rainbow Tavern in Fleet Street. Among its members were the economist J. A. Hobson, William Clarke, a radical journalist and Fabian, J. Murray MacDonald, the Liberal MP for Bow and Bromley, Herbert Burrows, a founder member of the SDF, and Ramsay Macdonald, later a member of the ILP and the first Labour Prime Minister. Hobson in his discussion of the failures of classic liberal economics had come to believe that the state must intervene to compensate for the failings of the free market.³⁸ The group called themselves ‘New Liberals’ and hoped to reform the existing Liberal Party rather than form a new party. The members of this organisation indicate the confusion of the new ideas at this stage, representing as they do many shades of liberal, labour and socialist opinions. Gradually the idea was developing that the state had a role in organising society without this being a threat to individual liberty and ‘socialistic’. However, at this time all social

³⁷ Bondfield, Rt. Hon. Margaret, *A Life's Work*, Hutchinson & Co., 1948, p. 79.

³⁸ Allett, J. *New Liberalism: The Political Economy of J A Hobson*, University of Toronto Press, 1981, p. 192.

reformers were concerned that, although the state should tax the rich to provide welfare for the sick and children, any unemployment schemes must be educational to prevent the perpetuation of poverty. As Pat Thane argues the Right to Works clauses in Labour propaganda demanded a right to work and self respect rather than merely subsistence.³⁹ Members of the London County Council [LCC] and local councils who held these views were known as Progressives. They held the majority on the LCC from 1889 and saw their role as one of promoting municipal socialism, improving Londoners' lives by better housing, roads and drains for example.⁴⁰ The support of the few Progressives on West Ham Town Council was very important to Labour members since they tended to vote with them. However, on Poplar Borough Council their support for socialists could not be relied upon.

I shall now explore the ways in which this changing idea of the role of the state combined with the different view of economic organisation that also developed in the late nineteenth century, that of socialism. The previous discussion of the role of the COS and the Settlement Movement illustrates one attitude to the problem of poverty in the East End. Other intellectuals sought to explain the poverty not by looking at individual cases but at the class of the poor as a whole. One of Booth's researchers, Beatrice Potter, later Webb, disagreed with Octavia Hill and Helen Bosanquet and their emphasis on individual morality and attention without recourse to an overall view. She believed that it was necessary to gather as much information about the work patterns and structures of life and then establish a theory of the cause of

³⁹ Thane, P. 'Labour & Welfare', in *Labour's First Century*, Tanner, D., Thane, P., and Tiratsoo, N., Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 81.

⁴⁰ Pennybacker, *A Vision for London*, p.11.

poverty. Only then would any measures to help the poor stand any chance of success. To aid an individual, however deserving, was for Beatrice Potter, a waste of energy if one did not as well attempt to change the underlying structural problems.⁴¹ Together with her husband Sidney Webb, whom she married in 1892, she determined to look at the social structures and work patterns to see if this would lead to an explanation and thus a remedy. In 1884 they along with George Bernard Shaw, Annie Besant and other intellectuals formed the Fabian Society to continue their investigations with the stated aim of influencing government and simultaneously alleviate poverty. Like the COS, the Fabians regarded themselves as an élite and this firm belief in the values of their class and education was resented by many in the working classes. They believed in efficient administration run by professional civil servants working for the benefit of all classes and with elected representatives acting as a check.⁴² As the Fabian programme published in 1886 argued

The Fabian Society consists of Socialists. It therefore aims at the reorganisation of Society by the emancipation of Land and Industrial Capital from individual and class ownership, and the vesting of them in the community for the general benefit.

For the attainment of these ends the Fabian Society looks to the spread of Socialist opinions, and the social and political changes consequent thereon.⁴³

However, the Fabians did not believe in mass democracy as the *Fabian News* explains: ‘the utmost function that can be allotted to a mass meeting in the machinery of democracy is the ratification or rejection of a policy already

⁴¹ Lewis, J. *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England*, Edward Elgar, 1991, pp. 104-114.

⁴² Foote, G. *The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History*, Croom Helm, 1985, p. 29.

⁴³ Quoted in Pearce, M. & Stewart, G. *British Political History 1867-1995*, Politicos, 1992, p. 241.

prepared for it, and the publication of decisions to those concerned.⁴⁴

Beatrice Webb herself was opposed to the vote for women until early in 1906, believing that it was unwomanly for women to appear on a public platform.

In order to influence the working class the Fabians used pamphlets and lectures. Like the COS, members sat on local committees and Royal Commissions. However according to the local press in Poplar and West Ham their lectures were poorly attended and a course run by R. C. K. Ensor at Toynbee Hall to train men in committee work was not very popular.⁴⁵

However, they continued to work in Poplar, and subscribed to the Poplar Labour Electoral League [PLEL]. This was not without its conflict. Ensor, who had been elected to the executive of the Fabian society in 1909, was an ILP candidate for the London County Council. At a campaign meeting where he was supported by prominent Labour League men such as Crooks and Hilditch, his break with the Liberals was queried by another member of the League, Tom Williams. Williams, according to the press report, thought that Labour should stay 'coupled' with the Liberal Party.⁴⁶ As this occurred in February 1910, less than a month after George Lansbury's victory for Labour in the General Election at Bow, the northern constituency in the borough, it indicates that even then the Labour movement in the borough of Poplar was not a coherent party.

In West Ham, on the other hand, the Fabians appear to have had very little influence. Apart from Percy Alden, who was a well-respected warden at Mansfield House and a friend of Ramsay MacDonald, there were no other

⁴⁴ *Fabian News*, November 1896, quoted in Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ *Stratford Express*, 24th October 1908.

⁴⁶ *East End News*, 18th February 1910.

Fabians represented on Labour electoral committees and, unlike Poplar's Toynbee Hall, there were no regular Fabian speakers at the lectures at Mansfield House.⁴⁷ As will be seen the Liberals in North West Ham and the Socialists in the South left little room for Fabian Socialism.

However, since the advent of mass education in 1870 many more people had become aware of the new ideas on economics and politics. Some rejected the old ideas of deference to the middle classes. They used the information they received from basic education and the books they later read to determine their own ideas about reform and social change. This was reinforced by the public libraries movement of the late nineteenth century. Jonathan Rose's research into working class autodidacts shows the wide variety of thought that developed from this new mass literacy.⁴⁸

Many members of the working classes, therefore, had read, or at least become aware of the American economist Henry George and his views on the problems of poverty in wealth. In 1879 he published *Progress and Poverty* in which he argued that the cause of social inequality was the possession of land and the rents acquired from it. The great increase in production due to the Industrial Revolution had not benefited those who worked for it as the landlords had taken the increased profits in increased rents. He argued that this income should be taxed and this single land tax would mean that all other taxes would be irrelevant and people would be able to keep more of their earnings. This book and his ideas were extremely popular. Walter Southgate

⁴⁷ Percy Alden, who read theology at Oxford University, became warden of Mansfield House in 1890. He was a West Ham councillor until 1901 after which he was elected MP for Tottenham in 1903. On his defeat in 1924 he renounced politics and devoted himself to philanthropy and education. He died in 1944.

⁴⁸ Rose, J. *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Yale New Haven, 2002.

recalls that his father read Henry George and argued for land nationalisation with his friends in the local pub.⁴⁹

Himmelfarb argues that the appeal of Henry George lay in the belief that the private ownership of land was the symbol of all social injustice.⁵⁰

Although it might be argued that she overstates the case, George did appeal to the ‘natural rights’ of man:

The great cause of inequality in the distribution of wealth is the inequality in the ownership of land. The ownership of land is the great fundamental fact which ultimately determines the social, the political and consequently the intellectual and moral condition of the people. And it must be so. For land is the habitation of man, the storehouse upon which he must draw for all his needs, the material to which his labour must be applied for the supply of all his desires; for even the products of the sea cannot be taken, the light of the sun enjoyed, or any of the forces of nature utilized without the use of land or its products. ... Take away from man all that belongs to land, and he is but a disembodied spirit.⁵¹

The leading socialist advocate, H. M. Hyndman, also stressed the importance of land in his speech in June 1881 at the inauguration of the Democratic Federation, later called the Social Democratic Federation [SDF]. This organisation was originally founded to campaign against the British government’s policy in Ireland. The speech was later published as the pamphlet *Socialism Made Plain*. Hyndman argued that the majority of the wealth of the United Kingdom was taken by ‘Landlords, Capitalists and Profitmongers’. He continued:

Study these figures [of wealth and poverty] all who toil and suffer that others may be lazy and rich; look upon the poverty, the starvation, the prostitution around you, ye who labour and return the value of your entire day’s wages to your employers in the first two or three hours of

⁴⁹ Southgate, *That's the Way it Was*, p. 20.

⁵⁰ Himmelfarb, G. *Poverty & Compassion: The moral imagination of the late Victorians*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1991, pp. 321-3.

⁵¹ George, H. *Progress & Poverty*, first published 1880, Random House reprint 1929, p. 295.

your days' work. Ponder on these facts, reflect upon these figures, men and women of England, and then ask yourselves, whether it is worth while for such a result as this to bow down in slavish subjection before your 'governing classes', whether you will not rather demand and obtain the full fruits of your labour and become your own governing class yourselves.⁵²

To change society Hyndman advocated complete adult suffrage, for both men and women, free education, an eight-hour working day, graduated income tax and nationalisation of the land. Again the importance of land was stressed:

The land of England is no mean heritage; there is enough and to spare for all; with the powers mankind now possess wealth may easily be made as plentiful as water at the expense of trifling toil. But today the worn-out wage-slaves of our boasted civilisation look hopelessly at the wealth which they have created to be devoured only by the rich and their hangers-on.⁵³

This importance of land was also emphasised by Charles Mowbray, an anarchist in West Ham, when he was trying to 'set light' to the unemployment movement in 1906. He averred that 'working men did not own so much as a "flowerpot" of the "Glorious Land" they fought for in the African War'.⁵⁴

For the SDF education was vital. Hyndman believed that democracy might lead to despotism if the mass of voters were not educated in socialist principles.⁵⁵ To this end the SDF published many pamphlets and organised speakers and lectures as well as publishing the paper *Justice*. Each branch had its own library of socialist literature. Although I have not found a reference to it, it is also possible that both West Ham and Poplar SDF would have had a copy of Bellamy's library, a list of recommended reading for socialists, which

⁵² Hyndman, H. M. *Socialism Made Plain*, first published 1881. Reprinted in Frow, E. & R., Editors, *Politics of Hope*, Pluto Press, 1989, p. 3.

⁵³ ibid. pp. 5-6.

⁵⁴ *Stratford Express*, 18th August 1906.

⁵⁵ Barrow, L. & Bullock, I. *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement 1880-1914*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 48.

Matthew Beaumont argues was ‘a framework for a course in radical self education, one that could be conducted individually and in a collective environment’.⁵⁶ Lansbury recalls in his autobiography that he and his wife attended meetings at which socialist books were read and discussed.⁵⁷ The Minutes of Canning Town SDF branch for 5th June 1892 lists 200 Hobart tracts, 500 copies of the programme of the SDF, one quire of *Misconceptions of Socialism* and one quire of Ruskin’s *Rights of Labour*. The minutes also note that ‘the secretary’s wife is to use the old *Justices* that’s left as she can’.⁵⁸ Obviously not everyone bought a copy regularly. As part of their commitment to education members of the SDF also spoke out frequently at open-air meetings in an attempt to win recruits. A description in *Reynolds News* indicates the success of this strategy:

At street corners, in the parks, at workmen’s clubs this Socialist propaganda proceeds incessantly. Common labourers become ready speakers, ordinary workmen skilled organisers. You see that delicate-looking young man holding forth at that gathering of half-a-hundred persons a little way up that back street under the lamplight. Don’t regard him as an unimportant or uninteresting figure. His words will come back to these people when they have a Labour grievance. He is in earnest, and those people with the shabby clothes approve heartily of his every word. Time was when the socialist would be ridiculed, or persecuted! Now he sits in Parliament and on the City Council, is the lion of the drawing rooms and the pet of slums. And it is this Social-Democratic Federation which has made these things possible.⁵⁹

Like the Fabians, the SDF also claimed a great deal of influence over left wing political successes. As will be seen it has some validity for South West Ham but the SDF had less influence in North West Ham or Poplar.

⁵⁶ Beaumont, M. ‘William Reeves and late-Victorian Radical Publishing. Unpacking the Bellamy Library’, *History Workshop Journal*, Spring 2003.

⁵⁷ Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 78.

⁵⁸ Minutes of Canning Town SDF 1890-93, 5th June 1892.

⁵⁹ *Reynolds Newspaper*, 7th May 1904. Quoted in Crick, M. *History of the Social Democratic Federation*, Keele University Press, 1984, p. 299.

However, even in South West Ham it will be seen that the trade union activity was as, if not more, important than the activities of the SDF in achieving Labour party success.

As a third organisation, the ILP provided an ideological bridge between the reforming new Liberals and the more doctrinaire socialists. It was founded at the Bradford Conference in January 1893 to promote the election of working men to Parliament. They believed that the lot of the working classes could be improved by reform of existing institutions rather than a fundamental change and developed a distinctive form of socialism which helped to make it more acceptable to traditional radicals. This included male and female adult suffrage, salaries for MPs, greater decentralisation and reform of the Poor Law, old age pensions and a legal eight-hour working day.⁶⁰ Ramsay Macdonald by now had become disillusioned with the Liberal party's support for working men and had decided to support independent labour candidates for Parliament. To reinforce the bridging of ideas between Liberal and socialist Macdonald argued that:

Socialism is not a class movement. Socialism is a movement of opinion, not an organisation of status. It is not the rule of the working class; it is the organisation of the community. Therefore to my mind, one of the most significant facts of the times is the conversion of the intellectual middle class to socialism.⁶¹

This was to have an impact on the role of the trades unions in the Labour movement as many of the traditional unions were extremely suspicious of socialism. As will be seen in later chapters one of the ways in which George

⁶⁰ Marquand, D. *Ramsay Macdonald*, Richard Cohen Books, 1997, pp 34-36 and Thane, P. 'Labour & Local Politics: radicalism, democracy and social reform 1880-1914', in Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 252.

⁶¹ MacDonald, R. *Socialism*, London, 1907, pp. 122-3.

Lansbury and Will Thorne differed was that for Lansbury socialism was a quasi-religious movement. Mary Davis has argued that the ILP's lack of doctrinal consistency was one reason many trade unions were able to support the new Labour Party.⁶² However, it could also lead to confusion in the electorate as to the exact allegiance of the labour activists and their beliefs. This had an impact in Poplar where both the ILP and the SDF had a branch, meeting in the same house but on different nights. In West Ham, however, the ILP did not have a very active branch in the south and the SDF was dominant. This, together with the greater social coherence, may be one reason for increased votes.

Socialists were often accused of being atheists by their opponents. Johnson has argued that many prominent socialists such as Edward Aveling, Annie Besant and Belfort Bax supported secularism as part of their culture of rejection of capitalism. Bax in particular saw Christianity as an important component of capitalism and a tool of class domination. He disagreed with those who argued that Christ was a socialist since he accepted the economic status quo and preached simplicity and humility. The prominence of these advocates for socialism led many to think that socialism equalled atheism. However, many other members of the SDF were willing to overlook the religious opinions of individuals so long as they were committed to socialism.⁶³ Furthermore the ILP, especially in the north of England, owed a great deal to Non-Conformism. Brown has argued that these churches gave many late nineteenth century working men's organisations experience of

⁶² Davis, M. *Comrade or Brother? The history of the British Labour Movement 1789-1951*, Pluto Press, 1993, p. 108.

⁶³ Johnson, G. 'British Social Democracy and Religion 1881-1911,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Volume 51, No. 1 January 2000.

democratic government, administrative skills and a distinctively Biblical language.⁶⁴

As has been noted Christian religious faith and practice was closely allied to acceptability and in many instances charity was denied those who did not conform. Nevertheless research by August has led him to believe that many of the poor while resisting the advice of charity workers still accepted their benefits.⁶⁵ Many sent their children to Sunday School as much for the material benefits of meals and outings as for religious teaching.⁶⁶ Despite this, by the early twentieth century many middle class intellectuals and churchmen considered that there had been a decline in Christian religious belief and practice, particularly by members of the working classes. This belief is confirmed by McLeod's researches into religious censuses held in 1886-1887 and 1902-1903 which showed that church attendance in inner London fell 23%. These figures were reflected nationwide.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the problem of data is one that makes analysis of religious belief and practice very difficult to judge. In his study of Yorkshire, Green found that the statistics were complicated by inter-denominational rivalries, as churches had no wish to advertise falling numbers.⁶⁸ In East London the census taken on 20th September 1903 by Mudie-Smith records that 17% of the population in Poplar attended a form of religious service, either morning or evening.⁶⁹ In West

⁶⁴ Brown, K.D. 'Non-Conformity and the British Labour Movement: A Case Study,' *Journal of Social History*, Volume 8, 1974.

⁶⁵ August, A. 'A Culture of Consolation? Re-thinking Politics in Working Class London 1870-1914,' *Historical Research*, Volume 74, No 183, February 2001.

⁶⁶ McLeod, *Religion and Society*, p. 78.

⁶⁷ McLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, p. 178.

⁶⁸ Green, S.J.D. *Religion in the Age of Decline. Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire 1870-1920*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 352.

⁶⁹ Mudie-Smith, R. *The Religious Life of London*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1904, p. 48.

Ham the comparable figure was 9.8%.⁷⁰ However, the figure for Roman Catholics was probably under estimated since the census was taken at one Mass only and many churches held several every Sunday.⁷¹ This may explain the low figure for West Ham since it was known that there were a great number of Irish Catholics living near the docks in the south of the borough.⁷²

The decline, it was believed by many, was due to a growth in secularism and competition of other forms of association such as working men's clubs, friendly societies and cycling clubs.⁷³ However, as McLeod argues, using church attendance as the criterion for religious belief, historians such as Inglis, have hitherto accepted the standard of the early twentieth century clergy rather than look at the beliefs of the working classes themselves. This led Inglis to assert that the 'estrangement of classes and popular indifference to religious practice had possibly gone farther in East London than anywhere else.'⁷⁴ In her study of Southwark, Williams argues that Booth and others surveys of religious attitudes were based on middle class assumptions and male behaviour. The importance of women's influence on religion and culture was not appreciated.⁷⁵ She argues that associating irregular church attendance with religious indifference is incorrect. The working classes in Southwark were very keen that their children should be baptised and attend Sunday school in order to learn about the Bible.⁷⁶ Her research confirms that participation in such rituals as baptism, marriage and funerals were seen as

⁷⁰ Howarth & Wilson, *West Ham* p. 356.

⁷¹ McLeod, H. *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914*, Macmillan Press, 1996, p. 169

⁷² McLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, p 41.

⁷³ Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline*, p. 387.

⁷⁴ Inglis, K.S. *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, p 323.

⁷⁵ Williams, S.C. *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c1880-1939*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁷⁶ Williams, *Religious Belief*, p. 163.

part of ‘respectable’ behaviour.

However, the fact that the charities, especially those sponsored by religious organisations, emphasised the moral character of the recipients, as evidenced by their sobriety and their thrift, and were as much concerned with souls as with soup was often resented by the recipients of that charity. As Walter Southgate, who was born in Bethnal Green in 1890, recalled in his autobiography, although the working classes were taught that poverty was next to holiness he considered that ‘there was no sanctity about poverty, for few practising Christians believed it and certainly organised religion never practised it.’⁷⁷ Organised religion often showed a total lack of understanding of the problems of casual work. In November 1908 the Vicar of Holy Trinity Church in West Ham urged a deputation of sixty unemployed men who had come to his service to ask for charity to practise thrift while they were employed so as to prepare themselves for times of unemployment. He also told them that any money collected would be given to the local Distress Committee for disbursal rather than to the men themselves. They left the church without making a collection.⁷⁸ This unsympathetic attitude of some of the clergy to the poor and their refusal to accept that society needed to change was the reason that George Lansbury left the Church of England in 1890.⁷⁹

However, although Lansbury was critical of many churchmen when he returned to his faith he became a strong supporter of the movement known as Christian Socialism which had developed during the nineteenth century and had many supporters in Poplar. It was started by F. D. Maurice and a group of

⁷⁷ Southgate, W. 1982, *That's the Way it Was*, p. 94

⁷⁸ *Stratford Express*, 21st November 1908.

⁷⁹ Dale, G. *God's Politicians: The Christian Contribution to 100 Years of Labour*, Harper Collins, 2000, p. 111. Lansbury later returned to the practice of his faith. See Chapter Four.

like-minded friends from Oxford University. A later adherent, Reverend Stewart Headlam, who founded the Guild of St Matthew, while a curate in Bethnal Green, in 1877, wrote of their views in 1892.

I take it that we are all agreed that under the best Socialist regime imaginable if a man (sic) is a loafer ...[if a man refuses to work] when he has every facility and opportunity for working he will fall into poverty.... But what is it that we see now? Why this: that on the whole those who work the hardest and produce the most have the least of the good things of this world for their consumption; and those who work very little and produce nothing, or nothing adequate in return for what they consume, have the most of the good things for their consumption. So much so that, as we have been taught, all society can at present be classified into beggars, robbers and workers.

This was later reprinted as a Fabian Tract in 1908 and indicates the changing attitudes of the late nineteenth century towards the issues of poverty and work.⁸⁰ Headlam had originally founded the Guild to promote a more sacramental way of life as opposed to the contemporary more Low Church practices but the movement later developed into a call for a closer adherence to the Gospel views on poverty and wealth in an attempt to bring the church to the working classes. As Headlam wrote, the Guild was to ‘urge upon all Churchmen the duty of supporting such measures as will tend to a) restore to the people a better value which they give to the land, b) to bring about a better distribution of the wealth created by labour.’⁸¹ Under Headlam’s influence Lansbury became a founder member of the Church Socialist League, which had a great impact on his personal political views.

In his book on voter alignment Wald attempted to ascertain the effect religious affiliation has on the two main political parties, Liberal and

⁸⁰ Headlam, S. *Socialism and Religion*, Fabian Tract, 1908, No. 1, p. 11.

⁸¹ Headlam, S. ‘Church Reformer’, Vol III, no 10, October 1884, quoted in Bryant, C. *Possible Dreams. A Personal History of the British Christian Socialists*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, p. 82.

Conservative. He cites Keir Hardie's belief that the two parties in 1910 were divided along the lines of the Anglican Church, whose adherents voted Tory, and the Non-conformist chapels who members voted Liberal.⁸² Wald argues that this cannot be conclusively proved as the data is not available. However, he does note that nationally the proportion of Anglican clergy in a given area co-related to a Conservative political majority.⁸³ Brodie, too, finds that Anglican church attendance in East London tended to co-relate with Conservative voting although he is careful not to suggest there is a causal link but merely that 'conditions may have existed in some area which supported both outcomes.'⁸⁴ In his study of Lambeth from 1870 to 1930, Cox noted that Non-Conformists were associated with New Liberalism and were elected to the London County Council as Progressives. There, as well as the municipal socialism mentioned previously, they supported the temperance movement and attempts to reduce obscenity in the Music Halls.⁸⁵ This argues Pennybacker, meant that

In London itself a political culture of evangelism and social purity nourished the circles of metropolitan Progressivism at the close of the nineteenth century ... The Progressives' ethics and their political strategy prescribed a redemptive role for the government of the imperial capital, a social mission in the secular metropolis.⁸⁶

The religious beliefs of the socialist and labour activists in the two boroughs under discussion seem to confirm the research of Williams and Cox in that most people even if they did not attend church regularly, nevertheless

⁸² Wald, K.D. *Crosses on the Ballot. Patterns of Voter Alignment since 1885*, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 57.

⁸³ Wald, *Crosses on the Ballot*, p 90.

⁸⁴ Brodie, M. *The Politics of the Poor. The East End of London 1885-1914*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 99.

⁸⁵ Cox, J. *The English Churches in a Secular Society. Lambeth 1870-1930*, Oxford University Press, 1982.

⁸⁶ Pennybacker, *A Vision for London*, pp. 1-3.

subscribed to some form of religious belief and most were married and buried with the rites of one or other denomination of Christianity. Many of the local left wing activists subscribed to a religious belief. As already noted, George Lansbury, after a period as a Theosophist, became a committed Christian Radical.⁸⁷ Councillor William Devenay of West Ham, a prominent member of the Dock, Wharf and Riverside Union and a member of the ILP was a Roman Catholic and yet was involved in running a Socialist Sunday School in Canning Town.⁸⁸ When Arthur Hayday's first wife was buried in 1904 the list of mourners included Ted Leggatt, who was a noted member of the Carmen's Union and a fiery speaker often accused of anarchism, and by implication atheism, by his opponents. Other mourners included Harry Baldock of the ILP and members of the Stratford Radical Club.⁸⁹ Three years later the press reported the funeral of J. W. Fennell who was the chairman of South West Ham ILP and a socialist and labour organiser. There was a detailed description of the cortege with over 300 mourners and with NUGW&GL and SDF banners and members marshalled by the SDF members Jack Jones and Shreeve. The Reverend Jenkin Jones, a former Mayor of Woolwich, conducted the service. In all the description reads as if such a funeral was not unusual and the press was according respect to a local politician.⁹⁰ Although as a member of the ILP Fennell could not be considered a revolutionary socialist, as has been argued before, the distinction between the ILP and the SDF was often blurred and in this instance the SDF

⁸⁷ Postgate, R. *The Life of George Lansbury*, Longmans, 1951 p 20. See Chapter Four for a fuller discussion of Lansbury's religious views.

⁸⁸ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 27th April 1909.

⁸⁹ *Stratford Express*, 13th July 1904 & 15th October 1904.

⁹⁰ *Stratford Express*, 23rd January 1907.

and the Gasworkers were out in force. This is yet another example of local left-wing political co-operation which was not reflected in the national leadership. It also indicates the importance of traditional Christian rituals and the respect in which the deceased were held.

As has been argued previously, the type of religion that was disliked by many of the social reformers was that practised by middle class men and women belonging to such organisations as the COS who demanded that recipients of their charity subscribe to their way of life.⁹¹ Ewell McAllen, a Labour councillor for Stratford High St, wrote to the press explaining that he would not be attending the Mayor's 'church parade' as he disliked such 'ostentatious displays of piety' and would be agitating for better conditions for workers on that day. He argued that if all men loved their neighbours there would be fewer slums.⁹²

However, religion is another of the aspects of the difference between South West Ham Bow and Bromley when George Lansbury became the Parliamentary candidate. He saw his socialism as informed by his Christian belief and was supported by many local and national clergy, both from the established church and the non-conformist churches, as letters in the George Lansbury archives show.⁹³ Thorne, together with his supporters in South West Ham, had more pragmatic beliefs. He argued for a socialism based on economics rather than Christianity. Thus, his ideas had been developed from a historical rather than a religious analysis of society, as well as a personal experience of poverty and class oppression. Although both men averred that

⁹¹ See Chapter Two.

⁹² *Stratford Express*, 5th September 1903.

⁹³ Lansbury Archive, MF 360-369 Volume 4, fols. 4-8 for examples.

their aim was to end ‘soup kitchens for children’, Lansbury sought to do this via a Christian perspective and Thorne via a trade union and economic perspective.⁹⁴ This attitude was emphasised in their introductions to a book published to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the borough of West Ham in 1936. Lansbury’s remarks emphasise the moral nature of political reform whereas Thorne talks of class war and the unity of the workers against the ‘bosses’ to improve the lives of working men.⁹⁵

This very brief overview of the state of left wing politics and intellectual ideas in the late nineteenth century forms the basis for the discussion of the detailed history of the two boroughs which follows. It must be noted that however much the leadership of the separate branches of socialism and labour tried to keep themselves distinct nationally in the localities the distinctions became blurred. People belonged to several different organisations during their political careers, sometimes simultaneously. The political opposition and the press often used this confusion to justify their arguments against Labour and the Socialists. However, the left wing solutions to social problems also had to contend with existing beliefs concerning social and economic structure. This chapter has sought to outline the solutions to the social problems that concerned politicians and philanthropists at the turn of the century. It is important when comparing the two boroughs to understand that not only were there differences in employment patterns and trade union structure, there were also differences in the tradition of charity and poor relief. It has already been noted that the COS branch in Poplar opened much earlier

⁹⁴ Thorne, *My Life's Battles*, p. 59.

⁹⁵ McDougall, D. Editor, *Fifty Years a Borough. The Story of West Ham*, 1936, p.18 and p. 21.

than did the one in West Ham. As was argued at the beginning of the chapter Poplar had a strong Liberal-Radical tradition which enabled the established charities to continue to work and which made significant change difficult. West Ham, on the other hand, with its new mass industries and mass trade unions was a society more open to change at least in the south of the borough. This is not to belittle the affect of the leadership of the left wing activists. However, here too, there are fundamental differences in attitude. It will be shown that the leadership in Poplar, that of Will Crooks and George Lansbury, favoured ameliorating the existing structure and system by urging the state to intervene and take responsibility for social policy and employment. In South West Ham, Will Thorne and his supporters seemed to be urging a fundamental change in the organisation of society so that a more Marxian socialist state could be achieved. The way that activists tried to effect these changes reinforces the hypothesis that the left in Poplar demonstrates the character of a social movement whereas in West Ham the left were organising into a political party.

CHAPTER THREE

LEFT WING ACTIVISTS IN THEIR LOCALITIES

Although many agreed that a major cause of poverty was the irregularity of employment, low wages were a further concern. It is here that the trade unions tried to exert their influence. Chapter One of this thesis described the differing patterns of employment; Poplar had a greater number of smaller firms based largely on the river trades, whereas in West Ham the main employment was dominated by the large enterprises centred on the gas works at Beckton in East Ham, a large percentage of whose labour force lived in West Ham, and the railway maintenance yards at Stratford in the north of the borough. This difference in employment pattern was reflected in trade union membership, with the older craft unions predominating in Poplar and the ‘new’ unions being more successful in West Ham. Trade unions had traditionally worked to preserve the special nature of their employment by restricting recruitment to maintain wages. However, the period following 1880 in industrial England led to the development of the phenomenon usually called the ‘new unionism’ following the influence of Beatrice & Sidney Webb whose history of trade unions formed the standard for many years.¹ Will Thorne’s National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers [NUGW&GL] was a ‘classic new union’ as it was both socialistic and open to all grades. Furthermore the Gas Workers’ union, in contrast to more traditional unions and after much discussion, charged a very low subscription and only paid strike pay and not death or sickness benefits as Thorne

¹ Webb, S. & B. *The History of Trade Unionism 1666-1920*, second edition 1920.

remembered in his autobiography:

We had a big debate on the amount of contributions to be paid. I pleaded for 2d per week; others pleaded for more but 2d was the sum finally decided upon. We took as our motto “Love, Unity and Fidelity” and our slogan was “One Man, One Ticket and every Man with a Ticket.” The ticket was the union card.²

Although the autonomous districts of the union later demanded and won the right to sickness and death benefits, Thorne’s attitude and priorities never changed.³

This view of trade union history has been challenged by Clegg, Fox and Thompson and others.⁴ They argued that the Webbs created the myth of New Unionism because it would illustrate the gradual development of socialism which they wished to emphasise. Some unions, for example in the cotton trades, developed ‘new’ characteristics by widening their membership.⁵ McClelland and Reid’s study of shipbuilding in the late nineteenth century indicates that the Boilermakers Union also developed strategies to include the semi-skilled in their membership and thus increase their influence in the workplace.⁶ Also, from the mid nineteenth century, trades unions had often combined in trades councils to adjudicate in inter-union disputes. This role was expanded to include arbitration between union and employers, and between unions, to compare working conditions and pay rates between different firms so as to set a union standard; to monitor which firms adhered

² Thorne, *My Life's Battles*, p. 71.

³ Radice and Radice, *Will Thorne*, p 34.

⁴ Clegg, , Fox, and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions* p. 96. See also Mommsen, W. J. & Husung, H. G. ‘The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany 1880-1914’ in Pollard, S. 1999 *Labour History and the Labour Movement in Britain*, Ashgate Publishing, 1999, pp. 32-52.

⁵ Hunt, E. H. *British Labour History 1815-1914*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1981, p. 299.

⁶ McClelland, K & Reid A.J. ‘Wood, Iron and Steel: Technology, Labour and Trade Union Organisation in the Shipbuilding Industry 1840-1914’, in Harrison, R. & Zeitlin, J. Editors, *Divisions of Labour. Skilled Workers and Technological Change in Nineteenth Century England*, Harvester Press, 1985, p. 181.

to trade union pay and conditions and to try to ensure these firms were used by local authorities. The London Trades Council was formed as result of the builders' strike in 1859 as it was seen there was a need for co-operation between trades, to arbitrate in disputes and develop a political agenda. As Rule 8 states, the role of the London Trades Council 'shall be to watch over the general interest of labour, political and social, both in and out of Parliament; to use their influence in supporting any measure likely to benefit Trade Unions.'⁷ This was echoed in the South West Ham Trades Council letterhead which claimed the council was founded in 1891 'for the purpose of uniting all classes of Labour for local purposes.'⁸ This council claimed to represent 6,500 men, twenty-seven trades and thirty-nine branches when it made one of its regular deputations to the Town Council.⁹ Initially Trades Councils aimed to support men in trades unions, not necessarily the general labourer, however, as Coates and Topham argue, the development of trades councils increased trade union recognition by employers and gave the men a sense of collective status which in itself helped to reinforce the collective identity of working men.¹⁰ This sense of collective identity was then exploited by Thorne and the other 'new unionists' when they called for all working men and women to join trades unions.

Following Thorne's successful example in organising the gasworkers Ben Tillett had founded a dockers union in the London docks which led him

⁷ Quoted in Dunipace, P. 'The Social Democratic Federation and the Labour Movement: the example of the London Trades Council', MA Dissertation, Thames Polytechnic, January 1980.

⁸ Labour Party Archives, LRC 2/335.

⁹ *Stratford Express*, 17th March 1903.

¹⁰ Coates, L. and Topham, T. *The Making of the Labour Movement: The Formation of the Transport & General Workers' Union 1870-1922*, Basil Blackwell, 1991, p. 72.

into conflict with Thorne as it was restricted to unskilled dock labourers. Tillett was afraid that if it were open to all labourers, as Thorne had wished, the Gasworkers would compete with the dockers for work in the summer when work slackened off in the gas works. However, Tillett's union was only successful when trade was plentiful, that is, from October 1889 to October 1890. As Lovell points out the closed shop that Tillett tried to enforce merely encouraged the workforce to work less efficiently and led to a decline in the productivity of the London docks. Despite appeals by Tom Mann the labour force refused to co-operate with their union leaders and maintain productivity and thus the management was all the more determined to resist union monopoly.¹¹ The only exception to this pattern was the Stevedores Union, whose General Secretary, James Anderson, resisted all attempts at forming joint committees with other unions. His union enjoyed management recognition with all that that meant for job security and regulated working conditions because it was self disciplined and had a relatively small membership.¹²

The concept of new and old was developed to compare these new general, all grades unions as opposed to the traditional craft unions. In the borough of Poplar it is evident from the candidates lists for the council and the subscribers lists to the PLEL that the more traditional unions predominate, at least initially. In West Ham the trades unions that supported the Labour party on the council in 1898 indicate that new unionism had a greater influence here

¹¹ Lovell, J. *Stevedores and Dockers – A Study of Trade Unionism in the Port of London 1870-1914*, Augustus M. Kelley, New York, 1969, p. 124.

¹² ibid. p. 148.

which enabled a more cohesive left wing political grouping to develop.¹³

Initially, as has been explained, trades unions had been formed to protect groups of skilled workers from competition from the less skilled and also to provide sickness and death benefits for a subscription. However, the depression in trade that occurred in the late 1880s meant that many of their members became unemployed and the unions were unable to use their traditional methods of negotiation satisfactorily.¹⁴ Socialist activists, such as Tom Mann, who had recently returned from the United States where union activity was much more aggressive made a rallying call to the unions to become more assertive in a pamphlet entitled *What a Compulsory Eight-hour Working Day means to the Workers*:

How long, how long, will you be content with the present half-hearted policy of your unions? I readily grant that good work has been done in the past by the unions, but, in Heaven's name, what good purpose are they serving now? All of them have large numbers out of employment even when their particular trade is busy. None of the important societies have any policy other than of endeavouring to keep wages from falling. The true Unionist policy of aggression seems entirely lost sight of; in fact the average unionist of today is a man with a fossilized intellect, either hopelessly apathetic, or supporting a policy that plays directly into the hands of the capitalist exploiter.¹⁵

The idea of a statutory eight-hour working day was not supported by all trade unionists. Many traditional unionists argued that this would give the government the right to interfere in working conditions. This was despite the fact that they accepted the government's role in safety legislation, since many jobs were not suited to regular hours and many more were seasonal.¹⁶ Most of the traditional unions and the London Trades Council were unsympathetic

¹³ See Appendices L and M for the relevant lists.

¹⁴ Laybourn, K. *A History of British Trade Unionism c1790-1990 – A Reader in History*, Sutton Publishing, 1992, p. 69.

¹⁵ Pelling, H. *A History of British Trade Unionism*, Second Edition,, Macmillan 1972, p. 90.

¹⁶ Reid, A.J. 'Old Unionism reconsidered: the radicalism of Robert Knight 1870-1900,' in Biagini & Reid , *Currents of Radicalism*, pp. 229-236.

to socialism and aggressive ‘labour’ politics and did not share attitudes with the unskilled workers such as the gas workers or the dockers.¹⁷ The president of the London Trades Council, George Shipton, went so far as to argue that Thorne’s new union was a disaster, a comment which was forcibly repudiated by Tom Mann in another pamphlet arguing that:

The organisation of those who are classed as unskilled is of the most vital importance and must receive adequate attention; no longer can the skilled assume with a sort of superior air that they are the salt of the earth.¹⁸

This lack of co-operation between unions makes Thorne’s achievements in West Ham all the more remarkable, in that, he had the support of a wide range of unions linked to the Trades Council, as well as mass support at the dock and factory gate. However, after 1891 the differences between new and traditional unions began to blur. Many new unions consolidated their gains rather than actively seeking a broader based membership. Mann himself, a very active member of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, persuaded that union to recruit more widely among the less skilled and the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants also began to recruit all grades.¹⁹ This latter had implications for West Ham where the men from the railway yards could now join with the gas workers to form a powerful pressure group.

Thus the new unions increased the numbers of unionised workers by including the previously excluded groups of the unskilled. They hoped that in this way men could move more easily between employers as they would not need to change trade union and would keep the benefits. Although Thorne

¹⁷ Tanner, D. *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900-1918*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 174.

¹⁸ Mann, T. and Tillett, B. *The New Trade Unionism*, Green & McAllen, 1890, p. 14.

¹⁹ Davis, *Comrade or Brother?* p. 95.

rejected the culture of deference he was prepared to negotiate with employers and was applauded by the local press for doing so.²⁰ However, as a further disincentive to trade union recognition many employers argued that trade union rates, especially in London, forced business to go elsewhere. This was a major argument by the Admiralty when awarding ship repair contracts.²¹ It was also argued by the majority Municipal Alliance on West Ham Town Council that paying high wages to council workmen or insisting on trade union rates for contract employees only increased the rates forcing tradesmen out of business, which further increased unemployment.²² This was reinforced by several editorials in the local press arguing that higher rates forced employers out of the borough.²³

Throughout the period under review, 1889-1914, Thorne and other trade union leaders constantly appealed to working men and women to join trade unions and organise to agitate for better pay and conditions. Both Thorne and Jack Jones, a prominent West Ham socialist, frequently bewailed the perceived apathy of the working classes to their situation. At a speech made at the Grove, Stratford, in 1902 Thorne called on men to join a union, as he was not prepared to help those who would not help themselves. As he was quoted as saying, ‘a great many people were under the impression that trade unions were only useful when they could get higher wages but rents were not lowered when wages were.’²⁴ He explained his reasoning at a meeting of the West Ham and District Trades and Labour Council [WH&DT&LC] to discuss

²⁰ Kirk, *Change Continuity and Class*, p. 162 and *Stratford Express*, 17th January 1900.

²¹ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 8th December 1908.

²² West Ham Town Council Minutes, 10th July 1900.

²³ See *Stratford Express*, 28th March 1903.

²⁴ *Stratford Express*, 30th August 1902.

his Parliamentary candidature by emphasising that it was necessary to have men in the House of Commons to represent ‘general labour interest.’ He could not understand the hostility of ‘craft labour’ to ‘general labour’.²⁵ In West Ham he was partially successful for as well as the NUGW&GL, trade union support also included a number of ‘craft’ unions, particularly in the building trades. These unions were strong in the area as a result of the great amount of new building in the borough to support the increasing population. Between 1900 and 1906 the co-operation between ‘craft’ and ‘labour’ unions grew as more affiliated to the new national LRC set up in 1900 to increase labour representation in Parliament. The gas workers, dockers and railway workers were among the first to affiliate in 1900 followed by the building trades the following year.²⁶ The national trend for co-operation was reflected in both West Ham and Poplar with the setting up of election committees in both boroughs.

It is, however, a mistake to over emphasise the importance of trade unions to the working population as a whole. Reference has been made to the continuous attempts of trade union leaders to recruit more members and Booth’s figures show that only a small percentage of the adult working population belonged to a union, mainly in the print trades and metal engineering. He does point out that the municipal employees and the shipwrights were also highly organised but is unable to give exact figures. Booth calculations, published in 1903, show that for the whole of London, excluding West Ham, 27% of employees in ‘gas service’ are in a trade union

²⁵ *Stratford Express*, 2nd April 1902.

²⁶ For a full list see Clegg, Fox, & Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions*, p. 375.

and employees on the railways have 25% of their men in three unions.²⁷ By these figures it would appear that up to three quarters of employees, London-wide, did not belong to any trade union.

The preceding discussion of trade unions has confined itself to male trade unionists and the impression given by contemporary press reporting of union and political activity was that it was an exclusively male province. However, there were trades unions for women and women were also allowed to join the men's unions, albeit at a lower subscription rate and with lower benefits. Women's trades unions in London developed initially in the mid nineteenth century and were led by middle class women. These women were not always positive either. Evelyn March Phillips writing in 1893 considered that 'in a great many trades women are stepping in and underselling men, dragging down their wages and throwing them out of work.'²⁸ Like their male counterparts, these unions were centred on craft unions and concentrated on the maintenance of pay rates and sickness and death benefits. The main problem for mass unionisation of women was the same as that for working women as a whole; their role in family life was seen as primary and their working lives were fragmentary both in time and space.²⁹ There was also the difficulty of collecting trade union subscriptions when the male wage earner often controlled the family income or, more likely, trade union dues were given less priority than food or clothing clubs.³⁰ Later the women, led by Clementina Black, a friend of Eleanor Marx, followed the men into mass

²⁷ Booth, C. *Life & Labour*, Second Series Vol. V, 1903, pp. 144-5.

²⁸ Phillips, E. M. 'The progress of women's trade unions,' *Fortnightly Review* Volume 6, 1893, quoted in Hollis, P. *Women in Public*, George Allen & Unwin, 1979, p. 119.

²⁹ See Chapter One of this thesis for a discussion of women and work.

³⁰ John, A.V. Editor, *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Work in England 1800-1918*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 279.

unionisation. After being a leading member of the Women's Trade Union league in 1889 Clementina Black helped form the Women's Trade Union Council and later President of the Women's Industrial Council. Her campaigning centred on minimum wages, especially for the sweated trades, and to that end she urged women to become members of trade unions. However, unlike many of the leaders of the men's unions these were middle class women attempting to improve the lives of working class women which proved to be a handicap in recruitment. Possibly influenced by Eleanor Marx , Will Thorne was originally enthusiastic. In his first union report he wrote:

I hope that every member, male and female, will do their utmost to make our union one of the strongest in England and I am glad that we have the females with us, it being our duty to help our fellow-women and to raise them from the starving position in which they are at present placed.³¹

As well as writing the Executive Rules for the NUGW&GL, one of whose aims was equal pay for women, Eleanor Marx founded Silvertown Women's Branch of the NUGW&GL on October 10th 1889. In 1890, at the first annual conference of the union she was elected to the Executive Committee and the rules were amended to allow this.³² However, with the decline in membership Thorne became less enthusiastic about women trade unionists. In a letter to B. L. Hutchins, written on 30th March 1914, he argued that, 'in my experience women do not make good trade unionists that is why we considered that it was better to direct our energies to the organisation of male workers.'³³ His justification for this came in a response to an enquiry from the *Women's Trade Union Journal*. He wrote that 'in general, women took a less active role in their union branches ... the day's work finished, a

³¹ Thorne, *My Life's Battles*, p. 102.

³² Bédarida, F. *Will Thorne, La voie anglaise du socialisme*, Fayard Paris, 1987, p. 95.

³³ibid. p. 187.

man is free, a woman is not'.³⁴ In holding this view Thorne was, of course, echoing the views of the large majority of male trade unionists as well as non trade unionists. Even at the beginning, according to the trade union returns of 1892, female membership of the Gasworkers union only amounted to 5% of the total. The majority of them were Lancashire textile workers rather than women from London's East End.³⁵ This indicates the difficulties of the unionisation of women who worked in smaller concerns, such as in the East End of London, rather than in large factories.

Nationally, by 1904, thanks to Lady Dilke's Women's Trade Union League, there was a revival of interest among women workers in trade union activity. In 1906 the Federation of Women Workers was founded for those women too poor to join regular unions and they intervened successfully in strikes in Silvertown and other parts of industrial London.³⁶ However, it would seem that this activity of women in trade unions was not reflected in the local political activity of West Ham and Poplar, as evidenced by the local newspapers. Here the emphasis was on votes for women rather than wages and working conditions.³⁷

Patrick Joyce argues that the role of trades unions, both 'old' and 'new,' was crucial in transforming class identification into independent politics.³⁸ Joyce further argues that this political independence was strongest in non-factory trades where the culture of deference was weakest.³⁹ Both of these factors could help to explain the success of Labour politics in South West

³⁴ ibid. My translation.

³⁵ Bédarida, *Will Thorne*, p. 101 and p. 186.

³⁶ Boston, S. *Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement*, David Poynter, London, 1980, p. 60 and p. 69.

³⁷ See Chapter Seven of this thesis for a fuller discussion of this point.

³⁸ Joyce, *Work Society & Politics*, p. 291.

³⁹ ibid. p. 326.

Ham, where much employment was either in a non-factory environment such as the docks or a relatively new industry, gas production. Joyce also suggests that ‘the potential for unifying political and industrial action was uppermost when control of the labour process was most threatened and the whole way of life of the worker came under attack.’⁴⁰ This applied in both the docks and the gas industry in West Ham during this period and resulted in increased trade union activity in the late nineteenth century and between 1910 and 1914.

The periods of acute unemployment and the threatened loss of Thames Ironworks from 1908, with the consequent uncertainty of naval contracts, meant that men would vote for those whom they perceived as defending their interests. However, Thompson argues that in London the proliferation of small firms and the number of different and rival unions made coherent labour policy difficult. He stressed the importance of the London Trades Council as a potential unifying force but this ultimately did not happen.⁴¹ In West Ham and Poplar, therefore, it can be argued that the local Trades Councils played a vital role in advancing Labour politics, especially in vetting and supporting candidates and in voter registration. However, the type of union involved shows a crucial difference between the two boroughs. In Poplar and Bow the number of ‘older’ unions and the lack of a large employer of labour meant that the older Liberal-Radical tradition was dominant. In West Ham the existence of large employers, the docks, the railway and the gas works meant that unified union activity was easier to organise.

It is now apparent that by the beginning of the twentieth century Trades Councils in East London had developed from being mainly composed of craft

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p. 335.

⁴¹ Thompson, *Socialists, Liberal & Labour*, Chapter 11.

unions intent on maintaining their particular interests and scarcity of skills to safeguard employment and pay rates; to groupings of all trades unionists, mass and craft. They saw their role as more political in that they actively supported working class representation at local and national levels as well agitating to alleviate other social problems such as unemployment. It is noticeable that rarely in the literature published or discussions reported in the local press did the issue of universal suffrage appear despite it being an important issue of the day.

It is now intended to consider the left wing activists in the two boroughs to see how they tried to put into practise the socialistic policies, which they had identified as a remedy for poverty. I will also look at opposition to these policies to see how far the traditional economic analysis still prevailed and affected the implementation of socialist remedies. In order to do this I will describe the labour organisations and their activities in Poplar and West Ham before considering their effect on the main contemporary issues of poverty and unemployment.

As has been mentioned before, the Borough of Poplar returned two Members of Parliament. Sir Sidney Buxton represented Poplar constituency in the south from 1885 until 1914. He was very popular and seen as a champion of the working man, having raised money for dockers' families in the 1889 Dock strike.⁴² Later, as Paymaster General, he anticipated the Trades Boards Bill fixing pay rates and conditions by supporting a minimum wage for women workers involved in Post Office clothing contracts.⁴³ In July 1909 the local press reported approvingly that he always supported trade

⁴² Coates and Topham, *The Making of the Labour Movement*, p. 63.

⁴³ *East End News*, 30th March 1909.

union rates of pay and conditions.⁴⁴ Despite being a member of the Liberal party he also gave an annual subscription to the PLEL of £15, one of the largest donations.

Throughout this period the PLEL existed to promote the cause of independent labour representation. However, at none of the General Elections during the period under review did the Labour Party put up a candidate in the Poplar constituency. This apparent contradiction can be partially explained by the nature and membership of the PLEL and of the man whose wages it funded, Will Crooks, who was the local labour representative on the London County Council.⁴⁵ The objects of the League, as stated in 1892, do not mention that representatives should be local but rather that it was founded for:

the uniting of all classes of wage earners, male and female, without regard to consideration of creed or party, with a view to forming a distinct Labor (sic)League for the purpose of securing direct labour representation on all administrative and governing bodies, and so eventually securing the nationalisation of the land and instruments of production, distribution and exchange. All wage earners, “hand and brain” are invited to become members.⁴⁶

This objective encapsulates the difficulties of the early Labour movement in that it embraces both Liberal ideals and Socialist doctrine. The League did not support a political party explicitly. It resembled more a social movement in that it was aiming to secure working class influence in local and national government. In this it was similar to the modern Fawcett Society which in a similar non-party manner advocates the cause of women in public life. The Fourth Annual Report went so far as to attribute the defeat of the Liberal government in the General Election of 1895 to the failure to amend

⁴⁴ *East End News*, 6th July 1909.

⁴⁵ PLEL Fourth Annual Report, 27th May 1896.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

the registration laws, which would have increased the working class vote, and to a failure to grant payment to Members of Parliament, which would have enabled more men without a private income to become MPs. Crooks' first action as an MP was aimed to rectify this when he gave notice of a motion to:

call attention to the present inadequate representation of labour in Parliament, and to move a resolution calling for the removal of the obstacles in the way of the attainment of that end.⁴⁷

Unlike the early Labour Party, which was not open to individual membership, the PLEL membership consisted of both affiliated unions and individuals, although the Executive Council was formed of members of trades unions. However, it is not clear from the Annual Reports whether they were on the committee representing their union or as individuals. Many men who were members of trade unions paid individual subscriptions in addition to the union subscription.

Looking at the subscription lists it is possible to gain an idea of the type of people who supported the PLEL. Its most successful year was 1898 when it collected money from over four hundred individuals and thirty-seven unions. The amounts collected varied greatly from 2d from some to £2.2s from others. All the amounts were meticulously recorded and printed in the Annual Reports. For the years 1896 to 1906, for which I have been able to find records, the unions who subscribed were of the 'old' type, which further emphasises the Liberal-Radical links. The 'new' unions of general Labourers were not represented apart from the Dockers Union two of whose members,

⁴⁷ *East End News*, 20th March 1903.

W. H. Halleybone and J. Carr were on the Executive Council for 1898 and 1899.⁴⁸

In July 1897 a separate branch of the PLEL was opened on the Isle of Dogs, in Cubitt Town, when the foundation stone was laid of the new Social and Recreational Institute.⁴⁹ This branch went on to acquire five hundred members by 1898 and with the help of Crooks campaigned for and founded Island Gardens, a public park on the banks of the Thames, which was called a ‘paradise’ in the report, especially on Tuesdays when a free band concert was held.⁵⁰

Other organisations which subscribed included the Fabian society, the Walthamstow Liberal and Radical Club, the Plumstead Radical Club and the Lewisham and Lee Liberal and Radical Association.⁵¹ The links with radical clubs south of the Thames can probably be explained by the fact that Crooks also spoke at the gates of the Woolwich Arsenal and was also very involved in the development of Woolwich Free Ferry and the Greenwich and Woolwich foot tunnels. Another link was that Hubert Bland, who spoke at the inaugural meeting of the PLEL, lived in Woolwich.⁵² The links were further developed when Crooks was invited to become the Parliamentary Labour candidate for Woolwich. The link with Walthamstow is more obscure but indicates that politics in London was not too parochial.

The Annual Reports also list in detail the activities of the PLEL, which

⁴⁸ See Appendix L for a complete list.

⁴⁹ *East End News*, November 1982. Tower Hamlets Local History Library Press Cuttings.

⁵⁰ PLEL Fifth Annual Report, 16th June 1897.

⁵¹ PLEL Annual Reports, 1899-1906.

⁵² Tyler, P. ‘Will Crooks MP, Local Activist and Labour Pioneer: Poplar to Woolwich 1852-1921,’ PhD., University of North London, 2002, pp. 89-90.

it was hoped would further the cause and improve the lives of working men and women. As well as providing premises at its offices at 6, Kerbey Street, Poplar, for meetings of the local branch of the Dockers' Union and Fabian Club, it also ran a cycling club, a loan society and a clothing club. This last sold goods made under 'good Labour practice', which meant not using sweated labour. A contribution of 6d per week would enable one to buy clothes to the value of £1. It was organised by C. Colvin of the Amalgamated House Decorators and Painters Union and R. Hilditch of the Litho Store Preparers Trade Union. Both men were also on the Executive Council from 1896 to 1906.⁵³

As well as his duties on the executive committee and with the Clothing Club, Hilditch was also responsible for another important aspect of the work of the PLEL, that of education. Along with other members he spoke at the West India Dock Gates every Sunday on the importance of increased labour representation. In 1903 he was elected to Poplar Borough Council, serving on the Library committee.⁵⁴ He later became very active in the campaigns to reduce unemployment in the borough.⁵⁵

Other educational work undertaken by the PLEL were the series of Sunday afternoon lectures at Poplar Town Hall. These were reportedly so popular that hundreds of people had to be turned away. The Fourteenth Annual Report dated 7th March 1906, which referred to the year 1905, listed lectures from Will Crooks, Reverend H. Mosley, Harry de Windt, an explorer, Beerbohm Tree, Raymond Blaythawayt, Sidney Webb and the Bishop of

⁵³ PLEL Fourth Annual Report, 27th May 1896.

⁵⁴ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 19th November 1903.

⁵⁵ PLEL Fifteenth Annual Report, 7th March 1906.

Stepney, Cosmo Lang. In addition, a series of lectures were held at the League Rooms on the ‘History of Combination’ by R. H. Tawney and W. H. Beveridge.⁵⁶ R.C.K. Ensor, the Oxford historian, also gave elocution lessons to ‘improve both the thinking and the public speaking of the men (sic) who wish to work for Labour in Poplar.’⁵⁷ The League, along with Toynbee Hall, seems to have been the only way the Fabians worked in Poplar. There is no record of them belonging to the Trades and Labour Council in Bow and Bromley.

Although one gets the impression that the work of the PLEL was overwhelmingly the role of men there are reports of women doing more than make tea. The Fourteenth Annual Report lists Mrs Will Crooks as leading a Distress Fund, with Miss A. J. Smith of Twickenham as secretary. This is a further example of middle class support for charity work in the East End from the West End of London. Mrs Crooks and other wives of members including Mrs G. Willing, Mrs W. G. Martley, Mrs Lindsay, Mrs A. H. Darby, Mrs R. W. Hilditch, Mrs Macdonald and Mrs Aldridge, visited the poor and distributed 6,000 garments and 200 pairs of boots, as well as giving employment to poor women making garments from donated material. Mrs Crooks also chaired the Poplar Girls club, which met at Shaftesbury House, and organised sports and cultural activities for working girls. The superintendent and assistant were both male, however.⁵⁸ Very few women who were not wives or daughters of existing members were mentioned in the Annual Reports or in the donations lists, apart from Mrs C. Despard and Mrs

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 7th March 1906.

⁵⁷ *ibid.* 13th March 1907.

⁵⁸ *East End News*, July 14th 1911.

J. Cobden Sanderson, who were both women of independent means and both very active London campaigners.

In addition to paying Will Crooks wage as London County Councillor, in order to attain its objective of greater working class representation on local and national government, the PLEL also campaigned for candidates for the vestry and later the Borough Council as well School Boards and Boards of Guardians. However, there was still an element of confusion as to the exact nature of 'labour'. J. McDougall was elected to the London County Council as a representative of the PLEL as a member of the Progressive Group rather than Labour.⁵⁹ Other electoral success included, in 1899, J. Anderson and E. J. Ford representing South Bromley and Blackwall wards respectively on the Poplar Board of Guardians where they joined Crooks.⁶⁰ The League also had links with Bow and Bromley in the north of the borough. Joe Banks, the secretary of the Poplar Trades Council, and his wife, Ada, were both subscribers but George Lansbury apparently never subscribed. This is possibly due to the fact that although Lansbury was on the Poplar Board of Guardians at this time his Parliamentary ambitions lay outside the borough. It could also be that despite working together on the Poplar Board of Guardians, Crooks and Lansbury had very different views on the nature of 'the poor' with Crooks being very careful to distinguish between the genuine poor and the 'loafer' a distinction rarely commented upon by Lansbury. In 1905, for example, Crooks expressed his satisfaction with the type of men chosen by the Distress Committee to work on the Abbey Mills Relief Works which had been

⁵⁹ Finch, H. *The Tower Hamlets Connection*, Stepney Books, 1996.

⁶⁰ PLEL Seventh Annual Report, May 1899.

funded by the *Daily News*.⁶¹

In 1903 the PLEL recorded another success for working class representation when Will Crooks was elected a Member of Parliament. However, the constituency was not Poplar, where Sir Sidney Buxton had been MP since 1886 and as a Liberal was seen to be sympathetic to the working man, but Woolwich where Crooks was funded by the national LRC and the local Labour Representation Association. The Poplar League continued to contribute £100 annually to his wages, as he remained their representative on the London County Council until 1909, when he resigned due to pressure of work and ill health.⁶² During his career Crooks was reprimanded by the Labour Party for his apparent support of the Liberals.⁶³ In 1899 he and his wife sent their apologies when they failed to attend the opening of the new Liberal offices on the Isle of Dogs.⁶⁴ Present on that occasion was the local Liberal MP Sir Sidney Buxton. Crooks also attended a meeting called by the PLEL in March 1899 to consider international peace, with particular reference to Russia. Also present at that meeting were both Sir Sidney Buxton and J. McDougall.⁶⁵ Much later, in the 1910 General Election campaign Crooks appeared on the same platform campaigning with the Liberals on the issue of free trade versus tariff reform.⁶⁶ In a further twist the Poplar Women's Liberal and Radical Association which consisted of about 200 'ladies' held annual teas to raise funds for Crooks' campaigns.⁶⁷ In March 1904 this

⁶¹ *Stratford Express*, 14th January 1905.

⁶² PLEL Thirteenth Annual Report, 1904.

⁶³ Labour Party Archives, LRC11/266 and LRC 11/267, 9th December 1903.

⁶⁴ *East End News*, 13th September 1899.

⁶⁵ *East End News*, 15th March 1899.

⁶⁶ Labour Party Archives, LP/GC 2/21-3.

⁶⁷ *East End News*, 6th March 1906.

fundraising took the form of a ‘cake and apron sale’. The cake was decorated with photographs of Buxton, McDougall and Crooks and sugar flowers. It was eventually bought by the Lady Mayoress, Mrs Yeo.⁶⁸ This underlines the confusion that existed as to the exact role of the PLEL, a confusion that was also to be seen in the national Labour party, – was it to further the interests of working men, generally and only women incidentally, or to seek working men’s independent representation on local and national authorities? In 1903 the ex London County Councillor Fred Henderson only added to this confusion by writing:

The simple fact was that Liberalism in England today stood for collectivism to such an extent that even its own leaders had not yet realised. ... for the fundamental principle of Liberalism was the right of the people to manage their own affairs, instead of having them managed for them by a privileged class, and socialism was only the application of that principle to industry as well as to the political organisation of the country.⁶⁹

After Will Crooks’ resignation in 1909 the press reported that the Poplar Electoral League had the names of several prominent men whom it would put forward to replace him. The outline careers of these men do nothing to clear the confusion concerning the exact political standing of left wing activists.⁷⁰ Looking at some of these ‘prominent men’ it is apparent some favoured the liberal-radical wing of left wing politics rather than the socialist. James Anderson, who was the General Secretary of the Amalgamated Stevedores Labour Protection League was sponsored by the Poplar Liberal-Radical Association and elected to the Poplar Board of Guardians in 1898. He later, from 1904 to 1906, served on the Distress Committee of the Board. His

⁶⁸ *East End News*, 8th March 1904.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Bernstein, G. L. ‘Liberalism and the Progressive Alliance in the Constituencies 1900-1914: three case studies,’ *Historical Journal* 26, 3, 1983, p. 622.

⁷⁰ *East End News*, 23rd March 1909.

campaign slogan for the Guardians election of 1904 was ‘equal rights for all ratepayers’ and he advocated a non-party stance.⁷¹ This non-party allegiance had been in evidence when in 1902 he wrote to the WH&DT&LC supporting the candidature of Will Thorne, a notable socialist, as a Member of Parliament.⁷² He also spoke in support of George Lansbury at an election rally in 1910.⁷³ As well as his political and union responsibilities, in March 1909 he became a member of the new Port of London authority.⁷⁴

Another ‘prominent’ man who was more to the left of the Labour movement was Arthur Darby, a member of the Export Branch of the Dockers Union.⁷⁵ He was Honorary Secretary of the Poplar Labour League, as it then was, from 1900 to 1905 when he resigned due to pressure of work, since he was also on the committee of the Poplar Labour Representation Committee based in Bow. He was also a borough councillor, representing Poplar North West ward, from 1903 to 1910, when he lost the election by one vote and was unable to afford a recount. He then left the district.⁷⁶ However, while in Poplar he was very active in the council, putting forward numerous motions on behalf of the unemployed, preferential employment for local men on council projects and free meals for needy schoolchildren to name but a few.⁷⁷ He also was a regular speaker during 1909 at the East India Dock Gates, where he attacked the Municipal Alliance.⁷⁸ His union work continued when

⁷¹ *ibid.* 25th March 1904.

⁷² *Stratford Express*, 2nd April 1909.

⁷³ *Bow & Bromley Worker*, 1st January 1910.

⁷⁴ *East End News*, 5th March 1909.

⁷⁵ Labour Party Archives, LP.GC 21/357/2.

⁷⁶ *East End News*, 19th April 1910.

⁷⁷ Poplar Borough Council Minutes 16th June 1904, 8th September 1904 and 7th September 1905 for example.

⁷⁸ *Bow & Bromley Worker*, 4th December 1909.

he was instrumental in founding a local branch of the clerks union in Poplar.⁷⁹

The impression is that of a man totally dedicated to achieving more working class influence in municipal affairs in order to improve the conditions of life. It is difficult to see when he had time to go to work.

The third ‘prominent man’, mentioned in the press report was the committed socialist, Sam March. He moved to Poplar in 1878, aged seventeen and was first a milkman and then a carman. He became Secretary of the Carmen’s Union and subscribed to the PLEL from 1896, becoming a councillor from 1903. In January 1899 he was presented with a clock in recognition of his work for the Union.⁸⁰ In February of the same year he was part of the committee that organised a large benefit concert to raise funds for Will Crooks wages.⁸¹ While on the council he proposed and supported measures to regulate wages and conditions and to relieve unemployment. In April 1908 he was appointed to the Advisory Committee for the new Poplar Labour Exchange.⁸² However, again there appears to have been some confusion as to his exact allegiance as the press reported in January 1909:

Councillor S March is very much in the public eye by reason of his position as secretary of the London Carmen’s Trade Union, the members of which are on the verge of a strike. Councillor March is one of the best-liked members of Poplar Borough Council, although a socialist, for he is a most temperate speaker.⁸³

It is clear there were differences of opinion among activists and Labour politics in south Poplar, at least, did not favour a truly independent Labour Party, whether Socialist or not. This is despite the presence of large numbers

⁷⁹ *East End News*, 17th September 1909 & 15th January 1909.

⁸⁰ *East End News*, 4th January 1899.

⁸¹ *East End News*, 1st February 1899.

⁸² Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 2nd April 1908.

⁸³ *East End News*, 12th January 1909. My emphasis.

of casual labourers and general levels of poverty and is in direct contrast to South West Ham. The answer to this apparent contradiction seems to lie in the character of the leading political activists, starting with the Member of Parliament himself. Also in Poplar the Municipal Alliance was formed in 1905 as a reaction to the rise in local taxation due to excessive Poor Relief and ‘socialism on the rates’ which it saw as a direct result of Lansbury’s influence on the Board of Guardians. Although the Alliance was led by Gilbert Bartholomew of Bryant and May, it claimed to represent the community. In its *Review* in October 1912 it even claimed that:

The Alliance is so strongly non-political and so absolutely impartial, that any serious proposition advanced even by a Socialist would receive support if there was any likelihood of beneficial results accruing to the Borough.⁸⁴

In contrast in the north of the borough, the constituency of Bow and Bromley, did elect a Labour MP for a brief period in 1910-1912 and activists campaigned vigorously for Labour, as opposed to Liberal/Labour, men on the local council and Board of Guardians. The constituency of Bow and Bromley returned a Conservative MP, Major Guthrie, from 1895 to 1905 when he lost his seat to the Liberal, Stopford Brooke. Throughout this time there was no real organised Labour interest. According to Albert Overland, who was born in 1900:

There was no Labour Party before the war [1914-1918] It [Labour politics] was a co-operative affair – the Trades Council, the Social Democratic Federation, a man named Joe Banks ran it from offices in Bow Road.⁸⁵

Although his memory is faulty (since the Bow Road offices did not in

⁸⁴ Quoted in Englander, D. *Landlord & Tenant in Urban Britain 1838-1918*, Clarendon Press, 1983, p.108.

⁸⁵ Rickman, *Fly a Flag for Poplar*, p. 93.

fact open until 1918), he is correct in that in Bow, Labour activity centred on the Poplar Trades Council. This was concerned with trade union representation and influence in the borough. Initially meetings were held in a small terrace house in Knapp Rd, rented by the organiser, Joe Banks.

As secretary, Banks wrote to the local press to affirm that the Trades Council Representative Committee had no connection with the PLEL, despite the fact that he and his wife were both subscribers, but was

a permanent body of delegates from about thirty different trades unions in the borough of Poplar formed for the purpose of running trade union and labour candidates at any election that may take place in the borough.⁸⁶

It seems there was a division of activity between the two organisations. The Trades Council Committee did not attempt to compete with the PLEL in Poplar by supporting candidates in that sector of the borough despite the letter to the press quoted above. This confirms the strength of the Liberal-Radical tradition in the south and should have made it easier for Labour to succeed in the north in Bow.

Appendix N gives a list of the selected candidates (with their union affiliations). However, they claim to ‘profess no party politics and offer themselves as representatives of trades unions and labour generally.’⁸⁷ This has implications for the argument that in this borough Labour is a social movement and its adherents do not think of themselves as belonging to a coherent unified political party. The unions are both ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ and in the candidates list printed in October only George Lansbury calls

⁸⁶ *East End News*, 23rd September 1903.

⁸⁷ *East End News*, 22nd September 1903.

himself ‘socialist’ all the others are ‘labour’.⁸⁸ This is unlike South West Ham where the idea of a party transcends that of union membership despite the insistence of the Trades Council on union membership for candidates.

As has been said, initially the committee was run from Banks’ house in Knapp Road, an ordinary terraced house, but in 1907 it was moved to a much larger terraced house in Campbell Road and in November of that year Banks wrote to MacDonald to inform him that the Poplar Trades and Labour Committee was amalgamating with the Poplar and District Trades and Labour Council. According to Lansbury this was originally Joe Banks’ idea since it would unite all the Labour forces in the borough, that is trades unions, the SDF and the ILP.⁸⁹ Although the committee was originally part of the trades council formed specifically to support candidates in local elections, it would appear that the new organisation was to be controlled by the committee.⁹⁰ According to the handbill the President of the Poplar Trades Council was E. J. Moore of the Poplar Municipal Branch of the Gasworkers Union. Its secretary was Walter Banks, Joe Banks’ brother, of the Wheelwrights Operators Union.⁹¹ Neither man, however, appears on the letterhead of the Poplar Trades and Labour Representation Committee [PT&LRC].

Number 6, Campbell Road must have been a very busy house. The *Bow & Bromley Worker*, the newspaper funded and printed by the local Labour representation committee, advertises the meetings taking place there for the

⁸⁸ *East End News*, 13th October 1903.

⁸⁹ Letter from Lansbury to R. MacDonald, 26th May 1908, Infancy of the Labour Party Archive MF76, L.S.E. fol. 83.

⁹⁰ See Labour Party Archives LRC. 13/396 February 1904 for a letter from Joe Banks describing the initial setting up of the committee.

⁹¹ Labour Party Archives, LP.GC 21/357/2 and interview with John Banks, son of Joe Banks, 5th May 2001.

week and lists the ILP and the Christian Socialist Fellowship on Wednesdays, the SDF and the League of Young Socialists on Thursdays. Banks was also the organiser of the Labour Representative Committee Supply Stores which took orders for all household goods and foodstuffs and sold them at a reasonable amount. Unlike the West Ham Workers Supply Association [WSA], from whom they took orders for bread and flour, the role of the Supply Stores was not to raise funds but to assist working families.⁹² In this they were continuing the liberal-radical tradition of the co-operative societies of self-help rather than merely raising money for political purposes.⁹³ Together with Charlie Sumner and George Lansbury, Banks was a trustee of the local LRC Loan Society, formed to lend money at reasonable rates to working class families.⁹⁴ As with many other activists Banks was also a member of the Poplar Borough Council from 1904 and on the Poplar Board of Guardians from 1911. He and his wife were also on the management board of Knapp Road School.

However, unlike the PLEL there is no record of any regular subscriptions to assist in campaigning. The press reported an annual social evening held on Friday 23rd April 1909 to raise funds on behalf of the Trades Council. There were speeches from Arthur Darby, Joe Banks, and Tom Watts as well as Lansbury, who was by then the Parliamentary candidate. There was a dance and concert.⁹⁵ Later that year another social was held at a packed Bow Baths Hall which was attended by Keir Hardie, Joseph Fels, an

⁹² *Bow & Bromley Worker*, 17th December 1910. See page 169 of this thesis for a fuller description of the WSA.

⁹³ Gurney, P. *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England 1870-1930*, Manchester University Press, 1996, pp. 61-65.

⁹⁴ *Bow & Bromley Worker*, February 1911.

⁹⁵ *East End News*, 23rd April 1909.

American philanthropist, as well as local activists.⁹⁶ The press reported ‘rousing speeches’ by Hardie and Lansbury calling for the government to accept the right of all to live and work.⁹⁷

What is apparent from the above discussion of both Parliamentary constituencies is that activists did not consider themselves to be members of a specific political party. There had been a branch of the SDF in Bow since 1891 but candidates for office always designated themselves as trade unionists and labour men. Lansbury was the only man who regularly called himself socialist. However, he founded a branch of the ILP in 1904 in Bow as a direct result of his difficulties with the SDF.⁹⁸ Therefore, although organisations existed in both Poplar and Bow and Bromley to promote the cause of working class representation in both local and national institutions, there was no single coherent organisation to promote a single policy which could be called a political party. The nature of the problem, poverty, was agreed; the ways to alleviate it were not. Before detailing the ways that activists campaigned to eradicate poverty and the diffuse nature of these campaigns, however, it is necessary to look at the situation in West Ham to see if the different underlying economic and social structure outlined in Chapter One is reflected in the political character of the borough. This will help to decide whether the different political outcomes were due to such structural variance or whether an additional factor, that of leadership is implicated.

⁹⁶ Fels, who was a personal friend of George Lansbury, supported many Labour causes in London.

⁹⁷ *East End News*, 3rd December 1909.

⁹⁸ Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour*, p. 229.

The borough of West Ham, like Poplar, was divided into two Parliamentary constituencies. North West Ham, the more prosperous, was represented by the Conservative Gray until he was replaced by the Liberal, Charles Masterman in 1906. In South West Ham the Labour politician Keir Hardie briefly represented the constituency from 1892 to 1895 when he overturned a Conservative majority. There was no Liberal candidate. However, the Conservatives regained the seat in 1895 and maintained a majority until Thorne recaptured the seat in 1906, when again there was no Liberal candidate.⁹⁹

West Ham Town Council results show a similar pattern with a strong socialist presence in the southern wards and Liberal or Conservative councillors representing the northern wards as the socio-economic make up would lead one to expect. In many local elections there was no contest in the south as the Municipal Alliance, the local Conservatives, regarded them as a lost cause. This contrasts with Poplar and Bow and Bromley where all seats were always contested by several different interests.

In November 1898, nine years after the Great Dock Strike and the foundation of the NUGW&GL West Ham Labour campaigners achieved one of their greatest victories in electing a majority of town councillors. The local press had warned that;

We have spoken of the danger of abstention ... the times are of the utmost gravity. There is coming a period of heavy expenditure. Unremitting care and watchfulness, unsleeping prudence, untiring sagacity, will be needed in the Council if the business of the town is to be carried on without burdensome additions to the rates. Everybody who holds that the Council should be prudently economical is bound to go to the poll next Tuesday and vote for the men who may be most

⁹⁹ *Stratford Express*, 17th January 1906.

safely trusted to pursue a prudent and businesslike course.¹⁰⁰

Although socialism was not mentioned specifically in the editorial it was clear from whence the writer thought the threat was coming. After the election results were known the same editor wrote;

Nobody anticipated such a complete rout of the old parties by the new one. The election is a triumph for the socialist organisers ... They have got all the election machinery in first rate order. They have had a gospel to preach, a principle to fight for; and they have fought for it as men who had faith. Against them was a disorganised crowd ... men with no great and fundamental principle to bind them together ... How could the crowd hope to defeat a disciplined army?Councillor Alden will succeed to the chair which has been so worthily filled by Alderman Ivey and its dignity will assuredly be diminished.¹⁰¹

This is a similar attitude to the press in Poplar when Crooks' mayoralty was questioned in the same way. One of the problems that labour activists had to overcome was the appropriateness of working men holding public office. Later, the local press was to criticise socialist 'hot heads' in the council and applaud Thorne as he 'possesses judgement and leadership'.¹⁰² In the event Alderman Adamson was elected Mayor after he assured the Labour members he would not be voting in council debates. The editor of the *Stratford Express* considered this to be a clever tactic on the part of the Labour group as Adamson was a well-respected businessman and would enhance their reputation.¹⁰³

The two major groups of socialists represented on the council were the SDF and the ILP. Unlike Poplar, although members of trades unions, these candidates also claimed membership of the socialist groups. Chief among the

¹⁰⁰ *Stratford Express*, 29th October 1898.

¹⁰¹ ibid. 5th November 1898

¹⁰² ibid. 27th October 1900. I have not found any similar comments about right wing councillors

¹⁰³ ibid. 12th November 1898.

members of the SDF was Will Thorne who had made his name as the founder of the NUGW&GL and had been a councillor since 1891. He was a charismatic figure if, at the time, not a particularly good public speaker.

William Stephen Sanders, a member of Battersea SDF, recalls the first time he saw him in about 1889:

One of the earliest, if not the first, meeting to promote the formation of the Gasworkers and General Labourers Union was held at Battersea Park Gates... At this gathering I had my first glimpse of Will Thorne. His was not then the burly figure which, with an appropriateness seldom experienced, represents West Ham in the House of Commons. Will Thorne at the time of which I am writing was slight and fine drawn through the heavy labour of his arduous calling. He came to the platform straight from the retort house with the murk of that fiery place burnt into his features. Round his eyes were dark rings of coal grime, and his hands were, and still are, gnarled and knotted by the handling of the charging tools. His voice, as I remember it, was not strong, and his words were not eloquent, but his obvious sincerity was more convincing than fine phrase.¹⁰⁴

Another charismatic figure was Joe Terrett, who originally came from the Forest of Dean and settled in West Ham in 1895 aged 23. He was an intelligent campaigner who wrote after the subsequent defeat of the socialists in 1899 ‘to understand Marx is all very well but it is better to understand Machiavelli.’¹⁰⁵ His campaigning skills soon earned him the name of the ‘the Danton’ of local socialists but he was not a team player and resented the discipline needed for a successful party. Nevertheless, his tireless efforts on behalf of the left wing made him an important figure in the labour success.

Another important SDF councillor elected in 1898 was Arthur Hayday, a devoted protégé of Thorne. He grew up in Tidal Basin and started work at nine years of age, employed variously in chemical plants and the merchant

¹⁰⁴ Sanders, W. S. *Early Socialist Days*, Hogarth Press, 1927, pp. 52-3.

¹⁰⁵ Bédarida, *Will Thorne*, p. 162. My translation.

marine. He had first used his vote in 1892 for Keir Hardie in West Ham and later became the chairman of the Local Trades Council and was very influential in liaising between the unions and the SDF.¹⁰⁶

The local SDF also provided seven other councillors. These included William Harris, District Secretary of the Dockers Union, and Richard Mansfield of the Gasworkers Union who was sacked for his union activity and later worked for the Socialist Bakery. There was also James Fraser a Board of Trade Engineer and Harry Davis who was a bricklayer and general dock labourer.¹⁰⁷ In addition the SDF also claimed George Cox, William East, a builder, and Charles Skelton, the General Secretary of the Crane Drivers Union.¹⁰⁸ Members of the ILP were also among the majority Labour group. These were Robert Ambrose, a member of the Operative Bricklayers Society, Walter Godbold a local printer, Charles Pert, a skilled mechanic and member of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and William Devenay, a dock worker and Henry Howard, both of the South West Ham ILP. There was also Walter Scott, whose father founded the Stratford Co-operative Society and who was, himself, treasurer of the North West Ham Socialist Council.

The foundation of this, apparently successful Labour, movement in South West Ham was laid in the late 1880's and 1890's with the foundation of Thorne's Gasworkers Union and the local SDF branch. Despite Hyndman and the SDF's dislike of trade unions as being self-serving, many men in West Ham belonged to both organisations. Among them were Thorne himself, G.H. Smith who was the treasurer of the SDF, Chappell, Byford,

¹⁰⁶ Transcript of *Rise of a Party* broadcast by the BBC in July 1950.

¹⁰⁷ Fink, 'Labour Politics,' p. 37.

¹⁰⁸ West Ham Electoral Scrapbook, p. 94.

Richard Mansfield and Percy Alden, who was also a prominent member of the Fabians and the local link with the ILP.¹⁰⁹ Both the SDF and the Gas Workers Union took a very active part in campaigning for Labour candidates on the local council and the School Boards and Boards of Guardians. They held many outdoor meetings and lectures, notably at the Dock Gates on Sunday mornings. As well as the SDF, the ILP also had a branch in South West Ham chaired in 1901 by Harry Baldock, the husband of the prominent women's rights campaigner Minnie Baldock.¹¹⁰ However, he was also a member of the NUGW&GL as were Tom Watts and William Devenay. Following Harry Baldock's move away from West Ham in search of work in 1906 Ben Gardner, a local teacher and member of the National Union of Teachers became the Secretary of South West Ham ILP.¹¹¹ This organisation also campaigned for candidates for local office. Gardner was one of the supporters of Mrs Podmore at the local Board of Guardians election. Unfortunately, she was not successful.¹¹²

As has been seen the emphasis at this period in both boroughs was on the character of individuals and their position in society rather than on political parties. As in Poplar the right wing Municipal Alliance which began in West Ham in 1900 to curb 'socialist extravagance', claimed to serve all sections of society, not just those in trade unions.¹¹³

Despite vigorous campaigning by the Municipal Alliance and the Liberals in both boroughs, independent labour representation at local and

¹⁰⁹ Labour Party Archives. Minutes of Canning Town SDF, 1890-93, NMLH/MOC3/2 and Minutes of the Canning Town Branch Gas Workers Union, 1891-1893.

¹¹⁰ West Ham Election Scrapbook No. 1, p. 247.

¹¹¹ Labour Party Archives, LP/GC 8/139.

¹¹² *Stratford Express*, 27th June 1907 and 6th July 1907.

¹¹³ *Stratford Express*, 10th January 1900.

national level did increase from 1900 although there were marked differences. The next three chapters will explore these differences and their political implications. Chapter Five develops in more detail the characters, beliefs and leadership styles of the two main Labour leaders, George Lansbury and Will Thorne. Chapters Six, Seven and Eight consider three issues of the period and locality, unemployment, women's suffrage and the mass strikes of 1912 to 1913. Taken as a whole, these four chapters will confirm the argument put forward in the introduction; that the theories of social movements and political parties have an explanatory role in answering the question why, when there were so many similarities, did these two boroughs have differing political histories at this time.

CHAPTER FOUR

CLASS, COMMUNITY AND CHARISMA: TWO LABOUR LEADERS

The previous chapter considered the left wing organisations and their members in the two boroughs and outlined the differences between them. I now propose to explore the effect that the two leaders of the labour movements in this locality, George Lansbury and Will Thorne, had on the political culture in their two constituencies. The argument of social movement and political party as an explanation for the difference in political outcomes for the period and areas under discussion will therefore be developed further. It will be argued that the attitude of these two men to political culture was fundamentally different and these differences were reinforced by the underlying social and economic differences of their two constituencies outlined in Chapter One. Lansbury, like his supporters in Bow, traced his political heritage from the Liberal-Radical tradition, and had strong religious convictions, whereas Thorne was a more straightforward left wing socialist. This chapter will discuss their socialist beliefs and their attitudes to three of the major issues of the period; unemployment, the campaign for women's suffrage and the increased trade union activity after 1910 as an introduction to Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.



George Lansbury MP

Both Lansbury and Thorne were born into the working classes.

Lansbury was the son of a railway time checker and it is believed he was born at Halesworth in Suffolk in February 1859. The family were settled in Greenwich by the time Lansbury went to a Dame school where his education was rudimentary.¹ His father and mother both drank and this may be the reason why he never did. George Lansbury, while not approving of alcohol, agreed with D. J. Davis, the chairman of South West Ham ILP, that giving men work to do with a living wage would not only reduce poverty it would give men more dignity and remove the need for excessive drinking.² Lansbury's tolerance of drinkers is shown in a passage in his book *Looking Backwards and Forwards* where he discussed a fellow activist Charlie Sumner.

Another ... great fighter on behalf of the workers was Charlie Sumner, a pioneer of the National Union of General Workers, the best of good pals. He was not an abstainer. Indeed not; he liked a tankard of beer or a glass of whisky and never concealed the fact. There are people who tell me I am too tolerant of those who take intoxicating drinks. ... Charlie Sumner liked strong drink. Though I am a total abstainer, I never tried to judge him. All I know is that that did not prevent him from being one of God's good men. He lived and died a servant of those among whom his lot in life had been cast. When I first knew him he worked as a stoker in one of the biggest chemical works in London; his working day was twelve hours, and in order to change from night to day he often worked seven twelve-hour days a week for 30s. Had I had to do this I might well have taken to drinking strong liquor.³

Lansbury's early interest in politics was fostered by his mother who took him to political rallies and, he claimed, also by attending debates in the House of Commons after work. This was during the time of the great conflicts between Gladstone and Disraeli, an exciting period for a potential political

¹ Lansbury, G. *My Life*, London, 1928, p. 11.

² *Stratford Express*, 28th September 1904.

³ Lansbury, G. *Looking Backwards and Forwards*, Blackie & Son, 1935, p. 193.

activist. He started work as a coal heaver emptying barges at the age of fourteen and had several different jobs but could not settle. When he was seventeen he met Bessie Brine, the daughter of a local timber and veneer merchant. After a long five-year courtship, since her father did not approve of Lansbury, they married in 1880. However, Lansbury was still unsettled and in 1884 he decided to emigrate to Australia to try to improve life for himself and his family. Since his mother had died he was responsible for his younger brother as well as his own family, which by now numbered three young children. The trip was not a success. Lansbury felt bitterly betrayed by the propaganda that promised jobs and a future but which did not materialise and as soon as he could he came back to England. The return passage was financed by his father in law who also gave him a job at the timber yard. On his return to England, Lansbury organised a campaign to expose what he saw as a fraud perpetrated on the vulnerable working classes, an early example of Lansbury's principled attitude to politics.⁴

The campaign brought him to the notice of Samuel Montagu, the Liberal MP for Whitechapel, who made him his political agent for the General Election in 1886. Although Lansbury later left the Liberal party as he felt they were not radical enough for him, he still retained the friendship of the local Liberal MP, J. M. MacDonald, even when he stood as a socialist candidate against him in 1895.⁵ As will be seen, the behaviour of the Liberals was also crucial to Lansbury in the two General Elections of 1910. They did not support him in January but in December a speech by Lloyd

⁴ Lansbury, *My Life*, pp. 60- 62.

⁵ Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Volume 1, 21st October 1895. See also a letter of support from J. M. MacDonald to Lansbury dated 20th December 1904, L.S.E. Volume 2. fol. 70.

George called for Liberals to vote for ‘my friend Lansbury’ as the Liberal candidate had withdrawn. The reason for his withdrawal is obscure but Lansbury himself put it down to the fact that the Liberals had come a very poor third in January.⁶ The fact that Lloyd George could call for Liberal support for Lansbury is an indication that Lansbury’s political views at this time were still acceptable to Liberals despite his socialism. It is also a further indication of the links between the Liberals and Labour in Bow and Poplar in this period. Liberal support ensured his success at the December General Election. He remained the local MP until his resignation on the principle of women’s suffrage in 1912 when he lost his seat at a bye-election in November not to regain it until after the First World War.

Will Thorne was born in Birmingham in 1857, where he had a much less favoured childhood. His father died when he was six and he went out to work almost immediately without receiving any formal education. From his earliest days at work Thorne tried to improve the lot of the workers and was involved in five strikes before he was eighteen. When his mother remarried Thorne left home to ‘go on the tramp’ and found himself working alongside the navvies building the railways. Their solidarity and comradeship left a lasting impression and helped form his strong belief in the power of united and organised workmen. By 1881 he had married and after being sacked from Saltley Gas Works after another dispute, he left the Midlands to try for work in London where he had heard there was work in the gas works there. He spent the winter in Bermondsey and returned to Birmingham when he was laid off in the spring. He went back the following year, taking his family with

⁶ Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 113.

him, to work at the Beckton Gas Works and to lodge in West Ham where he remained.⁷ There he founded the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers in 1888. He became a West Ham Town councillor in 1889 and the MP for South West Ham in 1906. As with Lansbury in Bow, he came to be identified with his local area but, unlike Lansbury, this identification was also strongly linked with his work with and for trades unionism. This was manifested in the campaign for a statutory eight-hour working day, which was the socialist campaign at the time. Thorne, along with other socialists, believed this would not only enable working men to have more leisure and an improved life but also would increase the numbers of men employed.

Although he ‘signed the pledge’ in his early years, Thorne continued to enjoy a drink and understood the fact that if pubs were the only entertainment on offer and homes were unsuitable for guests, men and women would continue to drink since ‘he liked a drop as well as anybody else.’⁸ In his manifesto he promised to municipalise public houses, both as a fund raising measure and as a way of controlling working class drinking.⁹ However, along with many other labour activists in both West Ham and Poplar he did not view the problem of the misuse of alcohol with the same moral abhorrence as the COS and some other middle class reformers.

⁷ Thorne, *My Life's Battles*, pp. 30-48.

⁸ *Stratford Express*, 29th September 1900.

⁹ West Ham Election Scrapbook, 1st November 1902.



Will Thorne MP

I now intend to consider the socialist beliefs of these two men and their relevance for the political outcome. As has been argued in Chapter Two, the economic and social problems of the late nineteenth century, perceived by many to be the result of unbridled liberalism and capitalism, led social reformers to look to some form of state intervention for amelioration or even a total re-ordering of the economic structure of the state. Both Lansbury and Thorne believed that a new order of society was necessary to solve the problems of irregular employment and consequent poverty. However, they differed in their ideas and strategy.

Lansbury had originally been a member of the Church of England and was married by the Reverend Kitto of Whitechapel. Initially Lansbury and Bessie taught at Sunday school yet, for a time, he left the Church of England, appalled by other local clergy's treatment of the poor and their tolerance of the social injustices.¹⁰ During this time he and Bessie joined the London Ethical Society and sent his children to the Ethical Sunday School.¹¹ However, he was still searching for a spiritual dimension to his life. In his autobiography he says that his period outside the church was about two years but this is contradicted by his son-in-law, who writes that it was more like ten years.¹² Lansbury returned to the Church after being introduced to Cosmo Lang, then the Bishop of Stepney, as a man who was dissatisfied with his role as a 'secularist lecturer'. According to Lang, he 'seemed to be feeling his way back to the Church.'¹³ In Lang's biography the date of this meeting is

¹⁰ Holman, B. *Good Old George*, Lion Paperback, 1990, pp. 33-34.

¹¹ Shepherd, J. *George Lansbury. At the Heart of Old Labour*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 41.

¹² Postgate, R. *The Life of George Lansbury*, p. 54.

¹³ Lockhart, J.G. *Cosmo Gordon Lang*, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 1949, pp. 160-161.

not stated and Lansbury himself was very imprecise about his faith development. This was possibly because he did not want to highlight his period of doubt. Also at this time he was strongly influenced by Stuart Headlam, a local priest who became a well known figure and who had founded the Guild of St Matthew to assist the poor.¹⁴ Lansbury then helped found the Christian Socialist League and spoke on many occasions to the Christian Social Union on such matters as unemployment and Poor Law reform.¹⁵ However, at a meeting in February 1903 one of his supporters criticised Lansbury for speaking about unemployment and not mentioning socialism directly. Perhaps Lansbury felt his audience was not ready for such extreme views or possibly Lansbury's Christianity was more important than his socialism.¹⁶ He claimed that he tried to model himself on St Francis of Assisi by following a life of service to others and not seeking power for its own sake.¹⁷ This belief contrasts with Thorne for whom religion was not an issue. For example, he was not one of the MP's listed by Picht in his book on Toynbee Hall.¹⁸ William Lax, a local Methodist minister, wrote in his autobiography that the source of Lansbury's power in Bow was founded in his social righteousness, his religion and his capacity for friendship. This capacity was echoed in the writings of H. W. Nevinson who wrote in his autobiography of;

¹⁴ See Bryant, C. *Possible Dreams*, pp. 74-95 for a discussion of Headlam and the Guild of St Matthew.

¹⁵ Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Volume. 1, fol. 181, May 1907.

¹⁶ *East Ends News*, 6th February 1903.

¹⁷ Lansbury 'Unemployment: The Next Step' in Culley, *Socialist Ideals – Addresses Given to the Leysian Men's Meeting*, 1909, p. 41.

¹⁸ Picht, *Toynbee Hall*, p. 112.

George Lansbury, defeating every enemy by his innocent appeal to original goodness, and the only man I could ever endure to call me brother.¹⁹

The support of many churchmen may have given Lansbury the false impression of his own influence, particularly when he resigned over women's suffrage. Lansbury's sense of the rightness of his cause did not necessarily translate into votes since the working classes in East London were notoriously apathetic to formal religion during this period and many were actively opposed to conventional churches.²⁰

From 1892, during his period of Ethical Socialism, Lansbury was also a member of the SDF, founding the Bow branch in the same year. The meetings he described were strongly influenced by a quasi-religious fervour as socialist songs were sung, books were read and discussed. Lansbury describes Bow and Bromley as the 'cockpit of socialism in the East End' with very enthusiastic supporters. However none of them came from the very poor since they all had 'good jobs'.²¹ Lansbury's return to the Church of England led him eventually to resign from the SDF in 1902, partly because of their attitude to religion and also their apparently ambiguous attitude to women.²² In his autobiography he also gave as a reason his dislike of the discipline of the SDF and their insistence on doctrinal purity.²³ Thorne, with his strong trade union background, seemed to find party discipline easier to understand. This dislike of discipline was one of the reasons for Lansbury's later difficulties with the Parliamentary Labour Party. However, he was still

¹⁹ Nevinson, H.W. *More Changes, More Chances*, Nisbet and Co., 1925, p 224.

²⁰ See Chapter 3.

²¹ Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 78.

²² Postgate, *The Life of George Lansbury*, p. 61.

²³ Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 110.

committed to labour representation in Parliament and at this time he joined the local Labour Representation Committee based at Campbell Road and immediately became its treasurer.²⁴ Thus by early in the twentieth century Lansbury was both Christian and Socialist and this became the foundation of his political beliefs.²⁵

Lansbury saw his principal role as a one of improving society as a whole. As a Poor Law Guardian he worked to ameliorate the appalling conditions in the workhouses, particularly for the children. In 1905 he was invited to sit on the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws with, among others, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and Helen Bosanquet. The Majority Report of 1909, supported by Helen Bosanquet and other adherents of the COS, while it acknowledged that poverty had a structural as well as a moral dimension advocated that remedies should address both factors. The Webbs and Lansbury disagreed, arguing that the moral degradation was a consequence of poverty not a cause and, in a Minority Report, advocated the total abolition of the workhouse system and its replacement with out relief, public works and training on farm colonies to enable men to gain a trade and look after their families independently.²⁶ For Lansbury the Poor Law and workhouse was a degrading method of dealing with poverty.

The whole paraphernalia is designed for the express purpose of bringing home to the inmate what a horrible person he must have been ever to have sunk so low as to have become a charge on the rates.²⁷

This brought him into conflict with other socialists such as Harry

²⁴ Poplar Labour Representation Committee Annual Report, 1904.

²⁵ See Chapter 3 for a discussion of Christian Socialism.

²⁶ Harris, J. *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, p. 242.

²⁷ Lansbury, G. *Smash up the Workhouse*, Pamphlet from ILP Publications Dept., Manchester, 1909.

Quelch, of the SDF, who believed that the system of Poor Law Guardians was one way the working classes could influence social policy, since they were eligible to stand for election to the Boards. At the public debate held between them at Holborn Hall, London on 20th and 21st September 1910, Quelch argued that;

The Minority proceeded on the assumption that destitution was an individual and not a social disease. They were merely proposing to apply curative treatment to individuals... They were not going to abolish or prevent destitution by any of these proposals.²⁸

This debate also highlighted one of the major differences between the SDF and Lansbury. The former wanted to change the basis of society to eradicate poverty which would take time; Lansbury was prepared to work with the existing system to ameliorate it immediately.²⁹

Another important facet of Lansbury's political strategy was that he was always prepared to work with anyone who shared his ambition for the poor. In his address to the voters at his first General Election campaign in Walworth in 1895 he stressed communal good and communal action as against the prevailing individualistic liberalism. Despite, as he wrote later, the fact that, as the SDF candidate, he 'was so extreme' and that a 'more moderate-speaking person might have done better' he thought it his duty to 'preach Socialism and Socialism alone.'³⁰ Although in his speeches he stressed socialism, this did not prevent him giving support to the Liberal MP Corrie Grant to set up a play centre for children in Bow. His possible embarrassment at this support was acknowledged in a letter from Clara Grant

²⁸ Poor Law Minority Report Pamphlet recording debate between George Lansbury, London County Council and Harry Quelch, SDF, Twentieth Century Press.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 111.

urging that he ‘keep it quiet’.³¹ Nevertheless Lansbury always argued that he would seek the support of anyone who held similar views of social reform and that he was not in any way doctrinaire or restricted by party discipline. This lack of restriction was to manifest itself later when he disagreed with the Parliamentary Labour Party and was to lead to his losing the support of the Party for a time. In his autobiography he argued for the use of referenda to maintain democracy and considered that the greatest danger for Labour was that its adherents would ‘imagine that the organisation was more important than the cause.’³² Even as a candidate in Walworth he asserted his individuality refusing to use the election address drafted by the local committee and submitting his own. As he wrote in his autobiography much later, ‘I rather kicked against these rules.’³³ Lansbury ‘kicked’ against such rules most of his political life arguing that he declined ‘altogether to blindly follow the path great men please to map out for me’.³⁴

In contrast Thorne’s ideas were much more rooted in class solidarity and opposition. He placed more emphasis on organisation, whether in trade unions or political groups, than did Lansbury. In a speech made at his regular Sunday morning meetings at the dock gates he argued that ‘the day must arrive when the lords and the dukes and the capitalist classes would unite and stand upon one platform, and the workers would be on the other... Here [in West Ham] they had all their enemies in one camp and knew where to find them.’³⁵ These views had been unchanged throughout his political career. In

³¹ Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Volume. 2, fols. 1-7, 27th May 1905.

³² Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 274.

³³ *ibid.* p 110.

³⁴ Lansbury, G. ‘Socialists and Socialism’, *Daily Herald*, 1913.

³⁵ *Stratford Express*, 18th September 1909.

his 1902 manifesto for the local council elections he had stressed this point as he told fellow workers that;

your destiny is in your own hands and it is for you to determine by your votes at this election whether you will continue to be represented by the landlord and property owning class – whose interests are directly opposed to yours – or return a worker, who has on every occasion consistently fought both in and outside the Council Chamber the battle of the class to which you and I belong.³⁶

Actually Thorne was bending the truth somewhat here. Since becoming the paid leader of the Gasworkers Union in July 1889, he had left the Gas Works and never again did any manual work. As a fulltime paid official he could have developed different, and potentially divergent, interests from the workers in his trade union and his political supporters. Jon Lawrence argues that this divergence of interest could have been a factor in Labour's lack of success in Wolverhampton. His research found that Labour politics in Wolverhampton were 'frequently greeted with indifference, if not downright hostility, by the very people whose interests they claimed to embody'.³⁷ However, in South West Ham, Thorne managed to maintain his strong support by emphasising his local roots and his experience of manual work as much by his close attention to local issues, as well as to issues of interest to trades unions nationally.

Thorne's lack of formal education and poor literacy skills meant it is unlikely that he ever read Marx. However, he was associated with Eleanor Marx who helped form his opinions. He was also a follower of Henry George who believed that a land tax would help equalise society. Land values in West Ham had vastly increased since 1850 making many people

³⁶ West Ham Electoral Scrapbook, No 2, p. 54.

³⁷ Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, p. 150.

rich without ever working for it, Henry George's ideas made sense to Thorne, especially as they had the virtue of simplicity. His lack of formal education meant that he did not theorise his views or publish them.³⁸ However, in his autobiography he emphasised that it was the personal contact with socialist leaders that formed his views, not reading.³⁹ He, like Lansbury, believed that the state had a duty to provide work for all and if this was not possible, then at least the families must be fed. Unlike Lansbury, he also argued more forcefully for formal wealth redistribution rather than relying on changing attitudes. In order to achieve this Thorne joined the SDF in 1884 as they seemed to provide a coherent programme of adult suffrage and taxation of surplus land values as a way to redistribute wealth.⁴⁰ His manifesto in 1906 stressed this, as he argued that his election to Parliament would be 'a blow struck for the workers in that war between capitalist and labour which must be waged relentlessly until the emancipation of the workers is achieved by the abolition of the capitalist system.'⁴¹

The difference in style of socialism, Lansbury's emphasis on the role of Christianity and community and Thorne's prioritising of class and class divisions and antagonism, is exemplified by their attitude to trades unions in this period. Thorne was firmly of the opinion that nothing would be achieved without some form of collective action by working men. Along with many of his contemporaries on the left, he was somewhat ambivalent concerning the role of women in politics.⁴² He wanted them to support trades unions

³⁸ Bédarida, *Will Thorne*, pp. 64-5.

³⁹ Thorne, *My Life's Battles*, p. 46.

⁴⁰ Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation*, p. 93.

⁴¹ *Stratford Express*, 6th January 1906.

⁴² For an account of the SDF and women see Hunt, K. *Equivocal Feminists*.

but not take active role in administration or leadership. However, he was more than pleased to receive the support of the Countess of Warwick, and her red car, in his political campaigning in the 1906 General Election, for example.⁴³ According to the *Daily Express* ‘one glance at the beautiful countess ... made Socialists of all the waverers.’⁴⁴ On a more practical note, she provided four cars to carry his supporters to the polls. Thorne’s advocacy of trades unions could have led to problems with the SDF as many of its leaders, especially Hyndman, did not consider trades unions to be revolutionary enough, especially as some miners were openly and actively anti-socialist.⁴⁵ The majority of SDF leaders regarded trades unions as, at best, reformist organisations, at worst, a diversion from the necessary political challenge of the wages system. Nevertheless, at a local level, they were able to come to some accommodation and Thorne, along with many other trade unionists, remained a member of the SDF and a leader of his trade union during this period.

Thorne had tried first to organise the gas workers at Beckton in 1883 but without success. Later, when new machinery was introduced which threatened traditional working practices, he was more successful and founded his new union in March 1889. His initial triumph was achieving an eight-hour working day in the majority of the London gas works without a strike.⁴⁶ Despite the initial enthusiasm for the NUGW&GL, the membership declined from its initial high figure of 60,000 that was claimed by Thorne at his first

⁴³ *Stratford Express*, 13th January 1906 and Labour Party Archives, LRC. 19/173.

⁴⁴ *Daily Express*, 12th January 1906. Quoted in Blunden, M. *The Countess of Warwick*, Cassell and Co., 1967, p.186.

⁴⁵ See Clegg, Fox, and Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions*, Chapter 7.

⁴⁶ Price, R. *Labour in British Society, an interpretative history*, Croom Helm, 1986, p. 117.

Trade Union Congress in Liverpool in 1889.⁴⁷ Nevertheless there was a less dramatic fall than many other ‘new’ unions. In 1902 Thorne paid affiliation fees to the national LRC based on a membership of only 43,000 and this further declined to 29,000 in 1904 despite his continual urging to his supporters to join a union.⁴⁸ According to Hobsbawm, when the general unions were founded after 1889, the weakness and political immaturity of the labourers who joined these unions meant that it was the revolutionary and intellectual socialists who either provided them with leaders or who trained the leaders.⁴⁹ This was certainly true of the gas workers, since Thorne was encouraged and supported by Eleanor Marx.⁵⁰ She wrote the preamble to the union rules and she also founded the women’s branch in Canning Town and, once the rules were amended, was a member of the executive committee. Thorne paid tribute to her help and encouragement and was devastated at her suicide in 1898; his speech at her funeral being almost inaudible.⁵¹

Throughout his political career Thorne always emphasised collective action based on a shared class identity. To that end, all his speeches, even those dealing with the medical inspections of school children, urged membership of a trade union.⁵² Unlike the more traditional craft unions, his idea of a trade union was not merely an organisation formed to protect the interests of its own workers but to protect all working men and women. He emphasised the importance of this in his report to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1892 arguing that;

⁴⁷ Thorne, *My Life’s Battles*, p. 134.

⁴⁸ Labour Party Archives, LRC 6/182/1 and LRC 17/493.

⁴⁹ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, Chapter 10.

⁵⁰ Bédarida, *Will Thorne*, p. 96.

⁵¹ Tsuzuki, C. *The Life of Eleanor Marx 1855-1898*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967, p. 321.

⁵² Labour Party Archives, LP.GC 21/130/2, October and November 1907.

If we confine ourselves to one particular industry, such as gasworkers alone, and those other people in various parts of the country are let go unorganised, then, if we had a dispute with any of the gas companies, these men would be brought up to be in our places.⁵³

The union he founded was designed for all labourers and he hoped eventually that his union would be represented in all industries. As he wrote in his autobiography, *My Life's Battles*, the formation of the NUGW&GL and its first victory 'put heart into thousands of unskilled, badly paid and unorganised workers'.⁵⁴

Lansbury, on the other hand, while admiring Thorne and joining his trade union in 1889, worked more as an individual to eradicate poverty.⁵⁵ He saw the behaviour of individuals as having a potentially greater impact on society than formal organisations and believed that he could prevail upon all sectors of society to change. Unlike Thorne, Lansbury did not regard trade union membership as the sole way to move forward. Even the paper he was most closely associated with reflected his inclusive views. In the second issue he argued that: 'in the *Daily Herald*, Trade Unionists, Socialists of every creed and kin, parliamentary and anti-parliamentary, Syndicalist and non-Syndicalist, will have room and scope to state their ideas in their own way.'⁵⁶ For the period 1911-1914 the *Daily Herald* supported many dissident opinions and was proud to be a 'rebel' paper despite having many financial difficulties.⁵⁷ The paper reflected Lansbury's inclusive views that if one was on the side of the poor one could contribute.

⁵³ Quoted in Coates and Topham, *The Making of the Labour Movement*, p. 109.

⁵⁴ Thorne, *My Life's Battles*, p. 73.

⁵⁵ Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 69.

⁵⁶ *Daily Herald*, 16th April 1912.

⁵⁷ See Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, pp. 104-5.

These differences in their underlying socialist beliefs and their differing attitudes to the trade union movement gave rise to different ways of political behaviour. Thorne was very tied to his local constituency. From 1893 when he was on the committee of the local SDF and throughout his time as West Ham's MP, he constantly referred back to his local supporters. He also relied heavily on the support of the trades unions, both locally and nationally. In fact, when his Parliamentary candidature was being discussed, he called for the support of all the labour and socialist societies in South West Ham before accepting. He asserted that he was 'going to leave himself entirely in the hands of the organised workers'.⁵⁸ Unlike Lansbury, he spoke within the constituency as a Labour MP and town councillor but he did not usually speak at political meetings throughout the country although he regularly addressed trade union meetings and conferences.⁵⁹ He was very careful to apologise for his absence at any meetings in West Ham, even on occasions having to admit he 'had mistaken the day'.⁶⁰ Every two or three months he would be called to a meeting of the WH&DT&LC, which represented the local trades unions and the local SDF and ILP, to account for his actions whether on the Town Council or in Parliament. An incident which showed how much he valued trade union membership, took place when the Labour Group were in control of West Ham Town Council. Thorne upheld the council policy of only employing sub contractors on council projects whose employees were members of trade unions. This led to the sacking of non-trade union men working for the council building houses for

⁵⁸ *Stratford Express*, 17th August 1901.

⁵⁹ One exception was his support of Lansbury in Bow in 1912.

⁶⁰ *ibid.* 31st March 1903

workers in Bethel Street in West Ham.⁶¹ For this he was criticised by many local socialists as unemployment was one of the main problems in the borough. Later, when an MP, he had to account to his local support committee for his actions in Parliament during debates about unemployment and his disputes with John Burns of the Local Government Board, the funding body for unemployment schemes.⁶² He had to prove that he really was trying to gain more money from the board for West Ham. Every autumn Thorne also spoke at a series of local public meetings to report on his past year.⁶³ Thorne, like MPs earlier in the nineteenth century, used these public meetings to reinforce his local position and to emphasise his links with his constituents. However, again there could be tension between Thorne's trade union position and his position as an MP. For example in 1913, the Canning Town Branch of the Gasworkers Union called on Thorne to resign from the Parliamentary Labour Party because of its support of the Liberals. The resolution called on him to 'run on the more advanced lines of the Socialist Party.' This Party had been constituted at the Socialist Unity Conference held the previous year. After discussion a decision was deferred and on this occasion Thorne prioritised his party over his trade union.⁶⁴

Despite being closely associated with Bow, Lansbury did not speak as regularly in his locality. Rather he spoke at meetings all over the country trying to gain support generally for his views rather than concentrating on his local supporters. Also, despite being a member of Thorne's trade union, he did not emphasise trade union membership in his speeches. As a local Poor

⁶¹ *Stratford Express*, 6th May 1899 and West Ham Town Council Minutes, 4th May 1899.

⁶² West Ham Town Council Minutes, 30th May 1907.

⁶³ See for example *Stratford Express*, 30th November 1910.

⁶⁴ *Stratford Express*, 11th October 1913.

Law Guardian he showed how much he cared for the poor in Poplar by constantly attempting to improve conditions in the local workhouse. On one occasion at a Board of Guardians meeting he argued forcefully that a piano should be provided so that the residents could listen to ‘good’ music.⁶⁵ As a local councillor he demanded more public works during times of unemployment.⁶⁶ However, his national perspective meant that when it came to his Parliamentary career he stood as a candidate in Walworth, in 1895, and in Middlesbrough, in 1906, as well as Bow in 1900 and 1910. At the General Election in 1906 Lansbury was not even considered by the local Labour Representation Committee as a candidate. It would seem that Lansbury and his supporters in Bow believed in this period that Parliament and the newly formed Labour Party would deal with issues nationally and that, at a local level, it was not important that the MP be a local man. This was in direct contrast to Thorne. Banks also wrote to MacDonald on several occasions asking for a speaker to be sent to Bow ‘to encourage their supporters’.⁶⁷ This is another instance where the local labour supporters in Poplar were less active – no-one from West Ham asked for speakers to be sent. They all had plenty of practice at the Sunday dock gate meetings.

Although Lansbury was on the local council from November 1903 and the London County Council from 1910 and despite his famous statement that his supporters would behave like the representatives of West Ham, he voted according to his conscience rather than his party.⁶⁸ According to Shepherd,

⁶⁵ *East End News*, 28th January 1899.

⁶⁶ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 23rd September 1907, 3rd September 1908, 21st July 1910 are just three examples.

⁶⁷ See for example Labour Party Archives LRC 26/263, August 20th 1905.

⁶⁸ Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 133.

this individualism makes it difficult to determine when Lansbury actually joined the Labour Party.⁶⁹ I would argue that this is the wrong question, as Lansbury regarded socialism as more important than any party. Furthermore Lansbury argued that the Labour Movement should be a religious movement arguing that he wanted it to be;

an unselfish movement, I want it to be a movement that is going to work in a human and whole-hearted manner for the good of all men and women, and it is because I believe that without religious enthusiasm it will become as selfish and soulless as any other movement that has cursed the world.⁷⁰

Further reinforcement of the argument that for Lansbury the situation in Bow resembled a social movement rather than a formal political party, is provided by the fact that Lansbury also did not consult or report back to his constituents in Bow in the same way as Thorne. This became especially important when he resigned his parliamentary seat in 1912. He announced his decision first at a Women's Social and Political Union [WSPU] meeting rather than discussing it with his agent or local committee. Lansbury did not feel tied to his constituency and, apparently, his local supporters acquiesced in this view. This has to say something about Lansbury's personal charisma that he retained their support even though they must have been bitterly disappointed that he resigned his seat so quickly after all the hard work to get him into Parliament.

I now propose to consider the different attitudes of these two men to two of the major issues of this period and area: unemployment and the campaign for women's suffrage. By focussing on the beliefs of the leadership, this chapter will help underline my principal argument concerning the political

⁶⁹ Shepherd, *George Lansbury*. p. 77.

⁷⁰ Address to Labour Week 1911. Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Volume 4, fol. 205.

nature of West Ham and Poplar, attitudes of the leadership being a crucial factor in the development of a political culture.

Both Thorne and Lansbury rejected the traditional view that poverty was, to a large extent, an issue of personal inadequacy and thus a moral issue; both understood that insecure and irregular employment was a major factor in the poverty of the family. As has been seen, the main employers in the area, the docks and the gas works, employed a large number of casual or short term workers. Irregular incomes do not encourage thrift, a point noted by Lansbury as well as many others, and the habit of gang bosses of paying and recruiting men in pubs also did not help provide a stable income for families and added to the problems of alcohol misuse. Thorne attempted to get the Dockers Union to unite with the Gasworkers to form a larger more powerful force but Tillett, the dockers' leader, believed that the gas workers, who were often laid off in the summer, would then swell the ranks of the casual dockers and reduce his men's chances of work still further.⁷¹ Throughout this period Thorne constantly urged men to join trades unions and fight for better wages and conditions. Although he supported the idea of farm colonies to train men and emigration for those who wanted it, his emphasis was always on trade union organisation.⁷² For Thorne in West Ham the main political effect of his emphasis on trades unions as a vehicle for social change was the discipline involved which could more easily be developed into a party discipline. The local Trades Councils, which represented the trades unions, were the main bodies for vetting candidates for elections, both nationally and locally. There

⁷¹ Lovell, J. *Stevedores and Dockers*, p. 124.

⁷² For examples see West Ham Town Council Minutes, 12th January 1904 and *Stratford Express*, 30th November 1904.

were many disputes as to the suitability of candidates and Thorne himself had to assure the Trade Council that his continuing membership of the SDF did not mean any lack of trade union support.⁷³

Unlike Thorne, Lansbury believed that the problem of poverty would not be solved by changing the economic structure of society alone. Men and women also needed to change their attitudes. This would involve some retraining so that individuals could play a responsible role in society. In this he shared the views of the COS and other middle class reformers about the necessity of re-education but he did not share their sense of moral superiority. He, along with most socialists, argued for equalisation of rates to force the rich boroughs to assist the poor in paying poor relief but he strongly favoured farm colonies to train men in a skill to enable them to work themselves out of poverty. In an undated pamphlet entitled '*The End of Pauperism*', Lansbury outlined his proposals for reform. He argued for statutory education and public health authorities for children and the infirm. He also advocated a National Ministry of Labour to share out available work and institute a system of public works. Any men left unemployed would be given training at farm colonies while their wives would be given assistance from national public funds.⁷⁴ He constantly called on all sectors of society to reform. His view of socialism was communitarian rather than based on trades unions and he emphasised the latter less than the need for a community to work together. He was far less adversarial than Thorne.

⁷³ *Stratford Express*, 2nd April 1902.

⁷⁴ Lansbury, G *Socialism for the Poor. The End of Pauperism*, Pass On Pamphlet No 12, the Clarion Press. Lansbury is listed as a member of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, the Central Unemployed Body for London, the Poplar Board of Guardians and the Poplar Borough Council which means it must have been written between 1907 and 1910 when Lansbury was elected to the London County Council.

The issue of women's suffrage also highlighted differences in emphasis and priorities between Thorne and Lansbury. There were many suffrage societies with differing priorities; the major societies arguing for women's suffrage on the same basis as men, though others demanded full adult suffrage and the removal of the property qualification.⁷⁵ Thorne, probably because of the influence of Eleanor Marx, had originally opened his new trade union to women, but later he argued that, although they could still be members, women were not really suitable to be branch officials.⁷⁶ This reluctance to admit women as professional colleagues was reflected in his attitude to women and suffrage. As a member of the SDF he shared their ambiguous attitude to the role of women. Harry Quelch argued that the suffrage issue divided the working classes by privileging gender over class whereas Zelda Khan, writing in *Social Democrat*, argued that working women needed the vote so that they could 'fight the more effectively side by side with men for the emancipation of both sexes from the fetters of capitalism.'⁷⁷ There was also the issue of appropriate behaviour for women. As Isabella Ford wrote in 1900, 'Trade Unionism means rebellion and the orthodox teaching for women is submission... The political world preaches to women submission, so long as it refuses them the Parliamentary franchise, and, therefore, ignores them as human beings.'⁷⁸

Thorne's views on women's suffrage were similar to Harry Quelch's. He did not see why women should not have the vote but considered that it was

⁷⁵ This is discussed more fully in Chapter Five of this thesis.

⁷⁶ Thorne, W. 'Women's Trade Union Review' collected by Isabella Ford, January 1900, and quoted in Hollis, P. *Women in Public*, 1979, p. 121.

⁷⁷ *Social Democrat*, 1909, p. 542, quoted in Hunt, K. *Equivocal Feminists*, p. 169.

⁷⁸ Ford, I. 'Women's Trade Union Review' quoted in Hollis, P. *Women in Public*, p. 121.

more important to achieve socialism first and then the socialists would grant the vote to all adult men and women. Thus, while he approved of Lansbury's stand on women's suffrage, and even came and helped him campaign in 1912, he argued that if he did the same thing he would lose his 4,000 vote majority. This was despite the support he had been given by such suffrage campaigners as Minnie Baldock, who not only spoke at his meetings but also wrote to Dora Montefiore to request her help in Thorne's campaign, 'as we are all worn out.'⁷⁹ Thorne and his supporters, while not anti-women's suffrage, regarded the struggle for socialism, which would include votes for women, as more important than simply gaining the vote for women on the same basis as men. This would have increased the middle class vote, and, they believed, be of no help to the socialist cause. This view, which was shared by many other left wing activists including those in Bow, was to prove crucial in Lansbury's career. Therefore, subsequent to the 1906 General Election, the main focus for the campaign for women's suffrage was in North West Ham with the formation of the Forest Gate branch of the WSPU.

In contrast Lansbury had been interested in women's suffrage since he had worked as Jane Cobden's agent for the London County Council elections in 1889.⁸⁰ His idea of justice was affronted when he realised that although elected, she was not able to take her seat. Here was another example of Lansbury's principled stance on a matter of politics. He organised meetings to gain support for her campaign and urged her not to resign so there could

⁷⁹ Undated letter from Minnie Baldock to Dora Montefiore, quoted in Montefiore, D. *From a Victorian to a Modern*, E. Archer, 1927, p. 47.

⁸⁰ Schneer, J. *George Lansbury*, Manchester University Press, 1990, p.79.

not be another election.⁸¹ Nevertheless, at first he did not see women as being involved with all matters of state but as primarily active in local government, dealing with more domestic matters such as health and education. Many who were anti women's suffrage also shared this view. According to Schneer, after his campaign for Jane Cobden, Lansbury concentrated on his work for the unemployed rather than overtly campaigning for women's suffrage.⁸² In his retrospective account written in 1935, he argued that the issue of the day in 1905 was unemployment and he was a 'Socialist and Labour candidate; not a women's vote candidate'.⁸³ However, by 1912 his attitude had changed. As he later wrote to Marion Coates Hansen, his wife 'had had very little chance' and that she 'should have had the opportunity of thinking and doing too.'⁸⁴ It was the encouragement of Mrs Hansen and the Pankhursts, whom he met at their London home, that led Lansbury to campaign actively for women's suffrage. Once in Parliament after December 1910 he was able to pursue this campaign.

This brief overview of these two leaders shows the importance of leadership style in gaining political power. Both Thorne and Lansbury aimed to become MPs and local councillors and thus improve the conditions of the working classes. However, Thorne during this period was much more focussed on achieving representation in local and national government. He

⁸¹ Schneer, J. 'Politics and Feminism in "Outcast London": George Lansbury and Jane Cobden's Campaign for the First London County Council,' *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 30, No 1, January 1991.

⁸² Schneer, *George Lansbury*, p. 87.

⁸³ Lansbury, G. *Fifty Years of London*. Off print of articles in the *Star*, April to May 1935 at Tower Hamlets Local History Library, LP343, 100LAN.

⁸⁴ Letter from Lansbury to Hansen quoted in Schneer, *George Lansbury*, p. 125.

constantly referred back to his supporters and each autumn held many public meetings to report on the past year both in Parliament and on the council. This emphasis on trade union collective organisation translated more easily into party discipline. Thorne was more used to working as a representative of an organisation, whether negotiating with employers or as an MP. For example, prior to Town Council meetings he would meet with fellow left wingers and decide how to vote on particular issues. All the Labour candidates, including Thorne, for both local and national elections were ratified by the WH&DT&LC before their candidature was endorsed. From the time he was first elected to West Ham Town Council in 1898 Thorne consistently represented his constituents of South West Ham and was the obvious choice of Parliamentary candidate in 1900 and 1906. This was in spite of his difficulties with Ramsay Macdonald over the choice of political description, since at this time Macdonald was trying to play down the importance of socialism and promoting the cause of labour.

In contrast, Lansbury moved on the national stage. Although he was based in Bow and a Poor Law Guardian there for over ten years, he stood as Parliamentary candidate for Walworth in 1895, Middlesbrough in 1906 and Bow in 1900 and 1910. He served on national committees and viewed his role as promoting Christian socialism nationally and he argued he would take help from whomsoever, regardless of their political persuasion. He had a more paternalistic attitude to his supporters and did not consult his local committee or refer back to them. Unlike Thorne, he did not present himself as one of the workers. In a letter to Ramsay Macdonald, Lansbury queried his suitability as a Labour candidate since he ‘was not a working man but a

partner in a Veneer Merchants' business.⁸⁵ Macdonald's response was that he was not concerned with status but opinions.⁸⁶

Macdonald had previously advised Lansbury that he could 'work up enthusiasm at meetings but it does not mean very much when the fighting takes place at the election'.⁸⁷ This was confirmed by the fact that despite all the letters he received in support of his actions in 1912, Lansbury's local voters did not come out to vote for him. Lansbury's personal charisma was put to the test and found wanting. The Liberals were actively opposed to Lansbury since the WSPU's policy was anti the party and it had been Liberal support that had been the main reason for his success in December 1910. In fact, in the Lansbury archive at the London School of Economics I was not able to find a single letter in support of his action from people in Bow following his resignation in 1912, although there were many who commiserated with him in defeat, saying that they would continue to support him and his principled stance.

Therefore, in this period at least, Thorne could be said to be the more successful politician. He accepted a greater 'party' type discipline. His single aim was to become a Member of Parliament to ensure that all working men and women received a fair day's pay for fair day's work or state maintenance. To that end he urged all working men and women to organise into a trade union and to vote trade unionists such as himself into Parliament and onto local bodies. He wrote that:

Politics had been preached to them [the workers] as vague and indefinite appeals to revolution, but we offered them something tangible, a definite

⁸⁵ ibid. LP.GC 4/233, 6th May 1906.

⁸⁶ ibid. LP.GC 234, 6th May 1906.

⁸⁷ ibid. LP/GC 14/214, 29th April 1907.

clearly lighted road out of their misery, a trade union that would improve their wages and conditions; that would protect them from the petty tyranny of employers.⁸⁸

Lansbury believed that a less divisive approach would be more successful. He urged all men and women to be more mindful of their Christian duty and to care for the poor. At this point in time at least Lansbury did not call for the poor to help themselves. After his defeat in 1912 Lansbury sent a statement to the NAC of the ILP, which was also published in the Labour press where he asserts that:

I am quite certain that the Party system in this country (which the Labour Party is bent on imitating) is the greatest hindrance to democratic progress. My conception of Parliament is a place where every kind of opinion is fairly represented by men and women with freedom to speak and to vote.⁸⁹

Lansbury's concept of Parliament and the duty of its members to vote according to their conscience rather than according to the party line made it very difficult for his supporters in Bow to promote his cause. His firm beliefs in the rightness of his cause meant he needed their trust and understanding. He did not feel obliged to seek their approval for his actions.

When one looks at the behaviour of Thorne and Lansbury and their supporters in this period, it becomes apparent that there were fundamental differences in the way they viewed their role in these two boroughs. The evidence from this chapter reinforces the explanatory theory of social movements and political parties. As was argued in the Introduction to this thesis, the main distinction that can be made between social movements and political parties is that the former seek to influence political institutions

⁸⁸ Thorne, *My Life*, p. 76.

⁸⁹ Lansbury, G. *Address to the members of the N.A.C.*, undated, Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Volume 5, fol. 90.

whereas the latter aims to control them. Another characteristic of social movements as opposed to political parties is that they tend to be about single issues. In Poplar, Lansbury sought the assistance of any who shared his views to achieve his aim, initially, of Christian socialism and, latterly, of women's suffrage. However, in West Ham Thorne helped form a party with internal discipline that aimed to get as many men as possible who shared his views and who belonged to his class and union elected to local and national institutions. In this way he sought to control the political agenda and thus change society. The following chapters will further demonstrate how this difference in the attitude of the two leaders translated into political action.

CHAPTER FIVE

FRANCHISE FACTORS AND ELECTIONS

Before considering the electoral campaigns and the examples chosen to exemplify my main thesis, there is one other issue that needs to be taken into account when considering the political fortunes of labour activists during this period. This chapter will explore the difficulties encountered by left wing activists in achieving representation at local and national levels. It will be argued that the different styles of political organisation led to differing styles of political activity and outcomes.

One of the main difficulties for the new ‘Labour Party’ was that many of its potential supporters, poor working men and women, who, it was assumed, would want to change the social structure and improve conditions, did not have a vote and could not therefore directly influence policy, either nationally or locally. The right to vote varied according to whether it was in a local or national election but both were based on property qualifications. This meant that even after the Parliamentary franchise was widened in the 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts, it was still restricted with only an estimated 60% of working men eligible to vote.¹ Even more restricted were women who had no right at all to vote in Parliamentary elections. As will be seen in Chapter Seven, the issue of votes for women highlights one of the main differences between the two boroughs and the attitudes of the labour activists.

The problems of the franchise in urban areas have been described by

¹ Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics*, 1982, p. 3.

Davis. His research found that if the occupiers of a tenement were rated individually they could have the vote but if the building had been constructed originally as a single dwelling and later divided then they might be considered as lodgers which meant that the property had to be valued at over £10 per annum to qualify. This was later amended by a court ruling in 1881 which judged that if the landlord of a multiple occupancy dwelling was non-resident all the householders could qualify for the Parliamentary franchise if other criteria such as residency were fulfilled.² If the landlord lived on the premises, other residents whose rent and rates were generally compounded, were usually classified as lodgers and could be denied the vote if the rent value did not qualify.³ However, Tanner argues that since the figure had been established nationally this favoured London where rents were higher so that more lodgers were able to claim the right to vote.⁴ It was argued by those in power that only those with a stake in society could be eligible to vote for its administration and this justified the property qualification for the franchise.⁵ Therefore, only male householders or tenants who lived at the same address for more than a year were eligible to vote for MPs. Adult sons, including those of widows, and servants were excluded as well as those who, for various reasons, moved lodgings. Unlike other large cities, London was not treated as a single borough for franchise purposes. Moving from Poplar to Stepney, for example could lose a householder the right to vote. In areas as overcrowded

² Davis, J. and Tanner, D. 'The Borough Franchise after 1867,' *Historical Research*, Volume LXIX, No. 170, October 1996.

³ Davis, J. 'Slums and the Vote 1867-1890,' *History*, Volume 64, 1991.

⁴ Tanner, D. 'The Parliamentary Electoral System , the "Fourth" Reform Act and the Rise of Labour in England and Wales,' *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, Volume LVI, 1983.

⁵ Mayhall, L.E.Nym, *The Militant Suffragette Movement. Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 12.

as Poplar and West Ham, with irregular family incomes, lodgings were frequently changed. According to the south London Labour ‘pioneer,’ Francis Soutter, the registration period ended on 15th July and the register came into effect on the following January 1st following ‘so the period of disenfranchisement could be anything from six to eleven months’.⁶ This is despite the fact that one still had to continue paying rent and rates for the entire period of disenfranchisement since the vote was attached to the property not the person.⁷ He cites his experience:

Take my own case. In 1910 there were two general elections. I was disenfranchised in both. I had been a householder without a break for over forty years, but because I moved from one house to another on the 17th April instead of the 15th July I was struck off the register for two elections.⁸

However, the poor were not the only category to move frequently. Many people moved to the outer suburbs when their circumstances improved and so temporarily lost the right to vote. Other categories such as bank employees and clergymen also moved frequently as a condition of their employment. In London, Tanner has argued that about thirty per cent of Londoners moved annually. If one was an occupier, as opposed to a lodger, and if one moved within the constituency one did not lose the right to vote. However, all lodgers who moved, even locally, lost their right to vote until they had re-registered.⁹

Davis’ and Tanner’s research also discovered that since the registration forms were completed by landlords the system was open to abuse with many voters not being included and some who were dead remaining on the

⁶ Soutter, F. W. *Fights for Freedom The Story of My Life*, T. Fisher Unwin, 1925, p. 182.

⁷ ibid. p.183.

⁸ ibid. p.182.

⁹ Tanner, *Political Change*, pp.103-104 and p. 112.

register.¹⁰ Another barrier to working class voters was the fact that each lodger vote had to be registered in person. The offices were only open during working hours which meant losing pay. In addition, if the right to vote was disputed the claim had to be made in the Registration Courts which were held annually in front of a barrister to resolve such disputes. This could mean another day off work with no pay. It was at the Registration Courts that the decision was made as to whether lodgings were multiple tenancies with the householder sub-letting rooms, which would deny the occupants the vote or whether they were individual tenancies. In September 1903 the Registration Court in West Ham was asked to adjudicate on the residency issue of men who lived at the Mansfield Settlement House. In this case the registration was confirmed which may have been because the men involved were from Oxford University and of good character.¹¹ Joe Terrett highlighted this problem for working class voters when he interrupted a council meeting to argue that the Overseers of the Poor who were responsible for registration administration (as opposed to the barristers employed in the Registration Courts), often used their position to prevent men from registering their right to vote.¹² He argued, also at the Registration Court, that a stricter re-interpretation of the rules since 1905 had led to a reduction in voter numbers of 874 in the borough.¹³ In an attempt to increase the number of voters J. Gilbey, who was Thorne's Parliamentary agent, wrote to Ramsay MacDonald in July 1906 requesting the relevant booklet but, unfortunately, it was out of

¹⁰ Davis and Tanner, 'The Borough Franchise.'

¹¹ *Stratford Express*, 19th September 1903.

¹² *Stratford Express*, 30th June 1906.

¹³ *ibid.* 12th September 1906.

print.¹⁴ It is also interesting to note that at the Registration Courts only Labour men appeared to appeal these decisions. Presumably, it was thought that men who voted Conservative or Liberal were already men of property and not lodgers or could it have been that only poorer working men were likely to be challenged.¹⁵ Another reason for the absence of Conservative or Liberal challenges could have been the potential embarrassment of having one's personal circumstances revealed in open court and possibly in the local press.¹⁶ This could explain the apparent contradiction of many non working class men being denied the vote through their domestic circumstances and yet not appealing the decisions. However, in Bow and Bromley it seemed that not even the Labour men appeared in the Registration Courts. Joe Banks, as the Secretary of the local LRC appealed in the Labour campaign paper, the *Bow & Bromley Worker*, for people who had problems with the franchise to call in at campaign headquarters at 6, Campbell Road for assistance.¹⁷ In 1912 Banks and the Municipal Alliance representative agreed the list before it went to the court so the work was 'routine'. At this time in West Ham, however, there were still arguments over the lodger vote which it was claimed affected at least two hundred voters.¹⁸

A further barrier to working class participation in politics was the money needed to fund campaigning. Although campaign material was sent from the LRC headquarters it had to be paid for and speakers needed expenses. Also until 1911, there was no provision for the payment of MPs so they needed

¹⁴ Labour Party Archives, LP/GC 6/410.

¹⁵ ibid. 19th September 1903.

¹⁶ Tanner, 'The Parliamentary Electoral System,' 1983.

¹⁷ *Bow & Bromley Worker*, July 1911.

¹⁸ *East End News*, 13th September 1912.

sponsorship or a private income. Crooks, for example, was funded by the PLEL and Thorne by the NUGW&GL. This could restrict their actions in Parliament. Lansbury, who was funded by his employment and his friends, was under no similar restrictions. Press advertising too needed funds. In West Ham they tried to overcome that problem by chalking advertisements on the pavement but the Town Council passed a bye-law prohibiting the practice in 1909. This was seen as a direct challenge to Labour by Thorne and his supporters. They argued that other advertisements were allowed on pavements using the example of 'beer at 4d a pint'.¹⁹ Thorne also complained that tramcars carried advertisements for 'Thorne's Whisky' which gave people the impression he was rich enough to own a whisky distillery. After much lively banter in the council chamber, Davis' amendment allowing political slogans on the pavement was defeated.²⁰

In an attempt to raise funds for elections Thorne and his allies founded the Workers Supply Association [WSA]. They funded this by raising shares of one to four shillings from local supporters. The original minutes lists seventy-six contributors, all with local addresses.²¹ This contrasts with the PLEL which had many supporters from outside the area.²² By June 1903 the WSA had approved the following objective for its Constitution:

The object of the Workers Supply Association shall be to provide a fund for the paying of Election Expenses of Socialist Candidates or members, to Parliament, Town Councils, Board of Guardians, and any other local bodies and for their maintenance when elected. Also for the advancement of the cause of Socialism generally, vis – by making grants to trades councils and Branches of the Independent Labour Party and

¹⁹ *Stratford Express*, 12th October 1909.

²⁰ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 12th October 1909.

²¹ Workers Supply Association Minutes, Labour History Archive, NMLH/MISC/3/7.

²² See Chapter Three of this thesis for details

Social Democratic Federation within the Trading area of the association.²³

In order to raise these funds the WSA sold ‘wholesome, nutritious bread at a fair price, made under fair conditions’ to local people and also supplied flour to other bakers. At its Conference, on 16th May 1904, it reported that the in the previous year the average weekly output was 5,008 quarterns of bread and between seven hundred and nine hundred customers were served weekly.²⁴ However, Thorne gave value for the money raised by his supporters. His expenses in the General Election of December 1910 were only £391 19s 7d whereas his Conservative opponent, who lost, spent £766 2s.²⁵

The Workers Supply Association differed from the similar organisation in Poplar in that its objective was not solely to assist local people but also to raise funds for campaigning. Here the advertisement on the front page of the *Bow & Bromley Worker* proclaimed that ‘the LRC stores open from 9.30 am.’ It urged workers to ‘support your own Stores! Your own men run it, and profits are yours.’²⁶ The Supply Stores used its profits co-operatively, by way of a dividend to supporters, rather than as a direct fund raiser for Labour candidates. Both the SDF and ILP were represented on its committee. In Poplar fund raising for elections was by two methods. The Poplar Labour Electoral League raised subscriptions, many from supporters living outside the borough, to fund Crooks and other candidates to Poplar Borough Council but did not involve itself in running anything other than charitable stores for

²³ Workers Supply Association Minutes, Labour History Archive, NMLH/MISC/3/7.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *East End News*, 31st January 1911.

²⁶ *Bow & Bromley Worker*, September 1912.

clothes for example. In Bow and Bromley occasional fund raising socials were held but there was no formal machinery for raising money.

As distinct from Parliamentary elections, where no woman had a vote at this time, the position of women voters in local elections was complicated. It was believed that women could play a part in local government as this was seen as an extension of their domestic role. Since 1869 they could, if ratepayers, vote in local elections, which in effect gave the vote to some single women and widows. Married women could not vote as their husbands claimed the franchise. After the establishment of the School Boards in 1870, women became eligible to vote for, and stand as, candidates for both the Boards of Guardians and the School Boards in 1875.²⁷ However, after the 1902 Education Act, the School Boards were abolished and the only opportunity for women to be similarly involved was as school managers. From 1907 women ratepayers could vote on all aspects of local government but property qualifications for candidates meant that few could be elected. Since only ratepayers were eligible, this meant in practice that most married women still could not vote. Therefore, although women formed 20% of the borough electorate nationally by 1910, this figure would have been considerably smaller in West Ham and Poplar.²⁸

Even if one had a vote there was a final hurdle that the poor had to overcome. Polling stations were routinely only open in working hours which made it difficult for many to cast their vote.²⁹ Although an attempt was made to change this it was not until 1912 that polling stations remained open until

²⁷ Hollis, P. *Ladies Elect: Women in Local Government*, Clarendon Press, 1987, p. 32.

²⁸ Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p.332.

²⁹ Pugh, *The Making of British Politics*, p. 73.

eight o'clock in the evening, thus enabling working men to vote. At that election the local press noted the fact that Conservatives voted during the day and implied that the later opening of the polling booth at this election would benefit the Labour cause.³⁰

A further problem for working class voters was that if they received any kind of Poor Relief or monies from the Distress Committee, paid to unemployed men, the householder lost the right to vote. Voters were disenfranchised too if their children received free meals from the Receiving Officers at school. This, as Saunders Jacobs remarked, meant that 'poverty has become a still greater crime'.³¹ This disenfranchisement through poverty became a real issue not only during periods of high unemployment but also, for example, during the smallpox epidemic of the winter 1901 to 1902, since once smallpox was diagnosed the entire family was isolated and unable to work and would therefore become dependent on Poor Relief.

These problems of the franchise weaken Fink's argument that the only reasons for the failure of the left wing in 1900 in the West Ham Council elections were internal dissension within the Labour Group and apathy among their councillors together with a greater coherence and strong campaigning by the opposing Municipal Alliance.³² He argues that the coherence of the working classes and the fact that West Ham possessed a large impoverished population but no 'encrusted paternal notion of leadership' should have meant that the borough would have been 'a fertile one for Labour politics'.³³ He assumes that since the increased population of West Ham, due to the rapid

³⁰ *East End News*, 29th November 1912.

³¹ *Stratford Express*, 24th May 1905.

³² Fink, 'Labour Politics', p. 81.

³³ *ibid.* p. 9.

industrial growth, was largely working class it would therefore vote Labour. In this he follows Paul Thompson in expecting an increasing number of the working class to vote for Labour politicians.³⁴ However, as I have argued in Chapter One, West Ham was not a homogeneous society. Although the professional and managerial sections of society were not numerous they were influential. It is also often forgotten by historians of Labour politics that the ideas of socialism and independent working class representation were relatively new. As will be seen when discussing the campaigns of 1900 to 1914, the Labour politicians not only had to contend with franchise difficulties they also had to fight against the conservatism of voters and their fears of this new, radical and sometimes strident politics. Voting patterns show that the left could not rely on the support of the working classes for a variety of reasons including deference, fear of intimidation and dislike of increased state interference.

For the Labour group in West Ham there was an additional difficulty in that in 1898 it was proposed to increase the number of local wards from four to twelve. The left opposed this as they felt it would give the north (a more prosperous area and more likely to vote Municipal Alliance), a greater advantage. The number of voters in the two northern wards of Stratford and Plaistow had only increased by an average of 34% between 1887 and 1897. However, in the south the numbers of voters had increased by an average of 66%, yet they were only able to elect the same number of councillors.³⁵ The left considered that the increase in the number of wards not only caused them greater problems finding and financing candidates but it did not fairly

³⁴ ibid. p. 87. See also Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour*, p. 110.

³⁵ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 17th June 1898.

represent the wishes of the people of the borough, since it favoured the lower population in the north. However, despite vigorous opposition in the Town Council, the changes were finally carried in 1899. This may have contributed to the Labour Group's failure to maintain its majority on the Council after this date since the election of 1898 when Labour achieved their majority was held under the old system of four wards.

In contrast to West Ham, Poplar did possess a history of municipal leadership representing all shades of political opinion. As has been outlined previously, the social and economic structure of the borough was more stable than that of West Ham. The population was not so divided geographically along class lines and the number of small and medium firms meant that there was a group of men who could be natural local leaders. This argument should have militated against labour representation and yet despite this the labour group did achieve some success in gaining representation on local bodies.

Prior to the council's incorporation as a borough under the London Government Act of 1899 the parishes of Poplar, Bow and Bromley were governed by elected vestries. The first council of 1899 saw all nine of the Poplar vestrymen (which included Will Crooks), elected to the council. Unfortunately, the minutes of the other parish vestries do not survive so it is not possible to be definite about their position, but it seems likely that at least some of the men would continue to serve on both vestry and council. From later voting evidence it is possible to conclude that of the thirty-five councillors in 1900, seven were actively sympathetic to labour aims. These were Will Crooks for Poplar and Charlie Sumner, George Maddams, Alfred Smith, John Bellsham, Francis Thurston and Fred Unwin, who represented

wards in Bow and Bromley. George Lansbury was not elected as a councillor until November 1903. However, both Crooks and Lansbury had been members of the Board of Guardians since 1892 and Crooks had been chairman since 1899. While on the Board they were both very active in promoting left wing social policies despite being in a minority.

Using the Heads of Household survey as described in Chapter One, I now propose to consider the voting registration patterns in the two boroughs to try to ascertain if there are any differences and if so what effect this may have had on political outcomes.³⁶ It is apparent that the constituency of Poplar favoured the skilled artisan. They form 45.3% of the electorate in Bow North, 46.3% in Bromley South East and 33.3 % in Cubitt Town. These would probably have been members of the more traditional craft trades unions and so could explain the conservative bias in the election results. The local councillors representing these wards defined themselves as Independents or members of the Municipal Alliance. The one exception is the ward of Bromley North East where the skilled artisans are only 29.1% of the electorate, the unskilled labourers form the majority at 40%. One explanation, already put forward, was the location of several factories in the area but it could also confirm Brodie's argument that the dominant housing stock determined the right to vote in a ward. Poplar with small houses throughout the borough and with lower rents than inner London enfranchised a greater number of labourers than elsewhere.³⁷ However, a more detailed survey is needed to verify this.

The situation in West Ham shows a degree of contrast. In the north, in

³⁶ See Appendix F.

³⁷ Brodie, *The Politics of the Poor*. p. 63.

Upton ward 56.4% of the voters were from the category of clerks and shopkeepers which helps explain the strength of the Municipal Alliance here. In New Town the majority of the voters were skilled artisans at 49.8% but in contrast to Upton the two labouring categories amounted to 37%. This may explain the more varied political representation of this ward. However, in the south the situation is very different. Here the majority of voters are unskilled or semi skilled labourers. In Custom House the figure is 52.3% and in Canning Town it is 56.7%. Since the Labour activists have their greatest successes in West Ham South during this period one could argue that the importance of traditional trade unions in the development of the Labour Party has been overstated. The NUGW&GL, with 48,038 members, formed the second largest trade union affiliated to the LRC in 1901.³⁸ It would appear that it was the new unions and the effect this had on the unskilled labour voters that contributed to Labour's initial success, at least in West Ham South.

Also notable is that the percentage of voters in each occupational category for both boroughs is broadly similar. One exception is Canning Town with 60.4% of unskilled labourers registered to vote. As this is the ward represented by Thorne this may reflect the activities of his agent. However, it does not explain why Custom House, also in the south, has a smaller percentage of unskilled labourers registered to vote. One other exception is Bow North where again unskilled labourers form a smaller proportion of the voting population. Both these exceptions could be explained by the type of housing in the ward or by the number of removals. More detailed investigations are necessary to explain this. However, the similarities

³⁸ Pelling, *Origins*, Appendix B, p. 230.

of the percentage voters in each occupational category confirm Tanner's argument that although the lodger franchise could be biased against the working classes it was more of a barrier to single men of whatever class.³⁹

In spite of all the difficulties with the franchise, left-wing representation did increase in Poplar and West Ham during this period and I will now consider the electoral campaigns of the early twentieth century which will reinforce my main explanatory theory. As was explained in the introduction, studies of West Ham and Poplar have tended to concentrate either on the period 1889 to 1900 for West Ham, or, in the case of Poplar, to use the period 1900 to 1914 simply as an introduction to explain the development of Labour politics during and after the First World War. This thesis however, explores the crucial period 1900 to 1914, when left wing activists in both boroughs were trying to increase their representation, both nationally and locally, in an attempt to alleviate the acknowledged problems of unemployment and the consequent poverty. As will be seen in the account of these years, to do this they had to unite many disparate groups on the left as well as overturn existing cultural attitudes to these social problems. Buck is therefore incorrect when he refers to this as a quiescent period when 'the Labour Group [in West Ham] seems to have decided that they were not going to achieve fundamental changes through the council, and to have accepted limits on local government action.'⁴⁰

Labour activists in both boroughs agreed that the principal cause of poverty was casual work and they therefore demanded a greater state intervention in the labour market to provide more work. However, their

³⁹ Tanner, *Political Change*, p.118.

⁴⁰ Buck, 'Class Structure', p. 194.

strategies differed in that Thorne worked to increase left wing representation, both locally and nationally, always working in conjunction with his supporters in a manner more like that of a modern political party. In contrast, in Poplar, not only was unemployment and providing work seen as a borough-wide issue but Lansbury himself would seek support from whomsoever agreed with him, of whatever shade of political opinion. In order to illustrate this difference I will now concentrate on the left wing campaigns for electoral representation.

In the General Election of 1900 George Lansbury, was put forward as the Socialist and Labour candidate for Bow and Bromley. In his address he acknowledged that many wanted the main issue to be the South African War. But he stressed that, while opposing the war, he considered social issues to be more important.⁴¹ The local press was not very optimistic about his chances. The editor of the East End News wrote that ‘the two parties - Liberal and Socialist – will be arrayed in favor (sic) of Mr George Lansbury who ... is a Socialist. Should there be no deviation from this ... it would appear that Mr Murray Guthrie will remain the member for Bow and Bromley’.⁴² The Editor had previously noted that, as a Socialist, Lansbury should be against all forms of capital and yet he was a shareholder in a company and ‘has recently acquired property from the profits’.⁴³ Lansbury’s manifesto published in a very small advertisement in the local press promised to work for ‘adequate maintenance of the aged poor; public control of the liquor traffic; relief of local rates from the national exchequer.’ The object of this programme, as the even smaller print at the foot of the poster makes plain, was ‘to obtain the

⁴¹ Lansbury Archive, L.S.E., Vol. 1, fol. 334, August 1900.

⁴² *East End News*, 10th August 1900.

⁴³ *ibid.* 7th August 1900.

Socialisation of the means of Production, Distribution, and Exchange'.⁴⁴

Despite the mention of socialism this programme could be made acceptable to the Liberal voters as well as to Labour, as correspondence between Lansbury and the Liberal candidate Harold Spender demonstrates. In October 1899 Spender had written a 'quite private' letter to Lansbury asking for his support since they both opposed the war.⁴⁵ In fact, the local Liberals were in disarray having lost the by-election in 1899, caused by the sudden resignation of the Conservative MP, Lionel Holland. The SDF had taken over the Liberals' offices in Bow Road and many Liberals were bitter and avowed 'their intention to abstain from voting at the coming election'.⁴⁶ The local SDF committee had also vowed that no member of their group would work for any other candidate than their own. In the event Harold Spender decided not to stand at the General Election in 1900.⁴⁷ The East London Observer in its campaign report noted that Lansbury had expected to receive the support of the Liberals, but asked whether the Liberals could 'endorse the Social Democratic programme' or whether they would vote Conservative.⁴⁸ This confusion of allegiance and policy between the Liberals and Labour is a feature of politics in both Poplar and Bow and Bromley and emphasises the difference in South West Ham where the Liberals did not try to contest Labour concentrating their efforts in the North.

In addition, the patriotic vote proved crucial. Richard Price has argued that the Boer War, as an issue, was not decisive in elections but this is

⁴⁴ Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Vol. 1, fol. 335.

⁴⁵ ibid. Vol. 1, fol. 325, October 18th 1899.

⁴⁶ *East End News*, 14th August 1900.

⁴⁷ Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, p. 75.

⁴⁸ *East London Observer*, 25th September 1900.

disputed by Paul Readman, at least for London. His analysis of speeches in working class constituencies in London shows that of the twenty-seven unionist candidate addresses, all mention South Africa and of the twenty-two Liberal candidate addresses 96% mention it. He argues that these figures show that this was the main issue for Unionists and it had to be answered by Liberals.⁴⁹ In both Poplar and West Ham the issue of the war formed part of the campaigns, even if support for the war was problematic.

Guthrie, the Conservative candidate for Bow and Bromley, had been appointed to act as Secretary to the American Field Hospital in South Africa and had spent time at the front. His wife had also been involved in hospital work for the troops.⁵⁰ A banner headline in the press during the campaign announced that Guthrie put ‘Country before Party; British Supremacy’ and called for ‘Deeds not Words: Progress not Anarchy’.⁵¹ In February Hyndman, the SDF leader, had spoken at an anti-war rally in Mile End. Subsequently, after a resolution to end the war was carried by an overwhelming majority, the vestry hall was wrecked by rioters from outside.⁵² Also in July Poplar and Bow and Bromley had held a carnival procession in support of the war to raise money for the *Daily Telegraph* fund for widows and orphans of the war. The list of the floats, all with patriotic and/or military themes, ran to two columns of newsprint.⁵³

In the south of the borough Sir Sidney Buxton, who had been the MP for Poplar for fourteen years, was the Liberal candidate. In August the local press

⁴⁹ See Price, R., *An Imperial War and the British Working Class*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972 and Readman, P., ‘The Conservative Party, Patriotism and British Politics: The Case of the General Election of 1900,’ *Journal of British Studies*, 40, January, 2001.

⁵⁰ *East London Observer*, 17th February 1900.

⁵¹ *ibid.* 22nd September 1900.

⁵² *ibid.* 17th February 1900.

⁵³ *East End News*, 6th July 1900.

noted that the Conservatives had not even chosen a candidate and was predicting a ‘walkover’ for the sitting MP.⁵⁴ In his letter to the electors Buxton pointed out that the war was being used as a device by the Conservatives to distract people from their incompetence in government and ‘constitutes a discreditable attempt to utilise the Patriotism of the Country for party purposes.’⁵⁵ Readman has argued that the Liberals used patriotism as much as the Conservatives, claiming that Liberal social policies would benefit the Empire.⁵⁶ The Conservatives eventually put forward a candidate, Bullivant, owner of a local wire factory. He had paid for a float in the carnival procession and was known locally as a benefactor.⁵⁷ However, he did not succeed against Buxton who may have been preferred even by Conservatives as the ‘sitting’ MP. Buxton also ‘hedged’ the immigration issue so as not to offend more right wing liberals and made it easier for some Conservatives to vote for him.⁵⁸ The final results were a Liberal majority of 1,152 for Buxton and a Conservative majority for Guthrie of 1,815.⁵⁹ Buxton’s local popularity and his claim to be a Liberal Imperialist may help explain why he remained the MP for Poplar despite the success of the Conservative Municipal Alliance in maintaining a majority of local councillors.

The situation in the borough of Poplar in 1900 was thus quite complicated for supporters of labour and socialism. In the north, Bow and Bromley, the socialists had lost to a Conservative but in the south they were represented by a trusted Liberal. On the newly elected council there were

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 14th August 1900.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 28th September 1900.

⁵⁶ Readman, P. ‘The Liberal Party and Patriotism in Early Twentieth Century Britain,’ *Twentieth Century British History*, Volume 12, No 3, 2001.

⁵⁷ *East End News* 6th July 1900.

⁵⁸ Pelling, *Social Geography*, p. 47.

⁵⁹ 19th January 1906.

seven labour men out of a total of thirty-five. As already noted, apart from Crooks, they represented wards in Bow and Bromley. While it could be argued that one of the reasons for this division could be that these councillors lived in the northern constituency, looking at the candidates for the council in 1903 and at councillors who voted with the Labour group it is apparent that this is too simplistic.⁶⁰ For example, Sam March, who represented Poplar East in 1903 and Bromley South West in 1906, lived in Upper North Street, Poplar. Both Donzy Hubbard and Arthur Darby lived in the south. Darby belonged to the PLEL and was the President and later, after Lansbury's election to Parliament, Treasurer of the Labour Representation Committee based in Bow.⁶¹ Darby, along with the others who lived in the south may have not wanted to oppose the Liberals but they were keen to oust the Conservatives in the north. Another explanation could be the numbers of skilled artisans on the voting register. According to the Heads of Household survey a large percentage of the voting population in Bow North, Bromley South East and Cubitt Town was in this category at 45.3%, 46.3% and 33.3% respectively. All three wards were represented by non-Labour councillors in 1900. In contrast Bromley North East with 40% of unskilled labourers on the voting register was represented by two members of the Labour group, A. G. Smith and J. R. Smith.⁶²

Chapter Three outlined the various organisations that existed in Bow and Bromley to promote the labour interest, which they saw as promoting the cause of working men, both employed and unemployed. In September 1903

⁶⁰ See Appendix N for details.

⁶¹ *Bow & Bromley Worker*, 18th December 1909.

⁶² See Appendix F.

the *East End News* reported that the newly formed Poplar Trades and Labour Representation Committee [PT&LRC] selected candidates for the local elections who professed ‘no party politics and offer themselves as representatives of trades unions and labour generally’. The dominance of the ‘new unions’ is apparent in Bow and Bromley where they are in the majority, although traditional unions are also represented. The south of the borough shows the influence of the traditional unions which reinforced links with the Liberals.⁶³

This also demonstrates one of the main differences between Poplar and West Ham at this time. The labour activists in the borough of Poplar did not consider themselves a political party. They were aiming to increase working class representation at local and national level, whereas in West Ham the activists were being organised into a more formal party arrangement. This attitude is confirmed by the election literature of both James Anderson and John McCarthy who stood as Progressive and Labour candidates for the Poplar Board of Guardians in 1904. They did not emphasise their political allegiance, writing that they were men ‘who have served you faithfully and well in the past, and if elected, will continue to insist on equal rights for all ratepayers’.⁶⁴

As in West Ham, the unions attempted to influence local administration by insisting that members elected under their banner, whose election expenses they had paid, would adhere to their policies. However, they had less success than in West Ham. Correspondence printed in the local press in November 1902 gives an example of this. The local branch of the NUGW&GL had

⁶³ See Appendix N for a full list

⁶⁴ *East End News*, 25th March 1904. The emphasis is in the original.

urged J. R. Smith and Mrs Cordery to resign from the Poplar Board of Guardians as they had not voted to receive a deputation from the local Trades Council and NUGW&GL. The Board had argued that the subject of the deputation, the issue of the resignation of a general assistant and a stoker in the casual ward, was a ‘matter of discipline’. As it had nothing to do with hours, pay or conditions of work, the Board unanimously declined to accept the deputation. This was considered by the union branch as being ‘against trade unionism’ since, having paid the expenses of all three, that is Lansbury, Smith and Mrs Cordery, as members of the Board of Guardians, the trade union branch committee considered, it had the right to ask for their resignations. However, Lansbury, while not being asked to resign from the Board was asked to resign his position as trustee of the union. They must have realised that he regarded his work as a Poor Law Guardian as more important than his membership of the union.⁶⁵ This is in contrast to Thorne whose union membership transcended all other allegiances, at least in this period.

Furthermore, although Lansbury was a prominent local figure, a member of the Board of Guardians, a local councillor and a member of the London County Council, who had already stood as a Parliamentary candidate in Bow in 1900, he was not considered as a Parliamentary candidate in the 1906 General Election. In February 1904, Banks, as the Secretary of the PT&LRC, wrote to Ramsay Macdonald, as secretary of the LRC, to ask for details as to the correct procedure for adopting a Parliamentary candidate. He also asked for suggestions as to names of possible candidates ‘from Trade Unions

⁶⁵ *East End News*, 7th November 1902.

affiliated to your body or candidates recommended by your Executive.' As a matter of urgency, he requested further details as to any financial assistance that may be offered, reminding MacDonald that he had not received any replies to his earlier letters.⁶⁶ At no time in the correspondence was George Lansbury's name mentioned as a potential candidate. John Shepherd in his recent biography argues that this may be because even though Lansbury had left the SDF by 1901 his socialism may have made it difficult for Ramsay MacDonald to endorse his candidature.⁶⁷ In addition Lansbury may have felt that, as a former Liberal agent for the previous MP, J. A. Murray McDonald, who continued to be his friend, it would have been disloyal to stand against the Liberals.⁶⁸ Also, it is possible, that he considered that the Liberal position was too strong, so he committed himself to standing as a candidate in Middlesbrough. None of these explanations is wholly satisfactory and it does not explain why the Poplar committee did not suggest him, or any other candidate. This may be because since, at this time, the distinction between many in the socialist groupings and the Liberals was not clear-cut. Mention has been made of Will Crooks' ambivalent position. It may have been that the Liberal programme put forward by Stopford Brookes in Bow and Sidney Buxton in Poplar was 'socialist' enough to satisfy the Trades Committee given that they did not have an alternative candidate as strong as Lansbury. This Liberal programme included reduction in working hours, payment for MPs, old age pensions and rate equalisation. They also argued for trades unions to be allowed to keep their funds even if involved in disputes, a reference to the

⁶⁶ Labour Party Archive, LRC 18/218.

⁶⁷ Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, pp. 86-87.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

Taff Vale decision which had made trades unions liable for a firm's consequential losses in the event of a strike. The press also pointed out that Buxton's seat was secure as he was a well-known and well-loved MP. Stopford Brookes, although a newcomer to the district, had campaigned hard since the summer and 'by this means he made himself known to the whole of the electors and the views he expounded undoubtedly gained for him the great proportion of the Labour vote'.⁶⁹

In July 1905 the Poplar Municipal Alliance was inaugurated and by that October had one hundred and forty eight members. They claimed to represent all ratepayers and aimed to elect councillors and Guardians so as to check the socialist threat.⁷⁰ However, the local left wing activists continued to campaign hard and by 1906 there were sixteen councillors who voted with the Labour group on the Council. As before the majority represented the wards in Bow. This number remained broadly similar for the rest of this period.⁷¹ However, councillors did not always divide on party lines. Many issues, such as the call for rate equalisation to help pay for the Poor Law administration, were supported by all shades of political opinion.

Unlike Poplar the situation in West Ham was more clear-cut at this time. The local council elections in November 1899 saw the Labour majority reduced and in January 1900 the Municipal Alliance was founded to serve all 'classes in the borough' and not 'just those in a trade union'.⁷² The fact that this was earlier than Poplar indicates the coherence and the threat of the Labour opposition. Membership, which united Tories and Liberals against the

⁶⁹ *East End News*, 19th January 1906.

⁷⁰ *ibid.* 20th October 1905.

⁷¹ For lists see Appendix P.

⁷² *Stratford Express*, 10th January 1900.

perceived extravagances of the socialists, included representatives from ratepayers' groups, the Free Church Council, the Church of England Lay Council and the Chamber of Commerce.⁷³ Members of the Alliance, which also included many prominent factory owners, had learnt their lesson from the mistakes of 1898 and campaigned hard throughout the year, putting the issue of the rates to the forefront of the campaign. The *Stratford Express* argued that socialist extravagances and poor administration had caused the rates to rise which in turn would lead to firms leaving the area and increase unemployment still further. Furthermore, according to the paper, Labour members of the council were planning to double pensions to council workmen which would cause even greater rate rises.⁷⁴ One of the possible explanations for the lack of support for labour and socialist candidates by the working classes was that council workmen, both clerical and manual, enjoyed greater job security, as well as pensions, that were not available to the majority of the labouring poor, who still had to pay the increased rates.⁷⁵ As the Editor of the *Stratford Express* wrote after the Council elections of November 1899, 'West Ham is not a Socialist borough ... its opponents are still six or eight times as numerous as its adherents' but it is 'inconceivable that any man should woo a West Ham constituency without being deeply sympathetic with the claims of Labor (sic), simply because the working class vote in the Borough is enormously preponderant.'⁷⁶ Although there were left wing candidates in the north they were not typical representatives of the trades unions. For example Ewell McAllen, who stood unsuccessfully in Broadway ward was a

⁷³ Marriott, 'London Over the Border' p. 185.

⁷⁴ *Stratford Express*, 31st March 1900, 16th June 1900.

⁷⁵ Fink, 'Labour Politics', p. 82.

⁷⁶ *Stratford Express*, 4th November 1899.

commercial traveller and held an ‘influential position in one of the wealthiest and best known firms in the commercial world.’⁷⁷ Saunders Jacobs, who had represented Forest Gate since 1898, was a lawyer who had been expelled from the SDP and was in 1900 a member of the ILP. He was not a supporter of Will Thorne and by 1903 was claiming independence from both Labour and the Municipal Alliance.⁷⁸

The General Election was called in September 1900 and Will Thorne stood as a Labour and Socialist candidate in South West Ham with John Bethell as a Liberal Imperialist in the North. Thorne held two or three meetings a day throughout the campaign, calling for nationalisation of the school boards and poor rates, together with the public utilities and railways, and a minimum wage. He urged men to vote for working class representation in Parliament since capitalists would only pass legislation of benefit to themselves and would not help the working man. As he put it ‘a Parliament of burglars would do away with the Police.’⁷⁹ However, this socialist programme and colourful language did not win him enough votes and he lost to the Conservative, Major Banes, the sitting MP, by 5,616 votes to 4,439. However he did increase the labour vote by 460.⁸⁰ This may reflect personal support given to Thorne by the local press. While critical of lavish socialist spending the Editor argued that ‘he [Thorne] possesses judgement and leadership’.⁸¹ One of the factors that may have contributed to his failure to increase the vote still further was, as in Poplar, the issue of the South African

⁷⁷ West Ham Elections Scrapbook Volume I, p. 175.

⁷⁸ West Ham Election Scrapbook Volume II, p. 116.

⁷⁹ *ibid.* 29th September 1900.

⁸⁰ Infancy of Labour Party Archive, L.S.E. MF 76, fols. 17-18.

⁸¹ *Stratford Express*, 3rd November 1900.

War since the Conservatives here too had emphasised that a vote away from them could be seen as unpatriotic.

The success of the Conservatives could also have been due to the pattern of employment in the area. For example, Thames Iron Works, a major employer, had contracts with the Admiralty. Conservatives were also successful in other Parliamentary constituencies with military links such as Greenwich and Woolwich, the average percentage of the vote being 65%. In Bow and Bromley it was 63.3% and in West Ham the average was 58.6%. Poplar, despite being on the river, maintained a Liberal majority, which probably reflects the respect in which the MP, Buxton, was held locally.⁸² In May 1900, as in Poplar later in the year, there was a massive ‘processional demonstration’ in Canning Town to raise funds for soldiers’ widows and orphans. The processions of carts and displays from various trade and friendly societies as well as the Liberal and Radical Club wound its way through South West Ham collecting £200 in subscriptions on its way.⁸³ Although this support did not necessarily imply approval of the war such demonstrations made socialist opposition more difficult.

Throughout the summer this patriotic fervour was reflected in the press. This did not help the socialists who regarded the war as ‘a capitalist struggle’ and strongly disapproved of it. When a proposal was mooted for a war memorial for the volunteers who had died, Thorne objected on the grounds that they had volunteered and the defence of the realm was not at stake.⁸⁴ Crick argues that despite the opposition of the SDF to the war they did not

⁸² Pelling, H. *Social Geography*, pp. 37, 42 and 63.

⁸³ *Stratford Express*, 8th May 1900.

⁸⁴ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 27th November 1900

succeed in gaining much support from the working classes for their views.

This, he argues was, because the anti-war protesters put forward a moral, rather than a practical objection, to the war which did not appeal.⁸⁵ The divisions within the Liberal party nationally and their poor organisation in many areas also contributed to the Conservative success.

The impact of the war on the local elections was also a set back for the left and in November 1900 it lost its majority on West Ham Town Council. However, other factors such as the better organisation of the opposition and the cost implications of the re-organisation of the borough into twelve wards rather than four also contributed to their failure. The press, too, continued its campaign against the labour group and had complained in March that Thorne was now an ineffective leader and Terrett was disrupting council meetings with wild allegations accusing the Town Clerk of failing in his duties.⁸⁶ The editor regarded the election of socialists in West Ham as a wasted opportunity arguing that ‘failing in administration they took to abusing and threatening each other at Council and Committee meetings. They talked but they did not work’.⁸⁷ This, although unsurprising, is not entirely fair. In December 1900 Thorne had proposed increased pensions for council employees, from ten shillings to twenty shillings per week, which was rejected after a long debate.⁸⁸ Both Hayday and Thorne tried, unsuccessfully, to have the tender for the new electrification of the borough re-opened as the existing contractor, Ferranti, would not guarantee to uphold the council labour clause and agree to

⁸⁵ Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation*, p 161.

⁸⁶ *ibid.* 16th February 1901.

⁸⁷ *ibid.* 16th March 1901.

⁸⁸ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 12th December 1900

trade union pay and conditions.⁸⁹ Godbold had proposed that the Town Clerk, Hilleary, provide the council with a list of works done and fees received since it was first incorporated in 1898 in an attempt to justify the rates increases by showing that the Labour councillors were not wholly responsible. This was defeated as it was thought that this implied dishonesty on the part of the Town Clerk.⁹⁰ Saunders-Jacobs tried again in February to have the council list contracts that involved a relationship with a member of the council but this too was defeated.⁹¹ This argument continued throughout the summer and finally Saunders-Jacobs and Terrett joined forces to attempt to force a judicial enquiry into the new Electric Light and Tramway undertakings but this too failed.⁹²

After the General Election and throughout the summer of 1901 the question of Thorne's Parliamentary candidature was under review. Since the establishment of the national LRC the necessary support of trades unions meant that the Labour Party, as it became, was founded in the interests of labour and not necessarily to promote socialism. As Ramsay Macdonald wrote to his supporters after the 1900 election the LRC 'was launched to impart unity and coherence to Labour politics'.⁹³ In May 1900 the NUGW&GL affiliated to the newly formed national LRC.⁹⁴ However, it was not until a year later that Gilbey, as secretary, organised the affiliation of the WH&DT&LC, the representative committee of trade unions in the borough,

⁸⁹ *ibid.* 8th January 1901 and 12th February 1901.

⁹⁰ *ibid.* 29th January 1901.

⁹¹ *ibid.* 12th February 1901.

⁹² *ibid.* 8th October 1901.

⁹³ Infancy of the Labour Party Archive, L.S.E. MF76, fols. 17-18.

⁹⁴ Labour Party Archives, LRC 1/71.

both north and south.⁹⁵ In August 1901, a special conference was held between the Trades Council and representatives of local socialist organisations, all of whom were affiliated to the LRC, to consider their parliamentary candidate for South West Ham. A detailed, three column, press report highlights the difference between the socialist and labour groups in the borough. At issue was the confusion as to whether Thorne was prepared to stand again as parliamentary candidate for South West Ham and whether, if he did so, the SDF would support him if he were unable to stand as both socialist and labour candidate as he had done in 1900. The position of the LRC was that socialism should not form part of the candidate's description even if the candidate was a convinced socialist. This Ramsay MacDonald hoped would enable the trades unions to support the new party.

There was a sense of urgency because, as Tom Watts explained, it had come 'to the knowledge of the members of the ILP that there was a movement on (sic) foot with the new Radical and Progressive League to introduce a candidate in the Liberal interest for South West Ham.'⁹⁶ In 1900 there had been no Liberal candidate which meant that the socialists stood a better chance against the Conservatives. Godbold, as representative of the local ILP, asserted that whereas every member of his branch wanted Thorne as candidate this was not the situation with regard to the SDF for although they had invited Thorne to speak at their meeting they had not formally selected him. At this point Thorne, who had been outside the meeting, was summoned to give his views. According to Bédarida, Thorne at this time was trying to increase working class representation in Parliament and to develop closer links

⁹⁵ *ibid.* LRC 2/335.

⁹⁶ *Stratford Express*, 17th August 1901.

between trades unions and Parliament which should have made him acceptable to Ramsay MacDonald.⁹⁷ The fact that Thorne's socialism was strongly based on trades unionism may have contributed to his difficulties with the more doctrinaire members of the SDF who wanted a more revolutionary approach. A further complication was that the national committee of the SDF had by now left the LRC in protest at its lukewarm approach to socialism.⁹⁸

At the meeting Thorne countered criticism of his socialist programme by saying everyone knew his views and that 'he ran as a socialist but because he was a Socialist that was no particular reason for supposing he had to ram it down the throats of the people every minute'.⁹⁹ Alderman Hayday confirmed that the Trades Council supported Thorne but of the two socialist societies only the ILP had formally declared their support. After considerable discussion Godbold of the ILP and Mansfield of the SDF proposed an adjournment so that the two groups could confer and agree. After several lively comments from the floor it was decided by a vote to adjourn the meeting and no decision was taken regarding Thorne's candidature.

I have given a detailed account of this meeting to illustrate two points: firstly, the importance that Thorne attached to trade union support, both his own union and the older craft unions and secondly, his understanding of the necessity of obtaining the endorsement of all sections of socialist and labour views in the constituency in order to organise a 'party'. The attitude of the LRC did not help this as it was rumoured that they were considering endorsing

⁹⁷ Bédarida, *Will Thorne*, p. 166.

⁹⁸ Crick, *History of the Social Democratic Federation*, p. 190.

⁹⁹ *Stratford Express*, 17th August 1901.

the ambitious Saunders Jacobs as the candidate, to save the complications of Thorne's socialism. On 18th March 1902 Pete Curran wrote to Ramsay MacDonald arguing that endorsing Saunders Jacobs as candidate would be 'a serious blunder as Thorne is already in the field' and 'it would create further complications'.¹⁰⁰ Later on March 24th 1902 Thorne himself wrote to Ramsay MacDonald querying the press rumours that the National Administrative Council [NAC] of the ILP and the LRC had endorsed Saunders Jacobs' candidature and informing him of his intention to stand at the next parliamentary election.¹⁰¹ It could be argued that, by insisting on being a Socialist and Labour candidate instead of simply Labour as preferred by the LRC, Thorne was guilty of dividing rather than uniting the new Labour Party. However, as Gilbey put in a letter of January 1904 he was adopted by the Trades Council, the SDF and the ILP 'the only really live politically organised workers associations in the division,' as a socialist and labour candidate for both 1900 and the next election.¹⁰² Gilbey also notes that all the recent candidates in the local elections ran as socialist and labour and were successful in four out of the five wards contested. He asserts that this success was despite the fact that most women voters were against them but he does not give a reason for this, nor does he explain how many women it applied to. It is apparent from this letter that Gilbey, the secretary of the Trades Council and Thorne's election agent, was convinced that it was only as Socialist and Labour that Thorne would succeed.¹⁰³ Eventually, after considerable correspondence between the LRC and Thorne, which Thorne published as a

¹⁰⁰ Labour Party Archives, LRC 4/57.

¹⁰¹ ibid. LRC.4/144

¹⁰² ibid. LRC 12/320.

¹⁰³ ibid.

pamphlet to MacDonald's annoyance, his candidature was endorsed. He was to stand as a Labour candidate 'pure and simple' but MacDonald implied that the national committee would not interfere with the name of any local organisation. This compromise solution reflected MacDonald's acceptance of Gilbey's assessment that Thorne would be a successful Parliamentary candidate.¹⁰⁴ Since Saunders Jacobs had by now been expelled from both the SDF and the ILP this meant that Thorne became the undisputed leader of the Labour Group in South West Ham and on the local council.

It was not only Thorne's Parliamentary candidature that caused problems. There were many discussions in the Trades Council meetings as to whether or not a candidate was suitable for election to the Town Council or the Board of Guardians. Appendix O shows the trade union allegiances of the Labour councillors who were elected in November 1903. On 1st March 1902 all candidates to the Board of Guardians had to agree to abide by the decisions of the Trades Council with reference to the formation of Socialist and Labour policy on an eight-hour day and trade union rates of pay for contracted workers.¹⁰⁵ This continued to be an issue. In 1905 Walter Godbold, a local print shop owner, prominent member of the ILP and a Town Councillor since 1898, was questioned as to his allegiance to the labour cause. It was queried because it was thought he supported Scrutton, a member of the Municipal Alliance, by doing his printing.¹⁰⁶ However, he was allowed to continue to stand as the candidate for Custom House and Silvertown ward as he was 'basically sound and supported the working classes'. However, he was later

¹⁰⁴ Labour Party Archive, LRC 15/247, LRC17/351 and LRC 17/561.

¹⁰⁵ *Stratford Express*, 1st March 1902.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, 2nd and 30th August 1905.

also criticised by the Trades Council for not actively campaigning in the local election.¹⁰⁷

This chapter has looked at the problems labour activists encountered when trying to increase working class representation at national and local level. They included problems with the right to vote, the organisation of the opposition and the reluctance of many members of the working classes to support left wing candidates or policies. Another factor was the role of the Liberals in promoting social reform which led to confusion as to the exact allegiance of many activists. However, although these difficulties were common to both Poplar and West Ham, I argue that the way the activists sought to overcome them differed in emphasis. The organisation of the left in South West Ham was more formal than that of Bow. The Trades Council exerted far greater control over the candidates than did that of Bow. The following three chapters will use the examples of the campaigns for the unemployed and women's suffrage, together with a discussion of the increased trade union activity before the First World War, in order to explore these differences further.

¹⁰⁷ ibid. 28th October 1905. Godbold lost his seat at this election.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CAMPAIGNS FOR THE UNEMPLOYED

As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, classic nineteenth century economic theory did not recognise unemployment as a specific social category. It assumed a balance between the supply of and demand for labour. However by the early twentieth century social reformers considered that the state had a responsibility to either provide work or maintenance for those men who were unable to find employment. Beatrice Webb argued that the Minority Report on the Poor Law demonstrated that ‘unemployment was mainly due to defects of industrial organisation, which it is fully in the power of the state to remedy.’¹ As was outlined in Chapter One, the problem of casual work and unemployment was particularly acute in East London because of the decline of the docks and building trades and the inherent fluctuations in the job market. However, many believed that one reason for the high rates of unemployment was the increase in population. As the Editor of the *Stratford Express* argued ‘the most helpless and spiritless among the poor have been drawn to West Ham by the lodestone of out relief.’² This argument was applied equally to Poplar. The solution for this situation, it was thought, was either to reduce out relief or send such people on assisted emigration to Canada or Australia. Many socialists agreed with these solutions but, as was outlined in Chapter Two, they also argued for a land tax to fund work schemes and pensions together with a statutory eight-hour day to increase the demand

¹Drake, B. and Cole, M. Editors, *Our Partnership* by Beatrice Webb, Longmans, Green and Co., 1947, p. 485.

² *Stratford Express*, 7th April 1906.

for labour. It will be argued that one of the differences between Poplar and West Ham is that the activists in the former Borough, while aiming for a socialist solution, worked with representatives of all shades of political opinion to ameliorate it. In West Ham the socialists were less compromising and argued more forcefully for an immediate change in the economic structure of society while still calling for public works to alleviate poverty. As noted in Chapter Five, one of the distinctions that can be made between social movements and political parties is that the former seeks to influence the executive while the latter aims to control it. Thus Poplar can be said to be an example of the former and South West Ham of the latter.

Hunt has calculated the numbers of unemployed during this period and shows that two peaks between 1891 and 1914 occurred during the winters of 1904 to 1905 and 1908 to 1909.³ This coincided with greatest agitation for the unemployed held in the two boroughs but although the main focus of the Labour campaigns at this time was unemployment, in Poplar the issue was regarded as one for the entire borough not merely the socialists and labour activists. Labour councillors regularly asked for money to be granted by the Poplar Borough Council for public works and for preference to be given to local men when recruiting for council work.⁴ These requests were usually denied as they would have had a detrimental effect on the rates. However, the Bow Ratepayers Association called for the equalisation of rates throughout London so that the burden of poor relief could be shared by rich and poor

³ Hunt, E.H. *British Labour History*, p. 319

⁴ See Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 18th December 1902 and 8th December 1904 for examples.

boroughs, a policy that was also advocated by left wing groups.⁵ A meeting presided over by Lansbury at Bow Baths Hall in January 1903 was supported by the local MP, William Guthrie, who was a Conservative, and Stopford-Brookes, the Bow and Bromley Liberal candidate, together with councillors of all political opinions. Lansbury called for government assistance to increase employment but added that he would continue feeding women and children even if it meant increasing the rates.⁶ This had been Lansbury's policy since first on the Board of Guardians in 1893. As he wrote in his autobiography;

as a Guardian I took as my policy that no widow, or orphan, no sick, infirm or aged person should lack proper provision of the needs of life and able bodied people should get work or maintenance.⁷

The local press approved the fact that local party divisions were being ignored in order to tackle the problem. It urged the government to do something about the unemployed as the continuing situation would only lead to moral and physical decline but also to increased crime 'especially against women.'⁸ However, the press was also critical of unemployed marchers with trade union banners who were 'regulars at the casual wards [of the workhouse], and of a class who never did and never intend to do a day's work', arguing that trades unions should not support such men.⁹ At a meeting of the Poplar Trades and Labour Council, presided over by Will Crooks, there were calls for MPs to do more to influence the government and a request to petition the King.¹⁰ In November 1904 the Conservative Mayor John Bussey argued that the London County Council should provide the necessary work

⁵ *East End News*, 21st October 1902.

⁶ *ibid.* 13th January 1903.

⁷ Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 133.

⁸ *East End News*, 23rd January 1903 and later 15th April 1904.

⁹ *ibid.* 6th February 1903.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

(and presumably pay for it).¹¹

Another example of cross party co-operation on the issue of unemployment was the establishment of farm colonies. Lansbury, as Chairman, had persuaded the Poplar Board of Guardians to accept help from the philanthropist, Joseph Fels, to purchase two farms. These were to become self-supporting communities training men for work either in Britain or abroad.¹² They were not an unqualified success. A report from the Essex Constabulary sent to the Guardians in 1905 complained of a lack of supervision of the men after working hours writing that ‘at the present time respectable people are afraid to be about after dark, and it is certainly not safe for females at any time.’¹³ After investigation the Board reported that there was little substance to these fears although one farmer had complained about poaching. The report continued;

Bad as the men were one can well imagine that threats of shooting did not improve matters, and I am told, they made it a nightly practice to yell and sing outside his house, and special visits of annoyance were prevalent between midnight and three o’clock in the morning.¹⁴

It was recommended that these men be returned to London. However others had not waited to be returned but had absconded and returned to the East End where they were accused of stealing their work clothes.¹⁵ Despite these problems, however, the farm colonies continued to operate.

In West Ham the situation was rather different. In November 1904 Fels had offered to buy land for a farm colony but the council decided to refer it to

¹¹ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 17th November 1904.

¹² Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, p. 63.

¹³ Minutes of the Poplar Board of Guardians, 14th June 1905.

¹⁴ *ibid.* 26th July 1905.

¹⁵ *East End News*, 8th January 1904.

a committee rather than accept immediately.¹⁶ After discussion it was decided to pass the offer to the Guardians as they considered the council was not authorised to accept it.¹⁷ The following spring the Trinity College Settlement, based in Stratford, opened a temporary colony for the unemployed at Letchworth where they were to dig a lake. After scrutiny by the local Distress Committees ninety-nine men were given three months work from February to April 1905. The report considered that while it was not a long-term solution to the problem, the regular money and food meant that health improved and items could be taken out of pawn.¹⁸ Therefore, in 1906 the Town Council applied for and obtained a grant from the Local Government Board, whose president was John Burns, to found a farm colony of their own. The numbers it supported was not recorded in the Council minutes but since the calls for more public works and complaints of increased rates due to increased out relief continued unabated it did not seem to make much of an impact on the situation.¹⁹

For the entire East End the summer of 1905 was a crucial one for the issue of unemployment. On 11th July there was a large demonstration at Hyde Park where 10,000 men heard Will Crooks call for government guarantees of work for men made unemployed by new technologies. On August 27th, a Sunday morning, the usual meeting at the East India Dock Gates took up the question. Here, there was evidence of co-operation between the two boroughs. Thorne of West Ham called for the implementation of the

¹⁶ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 30th November 1904.

¹⁷ ibid. 13th December 1904.

¹⁸ Collier, G., Howarth, E. and Miller, G. *Report of a Temporary Colony at Garden City*, P.S. King, Orchard House, Westminster, 1905.

¹⁹ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 13th February 1906.

Unemployed Workmen's Act and was seconded in this by Joe Banks of Poplar. However, Banks argued that the Act as it stood would not help the unemployed but that the Labour Party would help in 'altering its provisions',²⁰. The problem was that the Act merely enabled local authorities to raise money by charitable means and no work was to be provided at the cost of the rates. Watts, of the Poplar Board of Guardians, now called for increased Labour representation at local and national level and 'he strongly advised them to make themselves more confounded nuisances to the authorities during the coming winter than last season.'²¹ The issue continued to be reported at length in the press, with long council debates and petitions to the council. Lansbury spoke in response to one of these petitions by saying that Poplar had done itself a disservice by being law abiding since it was 'demoralised by the legal agencies.' However, he also argued forcefully against private charity citing the example of West Ham where the borough was 'degraded and demoralised by the private charity of the newspaper funds'.²² He urged the council to plan for the forthcoming winter. The council then unanimously decided to seek an audience with the King on the matter, to urge the London County Council to provide, and pay for, more work opportunities and to allow the unemployed to meet regularly at Bow Baths Hall in the winter.²³

As well as petitions to the Council the campaigners for the unemployed held marches and mass meetings. They attempted to increase support for their campaign by asking for assistance from the Parliamentary Labour Party. On August 11th 1905 Joe Banks wrote to Ramsay MacDonald to inform him that

²⁰ *East End News*, 29th August 1905.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.* 12th September 1903.

²³ *ibid.*

the PT&LRC was holding a mass open air meeting with local trade unions ‘and their banners’ on Sunday morning 17th September ‘for the purpose of advocating the urgent necessity of Independent Labour Representation in Parliament having special reference to the recent proceedings re Labour interests in that Assembly.’²⁴ This is probably a reference to the Unemployed Workmen Act the slow progress of which George Lansbury had highlighted at the council meetings on 13th July 1905 and again in September 1905.²⁵ Yet again in April 1906, after the General Election, Banks was writing to ask for a speaker at a Demonstration Meeting at the East India Dock Gates to ‘urge upon the government to introduce the promised legislation for amending the Unemployed Workmen Act and to Equalise the rates over the whole of London.’ He says that the meeting will be supported by the Socialist and Labour representatives on the Borough Council and the Poplar Board of Guardians, which would presumably include Lansbury, although he is not mentioned by name.²⁶

In Poplar, as elsewhere, the campaign for the Right to Work continued through the winter of 1905 and 1906 when unemployment was very high. On 24th October 1905 the local press reported a meeting of the unemployed at which Joe Banks called for a deputation of women to go to the Prime Minister, Balfour, since women suffered most under unemployment. Councillor Hilditch, a leading member of the PLEL, wrote to the local press to tell them that a march of 1,000 women had been organised. Since at this time (as much later), women who were economically inactive were not necessarily

²⁴ Labour Party Archive, LPGC, 25/245.

²⁵ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 13th July 1905 and *East End News*, 12th September 1905.

²⁶ ibid. LPGC, 3/234.

classed as unemployed, he did not say whether they were women who were unemployed themselves or married to unemployed men or both.²⁷ The press later reported that the deputation had been received but had little practical effect.²⁸

In November 1905 there was another march of about 3,000 men to Hyde Park to protest about the use of charity to mitigate unemployment. The marchers demanded that the ‘government recognise the elementary right of every man to gain his bread by honest labour’ and called upon Parliament to initiate works of ‘national utility’.²⁹ This march was organised and led by the Poplar Aldermen, Charlie Sumner and Joe Banks, with speeches from George Lansbury, Harry Quelch and Walter Steadman.³⁰

Turning to West Ham, it appears that there was very little cross party support for the unemployed. Right wing councillors were often extremely unsympathetic to the labouring poor. Councillor Scott even refused to approve a fund for the starving in India as it would set a precedent and they then ‘might even have a collection for the starving dockers of West Ham.’³¹ But it was not only the middle classes who were unsympathetic. A letter to the press signed by ‘a working man at GER’ [Great Eastern Railway] claimed that Labour policy was unjust and unfair and arguing that all they have done for working men is ‘to raise their rents by increasing the rates’.³² Whether or not this was a genuine letter it is impossible to say but it does reveal the prevailing arguments put forward against the Labour councillors.

²⁷ *East End News*, 24th October 1905.

²⁸ *ibid.* 10th November 1905.

²⁹ *ibid.* 21st November 1905.

³⁰ *ibid.* 19th January 1906.

³¹ *ibid.* 30th June 1900.

³² *ibid.* 30th June 1900.

There was also industrial unrest in the summer of 1900 with an unofficial strike at the Victoria Dock, which was broken by the use of free labour brought from outside the borough.³³ There were mass union meetings claiming recognition, increased pay and reduced hours at the Great Eastern Railway works and calling for greater labour representation on both the Town Council and in Parliament. However, this action was not supported by all trade unionists. In 1909 Osborne, secretary of the Walthamstow branch of the ASRS, won the right for trade union funds not to be used for political purposes which meant that the Labour group were further starved of money. This court ruling was not overturned until 1913. It is tempting to identify Osborne as the writer of the letter to the press cited earlier but there is no evidence for this.

From 1900 to 1906 the Labour and socialist groups in West Ham took every opportunity whether in the Town Council meetings or at open air meetings at the dock gates or the Grove to put forward the labour and socialist message particularly with regard to unemployment and wages. They called for the eight-hour day and for the council to pay for more works, such as road clearing, to reduce the unemployment. On 25th March 1902 letters were received from Canning Town SDF, NUGW&GL, dockers and bricklayers unions and the Stratford ASRS urging the council to pay realistic wages for relief work and complaining that the May Day holiday had been abandoned.³⁴ In November 1902 Thorne urged the council to demand that Osmans, who were the contractors for the new electrified trams, start work immediately and employ only local men. Unfortunately this constraint was not in the original

³³ ibid. 16th June 1900.

³⁴ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 25th March 1902.

contract and the council were unable to compel Osmans to employ anyone.³⁵

The Labour group also organised a public meeting, which was attended by all Labour councillors as well as Keir Hardie, to protest at the unfair allocation of naval contracts. In this they were supported by the local press who agreed with their demands for a publicly run Port of London.³⁶ The Trades Council and local trades unions continued to write to the council demanding measures to relieve unemployment and urging them to petition Parliament to treat unemployment as a national not a local issue.³⁷ Furthermore, campaigning was not restricted to men's employment. In August 1903 Minnie Baldock, who later became a paid worker for Women's Suffrage, wrote to the press complaining not only of the low wages proposed for the male tram drivers, employed by the Town Council, but also for the young female clerks:

I would like to ask the mothers of West Ham is 12s a week enough to keep a woman respectable. Why are they employing women clerks? Is it because they are cheaper than men? What about the men clerks who are out of employment, their wives and families suffering? I am certainly not against women being employed, but for God's sake give them a living wage, whereby they may keep themselves unspotted from the world and independent.³⁸

A year later Ted Leggatt, that well-known activist with a vivid turn of phrase, tried again at the Town Council Meeting arguing that:

these girls are the future mothers of England. They are your slaves for a paltry 10s or 12s. What an enormous salary! I would rather see my daughter dead than your slave for a miserable, paltry 12s! ... These young women had a right to housing recreation and amusement. The daughters of workingmen had as much right to good conditions as anyone else.³⁹

³⁵ *Stratford Express*, 12th November 1902.

³⁶ ibid. 6th December 1902.

³⁷ See West Ham Town Council Minutes, 22nd September 1903, 12th January 1904, 17th December 1904 and 11th January 1905 for examples.

³⁸ *Stratford Express*, 8th August 1903.

³⁹ ibid. 26th June 1904.

Despite this speech and another by Mrs. Baldock's husband, Harry, the motion to increase the tram girls' wages to £1.1s was lost. The issue, as she had identified in her letter, was the effect any increase in wages would have on the rates. As the press often pointed out the high rates was believed to be one of the main reasons that firms left West Ham. For example, Messrs. Ritchie closed their jute works in August 1904 citing high rates and an increased burden of factory inspections.⁴⁰

However, the increased unemployment caused by such firms closing, together with the seasonality of work in the docks and the gas works led to even more demands on the rates and even more men claiming out relief. Nevertheless this analysis was rejected by the Boards of Guardians and members of the COS who argued that out relief in West Ham was too generous and encouraged inward immigration from other boroughs. The COS also argued that the distribution of food to the destitute was to be discouraged, or at least rigidly supervised, to prevent fraud and the further demoralising of the poor.⁴¹ The Forest Gate Ratepayers, a 'non-party' organisation that had been in existence at least since 1903, agreed in their resolution sent to the Town Council in September 1905:

that this meeting of ratepayers of West Ham deprecates the sensational and exaggerated statements that are being circulated in reference to the prevalence of deserving unemployed in the Borough, warns the charitable public not to assist in the creation of a permanent class of mendicants, and in view of past experience, requests the Town Council not to waste public money on uneconomical relief works such as have proved in the past to be injudicious and injurious to the best interests of the district.⁴²

⁴⁰ *ibid.* 31st August 1904 and 17th September 1904.

⁴¹ Bosanquet, *Social Work in London*, p. 338.

⁴² *Stratford Express*, 28th October 1903 and West Ham Town Council Minutes, 29th September 1905.

This is in contrast to Poplar Borough Council who argued for more funds so as to be able to pay for more public works to alleviate the situation.

As identified by Hunt and confirmed by contemporaries, the winter of 1904 to 1905 had been particularly severe for the unemployed. A conference in March 1904 had called for unemployment to be treated as a national not a local issue but nothing had come of it.⁴³ Throughout the autumn Thorne and the other labour councillors continually called for increased grants for relief works as well as speaking at mass meetings at the Grove, the dock gates and at the Town Hall. However, even when the council passed resolutions approving work the relevant department did not necessarily carry it out. In December 1904 the Highway and Parks Committee agreed to employ 300 men to clean the borough, taking them from the unemployed register, but at a later mass meeting at the Town Hall Hayday accused the Borough Engineer of only recruiting one hundred men and discharging fifty from the Electric Light department.⁴⁴ Throughout December there were daily meetings of up to 800 men culminating in a mass march to Trafalgar Square when it was reported that four thousand men came from all over London with the largest contingent from West Ham and Poplar.⁴⁵ This resulted in the *Daily News* campaign for donations and ward committees were established to distribute food and coal tickets. Even this proved controversial as *The Times* and the *Telegraph* both accused Hayday and Jack Jones of mismanaging the funds in the south of the borough. The northern wards were administered by members of the

⁴³ *Stratford Express*, 19th March 1904.

⁴⁴ *ibid.* 7th December 1904.

⁴⁵ *ibid.* 21st December 1904.

Municipal Alliance and were not accused of mismanagement.⁴⁶

At the council elections of November 1905 the Labour group achieved eleven councillors. Their leader was undoubtedly Will Thorne and a look at the list shows that some of them, William Devenay, Harry Davis, Arthur Hayday and Richard Mansfield, had been there since 1898. Among the new councillors who had been elected since then was George Croot, who was a member of the ILP and the NUGW&GL. Other members of the ILP were Tom Watts, who also sat on the West Ham Board of Guardians and Harry Baldock, who was the chair of the South West Ham ILP and also a member of the NUGW&GL. Councillors who were members of the SDF were Ben Cunningham and Ted Knight, who were both supported by the West Ham and District Trades and Labour Council [WH&DT&LC] despite Cunningham, a plumber, not being a trade union member. It was considered by the meeting that the Plumbers Union had acted out of spite in reporting this but tantalisingly gives no further details.⁴⁷ Jack Jones of the NUGW&GL was also on the executive of the WH&DT&LC. What is striking about this group is the amount of co-operation that existed between them. For example they voted as a group when Davis proposed better street lighting ‘to add to the health of the borough’ and incidentally provide work.⁴⁸ Baldock and Hayday proposed and seconded motions in the council urging that council relief works be set up to reduce unemployment.⁴⁹ Thorne, Hayday, Devenay and Davis also served on the Distress committee that had been established to distribute

⁴⁶ ibid. 14th January 1905.

⁴⁷ *Stratford Express*, 2nd December 1903. See also Appendix Q.

⁴⁸ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 28th November 1905.

⁴⁹ ibid. 23rd January 1906.

funds to the unemployed.⁵⁰ Cunningham, along with other members of the SDF took part in the famous ‘land grab’ of the Triangle Camp. This was a piece of waste ground in Plaistow that they took over and encouraged men to use for growing food. However, after a long summer of dispute the council finally obtained a court order to clear it forcibly in August 1906.⁵¹ As a response Cunningham called for the Council to allow allotments to be rent free for six months for the unemployed. This too was defeated.⁵²

In contrast to activists in Bow and Bromley, Labour activists in South West Ham also campaigned to make Thorne an MP as well as increasing the Labour representation on the Town Council. This was because they believed that only by increasing labour representation at a national level could the problem of local unemployment be solved. In 1892 Keir Hardie had been elected as MP for South West Ham with a majority over the Conservative, Major Banes of 1,232 votes. Hardie had campaigned for measures to reduce unemployment which could be supported by both Liberals and socialists. However, in 1895 the local left wing organisation was divided among the various groups, the Liberals were dissatisfied with Hardie’s Parliamentary performance and significantly, the local Irish population were outraged at his prioritising unemployment measures over Irish Home Rule. Hardie lost his seat to Major Banes.⁵³ These events made an impression on Thorne and his supporters and they organised themselves to fight for his, Thorne’s, candidature.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* 12th December 1905.

⁵¹ *Stratford Express*, 8th August 1906.

⁵² West Ham Town Council Minutes, 25th June 1907.

⁵³ Morgan, K.O. *Keir Hardie, Radical and Socialist*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1975, pp 51 and 80.

The Parliamentary campaign had started long before the election was called. As far back as June 1903, Gilbey as president of the Trades Council and Thorne's election agent, had decided to contest South West Ham only, as Joe Terrett, by alienating the Liberal vote in the north, had made fighting an election there impossible. Terrett had accused the Liberal candidate of opposing the working classes in everything and said that he preferred Gray as an 'honest Conservative'.⁵⁴ This decision not only enabled Thorne's adherents to concentrate their efforts, it also enabled them to call for Liberal support in the absence of a Liberal candidate. The Liberals had not put forward a candidate at the general election since Joseph Leicester lost to the Conservative, Major Banes in 1886. At a meeting of the West Ham Liberal Association in March 1903 it was decided not to put up a candidate in South West Ham because Thorne's position was seen as unassailable.⁵⁵ In November 1904 Gilbey wrote a private letter to Ramsay Macdonald informing him that the sitting MP for West Ham South, Major Banes, was 'nearly dead'.⁵⁶ Since the issue of Thorne's candidature had now been resolved, Macdonald replied offering canvassing cards and assistance with speakers. Obviously the activists were expecting a bye-election if there was not going to be a General Election and wished to be prepared.

Throughout 1904 and 1905 activists held numerous meetings calling for increased socialist and labour representation both on the local council and in Parliament which, it was hoped, would put pressure on the government to help the unemployed. There were also many Liberal and Conservative meetings

⁵⁴ ibid. 16th May 1903 and 24th June 1903.

⁵⁵ ibid. 28th March 1903.

⁵⁶ Labour Party Archive, LRC 17/538.

which received greater coverage in the press, with verbatim reports of the speeches, but this apparent bias did not prevent both Jones and Thorne confidently asserting when the election date was announced in December 1905 that 'it was all over bar the shouting'.⁵⁷ They continued to campaign hard. The *Stratford Express* of 13th January 1906 lists twelve meetings in one week, many in the open air, which were attended by great crowds.

Nationally the main issues were free trade, social reform, the 1902 Education Act, Chinese labour and Irish Home Rule. All these issues were reflected in West Ham, both north and south but in West Ham the effect of unemployment was a major factor in the election campaign. Thorne argued that the Taff Vale decision and the Workmen's Compensation Act had meant workingmen's rights were being further eroded. At a conference organised by the National Union of Sailors and Firemen, he protested that it was disgraceful that seamen were excluded from the Act and that residency rules denied them a vote. Thorne's solution, not surprisingly, was to call for greater trade union activity and greater working class representation in Parliament as well as at local level.⁵⁸ He also supported the non-conformists in their opposition to the 1902 Education Act, calling for all education to be secularised and funded nationally rather than by the local rates. This meant that many Liberal voters and non-conformist clergy in south West Ham could support him.⁵⁹ At their annual dinner the Upton and Forest Gate Liberal Association confirmed their earlier decision not to oppose Thorne in any General Election by putting up a

⁵⁷ *Stratford Express*, 9th December 1905.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* 22nd April 1905.

⁵⁹ *ibid.* 23rd March 1905.

candidate in South West Ham.⁶⁰ However, the Unionist propaganda did try to diminish Liberal support by pointing out that Thorne's ally, Jack Jones, was in Camborne campaigning against a Liberal candidate.⁶¹

Thorne himself was unwavering in his battle for socialism which he firmly believed would be solution to the problems of unemployment and low wages. In his manifesto, printed in the form of a letter in the local press, he argued that:

As a social democrat I am convinced that the question which Thomas Carlyle once called 'the condition of England question' is the most important problem before us today and that the final emancipation of the people will never be achieved until the means and instruments of production, distribution and exchange are taken over and worked collectively for the common good of all.⁶²

As a step towards this, Thorne called for an eight-hour working day, free schooling and maintenance for poor children, the nationalisation of land, railways, canals and mines, pensions for the elderly and infirm, universal adult suffrage and payment and election expenses for MPs. He concluded by saying that a vote for him would be a 'blow struck for the workers in that war between capitalist and labour'.⁶³

Despite reports of intimidation by landlords, who tried to give notices to quit to people who displayed Thorne's campaign cards, and the problems of the lodger franchise, Thorne achieved a 5,237 majority over his Conservative rival Sir John Nutting, the candidate who had replaced Major Banes.⁶⁴ He did so by uniting the various left wing groupings behind him. The national

⁶⁰ *ibid.* 23rd March 1903

⁶¹ *ibid.* 17th January 1906.

⁶² *ibid.* 17th January 1906.

⁶³ *ibid.* 6th January 1906.

⁶⁴ The result was Thorne, 10,210 and Nutting 4,973. See *Stratford Express*, 17th January 1906.

ideological differences between the SDF and the trades unions were not reflected locally in West Ham, possibly because many men were members of both organisations. The work of the Trades Council in selecting candidates and compiling the voting registers under the leadership of James Gilbey, a local bricklayer, who was also Thorne's election agent, was crucial in this process as was the support of George Angle who was the General Secretary of the NUGW&GL. Also very important was the fact that Thorne was a local man who worked in the borough and could be presented as a genuine working class representative, something that his rival could not. In North West Ham Charles Masterman had been elected the new Liberal MP. His manifesto had, like Thorne's emphasised, social reform, municipalisation of local monopolies and utilities. They were able to work together very closely for the good of the borough even if Thorne was still a convinced socialist. It seemed as if the Liberal landslide had enabled both Liberal and Socialist opinion to prevail.

Following the election of 1906 activists in both boroughs continued to press for solutions to the unemployment crisis. In Poplar, as in West Ham, the major issue of concern throughout this period was the increase in the rates due to the poor law precept demanded by the Guardians to pay the poor relief. However, concern transcended party politics and the remedies differed in emphasis rather than doctrine. For example, Lansbury, who had not stood as a Parliamentary candidate in Bow, still believed that the best remedy was the equalisation of the Poor Rate. In this, he was supported by all shades of local political opinion even if his 'generous' out relief as a Guardian was not. This co-operation continued. In 1906 William Hubbard, the Labour councillor for Cubitt Town put forward a resolution that;

the council again calls public attention to the acute distress prevailing throughout the district owing to lack of employment, and hereby instructs the Town Clerk to write a letter to the Poplar Board of Guardians, pointing out how impossible it is for the Borough Council to deal effectively with the question, although willing to do all it legitimately can in the matter and respectfully suggesting, in view of the sad death from starvation of a little child in Bromley, how necessary it is that by the provision of adequate relief such cases should not recur.⁶⁵

This resolution was passed unanimously once the phrase ‘after through investigation’ was inserted after ‘relief,’ and it was further decided to send another petition to the Government to demand a Central Authority for Poor Law administration for London.⁶⁶ This example shows how difficult it was for local councils at this time to provide work for the unemployed, as it would have a direct implication for rates. The Guardians had previously argued that they were unable to create more work for the able bodied unless it was oakum picking or stone breaking, both of which cost more to administer than accrued in income.⁶⁷ However, an increase in disbursements by the Guardians, such as that demanded here, would also cause the rates to rise as the money for the Guardians was paid by the local council. This led to even greater problems as by 1909 the council was unable to pay the Guardians’ precept payment and payment had to be enforced by the courts.⁶⁸

Accordingly, the council accepted Lansbury’s solution and called for the equalisation of the Poor Rates to enable richer boroughs to subsidise the poorer. In December 1906 Councillor Barge, a member of the Municipal Alliance and strongly opposed to Lansbury’s socialism, urged that the Prime Minister be petitioned to this effect. This was approved. The Prime

⁶⁵ ibid. 21st November 1906.

⁶⁶ ibid.

⁶⁷ *East End News*, 10th April 1906.

⁶⁸ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 25th March 1909.

Minister's response to this was that he was 'too busy' to receive deputations.⁶⁹

However, Lansbury and the labour activists' efforts to persuade the Council to open the Distress Committee registers, which enabled men to be employed on public works, were defeated on several occasions as being too expensive and deputations by the PT&LRC and the local SDF calling for more public works to assist the unemployed were also rejected by the council.⁷⁰

The following year, 1907, the 'East End Socialist and Labour Bodies' held a demonstration in Victoria Park which was attended by upwards of 5,000 persons, according to the press report. The resolution proposed by Banks reflected Lansbury's concerns. It was an impassioned plea for the right to work and a call for the workers to organise to change the system and, as an example of the type of resolution put forward by the Bow and Bromley socialists, is worth quoting in full.

In as much as the two most pressing needs of the workers are a) the provision of a compete and adequate system of old age pensions and b) the provisions of work for the unemployed this meeting of workers of the East End of London condemns the government for its lack of initiatives, its heartlessness, and its contemptuous neglect of these problems. It further calls upon the labour (sic) Party in the House of Commons to leave no stone unturned to expose the attitude of the government and compel it to take immediate action. This meeting further affirms that the final solution of the problems of poverty and misery can only be achieved by the workers organising for the purpose of securing political power for themselves and using it for the benefit of the whole community by bringing about the complete overthrow of the present capitalist system.⁷¹

However, this motion makes no mention of the type of society that should replace the current system and, in this, differs from the resolutions set out by Thorne and his supporters at their many dock gate meetings. They

⁶⁹ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 26th November 1906.

⁷⁰ ibid. 3rd December 1906.

⁷¹ *East End News*, 23rd July 1907.

were much more prescriptive, calling for a legal eight-hour day and land tax to fund pensions, for example.

Marches and deputations to the Council continued but without any real success in changing the situation. In January 1909 Banks, as Secretary of the Right to Work Committee, sent the following notice to the local press headed ‘A Misery March’.

To the Unemployed, Starving and Destitute Men and Women of Bow, Bromley and Poplar.

We intend holding meetings all over the Borough to protest against the starvation and misery in our midst, and to organise a demonstration and march through West London on the day Parliament opens, Tuesday, February 16th. We want Unemployed men and their wives and children to turnout and show their misery.

We want unemployed widows and single women also to join us.⁷²

The previous week a deputation of women had petitioned the Poplar Board of Guardians demanding that they should have the right not to be separated from their children in the Workhouse. According to the press the meeting had ended in uproar as one of the women, Mrs Holland shouted abuse at the members.⁷³ Following the notice in the press about the Misery March, a special meeting of the Borough Council was called for by Lansbury and his colleagues, to discuss sending petitions to the London County Council and Parliament to urge more funds for public works. This was opposed by the Municipal Alliance, Councillor Green, who argued that the problem was ‘beyond the Council’s power of solution’ and that Lansbury was exploiting the poor by his actions and ruining the reputation of the Borough. Lansbury responded that he would do all he could to publicise the plight of the poor in

⁷² ibid. 29th January 1909.

⁷³ ibid. 22nd January 1909.

Poplar and no one could stop him.⁷⁴ Accordingly he took women and children on the Misery March through the West End to demonstrate their poverty.⁷⁵ By now Lansbury had been accepted as the Labour candidate for the constituency of Bow and Bromley so his calls for increased help for the poor were becoming louder. However, his call for the abolition of the Workhouse as outlined in the Minority Report had led to a conflict with some members of the SDF, notably Harry Quelch. Once again, Lansbury was demonstrating his prioritising of principles over political pragmatism.⁷⁶

As unemployment itself was a relatively new concept at this time reliable statistics were very hard to obtain. A report of the Poplar Borough Distress Committee for 24th September 1908 to 30th April 1909 lists 3,113 married men and 1,282 single men registered for work. Combined with the 4,261 men maintained by the Guardians in the workhouse, this gives a minimum figure of unemployed for one year as 8,656.⁷⁷ However, these figures are the minimum since residency rules applied to those who wished to claim assistance from either the Guardians or the Distress Committee and, furthermore, men were only allowed to make one claim every two years from the Distress Committee. Efforts by the Labour group to relax these rules by applying to the Local Government Board were in vain. Even so the Distress Committee were only able to give work this season to 665 men, and in each case that would only have been three or four days at a time.

Because of the unsatisfactory nature of the statistics for Poor Relief and unemployment, Banks called several times for the council to conduct a census

⁷⁴ ibid. 12th February 1909.

⁷⁵ ibid. 19th February 1909.

⁷⁶ See Chapter Four for details.

⁷⁷ *East End News*, 27th May 1909.

of the unemployed but his motions were always defeated.⁷⁸ Individual labour councillors continued to press the council for more public works and for petitions to the Local Government Board right up until the beginning of the war but the problem was still grave in 1914. Unlike West Ham, the petitions and speeches in Poplar were not initially led by trade unionists but by the Right to Work Committee, based at Labour Headquarters in Campbell Road. However, trade unionists did attempt later to compel the council to employ only trade union labour. After a public meeting in Poplar Town Hall, in May 1912, a deputation to the council was introduced by Joe Banks and Sam March to that effect. The petitioners were J. Kiniburgh (Electrical Trades), Evan T. Jones (Amalgamated Society of Carpenters & Joiners), J Bancroft (Society of Housepainters and Ship Painters), Harry Orbell (Dockers), Councillor Jack Jones (NUGW&GL), Will Godfrey (Society of London Carmen) and T. E. Smith (Amalgamated Union of General Labourers). The range of trade unions represented was similar to the range of trade unions active in Poplar throughout this period, that is both ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ but, unlike West Ham, these trade unionists were not also, in general, members of the borough council. The motion proposed by Banks however, that employee preference be given to trade union members, was defeated by 22 votes to 11.⁷⁹

In West Ham, following Thorne’s election as MP in 1906, the Labour group continued its campaign for the unemployed. Their main area of support continued to be the southern wards. At the council elections in November neither the Municipal Alliance nor the Liberals put up a candidate for Canning

⁷⁸ ibid. 23rd May 1912.

⁷⁹ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 8th February 1909 and 9th May 1912 for example.

Town.⁸⁰ The labour activists in the north were not so united. According to Jack Jones they were divided and fighting ‘like Kilkenny cats’ and this was reflected in the results for the Town Council.⁸¹ Another reason for Labour’s lack of support in the north may have been the strength of the Liberal movement there since the MP, Charles Masterman, was a very well respected Liberal, who joined with Thorne in many instances in advocating social reform. However, a distinction was made between the Liberals and Socialists. Several well attended debates were held between Harry Kirby of the SDF and the Liberal Charles Hughes on the differences between them.⁸²

On 31st October 1906 Thorne held a public meeting at the Town Hall to report on his work in Parliament. The issues he discussed; unemployment, education and suffrage, were to be the main issues of all the campaigning until the First World War. Throughout the period Thorne and his supporters continued to promote socialism through the election of labour activists to the local council and other local authority bodies. In November 1906 they had achieved fourteen out of a council of thirty-five and this number remained roughly similar until 1914. However, although in a minority they continually tried to put forward socialist and labour policies on the council despite usually being defeated.

By now the entire West Ham Town Council was pursuing the issue of unemployment, as its effect on the rates was proving even more serious. Consequently, they called for more funds from the Local Government Board to pay for public works and women’s work centres, similar to those

⁸⁰ *Stratford Express*, 3rd November 1906.

⁸¹ ibid. 10th November 1906.

⁸² See *Stratford Express*, 24th August 1907 and 20th January 1909 for two such examples.

established in Poplar. This, it was hoped, would help to curb the rising rates bill. This request was denied by the President of the Board, John Burns, saying that he considered 'that on the whole West Ham has been treated liberally. It has one hundred part of the population and it has had one seventh of the total money disbursed. It has a farm colony, large relief works and a substantial grant towards emigration. For the moment I cannot see my way to grant any more.'⁸³

Thorne also attempted to achieve more money for West Ham by asking questions in Parliament but he failed to achieve satisfactory answers.⁸⁴ However, he was also concerned at the Town Council's decision to close the Works Department, which employed men directly on such tasks as road clearing and paving as well as maintenance of public buildings, schools and libraries. The main problem for the Works Department was that since its reorganisation when the Labour group lost its majority, it had had to compete with outside contractors for work. As these outside contractors were not obliged to pay trade union rates they could provide cheaper quotations. In 1907 after a long, acrimonious debate the council decided that as the Works Department had so little work it was now redundant and should be closed down. This would save money on the rates, as men would no longer be employed directly.⁸⁵ This action was bitterly opposed by the Labour group as they felt this would exacerbate the unemployment situation.

By December 1907 the local press reported that unemployment was worse than the previous year and the problem was debated at the regular Town

⁸³ *Stratford Express*, 13th March 1907.

⁸⁴ *ibid.* 23rd February 1907.

⁸⁵ *ibid.* 13th March 1907.

Council meeting. Thorne put forward a proposal for an eight-hour working day for all council contractors, and an attempt to fund works of public utility. The motion was lost by nineteen votes to thirteen. Later a Special Council Meeting was held to continue the discussion of Thorne's proposals but the vote again was lost by twenty-six to fifteen.⁸⁶ The issue of unemployment was further discussed in the Council when the Secretary produced a report of a Municipal Conference, held to discuss the new Unemployed Workmen's Act. The report, which was accepted without a vote, concluded that the Act needed amending to ensure that local authorities had increased power and resources to provide work for the able bodied and that investigations should continue into distinguishing the shirkers from the genuine unemployed.⁸⁷

This view differs from that of Poplar Borough Council which continually urged that unemployment should be seen as a national rather than a local responsibility. A letter from Warwick Borough Council to West Ham Town Council urging support for a resolution that unemployment would 'be best dealt with on the great national and Imperial lines of reform of our inequitable Fiscal System' was minuted without comment. Another solution put forward by councillors Hurry and Devenay, that the council should recommend that any new men required for work should be taken from the unemployed register, was also defeated by thirty votes to fourteen.⁸⁸ Apparently the majority of West Ham councillors still regarded unemployment as a problem for individuals and not for council intervention.

Throughout 1908 the campaign for work continued with speaker after

⁸⁶ ibid. 7th December 1907 and 21st December 1907. See also West Ham Town Council Minutes for 10th December 1907 and 17th December 1907.

⁸⁷ West Ham Town Council Minutes, 23rd December 1907.

⁸⁸ ibid. 11th February 1908.

speaker at the regular Sunday Dock Gate and Beckton Road meetings urging men to vote for Labour and Socialism as the only answer to the problem. At a mass meeting held in October organised by the local SDF, ILP and Trades Council the attitude was becoming more threatening. Thorne called the Town Council ‘callous’ and Liberal party ‘useless’. He argued that Labour must use stronger tactics and protest more loudly for he was ‘sick and tired of preaching patience when I know hundreds and thousands of men women and children are on the verge of starvation’.⁸⁹ The meeting called for the council to provide work for all the unemployed but this was continually resisted by the Municipal Alliance majority, citing its effects on the rates. Despite all the campaigning the Labour group had not made any difference to the situation for the unemployed in West Ham, although, as in Poplar, they continued to urge for public works and better pay until 1914. In Poplar, at least, the Poor Law was administered in a slightly more humane way as a result of Lansbury’s and Crooks’ influence on the Board of Guardians.

In the campaigns for the relief of poverty and unemployment this chapter has demonstrated differences between the two boroughs. Poplar shows no clear divisions between the Liberals and the left wing activists either in the north or the south. The major trade union influence was of the traditional variety, which was not comfortable with socialism. Even so, they did not exercise such a great level of control over the candidates or their policies, despite sponsoring them, as did the West Ham Trades Council. They reflected the individualistic attitude of their leader, George Lansbury. He, too, was not doctrinaire. Despite his socialist beliefs, he always argued he would

⁸⁹ *Stratford Express*, 3rd October 1908.

work with anyone to achieve his main goal of reducing unemployment and consequent poverty. He advocated greater state control of the labour market to ensure work could be available to all. As he said in his maiden speech in Parliament on 10th February 1911, in answer to John Burns' refusal to assist poorer boroughs;

If you deny men the right to work, if you take from them by your capitalists' and landlords' system the means of earning their daily bread, you cannot at the same time deny their claims to maintenance at the hands of the State.⁹⁰

However, at the same time he pushed for Poor Law administration to be more humane by, if necessary, bending the rules. He was prepared to work within the system until it could be changed.

In South West Ham, on the other hand, politics was much more clearly divided. The Trades Council was led by members of the NUGW&GL, a 'new' union. Although they agreed with Lansbury that socialism and state intervention in the labour market was the only way to solve the problem of unemployment, the West Ham Labour activists formed a more disciplined group in order to achieve representation on the local council so as to promote these policies. They organised candidates and ensured that they would always adhere to socialist and trade union rules. This control applied equally to members of the Town Council as to their local MP, which was a very different situation from that in Bow. The following chapters demonstrate the effect of these differences, particularly those between Lansbury and Thorne, on the political culture of the two boroughs.

⁹⁰Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Volume 3, fol. 172.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

While labour activists continued their efforts towards achieving working class representation, nationally and locally, in order to improve working class lives by arguing for the Right to Work or Maintenance, the role of women in society and the campaign for Votes for Women also became important for political activists in both boroughs in the period up to 1912, as elsewhere. Many historians have ignored this issue in their histories of the development of labour politics, in particular the four theses cited in the introduction.¹ They discuss the franchise in their accounts without mentioning the fact that many women were Labour supporters but without the vote. This chapter, while not considering the campaign for women's suffrage in detail, explores its effect on the political fortunes of Labour activists in Poplar and West Ham.

Throughout the nineteenth century there had been calls for the extension of the Parliamentary and local suffrage either to all adult men, regardless of property qualification, to all adult men and women or, thirdly, extending the current rules of suffrage to women, which would largely enfranchise middle class women. Victorian liberalism argued that the right to vote depended on the person having a 'stake in the polity', as was discussed in Chapter Five.² According to this view those without property, usually married women and the working classes of both genders, did not have a right to be consulted. However, the development of education for girls and women and their

¹ Buck, 'Class Structure', Bush, 'Labour Politics and Society', Fink, 'Labour Politics', Marriott, 'London over the Border.'

² Mayhall, *The Militant Suffragette Movement*, p. 12.

participation in social reform changed the nature of the debate. Intellectual women increasingly argued that their contribution to society, as opposed to their possessions, gave them the right to participate in the decision making process. Before considering the various societies that campaigned for votes for women it will be useful to look at the socialist groups and their attitudes. The two main socialist groups represented in Poplar and West Ham, the ILP and the SDF, together with the trades unions, placed different emphases on the role of women and the importance of the debate. However, as with economic ideas, the differing ideologies of the leadership were often blurred at a local level.

Of the two main socialist groups the ILP was ostensibly more favourable to women. Keir Hardie claimed that the Party prided itself on equality of opportunity for both men and women but the situation was more complicated than that.³ Most ILP men were initially more interested in achieving socialism by Parliamentary means than by extending the franchise to women. Some were actively hostile, especially when the campaign for women's suffrage became more militant.⁴ However, many women such as Isabella Ford, who became an active campaigner for women's suffrage, and Emmeline Pankhurst, who led the militant campaign, had been members of the ILP and campaigned on behalf of ILP candidates at elections. As already noted in West Ham, Minnie Baldock, the wife of the local ILP chairman, campaigned on behalf of Will Thorne in the 1906 General Election, as well as for other candidates in local elections. As Thorne was a prominent member of the SDF, this is

³ Ugolini, L. 'We must stand by our own bairns: Independent Labour Party men and suffrage militancy', *Labour History Review*, Vol. 67, No. 2, August 2002, p. 150.

⁴ *ibid.* p. 156.

another indication of local politics being less divisive than the national leadership. However, when the Labour Party weakened its support for women's suffrage in 1906, preferring to support adult suffrage, many campaigners, among them Emmeline Pankhurst, left the ILP in order to concentrate on the suffrage campaign. She herself became the founder and leader of the Women's Social and Political Union [WSPU]. She was then free to oppose Labour politicians.⁵ In West Ham, however, Minnie Baldock worked for the WSPU while her husband continued to campaign for the ILP.⁶

The SDF was apparently more divided on the role of women, both politically and culturally. Its members agreed with many in the ILP that the women's campaign was a distraction from the real business of achieving socialism. As an article in *Justice* argued, 'the efforts of the SDF are limited by its means ... The SDF is constantly exhausting its resources in agitating questions of even more urgent importance than any extension of the franchise'.⁷ One of those more urgent questions in 1906 was unemployment. Some SDF men, such as Belfort Bax and Harry Quelch, went further and argued that gender differences were natural and that women had privileges not available to men. These included the right of support by men and exemption from military service. According to Karen Hunt, for most SDF members feminism, and by extension the campaign for women's suffrage, had to be opposed because it divided the working classes. The SDF considered it was middle class inspired and led.⁸ The SDF allowed women to canvass on their

⁵ Holton, S.S. *Feminism and Democracy – Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900-1918*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 35.

⁶ *Stratford Express*, 17th October 1908.

⁷ *Justice*, 1st December 1906. Quoted in Hunt, K. *Equivocal Feminists*, p. 166.

⁸ Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, p. 53

behalf but rarely become candidates for School Boards or Boards of Guardians. However, in West Ham and Poplar many women members of the SDF were on these local bodies, which probably says more about the weakness of the local ILP, which led people on the left to join the SDF, than any policy shift by the SDF. As I have argued, local politics was as complex as national; many people belonged to several different organisations.⁹

The role of trades unionists in the women's campaign was also confused. Many in the north of England were sympathetic and Isabella Ford combined trades union campaigning for women with the campaign for the vote. In her biography of Ford, June Hannam argues that her work as a trades union organiser had convinced her that working women, even those in trades unions, needed the vote to ensure they were not discriminated against in the workplace.¹⁰ Other trades unionists, notably the miners, were opposed to any form of women's suffrage. Others regarded women in the workplace as blacklegs, believing that they lowered wages and they argued that men should receive a family wage so that women should not have to work. Both Dora Montefiore and Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy argued forcefully against this, pointing out that there were many unsupported women with dependants who needed to work, since the state's provision was not adequate.¹¹

The socialist groups therefore seemed to prioritise class over gender issues in their campaigns. Some activists preferred to campaign for socialism and economic reform arguing that once this was achieved, equality with women could be granted with the consequent economic improvement. This

⁹ See Chapter 4 of this thesis for the situation in the two boroughs.

¹⁰ Hannam, J. *Isabella Ford*, Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 109.

¹¹ Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, p. 122.

was disputed by, among others, Dora Montefiore of the SDF, who argued for parity with men as a right, not a privilege to be conferred. As she wrote in 1909, ‘we militant women strongly protest against the idea that Socialism can be given us by men … Socialism given to us women would only be an added slavery.’ She argued that ‘they [women] therefore demand, as a first instalment towards the realisation of democratic power, votes for all women and all men,’ which would lead to full economic and social freedom.¹²

I would argue that in West Ham and Poplar, local labour activists also prioritised socialism and labour policies over gender, preferring to campaign to achieve great working class representation rather than women’s suffrage. One reason for this could be that initially middle class intellectuals had led the campaign for votes for women. Although in 1894 suitably qualified women could vote in local elections, despite the campaigns, letters and petitions the Parliamentary vote was still denied to women.¹³ By 1907 the increasing militancy of the WSPU meant that some members left to form the Women’s Freedom League which called for greater links with and participation by working class women. This group maintained its links with the ILP and became known for its tactics of passive resistance.¹⁴

Despite this new organisation, with its links with working class women in West Ham, the WSPU maintained its branches in both Forest Gate in the north and Canning Town in the south. However, the WSPU branch in Canning Town, which was founded by ILP women and those involved in the

¹² Montefiore, D. B. *The Position of Women in the Socialist Movement*, Twentieth Century Press Pamphlet, 1909, p. 8 and p. 13.

¹³ See Chapter Five of this thesis for more details.

¹⁴ Frances, H. ‘The Women’s Freedom League and its Legacy’ in Purvis, J. and Holton, S.S. Editors, *Votes for Women*, Routledge, 2000, p. 182.

unemployment marches, became involved in disputes with the national leadership after it became apparent that the WSPU was campaigning for women's votes on the same basis as men and not for working women.¹⁵ Since this could privilege middle class women this policy change led to conflict in the local organisation and the secretary, Mrs Knight, resigned in January 1907 over the issue.¹⁶ However, Minnie Baldock, despite being a leading light in South West Ham Labour, joined the Forest Gate organisation and was a paid organiser for them, speaking at many meetings throughout the East End.

The campaign for a wider suffrage was here directly linked to unemployment since, when men were unemployed and forced to go to the Distress Committee or the Guardians for assistance, they lost their right to vote for the entire registration period, which could be as long as two years. This had immediate implications for votes for the Labour group in West Ham as they, and other contemporaries, assumed that working men would naturally vote for Thorne and his supporters. Minnie Baldock, a member of the Board of Guardians, together with other labour activists' wives organised a group of unemployed women to campaign both for the vote and for the unemployed. At a meeting in February 1906 they discussed sending a deputation to the Distress Committee. Annie Kenney of the WSPU and a former Lancashire mill worker, addressed the forty two women at the meeting and called for the women to 'organise and educate themselves to vote and having got the vote... press on for old age pensions, [for] women to be paid and for the unemployed problem to be settled by taking the land and wealth of the country out of the

¹⁵ Winslow, B. *Sylvia Pankhurst. Sexual Politics and Political Activism*, UCL Press, 1996, p. 32.

¹⁶ ibid. p. 32.

hands of a few individuals and managing it for themselves'. The press also reported that G. W. Shreeve, the president of the WH&DT&LC was present 'to get things in working order'. He reportedly told the women to 'take a cue from the men' and that the 'road was along and dreary one'.¹⁷ The petition had little success. At an ILP meeting in March 1908 it was argued that the rules were being applied too strictly with the intention of depriving working men of the vote and it was decided to petition Burns of the Local Government Board to ask him to relax them.¹⁸

The militant campaign for votes for women was also reflected in a more militant attitude of the campaigners for the unemployed. At a well-attended meeting in July 1906 in Canning Town the speakers included the anarchist Charles Mowbray, the South West Ham ILP secretary, Harry Baldock and the WSPU national campaigner, Teresa Billington.¹⁹ Mowbray argued that some of the unemployed were becoming desperate and that the 'current state of distress in Canning Town [is] likely to lead to increase of crime, together with riot and disorder.' He also argued that it was useless sending Thorne to Parliament as Parliament only protected the landlords. While Harry Baldock agreed with much of this speech he called on the men to 'value their votes as there were women willing to go to prison for them.' Teresa Billington likened the situation of the unemployed to that of women. The former did not have the means whereby they could live, that is work, and the latter 'were being denied the definite right of liberty to take part in the government of the country.' She called on men and women to continue their campaigning and

¹⁷ *Stratford Express*, 10th February 1906.

¹⁸ ibid. 21st March 1908. No women were reported as being present at this meeting.

¹⁹ Teresa Billington later left the WSPU and joined the Women's Freedom League after disagreements over the militant strategy.

to support Thorne so that both employment and votes for women could be achieved. According to the press she was given three cheers for this speech.²⁰

The WSPU continued to receive support from the northern wards of West Ham, where the numbers of middle class voters were greater. Throughout the summer of 1907 there were meetings held at Upton Park, where the leaders of the WSPU including Annie Kenney and Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, whose husband, Frederick, had been working for Mansfield House, spoke.²¹ In January 1908 a local branch of the WSPU was founded at Forest Gate. The inaugural meeting was addressed by Mrs Pethick Lawrence who discussed women's pay and the trade union opposition to equal pay. According to the *Stratford Express* (which gave the meeting a favourable report, saying that this issue was worthy of debate), there were about forty women present.²²

The local Trades Council, possibly because of the links between unemployment and the campaign for women's suffrage, gave its support to the women imprisoned after the Cavendish Square confrontation with the police on June 21st 1906 when Teresa Billington and Minnie Baldock had led a deputation to Prime Minister, Campbell Bannerman's house. In July 1906 the Trades Council responded positively to a resolution from the WSPU deplored the imprisonment of the women and calling for a Women's Suffrage clause in the Plural Voting Bill.²³ Later, when the women were released a large meeting was held at Beckton Road to welcome them back. Minnie Baldock

²⁰ *Stratford Express*, 14th July 1906.

²¹ *Stratford Express*, 29th September 1906, 3rd October 1906 and 20th October 1906.

²² ibid. 25th January 1908.

²³ ibid. 28th July 1906. See also Rosen, A. *Rise Up Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union 1903-1914*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, pp. 67-68.

pointed out that the prisoners had had more food than many in Canning Town.

Later that week a conference was held in Canning Town, specifically on constitutional reform, which called for full adult suffrage and payment of election expenses.²⁴ However, speeches by Thorne during the summer and his questions in the House of Commons to John Burns, the president of the Local Government Board, do not mention the issue of votes for women. Thorne concentrated on unemployment, education and the feeding of poor school children, as well as the nationalisation of utilities.²⁵

Nevertheless Thorne, when he was giving his annual report on his work in Parliament, argued that he was responsible for Mrs Baldock being in prison as when she had visited him at the House of Commons with a large group, ‘a little scheemozle took place’. The disparaging language he used was an indication of the strength of his commitment to the campaign as well as his belief that it was not a vote winner among his constituents. He continued that he ‘was not going to bother whether votes for women was right or not he just wished that men had as much determination to fight’. He called for full adult suffrage to be granted soon. The main point of his report was on his work for education and the medical examination of children, as well as unemployment and the question of the future of Thames Ironworks.²⁶ It is evident that while sympathetic to the cause of Votes for Women, it was not one of Thorne’s major priorities.

By 1910 the press was even less tolerant towards votes for women since the militant campaigns had by then become more strident. Their policy of

²⁴ *Stratford Express*, 25th August 1906.

²⁵ *Stratford Express*, 28th July 1906, 1st August 1906, 4th August 1906.

²⁶ *ibid.* 31st October 1906.

interrupting political meetings was deplored. Thorne may have been advised that if he had condoned this policy it would have harmed his candidacy.²⁷ Thus in direct contrast to the borough of Poplar later, the issue of votes for women did not appear to affect the votes for the Labour Party. In West Ham it was seen as of less importance than the Right to Work Campaign and labour activists were not obliged to make a stand on the matter. This made it easier for Thorne and the other local councillors to maintain their position as they never had to fight an election on the issue.

For the labour activists in South West Ham in 1909 the main issue was still unemployment rather than the suffrage. In one week in May 1909 the Board of Guardians reported that indoor relief had been granted to 4,684 people when it was 4,295 the corresponding week in May 1908. The figures for outdoor relief continued to cause great concern despite a slight fall from 11,905 in 1908 to 11,406 in 1909. In addition about 1,600 people were assisted to emigrate.²⁸ In Parliament and at the dock gates, Thorne continued his campaign on the new budget, the House of Lords reform and land tax.²⁹ Party type discipline was still maintained as the WH&DT&LC continued to endorse candidates for local elections on the basis of trade union allegiance. There was some discussion as to the suitability of Tom Kirk as candidate for West Ham ward. As a member of the SDF it was considered that he might have been too extreme for this ward. However, he was allowed to stand but was not elected.³⁰ The main concerns of the various manifestos of the local council candidates were unemployment and education. Candidates

²⁷ ibid. 15th January 1910.

²⁸ ibid. 12th June 1909.

²⁹ ibid. 18th September 1909.

³⁰ ibid. 2nd October 1909. He was elected for Canning Town ward in 1910.

emphasised their membership of trades unions and the fact that they would work for the good of working men. Nowhere was the issue of suffrage reform mentioned.³¹ The speeches by the Labour candidates reported in the local press reflected the candidates' concerns, calling for a statutory eight-hour working day and free secondary education.³² This reticence may have contributed to the Progressive and Labour majority. This steady increase in Labour councillors continued and in 1910 they gained three more seats bringing the total to twenty-one with the Municipal Alliance at fifteen.³³

In 1910 there were two General Elections, in January and December. In January the Labour activists conducted a vigorous campaign – even Mrs Thorne addressed at least one of Will Thorne's meetings. Unfortunately the press did not report what she said. Although the WSPU interrupted many meetings of the Liberal candidate, Charles Masterman, in North West Ham, there are no reports of a similar action in South West Ham, where Thorne was opposed by a Conservative. The main focus of the election in the south was still unemployment. After such a vigorous campaign the election day itself was very quiet and resulted in no change, Thorne maintained his seat as MP.³⁴ In fact, at the second General Election in December 1910 Thorne was so confident of his success his supporters hired the hall for the victory celebration before the polls opened.³⁵ Thorne still had the solid support of the trades unions in West Ham. At the Thirteenth Annual Conference of the Social Democratic Party [SDP], (as the SDF was now called) Jack Jones called for all

³¹ West Ham Electoral Scrapbook, Volume IV, November 1909.

³² For example see *Stratford Express*, 23rd October 1909.

³³ See Appendix Q for details.

³⁴ *Stratford Express*, 19th January 1910.

³⁵ *ibid.* 10th December 1910.

SDP members eligible to do so to join a trade union and this was agreed by a large majority.³⁶ At a meeting of the Canning Town Socialist and Trade Union parliamentary committee a report from Thorne and other Labour MPs on their work in Parliament was read. The committee felt this was necessary as press reports, they considered, were unreliable.³⁷ This is another indication of the close links Thorne maintained with his constituency workers and together with the control of candidates by the WH&DT&LC, is further evidence of party organisation.

The WSPU continued its campaigning throughout the summer. In September three women tried to claim the vote. One, Matilda Widdicombe, was denied the lodger vote because she was a woman and two others, who claimed the full franchise as ratepayers were given the right to vote in local elections only.³⁸ Despite this, the Labour group continued to prioritise unemployment and education, emphasising the potential power of trades unions if they were elected to the town council. The local election results in November recorded two socialist gains, in Plaistow and Hudsons wards, and one Progressive in High Street ward.³⁹ This victory in both local and national elections was consolidated and by 1912 South West Ham was solidly Labour and the council had a left wing perspective with the support of the Progressive councillors who usually voted with the Labour group.⁴⁰ This had been achieved with campaigning, which was, in the main, united and with clear policies. The election of the Progressives in New Town, where they had two

³⁶ ibid. 2nd April 1910.

³⁷ ibid. 23rd April 1910.

³⁸ ibid. 17th September 1910.

³⁹ ibid. 2nd November 1910.

⁴⁰ See Appendix Q for details.

representatives on the council by 1912, and High Street wards indicates the success of these policies in gaining support from those who might otherwise have been thought to have supported the Municipal Alliance.

At a meeting under the auspices of the South West Ham Trades Council and attended by George Lansbury, among others, Thorne's speech foretold the events of the coming Parliament in his usual robust language.

Next Monday the House of Commons would meet again to 'talk over matters'. What they were going to do he was not in a position to say, because he was not in the Cabinet. He would like to see Home Rule got rid of, because until that was done the Labour Party would never make the progress they wanted to make. There had been lively times in Ulster with the wooden canon (sic) and tin bayonet. There would be lively times in the House of Commons, and he would not be surprised if there were one or two free fights. He did not mind so long as he was not hit below the belt.⁴¹

He made no mention of votes for women and the rest of this speech concentrated on local municipal affairs. The issue of women's suffrage was not party policy in South West Ham even though this speech was after Lansbury's outburst in the House of Commons and he was actively considering resignation at this time. Thorne knew his constituents.

Turning to Poplar, it is apparent that women's suffrage as an issue was as marginal as in West Ham, at least until 1912. Chapter Six outlined the Labour group's attempts to become local councillors and their emphasis on methods to alleviate unemployment. Suffrage reform did not feature in their campaigns. Lansbury was similarly reticent in his General Election campaign of 1900. In 1906 instead of Bow he stood as Parliamentary candidate in Middlesbrough in the north-east.⁴² His agent in this election was Marion Coates Hansen, which was to prove crucial in Lansbury's development as a

⁴¹ *East End News*, 4th October 1912.

⁴² See Chapter Five for a discussion of this point.

campaigner for women's suffrage. She had met Lansbury through his connection to Joseph Fels, the American philanthropist, and was also a very active member of the WSPU. As Lansbury's campaign manager she persuaded him to include Votes for Women in his manifesto. According to Shepherd this may have contributed to his failure in the election.⁴³

Following his defeat in Middlesbrough, Lansbury was adopted as the preferred Labour candidate for Bow and Bromley by the local election committee. However, his realisation that he would need the support of both the ILP and the SDP led to some correspondence with the Labour leadership before his candidature was accepted by the Party.⁴⁴ Lansbury's socialism caused him problems with the Labour Party and his personal advocacy of women's suffrage was not liked by the SDP nationally. The local press hinted at a problem for Lansbury with the local SDP. This was confirmed in a letter from the Fabian, R. C. K. Ensor, to Lansbury advising him to stand for both the London County Council and Parliamentary elections despite the activities of the socialists who could possibly confuse the voters.⁴⁵ Lansbury's response was that he would support 'whatever, in his opinion, was for the good of the people, from whatever source it came ... independently of whatever others might say.'⁴⁶ This may have confused the voters further so on 21st September 1909 Lansbury wrote to the press affirming his intention to stand as Labour and Socialist Parliamentary candidate for Bow and Bromley and the campaigning began in earnest.⁴⁷

⁴³ Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 91.

⁴⁵ Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Volume 3, fol. 247, 8th September 1909.

⁴⁶ *East End News*, 24th August 1909.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* 21st September 1909.

However, despite the activities of the suffragettes, there was no mention of votes for women in the campaign literature for the local council elections. On 29th October an advertisement appeared in the local press announcing that the Labour party stands for:

Humanity First. Money Second!
Social Service for the Helpless!
Pensions for the Aged!
A Healthy Poplar!
Support the People who make the wealth of the Nation!⁴⁸

Despite the campaign the Labour group only achieved ten councillors, with seven Progressives. There were twenty-one members of the Municipal Alliance elected together with three Independents.⁴⁹ This was a very similar pattern to the previous three years; Bromley South West Ward being solidly Labour, Bromley Central solidly Progressive and Bow West having Lansbury as Labour and Partridge as a Progressive. The Poplar wards for the most part were represented by the Municipal Alliance. Thus the Parliamentary constituency of Bow and Bromley was not as firmly for Labour as was West Ham South where the Municipal Alliance rarely put up a candidate for local elections at this time.

Once the General Election was called in December 1909 all the candidates held regular campaign meetings which were fully reported in the press together with full-page advertisements of their policies. The election in Bow and Bromley was a three-corner contest between the sitting MP Stopford Brookes, a Liberal, Alfred du Cros, a Conservative and Lansbury for Labour. Lansbury called on the voters to vote for him because he was a local man

⁴⁸ *ibid.* 29th October 1909.

⁴⁹ Minutes of Poplar Borough Council, 1st November 1909 and *East End News*, 15th October 1909.

whose reputation for working for the people was unrivalled. His election committee argued that he would work for the centralisation of the administration of London, Poor Law administration but also roads, public baths and other issues of public health. This would result in more efficient use of resources to enable the unemployed to be paid a reasonable sum or to be found work without putting so much pressure on the poorer boroughs. His manifesto did not mention socialist policies such as the eight-hour day and land tax although Lansbury certainly supported these measures. This may have been a reflection of his awareness that he needed a broad base of support to win. The Labour Party committee also called for reform of the House of Lords to enable the will of the people to be more effectively expressed but it specifically did not call for changes in the franchise.⁵⁰ A typical advertisement proclaims that the Labour policy means:

Tax the Landlord. He taxes you.
Abolition of Workhouses
Organised Labour for all Willing Workers⁵¹

In November 1909 the press had reported that Poplar was marked out as a special ‘zone’ for ‘suffragist’ (sic) activity which ‘will not be popular’.⁵² The campaign for votes for women was then very active in the borough with many large meetings and marches. Lansbury, however, did not put this issue to his electors at this time. This is a possible indication that the local Labour activists were not convinced that extension of the franchise was a good election policy despite it having Lansbury’s personal support. His wife, Bessie, was a member of the WSPU and Lansbury himself spoke at many of

⁵⁰ *East End News*, 7th December 1909.

⁵¹ *ibid.* 11th January 1910.

⁵² *ibid.* 23rd November 1909.

their campaign meetings. He was a popular speaker. According to Emmeline Pethick Lawrence this was because he was ‘entirely to the point and so refreshing’.⁵³

The General Election results were a partial success for Lansbury. Even with Lloyd George’s endorsement in the local press the Liberal, Stopford Brookes, was put into third place with 2,167 votes, Lansbury had 2,955, a majority over the Liberals of 788. The winning candidate, Du Cros polled 3,695, only 740 more votes than Lansbury.⁵⁴ As Edward Pease of the Fabian Society wrote, Lansbury’s result was ‘the most encouraging contest of the General Election!’ and he hoped ‘next time to see him fairly MP for Bow.’⁵⁵ Further encouragement was given to the Bow Labour group when Lansbury was elected to the London County Council in March. However, his candidature was still not without its problems. Correspondence from Ensor indicates that disagreements between the ILP and SDP factions were continuing. He tried to reassure Lansbury that despite this he, Lansbury, would be able to unite the left if he continued as the Labour candidate since his socialist views were well known. Ensor, himself, amended his candidature. He argued that, as both a socialist and representative of the middle classes in Poplar Borough, he would have been better placed to win more votes. However, the accusations of other socialists that he was more a supporter of the Liberals than a true socialist had persuaded him not to stand as Labour but as a Progressive candidate. His letter ends with the comment that he ‘had heard charges as mean and silly brought against you [Lansbury]

⁵³ Letter from Mrs E. Pethick Lawrence to Mrs Lansbury 23rd May 1907, Lansbury Archive, LSE, Volume 3, fol. 62.

⁵⁴ *East End News*, 18th January 1909 and 21st January 1910.

⁵⁵ Lansbury Archives, L.S.E. Volume 3, fol. 10, 10th January 1910.

behind your back times out of number; but I at least have never sat silent and let them go uncontradicted. Why did you?⁵⁶

The dissension in the Labour group did not go unnoticed in the local press. At an election meeting it was reported that many, including Will Crooks, believed that Labour, that is working men, and the Liberals should stay 'coupled'.⁵⁷ In Poplar, as opposed to Bow, this was the case. J.McDougall and Ensor were both elected as Progressives to the London County Council. In Bow itself Lansbury had stood as a Socialist coupled with G. L. Bruce as Progressive, which may have increased his vote, as he would then have been more acceptable to the Liberals.⁵⁸ This is a further indication of the confusion surrounding political allegiance in Poplar. However, unlike Thorne, Lansbury did not feel it necessary to explain himself to his supporters and resolve this confusion. The press does not record his attendance at any of the Trades Council meetings, for example.

During that summer Lansbury continued to campaign on his key issues but only at meetings specifically on the subject did he mention votes for women. At the, by now annual, Right to Work Demonstration at Victoria Park in June he called for immediate legislation to ensure work or maintenance, free school meals and the election of more Independent Labour and Socialist members to Parliament. Keir Hardie in his speech added that the real enemy was not the King, the House of Lords or the established church but 'workmen who voted Liberal or Tory.'⁵⁹ The local press even commented on the lack of women candidates despite their eligibility to vote and be

⁵⁶ *ibid.* Volume 3, fol. 59, 4th February 1910. The emphasis is in the original.

⁵⁷ *East End News*, 18th February 1910.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* 8th March 1910.

⁵⁹ *ibid.* 28th June 1910.

candidates.

For municipal elections in England and Wales today only twelve women have been nominated and yet according to the last Parliamentary paper the number of women eligible to vote at elections for County Borough Councils in England and Wales is 365860. In view of the increasing attention given by women to women's questions, it seems remarkable that but a dozen should seek activity in municipal work. The circumstance will hardly be used by the women suffragists (sic) as an argument in favour of their cause.⁶⁰

However, at the General Election in December 1910 the *East End News*, a broadly neutral paper (despite the fact that it was owned by Sir Sidney Buxton himself), made no mention in its biographies of the candidates of Lansbury's socialist ideals. Instead, it emphasised his membership of the local and London Councils and the Board of Guardians, and the fact that he was now a partner in his father-in-law's timber and veneer company. This biography is very similar in tone to the biography printed of the Poplar candidate, the sitting Liberal MP Sir Sidney Buxton, and may indicate that the local press preferred to support local men rather than the unknown Conservative, Amery.⁶¹ By not emphasising Lansbury's socialism and by concentrating on his work for the borough, he was made more acceptable to the voters. His campaign advertisement called for the abolition of the House of Lords and no more food taxes.⁶² A speech to his supporters also emphasised these points, calling for society to be 'organised differently' since 'the people who did the work of the world ought to share equally the product of the world (applause).'⁶³ The final resolution to support Lansbury was received with great acclaim. At a later meeting Lansbury called for excise

⁶⁰ *ibid.* 1st November 1910.

⁶¹ *ibid.* 25th November 1910.

⁶² *ibid.* 25th November 1910.

⁶³ *ibid.*

duties to be abolished arguing that ‘when the women went to buy their shilling tea they paid 5d in duty.’ Indirect taxation, according to Lansbury, only concealed the true amount that people were paying the state. He wanted to tax the rich so that the poor could be better fed and he called for the co-operation of all working men and women to achieve these aims.⁶⁴

However, despite the press reports of suffrage activity, the Lansbury campaign did not mention votes for women. A letter from Mrs Lansbury to the electors, printed as a poster, called for votes for her husband as he ‘will go on working in the future as he had done for your interests the last 25 years.’ She made no mention of her role in the WSPU.⁶⁵ The main manifesto demands were the same as in January. However, crucial to this election was the role of the Liberal Party. In his biography of Lloyd George, Gilbert argues that the Liberals were unprepared for a second election in 1910 and left many seats uncontested.⁶⁶ Thus, at the end of a speech in Mile End in support of the Liberal campaign, Lloyd George expressed his support for Lansbury and hoped that the Liberals would not oppose him since there was not a Liberal candidate in Bow in December 1910. This was to be the case and Lansbury was elected with a majority of 863, which must have included the votes of a number of Liberals.⁶⁷ The *East End News* congratulated him, choosing to ignore his record as a campaigner for women’s suffrage, and praised his ‘long record of municipal and social work’.⁶⁸ After his election success Lansbury wrote in an open letter in his local campaign newspaper, *The Bow & Bromley*

⁶⁴ ibid. 2nd December 1910.

⁶⁵ Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Volume 3, fol. 72.

⁶⁶ Gilbert, B.B. *David Lloyd George: The Architect of Change*, Batsford, 1987, p. 427.

⁶⁷ Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, p. 93.

⁶⁸ *East End News*, 9th December 1910.

Worker, that he wanted to thank ‘members of the SDP to whom, some of my views are, I know, very distasteful, for the splendid manner in which they rallied and supported my candidature.’⁶⁹ It is not clear what these views were but it may have included his religious views, the tacit support of the Liberals and Lansbury’s support for women’s suffrage, which, for many in the SDP, was either a distraction from socialism or outright anathema.

As an MP Lansbury continued to be involved in many campaigns to secure the rights of workers. He opposed the National Insurance Bill on the grounds that it was a further tax on the poor, who would have to contribute, and would not alleviate the fundamental causes of poverty. This put him in opposition to the Parliamentary Labour Party and the TUC, both of which were in favour of the contributory principle as a starting point. Lansbury supported the many strikes, particularly in the transport industry, calling for nationalisation of road and rail transport. His championing of the poor, while it gave him great popularity among his constituents, did nothing to endear him to the Labour Party leadership, which was still keen to retain the tacit support of the Liberals. He was an independent socialist arguing that socialists must form an ‘advanced wing’ to progress socialism otherwise the Labour Party ‘instead of advancing towards Socialism will drift back towards Liberalism, and I am not going there.’⁷⁰ In this he explicitly rejected party organisation and discipline, believing that the cause of socialism outweighed that of party.

Lansbury’s opposition to the National Insurance Bill did not go unnoticed by local Liberals. Pastor Hayes wrote that ‘Lansbury has disappointed my best hopes and fulfilled my worst fears and no longer

⁶⁹ *Bow and Bromley Worker*, December 17th 1910.

⁷⁰ *Labour Leader*, 24th March 1911.

represents me or my convictions'.⁷¹ A much longer letter to the local press by 'a modern Junius' criticises Lansbury's oratory and argues that even the Conservative party and his 'dear old former pal, Mr Will Crooks, have sung its [the Insurance Bill] praises'. He points out, with great prescience, that Lansbury has not conferred with his supporters sufficiently on the matter and doubts he will have their support.⁷² This correspondence continued for some time indicating, that Lansbury was not as popular among voters as he would like to think.

However, the issue that was to cause the most problems for the new Labour MP was that of the suffrage campaign and the treatment of the women involved. The details of the women's suffrage campaign in relation to Labour politics have been well documented but the attitude of the Labour activists in this borough less so.⁷³ As has been noted in this thesis, from his earliest involvement in politics, Lansbury had been interested in the campaign for women's suffrage. As he wrote in 1889 in the *Pall Mall Gazette*

Surely those who are in earnest about the enfranchisement of women will not be content to be a mere appendage of the Liberal party. Let them shake themselves free of party feeling and throw the energy and ability which they are now wasting on minor questions into the broader and more important one of securing ... the full rights of citizenship to every woman in the land.⁷⁴

This is also interesting in that it highlights Lansbury's readiness to ignore party discipline when it seemed to him not to be relevant and also at this time he was interested in suffrage for all women, not only those who held property. Presumably he would have extended this to all men as well.

⁷¹ *East End News*, 27th October 1911.

⁷² ibid. 31st October 1911.

⁷³ See especially Ellen, E. 'Women's Suffrage' & the Labour Party', MA Thesis, Warwick 1981 and Schneer, *George Lansbury*, pp. 100-117.

⁷⁴ *Pall Mall Gazette* 1st June 1891, quoted in Schneer, *George Lansbury*, p. 85.

The role of Asquith and the Liberal Party in delaying women's suffrage meant the WSPU would not support the Liberals, which led Lansbury to call for Labour to oppose all Parliamentary measures until suffrage reform was achieved. Lansbury was by now convinced that the question of votes for women should take precedence over all other social issues. Even the question of unemployment was for Lansbury related to the question of the franchise for women.⁷⁵

He was also appalled by the treatment of the women in prison at this time, especially forcible feeding, and this provoked his famous outburst in the House of Commons in June 1912. It would appear that at this time the paramount issue for him was not so much the justice of the women's campaign as the treatment of the campaigners. After receiving many letters of support for his action from all over England, he determined to force the issue by resigning his seat in Bow and fighting a by-election on the question of women's suffrage. It is interesting to note that many letters came from Conservative women and even from an anti suffragist, H de Costa Andrade who wrote:

I have the greatest abhorrence against the principles of Socialism which you so ably advocate, and no sympathy with the desire of women for the vote, and a strong repugnance against the violent and senseless method lately adopted and for which some are now as I consider quite justly imprisoned, but I have a very strong feeling that forcible feeding ... is dastardly, cruel and revolting ... I have the greatest respect and admiration for the humane feeling that prompted your indignant protest. Mr Asquith's remark that they could walk out of prison at any moment is evidence of the meanest, unnatural and cold blooded cynicism.⁷⁶

However, others had a different view. Bruce Glasier, of the ILP, for

⁷⁵ Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, pp. 119-121. See also a letter to Marion Coates Hanson, Lansbury Archives, L.S.E. Volume 28, fol. 87, 31st October 1912.

⁷⁶ ibid Volume 5, fol. 135. The language of the remainder of the letter leads one to suppose this is a man.

example, later wrote in his diary that Lansbury was ‘a bit of a fool. The whole attempt to work up the hysterics of women into a sublime display of self-sacrifice and martyrdom is rather sickening’.⁷⁷

Lansbury announced his decision to ‘consult his electors’ about standing as an Independent candidate for Women’s Suffrage and forcing a by-election at a WSPU meeting at the Albert Hall on October 19th without consulting his local party officials.⁷⁸ Shortly afterwards he went with Emmeline Pankhurst to visit her daughter, Christabel, in France and received their full support.⁷⁹ The widespread approval Lansbury received from outside his constituency must have further convinced him of the rightness of his action.⁸⁰ His election address, in a form of a letter to his constituents in Bow and Bromley, justified his actions:

I want specially that you will join me in a supreme effort to raise the question of Womanhood to the very highest position. The women of our country live hard laborious lives. Down here, where I have lived almost all my years, I have grown to understand in some way what poverty and destitution mean to the women. We men have wanted to use our votes to improve our social condition. I want that our mothers, our wives and our sisters shall be allowed to join us in the fight.⁸¹

He had reminded his supporters that because of a change in the law women could now become councillors and Miss Katherine Medley was elected to the Poplar Borough Council in 1912.⁸² She was a social worker and

⁷⁷ J. Bruce Glasier diary 26th June 1912 quoted in Ugolini, L. ‘Independent Labour Party Men and Women’s Suffrage in Britain 1893-1914,’ PhD., Greenwich, 1997, p. 405.

⁷⁸ Schneer, *George Lansbury*, p 103.

⁷⁹ Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, p 204.x

⁸⁰ Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, pp. 113-114.

⁸¹ Address to the Electors of Bow and Bromley, November 1912, Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Volume 6, fol. 169.

⁸² According to the Council records she lived at 8, Council Buildings, Poplar. In 1901 this road was occupied by stevedores, clerks and a Board School teacher. Miss Medley was not listed as a resident at this time. Miss Medley served on the public health, housing and libraries committees. Voting records indicate that she voted with the Labour group.

a local ILP delegate at the 1912 Conference.⁸³ She became the council's representative on the London Workers' Education Association, an 'unsectarian and non-political organisation'.⁸⁴ However, by now the left wing representation on the Borough council had been reduced to thirteen, concentrated on Bow and Bromley wards.⁸⁵ This makes Lansbury's decision to risk his place in Parliament all the more surprising as the Labour position in Bow was by no means secure, especially as he had been told by Ramsay Macdonald that his independent attitude meant that the Parliamentary Labour Party would not endorse his candidature.⁸⁶

Lansbury's resignation without consulting his local party supporters could have led to difficulties with them. A report in *The Times* hinted that Banks was not convinced of the necessity to put adult suffrage on the election agenda, saying that '[B]esides the main issue of adult suffrage it was their intention to obtain the views of the electors upon the Insurance Act which had always been strenuously opposed by Mr Lansbury.'⁸⁷ Here *The Times* is not quite correct. Lansbury was not fighting for adult suffrage, despite his previous views on equal suffrage, but the WSPU policy of women's suffrage on the same basis as men. However the attitude of many WSPU members to socialism and to adult suffrage at this time led to acrimony between the local activists and the, mainly middle class, members of the WSPU. Despite the fact that Sylvia Pankhurst was already working among the women of the East End, campaigning for better working conditions as well as the vote, the WSPU

⁸³ Ellen, 'Women's Suffrage and the Labour Party', p. 157.

⁸⁴ Poplar Borough Council Minutes, 1st November 1912.

⁸⁵ See Appendix P for full list.

⁸⁶ Schneer, *George Lansbury*, p 103.

⁸⁷ *The Times*, 13th November 1912.

sent an outsider, Grace Roe, to organise the election campaign. Sylvia found that Grace had little sympathy for the Labour movement and found it difficult to work with the local activists.⁸⁸ Banks, especially, she found ‘bitterly hostile’.⁸⁹ Nevertheless the Bow and Bromley Labour Representation Committee had sent a speaker to the WSPU rally in Victoria Park on 9th November 1912. The speaker was Joe Banks.⁹⁰ Possibly, he later came to resent the lack of control he had over the election campaign.⁹¹

However, his party activists supported Lansbury loyally and continued to emphasise the hard work he had done for the borough. Banks tried to widen the election campaign by calling on Lansbury’s supporters to look at his opposition to the Contributory National Insurance Bill currently going through Parliament but he was not very successful. The by-election was fought solely on the question of women’s suffrage and did not receive the support of many working class people in Bow. Although in the open letter to his electors Lansbury emphasised his opposition to the National Insurance Act in the first paragraph, the justification for his resignation, he argued, was his ‘complete disagreement with my party on a question which is, to me, of fundamental importance, namely, the enfranchisement of women’. He stressed that the only way this could be achieved was ‘for a sufficient number of men in the House of Commons who believe the question to be one of vital importance to inform the Government that they will not continue their support of other measures unless this reform is absolutely secured.’ This was the policy advocated by the WSPU. They also called for candidates who did not agree

⁸⁸ Winslow, *Sylvia Pankhurst*, p. 36.

⁸⁹ Pankhurst, S. *The Suffragette Movement*, first published 1931, Virago, 1977, p. 419.

⁹⁰ *East End News*, 12th November 1912.

⁹¹ Later discussions with his son, John, seem to confirm this.

with this position to be opposed, even opposing Liberals who supported equal suffrage. By attacking the Liberal position in this way, Lansbury lost the support of the local Liberals which had been so crucial in his election success in 1910. Even though there was no Liberal candidate in 1912 they did not vote for Lansbury as they had done in 1910. At a meeting held by the local Liberal and Radical Association it was resolved that:

The Bow and Bromley Liberal and Radical Association regret to find themselves without a candidate, especially as the Socialist member for this division does not represent them – first by his singular behaviour in the House, in the Lobby and by his speeches in the country. For these reasons we, as an Association, cannot support his candidature, nor do we think the political issues he thinks supreme and the cause of this bye-election (sic) worthy of disturbing the general policy of the Government and we advise all Liberals and Radicals in this division to abstain from voting.⁹²

Lansbury was also hampered by local attitudes to women's suffrage. Even as early as January 1909 a local bus had flown a very large banner announcing the passengers as 'Blokes for Women.'⁹³ Many were suspicious of the middle and even upper class supporters who campaigned in the borough, especially as they were not campaigning for full adult suffrage. In an area as poor as Bow many men did not have the vote and would not have been content to give it to women who had money rather than themselves. Lansbury's open letter cited earlier made no mention of the distinction between full adult suffrage and the measure he was campaigning for at this time. Possibly, he believed that once the principle of votes for women had been established it would only be a matter of time before full adult suffrage would be achieved. In a speech made to his supporters during the campaign he argued that women should have the vote so as to be able to protest against

⁹² *East End News*, 19th November 1912.

⁹³ *East End News*, 26th January 1909.

unjust taxes and to fight for better wages.⁹⁴ This linking of socialist views and the campaign for votes for women was not universally popular or even understood. A letter from G. Saunders Jacobs to Lansbury, written after the defeat, reflected the difficulty of reconciling the suffrage movement with Lansbury's socialism and his 'apparent hostility to the Labour Party'. His letter continues;

It does not help when some [suffragettes] go around saying they do not agree with your socialism, but they are supporting you on the suffrage question – in fact, frankly, they are using you as a tool. My wife, and I and my son found a lot of that when we were canvassing for you.⁹⁵

Also, according to his biographer and son in law, Raymond Postgate, the election campaign was not run effectively. Since his candidature was not endorsed by the Parliamentary Labour party he received no official assistance with the campaign, although some Labour MPs such as Keir Hardie and Will Thorne did come to Bow to give him support by addressing meetings.⁹⁶ According to Postgate, Lloyd George urged Liberals to vote for the Conservative candidate rather than for Lansbury.⁹⁷ In Bow, although the campaign was widened to include the other issues that Lansbury supported, unemployment and poverty, it was women's suffrage that caught the imagination. There were many other suffrage societies campaigning with Lansbury, including the NUWSS, the Women's Freedom League, the Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement and the Men's League for Women's Suffrage.⁹⁸ However it was the WSPU who seemed to provide the lead. The local labour activists also refused to co-operate with these middle

⁹⁴ ibid. 22nd November 1912

⁹⁵ Lansbury Archives, L.S.E. Volume 28, fol. 245, 27th November 1912.

⁹⁶ Schneer, *George Lansbury*, p. 105.

⁹⁷ Postgate, *George Lansbury*, p. 128.

⁹⁸ Ellen, 'Women's Suffrage', p. 171.

class women, even on the day of the election itself, and the entire campaign was tinged with bitterness, with the rival LRC and WSPU clashing over the hire of halls. The press reported that polling was slow until the factories closed at five o'clock and that there were some very prominent anti-suffrage posters with petitions signed by a number of women.⁹⁹

Lansbury lost his small majority, largely it was supposed because of the loss of the Liberal vote, many of whom either abstained or voted Conservative. In December 1910, with Liberal support, he had had a majority of 863 over the Conservatives but in November 1912 the result was a Conservative majority of 751. The total number of votes cast was 434 more in 1912 than in 1910, which either argues a strong Liberal protest vote or a better organised Conservative campaign.¹⁰⁰ However, another reason for the defeat could have been the confusion in policies and allegiance of Lansbury himself. His speeches and writings emphasised the linking of socialism and women's suffrage. Writing in the *Daily Herald* he argued that;

The people down here in this constituency, women as well as men, are suffering intolerable destitution and misery. Only when the women and the men are able to stand side by side to fight in the common fight can we really hope to accomplish economic and social emancipation.¹⁰¹

The attitude of the WSPU, which privileged gender over class, was not attractive to a working class constituency and Lansbury's actions were not fully understood. It would appear that he had put principle before party and had thrown away all the hard work of his supporters on an issue that was for many a distraction. Even Will Thorne, who was a great admirer of Lansbury, considered that his resignation had been a mistake. Thorne calculated that he

⁹⁹ *East End News*, 29th November 1912.

¹⁰⁰ ibid. The total number of votes cast in 1910 was 7,333 and in 1912, 7,767.

¹⁰¹ *Daily Herald*, 12th November 1912 quoted in Schneer, *George Lansbury*, p. 112.

would lose his majority in South West Ham if he argued as forcefully for votes for women. In his letter to Lansbury after the election, he expressed regret that the ‘rank and file of the wage earners’ were not more grateful.¹⁰² Although Thorne was not a member of the anti’s, he had never put the issue before his electors despite one of his closest supporters, Minnie Baldock, being very active for the women’s cause.

After the defeat Lansbury received many letters of commiseration. They congratulated him on his fight for women and for socialism. Frank Smith, a local committee member wrote that:

We admire and love and believe in you more than ever – This is not a defeat – Bow and Bromley is lost – politically – but the cause you fought for LIVES. Up to the present it has been talked about – you have raised the standard and may be sure that this fight has rallied to it many thousands – A new spirit is abroad. You have called it into being Halleluyah! It will grow and triumph. Henceforth we are with you, without party ties – Labour or otherwise – till the women’s cause is WON.¹⁰³

This letter was signed by many of Lansbury’s local supporters, including Joe and Ada Banks, Charlie Sumner, Mrs J. Jones, and Mr & Mrs Macpherson. It emphasised the personal support for Lansbury as opposed to support for the Labour ‘party’. This is in contrast to West Ham where the local activists exerted greater control over their candidates, including Thorne as MP. They demanded and received regular reports and justifications for political action.

This chapter has used the case study of the campaign for women’s suffrage to highlight the difference in political culture between these two boroughs. Thorne’s attention to his constituents contrasted with Lansbury’s

¹⁰² Lansbury Archive, L.S.E. Volume 4, fol. 88. Letter dated 27th November 1912.

¹⁰³ ibid. Volume 6, fol. 221.

independence. One of the main reasons for this difference between the two boroughs lay in the role of trades unions in political activity. In West Ham the District Trades Council under the influence of ‘new’ unions controlled the choice of candidates and their policies which led to a more disciplined approach to party politics. In Bow and Bromley as well as Poplar, where more ‘traditional’ and radical unions were still very influential there was still confusion as to the exact links between the labour activists and the Liberal party. Lansbury’s belief in socialism as a moral crusade made him a difficult MP. In his addresses to the electors he called for votes for women because ‘they were human beings, the same as men.’¹⁰⁴ While not necessarily sharing his approval for militant tactics, Lansbury’s Christian faith would have led him to approve his friend Gould’s ‘evangelical discourse’ on the subject of votes for women.¹⁰⁵ His friendship with other male supporters of women’s suffrage was also important since their disquiet at the suffering of the women in prison must have reinforced his own.¹⁰⁶ These views led him to disavow party allegiance. In his letter to the electors in 1912 he argued;

I believe that the policy [of votes for women] which I urge you to support is the only policy in these days worth fighting for. Many men will come to you and talk of party and party principles, but believe me, we have been caucus ridden and party driven too long. To vote according to one’s conscience is often to be untrue to party, and I want you to send me back to the House of Commons to fight, irrespective of the convenience either of Government or parties, for the principles you have supported.¹⁰⁷

Thorne, as a member of the SDF and staunch trade unionist, found it easier not to call for votes for women in his manifestos as it was not generally

¹⁰⁴ *East End News*, 22nd November 1912

¹⁰⁵ John, A. V. and Eustance, C. *The Men’s Share: Masculinities, Male Support and Women’s Suffrage in Britain 1890-1920*, Routledge, 1997, p. 168.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* p. 121.

¹⁰⁷ Lansbury Archive, L.S.E., Volume 5, fol. 107.

supported by the SDF, trades unions or the Labour Party. It is possible he would have been de-selected if he had done so; so authoritative were the trades unions in his constituency. In Poplar, since the trades unions exerted less control over their candidates, Lansbury was able to be his own man. It says much for the strength of his personality that he received such support even after the disastrous election of 1912 but it did not help the Labour cause. In the General Election held after the war in 1918 Lansbury again lost to Blair, largely because of his critical attitude to the government during the war. He did not return to Parliament until 1922.

The differing attitude of the two men reinforces the main argument of this thesis. I have argued that Lansbury prioritised socialism and suffrage against the compromises necessary to achieve party political success. On the evidence presented by the suffrage campaign and the campaign for Work or Maintenance, Thorne and his supporters seemed to respect party discipline and not let personal views intrude. They concentrated their efforts on achieving greater working class representation, which they believed was the way to change society. Lansbury, however, pursued an individual path basing his political activity on single issues of unemployment and the campaign for women's suffrage.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE GREAT UNREST AND LOCAL LABOUR POLITICS

As well as the increasingly violent campaign for women's suffrage the period 1910 until the outbreak of war in 1914 was also notable for another source of social unrest, that of trade union strike activity. The number of trade unionists grew by more than fifty per cent nationally during this period and the number of strikes and days lost vastly increased over the previous ten years.¹ Since contemporaries saw socialist agitation behind this upheaval some believed it could have had a detrimental affect on labour politics. Others however thought it would be Labour's opportunity to increase its support. This chapter will look at the effect, if any, that the strikes and increased trade union membership had on local labour politics and will compare and contrast the two boroughs under discussion to try to ascertain whether the main explanatory theory of social movement and political party is still appropriate. Initially I intend to outline the events of the 'great unrest' and then consider the local activists and their response before considering the effect this agitation had on local Labour representation.

¹ Hinton, J. 'The Rise of a Mass Labour Movement: Growth and Limits,' in Wrigley, C. Editor, *A History of British Industrial Relations 1875-1914*, Harvester Press 1982, p 38.

The table below indicates the extent of the strikes.²

Date	Strikers	Number (000s)	Working days lost (000s)
Sept 1910- Aug 1911	Coalminers Rhondda	13	2985
Jun-Aug 1911	Seamen & Dockers UK	120	1020
July-Aug 1911	Dockers & Carmen London	77	500
Aug 1911	Railwaymen UK	145	485
August 1911	Dockers & Seamen Liverpool	48	376
Dec 1911- Jan 1912	Cotton weavers NE Lancs	160	2954
Feb-Apr 1912	Coalminers GB	1000	30800
Feb-Apr 1912	Jute workers Dundee	28	726
May-Aug 1912	Cab drivers London	11	637
Apr-July 1913	Tube & Metal workers Midlands	50	1400
Aug 1913- Feb 1914	Transport workers Dublin	20	1900
Jan-Aug 1914	Construction workers London	20	2500
Feb-Apr 1914	Coalminers Yorks	150	2654

The causes of these strikes were debated then and are still disputed now. W. Appleton, the General Secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions [GFTU], wrote in the quarterly review of December 1910 that the causes of the ‘great unrest’ included the rising cost of living, disenchantment with the performance of the Parliamentary Labour Party, the pace of technological change, persistent unemployment and the showy opulence of the upper classes.³ Fraser, writing in 1999, broadly agreed with this assessment arguing in addition that by 1910 the economy was in a strong enough state for workers to reassert their rights. Conditions in the workplace were changing too, with new technologies in some industries leading to

² Clegg, H. A. *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889. Volume II 1911-1933*, Clarendon Press, 1985, p. 26

³ Prochaska, A. *A History of the General Federation of Trade Unions 1899-1980*, George Allen & Unwin, 1982, p. 102.

greater control over working practices by foremen and a consequent reduction in workplace autonomy.⁴ However, Reid argues that this was not always the case. In many industries the new machines were not as threatening as feared and needed skilled men to maintain them. He argues that skilled labour and craft unions in concentrated firms aimed to minimise government interference, since they were able to negotiate their own benefits. However, nationwide industries needed state intervention to improve their conditions as it was too difficult to negotiate a national rate with several employers.⁵ In addition, Hinton points to disappointment with the performance of new unionism as a factor in the rise of strike activity after 1910. He argues that the development of the Labour Party was not a victory for socialism but rather a way of reducing its effects. The ‘new unions’ had become as much concerned with sick benefits as striking.⁶

However, it can be argued that these conditions would not have necessarily led to so many strikes were it not for the development of the socialist agitation known as ‘syndicalism’. This, according to Holton, was ‘a movement dedicated to destroying capitalism through revolutionary class struggle and to build a new social order based, not on parliamentary democracy or state bureaucracy, but on workers’ control.’⁷ Holton argues that syndicalism was a response to the political and economic problems that had developed since 1900. He, too, agrees with Appleton’s original analysis that the cause of these problems were a fall in wages, technological change, loss of

⁴ Fraser, W.H. *A History of British Trade Unionism*, Macmillan, 1999, p. 123.

⁵ Reid, A.J. *Social Classes and Social Relations in Britain 1850-1914*, Macmillan Education, 1992, p. 34.

⁶ Hinton , J. ‘The Rise of a Mass Labour Movement’, p. 21.

⁷ Holton, R. *British Syndicalism 1900-1914*, Pluto Press, 1976, Preface.

worker control and an increasing sense of grievance at the conspicuous luxury of the upper classes. Furthermore, Holton argues that workers also felt increasingly alienated from their political representatives whether trades unionists, councillors or MPs. Workers and some of their local leaders were extremely sceptical of state sponsored conciliation and such reforms as Labour Exchanges and National Insurance seeing them as methods of social control rather than of direct benefit to themselves.⁸ As W.C. Anderson the ILP leader, wrote in the *Socialist Review* in October 1911:

If social conditions were to remain unchallenged, no working class school should have been opened. ... Education ... has helped create in him [the working class man (sic)] certain new wants which, though neither extravagant nor expensive, are beyond the reach of his purse. In short, the worker begins to think, and this process is at the root of the Labour unrest and will mark the beginning of many changes.⁹

Prior to 1910, syndicalism as a branch of socialism had made little headway but when Tom Mann returned from Australia in the summer of 1910 he immediately began a vigorous propaganda campaign to promote syndicalism and strikes among the workers. He had concluded, through his strike experiences in Australia, that conciliation and nationalisation did not help the working man and now believed that the only way forward was by extra parliamentary action and increased inter trade union solidarity. A true socialist state would never be achieved until democracy was based on the factory rather than the parish and the trade unions regulated production according to the needs of society and its members.¹⁰ As part of his campaign, a conference was held in Manchester in December 1910 to promote Mann's

⁸ Holton, *British Syndicalism*, p. 37.

⁹ Quoted in Pimlott, B. & Cook, C. Editors, *Trade Unions in British Politics: The First Two Hundred and Fifty Years*, Longman, 1982, p. 63.

¹⁰ Foote, G. *The Labour Party's Political Thought*, p. 94.

Industrial Syndicalist Education League with representatives from seventeen trade unions. The chair at the meeting, Harry Gosling, of the Watermen and Lightermen, reported that the ‘petty antagonisms that may have existed previously have been dropped, we trust never to rise again.’¹¹

In November 1910 a local dispute in the South Wales coalfield over local wage rates exploded into mass picketing and riots. At Tonypandy a striking miner was killed, many were injured and property was damaged. The South Wales Miners appealed to the Miners Federation of Great Britain to call a national coal strike, demanding a national minimum wage. However, after nine months the strike failed, having no support from other miners.¹² Nevertheless, the South Wales Miners did not give up the struggle for, as they saw it, workers rights. In December 1911 they published a pamphlet entitled *The Miners’ Next Step* which called for united action by all mine workers but with decentralised control and local democracy.¹³ The pamphlet argued that:

Sheep cannot be said to have solidarity. In obedience to a shepherd, they will go up or down, backwards or forwards as they are driven by him and his dogs. But they have no solidarity, for that means unity and loyalty. Unity and loyalty not to an individual, or the policy of an individual, but to an interest and a policy which is understood and worked for by all.¹⁴

Although the miners strike was of interest to the trade unionists in the two boroughs of West Ham and Poplar, of more relevance to the lives of working men in this locality was the activity in the docks and on the railways. Here Tom Mann, who had been helping the striking miners in South Wales,

¹¹ *Dockers Record*, December 1910.

¹² Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions, Volume II*, pp 30-33.

¹³ Holton, *British Syndicalism*, pp. 85-87.

¹⁴ Quoted in Cronin, J.E. & Schneer, J. Editors, *Social Conflict and the Political Order in Modern Britain*, Croom Helm, 1982, p. 90.

and Ben Tillett were very actively campaigning their syndicalist views.¹⁵ In September 1910 the National Transport Workers Federation [NTWF] had been founded with Harry Gosling as its President. As well as leading the Lightermen and Watermen's Union on the Thames, he was an active member of the London County Council for Labour. Both Mann and Tillett saw the Federation as the beginning of true mass industrial unionism. In June 1911 the seamen in Southampton came out on strike for better wages, they were followed by dockers in Hull, Manchester and Liverpool. In London in July a conference was held with delegates from the newly formed Port of London Authority, wharfingers and contractors and the executive committee of the NTWF. Some concessions from the employers were agreed but the men refused to accept this agreement.¹⁶ At a mass meeting in West Ham on 2nd August Gosling, Tillett and Orbell were unable to persuade men back to work so they approved the continuation of the strike. By 6th August the carmen and the stevedores had joined the strike and the food situation was becoming very serious. The local press reported that there was a risk of famine among the working classes in the area and asked 'where is the wisdom from the workers' point of view in making foodstuffs contraband of war?'¹⁷ Despite this, the paper reported that the numbers of strikers was increasing 'hourly' together with increasing episodes of violence as some traders tried to continue their business. The situation had become so serious that for the first time the government, represented by Winston Churchill as Home Secretary, announced that there would be measures taken to ensure the maintenance of law and

¹⁵ Pelling, H. *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p.134.

¹⁶ *East End News*, 14th July 1911.

¹⁷ ibid. 11th August 1911.

order and the food supply in London.¹⁸ Previously the government had not seen its role as one of intervening in industrial disputes. However, events moved rapidly and following negotiations with Sir Sidney Buxton, MP for Poplar and by now, President of the Board of Trade, the NTWF called off the strike on 11th August many of their demands having been met.¹⁹ The Dockers Union was now in such a strong position that as well as increased wages and reduced hours, it was able to insist on a role in deciding who should be taken on at the dock gates. This could ensure preference would be given to members of the union, something for which Tillett and Orbell had long campaigned.

However, this was not the end of strikes in East London. Since 1908 when the ASRS had campaigned for an all grades recognition there had been dissatisfaction on the railways. Since there were at least forty companies involved nationwide it was very difficult to obtain a unified pay and condition structure. Also the railway bosses considered that safety necessitated a military style of management which was inherently anti trade union.²⁰ By August 1911 railway workers were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Conciliation schemes set up in 1907 to deal with issues of pay and conditions and, encouraged by the success of the dockers, they decided to strike.²¹ This strike was centred on Liverpool and the north and, despite the huge Railway Works at Stratford, does not at this time appear to have made much of an impact on the East End; possibly it was overshadowed by the

¹⁸ ibid

¹⁹ Lovell, *Stevedores & Dockers*, pp. 167-170.

²⁰ Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 103.

²¹ Howell, D. *Respectable Radicals. Studies in the Politics of Railway Trade Unionism*, Ashgate Publishing, 1999. p. 12

Dock Strike. By the end of August the press reported that all disputes were settled. However, it also reported that Tom Mann was back ‘in the thick of labour agitations’ so the underlying causes of the unrest had not been resolved.²²

These unresolved issues surfaced again the following summer when the London dockers attempted to capitalise on the success of the previous year and insisted on control over the hiring of workers. Initially they had the support of the railwaymen at Stratford who refused to handle goods diverted from the docks.²³ However in June a refusal by the Poplar carmen to work with blacklegs was not supported by ASRS officials. In other words the ASRS refused to support the actions of the Carmen’s union.²⁴ This confusion and lack of official support led to violent demonstrations. The press reported that one such demonstration had started when a large group of strikers attempted to storm the dock gates at Custom House. About seven hundred managed to break through the police cordon and using revolvers forced the free labour working in the docks to flee. Some of the free labourers fired back and there were many injuries but no fatalities. Trouble continued later in the day and again the police used batons and truncheons to restore order. Many men were later charged with assault and either fined or sentenced to several months’ hard labour.²⁵ The strike failed, since the organisers assumed that support would be forthcoming from the provinces as in 1911, and did not consider what to do when no such support materialised.²⁶ Following the end

²² *East End News*, 29th August 1911.

²³ *Daily Herald*, 30th May 1912.

²⁴ *ibid.* 20th June 1912.

²⁵ *East End News*, 2nd August 1912. This is the first of many reports of court appearances by striking and rioting dockers.

²⁶ Holton, *British Syndicalism*, p. 122.

of the strike, the dockers lost the concessions granted to them the previous year.²⁷ Nevertheless, the failure of the strike did not lead to a lessening of agitation and mass meetings were held throughout Canning Town and West Ham during the winter calling for more recruits to trade unions and for trade union amalgamation.²⁸

The following year, 1913, attention turned to the building trades in London. As with the railway men and the dockers, the issue was as much one of trade union recognition as rates of pay. In London the Conciliation Boards had attempted to mediate between workers and management but with limited success, as the former found it difficult to accept adverse results and the latter wished to maintain control over recruitment and take on non-union men if necessary. The trade union leadership, as in the docks, lost control over the rank and file and the result was at least forty-eight unofficial strikes in the building trades in London between May 1913 and January 1914. These issues were not settled at the outbreak of war in August 1914.²⁹

Having looked, very briefly, at the events of the ‘great unrest’ I now propose to consider its effects on labour and socialist politics both nationally and in West Ham and Poplar. There was considerable debate within the wider socialist movement as to the best way to achieve the aims of a socialist society. The SDF leadership had always been hostile to trade union militancy believing that the Parliamentary route was the best way to achieve socialism. They saw education and propaganda as more effective.³⁰ Since they

²⁷ Reid, A.J. *United We Stand. A History of Britain's Trade Unions*, Allen Lane, 2004, p. 226
²⁸ *Daily Herald*, 11th November 1912

²⁹ Price, R. *Masters, Union and Men. Work Control in Building and the Rise of Labour 1830-1914*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 258.

³⁰ Johnson, G. ‘Making Reform the Instrument of Revolution. British Social Democracy 1881-1911,’ *Historical Journal*, Volume 43, No 4, 2000.

disaffiliated from the LRC in 1901 their influence nationally had declined and initially they made no response to the increased strike activity. In April 1910 Quelch wrote in *Justice* that ‘Our primary aim is to organise a political party, independent, class conscious, proletarian and Social Democratic. The function of industrial organisation lies with the trade unions.’³¹ This idea was not accepted by all members, many of whom belonged to trade unions and had been active in strikes. These divisions gave an added impetus to demands for socialist unity. Since February 1909 Grayson had been campaigning for socialist unity initially as a Socialist Representative Committee. Several of these were formed by 1911, mainly centred on the northwest.³² On 30th September 1911 a Unity Conference was held with delegates representing all aspects of socialism in Britain; the ILP, Clarion organisations, the SDF and the newly formed British Socialist Party [BSP]. The majority of the delegates came from northern England with only Woolwich, Kentish Town, and Mile End sending any delegates from London. There were no representatives from either West Ham or Poplar.³³ After two days of debates, attempting to resolve the divisions around attitude toward the Labour Party, the style of the organisation and whether or not to support direct action as opposed to the Parliamentary route, it was finally decided to privilege political over industrial action, since it was considered necessary to control the machinery of the state in order to effect structural economic change.³⁴ At the first Conference of the BSP in May 1912 Hyndman, whose influence was still very strong, called syndicalism a failure because it was ultimately powerless against the might of

³¹ Quoted in Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation*, p. 230.

³² Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation*, p. 239.

³³ Report of the Socialist Unity Conference, September 30th-October 1st 1911.

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 13.

the state. After this the campaign for socialist unity gradually declined and when Grayson became ill in 1913 it ceased altogether.³⁵ According to Kendall it was this hostility of the BSP to trade unionism that prevented it benefiting from the increased industrial militancy and gave the left no alternative apart from the revolutionary syndicalists or the Labour leaders.³⁶

One of the effects of this increased strike activity already noted was a rapid increase in national trade union membership. In East London the most dramatic increases were recorded by the two ‘new’ unions, the dockers and the gasworkers. After its initial success at the turn of the century the Dockers Union had declined so that by 1910 it had become moribund, with membership subscriptions from the fourteen East London branches, which included Tilbury in Essex, only amounting to £177.4s.9d. However, by December 1911 the number of branches had risen to forty-nine and the income for the half-year was £6,425.5s. The following June the income was even greater at £6,707.10s.6d, arguing a further increase in membership. After this the income declined somewhat although the number of branches remained at over forty.³⁷ Nationally, following the failure of the 1912 strike, the membership halved.³⁸ The NUGW&GL also reported an increase in membership, reflected in remittances to the District Office. In December 1909 the branches in Poplar and West Ham sent in a total of £69.3s. as their quarterly remittance. By December 1911 this had risen to £721.11s.9d. Canning Town the largest branch, and one where Thorne’s influence was

³⁵ Crick, M. *A History of the Social Democratic Federation*, p. 241.

³⁶ Kendall, W. *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain. The Origins of British Communism 1900-1921*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969, p. 45.

³⁷ Annual Reports of the Dock, Wharf and Riverside Trade Union, 1904-1913.

³⁸ Reid, *United We Stand*, p. 226.

greatest, sent £20.8s. in December 1909 but £375.14s.3d. in December 1911.

However, membership of the union declined the following year. Canning Town was still the largest branch and sent £193.16s to the District Office in December 1913. The total remitted by all the Poplar and West Ham branches for December 1913 was £500.13s.7d.³⁹

Of the other two major trades unions in the East End, the engineers and the railway workers, neither recorded as large an increase in membership as the dockers or gasworkers during this period. Membership of the ASRS in the two boroughs increased from 648 in 1904 to a maximum of 958 in 1909 when it declined slightly in 1911 to 715. After that it formed part of the National Union of Railway men and branch records were calculated differently so one cannot form a true comparison.⁴⁰ According to Bagwell, by August 1911 56% of all railway workers nationally were in one of the three unions, ASLEF, the NUR or the Railway Clerks Association.⁴¹ Prior to the strikes the majority of employees were not in trades unions so the railway companies could refuse to negotiate with trade union representatives. After the strikes this was no longer the case since men had realised the value of organisation and the various small railway unions had amalgamated into the NUR. This meant that management had to accept the need to negotiate with trades unions.⁴²

The East London branches of the Engineers report a similar pattern. In 1908 the membership was 1,974, in August 1911 it was 1,827 and in July

³⁹ Gas Workers and General Labourers Union Quarterly Balance Sheets, 1891-1913

⁴⁰ Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants Annual Reports, 1884-1912.

⁴¹ Bagwell, P. 'Transport', in Wrigley, C. Editor, *A History of British Industrial Relations 1875-1914*, Harvester Press, 1982, p. 236.

⁴² Bagwell, 'Transport' p. 231.

1912, 2,041.⁴³ Thus, the trade unions which reported the greatest increases in East London were the ‘new’ unions of the late nineteenth century rather than the more traditional ‘craft’ unions. This may help explain the success of Thorne and his allies in South West Ham since, as shown by the Heads of Household survey, unskilled labourers formed the largest category of voters in the south. Similarly, it could be one reason why Bromley North East ward in Poplar was solidly Labour as unskilled labourers represented 40% of the voting population.⁴⁴

I now propose to consider the activities of the two Labour party leaders, Lansbury and Thorne, during this period and to consider whether the strikes had any effect on their ideas or policies. One of the reasons cited for the appeal of syndicalism was that the rank and file membership of trades unions had become disillusioned both with the Labour Party and with the trade union leadership. Nationally, many of the leaders of the unions had either retired, died or become incorporated into government either as employees or as MPs. Thus Barnes of the Engineers, who had been elected to Parliament in 1906, had been sacked in 1908 because he could not impose his will on a local district dispute.⁴⁵ Shackleton of the Lancashire Weavers had also become an MP. Many others had taken jobs in the Home Office, the Board of Trade or the Factory Inspectorate.⁴⁶ Thorne himself had been an active member of the TUC Parliamentary Committee working with Robert Knight of the Boilermakers union.⁴⁷

⁴³ Amalgamated Society of Engineers Monthly Reports, 1884-1912.

⁴⁴ See Appendix F and the discussion in Chapter Five.

⁴⁵ Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 110.

⁴⁶ Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions Volume II*, p..20.

⁴⁷ Reid, *United We Stand*, p. 252.

Although the strikes were ‘traditional’ in that the strikers demanded union recognition and the right to refuse to work with non-trade unionists, they were different in that often the rank and file strikers were at odds with the leadership, refusing to accept negotiated settlements. This rebelliousness of the rank and file found an expression in the Labour paper the *Daily Herald*. Initially started by London compositors, the *Daily Herald* was re-launched by George Lansbury and his friends early in 1912 as a specifically socialist daily newspaper.⁴⁸ Lansbury had become increasingly disillusioned with the Parliamentary process and used the *Herald* to promote his views of Christian Socialism. However, he was also concerned that anyone who had a belief in socialism should have a platform and to that end he published articles by a wide variety of socialist authors. He argued that the *Herald* would not be ‘smothered in dogma’. His message to the workers was;

Trust in yourselves, have faith in your own ability and your own destiny. Remember that all must rise together; and remember also that rights and privileges carry with them duties also. And finally it is your first and last duty to organise, organise, organise.⁴⁹

Although Lansbury claimed that the *Herald* represented many views his own Christian socialist beliefs were very obvious. In its first campaign the *Herald* called for a public inquiry into the sinking of the Titanic, demanding that Sir Sidney Buxton to be opposed at the next General Election because, although he was ‘a man of blameless character,’ as President of the Board of Trade he was ultimately responsible for the lack of lifeboats in steerage and the consequent deaths of at least fifty-three children.⁵⁰

Lansbury continued to campaign on employment issues and on the

⁴⁸ Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, p.140.

⁴⁹ *Daily Herald*, 16th April 1912.

⁵⁰ ibid. 29th April 1912.

11th May he led a demonstration to Poplar Borough Council calling for the council to employ only members of trades unions on council works. He was loudly cheered when he argued, somewhat ambiguously;

it was no use hating the landlords and the capitalist. They must rather hate the poverty, misery and destitution and the system which brought it about.⁵¹

This is in full agreement with Lansbury's Christian views but he was less specific on how the system was to be changed if not through Parliamentary means. Lansbury still thought in terms of a social movement and was distancing himself from the idea of 'party'. Earlier at he had argued that;

It was said that the Christian Labour Movement was merely an attempt on the part of Christians to chloroform the working classes and smother Socialism. But he declared it was the lack of religion that made social progress so slow. Christianity meant first, the bettering of the individual; secondly, the improvement of the family; and thirdly, and consequently, the progress of society towards Socialism.⁵²

Lansbury's belief in socialism as a movement rather than a party was confirmed by his actions in regard to women's suffrage discussed in Chapter Seven. Although the *Herald* continued to report mass meetings of strikers and activists the main concern of the paper until November was Lansbury's campaign in Bow on the question of women's suffrage. Once out of Parliament Lansbury continued to campaign for workers issues, founding the Herald League in November 1912 as a mechanism for funding the paper so as to have a national platform for his views. By September 1913 he was claiming that the *Herald* had accelerated the pace of unrest. His dislike of the

⁵¹ *Daily Herald*, 11th May 1912

⁵² ibid. 8th May 1912.

Labour Party continued saying that the party was of no use to trades unions.⁵³

He was also scathing about his former colleague on the Poplar Board of Guardians, Will Crooks, writing that;

We regret to hear that Mr Will Crooks, that shining light of the Fabian Society, is on his way home from his Parliamentary tour of the colonies ... The *Daily Telegraph* correspondent from Cape Town says that 'People here were delighted to meet a Labour leader with human sympathies, not all rancour and pessimism.' We know the sort exactly; a nice fellow who won't worry the masters if they are too busy to discuss wages, hours and so on.⁵⁴

The *Daily Herald* was a national paper but Lansbury's supporters also published a local campaigning weekly paper, the *Bow and Bromley Worker*.

In September it reported that Lansbury had called on the government to justify its use of troops in the strikes and applauded the

glory of this movement among the sweated and the destitute ... is the fact that they all stood solidly together realising as never before their class solidarity as workers.⁵⁵

The following year the paper was calling for contributions to help feed the families of striking transport workers.⁵⁶ Lansbury continued to campaign for women's suffrage and was briefly imprisoned in August 1913. He does not seem to have played an active part in strike campaigning that year.

Lansbury, although he undoubtedly supported the strikes and the idea of revolutionary change, did not seem to have a coherent strategy to achieve this and concentrated his efforts on many different campaigns such as women's suffrage, as well as economic issues.

Thorne, on the other hand, remained firmly wedded to his trade union principles and the Parliamentary route. As early as 1894 he wrote in the

⁵³ ibid. 27th September 1913

⁵⁴ ibid. 4th November 1913.

⁵⁵ *Bow & Bromley Worker*, September 1911

⁵⁶ ibid. July 1912

annual report of the Gasworkers Union the aim of getting members elected to local councils and administrative bodies is

to my mind work in the right direction. Good work can be done of all the local Administration bodies if you can get men (sic) returned to them who have fixed and definite principles and whose aims are the abolition of the present competitive system and the re-organisation of society.⁵⁷

The effect of the strikes and the development of syndicalism did not cause him to change his views. At a meeting held in Mile End he called for an eight-hour day to reduce unemployment since it would not be cured under capitalism and argued that the biggest mistake his friend Mann made was when he told workers to ‘abandon Parliament and the vote’.⁵⁸ In order to promote socialism Thorne called on unions to amalgamate joining the GFTU. He called for funds to be set aside to pay men affected by other trades’ strikes and for money for organisation to recruit new members and to unite skilled and unskilled workers.⁵⁹

He continued to ask questions in Parliament about the behaviour of the police and to campaign for the release of Guy Bowman and Tom Mann after they were imprisoned for incitement to mutiny for publishing the *Don't Shoot* leaflet for the troops.⁶⁰ However, Thorne’s main cause was amalgamation of trades unions, which he had been interested in since the formation of his own union in 1889. Initially the amalgamation was to be of the building trades unions which would represent about 300,000 workers and include 60,000 members of Thorne’s union.

Mann’s attempt to form a mass trade union through the creation of the

⁵⁷ Gasworkers and General Labourers Union Yearly Report, 1894

⁵⁸ *Daily Herald*, 21st November 1912

⁵⁹ Prochaska, *A History of the General Federation of Trade Union*, p. 105.

⁶⁰ *Daily Herald*, 15th April 1912 and 17th May 1912.

NTWF and his membership of the GFTU had met with limited success in Poplar and West Ham. Letters received by W. A. Appleton, the secretary, in response to a call for a mass demonstration in Trafalgar Square in August 1913 indicate that the support of the trades unions in East London was more moral than practical.⁶¹ Similarly when Robert Williams, the secretary of the NTWF, wrote to the ILP requesting a loan of £1,000 to assist in the London dispute in September 1912 his request was turned down. It was decided to arrange a meeting to 'discuss other methods of raising loans and other means by which the Party could render assistance.'⁶²

Furthermore, although amalgamation was one of the routes by which Mann and Tillett hoped to create the large industrial union they were suspicious of joining Thorne. This suspicion dated back to the beginning of the two unions, the Dockers and the Gasworkers, when Tillett accused Thorne of taking work away from dockers in the summer when the gasworks were idle.⁶³ At the Third Annual Council Meeting of the NTFW Thorne continued to argue for 'one union, one ticket' to enable any man capable of doing a job to be taken on regardless of his usual trade. Again he was unsuccessful.⁶⁴ This friction continued throughout the winter of 1911 when Thorne argued in his Union Report that 'it appears to me to be a suicidal policy for the members of one union to refuse to work with members of another' and in 1913 he called for amalgamation not by trades, as in the building trades, but by grades so that all general workers would belong to one union and could work in all

⁶¹ Francis Johnson Papers folios 237-253, Microfilm 217, Reel 13.

⁶² Infancy of the Labour Party Microfilm 76 COLL Misc folio 306.

⁶³ Lovell, *Stevedores & Dockers*, p. 188.

⁶⁴ Report of the Third Annual General Council Meeting of the National Transport Workers Federation, 5th and 6th June 1913.

trades.⁶⁵ This policy of ‘one man one ticket’ had been one of Thorne’s ambitions since his union was first founded.

As well as his trade union work, Thorne continued to be an active Member of Parliament and local town councillor. He was active in the various demonstrations in the East End campaigning for the release of Bowman and Mann, as well as asking questions in Parliament as to police behaviour towards demonstrators.⁶⁶ In October 1913 his local branch of the Gasworkers in Canning Town called on him to resign the Labour Party so that he could be free of liberal interference and develop a more socialist party.⁶⁷ However, as Thorne was in Canada at the time on trade union business the resolution was deferred and the moment passed. His work on the council included leading a deputation to the Local Government Board to ask for increased funds for the Children’s Care Committee. This body had been set up to provide basic meals for indigent children and during the strike over 300,000 extra meals were being provided.⁶⁸ He was also involved in discussions about the new National Insurance Act. Unlike Lansbury who was opposed in principle, Thorne believed that the Act was flawed but that the trades unions must be involved, as approved benefit societies, if they were to maintain some measure of control.⁶⁹ He supported a letter to the Local Government board asking that the houses due for demolition to make way for the expansion of the docks be deferred until alternative accommodation had been found.⁷⁰ This brief survey of Thorne’s work as an MP and town

⁶⁵ Gasworkers & General Labourers Reports, 30th December 1911 and 28th December 1913.

⁶⁶ *East End News*, 8th June 1912 and 29th June 1912.

⁶⁷ *ibid.* 14th October 1913

⁶⁸ West Ham Town Council Minutes 22nd October 1912

⁶⁹ *ibid.* 28th January 1911

⁷⁰ *ibid.* 23rd September 1913

councillor indicates once again how closely tied he was to his constituents unlike Lansbury whose work had a more national flavour.

With all the upheaval caused by the various strikes between 1910 and 1914 and the consequent increase in trade union membership one might have expected a change in the composition of the local councils with an increase in Labour representation. However, in West Ham the opposite appears to have been the case. Edwards says that the number of councillors who voted with the Labour group in the Council was steady at nineteen throughout the period. During this time the Municipal Alliance councillors increased from twenty two to twenty six, taking the extra seats from the Progressives.⁷¹ Buck lists slightly different figures but the pattern is the same. He has twenty Labour men in 1910 and 1911 and nineteen in 1912 and 1913. According to Buck, the Municipal Alliance again records an increase from twenty in 1910 to twenty seven in 1913.⁷² These discrepancies can be explained by the fact that party allegiance at this time was by no means set. For example, the press reported that Charles Dear, a leader of the local ASRS, had left the Progressives and become a Socialist since the strike on the railway.⁷³ The local election results in 1913 show that the pattern of Labour representation had not changed dramatically since 1908. In the north the Progressives still held two out of the three seats in High Street ward and one in New Town. In the south Labour had a majority in West Ham, Plaistow, Custom House and High Street, which were contested that year, as well as Tidal Basin, Canning Town and Hudsons, which were not. Out of the eighteen councillors

⁷¹ Edwards, A.F.G. 'Local Government and Politics: West Ham, 1919-1939', PhD., Kings College, London University, 1999, p. 95.

⁷² Buck, 'Class Structure', Table 5.4

⁷³ *Stratford Express*, 7th November 1911.

representing these wards, thirteen had been on the council since 1908. It would appear that the ‘great unrest’ had not affected local council politics at least in terms of personnel. One possible reason for this may be that during the transport workers’ strikes of 1912 both Tillett and Leggatt, ‘the rebel agitator par excellence’ as Tillett called him, had advocated direct action on the part of the workers and not to use the representative route to improve their conditions.⁷⁴ To that end they formed the ‘Provisional Committee for the Formation of a National Transport Workers Union’ in West Ham led by Sam Roden and Ted Leggatt of West Ham with Charles Dear of the Railwaymen. During the autumn and winter of 1912 there were many mass meetings held in Canning Town to argue the case for industrial unionism and syndicalism.⁷⁵ They called for direct action rather than campaigning for political representation.

Turning to Poplar, the picture here is much the same but the spread of representation is borough wide rather than concentrated in one part of the borough as in South West Ham. In November 1909 the Labour and Socialist group claimed ten members, three in Bromley South West, two in Bow North, two in Bow West and one each in Bromley North East, Cubitt Town and Poplar North West. In 1912 they lost one seat in Poplar North West and in 1913 regained it only to lose one in Bow North. Despite losing his Parliamentary seat in 1912 Lansbury held on to his council seat which could indicate that while the national issue of women’s suffrage did not appeal to his voters his work for the locality was much appreciated. Again the upheavals of the great unrest and the increase in trade union membership does not seem to

⁷⁴ Holton, R. *British Syndicalism*, p. 122

⁷⁵ ibid. p. 129

have made a significant difference to local council matters. The issues discussed at council meetings still centred on the unemployed with resolutions put forward by the Labour members, usually unsuccessfully, for the council to increase public works.⁷⁶ The other major issue discussed at council meetings was often the rights of the suffragettes to hold meetings in council premises.

Despite several resolutions by Sam March, George Lansbury and his son, Edgar, permission for suffragettes to hold such meetings was denied.⁷⁷

As in West Ham, one reason for the lack of effect on local politics of the Great Unrest may have been because the strike leaders, Mann and Tillett, in particular, were openly against the representation route. In the *Herald* the editor argued that ‘we can count on the fingers of one hand the Labour members [of Parliament] who are really in earnest about the workers.⁷⁸ As White argues, syndicalism was a

spontaneous opposition movement that simultaneously challenged the timid, collaborationist and increasingly authoritarian, official trade union leadership on the one hand, and the equivocal stand on strikes and industrial militancy taken by the leaders of the established socialists parties – including the ILP and the SDF/BSP.⁷⁹

Thus it did not co-operate with existing political routes, it sought to revolutionise them.

This chapter has considered the strikes and trade union activity in the period 1910-1914 to try to ascertain what effect it had on Labour politics nationally and in the two boroughs of West Ham and Poplar. Nationally, it had demonstrated how a group of men in an industry, rather than an individual firm, could achieve power by using their solidarity and could therefore force

⁷⁶ See Minutes of Poplar Borough Council 4th December 1913 for an example.

⁷⁷ Minutes of Poplar Borough Council, 6th November 1913, 20th November 1913.

⁷⁸ *Daily Herald*, 12th November 1912

⁷⁹ White, J. ‘1910-1914 Reconsidered’ in Cronin, J.E. and Schneer, J. *Social Conflict* p.89.

employers to accede to their demands. This led to a major shift in government thinking about industrial matters. It became obvious that the government could no longer stand aside from involvement in economic affairs. Davidson has shown that there was no evidence to suggest that the labour unrest was discussed in Cabinet prior to 1911.⁸⁰ By March 1912 Asquith was telling the House of Commons that:

It is impossible that we should allow the whole life, industrial and social, of this country to be brought to a deadlock and a standstill. There we are agreed. Having that common end in view, are we not right, indeed are we not bound, to obtain from Parliament a legislative declaration of the reasonableness of the claim for a minimum wage, subject to adequate safeguards for the employer?⁸¹

Thus Hall and Schwartz argue that by 1914 syndicalism had been defeated, state intervention in the economy was accepted and the principle of industrial conciliation between capital and labour established, with the state as mediator.⁸²

In the two boroughs under discussion while it is evident that although both Thorne and Lansbury and their supporters were involved in the strikes and in campaigning for workers rights during this period, again their emphasis was different. Lansbury used his position as editor of the *Daily Herald* to put forward his views of Christian socialism and his ideas that party politics was not the best way forward since this did not allow for individual difference of opinion about policies. Although Lansbury called for Labour members of the council to work together he was less committed to national party discipline. Thorne remained very true to his trade union roots and maintained his grip on

⁸⁰ Davidson, R. 'The Board of Trade and Industrial Relations 1896-1914,' *Historical Journal*, Volume 21, No 3, 1978.

⁸¹ Quoted in Pimlott, B. & Cook, C. Editors *Trade Unions in British Politics*, Longman, 1982, p. 71.

⁸² Hall, S. and Schwarz, B. 'State and Society 1880-1930,' in Langan and Schwarz, *Crises*, p. 27.

local politics, continuing to work for workers rights inside the council and outside in the trade unions. He remained true to party politics.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has considered the development of labour politics in these two boroughs in a new way. It has compared their development not in the light of what happened but *why* certain developments did *not* happen. In 1914 Labour nationally was still a minority group with no guarantee of future success. Thorne's position in West Ham seemed unassailable whereas in Bow the Conservatives had taken back a seat from Labour within two years and there seemed to be no prospect of Lansbury retrieving the situation.

Superficially the two boroughs were similar, both suffering from poverty, unemployment and overcrowding. However, research has revealed crucial differences. Poplar was more mixed socially and economically, whereas the division between north and south West Ham was sharply marked. In addition, immigration into Poplar had almost ceased by 1900 and the population remained stable. In West Ham immigration continued and the population rose until after the First World War and included a greater proportion of young families. This led to a society more open to new ideas and new people.

Poplar still maintained a managerial class and a history of radicalism whereas south West Ham was almost totally working class, with workers mainly employed in a few major firms. This workforce joined the new mass unions and its leaders were able to organise and control candidates for election. Thus, to some extent they were able to reconcile the tensions identified by Barrow and Bullock between remaining both democratic and

collectivist. Thorne was both a delegate, that is he expressed the will of his followers, but on occasions he was able to act as a representative.¹ This agrees with traditional histories of the Labour Party, such as that written by Henry Pelling, that it was the trades unions that made Labour. However, it is important to realise that in West Ham South it was the ‘new’ unions that predominated and successfully gained seats on the local council. In Poplar where the more traditional trades unions were in the majority it proved more difficult to win seats for Labour.

The theoretical basis of the argument propounded in this thesis has been that the political culture of the Labour movement in the early twentieth century in Poplar and West Ham can best be understood by reference to the theories of social movements and political parties. In the borough of Poplar, I have argued, the Labour activists and their leaders behaved in a way more typical of a social movement than a political party. In his article, already cited in the Introduction, Charles Tilly defined a social movement as ‘essentially a party with broad aspirations and a unifying belief system’. He contrasted this with a definition of a political party as a ‘tamed nationalised social movement’.² He implies that social movements lack the internal discipline which comes with party organisation. They are therefore more fluid, both in membership and organisation. Furthermore, Jupp describes social movements as ‘free, irresponsible and dynamic,’ contrasting them with the more ‘inhibited,

¹ Barrow, L. and Bullock, I. *Democratic Ideas*, pp. 298-9.

² Tilly, ‘Social Movements and National Politics,’ p. 305.

compromising and bureaucratic' political parties.³

This, I have argued, was a reflection of Labour politics in both of the parliamentary constituencies within the borough of Poplar. The PLEL, with its headquarters in the south, was formed explicitly to elect working men to both local and national representative institutions, so that the 'interest' of that class could be represented in a public forum, as were the interests of their employers. This, rather than socialism, was the basis of their ideology. This organisation followed in the path of the Liberal-Radical tradition of the late nineteenth century of Lib-Lab MPs. Their adherents supported members of the Liberal party and were in turn supported by them. In addition the PLEL involved itself in education and charity on a self-help basis with clothing clubs and Will Crooks' 'College' at the dock gates as well as social events. Furthermore the PLEL did not put up a 'Labour' candidate in Poplar since the Liberal MP was considered a supporter of the working man. Instead they funded Crooks as their representative on the London County Council and Board of Guardians and supported him as Labour MP for Woolwich in 1903. Thus in Poplar there was no sense of a distinct Labour party, rather a group of people with the aim of improving the conditions for the working classes without being doctrinaire. Some members held socialist views but these did not predominate.

In the northern constituency of Bow and Bromley, within the borough of Poplar, the situation was equally diffuse. Here, the aim of local activists was still to put working men on the Borough Council and the Board of

³ Jupp, *Political Parties*, p. 68.

Guardians and again there was no sense of a separate party. The nineteenth century radical tradition was also very influential although some were committed socialists. Lawrence has shown how the SDF retained radical ideas in its programme, while calling for more revolutionary change.⁴ However, Lansbury's socialism, and therefore that of many of his followers, was of a quasi-religious nature with an emotional appeal. Activists were calling for a more just and moral society, advocating a complete change in moral character, more communitarian rather than based on economic analysis. The economic situation in the borough also reinforced the Liberal-Radical tradition. Work was mainly centred on small factories and workshops where employers and workers knew each other well, which could reinforce a culture of deference. This culture of deference was also reflected in the efforts of charities to alleviate poverty. The members of the local COS Committee came from outside the borough and imposed their middle class criteria on recipients of funds. The various settlements, such as Toynbee Hall, were established with the aim of improving the life of the poor by inculcating middle class values and ideals. Although the situation was not dissimilar in West Ham, here these movements were less influential, as they were less numerous.

In both Poplar and Bow and Bromley the trades unions were influential but, as I have argued, they were of the more traditional type. They were more conciliatory towards employers, preferring negotiation rather than strike action, if possible. The population, despite expanding in

⁴ Lawrence, J. 'Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain,' *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 31, 1992.

the late nineteenth century, remained stable until the First World War, with a broad range of ages represented and the society could maintain its traditional culture and political forms. It was not particularly receptive to new ideas, especially ideas that seemed to threaten dramatic change without any guarantee of improvement.

In any political development, leadership is vital. The main leader of the activists in Bow and Bromley was George Lansbury, a man of principle not a pragmatic politician. While this is not to argue that other politicians lacked principles, Lansbury was characterised by an unwillingness to compromise his fundamental beliefs. In his work as *Guardian* he concentrated on providing food and work even though this was bitterly opposed by the Municipal Alliance for its effect on the rates.⁵ He was a charismatic figure and good orator, with a genius for friendship, but at this period showed little appreciation of the discipline necessary for political success. He also did not call himself a working man but rather one who *worked for the poor*. In this he continued the tradition of service encapsulated by the charity workers of Toynbee Hall. Although Lansbury said he did not approve of such charitable works, believing them to be middle class patronage, his advocacy of farm colonies, for instance, was in a similar vein. He attempted to ameliorate poverty; he did not challenge the economic structure which led to those conditions. He was an employer, albeit not a very practical one. His son remarked that he would give work to any man who needed it, regardless of his fitness for the job.⁶ His efforts

⁵ See *East End News*, 15th January 1909 and 12th February 1909 for examples..

⁶ Lansbury, E. *George Lansbury, My Father*, 1934, London: Low Marston, p. 123.

to alleviate poverty in the borough led him to work tirelessly on the Board of Guardians and on the local and London County Councils, as well as serving on many national committees on unemployment and the Poor Law. His main ambition was to further his Christian Socialist ideals. In an undated pamphlet written sometime in 1910, he set out his aims.

Let us go forward and demand that Parliament no matter what shade of political opinion may be in the ascendant, shall arrange for the collective provision for the sick, for the fatherless children and the widow; for the aged and infirm and for the workless men and women. Let us demand this because we believe in that Gospel which teaches us that the religion of Christ means life and life more abundantly for everyone of the children of men, and because it is the mission of those who believe in Christianity to give effect to this.⁷

He tried to do this by becoming an MP but when he considered that these ideals were being put at risk by the National Insurance Bill and the treatment of the suffragettes, he resigned on principle. He appears not to have considered the effect his resignation would have on his constituents. He believed his cause was right and that they would follow him and trust his judgement. In this he was part of the pattern that had developed after the increased trade union activity from 1910. Tanner has argued that this led some on the left to believe in ‘the capacity of the working class to effect change, if necessary through class struggle, but not through the imposition of values or political structures.’⁸ In his determination not to compromise his socialism Lansbury rejected party discipline and the support of the Liberals, without, it would seem, understanding how crucial this support had been to his electoral success in 1910.⁹ He even went against the advice

⁷ Lansbury, G. *Smash Up the Workhouse*.

⁸ Tanner, D. ‘Ideological debate in Edwardian Labour Politics: Radicalism, Revisionism and Socialism,’ in Biagini and Reid, *Currents of Radicalism*, p. 281.

⁹ ibid. p. 96.

of Marion Coates Hansen who wanted him to fight for women's rights within the Labour Party.¹⁰ Lansbury's dominance as a charismatic leader rather than someone who held a position in a hierarchic organisation confirms my argument since according to Jupp, 'social movements are distinguished from parties by their commitment to an ideology, their mobilisation of enthusiasm and their scorn for established political institutions and practices.'¹¹ Lansbury's disillusion with party politics was expressed in an article in the *Labour Leader* in 1912 where he wrote;

A few years ago I should have sworn by a Socialist State dominated and organised by officials. To bring this about I should have declared for a disciplined party in Parliament ... On this matter however, my mind has undergone a great change. I no longer want a bureaucratic State, even if the boards are elected by the direct suffrage of the people. Labour Exchanges, Insurance Acts have sickened me of (sic) the whole paraphernalia of State officialdom.¹²

In West Ham the situation was different, at least in the south. Although Thorne was not known as an inspiring speaker he was always concerned about the views of his supporters and as I have argued throughout this thesis, the labour activists in West Ham South behaved more like a modern political party. According to Maor, common to all political parties is partnership in an organisation, participation in the decision making process and control over the selection of candidates for election.¹³ The situation in South West Ham reflected this situation more closely than that in Poplar or Bow. Furthermore, unlike the activists in Poplar, Labour in West Ham sought to determine policy, another

¹⁰ Shepherd, *George Lansbury*, p. 122.

¹¹ Jupp, *Political Parties*, p. 64.

¹² *Labour Leader*, 17th May 1912. Quoted in Barrow, L. & Bullock, I. *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement*, p. 264.

¹³ Maor, M. *Political Parties and Party Systems: Comparative approaches and the British Experience*, Routledge, 1997, p. 6.

characteristic of political parties, rather than simply influence the government, whether local or national.¹⁴ In this development the role of the trades unions was crucial. West Ham, unlike Poplar, had several firms employing large numbers of unskilled labour. This assisted the creation of the mass labour trade unions such the NUGW&GL. According to Maor:

Working class action first developed in the occupational sphere, by means of trade unions or co-operatives which became powerful and organised before the existence of the labour party. When political and electoral evolution finally allowed the development of the latter, trade union organisations already in existence provided it with a ready-made framework as well as with solid support.¹⁵

West Ham South provides an example of this development. This is in contrast to the borough of Poplar where the trades unions played a secondary role in politics. Unlike Poplar, where neither leader was a major trade union figure, the leader in West Ham South, Will Thorne, was a trade unionist first and a politician second. From the beginning of his working life he appreciated the value of formal co-operation between workers. Nevertheless he also understood the importance of his role on the Town Council and in Parliament in achieving a better deal for working men and women. He appreciated the importance of relating to his constituents and his local election committee, reporting back frequently and seeking their approval. The local Trades Council made such contact a condition of their support for all candidates for election, local or national. In this way they were able to maintain a measure of party discipline. There does not appear to have been a similar mechanism in operation in either Poplar or Bow. Thorne was also a committed member of the SDF and was able to reconcile

¹⁴ Ball, A.R. *British Political Parties: the Emergence of a Modern Party System*, Macmillan, 1987 p. 3

¹⁵ Maor, *Political Parties*, p. 83.

the tensions between the SDF and the trades unions. This may have been because he had an economic view of socialism. He argued for land taxes, nationalisation and the feeding of poor children at school. He called for Public Works to be provided to relieve unemployment. Although this was a similar programme to that supported by the Labour group on Poplar Borough Council, in West Ham they were forced by the opposition to be more coherent. In Poplar such matters were debated cross party which enabled Liberals, Labour and Progressives to combine in various forms. In West Ham the Labour group did not receive any support from other parties except from the few Progressives.¹⁶ This gave the Labour group a greater coherence and sense of unity. The distinctive nature of the Labour group in West Ham was noted by both its supporters and its opponents. Lansbury wrote that he and his Labour group on the London County Council ‘modelled’ themselves on West Ham.¹⁷ However, when principle was at stake he seemed to forget this discipline, as in 1912. The local press also recognised the different style of the West Ham Labour Group as it castigated the socialists for a missed opportunity on the town Council when they were in a position of influence. The editor complained that the initial goodwill was thrown away by their use of a secret ‘caucus’ outside the council meetings, where policy was discussed.¹⁸ However, despite his avowed socialism, Thorne had an understanding of political realism as when, for example, in spite of some sympathy for women’s suffrage, he

¹⁶ Edwards, A.F.G. ‘Local Government and Politics in West Ham 1919-1939,’ Ph.D., Kings College, London University, 1999, p. 30. They averaged four members in this period.

¹⁷ Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 163.

¹⁸ *Stratford Express*, 27th September 1902.

never put this issue to his electors, believing that that would be political suicide.

In concentrating on local politics this thesis has added to the sum of knowledge about the early Labour Party at grassroots level. Looking at other local studies of the Labour party in this period I would argue that they can be said to reflect my main thesis. Steven Cherry has explored the Labour movement in Norwich in the same period and found many links with West Ham.¹⁹ The Norwich branch of the NUGW&GL was founded in 1890, a year after the initial meeting in West Ham possibly because the Norwich Gas Works were owned by the British Gas Light Company, which had works in London. However, it was not without difficulty as the new union was accused by the existing Norfolk and Norwich Labour Union of poaching members from other unions. Thorne went to Norwich to try to sort it out and according to *Daylight*, the local radical newspaper:

made a clean sweep of the matter by freely attributing any shortcomings with regard to the balance sheet to the youth, inexperience, hard work and great drawbacks which the Gasworkers undoubtedly suffered from.²⁰

In Norwich, as well as in West Ham, the SDF were the more dominant and coherent group and the local East Anglian press frequently remarked on West Ham's ability to elect independent Labour representation.²¹ According to Cherry, the late nineteenth century in Norwich was characterised by inter-union quarrels and failed strikes in addition to the anti-union behaviour of some local firms.²² Therefore, the

¹⁹ Cherry, *Doing Different?* p. 29.

²⁰ *Daylight*, 9th August 1890.

²¹ Cherry, *Doing Different?* p. 45.

²² ibid. p. 40 and p. 53.

local trades unions, Cherry argues, may have turned to aiming for political representation, as they were not successful in improving matters via traditional trade union activity and negotiation with industry. This accords with the behaviour of the trades unions in West Ham, as they too were more political than those in Poplar. The smaller firms in Poplar made trade union organisation more difficult and the opportunity to develop political action less likely. Thus Norwich illustrates again how important trades unions and their organisation were in the development of successful Labour politics and provides a direct comparison with the trade union activity in West Ham.

Another detailed study of a Labour politics in a locality, Jon Lawrence's in Wolverhampton, uses local sociological data, such as census returns, and the local press to build up a picture of political activists and the people they sought to represent.²³ He discovered that few of the activists actually lived in the wards they represented and argues that this was one reason for their lack of electoral success. He argued that their 'political rejection of poverty and industrial exploitation presupposes its physical rejection.'²⁴ Despite sharing the class outlook of their supporters 'by the very nature of their political activism, of their claim to lead, Labour politicians were of necessity set apart from the majority of working people.'²⁵ This led to a tension between paternalism and being 'of the people'.²⁶ He also argued that the national leadership's policy of sending in outsiders to be Parliamentary candidates meant that Labour found it

²³ Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, pp. 128-133

²⁴ ibid. p. 133

²⁵ ibid. p. 160.

²⁶ ibid. p. 237.

difficult to develop local loyalties.²⁷

Comparing Lawrence's study with Poplar and West Ham, I would argue that his picture is similar to the situation in Poplar. Several Labour councillors did not live in the wards they represented. Furthermore, both Crooks and Lansbury presented themselves as champions of the poor, their homes open all hours to help anyone in trouble. However, Crooks did not build on his local support and seek to represent Poplar in Parliament and Lansbury did so only after trying two other constituencies outside the area. Furthermore, unlike Thorne, Lansbury did not present himself as a working man but as their champion. In West Ham the local Labour activists saw themselves not only as assisting local people with their problems but also acting in their community's interests on the national stage.²⁸ Thorne, for example, regularly asked questions in Parliament about local issues, such as increased funding for public works.

Based on the evidence of this thesis therefore, it would seem that Will Thorne and his supporters were the more successful political group but this depends on how we perceive politics. The chapters discussing unemployment, the campaign for women's suffrage and the Great Unrest illustrate that political success cannot be measured solely in votes. Despite not being in a majority on the council or the Board of Guardians, the Labour activists led by Lansbury in Poplar achieved a more humane treatment of the poor, even if they were unable to solve the main problem of unemployment. Similarly, with the issue of women's suffrage,

²⁷ ibid. p. 228.

²⁸ ibid. p. 237.

Lansbury's stance was the more committed and his actions, then and later, greatly assisted the campaign. Lansbury also claimed, via the *Daily Herald*, that he had 'accelerated the pace of unrest' and united the rebels in their campaigns for trade union recognition in 1912 to 1913.²⁹

Although it appeared that the socialists were in control in South West Ham, they too were unable to carry out many socialist policies because of their lack of overall majority on the Town Council. Even when they had a majority, from 1910 to 1912, these policies could not be enacted because of the rules governing local government finance. Their work on the West Ham Board of Guardians was also restricted, both by their lack of a majority and by the difficulties caused by the spread of responsibility over areas outside the borough. Here too the support for the campaign for women's suffrage by the Labour group was more muted. It was not seen as a major issue in West Ham.

In West Ham Thorne remained a committed trade unionist and MP. His vision was limited to gaining independent working class representation, both locally and nationally, so as to promote his essentially economic socialist policies. He was very focussed and did not have the wider vision of Lansbury. This made him more successful, in this period, in party politics. South West Ham is an illustration of successful development of a political party. Lansbury, however, with his national perspective and wider view of politics, that is not confined to purely party issues, represents the socialist movement. For both his work for the poor and his support for the campaign for women's suffrage Lansbury is

²⁹ *Daily Herald*, 22nd September 1913.

remembered today. Thorne on the other hand despite all his hard work for Labour and the trade unions is remembered by very few.

The differences in leadership style represented by Lansbury and Thorne were also reflected in the behaviour of their supporters. In Poplar the single issue of unemployment was given priority over campaigning for political representation. Many of those involved in the campaign did not put themselves up for election. They remained working through their trades unions and attempted to influence the local Council by their petitions for more work or better wages. This may reflect the more ‘traditional’ and deferential nature of political culture in Poplar. In South West Ham the development of the ‘new’ mass trades unions and the lack of established political leadership gave rise to a less deferential culture which enabled newer political ideas and organisation to develop. The Trades Council determined on increased working class representation at all levels in an attempt to change the capitalist economic structure. Barker in his study of Labour leadership in early twentieth century Yorkshire emphasises the importance of the work of Trades Council secretaries in the development of Labour success. He argues that they were committed men who ‘seldom participated in debates about policy, means or ends, and yet never faltered in their work for independent working class representation.’³⁰ He could have been describing J.Gilbey, the secretary of West Ham’s and District Trades and Labour Council from 1902. Although he was present at many

³⁰ Barker, B. ‘Anatomy of Reformism: The Social and Political Ideas of the Labour Leadership in Yorkshire,’ *International Review of Social History*, Volume 18, 1973.

meetings he rarely spoke and concentrated on administrative matters.³¹

This concentration on, and the subsequent control over, personnel and policy gave greater coherence to Labour politics and contributed to the success of local and national candidates.

By considering of the history of left wing activists in these two boroughs in the early twentieth century and comparing the cultural and economic milieu in which they acted and by using the theoretical concepts of social movements and political parties outlined in the introduction and reiterated in this conclusion this thesis has attempted to increase the understanding of labour and cultural community history before World War One.

³¹ See *Stratford Express*, 23rd May 1905, 26th October 1904, 31st May 1905 and 13th April 1907 for examples.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Poplar and West Ham – 1800



Source: Crouch, A.P. *Silvertown and Neighbourhood*, Thames Burleigh, 1900.

Appendix B

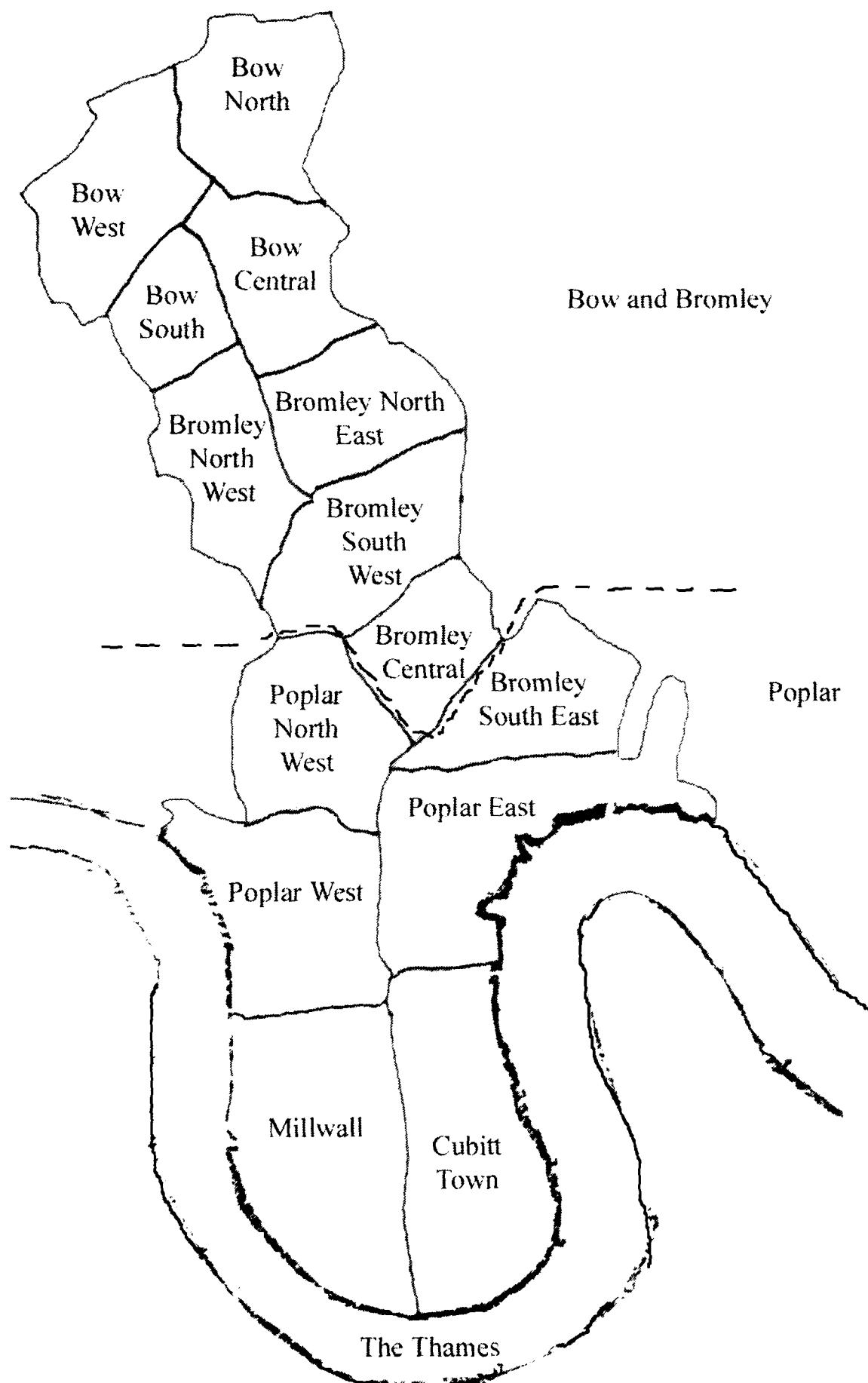
Poplar and West Ham – 1900



Source: Crouch, A.P. *Silvertown and Neighbourhood*, Thames Burleigh, 1900.

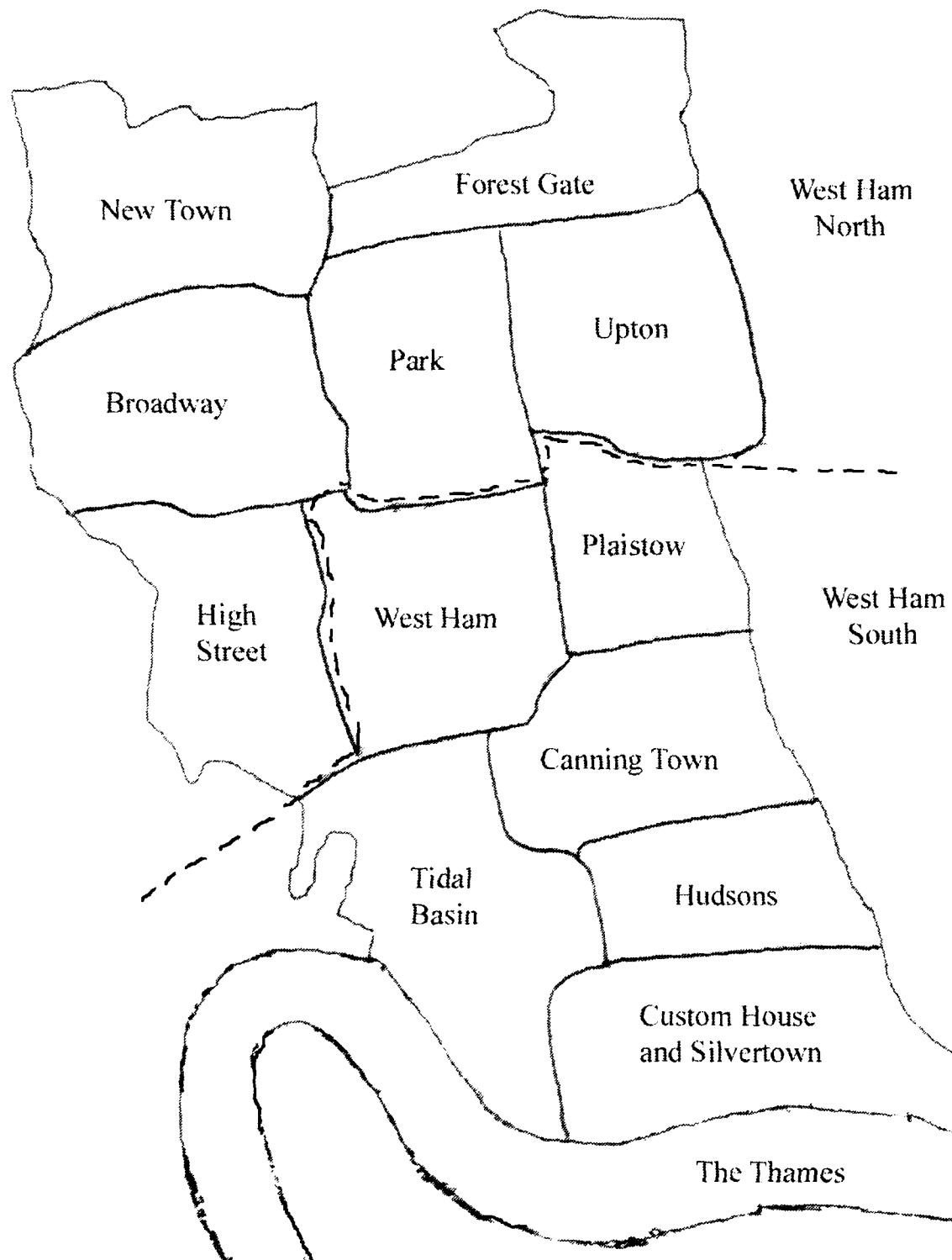
Appendix C

Poplar: Sketch Plan indicating Wards and Parliamentary Constituencies (not to scale)

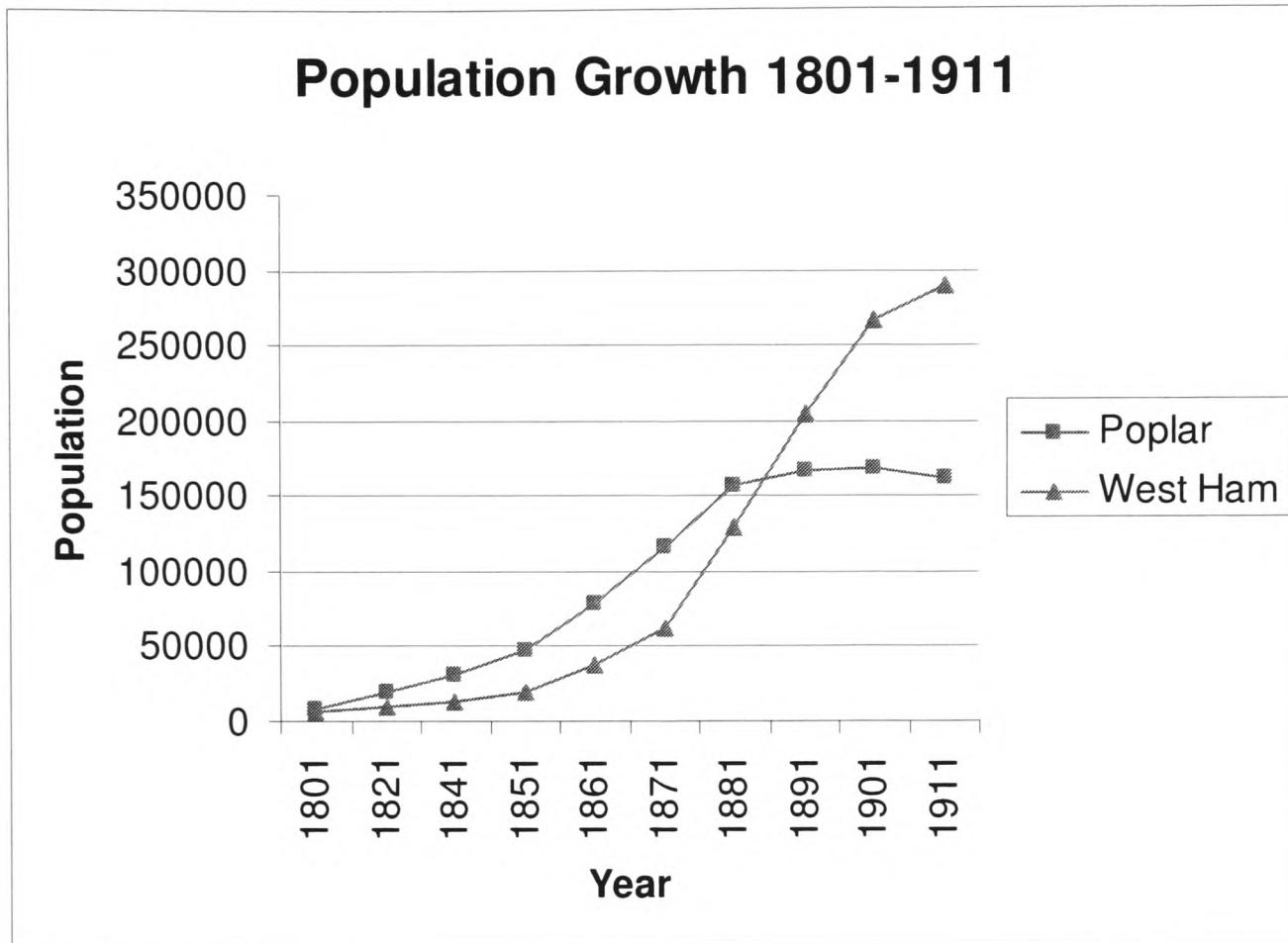


Appendix D

West Ham: Sketch Plan indicating Wards and Parliamentary Constituencies (not to scale)

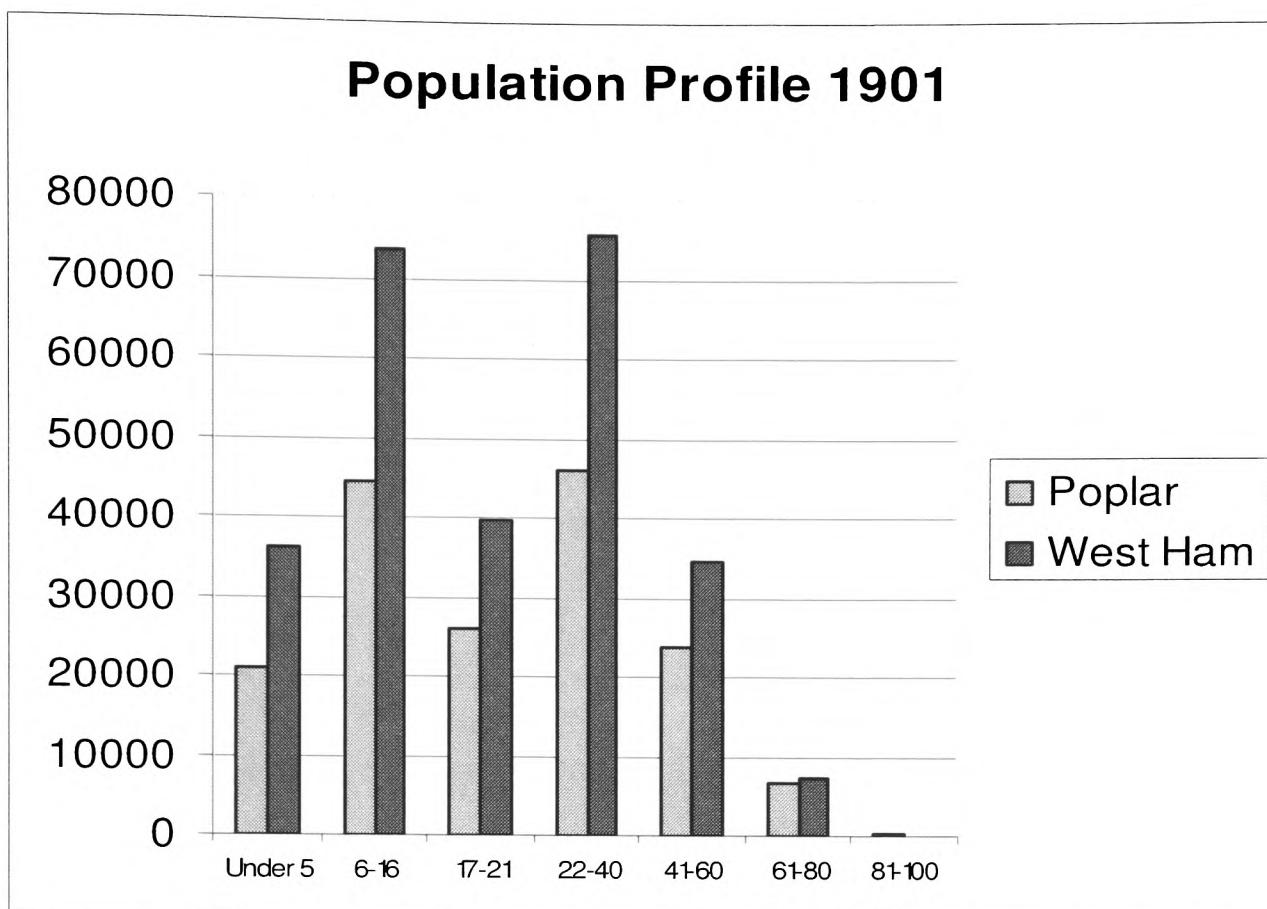


Appendix E – Table 1



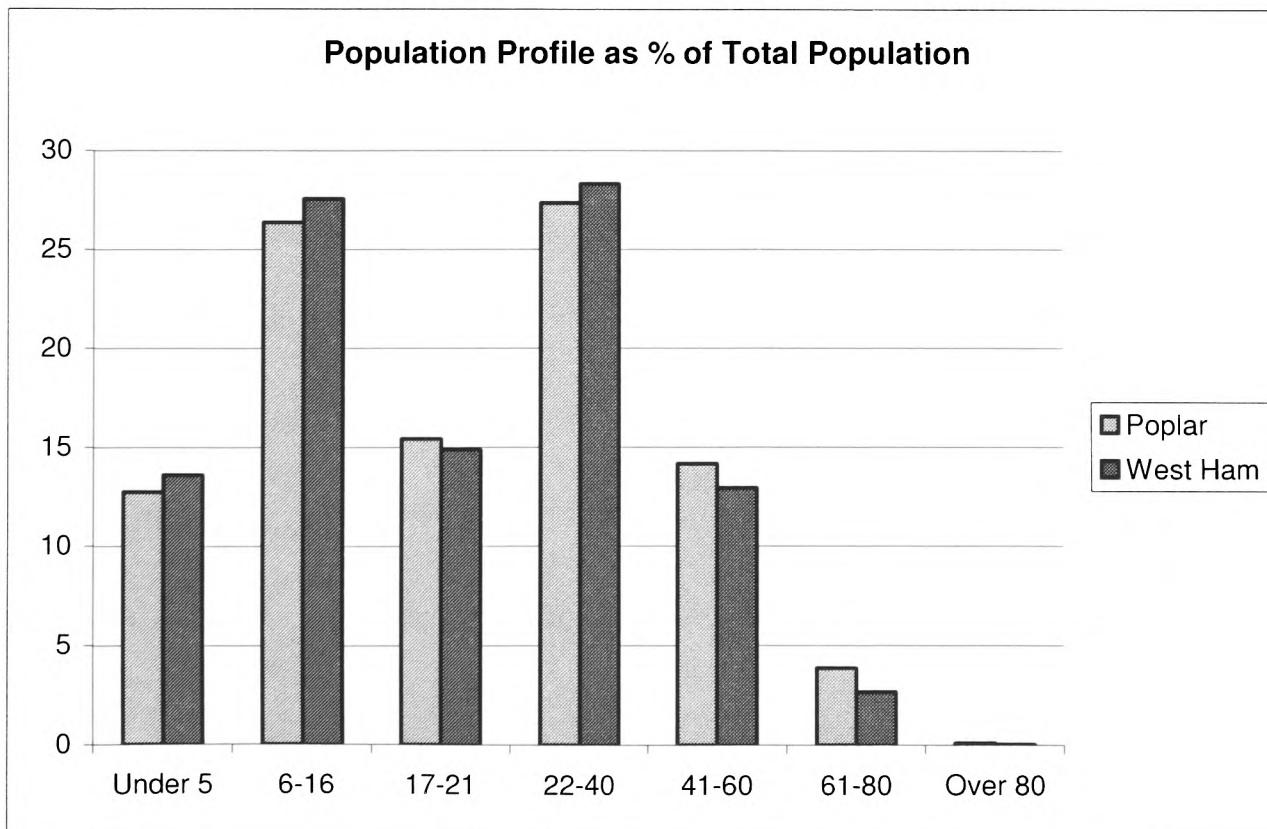
Source: Decennial Census of England and Wales

Appendix E – Table 2



Source: 1901 Census of England and Wales

Appendix E – Table 3



Source: 1901 Census of England and Wales

Appendix F: Heads of Household Survey

In order to compare the sociological composition and electoral franchise of the two boroughs a survey of eight wards was undertaken, two from each of the four Parliamentary constituencies. Using the Enumerators' notebooks for the 1901 Census of England and Wales the number of households within each ward was calculated. The four wards chosen represent those with the closest to the average (mean) number of households within each Parliamentary constituency. Ten per cent of the households in the chosen wards were sampled using computer generated random numbers. Then any women heads of households were removed leaving the total number of heads of household for analysis shown in the following tables.

The analysis shows the number of adult men in each of the broad occupational categories (a) and the percentage that forms of the number of Heads of Household sampled within each ward. (b) Also analysed were the number of men on the 1901 voting register within each occupational category (c) and the percentage thereof.(d) Finally the percentage of the voting population within each occupational category was calculated.(e)

In addition the birthplace of the sampled heads of household was recorded and this time the women were included. Four birthplace categories were used: within the home borough, elsewhere in London, elsewhere in the United Kingdom, including Ireland, and overseas.

The results are detailed below and discussed in the main body of the thesis.

Appendix F (cont'd)

BOW AND BROMLEY

Bow North

Total Male Heads of Household = 195
 Total on Voting Register = 86
 % Heads of Household on Voting Register = 44.1%

Occupational Category	Pop. per category	% Pop per category	No on register	%Voters per category	% Total voting pop.
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Unskilled Labour	51	26.1%	10	19.6%	11.6%
Semi skilled Labour	44	22.6%	20	45.4%	23.2%
Skilled artisan	74	37.9%	39	53.0%	45.3%
Clerks, shopkeepers	24	12.3%	15	62.5%	17.4%
Professionals, Pensioners	2	1.0%	2	100%	2.3%

Bromley North East

Total Male Heads of Household = 196
 Total on Voting Register = 110
 % Heads of Household on Voting Register = 56.1%

Occupational Category	Pop. per category	% Pop. per category	No on register	% Voters per category	% Total voting pop.
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Unskilled Labour	87	44.4%	44	50.6%	40.0%
Semi skilled Labour	33	16.8%	21	63.6%	19.1%
Skilled artisan	51	26.0%	32	62.7%	29.1%
Clerks, shopkeepers	23	11.7%	12	52.2%	10.9%
Professionals, Pensioners	3	1.5%	1	33.3%	0.9%

Appendix F (cont'd)

POPLAR

Bromley South East

Total Heads of Household = 226
 Total on Voting Register = 123
 % Heads of Household on Voting Register = 54.4%

Occupational Category	Pop. per category	% Pop. per category	No on register	% Voters per category	% Total voting pop.
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	e
Unskilled Labour	63	27.9%	27	42.8%	21.9%
Semi skilled Labour	48	21.2%	25	52.1%	20.3%
Skilled artisan	94	41.6%	57	60.6%	46.3%
Clerks, shopkeepers	18	8.0%	11	61.1%	8.9%
Professionals, Pensioners	4	1.8%	3	75.0%	2.4%

Cubitt Town

Total Male Heads of Household = 214
 Total on Voting Register = 114
 % Heads of Household on Voting Register = 53.3%

Occupational Category	Pop. per category	% Pop per category	No on register	%Voters per category	% Total voting pop.
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Unskilled Labour	77	36.0%	33	42.8%	28.9%
Semi skilled Labour	41	19.1%	27	65.8%	23.7%
Skilled artisan	62	30.0%	38	61.3%	33.3%
Clerks, shopkeepers	35	16.3%	15	42.8%	13.1%
Professionals, Pensioners	1	0.5%	1	100%	0.9%

NORTH WEST HAM

Upton

Total Male Heads of Household = 393
 Total on Voting Register = 282
 % Heads of Household on Voting Register = 71.7%

Occupational Category	Pop. per category	% Pop per category	No on register	% Voters category	% Total voting pop.
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Unskilled Labour	18	4.6%	10	55.5%	3.5%
Semi skilled Labour	31	7.9%	23	74.2%	8.2%
Skilled artisan	93	23.7%	70	75.3%	24.8%
Clerks, shopkeepers	222	56.5%	159	71.6%	56.4%
Professionals, Pensioners	29	7.4%	20	69.0%	7.1%

New Town

Total Male Heads of Household = 395
 Total on Voting Register = 211
 % Heads of Household on Voting Register = 53.4%

Occupational Category	Pop. per category	% Pop. per category	No on register	% Voters per category	% Total voting pop.
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Unskilled Labour	83	21.0%	34	41.0%	16.1%
Semi skilled Labour	72	18.2%	44	61.0%	20.9%
Skilled artisan	179	45.3%	105	59.0%	49.8%
Clerks, shopkeepers	57	14.4%	27	47.4%	12.8%
Professionals, Pensioners	7	1.8%	1	14.3%	0.5%

SOUTH WEST HAM

Custom House

Total Male Heads of Household = 393
 Total on Voting Register = 237
 % Heads of Household on Voting Register = 60.3%

Occupational Category	Pop. per category	% Pop./category	No on register	% Voters per category	% Total voting pop.
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Unskilled Labour	190	48.3%	90	47.4%	38.0%
Semi skilled Labour	54	13.7%	34	63.0%	14.3%
Skilled artisan	106	30.0%	77	72.6%	32.5%
Clerks, shopkeepers	45	11.4%	35	77.7%	14.8%
Professionals, Pensioners	2	0.5%	1	50.0%	0.4%

Canning Town

Total Male Heads of Household = 385
 Total on Voting Register = 256
 % Heads of Household on Voting Register = 66.5%

Occupational Category	Pop. per category	% Pop. per category	No on register	% Voters per category	% Total voting pop.
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Unskilled Labour	182	47.3%	110	60.4%	43.0%
Semi skilled Labour	51	13.2%	35	68.6%	13.7%
Skilled artisan	114	29.6%	86	75.4%	33.6%
Clerks, shopkeepers	33	8.6	23	69.7%	9.0%
Professionals, Pensioners	3	0.8%	2	66.6%	0.8%

Appendix F (cont'd)

Birthplace Analysis

POPLAR

Category	Bow North	Bromley North East	Bromley South East	Cubitt Town
Home Borough	13.5%	23.0%	31.8%	15.1%
London	58.5%	33.0%	30.1%	22.1%
British Isles	25.5%	42.5%	36.8%	61.0%
Overseas	2.5%	1.5%	1.2%	1.7%

WEST HAM

Category	Upton	New Town	Custom House	Canning Town
Home Borough	4.8%	12.5%	3.8%	4.8%
London	42.6%	27.0%	35.3%	41.5%
British Isles	50.0%	59.0%	55.0%	49.4%
Overseas	2.8%	1.5%	6.5%	4.3%

Figures aggregated by borough

	Poplar	West Ham
Home Borough	21.1%	6.5%
London	35.2%	36.5%
British Isles	42.0%	53.3%
Overseas	1.7%	3.8%

Appendix G**Firms with Rateable Value over £300****POPLAR**

Rateable Value £	Company	Business
305	J. Manger & Son Ltd.	chemical factory
310	David Johnson	factory
320	Westhorpe Ltd.	oakum works
325	Royal National Lifeboat Association	wharf
328	Berkell & Parnell Slicing Machine Co.	manufactory
330	J. & E. Barringer Ltd.	oil works
338	Alex Hutchinson & Son	iron foundry
344	Anderson & Anderson	works & stables
348	Young & Martin	union wharf
348	E. Osborne & Co., Ltd.	factory
350	Colthurst & Harding	paint works
350	Westwood & Co.	manufactory
351	Achille Sene Ltd.	dye works
354	London Asphalt Co.	asphalt works
360	Esdale & Co.	saw mills
360	Edward Tarn	safe factory
373	Lennox Brown & Co.	manufactory
374	Claridges Patent Asphalt Co.	wharf
377	John Bellamy Ltd.	manufactory
380	Engest & Rolfe Ltd.	felt works
380	Hunter & English Ltd.	works
380	John & Watts Ltd.	factory
389	H. H. Winkley	wharf
390	Palmer & Son	match factory
396	Grindley & Co.	oil works
400	Glengarnock Iron & Steel	manufactory
400	Facidal Ltd.	chemical works
400	Tabor Trego & Co., Ltd.	varnish works
400	Ratner Safe Co.	engineering works
400	E. Barnes & Co.	chemical works
412	Engest Co.	picture frame works
413	Snowden & Sons Ltd.	paint works
418	Lancaster & Co.	works
420	Siley Weir & Co.	engineering works
420	Lusky & Co.	jam mills
432	Le Bas	factory warehouse
447	J. F. Ebner	manufactory
448	Ragazine & Co.	oil store
455	Power Deane Ransome & Co.	wharf

Appendix G
(cont'd)

Firms with Rateable Value over £300

Rateable Value	Company	Business
£		
462	Lenanton & Son	timber yard
486	Shaw & Co.	iron works
490	B. P. Oils	wharf
500	L. Hodges & Sons	union iron works
500	Tank Storage & Carriage	warehouse
504	Watts Ltd.	wharf
514	Andrew Parry	works
520	G. Munday & Son	wharf
528	Chas. Webster Ltd.	stable & warehouse
530	Port of London Authority	wharf
536	Frazer & Frazer Ltd.	boiler works
552	Glengall Iron Works	dry dock
555	Cutler & Sons	iron works
565	Dunbars Cooperage	manufactory
567	J. W. Smith	factory
585	H. J. Shaw & Co.	iron works
594	Sapon Ltd.	manufactory
600	Stewart & Sons Ltd.	shipyard
601	Geo. Clark & Son Ltd.	glucose works
603	Turner Blewett & Co.	oil mills
610	Lush & Cook Ltd.	dye works
610	H. W. Caslow Ltd.	tyre foundry
631	Union Lightrope	manufactory
640	Hogarth & Co.	factory
643	Sir W A Rose & Co.	wharf
650	Hawkins	manufactory
680	Fraser & Son	boiler works
683	East Ferry Engineering	engineering works
688	London Trading Co.	warehouse
695	Browns Dry Dock	engineering works
698	London Thames Oil & Wharves Ltd.	
703	Bow Creek Oil Mills	
706	Barnet & Eleis Ltd.	factory
708	Jno. Kidd & Co., Ltd.	ink factory
720	Anglo American Oil Co.	wharf
745	Stirling Manufacturing Co.	manufactory
750	H. Street	garage
750	Perry & Co., Ltd.	workshop & stables
762	Limmer Asphalt Co.	yard etc
763	Britannia Folding Box Co., Ltd.	factory
770	Geo. Armstrong & Co.	wharf & stables

Appendix G
(cont'd)

Firms with Rateable Value over £300

Rateable Value	Company	Business
£		
799	Thornes Sack & Bag Co.	sugar refinery
806	Crosse & Blackwell Ltd.	wharf
815	J. T. McDougall	flour mills
827	Farmed Cake Co., Ltd.	manufactory
850	Manganeze Bronze & Brass	works
876	Edmund Burnell	wharf
877	Fenner & Alden	manufactory
880	J. Edwin Wright	ropery
895	Electrical Storage Co.	works
896	St. Leonards Oil Wharf Co.	wharf
920	W. C. Barnes Ltd.	works
945	Johnson & Son	factory
1011	J. W. Cook & Co., Ltd.	wharf
1105	Stewart & Sons	manufactory
1107	R. Bell Ltd.	match factory
1110	Fairfields Ltd.	warehouse & wharf
1244	Malmsley Co.	malt mills
1254	Union Castle Mails	depot
1280	W. W. Howard Bros., & Co.	timber mills
1407	Bullivant & Co.	wire rope works
1433	Kemball Bishop & Co.	chemical manufacture
1480	Smith Garrett & Co., Ltd.	brewery
1532	Benger & Co.	starch works
1580	Sun Flour Mills Ltd.	flour mills
1587	London Oil Storage Co.	wharf
1625	Wilkinson Heyward & Clark	paint works
1631	E. Cook & Co., Ltd.	soap works
1632	J. B. James & Co.	works
1687	J. Watson & Sons	wharf & stables
1790	Jno. Broadwood & Sons	factory
1916	London Graving Docks Co.	dry dock
2000	Maconochie Brothers	manufactory
2165	Aberdeen Steam Navigation Co.	wharf
2172	Fenesta Ltd.	works
2200	London Small Arms Makers	armoury
2214	Makerlow & Sons Ltd.	factory
2317	Wallpaper Manufacture Ltd.	factory
2461	R & H Green Ltd.	Blackwall Yard
2561	Fletcher Fearnell & Sons Ltd.	dry dock
2750	J. W. Cook	wharf & warehouse
3680	Bryant & May Ltd.	match factory

Appendix G
(cont'd)

Firms with Rateable Value over £300

Rateable Value	Company	Business
£		
3800	Clarke Nicholls & Coombe Ltd.	confectionery
3864	C. & E. Morton	wharf & factory
5808	Spratts Ltd.	animal feeds

Source: Poplar Borough Council Rating Valuation 1910

Appendix H Firms with rateable value over £300

WEST HAM

Rateable Value £	Company	Business
300	W. & J. Hunt	flour mills
300	W. C. Bacon	chemical manufacture
300	Victoria Docks Iron Foundry	
316	Wilson & Whitworth	printers
340	W. Simpson Manhattan Petroleum Wharf	
350	G. Cohen & Co.	iron works
350	Jeyes Sanitary Co., Ltd.	
370	Hogarth & Co.	confectionary manufacture
375	Harrison Barker & Co.	manure & glue
375	London Grain Elevator Co., Ltd.	
400	G. Rice	Hudsons Bay fur works
400	Morris Streimer & Co	confectionary manufacture
425	Smith Bros. & Co.	tar & oil works
429	Curwen & Sons	printers
430	Mason & Mason Ltd.	printing ink manufacture
450	Du Barry & Co.	patent food works
485	C. Turner	varnish works
500	T. Tyler & Co.	chemical manufacture
500	Suter Hantman & Co.	
500	United Alkali Co.	
515	Lester & Perkins	engineering
525	J. H. Johnson & Co.	chemical manufacture
530	Winstone & Son	printing ink manufacture
563	Albert Docks Engine Co.	marine engineering
600	Hemingway & Co.	colour & ink manufacture
600	Gibbs & Co.	manure
640	Patent Victorian Stone Co.	
721	J. Hunt & Son	animal, charcoal & bone works
767	R Clark Ingham Co.	varnish works
800	French Co.	asphalt manufacture
800	London Distillery & Yeast Co.	

Appendix H
(cont'd)

Firms with rateable value over £300

Rateable Value £	Company	Business
800	W. W. Howard	timber yard & saw mills
820	Ashton Green Iron Co.	iron works
830	A Boake Roberts & Co.	chemical manufacture
875	C. W. Schmidt	varnish works
878	H B Walmsley & Son	malting
945	Vinola Soap Co.	soap & tallow works
950	J. H. Harris	confectionary
1000	J. Keiller & Son	manufacture
1000	J. Knight	soap & oil works
1000	Lamson Paragon Supply Co.	stationery manufacture
1049	J. Frazer	artificial manure
1230	Palmer & Co	oil & candle manufacturers
1269	F. W. Berk & Co	chemical manufacture
1462	E. Cook & Son	soap & manure works
1500	Johnsons Sacheron Co.	chemical manufacture
1500	Slate & Palmer	printing ink manufacture
1605	W. Cory & Son	coal wharf
1700	Shuters, Chippindale & Colyer	steam cooperage
1770	London Tilbury & Southern Rly Works	
2450	British Alarazine Co.	colour & dye manufacture
2475	Savill Brothers Stratford	brewery
2590	Howard & Son	chemical manufacture
2625	Nitro Phosphate & Odam	chemical manure
2638	Anglo Continental Guano	manure manufacture
2750	W Ritchie & Sons	jute works
2760	New Lea Valley Distillery	
3250	Burt Bolton & Hayward	creosote manufacture
3667	Spencer Chapman & Messel	chemical manufacture
3867	Leather Cloth Co.	
4886	J. & W. Nicholson	distillery
5386	Brunner Mond & Co.	alkali manufacture
5386	Mineral Oil Corporation	oil refining
5500	A. Lyle & Sons	sugar refinery
6761	Gas Light & Coke Co., Silvertown Works	

Appendix H
(cont'd) Firms with rateable value over £300

Rateable Value £	Company	Business
8108	Thames Ironworks	shipbuilding & repair
8250	Henry Tate & Co.	sugar refinery
14560	India Rubber, Gutta Percha & Telegraph Co., Ltd.	
15279	West Ham Gas Co.	
16289	Albert Dock (part)	
21750	Great Eastern Railway	railway building & repairs
31546	Victoria Dock	
39300	Gas Light & Coke Co., Bromley Works	

Source: West Ham - Howarth, R. G and Wilson, M. *West Ham: a Study in Social and Industrial Problems*, London 1907, reprinted Garland Publishing, 1980.

Appendix I

Expenditure for five weeks of average family in classes B to E

	B			C & D			E		
	£.	s.	d.	£.	s.	d.	£.	s.	d.
Food	3	0	9½	3	4	6	3	7	2½
Beer & Tobacco		1	11¾		4	4¾		3	6¾
Fire & Light		10	0½		8	10		10	0
Rent	1	1	6	1	6	1½	1	3	7¼
Washing & Cleaning		3	3¾		2	9		2	11
Clothes etc			11		3	0½		10	5¾
Education, Medicine etc			5¾		2	2¾		2	10½
Insurance etc		2	8¼		3	7½		4	4¼
Total		5	1	8½		5	13	6	
Per Week		1	0	4		1	2	8½	
							6	0	0

Note: For the purpose of this exercise the family consisted of husband, wife and three children one son aged 18 and daughters aged 8 and 6. The incomes were not recorded.

Source: Booth, C. *Life & Labour of the People of London*, Macmillan, 1902-3, Volume 1, p. 138.

Appendix J

Male Occupations 1901.
Males aged over fifteen.

	Poplar		West Ham	
Occupation	total	%	total	%
Population Occupied	52129		80408	
National & Local Government	926	1.7	1585	1.2
Armed Forces	125	0.2	204	0.2
Professionals	737	1.4	1841	2.3
Domestic service	500	0.9	690	0.8
Commerce and insurance	2729	5.2	5988	7.4
Carriers incl. railway & docks	13506	25.9	19214	23.9
Iron & steel	8120	15.6	10795	13.4
Precious metals, instrument makers	556	1.1	1442	1.8
Builders, brick makers	4538	8.7	9052	11.2
Wood workers	2281	4.4	2158	2.7
Chemical, leather	1658	3.2	3262	4.0
Paper products	1369	2.6	1734	2.1
Textiles	2285	4.4	2992	3.7
Food, lodging houses	4228	8.1	6991	8.7
Utilities	727	1.4	1983	2.5
General labourers	7665	14.7	9956	12.4

Without specified occupation as a percentage of total unoccupied males

	Poplar		West Ham	
	Total	%	total	%
Population unoccupied	10950		15782	
Living on own means	218	2.0	439	2.8
Pensioners (not armed forces)	1512	14.0	1057	6.7
Others incl. students	9220	84.2	14286	90.0

Source: Census of England and Wales 1901

Appendix K

Female Occupations 1901.

Females aged over fifteen years, married and unmarried or widowed.

Occupation	Poplar			West Ham	
	total	%		total	%
Population occupied	18570			23815	
National or Local Government	227	1.2		145	0.6
Armed Forces					
Professionals	1008	5.4		2496	10.5
Domestic service	4491	24.2		7268	30.5
Commerce & insurance	328	1.8		613	2.6
Carriers incl. railway and docks	73	0.4		154	0.6
Iron & steel	159	0.8		117	0.5
Precious metals, instrument makers	78	0.4		80	0.3
Builders & brick makers	32	0.2		33	0.1
Wood workers	408	2.2		213	0.9
Chemicals, leather	1389	7.5		1092	4.6
Paper products	843	4.5		722	3.0
Textiles	6499	35.0		7530	31.6
Food, lodging houses	1964	10.6		2798	11.7
Utilities					
General labourers	582	3.1		411	1.7

Without specified occupation as a percentage of total unoccupied females

	Poplar			West Ham	
	total	%		total	%
Population unoccupied	44252			74355	
Living on own means	706	1.6		1573	2.1
Pensioners, not armed force	671	1.5		138	0.2
Others incl. students	42876	96.8		72644	97.7

Source: Census of England and Wales 1901

Appendix L

Trade Unions Subscribers to the Poplar Labour Electoral League 1901

Amalgamated Society of Engineers Blackwall No 2
Amalgamated Society of Watermen and Lightermen South District
Amalgamated Society of Watermen and Lightermen Upper District
Amalgamated Stevedore Labour Protection League No 7
Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants Stratford Branch
Engine Drivers and Firemen's Union
East London Ironfounders Society
London and Provincial Hammermen's Association
London Saddle and Harness Makers Trade Union
London County Council Employees Association
London Carmen's Trade Union
National Municipal Employees Union
National Municipal Employees Union Poplar Branch
Operative Bakers and Confectioners Trade Union
Tank Makers etc Trade Union

Source: Poplar Labour League Eighth Annual Report, 1899-1900.

Appendix M

Trade Unions who supported Labour Group on West Ham Town Council in 1898

Amalgamated Union of Bakers and Confectioners
United Society of Boilermakers and Iron Shipwrights
Operative Bricklayers Society
Union of Builders Labourers
Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners
United Coachmakers Society
London Society of Compositors
Dock Wharf Riverside and General Labourers Union
Crane Drivers Union
London United Society of Drillers
Amalgamated Society of Engineers
National Society of Glassblowers
National Municipal Labourers Union
Union of East London Painters
Amalgamated Society of House Decorators and Painters
National Association of Operative Plasterers
United Operative Plumbers Association
Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants
Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants
National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers

Source: West Ham Electoral Scrapbook, Volume 1, p. 95.
List as printed

Appendix N

Labour candidates for Poplar Borough Council 1903

Ward	Candidate	Nominated by
Bow		
West	G. Lansbury	NUGW&GL
South	Purdy	Operative Bricklayers
Bromley		
North East	King	NUGW&GL
	Councillor A G Smith	Operative Bricklayers
	A Phillips	United Builders Labourers
South West	C. Sumner	NUGW&GL
	W. Maddams	NUGW&GL
	J. Banks	ASRS
North West	J. Woodman	City Society of House Decorators & Painters
Central	P. Murray	Amalgamated Society House Decorators, Poplar Branch
South East	F. Thurston	Amalgamated Society Engine Drivers & Firemen
	J. Lindsay	United Drillers Society
	G. Palmer	London Carmen's Union
Poplar		
East	S. March	Secretary London Carmen's Union
North West	A. Darby	Export Branch Dockers Union
	R. Hilditch	Lithographers Society

Source: *East End News*, 22nd September 1903.

Appendix O

Labour Candidates for West Ham Town Council November 1903

Ward	Candidate	'Party' allegiance	Trade Union (if known)
West Ham North			
New Town			
Forest Gate			
High Street	E. Leggatt E. McAllen		Carman
Broadway	A. Skinner	Labour & Progressive	Toolmaker
Park	V. Fink	Socialist & Labour	
Upton	W. Woodward	Progressive	
West Ham	G. Bissell A. Maguire		NUGW&GL
West Ham South			
Plaistow	W. Edwards	Socialist & Labour	Endorsed by WH&DT&LC
Hudsons	B. Cunningham A. Hayday	SDF SDF	Not TU member but endorsed by WH&DT&LC NUGW&GL
Canning Town	T. Watts W. Thorne	SDF SDF	Shopkeeper NUGW&GL
Tidal Basin	J. Davis H. Baldock W. Devenay	ILP ILP ILP	Shop Assistants Union Self employed printer Dock Wharf & Riverside
Custom House	G. Croot	ILP	NUGW&GL

Sources: West Ham Election Scrapbook No 2 ; West Ham Town Council Minutes, 24th November 1903 and *Stratford Express*, 4th November 1903. For the reference to Cunningham's endorsement despite not being a trade union member see *Stratford Express*, 2nd December 1903. The party allegiances are taken from various press reports.

Appendix P

Poplar Councillors who voted with the Labour Group elected November 1906

Alfred James	Bow North
Charles Taylor	Bow North
George Lansbury	Bow West
Alfred Partridge	Bow West
William Fisher	Bromley North East
Albert Phillips	Bromley North East
William Suckling	Bromley North East
John Bellsham	Bromley Central
William Jones	Bromley Central
Sam March	Bromley South West
George Maddams	Bromley South West
Joseph Banks	Bromley South West
Charlie Sumner	Bromley South West
A. G. Smith	Poplar North West
Arthur Darby	Poplar North West
Donzy Hubbard	Cubitt Town

Poplar Councillors who voted with the Labour group elected November 1912

J. F. Gardner	Bow North
Rev. W.H. Hunt	Bow North
Edgar Lansbury	Bow North
Mark Dalton	Bow West
George Lansbury	Bow West
Alfred Partridge	Bow West
A. R. Adams	Bromley Central
Joseph Banks	Bromley South West
Charles Sumner	Bromley South West
Sam March	Bromley South West
R. W. Hilditch	Poplar North West
Miss Katherine Medley	Poplar North West
Walter Henry Green	Poplar East
Christopher Edward Williams	Poplar East

Source: Poplar Borough Council Minutes.

Appendix Q

West Ham Councillors who voted with the Labour/Progressive Group elected November 1906

Revd H Cubbon	Plaistow
J. R. Hurry (P)	New Town
David J. Davis	Tidal Basin
William Devenay	Tidal Basin
George Fennell	Tidal Basin
Harold Baldock	Tidal Basin
Arthur Hayday	Hudsons
Jack Jones	Hudsons
Richard Mansfield	Canning Town
Ben Gardner	Canning Town
Will Thorne MP	Canning Town
Richard White	Custom House & Silvertown
George Croot	Custom House & Silvertown

West Ham Councillors who voted with the Labour/Progressive Group in January 1911

Charles Dear	Forest Gate
Atkinson	Forest Gate
Morris Streimer (P)	High Street
W. T. Budd	High Street
G H Fennell	High Street
Charles Hughes	West Ham
Enos Smith	West Ham
Arthur Hart	Plaistow
James Pearce	Plaistow
J. R. Hurry (P)	New Town
E. Appleford (P)	New Town
Ernest Reed	Tidal Basin
David J. Davis	Tidal Basin
William Devenay	Tidal Basin
C Sendall	Tidal Basin
John Husband	Hudsons
George Grisley	Hudsons
H Bertram Maynard	Hudsons
Richard Mansfield	Canning Town
Tom Kirk	Canning Town
Will Thorne MP	Canning Town
Ben Gardner	Canning Town
E J Chamberlain	Canning Town
Chapman	Custom House & Silvertown
W. T. Bell	Custom House & Silvertown
Jack Jones	Custom House & Silvertown
George Croot	Custom House & Silvertown

Source: West Ham Town Council Minutes

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