

# The Leeds Rent Strike of 1914

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*A reappraisal of the radical  
history of the tenants  
movement*

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## **2.0 Introduction**

The tenants movement in Britain carries with it a radical tradition which may seem remote from the present day realities of many of its member associations.

Behind the current structures of tenant participation and the good practice of housing management, lies a tradition of a tenants movement which has changed laws and spearheaded social progress throughout decades of popular struggle.

This model of tenants associations as part of a mass social movement on the cutting edge of participatory democracy, stems, I will argue, from a largely fictional account of their origins.

The movement's historians admit that the first tenants associations to be established in the 1920s served primarily as interest groups for the labour aristocracy. They were the creation of a skilled artisan class who organised to defend their privileges as much against the unskilled and impoverished working class as against their new council landlords.

A different story, however, is told of the role played by tenants organisations in the early campaigns for social housing at the turn of the century. Events like the Glasgow Rent Strike in 1915 are seen as a crusade for progress by a popular mass working class movement.

The birth of the tenants movement in the series of rent strikes from the 1880s to 1915 gave the movement a radical birthright which today's associations still treasure. It is the received history of these rent strikes which allows tenants associations today to portray themselves as part of a campaigning movement and a representative voice for all tenants.

This research project sets out to examine this received history. It poses the hypothesis that the tenants movement was created to represent the interests of the skilled working class or artisan class and to discriminate against the un-skilled or unemployed sections of the working class. It presents sources showing that the tenants movement, from its origins, has acted to maintain a divide between sections of the working class. It disputes the campaigning image of the rent strikes and questions the movement's belief in itself as having ever represented all tenants.

## **3.0 Methodology**

Popular movements seldom leave much written history behind them. The story of tenants struggles is written on posters and leaflets and it fades as quickly as the memories of the people involved.

This research project studies one of the rent strikes of the pre-World War I years and seeks to draw conclusions which may be reflected in the other tenant struggles of those decades. Without deeper research into each one of those events, however, no definite conclusion on the hypothesis can be reached.

In 1914 tenants in Leeds went on rent strike and, apparently, launched one of the first tenants campaigning organisations demanding public housing. There has been no detailed study of this campaign, and the only available primary sources are local newspaper accounts.

The strongest source is the weekly newspaper of the Leeds Labour Party, The Leeds Citizen. In 1914 this newspaper saw itself as the voice of the rent strikers, and reported their every meeting. So it must be treated as a partial source and I have hoped to balance the evidence with the apparent "objectivity" of the Conservative Yorkshire Evening News and the Liberal Leeds Mercury as well as more distant labour movement observations from the Yorkshire Factory Times.

These sources present a strong case in favour of the hypothesis and what was quoted or not quoted in a newspaper account of a public meeting can be used to support the argument. But it cannot wholly endorse it. The available evidence can only give a glimpse into the Leeds rent strike and the motivation of its participants.

#### **4.0 A radical tradition**

##### **Historians and the origins of the tenants movement - a review of the secondary sources**

The tenants movement - like many working class organisations - has to create its own historians. Popular struggles find little place in the standard history texts. The people who research what little trace of documentation is left behind, may be excused their enthusiasm and their partisan approach to their subject.

John Grayson's "Opening the window - the hidden history of tenants organisations" (1996) draws together a variety of local secondary sources to present the first overview of the movement's early history.

It is a polemical account, designed to inspire present day tenant activists. It concludes with the rallying cry: "Campaigning tenant organisations have survived the 1980s. This history may help to encourage them to thrive again beyond 2000" (Grayson 1996 p.55).

For Grayson the tenant movement is "linked to wider social and political disaffection and rebellion" (Grayson 1996 p.8). He portrays it as a campaign for social progress as well as social housing and he is not alone.

Damer's account of the famous Glasgow rent strike of 1915 (Damer 1994) compares it to the anti-poll tax struggles of the 1990s - depicting both as popular movements championing justice. The tenant rent strikes are seen as shaking Parliament - bringing on the Rent and Mortgage Restriction Act of 1915 and even - in Kemp (1994) - giving birth to social housing by influencing the Addison Act of 1919 .

The first tenants associations did not appear in England until the 1920s (Grayson 1996). They were neighbourhood organisations formed to represent tenants' long term interests. As Grayson notes the new tenants associations and their type of organisation were "instantly recognisable to the present generation of tenant activist" (Grayson 1996 p28). These new tenants associations became an interest group, promoting the status of the privileged working class who could afford the rents of the first council housing. The early tenants associations in Leeds in 1934 became the prime example of this, when they allied themselves with the Conservatives to oppose Labour's rent rebate scheme (Finnigan 1984).

So the reputation of the tenants movement as a broad social movement and campaign for social housing does not lie with the activities of these first tenants associations. It finds its roots in a rash of tenant rent strikes first catalogued by Englander (1983) which broke out in 1881 and continued sporadically across the country up until 1915.

The Leeds Rent Strike of 1914 is touched on by Englander (1983) and is listed in Grayson (1996) as one of the failed episodes in those early campaigns. A more in-depth study of the Leeds rent strike, however, may cast a different interpretation on the radical history of the tenants movement. It certainly shows lines of continuity between what has been portrayed (by Grayson, Englander, Damer) as a movement concerned not just with rent, but with the quality, health and the public ownership of homes - and with the first tenants associations, which even Grayson accepts, were interested only in the sectional interests of the better-off council tenants.

## **5.0 The Leeds rent strike in 1914**

In early January 1914 around 300 tenants living in the terrace streets of the Harolds in the Burley area of Leeds went on rent strike against a 6d increase in rents imposed by the landlords Walmsleys. The rent increase had been called for by the Leeds branch of the Property Owners Association. At a mass meeting of Burley tenants on the Queens Road feastground on Sunday January 10, the rent strike organisers called for a city-wide protest against the increase (Citizen Jan 16 1914).

A week later on January 17, the Leeds Trades Council hosted a Labour conference intended to organise mass rent resistance. A Tenants Defence League was formed with a central committee of nine and a mission to spread the rent campaign across the city through a series of public meetings and neighbourhood canvassing (Citizen Jan 23 1914).

Increased rent demands were sent to 10,000 homes covered by the Property Owners Association. Like the rent rises, the rent strike spread quickly across Leeds that

month. By the end of the second week of the strike, Tenants Defence League committees had been set up in Burley, East Leeds and Harehills with delegates elected to the central committee. Further groups were set up in North Leeds and Armley and Wortley to the south (Mercury Jan 27 1914).

At the start of February five weeks into the rent strike, out of 285 Burley tenants who had refused to pay, 178 were still withholding the extra sixpence their landlords demanded. Twenty notices to quit had been served in the Burley area, and out of those tenants 14 were still refusing to pay, and four had moved out. (Mercury Feb. 9). Rent collectors were having a hard time of it. "Housewives are refusing to allow the rent collector over the doorstep or produce rent books. One tossed the poor man out of the house," noted the Citizen (Feb. 13 1914).

On February 27 1914, the first rent strike case came before County Court

when landlords Stephenson and Murgatroyd applied for possession orders against three tenants in Thornleigh Mount, Harehills. The Tenants Defence League solicitor, Walter Foster argued that the combination by landlords to raise rent across the city was an illegal monopolistic conspiracy. The arguments were of no interest to the judge who awarded possession to the landlords, postponed for one month. The hearing, seen as a test case by the Tenants Defence League, signalled the end of the rent strike (Citizen March 6 1914).

At the beginning of March, eight weeks into the rent strike, and after another court hearing, only 85 out of the 285 Burley rent rebels were left holding out. Burley strike organiser, Fred Patchett reluctantly told them: "Tenants you are beaten. The law has gone against you," (Citizen March 13 1914).

The Harehills area Tenants Defence League committee was still meeting in April, when it was noted that they were holding their first social gathering (Citizen April 17 1914). But by the beginning of May, the other neighbourhood tenant organisations thrown up by the rent strike had dispersed (Citizen May 1 1914) and by the end of June all the Harehills committee members had been evicted and blacklisted from renting any other home. It was an attempt by the landlords to wipe out the Tenants Defence League completely, and it worked (Citizen June 31 1914).

## **6.0 The role of the Labour Party**

What began as a spontaneous revolt against a 6d rent rise among a few streets of Leeds, became a city-wide campaign for social housing in the space of two weeks. This shift in the aims of the strike was due entirely to the involvement of the local Labour Party.

At the start of 1913, the Labour Party had seized on the housing issue as a key weapon in its electoral campaign against the Conservative council leaders.

Spurred on by the town planning obligations of the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890, and by public health scandals, the Conservative-led Leeds council had embarked on a massive slum clearance programme, selectively clearing some of the

worst blocks in Quarry Hill and Kirkgate. By 1914, they had demolished 5,212 homes and made more than 5,000 people homeless (City of Leeds 1915).

The Conservatives' refusal to build new homes to replace those demolished, and the high prices paid as compensation to slum landlords gave the Labour Party plenty of ammunition. In its weekly paper, *The Leeds Citizen*, Labour ran a series of articles blaming the Conservatives for the derelict state of housing in the city. The news pages were enlivened by headlines shrieking "Slum Death Traps" and "Horrors of East Leeds - gross indictment of city council" (*Leeds Citizen* Feb. 28 1913).

In June that year, a number of landlords called for a rent rise of between 4d-6d a week for their Leeds back-to-backs. Around 64 Holbeck tenants announced their intention of refusing to pay the increase, but the revolt came to nothing (*Citizen* June 6 1913). An earlier attempt at rent strike in Bradford (*Citizen* May 16 1913) had also failed.

That summer, Labour launched a major campaign for municipal housing in Leeds, claiming that the Conservative's slum clearance programme was creating a shortage of affordable homes through their failure to replace the thousands they had demolished. Labour councillor John Badley told a full council meeting: "Private enterprise has broken down in its attempt to meet the needs of the people". He called on the ruling Conservative group to use their legal powers under Part III of the Housing for the Working Classes Act to begin a public house building programme (*Citizen* August 1 1913).

As it went into the November council election campaign, the Leeds Labour Party made the cause of public housing its main manifesto issue. Claiming that a vote for the Tories or the Liberals was a vote for a rent rise, it trumpeted: "Your vote on November 1st will either be cast in favour of the landlord class, who are at present doing their best to raise rents in the city, or, in supporting a sensible policy which puts the health and the comfort of the people before the interests of the Rent Raising Class" (*Citizen* October 10 1913).

Labour saw public housing as a vote winner in the council elections. And the Party had nursed an ideological fondness for the rent strike since its earlier days of struggle. A combination of industrial action and rent strike had been seen as the blueprint for a socialist revolution since the days of the 1889 London Dock Strike. "When a black flag bearing the words 'no rent' floats over a single slum, when streets are torn up and barricaded, when from the windows and roofs of the houses there comes a shower of hot water and storm of stones and brickbats, what can the police or bailiffs do?" wrote John Greaghe in the anarchist *Commonweal* in 1891 (*Commonweal* Aug. 15 1891).

The socialist movement had cause to remember their revolutionary theory when, in December 1913, 3000 Leeds corporation workers went on strike in support of a wage demand. There was a blackout over the city as the gas workers stopped work and extra police were drafted in. There were bomb attacks on the gas works and the army barracks.

There were angry words too, as the Leeds Citizen linked the corporation strike with their campaign for municipal housing. "Tory and Liberal councillors like to help their fat landlord friends to pluck the workers pockets...The capitalist members of the council are just as anxious to prevent us using the corporation for getting cheap houses as they are to prevent us using it for the purpose of increasing our wages" (Citizen Dec. 12 1913).

After five weeks on strike the corporation workers were forced bitterly to give in. That was the moment that Chesington Brown, the President of the Property Owners Association, chose to tell his members in Leeds that they should take a leaf out of labour's book and get organised: "We recommend all owners to give notice of an increase of rents from January 1" (Citizen Dec. 19 1913).

The class war symbolism was too much for Tom Paylor, the oldest surviving veteran of the socialist left in Leeds. Writing to the Citizen he called for "the creation of a Tenants Defence League" and suggested that "the machinery for such an organisation exists in our Trade Union, socialist and Labour branches and in the ward committees" (Citizen Dec. 19 1913). A week later, Bert Killip of the British Socialist Party wrote to Leeds Trades Council calling on it to host a conference of all Trade Union representatives to discuss "the rent raising campaign" (Citizen January 2 1914).

So when the rent strike finally erupted, the ground had been well prepared by the Labour Party and the socialist movement was motivated and organised to steer it to their own ends.

When the rent strike began in Burley it appears to have been a genuinely local action, led by three tenants in Harold Grove. Its only aim was to refuse the 6d rent rise. And at that stage there must have been some distance between Labour and the tenant strike leaders. Certainly the Citizen's editorial thought it necessary to give advice to the organisers that they should raise the demand for social housing in their rent campaign (Citizen Jan 23 1914).

But Labour activists were quick off the mark. The first campaign meeting in Burley was addressed by Trades Council representative R.M. Lancaster - although in a personal capacity - and Mrs Butler, one of the Burley tenants organising the meeting, was a member of the Co-operative Education Committee, a Labour movement satellite group (Citizen Jan 16 1914).

The Party took control of the strike a week later when the Tenants Defence League central committee was formed at the Trades Council conference. Its main spokesperson was Harold Clay, the president of the Leeds Labour Party and a British Socialist Party member (Mercury January 19 1914).

Determined activists dispatched by the central committee of the Defence League helped the rent strike on its way across the city. In the Harehills area, the organisers went energetically house to house, "the canvassers in each case interviewing the head of the house and setting forth their case against the landlords" (Mercury Jan 21). They visited 124 homes and received pledges of support for the rent strike from 123 (Mercury Jan 23).

The Labour Party was still keen to keep their involvement in the background. Harold Clay told the Liberal daily newspaper the Mercury that he was "anxious that the movement should be regarded as altogether dissociated from any political sections and that any future action be looked upon as simply embodying the desires of a large body of tenants" (Mercury January 23 1914).

But at the end of the second week, Labour had shifted the emphasis of the strike away from the extra 6d rent protest to a tenants campaign for social housing. This message was agreed by the central committee of the Tenants Defence League and relayed to the neighbourhood groups (Yorkshire Evening News January 23 1914). All six area meetings were told to pass a standard resolution calling on the Local Government Board to hold an immediate inquiry into the lack of working class housing in Leeds.

A 2000 signature petition was to be collected and a deputation to the city council chosen to plead for municipal house building (Yorkshire Evening News January 29 1914). At the Harehills meeting on Nowell Mount, Mrs Butler presided over the resolution calling on the council to building 2,500 workingmen's houses in the city under the powers of the Housing for the Working Classes Act, clause three (Citizen Jan 23 1914) . The tenants rent strike had become the popular wing of the Labour Party's main electoral campaign.

When the strike itself broke apart under legally sanctioned evictions, Harold Clay tried to rescue the neighbourhood organisations and turn them into pressure groups for the Party's municipal housing campaign (Yorkshire Evening News February 28 1914). The Citizen urged ex-rent strikers to form Workers Housing Committees to support the election of Labour members (Citizen April 17 1914). The Harehills branch of the Tenants Defence League became just that and re-organised itself as the electoral machine for their local would-be Labour councillor (Citizen May 1 1914). Labour was still using its part in resisting the rent rises as propoganda to win the last local ward election before the outbreak of World War I postponed all further civil contests (Citizen June 24 1914).

## **7.0 Who were the rent strikers?**

If we can safely say that the rent strike was manipulated by the Labour Party for its electoral aims, what do we know about the motivation of the strikers themselves?

A search of Kelly's street directory of Leeds 1913 for Harold Grove, Burley, where the protest began, shows that the three rent strike leaders named by the Citizen (January 16 1914), James Relton, Fred Patchett and George Hargreaves, are listed under their trades as: mechanic, joiner and driller respectively. The strikers named in the press coverage of the possession hearings for Thornleigh Mount were William Robson, William Cox and John Harrison, (Citizen March 6 1914) listed in Kelly's with their occupations as: drayman, shunter and moulder respectively. Other named activists in the Harehills branch of the Tenants Defence League include the secretary Robert Lee, (Citizen May 15 1914) listed in Kelly's as a linotype operator. These were all skilled tradespeople and likely to have been near the top of a wage scale that saw engineers earning up to 37s a week in Leeds in the 1900s while those at the bottom end of the tailoring industry got a mere 8s a week (Woodhouse 1980).

The income of one of the Thornleigh Mount tenants was stated to be 25s a week by the Tenants Defence League solicitor. His rent was 5s6d, leaving 19s6d a week to provide for seven people, his wife and five children (Citizen March 6 1914). The strikers were certainly not rich and there is no doubt that they were put in financial hardship through the rent rise. Yet they were significantly better off than the majority of the working class.

Both Harold Grove and Thornleigh Mount are streets of 'modern style' back-to-backs. In the early 1900s there were 72,000 back to backs in Leeds, making up 64% of all homes (Rhodes 1954). Only 11,600 were of the modern type of two-up, two-down with a toilet block for every four houses. The majority of the older-style back-to-backs were insanitary slums built in long rows with typhus - breeding toilets in enclosed courts. Rents ranged from 3s for the older back-to-backs to 6s6d for the most expensive modern homes (Finnigan 1984).

It was part of the Tenants Defence League campaign, and with it the Labour Party's, to argue that slum clearance was creating a scarcity of affordable homes in the city and that the council should replace those it demolished with publicly built houses. When the Labour councillors first raised this argument, the Tory-led Development Committee announced an inquiry into the number of vacant dwellings and concluded that there was no scarcity and no need to build (Citizen August 15 1913). When the Conservatives carried out the same inquiry again in 1914, after the rent strike, the chair of the Development Committee concluded that there was a shortage of artisans dwellings and recommended that a private company should build them on the grounds that artisans could pay up to 8s a week rent (Citizen May 8 1914).

The rent strikers in their modern back-to-backs were not threatened with homelessness by the slum clearance programme of the Conservative council. But slum clearance at the bottom end of the housing market, coupled with a national slump in house building (City of Leeds 1915), increased the pressure on rents in the modern type of back-to-back, creating a shortage of affordable homes for the aspiring, employed working class.

The Labour Party was not calling for subsidised municipal house building but for a "business-like speculation in municipal property" (Citizen September 19 1913) letting homes at the cost of building and maintenance "seeking no profit and incurring no losses" (Citizen February 28 1913). Although they may have differed over the definition of affordable rents and whether housing should be publicly or privately owned, it seems that Labour and Conservative alike were interested in housing for the artisan class alone.

The rent strikers were outraged when the landlords told them that if they couldn't pay the increase they should "get into the slums" (Citizen February 27 1914). The strikers were the respectable working class. Otherwise they would have known better than to risk all on their misplaced faith in a County Court possession hearing. The Tenants Defence League had received the curious legal advice that courts were unlikely to grant possession orders in a dispute between landlord and tenant, if the tenants were of previous good conduct (Citizen February 6 1914). In the words of Burley strike organiser Fred Patchett: "The laws of ejectment were never framed for a trustworthy

class of tenant. It was framed for those who when they had no chips to light their fires with, chopped the doors up," (Yorkshire Factory Times February 5 1914).

The rent rise had hit the skilled working class the most, presenting them with the threat of moving back to the slums out of their costly modern back-to-backs. It was fear of losing their marginal status and becoming like the slum dwellers they despised that motivated the strikers.

Significantly, perhaps, none of the three original Burley organisers was quoted making a statement in favour of public housing during the rent strike. Fred Patchett only championed the cause when the strike was over and he found himself addressing an empty meeting (Mercury March 9 1914). It is possible, then, that the rent strike had a radicalising effect on the artisan class which helped them rise above their own interests. Judgement in favour of the landlords in the Leeds County Court showed them that their marginal status was an illusion. Harold Clay summed it up for them when he said: "They had now got a definition of what were landlord rights and what were tenants rights. It was a significant admission that the tenants had no rights at all" (Yorkshire Evening News Feb. 28 1914).

The strikers were victimised for their resistance to the rent rise. The Harehills organisers of the Tenants Defence League were hounded out of their homes by the landlords. One came back to find the bailiffs in his bedroom, throwing the furniture into the street (Citizen June 31 1914). It could be argued that mass support for public housing was not born during the rent strike, but in the retribution inflicted on the strikers by the private landlords. The suppression of the rent strike revealed the dominance of private landlords to be "a system of terrorism" just as the Labour movement's Tenants Defence League had described it (Yorkshire Factory Times March 5 1914).

## **8.0 Conclusion**

The Leeds Rent Strike in 1914 has been seen as one of a series of uprisings which gave birth to a tenants movement in this country dedicated to the cause of public housing and decent affordable homes for all.

It appears instead that the strike was a localised protest against a rent rise by members of the artisan class who feared that their marginal status was being eroded and that they would be forced out of their homes into the slumland of the despised underclass.

The strikers' demand for social housing was orchestrated by the Labour Party as part of its election propaganda. The social housing they wanted was of the type that could only be afforded by the better off artisans and not the poorest of the working class who suffered most from the lack of decent housing.

The "tenants movement" can be seen to be the creation of a privileged labour aristocracy whose contempt for the unskilled or unemployed working class was greater than their opposition to private landlords.

This interpretation is supported by the sources and - if born out in studies of the other rent strikes of the period - would undermine our received history of the tenants movement. Perhaps we should look elsewhere for the birth of a socially aware tenants movement, maybe in the defeat of the rent strikes and the aftermath of blacklisting and evictions. Perhaps it was in the first realisation that their marginal privileges were no privilege at all, that the tenants movement really began.

## **9.0 Recommendations for future research**

So this research project ends on a new hypothesis. The erosion of the housing privileges of the artisan class brought the tenants movement to consciousness and an awareness of itself as an organisation representing the whole of the working class and not just its elite. If this hypothesis has any truth in it, we should look again at the first tenants associations of the 1920s and 1930s. What is needed, I feel, is a closer study to track the social background of the early council tenants and explore the gradual impact on their beliefs and organisations, of the slum clearance and rent rebate schemes and the integration of the unskilled and unemployed into the ranks of the tenants movement. Perhaps we would find that the process of integration is not yet finished and that the image of the tenants movement as a radical social movement is something it aspires to be and has never achieved.

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