

*Transcribed from a typescript sent by Fred Warburton to Bill Moore. Mis-spellings and obvious inconsistencies only have been corrected.*

*Roger Boyle, Ford Maguire Society, January 1999.*

## **An Autobiography**

I was born in a small town in east Lancashire called Horwich on the 11<sup>th</sup> April 1892 into a very strict Methodist family and my father who tried to carry out all the tenets of his belief was also a very strong Trade Unionist and I remember that he also belonged to the Reform club which had its main strength in Lancashire.

I was the 8th of a family that finished with 13 children and although father was a journeyman Boilermaker, we had never had money to spare though not knowing what real want was.

I remember we had a parlour where father did his writing and we were allowed there on Sundays when a fire was lit and after Sunday School "Morning and afternoon" we all used to sit and read, I remember that we had a picture of Gladstone at one side. Queen Victoria on the opposite, and over the mantel a picture of Hawarden Hall which I was told was the house of Gladstone.

When I was about 5 things took a change, there was much talking about Socialism and books on the subject and we noticed that the pictures of Gladstone, Hawarden Hall and Victoria had now been replaced by Photogravure given away by Pear's soap, such as Bubbles had taken their places. Also my father who had up to then taken no papers had started taking the Clarion and books like Edward Bellamy's Looking Backwards, Looking Forward and Equality were taking the places previously occupied by the brothers Hockings.

We moved from Horwich in 1898 and went to Liverpool; then to Manchester. Finally settling in Leeds, my father who had been a member of the L.R.C. and the following year saw the Election of the first Labour Councillor for East Hunslet.

Leaving school at 13, our family had now reached 13 and every wage was needed there was no sign of scholarship. I became a rivet lad and later an apprentice rivetter.

In 1911 the Engineers which covered about 7 Unions were given a rise of 1/- per week rise and the Apprentices got nothing so we decided to strike, as my father was the president of his branch I became one of the leaders. It was an abortive strike but had results later. Until then there had been no catering for the apprentices, but such sections were formed after, which we think arose from our strike.

I remember during the strike the Leeds Branches No's 1 & 2 called a meeting for apprentice strikers at the Spotted Dog where No 1 met. About 40 of us went and we heard a worthy brother speak for 20 minutes on how he got to be the top man at his firm (top man in his shop) and then he said; "You lads want to think about that". I jumped up and said there are 8 apprentices where I work, how do we all get to the top? I was then informed not to be a cheeky bugger.

After the strike at our firm three were called into the office and we expected either the sack or some other action. The General Manager asked us individually about our opinion, he said he did not want a Leader's opinion so I was last. I pointed out to him that I was in a squad that had three; two of them had 38/- per week which had now risen to 39/- per week whilst the third (that was me) had 11/6 per week also as we earned on part piece time and a quarter it meant that we had to work

harder to get time and quarter and that the 11/6 man had to help to earn that extra 2/6 for my mates and got nothing myself. The General Manager said I at least had a case. As I was returning down the Boilershop Jim Partington the Angle-iron smith and also a member of the branch committee (in those days Angle-iron smiths had a badge of office they wore white smocks not blue, to show they were Higher than Platers and rivetters) and said look here, there always were Gaffers and there always will be: I started reciting NO MASTER (Wm Morris) to him and he threw a flattener at me.

After I came out of my time I moved to get my full money, at that time when you came out of your time your wage would rise from 13/- to 22/- with 2/- rise every quarter until you reached the full money, that meant you were 23 before you got it, so most men left.

I had two or three short spells before I got a regular place at a repair shop. It was while working at Bia, Peacock's In Manchester that I met our late Bro. Harry Pollitt.

Like many other young men who could not afford a holiday I had joined the Terriers so when the war started I became a reluctant soldier and went out to France in April 1915 and until I was transferred after the Somme I had kept my nose clean and was neither punished nor promoted.

I went out to the near East and did not get home until 7 months after the war had ended and after 5 years felt rather unorganised and a bitter resentment that I had been robbed of 5 years in a capitalist war. During the next year we were very busy in our trade catching up with the 5 years neglect and being away from home although having my S.L.P. card I was not active only by talking to my mates but then arose the Hands Off Russia campaign and a comrade and myself bought 2 dozen copies of the Herald with the full page HANDS OFF RUSSIA advert and posted them in our works and on walls in Wakefield where we worked early in 21 although I was an old hand by then and had been acclaimed as the first to go and the last to come back from the war and had all the specious promises, I got the SACK.

After the conference of the S.D.F. and S.L.P. conference I had changed my S.L.P. card for the new C.P.G.B. one and became active in the N.U.W.M. I became local adviser to the N.U.W.M. until Com. Deas who was the Bradford District Organiser told me he had had a letter from Com. Pollitt who had suggested that I was better doing direct work for the party and that I should be replaced in the Unemployed and that I should take up the work of the Minority Movement which had strong trade union attachments.

I was now working down the pit at Water Haigh Colliery I was soon well known there and asked to stand for office but I think to my error now, that I refused. I had quite a strong feeling of the syndicalist idea and the S.L.P. that we should convert and to take office would only tarnish our Socialism. It was after the formation of the Minority Movement that I met A.J. Cook and after a strong argument he convinced me that Socialism came after the revolution and I could do more by taking office and working for the working class than by discussing theory in a debating society.

I then became Secretary of the Yorkshire Miners Minority Movement and later all Yorkshire Secretary. Meanwhile I had become more active in my local branch and had become the main propagandist for the party through-out Yorkshire.

By now 1925 we in the party realised that a General Strike was inevitable and our job now was to strengthen the working class whenever or wherever we could. I had also become a blanket victim at the pit, I was given every rotten job and the management told the deputies that they must get rid of

me. One of them Ebor Williams said "But he's such a nice chap to talk to and it might cause some trouble as this pit is now 99% organised and I am sure they'll come out unless it is something extraordinary". "Well make it something", he said. We were now issuing a Broadsheet called the Pit-Worker and in the next issue it was inserted with a note from F. Warburton that he had 400 spies in that pit while the manager had only 12. This resulted in a note being left in my lamp that I must wait and see the under manager the next morning, "I had been put on permanent nights" after waiting from 6 to 8.30 the under manager called me into his office and then proceeded to try and extract from me who wrote the "PIT WORKER". "We know it's you" was his opening gambit, "Well then why ask me? It says issued by the Communist group therefore there can't be one as one does not make a group". After half an hour he raised his stick, I thought I was going to get it but he changed his mind and made a X with it saying that's the way not your way. I then asked him to sign a paper for half a shift overtime and I reminded him that if a man was detained at the pit on matters that were not affecting his work he must be paid and this was a part of the Mining Act and he couldn't refuse. There was no further attempt to sack me until the Strike took place.

The hunt for the Pit-worker went on and on one occasion I came out of a gate to find the Canchman (a senior byework drifter) holding a deputy over a tub and threatening to kill him. I stopped them and asked what was the matter. The Canchman said "He's been going through thy pockets to find a Pit-worker", the manager then issued a notice along with the part of the Mines Act that no paper of any sort had to be taken down the pit and doubled the searches. This rattled the men and all sorts of snap tins appeared from chocolate tins to the orthodox snap tin, miners were used to carrying paper for other purposes so the next Pit-Worker had a comment that Bum Fodder would be hung at every gate end.

Satire of this sort was loved by the miners and hated like hell by the management. By now we had a regular group of 60 members of the M.M. that met each week on Sundays, every gate being represented and we were certain of 100% support.

When I started at the pit I joined the Y.M.A. and found myself along with another comrade in a branch that had a Labour councillor as its Chairman it was not affiliated to either the Trades Council nor the Labour Party, so our first job was to rectify this and we were surprised that the chairman gave us no help at all and I and Jud became the first delegates to the Labour Party and Trades Council a position we both held until the expulsion. In 1924 I put up for the E.C. of the Trades Council and received what was then and perhaps still is the highest vote ever recorded, this was a position that was very useful both before and during the General Strike. The following year I became Vice President and it was the year before the upheaval and the party and M.M. both advocated the setting up of Councils of Action. We knew that we could get it through our Branch of the Y.M.A. We knew that we could set Council Agenda and we never expected any opposition but when we brought it up at the Branch the chairman "who was now a Labour Alderman" ruled it out of order, this seemed a blow and we thought he had been primed. I remembered the rule that a chairman could NOT rule out of order any legitimate business, he then said he would not have it read, by this time I was ready and moved that he be removed from the chair it was seconded and although we had a majority of M.M. members present and they had always accepted my lead they voted and we placed a V.Chairman in, after our motion was carried I moved that the Chairman now resume his chair, so we put him back.

So we got the vital resolution to the Trades Council and on behalf of the Water Haigh branch I moved it at the December meeting on a suspension of Standing Orders I was allowed free time to put our case, so after outlining the Miners' case I called for unified control so that what had been hotch potch in previous strikes could be averted, we had very little opposition this mainly from the old T.U. and labour Lib-Labs as we called them, when the resolution had been carried overwhelmingly one Labour Alderman jumped up and shouted, pointing at me "He's the bloody tail that wags the left wing dog".

Inside the party branch at this time I was being told I was spending too much time with the Trades Council and M.M. although I was addressing at least one meeting each week and journeying to London each fortnight as I was now on the E.C. of the M.M., I pointed out to the comrades the utmost importance of the M.M. in view of the General Strike and also of the Trades Council but as a disciplined member if they could find another comrade to replace me in either of these posts I would accept.

The Council of Action had now started to function and we held a mass meeting at the Coliseum with Ellen Wilkinson and John Wheatley. I was also a Speaker and before the start I was selling Worker's Weeklys outside when one of the delegates of the Trades Council came to me and said he was going to bring it up at the next Council meeting that the Vice President (me) was selling Communist papers thus lowering the stature of the Council.

At this time I was also the Branch representative on the Rota committee at the Labour Exchange and was here I had many fights with the authorities, when I was appointed my first job was to find out what I was expected, so obtained from HMSO a copy of the Acts and due to my knowledge of the Unemployment acts was asked to become advisor to the N.U.W.M. locally. I was suspended twice, once I was sitting with a full board which consisted of, one worker's rep, one Employers rep, and a solicitor as chairman (neutral, like hell they were) and I found out that the Employers rep was a PAWNBROKER. That immediately made me see blue. I told him he had NO right to be there as he got his living on the poverty of the people and therefore he was biased etc and what followed resulted in me being suspended for 6 months, I use the word suspended advisedly, they didn't call you for that period. Another time I was called and found myself a one man committee, Oh what a glorious position. I gave every man under 50 six weeks extension and every man over 50 12 weeks as that was the limit and then they gave me another 6 months rest, one case comes vividly to my mind of the Rota committees was a case on N.I.P.I. as it was termed the act was where a family income exceeded 11/- per head it was NOT IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST to give Unemployment pay and the first case in LEEDS came before a committee of which I was a member, Family, Father, Mother, two daughters one son. Father had been knocked off N.G.S.W. and the son was now before the committee having exhausted statutory benefits. Both girls working tailoring earning about 33/- per week. I contended that what they paid in board was family income the other was family wages and the two were separate, I got the solicitor to this point of view and we were going to refer to London for definition in the meanwhile we would extend the dole until we got a reply when the head clerk said Mr Warburton will you accept an independent opinion. Now the Organiser of the A.E.U. was sitting at another table and I suggested him thinking I had a good T.U. man, alas when asked he said what they earned was family income. ?????????????? That's what I called him.

Back to the General Strike, the day before the Strike began was Sunday and the May Day demonstration took place on Hunslet Moor and at least 26000 people were there as I was to speak

on the no. 1 platform along with the West Leeds M.P. I.L.P. Tom Stamford we had more than our share of listeners and with true I.L.P. thinking Stamford talked of a compromise which he hoped might be reached as I followed him I remember asking the crowd if they were prepared with poverty hadn't we been on 3 days a week for nearly a year how much lower do they want us to sink, this brought the miners who composed the larger part of our crowd to shout NO we'll Fight.

### **The story of the typewriter.**

As all printing had been stopped it was imperative that we issue a bulletin so we had to look out for the means, our first Bulletin was produced on the machinery of one of our Hospitals and on the second day our comrades hired a typewriter and duplicator from a well known firm in Albion St paying a quarter rent and we became producers I did the typing and editing and the other comrades did the turning etc, it was always sold out in ten minutes it was the only time the Leeds Branch ever had any money. We had agreed at the L.P.C. that the Machines should be moved every night and only the L.C.P. should know where. By now I had a police escort but I also knew the time they changed duty so I went and produced the bulletin. The police were always one step behind. At Comrade Norton's we had produced the bulletin and sent the machines on a motor bike to the next place when the police arrived. When Comrade Norton's father realised who they were he kept them talking and Mrs Norton stuck 200 bulletins down the piano. It took us three hours to get them out and then at my house we had got the bulletins away and I had put the machines in the closet yard as I lived in a back-to-back with outside toilet and covered them with sacks when the police arrived they searched and the inspector said "We know it's been here, your fingers are covered in ink". We had on the L.P.C. a Jewish boy whose mother was a widow and like many more emigrants either did not know or did not bother to take out naturalisation papers and they called him into the Aliens dept and threatened him with his mother's deportation, they then knew where to go and that was the end of our typewriter and duplicator, the police sent it back to the owners.

When an old woman was knocked down by a STUDENT driver we issued a Bulletin to the Electricity dept in Whitehall Rd telling them it was their fault and the police had to be called not to us but to keep the workers in, I think it was the only time the police did that except for black-legs.

That was the end of our production but we got comrades from Barnsley to produce it after that.

Back to the General Strike, after the Council of Action met on the Monday we found that the N.U.R and the A.E.U. had efficient strike committees and they recognised that a single direction was needed so they sent two delegates to the Council of Action and we were joined by delegates from unions who were not affiliated to the Trades Council meanwhile the local Hierarchy of T.U. Officers found themselves taking no part in the strike having been superseded by the rank and file so they formed themselves into an Ad Hoc committee under the leadership of J.H.D. HIGHMAN, born Hyman, we reported the matter to the General Council who replied that the Council of Action (Trades COUNCIL) was the authoritative body, Highman's plea was that the Minority Movement was the Council but Clynes must have told him to toe the line.

We had no difficulty with the workers they were solid, following the old remedy. CUT OFF THE HEAD I was arrested on the night the strike was over and was bound over more of this later.

SO WE HAD BEEN SOLD and despite what A.J.COOK had said we were the BURNT OFFERING.

Now began the long struggle from May to December of slow starvation of attacks by local authorities who were unsympathetic to the miners and one or two further conflicts at Barnsley 1 was booked

to speak on May Day Green which was the market. The Junior Imperial League which the Young Tories called themselves had a cyclostyled handout in which they said that Fred Warburton was coming to Barnsley, he has been in prison once and says he doesn't care for all the police in Yorkshire, the last part was a slight exaggeration, I had just finished when someone shouted they are here Fred and about twenty mounted police were coming over the bridge. Comrade Mills said "Slip through the pub there is a car waiting and go". I got in the car and the comrade did 60s to Leeds. We had just got to bed when the police arrived and told my wife who answered the door that they thought I had been arrested, she said he has not been out and is in bed, so I came down the inspector was astonished, two days after the same inspector came and read the Act to me and until it was repealed I had not to be seen with more than three people or I would be immediately arrested, that meant party meetings, no Trades Council, no appealing for funds, this led to the second instance. One Sunday night Jack Brotherton the Secretary of the Trades Council was speaking in the Town Hall Square when he was arrested, the reason given was that he was on the same platform as a person forbidden to be there (Fred Warburton). We had a comrade named who had purchased a hat like mine, rather broad brimmed, and was my build so the police had again erred. I had to go and prove that I was NOT there.

I have had two disappointments and some great times, I went to the Soviet Union in 27 and saw the beginnings of a Socialist country.

My disappointments were both local, one when Jim Roache asked the local branches not to book me as I was past it, and when Comrade Hamelson asked me to stand down to Jim Roache as Municipal representative on the District Committee. In view of the fact that I had been President of the Trades Council twice, V Pres of the Yorks Federation of T.C.'s and Labour Parties. I fought 5 elections for the party and two for the Labour Party and had been Parliamentary Agent for one. Rather galling wasn't it?

I have represented my union at Labour Conferences etc but nothing on these.

I hope this fills your requirements although I could fill another 8 pages, with lesser events.

Fred Warburton.