

LABOUR MUSEUM

TEACHERS NOTES; Number 5

*THE*

**POPLAR**

**STORY**

POPLAR - JUNE - SEPTEMBER 1921

JUNE

At the meeting of the London County Council, Sam Marsh, (Mayor of Poplar and L.C.C. member), explaining Poplar's refusal to pay the "precept" - Poplar's quota of rates due to the LCC said:

"In the borough there are over 5,000 unemployed and our only way of protest is a refusal to pay."

At a special conference called in East London by the Bethnal Green Borough Council, on the urgent problem of unemployment, Councillor George Lansbury, representing Poplar said:

"We are spending a considerable amount on places called Mesopotamia, Syria, and other ends of the earth. Well, we might go to the Imperial Government and bring pressure upon it to stop spending that money and, instead of having an Army that costs for destructive purposes something like £200 a year per man, we might be spending that money, or investing it, on useful work within the country...."We maintain that the people have a right to live and if they (the Government) deny us the right to earn our bread they must supply us with that bread in some other way. We hate doles, relief and charity, but that is the only alternative to leaving people to starve."

At the meeting of the Poplar Borough Council on June 29th the full Council rejected its own Finance Committee's proposal to levy the full rate for the next half year. Charles Key's amendment, to levy only a rate sufficient for the work of the Poplar Council and Board of Guardians, and to leave the LCC precept unpaid, was accepted almost unanimously.

Edgar Lansbury said:

"I believe as do my colleagues, that to get over the difficulty, the Government will have to bring in a measure for the equalisation of the rates in the Metropolis."

JULY

The Poplar Council already owed the tremendous sum of £48,015 for the first quarterly instalment of the precepts due to the LCC and the Metropolitan Asylums Board. They were summoned to the High Court. They marched there with banners flying.

"At the head of the procession a banner was carried, bearing the words"

POPLAR BOROUGH COUNCIL MARCH TO THE HIGH COURT  
AND POSSIBLY TO PRISON  
TO SECURE EQUALISATION OF RATES FOR THE BOROUGH

"On other banners were inscribed the words:

LET JUSTICE PREVAIL THOUGH THE HEAVENS FALL

and

WESTMINSTER GETS £29,000 FOR A PENNY RATE  
POPLAR GETS BUT £3,200

"The procession on starting was joined by 300 or 400 members of riverside Trade Unions, with about a dozen banners."

(Report in the "Times")

In Court, the Mayor of Poplar said"

"The Council has taken this action as a protest against the action of the Government in passing on to the Borough burdens which it cannot bear. Rates are 22/- in the pound. If we have to pay the precepts, the rates will be 38/-. We are supporting the unemployed whom the Government ought to support."

And George Lansbury said:

"The Government can never do justice until people take action like this..... We do not want to go to prison; we do not want to be martyrs.....But whatever happens to us, we will not make this rate because we will not be guilty of contempt of the people of Poplar, among whom we have lived and worked."

The Lord Chief Justice admitted he was "much impressed by the sincerity and honesty of these men". But the law is the law. The Poplar Councillors had refused to obey the order of the Court to pay the precepts. If they continued to disobey, they would be sent to prison for contempt of court.

The Poplar Councillors were determined to disobey.

#### AUGUST:

This month of holidays and heatwaves was spent by Poplar people in a state of tension.

The Poplar Councillors put their affairs in order. Thirty of them were to be arrested at the end of the month. The remaining twelve were entrusted with the job of "carrying on!" Individual Councillors made what arrangements they could for their families. Councillor Green had to leave his three small motherless children. Councillors Mr and Mrs Cressall would leave six children at home. Others risked losing their jobs.

In Poplar 12,483 unemployed men were continuing their unwelcome "holidays at home." Parliament was also on holiday - until October.

The heat in London was unbearable, especially in the overcrowded East End. And the drought drove up the price of milk. But it was cooler in the highlands of Scotland, where leading members of the Government were on holiday with the rest of the class. Their newspaper, the "Times" quite unaware of any unemployment problem, printed long articles on the prospects of grouse shooting on the moors.

In the last week of August, all Poplar flocked to the Fair:

"YE OLDE ENGLISH FAYRE"

POPLAR RECREATION GROUND

Saturday to Saturday 20th - 27th August.

"Under the auspices of the Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors"

"The proceeds will be applied to meet expenses already incurred or to be incurred in the fight of the Borough Council for the  
EQUALISATION OF RATES IN LONDON"

(Advt in local paper)

On the last day of August the Poplar Borough Council met in the Council Chamber. The gallery was packed with its supporters.

"The best of humour prevailed, laughter and jokes being exchanged between the members and their friends; the chief topic of course being the contemplated visit of the members to Holloway and Brixton as his Majesty's guests."

The press table was full. All the daily papers had sent reporters. Photographs were taken and a "movie man" was there. The Council solemnly gave leave of absence to thirty of its members. At the end of the business,

"The Red Flag was sung with great gusto, the Councillors rolling out the words 'Come dungeon dark or gallows grim, this song shall be our parting hymn' with obvious enjoyment; everyone in the Council Chamber, except the gentlemen of the press, standing the while."

Then all the Councillors and a large part of the population of Poplar adjourned to the Town Hall for an enthusiastic farewell meeting. Councillor John Scurr, speaking to the overflow meeting outside, said:

"The Government is on the horns of a dilemma. If they send us to prison they will not get their money; and if they do not send us to prison, they will bring the law into contempt. Poplar does not care on which horn they choose to impale themselves."

#### SEPTEMBER:

In the first week of September, twenty-five men and five women Councillors were arrested and taken to prison, a few on each day. The people of Poplar turned out in their thousands to cheer them on the way.

When the women were arrested that were given "a joyous send-off", according to the report in the local paper. "The unemployed rolled up in their thousands....The Trade Union sections with their banners and bands." The women Councillors spoke from the balcony of the Town Hall and were presented with bouquets, before being carried away in luxurious police cars to Holloway.

And so they went to prison. But what for? Not for a legal quibble over the municipal rates, surely? Can mere technical problems of local government inspire heroic action?

#### WHO WILL STAND BY THE UNEMPLOYED?

But you wouldn't have found local government dull in Poplar. You couldn't have been bored at the meetings of the Poplar Board of Guardians with George Lansbury in the room.

From that moment that he and his little band of socialists - members of the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party - were elected in the 1890's on to the Poplar Board of Guardians, they set out to "humanise the Poor Law".

The Poor Law needed humanising. Anything was considered good enough for working-class "paupers" - the widows and the orphan children, the old folk, the invalids and the cripples. They had to be supported out of the rates; the wealthier ratepayers regarded them as a nuisance. And the "Guardians of the poor" were too often guardians of the rates instead.

But the Guardians were democratically elected. And in the 1890's the working-class socialist parties began to put up candidates and get working men and women on to the Boards. In Poplar, George Lansbury and other socialist Guardians immediately set about improving conditions for those who had to accept relief. The "Bow and Bromley Socialist" of January 1898 reports that in the Forest Gate Orphanage which had just been taken over by the Poplar Guardians,

"The dietary table is being overhauled and, in the meantime, the children are getting bread and butter or dripping instead of dry bread; and on Sundays a small piece of cake is provided....Under the old system, a huge hunk of dry bread was given to each child, a big portion of which went to the pig tub." (In the Institution) "The old people...are now to have on Sundays some cake with their tea. We hope very soon some other addition will be made, especially to the one or two soup dinners, on which days we are sure some light wholesome puddings would be much appreciated.

Building on these small beginnings, the Poplar Guardians became famous in the years that followed, for their warm-hearted generosity to the poor of Poplar.

But there were limits to what even socialists could do within the existing system. The Poor Law was devised to provide for the poverty of illness, old age etc. But the normal working of the capitalist system entailed low wages, casual work, and periodic slumps in which unemployment rose to unmanageable heights. The maintenance of the unemployed even at starvation level strained the Poor Law system to breaking point.

So by the beginning of the 20th Century, the labour movement had taken up the fight to force the capitalist class to support the victims of its system out of national funds. Before 1914 a partial victory had been won; some sections of workmen were entitled to draw a very small benefit when out of work.

At the end of the First World War, unwanted soldiers, engineers, munition workers, coal-miners and others were thrown into the ranks of the unemployed. The question of who was to pay for their support became a burning issue. Boards of Guardians were overwhelmed with demands for relief. Town Councils, who had to provide the money out of the rates were financially crippled and in distressed areas like East London, South Wales etc., were being driven towards bankruptcy.

The startling notion of the Poplar Borough Council in 1921 was taken precisely in order to jolt public opinion on this question, and to force the Government to take action.

But the post-war Government of "hard-faced men who looked as though they had done well out of the War" was indifferent to the twin problems of unemployment and Poor Law Relief. the "Times" - the newspaper of the wealthy - reflected their attitude; we can look in vain in the "Times" of 1921 for any consciousness of the plight of the working class.

And now the Poplar Councillors have gone to prison. They have gone cheerfully and deliberately, for the sake of their own people. But they don't want to stay there. They are not martyrs. Besides, they have other jobs to do. George Lansbury has his daily newspaper to edit. Sam March and Susan Lawrence are members of the LCC. Others have their Trade Union Branch Meetings to attend. The Labour Party and the Co-Op Guilds rely on them. Their own Board of Guardians needs them. And they all have jobs to do in the Borough Council itself.

Also, these are working people who have to earn their living. Who will support their families while they are away?

And how long will they be away? They are not sentenced for any definite term - a month or two, or half a year. They are in for "contempt of court". They can only get out - according to the law - when they agree to obey the Court's order to pay up, and that they will never do. They have gone into prison to win "equalisation of the rates" and nothing short of that will satisfy them.

How then, can we get them out of prison?

---

On September 1st, just before the arrests, George Lansbury wrote in the "Daily Herald", "Our call, comrades, will be to you; and you must organise to ensure that victory shall see the end of our imprisonment."

#### THE POPLAR COUNCIL IN ACTION

Before they went away, the Councillors had done everything they could to make sure that the Labour movement understood their action.

They had always kept in close touch with their own electors, the people of Poplar. In August they sent a circular letter into every home to explain the rates' battle, and the meaning of the demand for the "equalisation of the rates." Everyone in Poplar understood that owing to the inferior quality of their housing, the rateable values were low, and that therefore the rates brought in much less in Poplar than in the rich boroughs like Westminster and Kensington. They also knew, without telling, that mass unemployment and the chronic poverty of casual labour made heavier demands of the Guardians of East London than on the Guardians of the richer boroughs.

To spread this understanding further afield, the Poplar Councillors sent a thousand copies of their circular letter to the TUC meeting at Cardiff in early September.

The Poplar Council was also in close touch with the neighbouring Labour Councils of Stepney and Bethnal Green. As Labour men and women, they appealed to the local Labour Parties to support them. As Trade Unionists, they relied on their brothers in their trade union branches. And as the champions of the unemployed workers, they appealed direct to them.

Above all, George Lansbury, as editor of the "Daily Herald", used all the power of a national working-class newspaper (which the Herald was in those days) to publicise the struggle, to organise the campaign, and to rouse the imaginative solidarity of the working class. The Herald's front-page headline on September 1st - the day which a later generation might have called "D-Day for the Poplar Councillors" - set the tone for the whole campaign.

This headline:-

"OVER THE TOP" FOR THE WORKLESS"

with its bitter memories of the recent and bloody trench-warfare in France must have gone straight to the hearts of the workers and soldiers who had "done their bit" and now were left workless. And now the Poplar Councillors were entering the battle, this time against the real enemies of the working-class - the vested interests of Capitalism.

SOLIDARITY - THE WORKERS RESPOND

How did the working people of Britain respond? Exactly as they had always responded to courageous action on behalf of their class. As they had responded to the farm labourers of Tolpuddle in 1834, to the Chartists in the Hungry Forties, to the starving Lancashire cotton-workers who would not support the slave-owners in the American Civil War, to the downtrodden dockers in 1889, the miners on strike in 1893, the Dublin workers fighting for Trade-Unionism in 1913, the young Russian Workers' Republic fighting for its life in 1920, and the people of Ireland fighting the murderous black-and Tans at that very moment.

The response was immediate. Filed away in the Minutes of the Poplar Borough Council for 1921 you can still read this lively and heartening letter from the Dartford Labour Party, dated 30th August:

"Dear Comrade,

The Executive Committee of the above Party desire to express their sincere admiration of the splendid stand made by you and your colleagues of the Poplar Borough Council on behalf of the workers of that Borough.

We feel that your determined efforts are a great example and an encouragement to the whole of our movement.

Whatever the immediate result may be, we believe your action will have been a grand inspiration to all members of the Labour and Socialist movement.

Should you go to prison, then we trust our Comrades throughout the land will spare no effort until you are released and the justice of your claim is recognised.

Best Wishes,

Yours fraternally

(signed) TC Stephenson (Secretary)"

This letter was only the beginning of a flood of letters, petitions, resolutions and protests, sent from all parts of the country and from all sections of the Labour movement, and acknowledged daily in the "Herald." They are far too many to list here. But those from East London alone include:-

Trades Council of West Ham and Stepney, and of course of Poplar; Labour Parties of Stoke Newington, East Leyton and others; branches of the NUR in Bow and Stratford; women's Co-Op. Guilds in Hackney, Shoreditch, Stoke Newington, Haringay; branches of the Dockers' Union in Poplar; Hackney ETU branch; and many others.

Support came from beyond the organised Labour movement. HG Wells, John Masefield, JL Hammond, Arnold Bennett and others petitioned the Home Secretary; so did all the clergy of Poplar.

The people of Poplar themselves responded with tremendous public meetings, demonstrations and marches through the borough - a form of political activity which continued for weeks, and in fact until the prison gates

opened and the heroes returned to their homes. Equally important, they organised a "Poplar Tenants' Defence League" to prevent any back-door collection of the precepts from the individual householders. Ten thousand families are said to have joined it. By September 17th, when there was a great match of tenants through the borough, with four bands, the "Herald" reported that "hardly a house is without its window-card denoting membership of the League."

The people of Poplar subscribed to the Fund for the dependants of the imprisoned Councillors:

"Huge demonstrations at the Obelisk, Bow and the Dock Gates, Poplar yesterday (ie Sunday September 11th) demanded the immediate release of the gaoled Councillors, and generously responded to appeals for funds for the wives and children".

Not only working-class people helped this cause. The "Fellowship of Reconciliation" took the children away for a country holiday in Kent - an unexpected treat for them.

#### THE COUNCILLORS IN PRISON

The people of Poplar also marched to Brixton and to Holloway, where the Lambeth and Islington Labour Parties organised nightly meetings and the Welsh Choir sang and the NUR Band played for the prisoners inside. The march to Holloway on September 7th was a family affair:

"Some of the women carried little children, and when Councillor Sumner invited them to place the little ones on the "Daily Herald" car many accepted with gratitude."

These women must have had a special thought for Mrs Cressall, whose own children were found digging in the garden when the Mayoress had called on them. "We are going to have the garden all nice when Mummy and Daddy come home", they told her. Mrs Cressall was expecting another baby, and the women of the Labour Movement made it their special job to get her out of prison. At the end of September she was released. She went straight into action. At a crowded Town Hall meeting in Poplar, called specially for the women, she told them:

"I did not want to come out, but the officials told me that they had been so overwhelmed with protests against my imprisonment and with my demands for my release, that they could not keep me in. What you have to do now, then, is to get my comrades out too."

To this crowd of women - "old women, mothers with babies in their arms, and spirited factory girls with eyes aglow with enthusiasm" - she spoke also of the screaming of women shut away in the padded cells, screaming which even drowned a thunderstorm:

"Think of it, you mothers! Young girls, taken from a life of freedom and locked up in cells with doors as thick as the doors of a pawnbroker's safe! Can you wonder at them screaming themselves into madness?"

---

Meanwhile, how were the Councillors in Brixton getting on? Their wives who visited them in the first few days were horrified. Mrs Scurr said:

"The food is unfit for any human being...Fish in an advanced state of decomposition. A porridge of underdone meal and water, bad bread, bilious



cocoa which they could not drink, and very small portions too."

The Poplar Councillors were on the ordinary prison diet, as though they were criminals. This was:

7.30am	Oatmeal porridge, bread a pint of tea
12.noon	Bully Beef, Potatoes, bread, water
4.00pm	Bread and margarine, a pint of cocoa.

George Lansbury told his wife: "What makes it possible for us is the thought that our hunger in gaol is saving people from being hungry outside."

At this stage, the Councillors had no priviledges whatever. They were isolated in their cells most of the time. Several of them, including George Lansbury were soon taken ill. They were allowed no books (except the light fiction of Mrs Henry Wood), no writing material, no newspapers, no contact with the outside world.

Their wives, by making this scandal public, quickly changed all that. The Labour Movement, and people far outside it, protested loud and long. Even the Councillors' political opponents in Poplar, the Municipal Alliance, wrote to the Government.

"Whilst entirely dissociating ourselves from their action, we feel that their being placed in the Second Division is altogether unwarrantable."

In a very short while the Government was driven to make concessions. First, the important priviledge of editing the "Herald" was granted to George Lansbury; for the rest of the term of imprisonment, he was able to organise the campaign for the release of the "Poplar Prisoners" from his headquarters in Brixton Gaol. By September 10th, Edgar Lansbury wrote to the "Herald."

"We are breaking down barriers every day, but nothing less than the treatment due to political prisoners will content us. We had our first really good dinner today. We are now allowed to have paper and pencils, and also to have our own books sent in. But we are going on asking for newspapers, letters and other rights of political prisoners."

On September 19th the "Herald" had a headline:

#### NEWSPAPERS IN PRISON: CONCESSION WON BY POPLAR

By the end of the month, the "Poplar Prisoners" had become almost a national institution. Everybody who was anybody went to visit them. The editor of the "East London Advertiser", after such a visit wrote:

"They are as happy as a lot of school boys on holiday... They are now allowed books from the Poplar Public Library, one of the many concessions in deference to public opinion outside and the quiet pressure from the deputations from Poplar Councillors which wait on the Deputy Governor almost daily. The prisoners are allowed to receive all the morning and evening papers, play football, see their friends practically every day, and the authorities treat them with such consideration that I understand the ordinary prisoners have petitioned to be treated in the same way as the pampered pets of Poplar."

But they were still prisoners. They had gone in the the sake of a principle, to make the Government take responsibility for the maintenance of the unemployed and level out the inequalities of the rating system. But the Government would not give it.

Yet a fortnight later, on October 12th the Poplar Councillors were discharged by the High Court and walked out free men. To understand this, we have to look at things that were happening outside Poplar.

### "WORK OR MAINTENANCE"

The Poplar Councillors were the champions of the unemployed workers and their families in their own borough. But they saw their own problem as part of the much bigger problem created by the capitalist system - the problem of periodic slumps which threw millions of willing workers on to the scrap heap and left them to starve.

In 1921 the brief post-war boom had nose-dived into a post-war slump. By May, there were two million unemployed workers, and another million only partially employed.

The capitalists and their Government were more concerned with their own problems than with the plight of the unemployed. In June they even cut the unemployment benefit down to 15/- per week - and there were no children's allowances in those days. They urged the Boards of Guardians to cut the relief scales also, and when Labour Boards refused they were accused of "extravagance."

The unemployed workers replied by fighting for their right to live. In many places unemployed committees had been formed, and these combined in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, whose inspiring history is so thrillingly told in the book "Unemployed Struggles" by Wal Hannington (himself a workless engineer in 1921).

The organised unemployed workers were very militant. They saw themselves as a section of the labour Movement - trade unionists who were temporarily workless. They could not at that time foresee that for many of them this state of worklessness would last for many years. Nor could they then guess that false "leaders" within the Labour Movement like Jimmy Thomas would erect an iron curtain between the trade union movement and the organisation of the unemployed workers. They looked to those workers still in work for support in their fight for life. And they were not disappointed. The mass of the British Working Class in 1921 were solidly behind their workless comrades.

When the Poplar Councillors were imprisoned, George Lansbury made a confident appeal in the "Herald" for the support of this valuable section of the Labour Movement. "Workers and Workless, back up Poplar!" he wrote.

The unemployed workers were already fighting in their own way. In the last week of August they had begun a great campaign of deputations to the Guardians to demand higher relief scales. In some places they even marched to the Workhouse to demand admittance, bearing such banners as: "Your King and Country need you - for the Workhouse."

The same issue of the "Herald" which had the headline about Poplar - "Over the Top for the Workless" - had another headline

THE MARCH OF THE WORKLESS" LONDON GUARDIANS BESIEGED BY HUNGRY THOUSANDS CALLING FOR JUSTICE.

It is reported that the slogan "Go to the Guardians" - suggested some months earlier by Lansbury in the "Herald" and taken up by the Unemployed Movement - was "acting as a fiery cross, and thousands of unemployed men yesterday presented their demands for work or maintenance, while thousands more will follow their example today." Within the next few days, the "Herald" had reported similar action in Shoreditch, Clerkenwell, Hackney, Woolwich, Holborn, Lambeth, Hammersmith, West Ham, St Pancras. The movement spread to the rest of the country, and there were mass deputations with police violence, in Bristol, Dundee, Liverpool and other cities.

#### THE RULING CLASS TREMBLES

This campaign was so terrific that it shook the ruling class to the foundations. But what really alarmed them was the fact that in many places Labour Boards of Guardians were willingly granting new relief scales, scales which (with Children's allowances) in some cases gave a man with a large family more money than if he were at work! Because this first happened in Islington, the "Islington Scale" became the rallying cry of both its supporters and its opposites. The unemployed demanded similar scales elsewhere. The capitalists, and their newspaper, the "Times", organised a campaign against the "Islington Scale", in the course of which Labour Guardians were accused of "criminal waste" leading to chaos. They were also accused of experimenting in "sheer Communism."

George Lansbury made a dignified reply in the "Times":

"Sir: You are quite mistaken. None of us are fools enough to imagine we can secure the triumph of Socialism or Communism by giving away money or relief. We want to stop the system by which one section of the nation lives on the labour of the rest. But as we are not in power, and masses of our people are hungry, and in dire distress, we use the power the law gives us to feed and clothe the other multitudes who on moor and dale and a thousand other places are enjoying the luxury of holidays without work at the expense of other people..... "Labour will go on with its campaign - Work or Maintenance- with emphasis on 'work'!"

The "Times" also went on with its campaign - against the Islington Scale. It frightened its readers with full accounts of the unemployed deputations to the Guardians. It pointed out that though the Guardians were legally empowered to provide "adequate relief", the question of what "adequate relief" was in terms of money had never been laid down. It suggested that the right course for exasperated ratepayers was, therefore, to call for a Public Inquiry into the whole matter. It reminded the Minister of Health that he had the power to veto the Guardians' relief scales.

The "Times" campaign succeeded. An organisation called the "Middle Classes Union" took the hint and demanded action by the Minister of Health. This gentleman, who happened to be Sir Alfred Mond of the firm of Brunnermond Ltd. (later Imperial Chemical Industries) was placed to veto the Islington Scale, and decree that relief scales must be

lower than the lowest wage.

The "Times" headlines for this period tell this story in a nutshell:

Aug 30th: "Big Dole to the Unemployed: Islington Labour Board's New Scale"  
 Aug 31st: "Full Wages for Nothing: First Steps to Chaos"  
 Sept 1st: "Wages and no Work"  
 Sept 2nd: "Full Pay for the Idle: Battening on the Rates"  
 Sept 3rd: "Lavish Doles: Possible Checks"  
 Sept 5th: "Pay without Work: What is 'adequate relief'  
 Sept 6th: "'Adequate relief': Minister to give ruling  
 Sept 8th: "High-Scale Relief Illegal"  
 Sept 9th: "Relief less than Wages: Instruction to Guardians  
 Sept 10th: "Smaller Dole at Islington"

-----

But the "Times" campaign against the unemployed proved to be a boomerang. The unemployed now turned from the local Guardians to the national Government. They now demanded a higher national scale of unemployment benefit, with children's allowances. Great demonstrations continued to be held, but they were now directed at the Government itself. And in this also, they had the full support of the whole working class.

-----

All this was going on at the same time as the Poplar struggle. The same workers and workless who were demanding the release of the Poplar Prisoners and the equalisation of the rates, were also demanding increased unemployment benefit and Government action on the whole problem of Unemployment.

And so it was that by the third week in September a united and very militant working class, supported by many people beyond its ranks, was in full cry after the Government.

The London Labour Mayors proposed seeing the Prime Minister Lloyd George who was then in Gairloch. After a very long train journey followed by a 70 mile motor trip to Gairloch, the Mayors succeeded in seeing Lloyd George on the 20th September regarding the imprisonment of the Poplar Councillors, who had refused to pay the 'precept'- Poplar's quota of rates due to the LCC, as they considered that a bigger share of the rates should go to the relief of the unemployed. The Prime Minister was at Gairloch on his holiday, and he summoned to his assistance other holidaying members of his Cabinet: Mr Winston Churchill was the first to get there. The unemployment problem, Labour proposals for constructive work schemes, and the demand for equalisation of the rates in London, were discussed.

But the Welsh Wizzard, experienced in "handling" Labour leaders, refused to be frightened into action by Herbert Morrison's rather lurid description of the unemployment movement as "bands of hungry and desperate men."

The Labour Mayors came back to London disappointed. The most that the Mayor of Hackney could tell the Press was: "We've got nothing definite, but we have made an impression"

And the Poplar Councillors were still in prison.

#### ATTLEE SAYS: IT'S TIME TO KICK

The Prime Ministers indifference roused the Labour Movement to greater efforts.

The Bethnal Green Borough Council decided by 16 votes to 10 to "follow Poplar". "Enthusiastic scenes followed the announcement of the result, the huge crowd outside cheering heartily." The Mayor, Joe Vaughan, had already, some weeks before, declared his readiness to follow Lansbury into prison if his electors wished it.

Stepney Borough Council, a few days later, also decided to "follow Poplar". A similar resolution brought up in the Battersea Council was lost by only one vote.

Ben Tillett, the respected leader of the dockers' struggles called for united Trade Union action to get the Poplar Councillors out of prison.

The unemployed workers continued their demonstrations. At Dundee, Winston Churchill was grilled in a public meeting by the local leader of the unemployed, who declared bitterly: "We ask the right to live". You tell us we have the right to die.

In Shoreditch, where Joe Vaughn reported the Gairloch interview to a mass meeting of the unemployed, the meeting declared:

"We refuse for the future to be content with empty promises in lieu of bread, and are determined to stop at nothing to enforce the winning of our just demands."

In the Essex Hall, London, twenty-seven local Labour Parties met to demand the immediate release of the Poplar Councillors. They also condemned a circular letter sent out by the London Labour Party Executive advising Labour Councils not to take similar action to that of Poplar. The Chairman of this meeting, Alderman CR Atlee, said:

"I have always been a Constitutionalist. But the time has come when it is necessary to kick."

#### THE GOVERNMENT ON THE RUN

By this time, the Government was on the run. Mond (The Minister of Health) was instructed to arrange a conference between his Department and the London Borough Councils including Poplar, on the related questions of equalisation of the rates and the unemployed problem.

At this stage a little "sorting out" within the Labour ranks was found necessary. Rumours reached the Poplar Councillors in Brixton that some of their friends outside favoured the participation of Poplar in such a conference without any guarantee of the release of the prisoners, and that the Mayor of Hackney had offered his services in negotiating Poplar's agreement to this. George Lansbury, in an article in the "Herald", gave these friends a gentle ticking off:

"The Poplar Borough Council has always been willing to meet and discuss the question. Consequently no neutral person, no good offices, are needed to ensure the attendance of Poplar Councils....

"All that is needed is freedom for the Councillors and Aldermen to attend.

"It is also necessary to remind friends and enemies that Poplar is governed by democrats, and that as such we do not intend handing our future over either to a few selected delegates or to our friends.

A few days later, on September 27th, the Labour Mayors of London went to Brixton. The Poplar Borough Council received them in the room of the

visiting Justices. The Mayor, Sam March, took the chair. The women councillors had even been brought by car from Holloway, attended by their wardresses.

The Mayor called for a report of the Gairloch interview with Lloyd George. Then the Mayor of Shoreditch reported that Mond had suggested a conference of representatives of the London County Council, the Metropolitan Asylums Board, the Labour Mayors and the Poplar Councillors.

Lansbury replied that:

"to ask for a conference in the present circumstances when half the participants are imprisoned is unfair. The first condition of our meeting is that we shall be absolutely free."

The Poplar Council then retired and drafted this statement:

"We are not in a position to choose representatives to a conference or to consult with our permanent officials, neither have we access to official documents....."We can only enter into a conference when we are all free."

The Labour Mayors endorsed this, then adjourned to the Lambeth Town Hall, where they decided to interview Mond. They told him that "it would be contrary to the public interest for the release of the prisoners to be refused."

Later that day, Joe Vaughan reported this interview to a meeting of the unemployed in East London:

"We found Mond in a frame of mind in which he wished the whole business was over. He looked extremely fed up. He apparently seems trouble looming in the distance."

"THE RED FLAG WAS WAVED AS WELL AS SUNG"

But it is no easy matter to get out or prison people who have been committed for "contempt of court" when they still refuse to obey the Court's order. Legally, there is no way out of this dilemma. Legally, a Government cannot interfere in the course of the law.

But a Government can drop hints in various quarters. In a surprisingly short space of time, it dawned on the London County Council and on the Metropolitan Asylum Board that it would be a good idea to help to get the Poplar Prisoners out of prison in order that a certain conference in which the Government was interested might be held. So two special meetings were called. On October 1st, the Metropolitan Asylums Board would meet at its office on the Embankment; on October 4th, the London County Council would meet at its headquarters in Spring Gardens.

The "Herald" announced these meetings, and urged the unemployed to demonstrate outside.

On the morning of October 1st the members of the Metropolitan Asylums Board who arrived half-an-hour early in the hope of avoiding the crowds found the Embankment already thronged with people, and "lined with policemen from Blackfrairs Bridge to the offices of the Board." It is not surprising that they passed a unanimous resolution expressing their willingness to see the Poplar Councillors released.

On Tuesday October 4th the "Herald" had a front page headline:

TO THE LCC TODAY: UNEMPLOYED, DO YOUR BIT!

An eager response came both from the people of Poplar and from the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. Great crowds from all over London collected on the Embankment in the early afternoon, prepared to march to Trafalgar Square and encourage the LCC (in the nearby Spring Gardens) in their good work.

But the police had instructions not to allow this. They diverted the marchers away from the Square, and took them on the long trek to Hyde Park. Many of the people had already walked from Poplar and other distant places. They were already tired with the exhaustion of malnutrition. Many of the women were carrying young children who could not be left at home - there was no money for prams in those days.

An eye witness account describes the "pathetic scenes" along Regent Street:

"Women with children and elderly men, feeble through weeks of semi-starvation, were unable to proceed and scores fell out and were compelled to rest by the roadside...Pinched faces and halting gait told the tale of intense poverty."

Another bystander saw the marchers "trudging along singing a popular song. They looked weary in the heat, covered with dust." One of the marchers said afterwards: "I have been on the march all day with nothing to eat."

The "Times" reported, on the other hand, says the procession was not composed of people in apparent distress". But perhaps he looked with a jaundiced eye, for he adds:

"The procession bore marks of exploitation by Communist agitators. The Red Flag was waved as well as sung about."

TRAFALGAR SQUARE - VIOLENCE AGAINST THE WORKERS

After the meeting in Hyde Park the folk from East London still had to walk home. The Square was on the way, and they still wanted to "have a go" at it. After all, their Councillors were still in Prison, and the LCC had the power to get them out. Besides, "the Square" belongs to London people - they fought for it on Bloody Sunday, 1887.

By various routes, some walking, some marching, thousands of people arrived in the Square. Contingents of the National Unemployed Workers Movement had to fight their way past the police. When the Square was packed with people, the police broke loose. Eye-Witness accounts filled column after column in the "Herald" the next day. People were bashed on the head indiscriminately, men and women, marchers and bystanders. Thirteen victims were taken to hospital; many others went home with injuries; women were taken fainting into the church of St Martin's in the Fields.

A phrase from the "Herald's" leading article the next day on this massacre sums up the exasperated feelings of the people:

"When will our rulers learn"

The atmosphere in London the next few days was tense. During the battle for the Square, the LCC had held its special meeting and had passed resolutions urging Government action on Unemployment, recommending equalisation of the rates, and cautiously indicating that the release of the Poplar Councillors would not be opposed.

The next move lay with the Government. The people of Poplar drew a breath, prepared to strike again if necessary.

The unemployed movement continued to hold demonstrations. The Labour Party and TUC celebrated the following Sunday as "Unemployment Sunday", with large meetings all over the country.

Shoreditch decided to "follow Poplar", Southwark and Islington called for "Town's Meetings" on the unemployment question.

#### VICTORY

On Wednesday October 12th the Poplar Prisoners were called to the High Court. What followed would have delighted Charles Dickens. If this were not an official legal report, one might take it for a burlesque.

The various lawyers acting for the Poplar Borough Council, the LCC and the Metropolitan Asylums Board, had concocted an affidavit to present to the Judges. One of the Judges commented that it was "rather an attractive affidavit....ingeniously framed....and exactly what it means I do not know."

They did know very well what was now expected of them, of course. But legal dignity had to be preserved, so the lawyers had to be questioned. The dialogue between Mr Justice Bray and the Council for the LCC goes like this:

"What is to happen about levying this rate?"

"My Lord, I do not know."

"The London County Council, I suppose, want the money?"

"No doubt my Lord."

"They cannot get it without a rate being levied?"

"No"

"Is there any machinery by which a rate can be levied without a resolution of the Borough Council?"

"No my Lord"

"There is nobody else deputed in default who can do it?"

"No my Lord"

"Then what do the London County Council want? Do they no longer want the money, or what?"

A few minutes later, the Judges are looking at the resolution of the LCC in which the proposed Government conference is referred to. The conversation continues:

"This Resolution, if I have caught it aright, says that they would welcome any action on the part of the Borough Council that would enable them to freely participate in such a conference."

"That conference being a conference with the Minister of Health and the Poplar Borough Council with the object of overcoming existing difficulties."

"How are they to have a conference?"

"I assume from the affidavit that the suggestiton is that they cannot participate in a conference as long as they are in prison."

"Does that mean the London County Council would welcome their coming out of prison then?"



"I do not know my Lord. I cannot say that.  
I can say nothing more on this."

"Really they ought to make up their minds, you know one way or the other on the matter."

(Another Judge then joins in)

"When is this conference to take place?"

"I do not know my Lord. I know nothing about it."

"You know nothing about it?"

"No my Lord"

"I suppose the London Country Council know something about it, do they not?"

"I will enquire; but I do not know."

(The Counsel for the Poplar Borough Council then helpfully explains to the Judges - as though they do not know! - that the Minister of Health cannot fix a date until the Poplar Councillors are free to attend. He adds: "I am instructed, my Lord, that it is desired to have the conference as soon as possible.")

However, the Judges seem to have all time on their hands today. The solemn-faced discussion continues a little longer. Then the Counsel for the Poplar Borough Council drops another broad hint:

"There is no doubt the Minister of the Crown, the Minister of Health, does desire the attendance of these persons upon whose behalf, I appear, to assist him at this conference."

This time, the Judges say "We will consider the matter and return shortly." A few minutes later they give their decision, and thirty men and women walk freely out of the hands of the law and make for home. Several hours later, thousands of Poplar people are celebrating the return of the conquering heroes.

#### THE STRUGGLE GOES ON

In a novel, this might be the end of the story. In real life, there is no end to the struggle of the working class to hold its own against the capitalist class and to advance towards Socialism.

The Poplar Councillors went back into the struggle. They attended the Minister of Health's Conference on October 17th. The following day Parliament returned from its long holiday, and equalised the rates. It also increased the unemployment benefit and granted children's allowances.

#### THESE WERE GREAT VICTORIES

But the struggle continued. The unemployed workers had to fight every inch of the way from 1921 to the late 1930's - when war brought a grim solution to the unemployment problem. In Poplar, the Tories instituted a public enquiry into the workings of the Board of Guardians; the Guardians replied with the famous pamphlet: "Guilty and Proud of it." Later, the Tory Government prevented the Poplar Borough Council from paying a decent wage to its own employees; the Borough Council replied with another grand pamphlet: "Red Poplar."

The Poplar Councillors had no respite from the struggle.