

'Rank-and-File Movements and Political Change in the Durham Coalfield, 1910-1914'

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The ferment in the coal miner's district unions and its national federation (the MFGB) was crucial in informing the nature of the 1910-1914 'labour revolt' in Britain. Yet remarkably little detailed research has been conducted on developments outside South Wales, the scene of the bitter Cambrian Combine dispute, the birthplace of The Miners' Next Step and apparently the most fertile soil for revolutionary syndicalist ideas among Britain's miners.

This paper will examine events in the Durham coalfield, which, after South Wales employed the largest number of workers of any of the British mining districts. In socio-economic terms, too, the two coal mining areas were remarkably similar and, as in South Wales, there emerged in Durham vigorous and militant rank-and-file movements intent on industrial and political change.

Essentially there were two movements competing for rank-and-file support; one revolutionary syndicalist, the second led by activists of the Independent Labour Party (ILP). This paper explores the nature of these hitherto undocumented movements, their respective size and organisations, their aims, successes and failures. It argues that rank-and-file anger with the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) leaders and with the coal owners could have been harnessed by either movement but that the ILP's approach was far more effective than that of the syndicalists.

Furthermore, the ILP were able to divert rank-and-file miners' desires to improve wages and conditions towards bolstering support for the Labour Party in Parliament, effectively challenging the Liberals' ideological hegemony in the Durham coalfield. The result was that the ILP activists, through their rank-and-file movement, won the DMA institutionally for their political project. In doing this they marginalised the older generation of Liberal and Lib.-Lab. miners' leaders who had hitherto been an obstacle to the emergence of the Labour Party as the major progressive force in the coalfield