

# Will Thorne: Marxist strike leader becomes... “Marxist” Labour rightist

- Will Thorne was born in Birmingham and started work at the age of six at a rope and twine spinners .
- In 1882 Will Thorne moved to London aged 25 and found work at Beckton Gas Works. He had previous experience of the savage conditions expected of gas workers at the Saltley Plant in Birmingham, where workers were expected to work up to 24 hour shifts.
- After moving to London, Thorne joined the Canning Town branch of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), where he was appointed secretary of the branch. He met other socialists such as Frederick Engels, Eleanor Marx and John Burns.
- Thorne was taught to read and write by Eleanor Marx after joining the SDF.



# National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers



- 1884: Thorne unsuccessfully attempts to start a union at Beckon Gas Works.
- 1889 Thorne is a member of a small union called "The Tea Operatives and General Labour Association" which was organised by Ben Tillett (also in the SDF)
- 1889 Beckton Gas Works Introduced the "iron Man" which sped up production at the plant, causing job losses and management expecting workers to work 18 hours with no notice.
- 31st March 1889, William Thorne, Ben Tillett and William Byford organised a meeting of Gas Workers at Canning Town Hall. They recruited 800 members that morning and Thorne defeated Tillett to become general secretary.
- By April 1889 the union had 3000 members. Thorne wanted the union to be a general union for unskilled workers, with the slogan *"one man, one ticket and every man with a ticket"*



# National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers

- The main demand of the new union was to reduce working hours, from 12 to 8 hour shifts.
- Thorne, who had been influenced by Tom Mann's appeal for an eight hour day, argued for a reduction in working hours *"the eight-hour day would not alone mean a reduction of four hours a day for the workers then employed, but that it meant a large number of unemployed would be absorbed"*
- Throughout the spring of 1889, the union built for this through Sunday meetings outside gas work plants across London.
- July 1889: Both gasworks had accepted the unions' demands. By the end of July the union had 60 branches nationwide and a membership of 20000.



- The victory of the gas workers helped to influence other industrial struggles. The most important of these was the London dock strike (1889) where Thorne helped to organise the strike, which was led by Ben Tillett
- 1890: Gas companies attempted to weaken the power of the new union. During a strike Leeds Gas company sacked union members. With Thorne's help the gasworks union forced the company to reinstate the men.

- 1892: Thorne helped Keir Hardie win West Ham South: the first real independent Labour MP ever
- 1894: Thorne is elected to the Trade Union Congress (TUC) parliamentary committee.
- 1900 Thorne is the LRC candidate in West Ham, but defeated
- 1906: Elected as an Labour MP for West Ham as an SDF member on a boldly socialist manifesto, which had the explicit approval of the SDF leadership (Thorne's manifesto was bolder than Hyndman's, who narrowly lost in Burnley as an LRC candidate). Since 1901 the SDF had refused to affiliate to the Labour Party on the grounds that it was too right-wing.

# Parliamentary Politics



- 1916: Thorne sides with Britain in the First World War, and joins Hyndman's "pro-war" split from the SDF (renamed BSP since 1911: Hyndman's group later takes back name SDF).
- 1917: Thorne and two others (James O'Grady, an ex-SDF Labour MP, and William Sanders of the Fabian Society) were selected to attend a British delegation to Russia following the February revolutions. The purpose to this visit was to persuade the Kerensky government to continue fighting in the war.
- 1918 to 1945: Thorne remains Labour MP for Plaistow until age 87. He slowly drifted to the Labour right but always maintained that he was a socialist and remained a member of the "Marxist" SDF.