

John Archer and the Politics of Labour

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If you look on the British Library Black Europeans website you will see it features John Archer written by Mike Phillips using material I supplied. Of mixed-heritage regarding himself as 'a man of colour' and a negro John Archer linked black and labour movement politics to demonstrate that Africans were capable of ruling themselves. His election for the Progressive Alliance of labourites, radicals and Liberals to Battersea Council in 1906 was a practical demonstration of the justice of the 1900 Pan-Africanist demand for the black colonies to be given "the rights of responsible government". He went on to be Mayor in 1913-14, and after the reorganisation of the Battersea labour movement in 1918 a leading local Labour Party activist. In this talk I will sketch out his roles and need to point out that there is much we do not know about him. It draws on new material Marika Sherwood found for me in her research in the USA.

Growing Up

Born in Liverpool in 1863, his father was a Barbadian ship steward, his mother Irish. We know very little about his childhood, apart from recalling in his 1918 African Progress Union Presidential Address 'I am, and always will be, a race-man. That feeling was born in me when quite a little boy in my native city, Liverpool. A famous company of American Negroes were playing that soul-stirring Negro tragedy *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I saw the play, and from that moment the seeds of resentment were planted within me that have resulted in making the race-man I am.'

If his father remained a ship's steward John would have experienced periods of parting caused by earning a living travelling the seas. If as I suspect his father took the family to Barbados he would have had a different set of experiences against which to judge those in Liverpool.

When he became of working age what work did he do?. He is thought to have travelled the world so perhaps he followed in his father's footsteps witnessing the hard life and dangers of being at sea. He seems to have visited the United States and Canada, where he appears to have met Bertha Elizabeth, a black Canadian born in Halifax on the east coast. They married and she came to England with him. We know virtually nothing about her.

Living in Battersea

They settled in Battersea in south-west London across the Thames from Chelsea and running along the river westwards to Wandsworth and southwards through Clapham Common to Balham. Apart from Battersea Park, the river area was heavily industrialised. The railway lines from the south cut through Battersea joining at Clapham Junction and going on to Victoria and Waterloo.

He needed to earn a living. Whether Bertha did as well we do not know. It is thought that he was a medical student for a while, but how this could have been funded is not known. The 1901 Census records him being a professional singer but I have found no supporting evidence. We know that after becoming a Councillor he set up as a photographer running a shop in Battersea Park Rd. How he learnt photography, how he could afford the equipment and chemicals we do not know. What being self-employed meant was that he was in control of his work hours. So later in life he would close the shop in order to attend the day time meetings of the Poor Law Guardians.

Apart from some pictures published in the Battersea Trades & Labour Council Annual Reports no photos have survived. I have not seen any advertisements for his business in the local press. We do not know whether photography was a lucrative occupation, or whether he or Bertha had some form of private income. He seems to have been well enough off to live in a reasonably to-do street until they moved into the shop. Despite being Catholics they did not have any children, so their living costs were presumably lower than many of his political colleagues. However, we know that he had great difficulty funding his Mayorial activities, because a friend sought to raise money for him.

The Battersea Context

If as is thought John moved into Battersea in about 1893, he did so at any exciting time. Was he attracted by there being a large Irish Catholic population in Battersea's poorest Nine Elms district near Vauxhall? Was he attracted by its radical reputation with John Burns as socialist London County Councillor and MP? Was he attracted by Burns and Battersea's role in the New Unionist explosion of 1889-1892 with the successful dockers and gasworkers strikes and rapid growth of trade unionism especially among the less skilled and lower paid? That activity had helped create the municipal socialist agenda which Burns and his supporters were pushing for.

The newly formed Battersea Trades & Labour Council's played a key role in role in the development of the Progressive Alliance between the labour movement, the Liberals and Radicals, which had already got Burns elected as MP in 1892. This Alliance was necessary to defeat the conservative Municipal Reformers given the fact that while North Battersea was largely working class, South Battersea was middle-class. In 1894 the Alliance took control of the local government machinery of the Vestry, implementing a municipal socialist agenda, and keeping control from 1900 when the Vestry was replaced by Battersea Council in 1900.

We know that John's initial foray into local action was as a Catholic intervening in spiritualist open-air meetings. He must have begun to attend the big public meetings held regularly at Battersea Park and at Battersea Town Hall, including the Town Meetings held to discuss local issues.

Engagement in Black Politics

He was also engaging in black politics and networking. As he told the African Progress Union in 1918 he had met Ida B. Wells in Britain when to use his words 'she was rousing the people to the highest pitch of indignation against the lynching of Negroes'. He read the works of Edward Wilmot Blyden, and at the British Museum George Washington Williams's 'The History of the Negro Race'. After his election as Mayor Caesar A. A. P. Taylor sent him his book *The Conflict and Coming of the Races*. John recognised the role of whites in the campaigns against the slave trade and slavery and for emancipation, singling out Granville Sharp in particular, while his 'hero in American history' was 'John Brown, who gave his life for the freedom of the slaves.' He paid tribute to Frank Colenso, son of Bishop Colenso, for being his 'guide; and helping him 'through many thorny paths'.

In 1900 we find him attending Pan African Congress, and being elected to the Executive of the Pan African Association, along with his friend Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the British born black composer.

Progressive Politics

The years 1900 to 1906 must have been intensely busy years: possibly training as a medical student and earning money on the stage, actively campaigning against spiritualism and becoming more and more politically involved. At some stage he joined a political group. By not joining the Social Democratic Federation he rejected dogmatic Marxism. He joined the Burnside Battersea Labour League, which valued localism and the Alliance without which the conservative Municipal Reformers would be in control. In 1900 Burns had attended the launch Conference of the Labour Representation Committee. He had rejected the new organisation as being too narrow, preferring to continue to promote the progressive alliance approach. In this he had the support of Tom Mann, his co-worker in New Unionism and the inspiration for the Eight Hour Campaign started in Battersea. The Trades Council had joined the Labour Representation Committee for a while but was expelled because of its involvement with Liberals in the Alliance. Although an independent labourite Burns joined the Liberal Cabinet from the beginning 1906 to the delight of sections of the labour movement including the Trades Union Congress. Not long afterwards the Representation Committee became the Labour Party.

By now Archer was sufficiently respected by the Progressives to be selected for a winnable seat in the November 1906 Council elections. It can be assumed that they did not think his colour would be an electoral disadvantage. That September he was

on the platform speaking to a resolution congratulating the Alliance's "good work done in the cause of labour and in the interests of the public at large" on the Council at a large public meeting held in Battersea Park. Organised by the Battersea Carmen and Labourers' Council and supported by the League and other Progressive organisations, the meeting was preceded by a march to the Park with the Battersea Irish Fife and Drum Band, and by the socialist campaign Clarion Van.

Member Battersea Council

His election to the Council meant that he was now a member of an employer organisation that saw itself as part of the wider labour movement in which trade unions played an important role in trying to improve working conditions and pay. This was not without difficulties in the relationship between the Council and the trade unions of its direct labour force. John went on the Baths, Health and Works Committees. There was public speaking as well as on the platform of Anti-Vivisection movement meeting in January 1908 in support of the Brown Dog Memorial statue.

Changing attitudes within the labour movement, especially the increasing attraction of socialist ideas, created splits within the movement. Some of the organisations in the Trades Council split off and formed Battersea Labour Party in 1908. The result was the loss of electoral power between 1909 and 1912 to the Municipal Reformers who tried to reverse some of the pro working-class gains. The Progressives regained narrow control again in 1912.

Election As Mayor

In 1913 he was elected by his Progressive colleagues as Mayor. In his acceptance speech he said:

‘My election to-night marks a new era. You have made history tonight. For the first time in the history of the English nation, a man of colour has been elected as mayor of an English borough.

That news will go forth to all the coloured nations of the world and they will look at Battersea, and say 'It is the greatest thing you have done. You have shown that you have no racial prejudice, but recognise a man for what you think he has done.'

This statement hid a more interesting motive for wanting to be Mayor. After his election he wrote to John E. Bruce, the President of the Negro Society for Historical Research, in the United States. ‘My keen desire to attain this position this year was owing partly to the fact of the Anglo-American Exhibition that is to be opened this year at the "White City" in London here. I knew that it would be food for thought for those of the American whites, when they arrive here, to find that a Metropolitan Borough of London permitted a man of colour to be its Chief Magistrate, otherwise, I do not think I would have undertaken the Office.’

Imagine going into his room at the Town Hall. On the wall for Councillors, officials and visitors to see was the picture Calender "What Cheer. Dedicated to our 50th Anniversary of Freedom. Factors in our Progress." sent by a well wisher in the States, 'with a coloured child in the centre - "Our Hope", and giving 'comparative information of the first 50 years of our freedom from American slavery.' As he explained to Bruce alongside are 'photographs of Members of our Race - American and others, You can therefore imagine my pride that, during the 50th anniversary I am the Mayor of Battersea. No other year would have been so suitable as this, and I am more than repaid, if my elevation will advance the cause of our People throughout the world.'

Archer faced real problems as Mayor. Under constant sniping from the Municipal Reform opposition in the Council Chamber, and those sections of the labour movement still hostile to the Progressive Alliance at Town Meetings called to discuss important local issues which the Mayor chaired. Finances were a key concern from him. He told Bruce that the £150 official expenses were inadequate to cover the costs of entertaining expected of him. He was feeling depressed at this stage because of the death of 'Granny', Jane Roberts, the widow of the first President of Liberia, who lived with him and Bertha.

The First World War

In the last months of his Mayoralty the First World War broke out and he set up an appeal for funds to relieve the distress caused locally by the war. A large procession to promote the appeal led by a band went around Battersea in the pouring rain in September.

We know little about his involvement in black politics across the war years. He obviously remained in touch with other activists as he was elected President of the African Progress Union in 1918. Referring to the role of Africans, West Indians and African Americans on the battlefields of France and Flanders, he told the Progress Union: 'A war, we have been repeatedly told, for the self-determination of small nations and the freedom of the world from the despotism of German rule. The truth of that statement will be proved by the way' the different countries deal with their 'Negro subjects'. "The people in this country are sadly ignorant with reference to the darker races, and our object is to show to them that we have given up the idea of becoming hewers of wood and drawers of water, that we claim our rightful place within this Empire. That if we are good enough to be brought to fight the wars of the country we are good enough to receive the benefits of the country.'

Pan-Africanism

Archer attended the Pan-African Congress organised by W E B Du Bois in Paris in February 1919. Later that year he led a Progress Union deputation to see the Mayor of Liverpool about the race riots. In October he attended the wedding of John

Alexander Barbour-James, the Jamaican GP in Hackney. In December he attended a lecture-concert in aid of a book which would tell the story of Africa's part in the First World War.

In August 1921 John went to the second Pan-African Congress organised by Du Bois meeting in Westminster Central Hall. He chaired a session on colonial freedom, at which he introduced Shapurji Saklatvala, giving a message of support. The Congress Declaration to the World or the London Manifesto demanded 'the recognition of civilised men as civilised despite their race and colour' and upheld 'the ancient common ownership of the Land and its natural fruits and defence against the unrestrained greed of invested capital', and contained forthright criticism of British colonial rule. It was unanimously adopted.

Battersea Labour Party

During the War the Liberals had split off from the Alliance and in 1918 the Trades & Labour Council, the Labour League, and the socialist groups came together to form the new Battersea Trades Council and Labour Party under the new Labour Party constitution which allowed individual members as well as affiliated organisations like the trade unions. Archer became a leading figure.

In the 1918 Kharki General Election the Party fielded Charlotte Despard, the suffragette, Irish nationalist, and supporter of Indian freedom, and Arthur Lynch, the former Irish nationalist who had fought against Britain in the Boer War. Archer was one of Despard's nominators and chaired at least one of her election meetings. They both lost given the national Liberal-Conservative coalition. The Party however swept the board in the Council elections in November 1919, with John among those elected.

For the next General Election he supported the adoption of the Communist Shapurji Saklatvala as Parliamentary candidate. At 'Saklatvala's funeral, it was claimed by an ex-Labour Councillor that it was Archer who had first brought him into contact with Battersea and that Archer had, for some years, been Mr. Saklatvala's most loyal and doughty champion.' In this he was supported by the socialists Arthur Field, who had been a founder member of the Independent Labour Party, and Duncan Carmichael who was to become Secretary of the London Trades Council. Both were members of the Workers' Welfare League for India, which Field had recruited Saklatvala into. Saklatvala was elected Battersea's Labour MP in 1922, but lost in 1923. After his re-election in 1924, the Parliamentary Labour Party denied him the whip and thereafter he sat as a Communist, while still enjoying the support of Battersea Labour. The Battersea Party fought against the bans and proscriptions against Communists being members of the Labour Party, for which it was expelled in February 1926.

After the defeat of the May 1926 General Strike it became public that Saklatvala had been advocating a strategy within the Communist Party to destroy the Labour Party. Archer was a prime mover in setting up new officially recognised Party organisations. He backed the new Parliamentary candidate adopted in 1927 against Saklatvala, Stephen Sanders. Sanders had been one of the architects of the Progressive Alliance from the late 1880s, and a neighbour of John's. He was now working for the International Labour Office of the League of Nations. In the 1929 election Archer was his election agent and he won.

Welfare and Unemployment

John had a special interest in public health and welfare issues, including active support for the Nine Elms Swimming Club, and was also a school governor. Even when he took a rest from being a Councillor from November 1922, he remained a Council appointee on a number of bodies. He was appointed Alderman from November 1925 until his re-election as Councillor in 1931. He attended several national and international public health conferences, including in Belgium and Germany.

As a member of the Wandsworth Board of Guardians from November 1919, he earned himself the title of the "K.C. for the unemployed". During the poor law funding crisis of 1921, the unemployed occupied the workhouse in protest at the withdrawal of payments keeping people in their homes. At the time he said "Wandsworth and Battersea cannot stand the financial strain of dealing with the unemployed problem, and it may probably result in action similar to that adopted by Poplar." This is a reference to the Labour Councillors in Poplar refusing to levy the poor law rate and being imprisoned. He angrily pointed out that the occupiers included men "wearing silver badges and wound stripes which a grateful country had presented to take with them into the workhouse."

A Town Meeting on unemployment agreed a resolution calling on the Government to provide work or maintenance, financed by a capital levy, to bring pressure on the Government through passive citizen resistance, such as rent and rates strikes, non payment of income tax and advocated the formation of a local council of action, and called on Battersea to follow Poplar. Archer spoke in favour of the resolution, which was carried.

He went with others from Battersea to a 50,000 strong demonstration in central London on 4 October demanding work or maintenance and the release of the Poplar Councillors. Archer described the attack on the march by the police with drawn batons as "cowardly and brutal".

Board of Guardians meetings continued to be very heated. In October 1923 all the Labour members were suspended and Archer was physically carried out.

When in 1924 the Board heard a deputation from the unemployed workers organisation 200 police patrolled the supporting demonstration.

Final Years

Although he was Labour's Deputy Leader from November 1931, a period of illness prevented him taking a full role in Council affairs. He died on Thursday 14 July 1932 aged 68. His funeral was attended by the representatives of the movement and other local organisations he had been involve in. The press reports do not indicate any black mourners apart from John's brother Arthur. He was buried in the Battersea Cemetery at Morden.

Concluding Thoughts

In writing this talk a couple of questions that I think have been niggling away at the back of my mind for a long time have come more clearly to the fore. Why does Archer seem to have remained content to stay at the municipal level and not appear to have used his Labour Party position to campaign within the national Party on black issues? Why does he not play a major role in black organisation and campaigning after 1921? When he addressed the Progress Union in 1918 he said: 'One of the objects of this association is to demand - not ask, demand; it will be 'demand' all the time that I am your President. I am not asking for anything, I am out demanding, because I have been speaking all through this election, and we have been telling people that children of the poor shall have the opportunity of going from the school to the college; and we demand the same right for Africa.' I think his reference to 'the election' is to the 1918 Khaki election. Why does he appear to give up demanding in respect of black rights? I do not think there are any easy answers to these questions. My closing thought is that perhaps he put his faith in Saklatvala to champion Indian and black rights at national and Parliamentary level. In 1926 he would have felt betrayed. From then on his priority seems to have been the rebuilding of the official Labour machine in Battersea, defeating the expelled organisations which continued to operate allied to the Communist Party, and ensuring that Saklatvala ceased to be MP. Perhaps also he had become suspicious of many other black activists' associations with Communism.

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