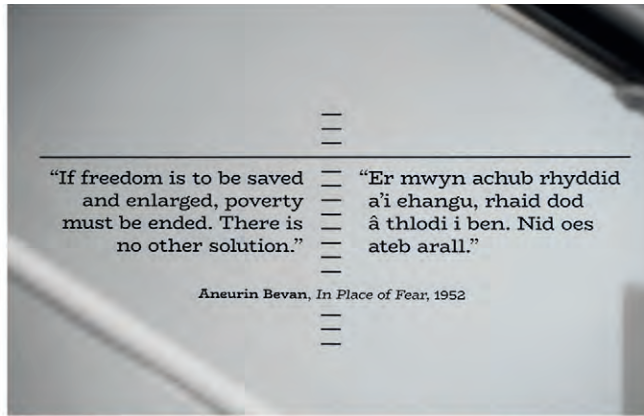


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Pics by Hannah Warrick

UNISON LAUNCHES WELSH LABOUR HISTORY EXHIBITION

by David Nicholson

THE history of British kings and queens is well known and is taught in schools. But what do we know of the history of working-class struggle and the formation of early trade unions?

UNISON Cymru Wales took a bold decision to tackle that gap in our knowledge of Wales's rich history of dissent and struggle and today launches its own permanent exhibition entitled UNISON & The Welsh Labour Movement.

Guest speakers include UNISON general secretary Christine McAnea, Wales TUC general secretary Shavanah Taj and the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford.

The launch will include a recital of a poem especially commissioned for the exhibition from Tredegar-born poet Patrick Jones.

Guests also include relatives of Aneurin Bevan, Betty Campbell and Thora Silverthorne, who feature in the exhibition.

UNISON Cymru Wales regional manager Dominic MacAskill explained that the ambitious project started out when the union held a Justice For Colombia meeting in its Cardiff office.

UNISON acquired a framed photo of a Colombian trade unionist in prison to put up in one of its meeting rooms.

But the photo had no description or explanation about it, or indication or who the woman in prison was – this later turned out to be Carmen Mayusa.

UNISON and Justice For Colombia successfully campaigned for Ms Mayusa to be released from prison and she is still active in Colombia.

"I was explaining this inspiring story of solidarity to our then regional secretary that we could make much better use of our meeting room and training suite space and she agreed," Mr MacAskill explained.

The labour movement history project was born, with funding from the UNISON Cymru Wales Council, to cover the first floor rooms with a permanent exhibition.

Mr MacAskill held discussions with Welsh historian Robert Griffiths and then spoke to Mark Wilson at the People's History Museum in Manchester.

"Mark came down to Cardiff to speak to us and gave us some really good tips on how we could go about mounting an exhibition.

"He also suggested some design companies who had experience of similar exhibitions and we put the work out for tender," Mr MacAskill said.

The winning designer was Hannah Warrick, whose enthusiasm



UNISON regional manager Dominic MacAskill with the photo of Colombian trade unionist Carmen Mayusa that inspired the exhibition. Pic by David Nicholson

and creativity captivated the union's project team.

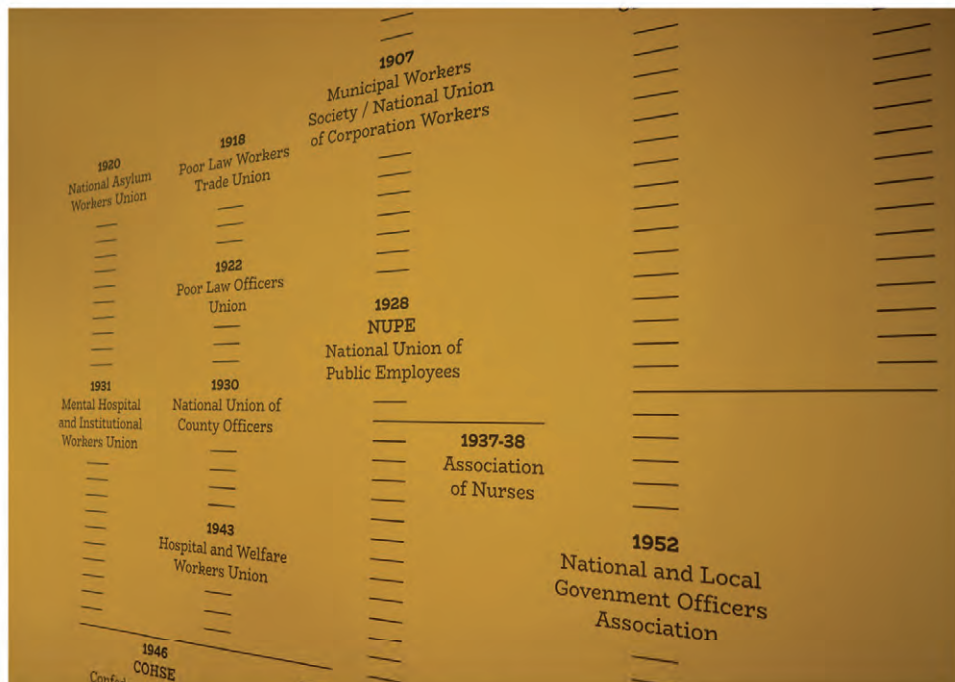
UNISON regional secretary Karen Loughlin said: "This is a unique union exhibition which has been transformational, creating a conference space which is both educational and inspiring.

"Our members and activists will be able to discover new heroes; learn lessons from our past struggles which will strengthen us all in facing up to and overcoming our present and future challenges."

The exhibition follows themed sections around the UNISON conference and training suite, with three rooms dedicated to key events from the lives of Thora Silverthorne, Aneurin Bevan and Betty Campbell.

"A key part of the project was for it to be placed online in an accessible format and that is also being launched today," Mr MacAskill said.

Visit the exhibition online at <https://bit.ly/UnisonHistory>



AN INSPIRATIONAL LEGACY

A history of resistance, protest and struggle

by David Nicholson

WELSH historian Robert Griffiths was a key member of the team UNISON Cymru Wales put together to turn its first floor Cardiff suite of meeting rooms into a living history of the Welsh labour movement.

Robert explained how he had a long-term interest in working class history in Wales, Britain and internationally.

"I got a full-time job as a senior lecturer in labour history and political economy, at what was the then Gwent College of higher education in Newport."

His first book was published in 1983, and was a biography of Merthyr Tydfil member of parliament, SO Davies, called *A Socialist Faith* and which has been recently updated – *Reddest of the Reds: SO Davies, MP and Miners' Leader*.

"I was approached by UNISON who wanted a history of the union in Wales, but they wanted to put it into the wider context to mount a permanent exhibition.

"When they asked me if I would be interested I jumped at it, and they commissioned me to write the scripts, select the illustrations, translate the text into Welsh and I gladly took that on."

Robert explained to me that much of the research has been original work, including talking to family members of some of the individuals and pouring through local and national newspaper archives.

"The further back you went, the less was easily available about the unions that were formed at the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, that themselves merged to become NUPE, NALGO and COHSE."

Robert was not surprised by this lack of historical archive as some of the forerunner unions were small, operating in unfavourable circumstances and came and went fairly quickly.

"I am thinking of unions such as the National Asylum Workers' Union, the National Association of County Authority Employees and the National Poor Law Officers' Association.

"You know, even the names, such as the Poor Law Workers union, give you some idea about the nature of their origins in hospitals, local government poor houses and workhouses.

"Some of these areas were very difficult to organise and the need to record for posterity what they did and to write the history of their foundation and so on was not high on their list of priorities.

"So I had to go to national newspaper and Welsh newspaper archives and comb through the old copies for news snippets about those unions."

Some of that original work is featured in the exhibition, although Robert tells me that he now has a huge archive of the unused material that did not make it in.

The exhibition is based around a timeline of key events that winds its way around the first floor space and then has three specific rooms dedicated



to key individuals: Aneurin Bevan, Betty Campbell and Thora Silverthorne.

I wanted to know if he has a secret favourite exhibit?

"What particularly enthused me is the room and exhibition space devoted to Thora Silverthorne, who really was a largely unknown figure in the British labour movement, and certainly in the Welsh movement.

"It was Rodney Bickerstaffe, who was general secretary of NUPE, and then later joint general secretary of UNISON, and trade union historian Mike Walker who uncovered more about the life of Thora.

"She was born into a miner's family in Abertillery where she organised the Young Communist League and sold the *Daily Worker*.

"When the family moved to Reading after her father could not gain work in the pits, she sold the *Daily Worker* at the local railway station, and the depot.

"Then she trained to become a nurse and after she qualified she joined a medical unit and went to the civil war in Spain where she tended to the wounded on the Aragon front.

"When she returned to London in the late 1930s she established the very first genuinely independent union for nurses."

The online exhibition includes a 3D-filmed version that allows the viewer to move around each of the exhibits. Robert also narrates this in English and Welsh and has translated each part of the exhibition.

He explained that the translations were not easy because spoken Welsh by large sections of the working class in Wales diverges substantially from formal written Welsh.

As far as Robert is aware the UNISON exhibition is unique and he is unaware of any exhibition that comes close to being such a comprehensive history of the Welsh labour movement.

I ask him what he hopes will be the legacy of this history that UNISON is now displaying in its conference suite.

"I hope it will be inspirational and it brings home to any who may need it the lesson that if you struggle, you can win, but if you don't struggle, you're guaranteed to lose.

"Working-class people generally, in my experience, love history, especially if it's the history they have not been taught. The history of themselves, their class and their communities.

"The history of the Welsh working class is one that is a rich history of resistance, protest and struggle."

A timeline of a movement

by David Nicholson

DESIGNER Hannah Warrick's honesty is a breath of fresh air when we chat about her role in ensuring the exhibition's visual impact in an office setting, and also the online version.

Most of Hannah's work that led to her being recommended to the union was with the People's History Museum in Manchester, where she has worked on projects such as Peterloo and the most recent exhibition on the life of murdered Member of Parliament Jo Cox.

"I have never done a project like this before," she tells me.

"I gave UNISON three routes to start with. I always like to give at least three ideas of how an exhibition could look and feel.

"So one of the ideas was the one that we used, which is this very nice sort of timeline device that runs throughout the exhibition.

"So you're almost going along it as you go through. And it's just that simple graphic device that really brings everything together.

"And then you can see it in the logo as well, where it helps to extend out the letters because the Es all line up."

I asked about the collaborative process with historian Robert Griffiths and UNISON and how they decided which events to give prominence to.

"Rob worked on the content of what we were going to put in – a lot of text and images and then we all worked together to cherry-pick and make sure those key events were in the exhibition, because it could have been endless.

"I had to consider the fact that we only had a certain amount of space that we could use, but it was mostly Rob and UNISON who made the key decisions.

"We spoke about the exhibition being in an office building and the challenges that posed.

"That is different to what I am used to doing with museums and galleries, but it's still a very important space.

"I love working with historical material which has some sort of radical element to it and it is such a great timeline of different events and people protesting and standing up for their rights."

The union has 90,000 members in Wales and I asked Hannah how she ensured the history exhibition is accessible to all those members, the public and not just those who can enter its Cardiff offices.



Pic by Sarah Blackie

"There is a 3D element to it and the cameras we used have shot 360 degrees. That means it is like Google Maps, where you can walk through the space and look at all the exhibits."

We talked about the hidden history of the British working class and how that is so rich and important.

"It's just like little hidden gems from Rob, where he's done all of his research into Thora Silverthorne, Betty Campbell and Aneurin Bevan and he reached out

to family members to get the material for each of the meeting rooms."

Hannah especially liked Patrick's poem and could not believe the Chartists' mural in Newport was allowed to be destroyed, but is thankful that it is now enshrined in the panels of the exhibition.

"It is such an interesting history that UNISON has and which will hopefully influence and inspire people when they go in and do their training."



Pics by Hannah Warrick

Bread and roses to bridge the past and present

Song of the Unvanquished

by David Nicholson

Patrick Jones is a poet, writer and songwriter and, like Aneurin Bevan, is a son of Tredegar, South Wales.

He co-wrote *The Forgotten*, a musical to mark the 175th anniversary of the Chartist Rising and the play *Before I Leave* about dementia sufferers inspired by the Merthyr Tydfil Cwm Taf Choir and performed by the National Theatre of Wales.

He also wrote the lyrics for James Dean Bradfield's album released last year about Chilean activist, singer and poet Victor Jara, *Even In Exile*.

We started the interview by talking about Patrick's connection with UNISON, and it turned out that he had been invited to recite his poetry at a union demonstration in Barry, South Wales, a few years ago.

When UNISON's Dominic MacAskill commissioned the poet he shared the images of the exhibition, which was a real shock to the poet.

"It was a great, great honour to be asked to do this. I didn't quite know where to start once Dominic explained the project to me.

"I have lived in Wales almost all my life and I did not know most of the history the exhibition charts."

He told me that he knew of the Chartists and Rebecca Riots from his father and knew of the Tolpuddle Martyrs but knew so little of Welsh working-class history.

"It was a great education for me, and

Song of the Unvanquished Patrick Jones, August 2020

"What you are running here is not a factory, it is a zoo. But in a zoo there are many types of animals. Some are monkeys who dance on your fingertips, others are lions who can bite your head off. We are the lions, Mr. Manager!"

Jayaben Desai

"I wouldn't call it a strike. It was a demonstration for existence"

Emyr Williams

They never wanted it to be like this
they were happy keeping us
in darkened rooms
on our knees
screaming/screaming
the 12 hour dissonant days
the pittance of pay
the damp hells of Anglesey's copper mines
slavery masquerading as freedom
spending our wages in their stores in Merthyr and Tredegar
They owned our time
And
to question, was treason

So we learnt our history from the musket and the gun
From Bethesda to Tonypandy
Mold to Llanelli
From Thatcher's pawns tormenting miners
with their tenners and raised truncheons

They protected their power
By perpetuating fear and insecurity
But the human need
For justice and equality/cydraddoldeb

And when Thora Silverthorne
Started her nurses' union
They said it wouldn't work
Threatened her with exclusion
She ignored them
followed her bright vision and
founded the National Nurses' Association
in '37

Cook Nicholas Tobias Pallister
And the hunger marches/gorymdeithiau newyn
of the thirties
And the brave souls of Tower, Maerdy and Taff Merthyr collieries
Standing together on the picket line
Back in '84/85
Unity is strength

Mewn undod y mae nerth
NALGO NUPE
COHSE
Each played their part to secure
The rights of you and me
And now now now
UNISON is the voice of the future



Patrick Jones

Who can protect us from these crooked
From unfair dismissal, racial discrimination
Sexist tropes, ableist bullying and homophobia
Who stands up when they say 'lie'?

Because there is another way
So that we will not become extinct
"No justice, no peace"
For us all to link
To better not batter the human race
in educating not desecrating
where equity is not a tick box but a lasting imprint

So let us listen to those ancient footsteps
drum taps beating from bleeding
let us feel that chalk upon the board
inspiring our learning
as from Rhyl to Rhymney
Porthmadog to Porthcawl
Llanberis to Llantrisant
And we may catch the chorus
of those gone before us
erased by history in their quest for justice

Part of Patrick Jones' *Song of the Unvanquished* as displayed at the UNISON office. To read the entire poem visit the online exhibition at <https://bit.ly/UnisonHistory> Pic by Hannah Warrick

I'm honest about that.

"Dominic got in touch last year during the pandemic and he asked if I would be interested and he sent me photos of the exhibition, all the panels.

"When I went through the photos I was in panic and thought: 'How can I do this justice?'"

We discussed how he started the work and, in particular, the Jayaben Desai quote above the poem itself on the exhibition panel:

"What you are running here is not a factory, it is a zoo. But in a zoo there are many types of animals. Some are monkeys who dance on your fingertips, others are lions who can bite your head off. We are the lions, Mr Manager!"

"I saw a play in Cardiff about the

Asian women's strike at the Grunwick film processing laboratories and Jayaben said that line about lions and the quote just stayed with me."

Patrick explained that he was also sad about how some things have just not changed for the better.

"Oh, my God, has anything changed?"

"But when you look around at all the movements and we are still here fighting for our rights, and our right to a fulfilling and happy life. And so, in another way, it was quite inspiring and we are unvanquished.

"Some days I feel pretty impotent and helpless myself and a little bit cut adrift, particularly with the pandemic and then something else kicks in and I feel inspired by so many

movements and people out there."

In his poem, Patrick bridges the past and the present and references the Me Too movement, Extinction Rebellion and the Black Lives Matter protests that rippled across Britain last year after George Floyd's murder by a police officer in the United States.

"As we stood in the world of 2020, I could not help but bring things together that I saw going on around the world of terrible injustices."

I asked Patrick if he would be reciting the poem at the launch event?

"Dominic has asked me to and I did say it is quite long. But he said that is OK, so I will have to take a big, deep breath."

UNISON Cymru Wales would like to welcome you to our unique exhibition. We hope you will be inspired to join and get involved in UNISON and play a part in our present and future struggles and victories.

<https://bit.ly/UnisonHistory>

Karen Loughlin
Cymru Wales Secretary

Dave Rees
Cymru Wales Convenor

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