

Celebrating heroes of Welsh working people

AMUNDANE office space in the centre of Cardiff has been transformed into an area that celebrates those who have fought to make lives better for ordinary workers.

Wales' biggest union Unison has created a mini-museum that in a series of displays tells the story of its contribution – and the contributions of its predecessor unions – to the Welsh labour movement.

Unison Cymru's head of bargaining and campaigns Dominic MacAskill said: "Unison House has always come across as just another corporate office. When it was originally decorated there were some fairly anonymous Cardiff scenes decorating the conference suite.

"We'd tried occasionally to turn it into something a bit more resembling a trade union centre with temporary photographic exhibitions, which went down really well and gave our activists a sense of recognition of what they were doing.

"I remember we had an event where we had all the organisers gathered together, and I was having a chat with the then regional secretary. I said wouldn't it be a good idea if we made better use of the space and created an exhibition of our work. She said 'yes – go ahead and put together a project!'

"That was the seed of it about two years ago.

"So I did. It was recommended that we had a chat with the People's History Museum in Manchester, which had done very similar types of things.

"I got in touch with Mark Wilson, their exhibitions officer, and he agreed to come down and talk us through what it all entailed."

One of the ideas was to have a family tree of unions that merged and eventually created Unison.

"But the key point to come out of our discussion with Mark was that we needed a historian to do the research. I know Rob Griffiths [an author and general secretary of the Communist Party of Britain] very well and between us we scoped out what we wanted to do.

"Part of Mark Wilson's contribution was to suggest a number of people who could transform these ideas into an exhibition.

"One was an up-and-coming, really enthusiastic new designer called Hannah Warwick.

"She stood out from the crowd, not only for her unique ideas but the commitment and the passion with which she talked about those ideas.

"Covid somehow concentrated our minds about how we could speak to a wider audience.

"We're not a museum, we don't have public footfall, and what we have mainly is activists coming to meetings and training events.

Despite having a rich trade union history, Wales hasn't had a permanent exhibition about the subject until today, reports political editor-at-large Martin Shipton



➤ Working class hero Thora Silverthorne

"As we couldn't do a physical launch because of the pandemic, we decided to take our time and put the exhibition online as well.

"The idea is that all our members in Wales – 90,000 plus – will have the ability to access what we believe now is a unique and inspirational story.

"It's introduced us to new people – new heroes that we could identify, and this is an opportunity for our membership to engage with what a trade union is, the struggles and the origins of how trade unions were formed and under what conditions they

arose."

One of the little-known heroes highlighted in the exhibition is Thora Silverthorne, who was born in a working class community in Abertillery in 1910, where her father George Silverthorne was a miner at the Six Bells Colliery, an activist in the South Wales Miners' Federation and an early recruit to the Communist Party of Great Britain.

Thora herself became a Young Communist and moved with her family as a 16 year-old to Reading after her mother died, later training as a nurse.

She went to Spain as part of the first foreign medical unit to enter the country during the Civil War, becoming head nurse at a hospital set up to treat the wounded. Over a period of five days she and her team treated 700 casualties.

On her return to Britain she helped found the first trade union for nurses, at a time when they were being threatened with longer hours and lower pay, and during World War Two was appointed organising secretary of the Socialist Medical Association.

In that capacity she led a delegation that met Labour leader

Clement Attlee, pressing him to establish a national health service.

Later she was a full-time official of the Civil Service Clerical Association, retiring in 1970 and living until 1999.

Mr MacAskill said: "She wasn't simply a trade unionist, she was also an internationalist, and her involvement with the volunteers who defended the Spanish republic was quite inspirational.

"Some of the other names in the exhibition you may have come across, but not really focused on."

He said that of those who'd had a preview of the exhibition, many had said they'd have to come back because they wanted to spend longer looking at the displays.

"We went to the People's History Museum for help because we couldn't think of anything in Wales that is similar. This is probably unique in that it's the only one we're aware of that puts a trade union into the context of the wider development of the labour movement. What we're hoping is that this starts a bit of a trend of trade unions looking to rediscover their history, but also put it on display for their members and for the wider public."

He recalled an occasion when he'd spoken to a class of 14 year-olds in a school and only two or three out of 30 had heard of trade unions.

"We're hoping this exhibition will inspire a wider interest in the history of trade unions and their importance in terms of the developments of our country and the social progress that has been fought over and won in the past and currently the things we are fighting to defend.

"I think the idea of the exhibition is to link our previous struggles with our present situation and the future challenges.

"I think what it does is show that the gains we've made in the past have not just been benevolently given to us by philanthropists and by wise, knowledgeable rulers.

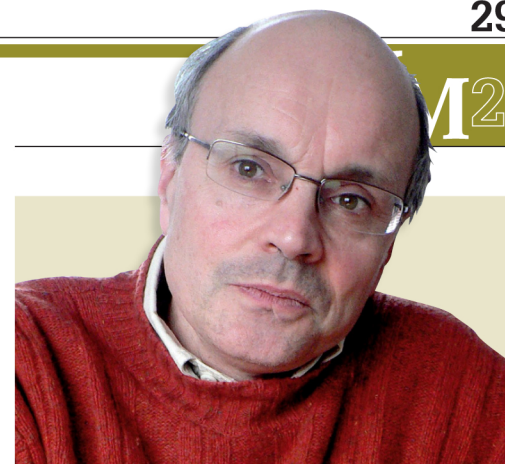
"They've been won by ordinary people gathering together in collective struggle and making demands.

Unfortunately the advances made in the past are being undermined now.

"Today society places the emphasis on individuals. Obviously individuals have a responsibility, but their ability to make major change is when they collect together and act together."

Unison is planning in due course to have open days once a month when people from outside the union can come and view the exhibition.

Meanwhile people will be able to view it online.



WELSH COLUMN DYLAN IORWERTH

DW i'n meddwl mai Eisteddfod Machynlleth oedd hi yn 1981 a Theatr Bara Caws yn perfformio un o'u rifiws ysgubol mewn tafarn yn y dre.

Y stori, os cofia' i'n iawn, oedd ymdrech pobl leol – gan gynnwys hipi o ddysgwyr – i achub pry' prin iawn oedd yn byw ar dail neu ddom.

Hyd yn oed os ydi'r cof yn pallu am y manylion, mae yna un olygfa'n aros yn y co'... o Mei Jones, yr actor, ar ôl i dwmpath o "dail" gael ei sblachu yn ei wyneb.

Am funudau ben bwy'i gilydd, roedd o'n sefyll yno a'r gynulleidfa'n rollo chwerthin. Dim byd arall, dim geiriau, dim ciamocs, dim... dim ond wyneb un actor gwirioneddol ddoniol a thyrfya wrth ei bodd.

Am Wali Tomos y bydd y rhan fwyaf'n cofio'r dyn o Fôn ac mae peryg fod y cymeriad hwnnw wedi mynd yn fwy na'i grewr hyd yn oed.

Ond mae'n gwbl deg fod pobl yn dal i ystyried heddiw mai C'Mon Midffild ydi'r gyfres gomedi Gymraeg orau erioed.

Cyfrinach Mei Jones a'i gyd-greawdwr Alun Ffred oedd taro ar gymeriadau yr oedd pawb yn eu nabod; boed yn y byd pêl-droed neu beidio.

Ym mhob cymdeithas leol, ar bob pwyllgor ac ym mhob clwb, mae yna bobl fel Wali Tomos ac Arthur Picton – y gwirfoddolwr diniwed a'r Stalin anobeithiol, y dyn sydd eisio rheoli. Mae trefn ddi-drefn pêl-droed yn rhoi cyfle iddyn nhw flodeuo ond pobl pob man ydyn nhw.

Roedd y digrifwch hefyd yn gyfuniad prin o hiwmor geiriau a hiwmor y llygad. Mae'r ffaith mai ar radio y dechreuodd hi'n brawf o'r cynta' a'r rhaglenni hynny, dan adain Elwyn Jones annwyl, yn defnyddio technoleg y cyfrwng hwnnw i'r dim.

Ac er mai geiriau a dywediadau a cham-ddywediadau oedd sail llawer o ddoniolwch Wali ac Arthur, pan ddaethon nhw at deledu, mi wnaethon nhw ac Alun Ffred y gorau o'r cyfrwng hwnnw hefyd.

Mae yna un olygfa arall sy'n aros yn y co' o'r rhaglenni teledu... o'r rhifyn pan oedd criw Bryn Coch yn trio cael "sesh hwyr" yn y dafarn, er gwaetha' plismon newydd lleol llawer rhy frwdfrydig.

Yn anrffod, mi ddaeth y rêd ar y dafarn ac mi fethodd ymgais yr yfwrwr anghyfreithlon i osgoi braich fer y gyfraith... gan gynnwys Wali mewn dillad mynd i'r môr efo bocs hel arian yn esgus bod yn gerflun casglu ar gyfer y cychod achub.

Dyna ddoniolwch y llygad. Doniolwch y gair oedd yn yr enw ffug roddodd o wrth edrych ar boteli'r optics. Arthur wedi dweud Arthur Bell... Wali yn dweud Glyn... Glyn Ffidich.

Allwn ni ddim gweld hipi Machynlleth fyth eto... ond mi allwn weld Glyn Ffidich tra bydd yna we a fideo.

walesonline/cymraeg



➤ Dominic MacAskill