

### **MIKE MECHAM'S VISIT TO BELFAST: 27 APRIL TO 1 MAY 2015**

Belfast born William Walker (1870-1918) is considered the most significant labour leader in Ireland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a young trade union activist, he established the first union of women linen workers (1893) and helped organise workers in other sectors. A joiner in shipbuilder's Harland and Wolf, he became a full-time organiser for the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (1901), delegate to the British TUC and President of the Irish TUC (1904). He helped found the Independent Labour Party in Belfast and his union sponsored him as a, narrowly unsuccessful, Labour candidate in North Belfast three times from 1905-1907. Ramsay MacDonald was his election agent. He was an elected Belfast Councillor (1904-1907) and Poor Law Guardian (1899-1909), a member of Labour's NEC (1907-1912) and Party Vice-Chair in 1911. He left politics to become an inspector for the new National Insurance Act in 1912.

Yet, Walker remains a minor figure in Irish labour historiography. My research therefore seeks to build a fuller picture of him and the Belfast labour movement, and to explore their influence on the development of the Irish and British Labour Parties. At the heart of the research is a first full biography of Walker built around a variety of public and private roles that he played. A recent visit to Belfast, funded by an SSLH bursary, had three important outcomes: (a) the completion of an analysis of the Belfast Poor Law Union records from 1899 to 1908; (b) an analysis of Belfast press accounts of Walker's crucial 1905 North Belfast by-election; and (c) additions to my research network in the Irish labour history community.

Although there are number of articles, book chapters and references to Walker, for the most part they focus on his political role. To build a more complete picture it is essential therefore to interrogate a number of archives for new primary material. For the most part these are outside London and largely in Belfast. The recent visit was therefore an essential part of that process. Running over five full days it included visits to archives at the Linen Hall Library, PRONI (the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland) and the central newspaper library.

One important role Walker played throughout his life in different spheres was as a social activist, including as a Poor Law Guardian (PLG). From the 1890s, PLG's were elected in Britain and Ireland giving working class campaigners a role in a significant, though historically negative, public welfare provision. For example, one time Labour leader George Lansbury was elected to the Poplar Union in 1892. Similarly, Walker was elected to the Belfast Union in 1899 and on two subsequent occasions until 1908. This role of his has never been properly explored. Fortunately, Northern Ireland was required by law to preserve all of its Poor Law records and these now reside in PRONI. Consequently, the recent visit enabled the completion of a detailed examination of the minutes of some 500 weekly meetings of the Belfast Guardians during the nine years of Walker's membership. They have revealed a fascinating insight into the role of the Union, and Walker's part in it, not just in poor relief but also the medical care in the infirmary, in which Walker's older sister Lizzie was a nurse, the fever hospital and the "Abbey" TB sanatorium which Walker campaigned to be established away from the Poor Law estate. It all adds to a new perspective of Walker.

# **SSLH Postgraduate Bursary**

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