Ernest Bevin Biography

Ernest Bevin

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Biography

The career of Ernest Bevin (1881-1951), English trade union leader and Labour politician, is often taken to symbolize the political rise of sections of the working class in 20th-century Britain.

Ernest Bevin was born on March 9, 1881, in Bristol, the son of poor, working-class parents. After finishing elementary school in Bristol, Bevin earned a precarious living in various manual jobs and was introduced to politics via the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the Marxist party. He organized the dockers and transport workers and from 1910 to 1921 led the Dockers Union. Through his union activities Bevin became involved in national politics; his brilliant advocacy at a commission of inquiry on dock conditions in 1920 led to greatly improved conditions for the dockers and national recognition for Bevin.

The noted historian A. J. P. Taylor has bracketed Bevin at this stage of his career with J. H. Thomas, the leader of the National Union of Railwaymen. They were both outstanding union leaders of a new type. Though aggressively working-class in character, they were no longer willing merely to resist. Nor would they put off improvement till the distant dawn of socialism. They bargained with the employers as equals, displaying equal or greater skill, and they never forgot that compromise was their ultimate aim, whether with a strike or preferably without.

Bevin's most important contribution to modern Britain was as creator and general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union from 1921 to 1940. Forging a national force out of scattered, locally organized, occupationally divided workers was a major achievement; in time, the T&GWU became the largest union in Britain.

In the late 1930s Bevin opposed George Lansbury and other pacifists in the Labour party and argued in favor of rearmament. When he entered Parliament in 1940, Bevin became a key figure in the wartime coalition as minister of labor and national service (1940-1945). Without him the Churchill government could not have achieved the levels of wartime production necessary to continue the war.

After the war Bevin served as secretary of state for foreign affairs (1945-1951) and was lord privy seal for a brief period in 1951. In spite of his controversial handling of the Palestine situation, he is generally regarded as a great foreign secretary. Perhaps this accolade springs from surprise that Bevin, a Labour minister, did not depart radically from traditional British policies in foreign affairs. He died in 1951.