

BELL, RICHARD (1859 - 1930), M.P. and trade union leader

Name: Richard Bell

Date of birth: 1859

Date of death: 1930

Parent: Mary Bell

Parent: Charles Bell

Gender: Male

Occupation: M.P. and trade union leader

Area of activity: Business and Industry; Politics, Government and Political Movements

Author: Huw Morris-Jones

Born 29 November 1859 at Penderyn, Brecknock, son of Charles and Mary Bell. His paternal grandparents were Scots who moved from Lincoln to the Pantmawr farm at Ystradfellte. Shortly after 1860 his father, a quarryman, joined the Glamorgan police force and went to Merthyr Tydfil, where Richard had his scanty early education. He first worked as an office boy in the Cyfarthfa iron-works, but in 1876 entered the employment of the railway company and was stationed at Pontypool Road, where he joined the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants. In 1886 he was transferred to Swansea, and there, finding no union activities, he established a branch of the A.S.R.S. in 1887, becoming, in 1897, its general secretary.

Two episodes of outstanding importance occurred during his tenure of office. The first was the Taff Vale dispute in 1900, when, because of an unofficial strike among railway workers, the company sued the union and obtained £23,000 damages; this led to a change in trade union law. The second was the famous Osborne case, when a branch secretary of the union queried the validity of its rules regarding the political levy. The case was finally taken to the House of Lords and decided against the union. The consequence was the 1913 Act, which permitted unions to levy a political toll on their members.

Bell will chiefly be remembered for his resistance to the efforts of those who wished to establish an autonomous Labour Party. In 1900 he was elected M.P. for Derby boroughs, the first railway worker to enter Parliament. He was one of the four trade union members of the joint committee which drew up the draft constitution of the Labour Representation Committee (L.R.C.). When that committee was established in 1901 he became its first treasurer, and its chairman in 1902-3. Nevertheless, at the Newcastle conference in 1903 he opposed the adoption of a redrafted constitution which sought to create a new self-governing Labour Party. In 1904 he became president of the Trade Union Congress. In 1906 he was re-elected as a 'Lib.-Lab.' for Derby, but resigned his seat and his trade union office in 1910. He then undertook an administrative post at the Board of Trade in connection with the establishment of labour exchanges under the unemployment section of the National Insurance Act. This was later transferred to the Ministry of Labour. In 1907 he had been made a J.P. for the county of Middlesex. He also acted as secretary of the London Board of the Co-operative Printing Society. He died 1 May 1930. A thorough Welshman, he spoke Welsh fluently.

He was married three times and had eight children.

Author

Professor Huw Morris-Jones, (1912)

Sources

Labour Party Research Department

The Daily Herald, 2 May 1930

Y Brython, 15 May 1930

Alcock, *Fifty Years of Railway Trade Unionism* (1922)

Beer, *A History of British Socialism* (1920-21)

information from the Rev. R. W. Bell, Abercynon

Further Reading

NLW Archives: [General Election 1906 Wales and Monmouthshire. A Souvenir containing photographs, biographical sketches etc., of all the Welsh MP's: Richard Bell](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Richard Bell](#)

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