

O'CONNELL, HARRY (1886 - ?), seafarer, trade unionist and political activist

Name: Harry O'connell
Date of birth: 1886
Date of death: ?
Gender: Male
Occupation: seafarer, trade unionist and political activist
Area of activity: Activism; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: David Featherstone

Harry O'Connell was born on 14 May 1886 in Georgetown, British Guiana (now Guyana). He came to Cardiff in the early 1910s, and lived for many years at 27 Maria Street in Butetown with his Welsh wife. A ship's carpenter by trade he was 'proud of his skill at splicing ropes and rigging ships'. He was awarded both the Mercantile Marine Ribbon and British Medal Ribbon for his services on merchant ships during the First World War.

By the early 1920s he had become involved in organising opposition against the racist politics of the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union, which became the National Union of Seamen (NUS) in 1926. In January 1922 he led a deputation of seafarers of colour to the union's executive to protest against their unequal treatment as members of the union, drawing attention to discriminatory hiring practices and significant unemployment among seafarers of colour at this time. O'Connell himself noted during the ensuing discussion that at this time he personally had been out of work for two years.

The African American anthropologist St Clair Drake, who spent time in Cardiff's dockside community in the late 1940s, argued that in the period from 1927-1939 O'Connell was 'the best known, most aggressive and most vocal leader in the community'.

Through the interwar period O'Connell continued to be active in struggles against the Union and its links with the shipowners, police and Cardiff City Council. In 1927 he was central to the formation of the Colonial Defence Association (CDA), a Cardiff-based organisation linked to the Communist Party of Great Britain which sought to challenge racism and discrimination. He chaired the organisation working together with figures such as the Barbadian seafarer Jim Nurse, the vice-chair, and some white leftists such as the trade unionist Jim Henson who had been expelled from the NUS for observing the General Strike in 1926, and had subsequently distanced himself, at least in part, from earlier racist views.

O'Connell and the CDA were involved in a number of struggles such as challenges to racially discriminatory unemployment relief rates in the city. In 1935 O'Connell was at the forefront of opposition in Cardiff to the Tramp Shipping Subsidy Act which was based on a trade off where the NUS supported subsidies for owners of tramp ships in exchange for the prioritising of the employment of 'white British' seafarers. Tramp shipping, vessels which took cargoes from port to port, was central to the economy of Cardiff's port, but was in decline by the 1930s. After the implementation of the Act it became increasingly difficult for seafarers of colour to sign on tramp ships, and in campaigning against this discrimination O'Connell liaised with the League of Coloured Peoples, and also Captain Arthur Evans, the Conservative MP for Cardiff South, and organised among seafarers of different ethnicities in Butetown.

These links indicate that despite his own ardent communism he could be adept at working across political divisions when necessary. Allied to this organising O'Connell made powerful criticisms of racist representations of Butetown. In a letter published in the *Western Mail* in July 1935, he wrote a vehement critique of a report which rehearsed and entrenched stigmatising discourses about the area and which had been publicised in the paper. O'Connell's intervention challenged the way the author pathologized children from mixed heritage relationships in Cardiff and exposed the colonial assumptions behind the publication. The letter also challenged attacks on working class white women, such as O'Connell's wife, who had married Black seafarers and often faced considerable prejudice.

In challenging discrimination and racism in Cardiff and in trade unions O'Connell drew on sustained involvement in left internationalist networks. He joined the Communist Party of Great Britain - most likely in the early to mid 1920s - and was a key figure in the Seamen's Minority Movement which was established in the 1920s to challenge the NUS. This activity led to involvement in maritime organising linked to the Communist International and contact with influential figures such as the Trinidadian radical George Padmore. O'Connell wrote for the *Negro Worker*, the paper of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, which described him as the 'leader of Communist seamen in England'. A delegate at the International Seamen and Harbour Workers' Congress in Altona, near Hamburg in 1932 O'Connell was critical of 'opportunistic tactics' which he argued had led to Arab, Black and Somali seafarers becoming disillusioned with the organisation.

That O'Connell articulated such critical positions within white-dominated Communist organisations indicates his ability to negotiate the limits of these spaces. He also held his own against Party figures such as George Hardy who he saw as blocking Black organisers from leadership positions. O'Connell nonetheless remained a loyal Party member standing (unsuccessfully) for election as a Communist Councillor in Cardiff's Adamsdown ward in 1950. A letter to his friend the Barbadian Communist Peter Blackman in January 1940 expressing concern that 'all activities on behalf of our People have come to a close' indicates that he did not, however, take an uncritical attitude to the party's positions and record on questions of race. The letter also spoke of the disorientating impact that long periods away at sea could have on his political organising and connections.

Such left wing political activities resulted in police repression, harassment and blacklisting. He was arrested in October 1935 for leading a protest to the Italian consulate in Cardiff, part of the global resistance to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. During the Second World War, while doing shore work, he was blacklisted and the ticket that he needed to access the docks was taken away. The Home Secretary Herbert Morrison responded to a parliamentary question from Arthur Evans MP raising O'Connell's case by commenting that for him to serve on either British or foreign ships 'would not be in the national interest'. Opposition to his blacklisting was taken up the Overseas Committee of the National Council of Civil Liberties - an organisation which included key anti-colonial radicals such as V.K. Krishna Menon and Peter Blackman.

His dogmatic Communism - he had a chrome portrait of Stalin in his house on Maria Street - also caused some tension among fellow Black radicals. He boasted of breaking up organisations in Cardiff which had been formed to protest against plans for segregated housing because some activists, such as Jim Nurse and Aaron Mossell, had participated in the 1945 Pan-African Congress in Manchester, which O'Connell denounced as Trotskyist. This indicates some of the tensions which different visions of Black left politics had on the Colonial Defence Association which also was impacted by tensions between O'Connell and some figures within Cardiff's Arab communities. These tensions also reflected the combative masculinities which shaped his politics. Younger women in the community such as Olwen Watkins recounted finding him and other Black Left men stern and intimidating.

During the late 1940s the NUS renewed its attacks on seafarers of colour, passing a motion in support of the 'colour bar' at the organisation's 1948 conference. In this context O'Connell worked together with fellow seafarers of colour to challenge the racism of the Cardiff branch of the union. O'Connell and Dualeh Mohammed Aftaag, a Somali ship's fireman and anti-colonial nationalist who was involved in the Somali Youth League, supported each other's nominations for positions in the branch and successfully passed a no confidence motion in a racist official.

Eventually O'Connell was to chair meetings in the branch against which he had so consistently mobilised through the interwar period. He continued to advocate a militant line in the union until at least the early 1950s. His last recorded contribution to discussions in the branch, at a meeting on 4 January 1952, notes that he 'hoped the day would come when Union members joined ships and not just a certain type of nationality or tribe, as we were going forward as Union members now'.

The date of Harry O'Connell's death is unknown.

Author

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Wikidata: [Q125792268](#)

Published date: 2025-02-24

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APA Citation



Featherstone, D., (2025). O'CONNELL, HARRY (1886 - ?), seafarer, trade unionist and political activist. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 1 Dec 2025, from <https://biography.wales/article/s15-OCN-HAR-1886>

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