**Jarrow March An Overview – BBC Website.**

In October 1936, a group 200 men from the north-eastern town of Jarrow marched 300 miles to London. They wanted Parliament, and the people in the south, to understand that they were orderly, responsible citizens, but were living in a region where there were many difficulties, and where there was 70 per cent unemployment - leading one of the marchers to describe his home town in those days as '...a filthy, dirty, falling down, consumptive area.'

The men were demanding that a steel works be built to bring back jobs to their town, as Palmer's shipyard in Jarrow had been closed down in the previous year. The yard had been Jarrow's major source of employment, and the closure compounded the problems of poverty, overcrowding, poor housing and high mortality rates that already beset the town. Ellen Wilkinson, the local MP, later wrote that Jarrow at that time was:

'There was no work...'

'... utterly stagnant. There was no work. No one had a job except a few railwaymen, officials, the workers in the co-operative stores, and a few workmen who went out of the town... the plain fact [is] that if people have to live and bear and bring up their children in bad houses on too little food, their resistance to disease is lowered and they die before they should.' (The Town that was Murdered, 1939).

**World depression:**

Britain in the 1930s was suffering from the world-wide depression, and its areas of heavy industry, such as Jarrow, were hit hardest.

During these years unemployment benefit lasted for 26 weeks; when this time was up, people were given transitional payments, subject to the resented Household Means Test introduced in 1931. The Unemployment Assistance Board was created in 1934, and was responsible for the long-term unemployed. The relief given, however, was totally inadequate and was grudgingly given.

The wages of all family members, and any household assets, were taken into account when deciding whether or not relief should be paid. This meant that in some cases redundant men were dependant on their daughters or wives, a situation that did not fit in with the mores of the time.

Jarrow Borough Council, on 20th July 1936 decided to present a petition to Parliament, delivered by men who had marched the 300 miles to London.

There was widespread and long-term male unemployment, and in protest against this, 'hunger marches' were arranged by the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM). These included a march of 2000 people in 1932, two further national marches in 1934 and 1936, and a march of 200 blind people to London, also in 1936. It was in this climate that Jarrow Borough Council, on 20th July 1936 decided to present a petition to Parliament, delivered by men who had marched the 300 miles to London. They called this their 'crusade', partly to emphasise the seriousness of their plight and partly to distinguish their march from those of the NUWM - whose connection with the Communist party raised the spectre of revolution.

Fear of this had caused the Labour party to refuse affiliation with the NUWM, while recognising the movement's value in representing claimants who came before the benefit tribunals. The Jarrow crusade, however, attracted broad political support, including that of local Conservatives.

**Ellen Wilkinson:**

Ellen Wilkinson (1891-1947) was one of four children born to Methodist parents. She was well educated, winning a scholarship to Manchester University, and never married. Through joining a wide range of women's groups she gradually built up an impressive political career, and in 1915 she became National Women's Organiser for the Cooperative Employees union, which eventually joined the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (NUDAW). Ellen joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1907, remaining a member until 1932, and also briefly joined the Communist party - she was still a member when elected to Manchester City Council in 1923.

Elected as an MP for Middlesbrough East in 1924, Ellen was one of four women MPs in the Labour government at the time of the Jarrow crusade, and constantly sought to draw the plight of Jarrow to the attention of party leaders. A petite, elegant woman, she was an outstanding orator, with a fierce political passion, both in and out of parliament, She was, however, a rebel, and Herbert Morrison said of her: '...sometimes she is a bit of a nuisance to us.'

Ellen was primarily an international socialist, totally opposed to fascism. She undertook a tour of Germany in 1932, taking with her an anti-fascist flag from British women, and was a member of the International Commission of Enquiry into the Reichstag Fire. The fire was the act of arson that preceded the elections that brought Hitler to power in Germany in 1933. Ellen also often visited Spain, both before and after the Spanish Civil War in 1937, and was active in Spanish relief committees.

It was her international politics that led Ellen to rebel against Labour party policy. She was disapproved of because she tolerated communist involvement in anti-fascist groups, but she did just manage not to be expelled from the party.

Ellen's achievements were many. As Minister of Education in the 1945 Labour government, her greatest victory was the raising of the school-leaving age to 15, despite the shortage of buildings in war-damaged Britain and the need for 13,000 extra teachers. It was a measure of her political intelligence that, despite the vehemence with which she expressed her views, she remained one of her party's stars.

**The crusade begins:**

In 1936, as plans for the Jarrow crusade got under way, Ellen Wilkinson determined that she would support it by walking some of the way - mainly to win publicity for the marchers. Ellen had also supported the NUWM marches, and she approached the NUWM about adopting the Jarrow march. The respectable councillors of Jarrow, however, were determined to maintain their cross-party appeal and did not follow up this request. Their success in raising the thousand pounds needed for the march, enough to give the men some pocket money, proved them right.

The marchers were carefully chosen. Women were not invited. Men were medically examined, and 200 fit men were appointed to march. A second-hand bus was bought to carry cooking equipment, and ground sheets were provided for outside rests. An advance guard was sent out to arrange overnight stops and public meetings. Finally a religious service was held on the eve of departure to bless, and set the tone for, the crusade.

Bearing blue-and-white banners, the Jarrow men paraded at 8.45 each morning of their 25-day march. Many marched army style - 50 minutes to the hour with 10 minutes' rest. A mouth organ band was a great success, 'keeping the men swinging along all the time', according to a report in the Shields Gazette, and there was singing - led sometimes by Ellen Wilkinson. One marcher described one day, with rain '...belting down ...cats and dogs ...but we were still marching like soldiers. There were people on the pavement, they were crying you know...'

The petition, signed by 11,000 Jarrow people, was carried in an oak box with gold lettering. A further petition was collected en route. Overnight accommodation varied, from the casual wards of local workhouses to more friendly lodgings and municipally-arranged feasts. One helper along the route described how, on one occasion, he saw a marcher take the ham from inside his sandwich, and place it in an envelope. When asked what he was doing he replied, 'I'm sending it home ...my family haven't had meat in the house for six weeks.'

At Leeds the Jarrow men received a welcome donation - for their return trip by train. At Barnsley, the men rejoiced in the specially-heated municipal baths. Ellen Wilkinson had the women's foam bath all to herself. Some of the marchers were showing signs of the strain they were under, and care was provided **by medical students from the Inter Hospital Socialist Society.**

**Impact:**

The Jarrow marchers successfully reached London, but despite considerable public sympathy the crusade made little real impact. Ellen broke from the march in order to address the Labour party conference and, with tears streaming down her face, exhorted delegates to '...tell the government our people shall not starve!' She failed, however, to win special attention for her cause.

The marchers themselves were generally well-received, and were entertained by sympathisers when they reached London. Despite this, their demonstration at Hyde Park Corner on 1st November was sparsely attended in comparison with an adjacent Communist meeting, which disbanded to swell the Jarrow men's numbers.

The marchers made no en masse assault on the House of Commons, leaving Ellen Wilkinson to present their petition on 4th November, watched by some of her fellow protesters in the gallery. Despite Ellen's eloquence as the petition was accepted, no specific proposal was made for Jarrow's relief. Ellen later told one of her colleagues that, when she had asked the prime minister to receive a deputation from the men, he had refused: 'He said he was too busy.'

At the time of the march, Britain was ruled by a National government whose personnel and policies were largely Conservative. Despite its lack of response to the plight of Jarrow, its protectionist policies did eventually improve the British economy somewhat, by increasing domestic consumption. In addition, cheap mortgages led to a housebuilding boom.

In Jarrow, a ship-breaking yard and engineering works were established in 1938 and the Consett Iron Company started a steelworks in 1939. However, in areas such as Jarrow the depression continued until World War Two, when industry prospered as a result of the country's need for rearmament.

***About the author:***

By Christine Collette, a lecturer in women's studies, has been a scholar in the field of gender and working class history for a number of years. Currently writing a feminist history of the Labour Party, she edited The European Women's History Reader with Fiona Montgomery, (Routledge 2002).