

## **When Sunday Schools Taught Socialism**

**The end of the nineteenth century saw the birth of an important but little-known movement in British working-class history: Sunday schools dedicated to teaching the values of socialism.**

Children in a socialist Sunday school in Govanhill, Scotland. (Govanhill Baths Community Trust / Govanhill People's History)

Before 1870, Christian Sunday schools provided some of the only educational opportunities for the children of working-class families. Often associated with nonconformist groups like the Baptists and Unitarians, these schools were staffed by laypeople who instructed children in the tenets of religion alongside basic literacy and numeracy. But after the development of a national system of compulsory education for children, often under the auspices of the Church of England, Sunday schools shifted focus to instilling the ideas of Christian ethics and good behaviour.

While religious moral education flourished, Britain's early labour movement was also growing and organising. The exposure of many of the early leaders of labour politics to the Sunday school system of moral and ethical teaching, both as students and as teachers, sparked an important but little-known movement in working-class children's education: secular Sunday schools, dedicated to teaching the values of socialism.



1 May 1913: The May Queen leads the procession, under the banner 'London Socialist Sunday School Union', at the Socialist Labour Day demonstration in Hyde Park. (Hulton Archive / Getty Images)

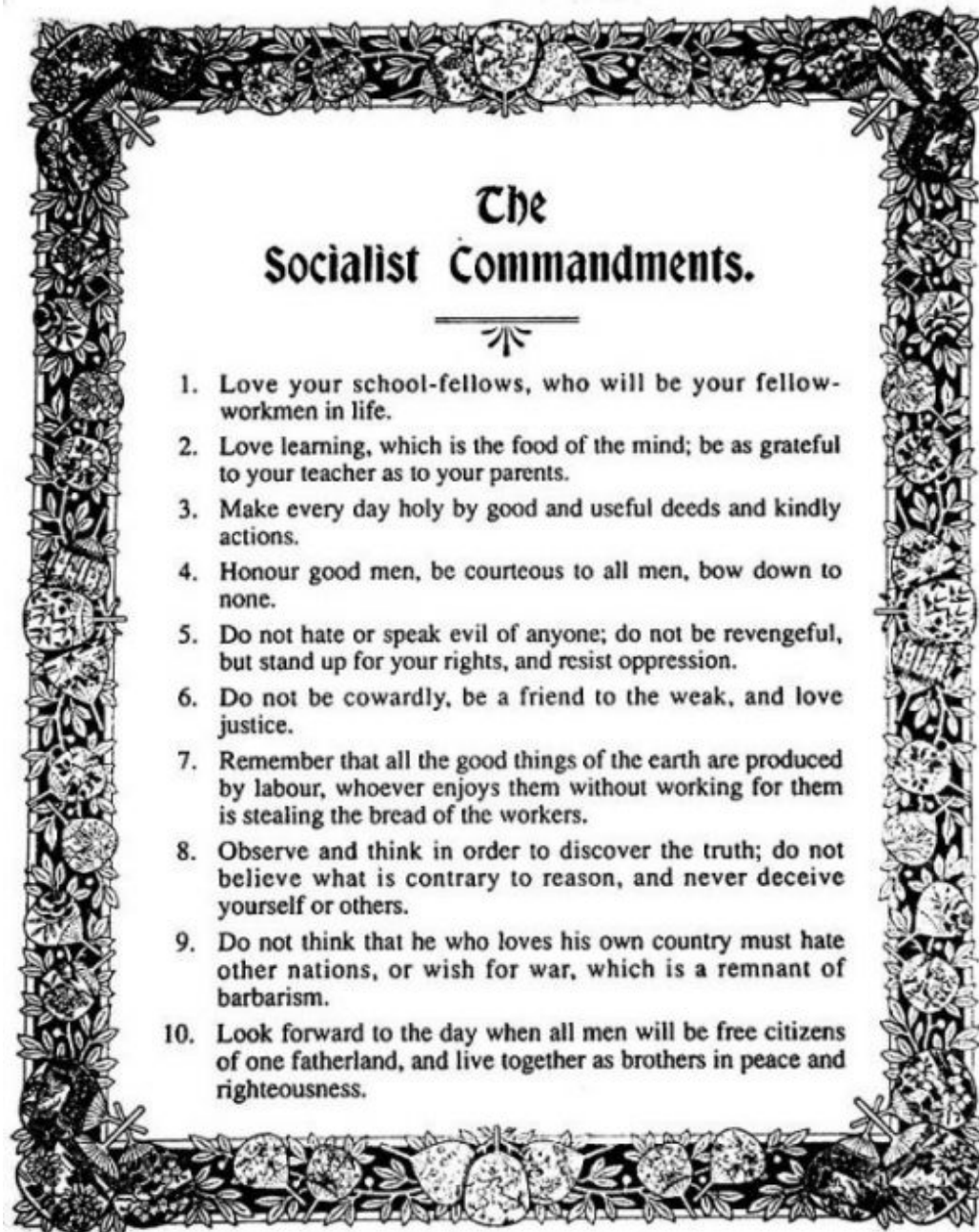
The idea of a secular Sunday school for the children of labourers appears as early as the 1830s among the followers of the Chartist Robert Owen, but the first concerted effort dates from 1892. Mary Gray, a member of the Social Democratic Federation in Battersea, London, [founded](#) a Sunday school for teaching the children of striking dock-workers in the East End about the 'causes and consequences of poverty', which opened in November of that year.

The curriculum followed the model of a religious Sunday school, focusing on moral formation, but in line with socialist rather than Christian values. After starting out with just two pupils, the Battersea school had an attendance of around ninety by the early 1900s. Mary Gray remained the only staff member all the way up until 1903.

Gray's school lacked the support of the local SDF branch, and ultimately, it closed. But similar movements supporting the political education of working-class children had appeared in other

industrial cities, too, and in Glasgow, the idea took root at the instigation of trade unionist Keir Hardie.

Before his election to Parliament, first as an independent and then as part of the Labour Representation Committee, Hardie edited the monthly *Labour Leader* newspaper. From 1893, the paper included a column, penned by Hardie, too, that aimed to explain socialist ideas and labour theories in simple terms for a child audience. This column led to the creation of a children's club known as the 'Crusaders', and by 1895, with around a thousand members, Hardie encouraged the creation of organised classes for these groups in his native Glasgow.

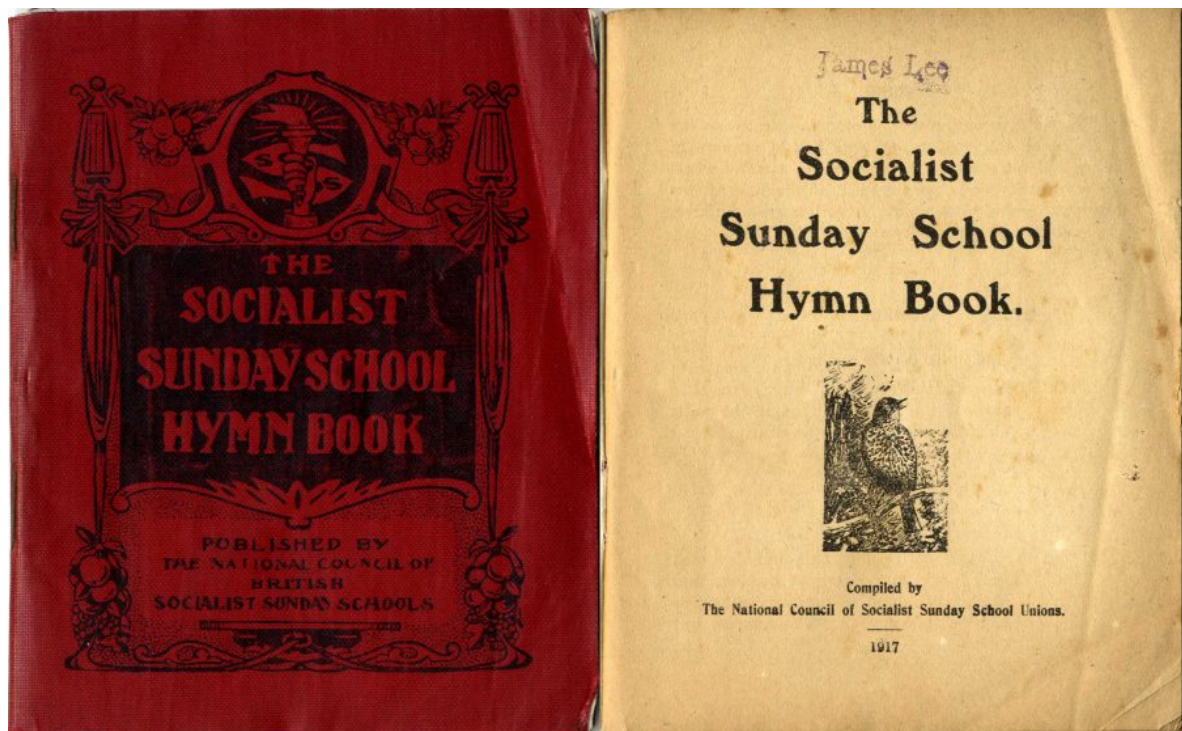


(Wikimedia Commons)

The idea of modelling these classes after Christian Sunday schools owes much to the religious environment of many early labour leaders. Hardie himself was a lay preacher of the nonconformist Evangelical Union, and the first secretary of the Glasgow Socialist Sunday School, Caroline Martyn, was a prominent Christian Socialist. And although the teachings of the Socialist Sunday Schools were

strictly secular, they made extensive use of the language of Christian ethical teachings. By 1900, at least three of the Sunday schools were organised by Labour Churches—Christian socialist groups whose congregations were predominantly working-class.

Hardie's [successor](#) as editor of the 'Crusader' children's column was another leader of the Socialist Sunday School movement, Archie McArthur. Like Hardie and Martyn, McArthur had had a Christian upbringing and was involved in nonconformist church movements well into his forties. By 1895, he had mostly lost his faith, but he retained an appreciation for the traditional language of Christian Sunday schools and their ethics, reflected in many of the practices of the rapidly growing movement. Writing in the newsletter *Young Socialist*, McArthur cast the ideals of the labour movement in terms familiar to a Christian Sunday school pupil; it was the aim of any young socialist to 'build up the City of Love in our own hearts and so, by and by, help to build it up in the world'. Many schools made use of the *Socialist Sunday School Hymn Book*, and some editions included a list of ten '[Socialist Commandments](#)': 'Love learning, which is the food of the mind; be as grateful to your teacher as to your parent', and 'Observe and think in order to discover the truth; do not believe what is contrary to reason, and never deceive yourself or others'.



Jennie Lee's copy of the *Socialist Sunday School Hymn Book*, passed down by her father James. (Open University Digital Archive)

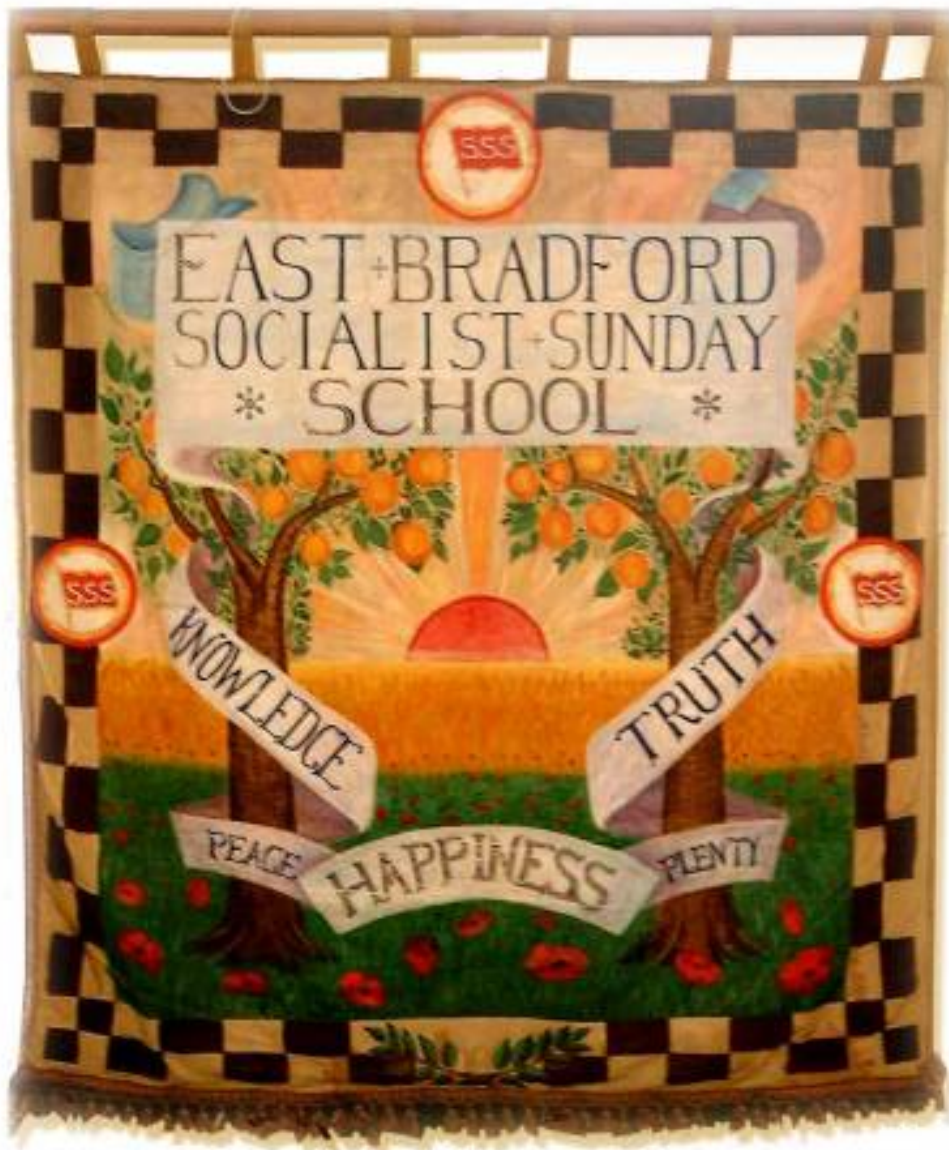
Socialist Sunday School meetings might include singing, a short lecture on an ethical or moral issue known as a 'Lesson', and the recitation of an 'Aspiration'. More broadly, the schools also organised sports teams, orchestras, and communal libraries. Membership expanded to include parents, too, and by 1912, there were more than twelve and a half thousand attendees between ninety-six schools across Scotland, the North of England, and London.

But as the movement grew, critics of the Sunday Schools also emerged, both inside and outside of socialist circles. Town councils were often unwilling to license these meetings, arguing that they subverted the religious morals of children. Negative press from *The Times* during the 1906 London County Council elections led to the eviction of four schools from Council-owned buildings, a move which was met in turn with a protest in Trafalgar Square. Some members of the labour movement criticised the devotional character of the school, too, arguing that the curriculum should be based on hard economic theory rather than ethics.

In the period following the First World War, the Sunday schools found themselves victims of the changes and divisions taking place within the labour movement at large. The recently-founded

Communist Party of Great Britain formally rejected the Sunday schools in 1922, and the quasi-religious characteristics of the movement came under increasing fire with attacks on the 'Commandments' and the structure of the meetings. Combined with the Great Depression, which stalled the schools' growth, the movement fell into financial and organisational decline. The much-reduced National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools, formed in 1909, eventually renamed itself the Socialist Fellowship in 1965.

Despite that decline, the teachings of the Sunday Schools can be said to have had an impact on leading figures in the twentieth-century labour movement and the achievements of that movement in turn. The copy of the *Socialist Sunday School Hymn Book* that once belonged to Jennie Lee, passed down to her by her father James, today [remains](#) in the collection of the Open University, which she had gone on to found as Minister for the Arts in Harold Wilson's government. Lee, who writes about attending a Socialist Sunday School in her memoir, also went on to co-found *Tribune*.



The banner of the East Bradford Socialist Sunday School, now in the collection of the Working Class Movement Library. (Working Class Movement Library)

More than a century on from their growth, and decades after their decline, the Socialist Sunday Schools are today evidence of the breadth of the early labour movement, and the major role the Left played in community life, also attested to by other socialist civic and leisure groups like the [Clarion Cycling Club](#). The Schools were also representative of a distinctly British tradition of socialist ethics written in the language of a religious working class, and of a relationship drawn between political organisation, community engagement, and personal morality.

The building blocks of socialism may be economic theory, but at Christmas it's worth remembering that there is too a long tradition of socialist thinkers who promoted more spiritual notions of community and fraternity as the keys to a better world—not in the next life, but in this one.