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Revision

How to answer questions on the rise of the Labour Party

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There are a number of types of question that could be set on the rise of Labour. Questions could be set on the issues such as the early development of the party, the impact of the First World War, or the first Labour government and the impact that had on its rise. Questions might also refer to specific events, such as the Taff Vale decision, or key individuals like Keir Hardie.

Whatever question is set, it is important that you read the wording of the question carefully and pay particular attention to any dates mentioned in the question.

The emergence of a labour movement in the nineteenth century

Questions on the emergence of the labour movement in the period to 1900 are likely to focus on why a such a movement emerged and how much support there was for it.

Question

Assess the reasons for the emergence of a labour movement by 1900.

In considering why a labour movement emerged you would need to consider long-term issues, such as the emergence of Marxism and socialism, the demands made by the Chartists in the 1830s and 1840s, the widening of the franchise, a growth in working-class consciousness (which resulted from industrialisation), and the failure of the Liberal Party to meet the needs of the working class.

Answers might also consider developments in the trade union movement, strikes and the emergence of organisations such as the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabians. You would need to be able to weigh up the contribution of each group and reach a judgement as to their relative importance in the development of the movement.

Question

How much support was there for the Labour movement by 1900?

Although many of the topics covered would be similar, a different approach would be needed if you were asked to assess the strength of the labour movement in the nineteenth century. You would need to be able to comment on the limited support for the socialist groups, how many unions still backed the Liberal Party and continued to believe that they best represented the interests of the working man, and the extent to which a working-class consciousness had emerged in the nineteenth century.

It would also be important to discuss the issue of the franchise, as by 1900 many working men still did not have the vote. You might also consider the lack of support among unions for socialist ideas, with

their concerns dominated by pay and conditions and protecting the rights of the skilled workers who dominated their membership. However, you might contrast this with the emergence of 'new unions' in the period after 1889 and the impact this had on the labour movement

The Labour Party to 1914

Questions

- 1 How important as the Taff Vale decision of 1902 in the development of the Labour Party in the period to 1914?**
- 2 Assess the reasons for the growth of the Labour Party in the period to 1914.**
- 3 How important was the Lib-Lab pact in the development of the Labour Party?**
- 4 The attitude of the trade unions was the most important factor in the growth of the Labour Party in the period to 1914. How far do you agree?**
- 5 How successful was Labour in the period to 1914?**

All of these questions require a detailed knowledge of the developments within Labour in this period. However, while question 2 allows you to decide what reasons to include, questions 1, 3 and 4 require you to discuss a particular issue and weigh up its importance against a range of other factors. The final question requires you to establish a set of criteria against which to judge success and then assess how far those criteria were met.

In covering this period, it is important that you have a good understanding of the factors that allowed Labour to grow and can assess their relative importance in that growth. You would need to be able to evaluate the importance of:

- developments in the late nineteenth century (covered in the previous section)
- the role of courts, particularly with the Taff Vale decision
- the growth in the ILP
- the attitude of trade unions to representation in Parliament
- the formation of the LRC in 1900
- the importance of the Lib-Lab pact
- concerns about social conditions and the Boer War

However, in considering 'how successful' the party was in the period to 1914 there would need to be knowledge of:

- performance in elections
- the legislative achievement, such as the Trades Disputes Act
- the Osborne Judgement
- the decision of the Miners' Union to switch support from the Liberals to Labour
- the growth in union affiliation
- the experience gained by Labour leaders

- the impact of industrial unrest in the period 1910–14

With all of the questions it will be important to reach a judgement about each of the issues you discuss, but ensure that judgement is about the issue in the question. If you answering the final question, is the judgement about success or with the other questions are you reaching a judgement about the issue you have discussed? Are you weighing up the importance of a named factor against other issues?

The impact of the First World War on the Labour Party

Questions could focus just on the impact of the war on the development of the Labour Party, but it is more likely that they will require you to weigh up the impact of the war against other factors. It is also possible that you could be asked about the strength of the Labour Party by 1918 and this might be compared with its position in 1914. Was it stronger in 1918 than 1914?

You need to think about the extent to which Labour gained from the war and you might want to consider:

- the improvements in local organisation
- the aims of the party and the new constitution, particularly Clause IV
- the experience gained in coalition
- the result of the 1918 election
- the increase in the franchise that followed the war
- the expansion of trade union membership during the war
- the size of its popular vote
- the divisions within the Liberal Party
- Splits within the Labour Party at the start of the war and its impact
- developments on Clydeside
- the Russian Revolution

The first Labour government

It might be argued that questions on the first Labour government go beyond the scope of the rise of the party, but it might also be seen as the culmination of that rise and its acceptance as a mainstream party that was more than just the baby of the trade unions.

You should consider the significance of the first Labour government and be able to assess whether it was a success or failure. Some have argued that in surviving for just 9 months it should be viewed as a failure, particularly when one examines its domestic record. However, a counterargument can be made and you would need to consider its foreign policy, but also the fact that a party that had been founded only in 1900 was able to form a government and do much to destroy its 'Bolshevik' sympathies.

In considering the first Labour government's significance you would need to be able to place its development in the wider context of British politics. Was it an indication that the Liberal Party was in terminal decline and had been replaced by the Labour Party? Was the Labour Party now the alternative to the Conservative Party? Why had the Labour Party been able to increase its support so quickly? This last question will require you to look back to 1900 and look at a range of events that helped to gain it support — which was the most important?

In discussing the success and failure of the first Labour government you should ensure that you produce a balanced answer. On the success side you might include:

- the ability to form a government
- seen as the alternative to the Conservatives
- destroy the image of Bolshevism
- show they were fit to govern
- foreign policy
- the Unemployment Insurance Act
- Agriculture Act
- Housing Act

This would be balanced against:

- short-lived
- failure to bring in socialist policies, such as nationalisation
- disappointment to many of its supporters
- traditional policies
- treaty with Russia
- the Zinoviev letter

This is a large topic area and there are many different types of questions, covering a range of periods, that could be set. It is therefore important that, as with all topics, you read the question set carefully and ensure that your answer focuses on the precise wording of the question and does not simply discuss the topic.

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