

FRANCIS, DAVID ('DAI') (1911-1981), trade unionist and miners' leader

Name: David Francis
Date of birth: 1911
Date of death: 1981
Gender: Male
Occupation: trade unionist and miners' leader
Area of activity: Business and Industry; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: John Graham Jones

Dai Francis was born on 5 February 1911 at Glynhelig House, New Road, Pantyffordd in Seven Sisters, near Neath in the Dulais Valley, the second of the six children of Thomas Francis, a coal hewer, and his wife Winifred (née Morgans). Thomas Francis had voted regularly for the Labour Party from 1918 onwards and was the only one in the village to buy the *Daily Herald* each morning. Welsh was the language of the hearth, and the family were devout Christians, regularly attending chapel three times each Sunday. Thomas Francis was a deacon at Onllwyn Congregational Chapel and a lay preacher. Dai Francis received his education at Onllwyn elementary school from 1915 until 1926, but failed his eleven-plus examination.

During Dai Francis's boyhood the traditional localism and isolation of the western anthracite coalfield were visibly breaking down as local miners, avid in their defence of their traditional customs and working practices, now displayed much broader horizons and perspectives. He was consequently fully embroiled in the intense hardship and social deprivation which accompanied the anthracite coal strike of 1925, the nine-day General Strike of May 1926 and the subsequent long stoppage which ensued in the coal industry. Francis was hugely impressed by the presence of Arthur Horner, who delivered several powerful public speeches in the Rhondda valleys, later to become the first Communist president of the South Wales Miners Federation in 1936, and eventually a regular visitor to Francis's home. Horner's values of international class solidarity, the unity of the South Wales Miners' Federation, personal loyalty, and a warm humanity, became very much his own too.

Francis became a coal miner in December 1926 when he joined his father at Onllwyn number 1 colliery, remaining there right through until 1959 (although in the late 1930s ill-health compelled him to become a surface worker). He represented the fifth generation of his family to work in the coal industry. On 19 December 1936 he married Catherine, the daughter of William Powell, a local colliery checkweighman, and they set up home at Onllwyn. The union was extraordinarily happy and proved immensely supportive to him throughout the harsh vicissitudes of public life. They had two children, a daughter Nancy (born 1939), and a son Hywel (born 1946) who became a distinguished historian and served as Labour MP for Aberavon from 2001.

Francis attended the evening classes of the National Council of Labour College during the mid-1930s, where he was taught by the Marxist Dai Dan Evans. Following the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1936 (convinced that it alone could stop the advance of Fascism in Europe), and he remained firmly in its ranks for the rest of his life. His career within the South Wales Miners Federation began when he was elected financial secretary of the miners' lodge at Onllwyn number 1 pit, and he became chairman in 1940. He also chaired the Onllwyn welfare association and medical aid scheme for many years. When the National Union of Mineworkers was formed in 1959 Francis was appointed chief administrative officer for the south Wales area, upon which the family moved to Whitchurch in Cardiff.

In 1963 he succeeded his old mentor Dai Dan Evans as the general secretary of the south Wales area of the NUM at an intensely difficult time for the south Wales coal industry, beleaguered as it was by numerous pit closures and tragedies like the Cambrian colliery explosion of 1965 and the horrific Aberfan disaster of October 1966. Francis called repeatedly on the Wilson government to halt the rate of pit closures and strongly supported the largely successful national miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974 which he depicted as avenging the events of 1926. Highly critical of the regional structures of the TUC in Wales, he backed the formation of the Wales TUC in 1974, made up as it was of elected delegates, and empowered to reach decisions on matters relating to Wales, and he became its first president.

After a full fifty years' distinguished service, Dai Francis retired in 1976. But he remained active in a number of spheres, including his involvement in the Wales-Soviet Friendship Society, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), and other peace movements. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the 'Yes' campaign during the devolution referendum of March 1979, and also served as a member of the Welsh Arts Council and of the Welsh National Opera Board. In 1976 he gained considerable support as students' nominee standing against Charles, Prince of Wales, for the position of Chancellor of the University of Wales.

The victim of a stroke, Dai Francis died at the University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff, on 30 March 1981 following a brief final illness. He had remained active until within weeks of his death at the age of 70. A memorial meeting was held soon afterwards at the Onllwyn Miners' Welfare Centre. His papers are in the custody of the Richard Burton Archive at Swansea University.

Throughout his life, Dai Francis was a bright emblem of the south Wales coalfield community which had shaped his character. His innate stubbornness and tough inner resilience were tempered by a deep sense of humanity and warm humour. He was immensely widely read, and his attachment to the Welsh language and its literature was reflected in his support for the miners' eisteddfod established in 1947 and the miners' gala instituted six years later, both prominent events in the cultural life of south Wales. At the 1974 National Eisteddfod he was admitted to the Gorsedd of Bards, taking the bardic name 'Dai o'r Onllwyn'. On his death, Labour Party leader **Michael Foot** hailed his old friend as 'warm-hearted, passionate, dedicated to his cause and his people, and Welsh to the fingertips'.

Author

Dr John Graham Jones

Sources

Ben Curtis, 'Francis, David [Dai] (1911-1981)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
The Times, 1 April and 4 April 1981
Western Mail, 29 January 1976 and 1 April 1981

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