

## DAVIES, STEPHEN OWEN (1886?-1972), miners' leader and Labour politician

**Name:** Stephen Owen Davies

**Date of birth:** 1886?

**Date of death:** 1972

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** miners' leader and Labour politician

**Area of activity:** Business and Industry; Politics, Government and Political Movements

**Author:** John Graham Jones

He was born at 39 John Street, Abercwmboi, Aberdare, probably (or officially) on 8 or 9 November 1886. Some sources place his birth in 1883 or even earlier. According to the 1891 census, he was nine years of age at that time. He was the fourth of the six children of Thomas Davies, farm labourer, coalminer and trades union officer (died 1909), who had been excommunicated from Soar chapel, Mountain Ash in 1904, and his wife Esther Owen, a local shop assistant and a very strong-willed, resourceful individual. Davies was educated at the local Cap-coch School, Abercwmboi, and began work in the Cwmpennar coal mine (where his brothers also worked) at the tender age of twelve. He studied mining engineering at night classes, and in 1908, sponsored by the Brecon Memorial College, he entered University College, Cardiff, to study for the BA degree. His intention at the time was to enter the nonconformist ministry, but some vacillation on Davies's part over the precise nature of his religious beliefs led to the withdrawal of the financial support which he had been receiving from the Brecon College. Nevertheless, Davies succeeded in gaining his degree in 1913. (Years later he was to become a governor of the university college at Cardiff.) He also studied at the Royal College of Science at London. In his early life Davies was much influenced by the theology of R. J. Campbell. As a student, he stood as an ILP candidate for the Cardiff Board of Guardians.

Immediately following graduation, he worked as a coalminer at Tumble and he also worked as a checkweighman in 1913. During the war years he was adopted as an ILP candidate for the Llanelli division. Davies's youth was spent in a South Wales coalfield, embroiled in a heady mix of the twin impact of Socialist politics and trades union militancy. In October 1918, just before the end of World War I, he was appointed the full-time agent to the Dowlais district of the South Wales Miners' Federation, remaining in the position until 1934, and became a partner-in-arms of his counterpart for the Merthyr district, **Noah Ablett**. He was also a close associate of **W. H. Mainwaring**. Davies quickly developed a reputation for militant action. He became strongly opposed to the post-war demands for the nationalization of the British coal industry. He visited Russia in 1922 and became a lifelong warm admirer of the Soviet system. Yet he remained loyal to the Labour Party, despite being strongly attracted by the appeal of the Communist Party. In 1924 he was appointed Chief Organizer and Legal Adviser to the SWMF and also became its Vice-President in the same year. He also served on the Executive of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, 1924-34, as the representative of the South Wales miners, and he was elected a member of the Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council in 1931. He later became an alderman of the Council and served as its Mayor in 1945-46. He remained a member of the council until 1949.

In a by-election in 1934 Davies was elected the Labour MP for Merthyr Tydfil as successor to Richard C. Wallhead MP who had represented constituency as the ILP MP since the general election of 1922. Over the years Davies enjoyed substantial majorities at each general election. Throughout his parliamentary career, he was a great individualist, ever ready on occasion to attack even the enactments of a Labour government. Consequently, on three separate occasions between 1953 and 1961 he was deprived of the Labour whip on issues concerning American bases in Britain, rearmament in West Germany, and opposition to the Polaris submarine programme. He was ever ready to attack the Wilson administrations of the period 1964-70 as a result of his disagreement with their public spending policies, wage controls, and legislation relating to the trades unions. He was also a fervent advocate of self-government for Wales - totally at variance with the official party line on the issue. He actively supported the tenacious Parliament for Wales agitation of the period 1950-56. In 1955, acting totally on his own initiative, and without even consulting his colleagues within the Parliament for Wales campaign, he introduced a Government of Wales bill in the House of Commons. Predictably, the measure floundered. He also served as a governor of the National Museum, the National Library and the University of Wales. He presented evidence before a large number of governmental enquiries.

As might be expected, S. O. Davies was never offered governmental office, but he proved to be an excellent constituency MP, ever sensitive to the needs and aspirations of the people of Merthyr Tydfil with whom he felt a very close affinity. He was especially concerned with the reformation of the national insurance law in 1967 and the need to award enhanced compensation to former miners who suffered from dust-related diseases. Sheepishly, he admitted to the Aberfan disaster tribunal in 1967 that he had entertained grave misgivings about the safety of coal tips in the area, but had kept silent lest his intervention might lead to the closure of local collieries and cause large-scale unemployment in the area. Davies was often out of step with the party line. Following the Aberfan disaster, he was a vocal critic of the way in which the government compensated the families of those killed. In the general election of 1970 S. O. Davies was de-selected by the local Labour Party because of his advanced age (he was at least 84), but, unprepared to accept that his active political career was at an end, he stood as an Independent Labour candidate and was elected by a majority of 7467 votes over Tal Lloyd, the official Labour candidate. He was then expelled from the Labour Party. The outcome was eloquent testimony to the esteem in which he was held locally. In Parliament he maintained thereafter discreet links with the Parliamentary Labour Party and was sent a copy of the Labour whip, though he was nominally an independent. Shortly afterwards, he refused to accept the freedom of the borough of Merthyr Tydfil, asserting proudly that his re-election by its people was sufficient honour for him. In his appearance, Davies was anything but a revolutionary. Tall, with a generally pleasing personality, he had an outwardly quiet demeanour. In August 1919 S. O. Davies married Margaret Eley (sometimes known as Madge) of Cardiff. They had three daughters. She died of cancer in 1932. Two years later he married Sephora Davies, a native of Gwauncaeurgurwern, Carmarthenshire, a school-teacher, and they had two sons. The marriage was a happy, supportive relationship. They lived at Gwynfryn Park Terrace, Merthyr Tydfil. His hobbies were walking and swimming. He died at Merthyr Tydfil general hospital on 25 February 1972 and was buried at Mountain Ash in his native Cynon Valley. His estate was valued at £1,945. In the by-election which followed Davies's death, the seat was re-captured by Ted Rowlands for the Labour Party, but there was a large swing to Plaid Cymru in the constituency. S. O. Davies's early papers deriving from his period as a miners' agent are in the custody of the Glamorgan Archives Service in Cardiff, while his more recent political papers have been placed in the care of the South Wales Coalfield Archive at the University of Wales, Swansea.

## Author

Dr John Graham Jones

## Sources

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## Further Reading

NLW Archives: Brecon & Radnor Divisional Labour Party. "Prelude to Victory" Rural Campaign.

NLW Archives: Merthyr Tydfil Division. Parliamentary Election, 1950. S. O. Davies Labour Candidate

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Wikipedia Article: S. O. Davies

## Additional Links

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