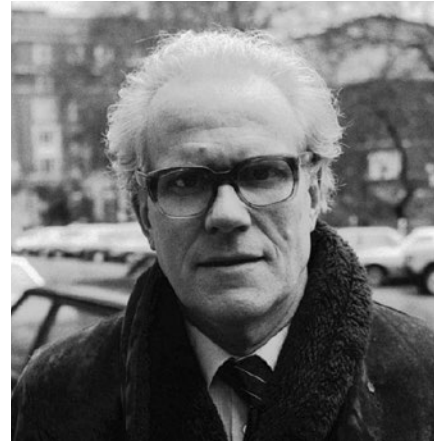


Alex Ferry

“The epitome of kindness, and that, coupled with his intelligence and ability, made him one of the most popular national full-time trade union officials”.



Alex Ferry was born in 1931 in Dalmuir, part of the town of Clydebank on the north bank of the river Clyde, at that time a thriving community built around engineering and shipbuilding. Shipyards were established there in the 1870s, and other industries were increasingly attracted to the area because of the skilled labour force and its location on the Clyde. The Singer Manufacturing Company built a massive sewing machinery factory in the early 1880s, the most modern in Europe at the time, with internal railway lines connecting different parts of the factory. At the peak of its production in 1913, the factory site covered 100 acres, shipped 1.3 million sewing machines worldwide, and employed 14,000 people. During the Second World War the factory manufactured munitions, aircraft parts and equipment for the war effort.

Early life and work

This was the world into which Alex Ferry was born. Ferry attended secondary school at St Patrick's, Dumbarton, as there were no secondary schools left standing after the Clydebank Blitz of 1941. After leaving school he became an apprentice in the Singer factory. During his five year apprenticeship he and his boyhood friend Gavin Laird (later to become General Secretary of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW), joined the same branch of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) on the same night. They took part in trade union affairs from an early age and were the leading spirits in the Apprentice Strike of 1952 which aimed to achieve a different attitude to the training of young people, and an improvement in wages. At the time apprenticeships were seen

as contracts between parents and employers, with wages reflecting this. Jimmy Reid was another union leader who cut his teeth on the Apprentice Strike of 1952.

After his apprenticeship, Ferry did his national service in the RAF as a fitter, during which time he won prizes for his skills. He said that it was during this period that he became politicised, with a lifelong belief that Labour politicians should provide the best possible equipment for those asked to fight for their country.

In 1954 he got a job as a turner at Singer, and after a short time became shop stewards' convenor and was instrumental in establishing a formidable trade union presence in what was at the time the largest employer in Scotland in a single factory.



In 1958 he married Mary O’Kane McAlaney, and they had two daughters and two sons, one of whom sadly died at the age of 18.

In the same year, Tam Dalyell recalls Ferry’s appearance at the Scottish Labour Party conference in Dunoon, when

“a passionate young Singer’s shop steward with the good looks of the gods and deep, abundant flaming red hair took on Johnny Boyd, at that time general secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union.

Dalyell got to know Ferry a few weeks later, and Ferry helped Dalyell make the case for the school ship HMT Dunera, which from 1961 took hundreds of Scottish schoolchildren on educational trips. Dalyell was the Director of Studies on the ship from 1961-1962 before becoming an MP.

Despite being a life-long member of the Labour Party, and at one stage chairman of the Clydebank Labour Party, Ferry decided against a political career. He was adopted as the Labour candidate for Dunbartonshire East in 1967, a seat which he would have been certain to win, but he decided that he would prefer to continue to serve in the trade union movement. He is remembered by a friend from those days as a driving force in local politics, extremely hard working, and a strict follower of correct procedure.

From shop floor to full time union work

In 1964 Ferry became Glasgow district secretary of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW). In 1974 he extended the scope of his work to become the AUEW’s west of Scotland divisional organiser, a role which he carried out until 1978 when he moved to become the assistant general secretary, and six months later general secretary, of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (known as the Confed).

His skill and experience as a trade union leader is unquestioned, and

he succeeded in holding together a confederation of 38 different trade unions, covering 4.5 million workers, during his 16 years at the Confed. He had a particular skill in tackling delicate demarcation disputes and negotiating solutions. Tam Dalyell claimed that he saved British industry more lost working days than any other single individual in the last quarter of the 20th century.

In the CSEU Alex Ferry played an important role in bringing unions together as a strong industrial force. He was immersed in the fate of engineering in the UK, and became a major figure in UK trade unionism.

A changing industrial landscape

Ferry lived through a time of fundamental change in the industrial sectors to which he dedicated his life’s work: from the power and energy of engineering on the Clyde, to the decline of shipbuilding in the UK and the impact of foreign competition on the engineering industry. In 1966 Ferry witnessed the experiment set up by Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, George Brown, to use the failing Fairfield shipyard on the Clyde as an experiment in new ways of managing industry by enabling the trade unions to play a larger part in the management of the yard, alongside management and shareholders. Following this relatively short-lived experiment came the rationalisation and integration of shipbuilding companies into large regional groups, such as Upper Clyde Shipbuilders created in 1968, supported with state aid. In June 1971 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders went into receivership despite having a full order book. The work-in at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders which followed was led by Jimmy Reid and Jimmy Airlie, and received huge public support. The Heath government restructured the yards in 1972, and this was followed by the nationalisation of the entire shipbuilding industry into British Shipbuilders in 1977. During the early years of the Thatcher government there was a spate of yard closures, and privatisation of what was left by 1989. The handful of yards left in the UK are mostly building warships, while in Scotland, Ferguson Marine in Port Glasgow struggles on with state support, and proposed nationalisation.

In this rapidly changing, highly politicised climate, Alex Ferry realised that trade unionism based on specific sectoral skills would have to change as industry changed. His success at the Confed, and the strategic vision provided by the Confed, demonstrates this. Alex Ferry sought pragmatic, realistic solutions: not casting the blame on one side only, but seeking creative ways to strengthen the position of workers, and also to maintain an engineering and shipbuilding presence in the UK.





The campaign for Shorter Working Time: achievement of a 37 hour week

It is widely said that Alex Ferry's greatest success as a trade unionist was the achievement of a 37 hour working week for shipbuilding and engineering workers. Ferry believed passionately that men and women ought to have the dignity of a proper wage not dependent on overtime, and that people gave of their best if hours were reduced.

The background to this campaign was that a working party set up by the Engineering Employers Federation (EEF) and the Confed had started negotiations in 1983 but this had collapsed in 1986 after the EEF attached too many conditions to their offer of a 37.5 hour week.

A new campaign for a 35 hour week was launched, strictly controlled from the centre, making use of a national levy of all workers to finance selected strikes in different plants in different parts of the UK, carefully selected for maximum impact. The levy was launched in September 1989 and required workers to give one hour's pay to the fund which would support those striking. The levy raised £500,000 a week. The collection of the levy was the responsibility of local shop stewards and one side effect of this was to raise the profile of shop stewards, and strengthen their links with the local workforce.

The Confed under Ferry's leadership carefully chose the strike sites with the aim of reaching a nation-wide settlement for all workers. By November 1989 the first breakthrough came with a major engineering firm in Newcastle, NEI Parsons, offering a 37 hour week. By the end of 1989 five companies had agreed a 37 hour. In phase 2 of the campaign the Confed targeted smaller companies to emphasise the national nature of the campaign and, by March 1990, 60 agreements had been ratified covering 70,000 workers. By September 1990 this had grown to 1034 agreements covering 400,000 workers. Not only had the campaign succeeded, but there was still £millions in the 35-Hour Week Fund. **This is the fund which was eventually used to establish the Alex Ferry Foundation.**

Towards workers' control


Ferry believed that work was an important part of people's lives, and too important to be controlled by the whim of employers or the decisions of government ministers. The role of the trade union went well beyond simply the negotiation of wages and improvements in the economic condition of workers. The aim of the trade union movement should be to promote industrial democracy and ultimately workers' control of the industries in which they were employed. And this extended beyond the workplace, with Ferry's plea that workers

should be represented on all public bodies which in some way affect the community in which they lived. It was not enough for trade unions to nominate one of its full time officers to fulfil such a role, and Ferry believed that rank and file activists should be encouraged to become more involved in such bodies.

In a seminal chapter of *The Red Paper for Scotland*, published in 1975 and edited by Gordon Brown, Ferry argued that collective bargaining must be extended in scope beyond wages, hours of work, holidays and overtime, and extend to

areas like redundancy, discipline, and pensions. In all these areas workers were subject to what Ferry called 'managerial prerogative'. He considered that questions of manpower planning, forward planning of production processes, training programmes, and the financial position of the company were all matters which should be covered in collective bargaining between workers and employers if there was to be any semblance of industrial democracy. The more influence workers had over their working lives, the greater would be the demand to reduce managerial prerogative. In the same chapter Ferry argued for a national minimum basic wage below which no worker could fall, and which would be 'well above the bread line level'.

While Ferry's political goal at this time was undoubtedly a socialist society, he recognised that in a mixed economy some form of joint control would be the most which could be achieved and this should not prevent trade unions from taking every opportunity to extend participation and 'wrest the almost total control of industry from the private owner'. He believed that progress towards these aims would only come through trade unions. The Fairfield Experiment of 1966 had provided a real opportunity to demonstrate the benefit of workers' participation, and had many positive outcomes including a much greater recognition of the role of the trade union and more consultation between management, unions and workers than ever before. One particular success was the establishment of a common craft rate for all trades, at a time when the differential between trades in the shipyards had been a particular bone of contention for many years. This success spread to other yards on the Clyde. Ferry regretted that the experiment had not been given more of a chance to demonstrate the potential of workers' control.





A wider role in public life

Ferry's ability was recognised by others, and he was invited to join national bodies outside the trade union world. He was invited to become a member of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) in 1986, deputy chairman of Harland and Wolff, Belfast in 1985, a member of the Employment Appeal Tribunal in 1991, and a director of Nirex, set up in 1992 by the UK nuclear industry in connection with the disposal of nuclear waste. Alex Ferry was as comfortable around boardrooms as on the factory floor. Ferry accepted an MBE from the Callaghan government in 1977.

The chairman of Nirex at the time of Ferry's death, Sir Richard Morris, said that Ferry had been 'immensely sympathetic to people's concerns about the nuclear industry but most constructive in support for us.' Ferry was keen to seize opportunities to make an effective contribution at a national level, and in the MMC saw his role as about resolving problems rather than in striking postures.

While never elected to political office, Ferry continued to be very involved in Labour politics, holding every position at branch and constituency level, including chairman of Strathclyde Regional Labour Party. He was also chairman of the Bexleyheath Constituency Labour Party. Alex Ferry was widely recognised as a leader throughout the trade union and labour movement. In 1982 he was a candidate to become General Secretary of the Labour Party and was also tipped to become general secretary of the TUC at some point in his career, posts which he would undoubtedly have filled with distinction.

After his death, Jack McConnell, at that time secretary of the Labour Party, and later to be First Minister

of Scotland, said 'Alex made a great contribution to the Labour movement and to the Labour Party both north and south of the border and will be sadly missed.'

International

Alex Ferry also took a significant interest in international affairs and he was elected the Chairperson of the Scottish Chile Defence Committee when it was founded in 1974. The Popular Unity Government of Salvador Allende was overthrown in September 1973 by the military, led by General Pinochet. The Pinochet regime was responsible for the torture, disappearance and death of thousands of Chileans. Many Chileans fled their country and many ended up in Britain through the intervention of the late Judith Hart MP.

Alex's participation in the Scottish Chile Defence Committee, a committee that had a strong trade union involvement, organised rallies and meetings highlighting the struggle of the Chilean people against the Pinochet Regime. Madam Allende, the former First Lady of Chile, addressed rallies in Glasgow that Alex presided over and she also stood as candidate for Rector of the University of Glasgow.

He also lent his support to the Rolls Royce workers at East Kilbride who decided to boycott repair work of Rolls Royce Engines from Chile - the same engines that were used to bomb the Presidential Palace in 1973.

Alex Ferry's role in the Scottish Chile Defence Committee was paramount and laid the foundations of the committee continuing its work for several years after he moved to work in London.

Character and legacy

It is clear from comments made in obituaries of Ferry, and in comments made after his death, that Ferry was held in very great respect both within the trade union world and within business and political circles. His kindness, his positivity, his trustworthiness and his capacity for hard work are all singled out. Ferry had unerring commitment to improving the lot of those working in the engineering and shipbuilding industries, and worked meticulously and ceaselessly to achieve those ends.

In an obituary of Ferry in the Herald, Gavin Laird said that Alex Ferry was 'the epitome of kindness, and that, coupled with his intelligence and ability, made him one of the most popular national full-time trade union officials'. Tam Dalyell described him as 'one of the most positive minds in British public life'. Bobby Gordon, the employee relations director of Kvaerner, the Norwegian company which took over Govan Shipbuilders said of Ferry that he was 'a very honourable and trustworthy man'. An academic who worked regularly in London described how Ferry would meet him off the sleeper at 6am and take him to his destination.

Alex Ferry was devoted to his family and had a strong sense of humour and fun.

Ferry had decided to retire early, on 5 July 1994 but he sadly died only two weeks later.



The Alex Ferry Foundation, 16 Upper Woburn Place, London WC1H 0AF

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