

The Poplar Rates Rebellion 1921

After the First World War (1914 – 1918), London's East Enders lived in extreme poverty.

Most working-class people had only recently gained the right to vote. In 1919, they elected a Labour council in Poplar. Councillors included local railway, dock and postal workers, teachers and engineers.

Improving Poplar's lot

The council improved libraries, public baths and parks, and electrified street lighting and homes. It took over the small, charity-run tuberculosis dispensary and expanded it, setting up new headquarters in Bow Road. It gave free milk to mothers and babies. It built new houses and compelled landlords to improve existing homes.

The council increased its workers' wages and paid women the same as men.

In 1920, Britain's economy crashed, and Poplar's dockside economy lost thousands of jobs.

Maintenance payments (welfare benefits) were administered by Poor Law guardians and funded by local councils, who received their funds from local taxation called 'rates'. Poplar had huge numbers of poor and needy people to provide for, but the council could only fund this by charging the same people who could not afford to pay.



Councillor Chris Kelly addresses thousands gathered at Tower Hill to show their solidarity with Poplar's rebel councillors, Sunday 28 August 1921.

Poplar hit financial crisis when the government reneged on its

promise to fund road-building jobs for local men.

Breaking the law

In early 1921, Poplar's labour movement decided how to respond. The council agreed to avoid cutting services or increasing rates by refusing to collect and pay the 'precepts' that it was required to give to the London County Council and other cross-London bodies.

The councillors knew this was illegal but believed that defying an unfair funding system was better than cutting much-needed services or increasing rates to unaffordable levels.

On 29 July 1921, five thousand people marched from Poplar to support their rebel councillors at the High Court on the Strand. The judge told the councillors that they must pay the precepts or go to prison indefinitely for contempt of court.



Thousands of supporters march from Poplar along East India Dock Road to the High Court on the Strand for the councillors' hearing on 29 July 1921.

In prison

The councillors refused to collect the precepts, and at the start of September 1921, the sheriff arrested thirty of them, taking five women councillors to Holloway Prison and twenty-five men to Brixton Prison. The councillors continued their campaign, and even held official council meetings in prison.



Alderman Minnie Lansbury arrives at Poplar Town Hall to be arrested with four other women councillors, 5 September 1921.

Supporters held daily demonstrations, and Stepney and Bethnal Green councils voted to refuse to pay the precepts too. In mid-October, the government conceded, arranged for the councillors' release, and quickly passed a law reforming London's local government funding, making rich boroughs contribute more, and sharing the cost of maintaining the poor.

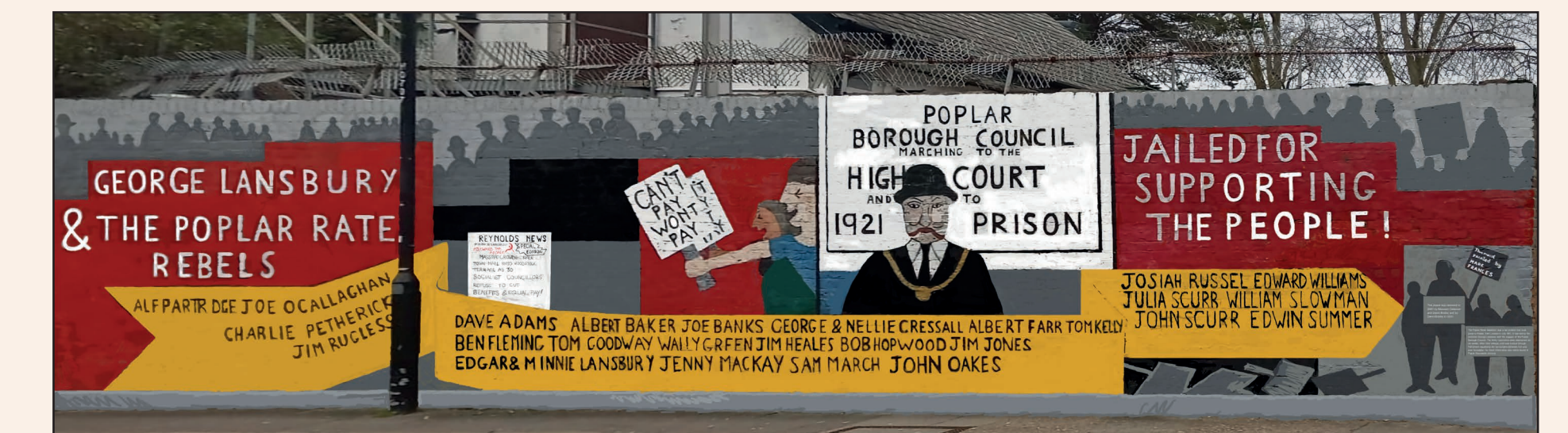


The freed councillors, with the lawyer and some of their supporters, outside Brixton Prison after being released, 12 October 1921

Poplar Borough Council gained £250,000 per year and other poor boroughs benefited too. Poplar's defiant council had won.

Remembering the councillors

The mural on Hale Street was painted in 1990 and restored in 2007 and again in 2021. It names all thirty imprisoned councillors: David Adams, Albert Baker, Joe Banks, George Cressall, Nellie Cressall, Albert Farr, Benjamin Fleming, Thomas Goodway, Walter Green, James Heales, Robert Hopwood, James Jones, Thomas Kelly, Edgar Lansbury, Minnie Lansbury, George Lansbury, Susan Lawrence, Jennie Mackay, Sam March, John Oakes, Joe O'Callaghan, Alfred Partridge, Charles Petherick, James Rugless, Josiah Russell, John Scurr, Julia Scurr, Henry Sloman, Charlie Sumner, Chris Williams



The restored mural in Hale Street. The mural is on the wall that runs along the edge of this park.

Mural image courtesy of David Bratby. All photographs courtesy of Thompson's Solicitors