

The National League of the Blind

OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND.

Organised June 12th, 1890.
Registered December 21st, 1899.



CENTRAL OFFICE, . . .
76, GRAY'S INN ROAD, . . .
LONDON, W.C.1.

Registered Pursuant to Act of Parliament No. 1191. . . . General Secretary: A. HENDERSON.

AFFILIATED TO THE TRADES UNION CONGRESS AND THE LABOUR PARTY.

Protest Demonstration. March to London.

TO SECURE AN AMENDMENT TO THE BLIND PERSONS ACT, 1920.

TO THE MEMBERS;

Trades Councils, Labour Parties, Trade Union Branches, Co-operative Societies, Men's and Women's Guilds.

TO WORKERS,

In April 1920 Two-Hundred and fifty of our members anxious to secure the acceptance by the Government of full responsibility for the provision from public funds of a decent standard of life for the whole Blind Community, organised as a Demonstration a March to London, with the object of creating that volume of public opinion which would influence the Government to make such provision, and in setting out on the March they concentrated on securing a personal interview with the Prime Minister (The Rt. Hon. D. Lloyd George).

The Demonstration was eminently successful, in that it secured the passing of the Blind Persons Act,

PROTEST DEMONSTRATION!
MARCH TO LONDON!!

BLIND MARCHERS IN MAGGLESFIELD

Meeting in the Market Place

on

TUESDAY, OCT. 13th, 1936,
at 7-0 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. F. PARKINSON

PROQUEST USE CASE

Blind Disability Activism: The Blind Marches of the 1920s and 1930s

By Dawn Kaczmar, Ph.D. Candidate, English Language and Literature, University of Michigan

In the fall of 1919, members of the National League of the Blind disrupted a session of the House of Commons in an attempt to have their voices heard, requesting "grants for workshops, home teaching societies, homes and hostels, and the provision of Braille and Moon literature" (1). This protest led MP Ben Tillett to introduce a Private Member's Bill in February 1920 that addressed the demands of the National League of the Blind.

The National League of the Blind's disruption of Parliament was just one of their many efforts during 1919 as the League attempted to secure state assistance and resources. The National League of the Blind's main concerns were that the government needed to take over responsibility for employing blind people, as well as providing state aid for those who could not work. At the time of the protest in 1919, blind people relied solely on the Poor Law and charitable donations, neither of which were ideal. The Poor Laws, because they did not specifically address the needs of the blind, often fell short of providing adequate accommodations and resources. Charitable donations were uneven across the country, and often not a stable resource for those in need.

Following the protest at the House of Commons and other efforts during 1919, in the 1920s and 1930s disability activists in Great Britain organized marches to gain support for government action. Not only did these marches lead to direct government action and aid in the form of the Blind Act of 1920, followed by several amendments in the 1920s and 1930s, the marches also became a model for protest marches in Great Britain throughout the 20th century. By organizing marches that maximized visibility, disabled activists were able to generate massive national support.

The efforts of the National League for the Blind and other disability activists are chronicled in Alexander Street's Disability in the Modern World, a collection of primary sources, supporting secondary materials, and 125 hours of video.

In this use case, we look at blind disability activism in the form of the Blind Marches of the 1920s and 1930s as one example of the type of research that can be carried out using the Disability in the Modern World database.



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The 1920s: Building Coalitions

In 1920, the National League of the Blind proposed a march to gain public visibility for their struggles that would, they hoped, put pressure on the government to respond to their concerns. Under the banner, "JUSTICE NOT CHARITY," the protestors began their march on April 5th, starting from Leeds, Manchester, and Newport. Three weeks later, at the end of the march from these three cities, 200 blind protest marchers converged in central London to the House of Commons on April 25th. The goal of the march was to create support for what would become the Blind Persons Act. Thousands of Londoners attended the march and listened to the speeches delivered by Ben Purse, president of the League, David Lawley, Pat Neary, W. T. Jackson, C. Priestly, R. J. Davies, J. Toole, M. Jagger, and Annie Lee (2). By starting at several locations around England, this three-week march gained public visibility not only in the capital, but across the entire country. The protesters waited in Trafalgar Square for five days before Prime Minister Lloyd George finally agreed to meet with members of the League.

CROWDS WELCOME BLIND; MARCH TO LONDON ENDED: SOME SO EXHAUSTED THEY HAD TO BE HELPED ALONG—THEY SUCCEEDED IN STIRRING UP WIDESPREAD SYMPATHY

By W. ORTON TEWSON.

(Special Cable to The Globe from the Cross-Atlantic News Service. Copyright, 1920.)

LONDON, April 26.—Nearly two thousand blind, the majority of them wreckage of the war, concentrated in London yesterday, forming probably the most pathetic and tragic procession ever seen in the streets of this city.

For nearly three weeks sightless bands have been wending their weary way, on foot, from all parts of the United Kingdom and Ireland, en route to hold meetings in various parts of the country. They have succeeded in stirring up widespread sympathy.

The object of their pilgrimage is to call attention to the failure of the Government to provide proper legislation dealing adequately with the problem of the blind.

Some marchers have been so exhausted that they had to be helped along the last stages of their journey. Crowds of people welcomed them, and one demonstrative woman broke through the crowds and hugged a man, crying:

"Cheer up, we'll soon end this disgrace."

After the meeting between Lloyd George and the marchers, the *Manchester Guardian* reported that the Prime Minister said that he "feared the sympathy of the nation would not be sufficiently strong for the Government to carry out all that the deputation asked for" (3). The article reported:

"Mr. Ben Purse, the president of the National Institute of the Blind, made a statement in which he submitted statistics to show that mere voluntary effort had failed hopelessly to meet the requirements of the blind. There were, he said, 25,000 blind persons in the British Isles, of whom not more than 2,000 were employed in special institutions for that purpose; 10,000 were dependent upon Poor Law agencies; 5,000 were engaged in casual occupations; and 12,000 were totally

incapacitated. The Blind (Technical Education Employment and Maintenance) Bill was a modest, unpretentious effort to deal with the situation. It was the minimum of their requirements" (3).

Despite the Prime Minister's lukewarm welcome to the National League of the Blind, the Blind Persons Act passed later that year. The Blind Act of 1920 established that every blind person over 50 would also be entitled to receive the Old Age Pension, which was usually not available until the age of 70; that every county would "provide and maintain or contribute towards the provision and maintenance of workshops, hostels, homes, or other places for the reception of blind persons"; and that the War Charities Act of 1916 would also apply charities for the blind (4).

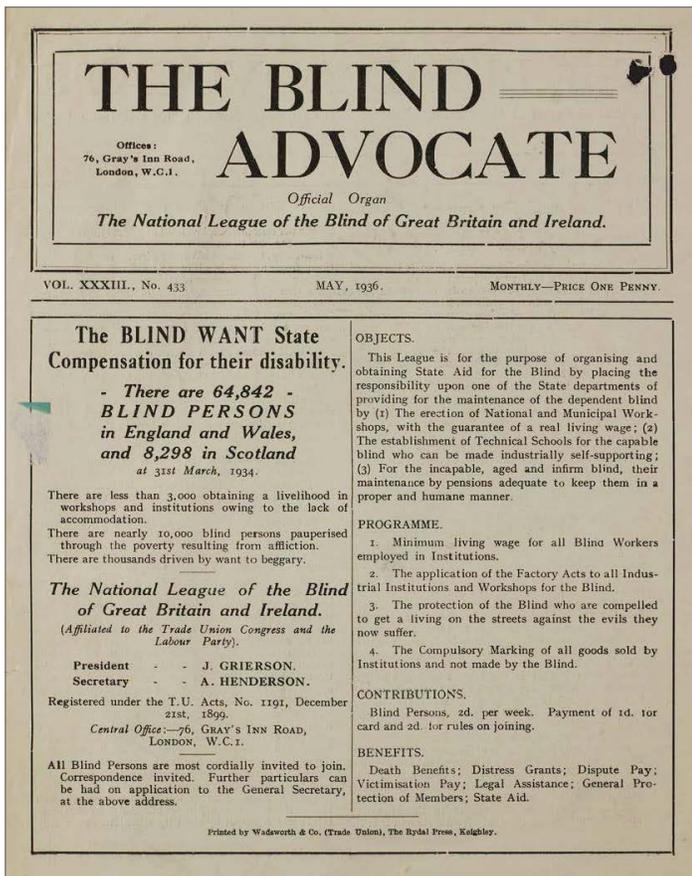
The 1920 Blind March established the effectiveness of marches in drawing public support for policy changes. Across the 1920s and 1930s, London witnessed many "hunger marches," including those organized by the National Unemployed Workers' Movement and the Jarrow March, that sought to gain public support for government action by modelling their protest strategies after the 1920 Blind March. In fact, the National League of the Blind often worked with the Labor Party, the National Unemployed Workers Movement, and other organizations involved in hunger marches to support each other in common struggles.

The 1930s: Reframing Rights

Although they still considered the 1920 Act a success, "the permissive nature of its provisions have left it possible for a large number of Local Authorities to shirk their responsibilities" (5). Much of the language in the 1920 bill had allowed local authorities to interpret what was actually required of the bill, which had created unequal aid in some areas. As one newspaper noted, "thousands of blind people are dependent upon the caprice of local authorities, many of whom do nothing" (6).

In 1928, the National League of the Blind successfully appealed to the government to pass an amendment to the 1920 bill. This amendment sought to clarify some of the language of the original 1920 Act, as well as include a new provision that "Every blind person who has attained the age of twenty-one and who is unable to obtain employment in any workshop . . . shall be entitled to receive a sum of twenty-seven shillings and sixpence per week" (7). In 1934, the National League of the Blind continued to press for social change by working closely with the Labour party to develop the Blind Persons Charter, which the party adopted as the Policy of the Party at its Conference in Southport that year (8). Secretary of the National League of the Blind, Alexander Henderson, then began organizing a second march that centered on passing the Charter into law.

Building on coalitions they had developed in the past, the National League of the Blind joined the Jarrow March, an organized protest against unemployment and poverty that began in the town of Jarrow. Like the 1920 march, the blind marchers gathered in Leeds, Manchester, and Cardiff to begin their march. Together, the Jarrow marchers and the blind marchers converged on London in October 1936. Because cities like Leeds are over 190 miles away from London, marchers were required to complete a fitness test



before participating to ensure that they could complete the three-week-long journey without injury (9). The League arranged for food and shelter to be provided by local branches of various trade unions. Each protester was supplied with a white stick to carry, and demonstrations were held in towns along the way (10).

The National League of the Blind outlined their overarching and highest priority goals as follows:

"This League is for the purpose of organising and obtaining State Aid for the Blind by placing the responsibility upon one of the State departments of providing for the maintenance of the dependent blind by (1) the erection of National and Municipal Workshops, with the guarantee of a real living wage; (2) the establishment of Technical Schools for the capable blind who can be made industrially self-supporting; (3) for the incapable, aged and infirm blind, their maintenance by pensions adequate to keep them in a proper and humane manner." (11)

For the 1936 march, the National League of the Blind wanted to reframe government policy around aid. Many of the responsibilities outlined in the 1920 act were distributed by volunteer charities; by the 1930s, the National League of the Blind wanted to frame their entitlement to aid as a state right, rather than a form of charity. Because the current disability pension was only 10 shillings a week, compared to the 40 shillings a week a private soldier who had been blinded in the war would receive, the National League of the Blind sought to highlight and correct this disparity by asking that the "unemployable blind . . . receive a pension in respect of their blindness equivalent to the pension

received by the War Blinded" (11). If the state could recognize and address the needs of blinded soldiers, it seemed obvious that all blind people deserved state support.

They also wanted to separate welfare plans for the blind from the already existent Poor Laws to better address the struggles that people with their specific impairment faced, such as access to secondary educational opportunities or technical training. The marchers demanded an intersectional approach toward their welfare: facing both disability and poverty, they required a solution that addressed both aspects of their lives. In 1936, around 70,000 blind people lived in Great Britain, and about 70% of blind people were unemployed (6). To address this, they asked for the age for the Old Age Pensions for the Blind to be reduced from age 50 to age 40—a request that the 1920 march had also made but had been denied. They argued that those under the age of 30 had better opportunities to learn new skills to become employed and independent, whereas for those over 40 it is "difficult, if not impossible, for a blind person to take advantage of the training facilities."

Speeches were given by both members of the Labour party in support of the marches, from speakers such as Reginald Sorensen, George Hicks, Frederick Messer, and Hannen Swaffer (11). The marches succeeded in gaining public support, and several newspapers featured interviews with the blind marchers. One article includes an interview with Alexander Henderson, organizer of the 1936 march. In the interview, Henderson made a universal appeal by highlighting how common disability is: "People seeing a blind man do not understand that they might, by a mischance, be in the same plight themselves in a few days. 'I had a cold, that's all,' Henderson said to me. 'It got into my eyes. In three months I could see nothing. I have seen nothing since'" (6). This story was important because it allowed readers to imagine themselves in a similar position to the marchers: Henderson didn't become blind after a tragic accident—it happened as a result of a common cold.

Although Ernest Brown, the Minister of Labour, had initially refused to meet with the Blind Marchers and had discouraged the marches, he eventually relented (13). Through the persistent efforts from the National League of the Blind, additional amendments to the Blind Act of 1920 were eventually passed in 1938 with new provisions.

The history of the Blind Marches and their effects on government policy is just one of the many topics in disability studies that you can research on ProQuest's *Disability in the Modern World* collection. Topics covered in the *Disability in the Modern World* database include: employment, job training, government programs, social activism and activists, protests, laws and legislation, policy, transportation, patents, wages, sexuality, veterans, soldiers, industry, factories, accessibility, physical disabilities, mental disabilities, race, intellectual disabilities, gained disabilities, arts, deafness, blindness, identity, pensions, class, employment opportunities, rehabilitation, welfare and public relief, poverty, civil rights, education, medical model vs. social model, unemployment, athletics, and more. More information and newspaper coverage of the Blind Marches can be found in ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

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