

CHAPTER V

THE SOCIALISTS MAKE CONTACT WITH THE MASSES, 1887-1888

"As opinion spreads, organization does not spread with it . . ."¹

I "Staying power is what we want"

1887 and 1888 are confused years in the history of the British Socialist movement. They are the years of the confluence of the small clear-water stream of Socialist theory with the broad waters of the labour movement. Everywhere there were eddies, back-waters, cross-currents. Although Socialist opinion was spreading rapidly during these years, there was no comparable increase in the membership of either the S D F or the Socialist League. Indeed, one consequence of the penetration by the Socialists of the mass movement was the disintegration of the two Socialist bodies themselves. One after another some of the most gifted Socialist propagandists—H. H. Champion, John Burns, the Avelings, Tom Mann, J. L. Mahon, Tom Maguire, and many others—were being forced by events to loosen their organizational ties with the Federation or the League in order to make contact with the working class in their own organizations. By contrast, the dogmatism of the S D F and the anarchist-tinged purism of the League were increasingly forming a back-water aside from the direct currents of the mass movement. And William Morris, although one of the few men respected on nearly every side of the Socialist Movement, was finding himself reduced to being the leader of an Anarchist tail.

Already by the first months of 1887, some of Morris's first fervour had spent itself, and he looked on the prospect ahead with foreboding. He did not abate the work of the propaganda one jot. But he had come to realize more of the forces pitted against it. The "Revolution" seemed less and less likely to fall in his own life-time. Early in February he took a short holiday

¹ *Letters*, p. 280

("I don't know what a long one means")¹ at Rottingdean, and wrote an article, "Facing the Worst of It", for *Commonweal*, which he felt to be somehow unsatisfactory.² "Though we Socialists", he wrote, have "full faith in the certainty of the great change coming about, it would be idle . . . to prophesy . . . the date and it is well for us not to be too sanguine, since overweening hope is apt to give birth to despair if it meets with . . . disappointment" Two forces, he said, were making for Socialism—first, the inner disintegration of capitalist society, which although it is now "sweeping onward to the sea of destruction . . . yet it may itself create checks—eddies . . . in which we now living may whirl round and round a long time". At the same time,

"although commercial ruin *must* be the main stream of the force for the bringing about revolution, we must not forget the other stream, which is the *conscious* hope of the oppressed classes, forced into union . . ."

Most of the article was given up to an analysis of the ways in which "the onward course of capitalistic commerce to its annihilation" might be delayed, and he took a view more sober and far-seeing than most of his contemporaries. The three main possibilities he felt to be

"1st The lessening of stocks and consequent slight temporary recovery, 2nd, A great European war, perhaps lengthened out into a regular epoch of war, and 3rd, The realization of the hopes of important new markets, which hopes are the real causes of hostility between nations"

Apart from these three—recurrent and temporary trade recovery, war, and the opening of fresh markets—Morris referred (can it be with a prophetic vision of fascism?) to "more speculative possibilities . . . which would lead to more ruin and suffering than even those. . ."

These three possibilities, Morris felt, were not without opportunities for the Socialist, if the other current, that of conscious and organized hope could be brought to hasten the downfall of

¹ See Mackail, II, p. 172 "As for holidays, 'tis a mistake to call them rests one is excited and eager always, at any rate during a short holiday, and I don't know what a long one means. The ordinary drifting about of a 'busy' man is much less exciting than these sort of holidays . . ."

² *Socialist Diary*, Brit Mus Add MSS 45335 "Did . . . an article for *Commonweal* which . . . is weak, long and no use"

capitalism. Signs that the "Great Depression" was beginning to lift need cause no despondency,

"because such a period [of temporary prosperity] is sure to be fruitful of disputes between the trades'-unionists and the capitalists, and it will be our business to stimulate and support the claim to a higher standard of livelihood which the brisker business and consequent bigger profits of the manufacturers will enable the workmen to make with success"

A great European war¹ would also "give a great stimulus to trade while it lasted, just as if half London were burned down, the calamity would be of great service to those who were not burned out" But, Morris reminded the comrades, "only the most short-sighted of the capitalists can pray for war in the times we are now in because behind the brilliant 'respectable' wa¹ stands its shadow, revolution"

"And yet though they may dread war, still that restless enemy of the commercial system, the demon which they have made, and is no longer their servant but their master, forces them into it in spite of them, because unless commerce can find new capacities for expansion it is all over the one thing for which our thrice accursed civilization craves, as the stifling man for fresh air, is *new markets*, fresh countries must be conquered by it which are not manufacturing and are producers of raw material, so that 'civilised' manufactures can be forced upon them *All wars now waged, under whatever pretences, are really wars for the great prizes in the world market*"

From these three possibilities, Morris envisaged a fourth—a labour movement subsidized by the pickings of imperialism and war, content with limited reforms, and no longer forced into revolutionary antagonism to the capitalist class "The claims of non-Socialist workmen go little beyond the demand for a bigger ration, warmer coat, and better lodging for the slave, and even Socialist workmen, I think, are apt to put their claims too low" The job of organized Socialists under all conditions, he urged, was to "aid the *conscious* attacks on the system by all those who feel themselves wronged by it"

"It is possible that we may live to see times in which it will be easier than now for the labourer to live as a labourer and not as a man, and there is a kind of utilitarian sham Socialism which would be satisfied by such an outcome of times of prosperity. It is very much

¹ Rumours were rife at this time of imminent war between Germany and France. See extracts from Morris's *Socialist Diary* in Mackail, II, p. 170.

our business to meet this humbug by urging the workers to sustain steadily their due claim to that fullness and completeness of life which no class system can give them"¹

The article—remarkable both for its foresight and for its understanding of imperialism—was weakened by the purism of its conclusions. To urge the workers to sustain their claim to the "fullness and completeness of life"—this was a job which Morris, of all men, was suited to carry out. But this advice, as interpreted by the Leaguers, meant a turn still further away from "mere politics" (and even trade unionism) towards cultural and theoretical topics in the lecture lists of League branches and in the pages of *Commonweal*. The article voiced a new mood from that of "The Day is Coming". "I am glad to hear that you are getting *solid* up there", Morris wrote to Glasier, of the Glasgow branch, in January, 1887. "Staying power is what we want, the job before us being so egregiously long" "What I am on the look-out for is the *staying* qualities", he re-emphasized in April, 1888, although he added "I believe we shall yet make a good fist at it even while we live"² Faced with the long perspective of struggle ahead, Morris placed even more emphasis than before upon Socialist education—the formation of a band of comrades, proof against any seduction they might meet with on the way

II "Jonah's View of the Whale"

"I am writing a diary", Morris wrote early in 1887 to his daughter, Jenny, "which may one day be published as a kind of view of the Socialist movement seen from the inside, Jonah's view of the whale, you know . . ."³ The diary runs from the end of January to April, 1887.⁴ Day by day Morris's part in the movement is recorded—the round of lectures, open-air meetings, committees—and some of the reasons for his discouragement when he wrote "Facing the Worst of It" are made plain

The "great class gulf" which Morris had felt between himself

¹ "Facing the Worst of It", *Commonweal*, February 19th, 1887

² Morris to Glasier, January 27th, 1887, April 16th, 1888, Glasier MSS

³ Mackail, II, p. 169

⁴ Brit Mus Add MSS 45335 Some passages were published by Mackail, II, pp. 169–80.

and the average East-Enders (see p 494) was not imaginary. In this diary we can observe Morris searching, not for issues upon which to unite the workers in an organized struggle on the road to Socialism, but for a type of single-minded intellectual conviction and emotional fervour rare in capitalist society. The diary opens on January 25th

"I went down to lecture at Merton Abbey last Sunday the little room was pretty full of men, mostly of the labourer class anything attacking the upper classes directly moved their enthusiasm, of their discontent there could be no doubt or the sincerity of their class hatred, they have been very badly off there this winter, and there is little to wonder at in their discontent, but with a few exceptions they have not yet learned what Socialism means "

Again and again the same note is struck. On January 27th he spoke at a meeting of the Hammersmith Radical Club called to condemn new evictions in the Highlands. The room was crowded and his speech was well received, but—he comments

"I thought the applause rather hollow as the really radical part of the audience had clearly no ideas beyond the ordinary party shibboleths, and were quite untouched by Socialism they seemed to me a very discouraging set of men, but perhaps can be got at somehow the frightful ignorance and want of impressibility of the average English workman floors me at times "

On February 4th he was at another Radical Club, this time at Chiswick, where he was called upon to open a debate on the Class War before an audience of twenty, which swelled later to forty

"The kind of men composing the audience is a matter worth noting, since the chief purpose of this diary is to record my impressions on the Socialist movement. The speakers were all either of the better-trade workmen or small tradesmen class. My Socialism was gravely listened to by the audience but taken with no enthusiasm, and in fact however simply one puts the case for Socialism one always rather puzzles an audience the speakers were muddled to the last degree, but clearly the most intelligent men did not speak. I was allowed a short reply in which I warned them up somehow this description of an audience may be taken for almost any other at a Radical Club. The sum of it all is that the men at present listen respectfully to Socialism, but are perfectly supine and not inclined to move except along the lines of radicalism and trades unionism ."

The same week the Hammersmith Branch re-started their open-air meetings

"I spoke alone for about an hour, and a very fair audience (for the place which is out of the [way]) gathered curiously quickly, a comrade counted a hundred at most. This audience characteristic of small open-air meeting also quite mixed, from labourers on their Sunday lounge to 'respectable' people coming from Church the latter inclined to grin the working men listening attentively trying to understand, but mostly failing to do so a fair cheer when I ended, of course led by the 3 or 4 bianch members present. The meeting in the evening poor "

On Saturday, February 12th, he notes "I have been on League business every night this week till to-night." On Monday he was at the weekly Council meeting of the League—"peaceable enough & dull". On Tuesday he took the chair at a joint meeting of Socialists and Anarchists of various groups to protest at the threat of a European war. The Anarchist followers of Kropotkin refused to participate,

"on the grounds that Bourgeois peace is a war, which is true enough but of course the meeting was meant to be a protest against the Bourgeois whether in peace or war, and also to keep alive the idea of a revolt behind the bourgeois and Absolutist armies if a war did happen "

On Wednesday he was lecturing at a schoolroom in Peckham High Street "for some goody-goody literary society or other". However, the meeting of about 100 was "quite enthusiastic" and 30s were collected for the *Commonweal* printing-fund. On Thursday he was at the Ways and Means Committee of the League "found them cheerful there on the prospects of *Commonweal*.¹ I didn't quite feel as cheerful as the others, but hope it may go on." On Friday he returned to the Chiswick Radical Club, to conclude the debate opened on the previous Friday. Sunday he was once again at the open-air post, speaking in a very cold north-east wind to about sixty people. and in the evening

¹ The possibility of *Commonweal* becoming once again a monthly is a constant anxiety in Morris's letters of the next three years. On March 12th, 1887, he was writing to Glasier "What is this story about a Socialist paper agoing in Scotland? I don't understand it. It is opposite to C'weal? & if so who by? & if not what's the use of it? It will fritter away people's energies & do no good, and end by failing. The fewer Socialist papers there are the better chance they have there ought to be *one only*" (Glasier MSS)

was lecturing in the Hammersmith League Clubroom on "Medieval England".

This is a typical week of his London propaganda, the days being spent in writing for and editing *Commonweal*, correspondence, the affairs of the Firm, and—as a stolen luxury—a spell of work on the Homer Visits to the struggling League branches were rarely encouraging. On Sunday, February 13th, he visited the new Branch in Mitcham.

"Spoke extemporary to them at their club-room, a tumble-down shed opposite the grand new workhouse built by the Holborn Union amongst the woeful hovels that make up the worse (and newer) part of Mitcham, which was once a pretty place with its old street and greens and lavender fields. Except a German from Wimbledon (who was in the chair) and two others who looked like artisans of the painter or small builder type, the audience was all made up of labourers and their wives. They were very quiet and attentive except one man who was courageous from liquor, and interrupted sympathetically, but I doubt if most of them understood anything I said, though some few of them showed that they did by applauding the points. I wonder sometimes if people will remember in times to come to what a depth of degradation the ordinary English workman has been reduced, I felt very downcast amongst these poor people in their poor hutch whose opening I attended some three months back (and they were rather proud of it). There were but about 25 present yet I felt as if I might be doing some good there. The branch is making way amongst a most wretched population."

On Sunday, March 13th, he visited the Hoxton Branch (Labour Emancipation League), and "rather liked it".

"A queer little no-shaped slip cut off from some workshop or other, neatly whitewashed, with some innocent decoration obviously by the decorator member of the branch. All very poor but showing signs of sticking to it. The room full of a new audience. All working men except a parson in the front row, and perhaps a clerk or two, the opposition represented by a fool of the debating club type, but our men glad of any opposition at all. I heard that our branch lecture was a wretched failure. The fact is our branch, which was very vigorous a little time ago, is sick now, the men want some little new thing to be doing or they get slack in attendance. I must try to push them together a bit."

On March 13th he was lecturing, again in a "queer little den" for the Hackney Branch in, "a very miserable part of the East End."

"Meeting small, almost all members I suspect one oldish man a stranger, a railway labourer, who opposed in a friendly way gave me an opportunity of explaining to the audience various points . also a fresh opportunity (if I needed it) of gauging the depths of ignorance and consequent incapacity of following an argument which possesses the uneducated averagely stupid person "

On Sunday, March 20th, "I lectured in the Chiswick Club Hall and had a scanty audience *and* a dull It was a new lecture, and good, though I say it, and I really did my best, but they hung on my hands as heavy as lead " By contrast, the morning's open-air meeting at Walham Green "was very creditable considering the cold weather and the underfoot misery" The next Tuesday he was lecturing on "Feudal England" at the Hammer-smith Radical Club. "9 people for audience' the fact is this is a slack time for lectures " On Sunday, March 27th, he had a better audience, but still felt dissatisfied

"I gave my 'Monopoly' at the Borough of Hackney Club, which was one of the first workmen's clubs founded, if not the first, it is a big Club, numbering 1,600 members a dirty wretched place enough, giving a sad idea of the artizan's standard of comfort the meeting was a full one, and I suppose I must say attentive, but the coming and going all the time, the pie-boy and the pot-boy was rather trying to my nerves the audience was civil and enclined to agree, but I couldn't flatter myself that they mostly understood me, simple as the lecture was This was a morning lecture, over about 2 o'clock I went afterwards . to the Hackney Branch as I had to speak at the 'free-speech demonstration' in Victoria Park dined on the way off 3d worth of shrimps that I bought in a shop & ate with bread & butter & ginger beer in a coffee shop, not as dirty as it looked from outside "

This last example may be taken as symbolic of the strain of failure which runs through the great earnestness of the London propaganda described in the diary. It is a curious and moving situation. Morris was trying to fill the role of the active agitator and propagandist, and yet his reputation as a poet and artist and his class background were standing in his way. To some degree he did not understand the people he most wanted to reach Until he became a Socialist he had viewed the working class from a distance His grasp of Socialist theory had led him to see the workers as the revolutionary force within society—the men who were Chartists, Communards, and from whom the Socialist Party must be built. But he was no romancer, and as he made

these long journeys by underground and by horse-tram into the most depressed regions of the East End, the intellectual and spiritual deprivation of the workers weighed upon his senses. The impoverishment of the lives of the people of the East End evoked in him feelings, not of patronage, but of shame "a sense of shame in one's own better luck not possible to express—that the conditions under which they live and work make it difficult for them even to conceive the sort of life that a man should live"¹

Faced with these audiences, whose experience was so different from his own, he struggled hard to express his meaning in the simplest terms. Preparing a talk for the Mitcham branch ("a rather rough lot of honest poor people"), he commented "I shall have to be as familiar and unliterary as I can"² If he caught himself parading his own knowledge, he was severely self-critical.³ But he preferred to regard his audiences as his intellectual equals (even at the risk of misunderstanding) rather than to suggest the least shade of condescension. His lectures were simple in expression, but his manner was to deal in broad historical generalizations, which were strange to the average Radical working-class audience. "Monopoly Or How Labour is Robbed"—the lecture delivered at the Borough of Hackney Club—was straightforward in its essential analysis of the economic basis of class oppression, and Morris employed few terms which were not everyday but the whole carried an air of abstraction, since Morris's serious lack of industrial experience meant that from beginning to end he gave no striking examples of the facts of exploitation which would touch the experience of his listeners, no illustrations drawn from the tyranny of the employers and sweaters of the East End. As an agitator, Morris could not help but be an amateur. This does not mean that his profound and

¹ "Facing the Worst of It", *Commonweal*, February 19th, 1887

² Morris to his daughter, Jenny, February 18th, 1887, Brit Mus Add MSS 45339

³ On March 17th, 1887, Morris spoke at the joint Socialist meeting to celebrate the anniversary of the Commune, and was severely critical of his own performance, writing in his *Socialist Diary* "I spoke last and, to my great irritation and shame, very badly, fortunately, I was hoarse, and so I hope they took that for an excuse, though it wasn't the reason which was that I tried to be literary and original, & so paid for my egotism"

imaginative lectures were wasted. Born agitators like Tom Mann and John Burns, skilled open-air speakers like Maguire and Mahon, learned much of their Socialist theory, and gained something of their vision, from them. But the lectures were not suited for agitation among the masses. Morris's ideas could only reach the broad working-class movement through the medium of translators.

In the 1880s there was a failure of understanding on the side of the workers as well as on Morris's side. The accounts are all the same: the audiences were attentive, respectful, appreciative, but puzzled. Morris wrestled with "Monopoly" before the Borough of Hackney Club—and then went for his 3d worth of shrimps and ginger-beer in a coffee-shop outside. Why did he not enjoy the hospitality of the pie-boy and the pot-boy passing inside the Club itself? Probably because his audience would have thought it an insult to have offered him such fare. He simply did not fit into any category to which they were accustomed. He clearly was not an aspiring Radical politician, nor a parson come to instruct the workers in their duties, nor an eccentric, nor an exhibitionist crank. His own comrades, by emphasizing on every occasion that he was the distinguished author of *The Earthly Paradise*, tended to make his problem of simple, direct communication with the workers more difficult.¹ As a member of a propagandist team, when others could speak alongside him, directly, and out of the experience of the workers, he brought weight, richness and vision to the propaganda: but in so far as he became the main spokesman of the League, the League itself—despite his desire to the contrary—was bound to take on some of his own inexperienced tone.

III *The Northumberland Miners*

The test of the League's maturity came in its reaction to the industrial struggles in the first months of 1887—and, in particular, to the great miners' strikes in Lanarkshire and in Northumberland. The Council of the League was not indifferent to

¹ See Glasier, *op cit*, p. 81, for an anecdote illustrative of this problem, and for Morris's statement: "What we Socialists are out for is not to win the support of dilettante literary and art people (though we don't in the least degree exclude them . . .) but of the working class."

industrial battles in the first two years of its existence. but it regarded them in the main as opportunities for general Socialist propaganda. In September, 1886, a Strike Committee was set up, and in its first eight months, 23,000 leaflets were distributed in strike centres. The strikers may, it is true, have sometimes been at a loss to decide whether they were being approached by enemies or friends. "Fellow Workers", declared the League's standard strike leaflet:¹

"You are now on strike for higher wages or against a reduction in your already small wage. Now, if this strike is but to accomplish this object and nothing more, it will be useless as a means of permanently bettering your condition, and a waste of time and energy, and will entail a large amount of suffering on yourselves, your wives and families, in the meantime "

This must have seemed suspiciously like the bosses' line to workers struggling to maintain a standard of life already dangerously near to starvation. But the League had encouragement to offer as well:

"If, on the other hand, you intend to make this a starting-point for a complete emancipation of the labourers from the thralldom of the capitalists, by bringing about the solidarity of the workers—employed and unemployed, skilled and unskilled—if you intend to learn why we the wealth-producers are poor, and what is the remedy,—then we Socialists welcome you as comrades . . . But if you are looking for a small betterment of your own condition only—if you are content to attempt to fight this question with your sectional trades' unions—then we feel that it is a duty that we owe to our class and to you to show you that it is a hopeless fight "

The hopelessness of the fight was then explained for a good part of the leaflet, and a positive alternative suggested. This was the old recipe of the "leftists" and purists in the League: first, education in Socialism; second, the organization of a great federation of labour (national and international) in preparation for the Day.

"Then when the crisis comes they will be able to rise as one man and overthrow this system of exploitation, and all class-hatred will

¹ *Strikes and the Labour Struggle*, issued by the Strike Committee of the Socialist League (1886)

cease and men live federated together as brother workers the world over."

"UNION among ALL workers" was becoming the slogan of the Leaguers, and the one aim set before all trades unionists was the General Strike for Socialism. To such mere incidents on the way to this goal as the bitterly-fought miners' strikes in S. Wales, Scotland and Northumberland, many of the Leaguers gave only a detached and absent-minded sympathy. They hoped, of course, that the strikers would win, but they made it clear that they wouldn't be surprised if they *didn't* win, and that even if they *did* the bosses would see to it that their gain was only temporary "You must incessantly aim at . . . *common action among all workers*", the Glasgow Branch declared in a Manifesto at the time of the strike of the Lanarkshire miners:

"When the Miners resolve to demand an advance, let it be understood that, should it not be conceded, every riveter would lay down his hammer, every joiner his plane, every mason his trowel Let it be known that every railway guard, porter, signalman, and driver folded his arms, that every baker refused to make his dough, every cook refused to make dinner, and every maid refused to wait at table . . . One day, or at most two days, of this paralysis would bring the holders of capital and spoilers of labour to their senses and their knees One general strike would be sufficient This perfectly fair, impartial, and non-confiscatory policy should commend itself to all reasonable people"

Having put forward this "impartial, non-confiscatory policy" for reasonable people to meditate upon, they advised the miners "not to lose either heart or head", not to indulge in "deeds of aimless violence", and asked them to recognize that their present struggle was "but a prelude" to the "great Revolution".¹

The irony of the situation lies in this. already, it seems, in 1887 sections of the workers were showing marked signs of sympathy with the Socialists, were looking in their direction, were even ready to accept a lead from them in their struggles for their own conditions. In February, 1887, when the Glasgow Branch called a demonstration on the Green in support of the striking Lanarkshire miners, over 20,000 attended: the miners' leaders spoke from the same platform as the Leaguers. a collection for the miners of £23 was taken. On a subsequent Sunday the Edinburgh

¹ *Manifesto of the Glasgow Branch of the Socialist League to the People of Scotland* (1887)

League and S.D.F. followed suit, before an audience of 12,000¹ Further collections were made by the League in other parts of the country, and relations between the miners and the Socialists improved with great rapidity. But the League did not learn from its experience The Glasgow demonstration was only a flash in the pan The miners went back, and soon the League was back to its old exhortations—Utopian in form, but in actual effect and tone defeatist A branch of the League had been formed with brilliant prospects in the mining town of Hamilton during the strike, forty miners enrolling at the first meeting but when Morris visited it in April it was already in a dismal state.

“We went to Hamilton”, he noted in his diary, “the centre of the coal-mining district the miners had gone in on a sort of compromise, but were beaten in point of fact so it is hardly to be wondered at that this was a depressing affair we met in an inn parlour some members of the Branch which seems to be moribund, and they would scarcely say a word and seemed in the last depths of depression the hall, not a large one, was nothing like full. it was a matter of course that there was no dissent, but there was rather a chilly feeling over all ”

Among those present were the Secretary and President of the Hamilton miners, who actually moved and seconded the resolution in favour of Socialism which the meeting carried unanimously² Morris appears to have failed to realize either the importance of the possibilities opened up by this foothold in the coalfields or the gravity of the defeat. And it must be admitted that it was in part his own failure to realize the importance of a clear and militant lead by the League on all industrial questions which was disheartening this miners’ branch.

This was the problem faced by the best of the working-class agitators within the League, and it was the ambiguity of the League’s attitude to industrial matters which was decisive in

¹ See *Annual Report* of the Glasgow Branch (May, 1887), pp 4-5, which records “When it became apparent that the conventional political, trade, and religious bodies did not intend holding any demonstration in behalf of the struggling and destitute Miners, the Socialist League resolved to take the matter in hand ” 15,000 copies of the *Manifesto* were distributed at the Glasgow demo, and John M’Munn and William Small, Chairman and Secretary of the Lanarkshire Miners’ Union, spoke from the League platform Morris, in his diary, showed himself to be both surprised and delighted at the size of the meeting.

² *Commonweal*, April 16th, 1887.

causing its failure in 1887 and 1888 to organize the opinion in favour of Socialism which was spreading among the workers. The impossibility of preaching "purism" to workers engaged in bitter class struggles was illustrated clearly in the dilemma of the young agitator J. L. Mahon. After resigning from the Council at the end of 1885, Mahon was replaced as Secretary of the League by H. Halliday Sparling. Returning to Leeds and to Hull (where he swung the S.D.F. branch into the League), he was "systematically boycotted by the employers" and barred from his work as an engineer.¹ In January, 1887, he started a tour of the Midlands and the North, still a convinced partisan of the "anti-parliamentary" side. The Socialists of Nottingham he ridiculed as "mere politicians . . . anxious to shine on School boards or town councils . . . with perhaps vague & distant dreams of parliament". He was impressed by the ready response of his audiences "Everywhere Socialism seems to be making headway", he wrote after a week in which he had paid visits to Norwich, Oxford, Reading, Bedford, Leicester, Nottingham and Sheffield "Branches might be formed in nearly every town in England if only some energetic organizers could be sent round to give things a start."² In the first fortnight of February he went on to Lancashire, held some successful propaganda meetings, and—more important—made friendly contact with local branches of the S.D.F. the futility of carrying the London quarrel into the provinces seems to have begun to work in his mind. His ready reception the next week from the chain-makers on strike at Cradley Heath and Walsall, and among the Derbyshire miners, strengthened his feeling that the movement outside London was on the eve of great advances. Moreover, he was rapidly shedding the purism of Farringdon Road. "The miners are splendid fellows", he reported to the Council after a meeting at Clay Cross. "They are very quick. They don't care for generalities or bluster":

"Socialism should be before the miners & iron workers now of all times. Durham or Northumberland are more important than 20 Londons . . . I suppose it will be too much to expect Londoners to see the importance of anything outside the area of their abominable fogs."³

¹ *Hull Critic*, July 26th, 1890

² *Commonweal*, February 5th, 1887.

³ J. L. Mahon to S.L. Council, February 19th, 1887, S.L. Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist., and *Commonweal*, March 12th, 1887

Meanwhile, a bitter strike of the Northumberland miners—provoked by lock-outs by the mine-owners in an attempt to enforce a $12\frac{1}{2}$ per cent reduction in wages—was in progress. Early in March Mahon visited Newcastle, and he decided to stay. John Williams and J. Hunter Watts of the S D F had arrived several days before, and the propagandists found they could work “quite harmoniously” together. Despite the fact that this was an old centre of the Lib-Lab tradition, from which Thomas Burt, the Secretary of the Union, was returned as M P., the propagandists found that the miners came in hundreds and even in thousands to hear their message. It seemed to Mahon that the miners were “ready for a thorough revolutionary movement”. The callous means by which the mine-owners were forcing the reduction, the half-heartedness of their own leaders, the enforced idleness of the strike—all these made them ready to give a hearing to the Socialist case. Mahon reported that the miners were coming to Socialist meetings in “great crowds”, the smallest meetings being four or five hundred strong, the largest up to 2,000. “The grumbling and general dissatisfaction with Burt and his like is very open. . . Of course no personal attack upon these gentlemen has been made by the Socialist speakers”¹ On March 22nd he was writing again to *Commonweal* in terms which showed a definite change from the usual note of detached sympathy and “sermonizing” found in the paper. He definitely identified the Socialists with the success of the strike itself, and attacked with vigour the prophets of despair who were sapping the workers’ confidence. “A county demonstration in favour of Socialism is being arranged”, he reported, and “steps for founding an organization in the northern counties are going rapidly forward.”² The same week he paid a flying visit to London for discussions with Morris (and probably with Engels). Morris noted in his diary:

“Mahon . . . reports well [of the campaign amongst the miners]: only as he had to work with J. Williams and Hunter Watts (of the S D F) he will hardly be able to form a branch of the League, & thinks that he had better form a separate body, independent of the League & S D F this is awkward but perhaps can’t be helped”

¹ J. L. Mahon to S L Council, March 19th, 1887.

² *Ibid*, March 26th, 1887

As if as a token of reconciliation, born in the common Northern struggle, J. Hunter Watts contributed an article for the next week's *Commonweal*. Mahon's "Northumbrian Notes" were given by Morris the pride of place in the same number, in which a shadowy plan for the future was put forward

"Next Saturday, a conference will be held in Newcastle, and miners from a number of collieries and towns of Northumberland and Durham will attend. As members of the Socialist League and Social Democratic Federation have worked equally hard in the district, it would be unwise to force one organization on to the exclusion of the other. Any rivalry would be fatal to both parties, and foolish on all grounds. My own opinion is that a local society, say the North of England Socialist Federation should be formed and issue its own rules, etc. That both London parties and papers should be treated exactly alike, while no official connection should be formed with either. When the reunion and consolidation of the Socialist movement takes place, the local body could join the reunited forces. In 1888 the United Socialists could hold their first conference in Newcastle-on-Tyne" ¹

Mahon, hearing that Hyndman was coming up to speak at the miners' county demonstration on Easter Monday, sent an urgent message requesting that Morris also should come. Morris was at the time conducting a propaganda tour of his own in Scotland, under the auspices of the Glasgow Branch, but he agreed reluctantly to break his journey at Newcastle on his return. ² His tour had been a fair success, with the exception of the damp reception by the dispirited miners at Hamilton, and he had himself made some contact with the rising mood of the people. He had had several good meetings in Glasgow, and useful ones in Dundee, Edinburgh and Paisley. ³ On Saturday, April 9th, he took part in a propaganda outing to Coatbridge, speaking on a cinder-tip to an audience of about sixty miners and steel-workers to the accompaniment of a Salvation Army meeting and a cheap-jack selling linoleum and wall-papers. "all this we did by star and furnace

¹ J. L. Mahon to S. L. Council, April 2nd, 1887

² See Morris to May Morris, April 6th, 1887. "I have been bullied to go to Newcastle so as not to let the S. D. F. reap where we have sowed" (*Letters*, p. 268)

³ There is a full account of this propaganda trip to Scotland in his *Socialist Diary*, and anecdotes from it are recounted in Glasier, pp. 72-83, "A Propaganda Outing". See also *Letters*, pp. 269-71, and *Commonweal*, April 16th, 1887.

light, which was strange and even dreadful". but the meeting put him in good heart, from the earnest attention of some of the miners.¹ The next day, before leaving for Newcastle, he spoke at a very successful open-air meeting on Glasgow Green, where Socialist and anti-coercion resolutions were passed before an audience of over 1,000. He noted in his diary

"The audience quite enthusiastic The Glasgow Branch is in good condition apparently, are working hard, & getting a good deal of support There are some very nice fellows amongst them, they are a good deal made up of clerks, designers, & the like, and rather under the thumbs of their employers or they would be able to do more Kropotkin's visit has turned them a little in the Anarchist direction, which gives them an agreeable air of toleration, and they are at present quite innocent of any parliamentary designs The feeling amongst the working men about is certainly in favour of Socialism, but they are slack in joining any organization as usual, still, the thing is taking hold "

Clearly, whatever successes were being made in Scotland, both the propaganda and the propagandists were of the same type as were to be found among many Leaguers elsewhere a propaganda of pure theory, Socialism neat and undiluted, carried forward most enthusiastically by a few exceptional workers and "Slaves of the Desk" When Morris arrived at Newcastle he found a propaganda of a new sort, and—while his experiences did not immediately affect his actions—they profoundly affected his imaginative understanding of the working-class movement.

Morris arrived at Newcastle on Sunday, April 10th, and was met by Mahon and Donald by chance they ran into Hyndman, "who I suspect was not over-pleased to see me, as the S.D.F. have been playing a rather mean game there": "after seeming to agree that neither organization should press itself on the miners [the S D F] has been trying to bag them after all". The next morning they set off for the collieries Morris and Donald were entertained in a miner's cottage in Seghill, while Mahon—who had planned the demonstration with energy and skill—busied himself with preliminary arrangements Morris was impressed by all he saw by his host, "a tall strong man, his face wrecked by an accident which had blown out one eye and damaged the other", a "kindly intelligent man", talking with

¹ *Letters*, p. 271, *Socialist Diary*, Glasier, *op cit*

"that queer Northumbrian smack"; by his host's description of the issues of the strike; by the good-temper and hospitality of the miner's wife and daughter, by the house, "as clean and neat as a country cottage", and by the other houses he passed which were equally so, although "they are most woful looking dwellings of man, and the whole district is just a miserable backyard to the collieries". Leaving Seghill they went by train to Blyth, where a considerable crowd was awaiting them. While Mahon made more arrangements, Morris mounted a trolly and made an impromptu speech for about forty minutes "Then we set off, rather a draggle-tailed lot because we couldn't afford a paid band. . . as we plodded on through the dreary (O so dreary) villages, & that terrible waste of endless back-yard, we could see on our left hand a strip of the bright blue sea, for it was a beautiful sunny day." After about three miles they joined another contingent with band and banner, and "soon swelled into a respectable company" of about 2,000 strong. After a six-mile march they reached the meeting-field and found two strong contingents already there, and "groups of men and women . . . streaming up the field from all about" Soon the crowd was many thousand strong, with contingents from all the mining villages around. "It was a very good meeting", Morris noted "The audience listened intently and were heartily with us." "We spoke from one waggon, Fielding of the S.D.F. in the Chair, then Mahon, then me, then Hyndman, then Donald." The mood of the crowd was something new in Morris's experience, "orderly & good-tempered", but militant and swiftly responsive. When (at the opening of the meeting) the reporters in a waggon beside the speakers got out their notebooks, the miners threatened to "put them out . . . unless they promise to put all down!" "On these gentlemen remonstrating, the spokesman of the crowd stated that the reason they wanted them out of it was because they gave in bogus reports; but . . . if the reporters would faithfully promise to give a full and accurate report, or none at all, they would let them remain. This the reporters agreed to, but only in the case of the *Newcastle Chronicle* was it fairly kept." "There were many women there", Morris noted, "some of them very much excited . . . one (elderly) when any obnoxious person was named never failed to chorus it with 'Put him out!' " The front ranks of the audience

sat and squatted on the ground, to let the others see and hear, and the whole scene became deeply marked in Morris's memory—the waste and desolate “backyard” to the collieries, the earnest faces of the miners, “the bright blue sea forming a strange border to the misery of the land”¹

The honours of the day went to Morris and to Donald Morris, his enthusiasm set afire, made one of the best impromptu speeches of his life. Here at last he was speaking as he wanted to speak, as a leader of the Socialists addressing the workers—not as the distinguished curiosity and man of letters lecturing to an audience partly drawn by his artistic reputation. The speaker's plank on the waggon was “rather perilous” “I was for simply coming to the front without mounting on the plank but some of them sung out from the side, ‘If yon man does na stand on the top we canna hear him!’” Someone turned up a notice board on a pole for him to lean on “It was very inspiring to speak to such a crowd of eager & serious persons”, he noted “I did pretty well and didn't stumble at all.” The speech (as reported in Joseph Cowen's *Newcastle Chronicle*) may be quoted at length.²

“Mr Wm MORRIS, of London, [said] Sometimes . . . when he was addressing meetings of his countrymen he was in doubt whether the whole of those whom he was addressing were discontented He thought he need not have any particular doubt about the audience at that meeting He hope there was not a person on that ground who for one reason or another was not discontented with the life he or she lived They were connected with a great struggle Into the details of the strike he would not enter He quite understood that they were at present in such a position that they could scarcely live at all Their struggle was for a position in which they would be able to live a life which people called tolerable (Hear, hear) He did not call the life of a working man, as things went, a tolerable life at all When they had gained all that was possible under the present system, they still would not have the life which human beings ought to have (Cheers) That was flat What was their life at the best? They worked hard day in, day out, without any sort of hope whatever Their work was to work to live, in order that they might live to work (Hear, hear, and ‘Shame’) That was not the life of men That was the life of machines That was the way in which

¹ The account of the Northumberland demonstration is given in the *Socialist Diary, Letters*, pp 271-4, *Commonweal*, April 16th and 23rd, 1887, *Newcastle Chronicle*, April 12th, 1887

² The report is reliable, since Morris noted in his diary that it was almost verbatim

capitalists regarded them . . . Why was it that they were condemned to live in that toiling hell in which they lived? If the present labour system were to continue no theologian or parson need trouble himself to invent another hell. That would be perfectly good enough for all purposes (Hear, hear and laughter) . . . Even supposing he did not understand that there was a definite reason in economics, and that the whole system could be changed, he should still stand there in sympathy with the men present . . . If the thing could not be altered at all, he for one would be a rebel against it (Cheers.)"

The miners had only one choice, Morris said. They must either rebel, or be slaves. He recalled to their minds the fact that the strike was only one incident in the general struggle.

"War was the condition of their lives as against their masters (Cheers). War was the condition of the masters' lives both as against the men, and against everyone of their own class also. What he preached to them was what the Socialists always had to preach. Not war—peace . . ."

When the workers were organized throughout the country, and demanded Socialism with one voice, the masters might give in peacefully:

"He admitted there was another thing they might do. If there was such a thing as a general strike, he thought it was possible that the masters of society would attack them violently—he meant with hot shot, cold steel, and the rest of it. But let them remember that they (the men) were many and the masters were few. It was not that the masters could attack them by themselves. It was only the masters with a certain instrument, and what was that instrument? A part of the working classes themselves."

Here Morris caught sight of the four or five policemen who had been sent to the meeting (a strange contrast with the multitudes of police set on to pester the small open-air meetings in London!), and began to "chaff [them] rather unmercifully". News had arrived the day before that Jack Williams (who had only recently toured the coalfield) had been arrested at an open-air pitch in London, and the miners were heartily on Morris's side.

"Even those men that were dressed in blue with bright buttons upon them and white gloves"—Morris continued, to the accompaniment of cries of "Out with them!"—"and those other men dressed in red, and also sometimes with gloves on their fingers, what were they? Simply working men, very hard up, driven into a corner and compelled to put

on the livery of a set of masters" (Hear, hear, and prolonged hooting) (Here the "blue-coats beat an undignified retreat" according to a *Commonweal* reporter) "When these instruments, the soldiers, and sailors, came against them and saw that they were in earnest, and saw that they were many—they all knew the sufferings of the workers—what would happen? They would not dare obey their masters. The cannon would be turned round, the butts of the muskets would go up, and the swords and bayonets would be sheathed, and these men would say 'Give us work let us all be honest men like yourselves'"

Then Morris, veering back to the old prescription of the League, told the miners that they must organize not for a partial victory, but a *true* victory.

"No a little more wages here and leave to work six days instead of four. He wished they only worked two days and got the same wages or more. Six days a week for the work they had to do was a great deal too much for men of ordinary body and strength. What, he asked, was a life of real happiness? Work for everybody who would work. For him who would not they could not say that Society had rejected him—he had rejected Society. The masters had rejected Society. He wished that the men might have a life of refinement and education and all those things which made what some people called a gentleman, but what he called a man. (Cheers) That was the victory he wished them. Nothing short of that would be victory. And yet every skirmish on the road and every attack on the position of the masters brought them nearer. They must go on until all the workers of the world were united in goodwill and peace upon earth. (Loud cheers)"

By contrast with Morris's sincerity and earnestness, Hyndman's speech appeared somewhat rhetorical. Alexander Karley Donald, a young middle-class intellectual, who had come south from Edinburgh, and who was rapidly becoming a leading propagandist of the League, made what Morris thought was "the speech of the occasion". "In the course of a telling speech, delivered in stentorian tones that were heard by all the vast assemblage, he ridiculed the idea that they were to be satisfied with a few shillings increase in sixty years. They should insist on having the full fruits of their labour. . . "

"The mine-owners and landlords were amusing themselves in the gambling-hells of Paris, London, and Berlin on the stolen proceeds of the pitman's toil. The wives and daughters of the workers could hardly get sufficient food or decent clothing, while the frivolous and stupid ladies of high society were pampered and bedecked and loaded

down with the costly apparel provided from the earnings of the working class . . . The workers must be organised for the over-throw of the tyrannical and thieving system. Cunning and craft and cultured black-guardism must be torn from the place of honour it now occupied, and skill, industry, and honest useful labour revered as the only qualities which should raise a man in the esteem of his fellows”¹

The straightforward and hard-hitting exposition of class antagonism was greeted by the miners with loud and repeated cheers.

Morris, Donald and Mahon hurried off from the meeting to catch the Newcastle train, had “a bite and a drop” in the station refreshment-room, and went on to Ryton Willows, a recreation ground by the side of the Tyne—“a piece of rough heathy ground . . . under the bank by which the railway runs: it is a pretty place and the evening was lovely”. “Being Easter Monday, there were lots of folks there with swings and cricket and dancing & the like” Here, among the merry-go-rounds and the holiday-makers, another meeting was held

“I thought it a queer place for a serious Socialist meeting, but we had a crowd about us in no time and I spoke, rather too long I fancy, till the stars came out and it grew dusk and the people stood and listened still, & when we were done they gave three cheers for the Socialists, & all was mighty friendly and pleasant & so back we went to supper and bed, of which I for one was glad enough. ”

“I guess I tried their patience”, Morris noted in his diary, “as I got ‘lectury’ and being excited went on & on. . . .” The next morning he felt “very well & brisk”. “There is no doubt of the success (which may be temporary) which we have made in those northern mining districts.” He returned to London full of a new enthusiasm, and reached the weekly Council meeting in time to propose a Hyde Park meeting in aid of the Northumbrian miners. His proposal was accepted. But the return to London was like a dousing of cold water over his hopes “Got to the Council in time to come in for one of the usual silly squabbles about nothing”, he noted in the privacy of his diary “I spoke the next Sunday at Beadon Road and couldn’t help contrasting our Cockneys much to their disadvantage with the northerners . . .” In fact, the Socialist League was at the very moment when the masses were beginning to listen to its message entering a phase

¹ *Commonweal*, April 23rd, 1887.

of savage internal dispute. and was becoming less and less competent to give leadership to the movement which it had played a part in setting into motion.

IV *The Third Annual Conference*

From the time of the Second Annual Conference of the League in the summer of 1886, the Council had been divided on the issue of parliamentary action. In November, 1886, a sub-committee was appointed, comprising Mahon and Lane, from the "anti-parliamentary" side, and Bax and Binning, from the "parliamentary", to draft an agreed policy statement for the League. The sub-committee failed to agree (as might have been expected) both on the parliamentary issue, and on the League's attitude to the Eight Hours agitation. By the end of 1886 there were "two separate parties" formed on the Council, and squabbles were continuous. A characteristic entry in Morris's diary, early in March, 1887, affords an example of the ill-feeling:

"Attended the Council meeting. . . It was in the end quarrelsome. Donald captious and obviously attacking Lane, who was very raw and sore, and at last over some nothing about the Commune¹ meeting the latter resigned his place on it, and everything seemed at a deadlock then I must needs flyte them, which I did with a good will, pitching into both parties."

Morris had attempted to define his own position in his diary at the time of an earlier flare-up.

"I may as well say here that my intention is if possible to prevent the quarrel coming to a head between the two sections, parliamentary and anti-parliamentary, which are pretty much commensurate with the Collectivists and Anarchists and this because I believe there would be a good many who would join the Anarchist side who are not really Anarchists, and who would be useful to us. indeed I doubt if, except one or two Germans, etc., we have any real Anarchists amongst us and I don't want to see a lot of enthusiastic men who are not very deep in Socialist doctrines driven off for a fad of the more pedantic part of the Collectivist section. . ."

¹ The attempts (not always successful) to hold joint Commune celebrations by the SDF, Socialist League, Anarchists, and independent Socialists, between 1885 and 1890 were often as much a source of friction as of unity. For Morris's views on the importance of these meetings, see his article, "Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris", *Commonweal*, March 19th, 1887.

But his attempt to heal the split was unsuccessful. On March 21st, he noted:

"Council meeting short and confused the two parties bitter but not inclined to do much since the Conference comes off so soon. Lane gave notice of resolution for next Monday, pledging the Council to leave the whole matter of tactics alone at present. I shall support that. I am certainly feeling discouraged about the League between them they will break it up, I fear, and then the S D F will be the only practical body here, which I don't like the idea of, as its advertising tactics make it somewhat ridiculous. I shall move at the Conference that the question of parliament or non-parliament be deferred for a year. The Fabians . . . have issued their parliamentary league manifesto. I don't mind this if they like to try it. But the S L going parliamentary would be a misfortune."

After the next Council meeting, on March 28th, Morris's despondency had deepened. "Whatever happens, I fear . . . that as an organization we shall come to nothing though personal feeling may hold us together." When he left London for his Northern propaganda tour, Lane was planning to canvass the branches on the anti-parliamentary side, and the efforts to secure a genuine compromise seemed to have failed.

The struggle which opened in earnest on his return from the North was to absorb much of his energy for over a year, and was to render the League largely ineffective even as a propaganda organization. On April 25th Morris noted that Lane and Mainwaring were "very much in opposition & not a little unreasonable." Lane, the previous week, had fired his opening salvo by reading at a meeting of London members of the League his *Anti-Statist, Communist Manifesto*, which he claimed was a "minority report" from the sub-committee, and which (in Morris's opinion) "turned out to be a long lecture not at all fit for its purpose, and which would have been damaging to us anti-parliamentarians if it had gone to the Branches . . . a vote was taken as to whether the Council should be advised to print it . . . and it was carried that it should not be. I voted in the majority." It should be noted both that Morris regarded himself as a declared anti-parliamentarian at this period, and that he did not accept the terms of Lane's Manifesto on the question.

"We revolutionary socialists"—declared Lane—"desire to organize

ourselves in such a manner as to render politics useless and the powers that be superfluous . . . We aim at the abolition of the State in every form and variety . . . We are Atheists in point of philosophy
 Anti-Statists in point of politics . . . Communists as regards the economic development of human society . . . We are free communists as opposed to the state communists ”

The Manifesto also embraced Free Love

“It is hardly necessary for us to add that we fight against (on the same principle of the abolition of private property), the institution of the family, such as it exists nowadays . . . Thoroughly convinced partisans of the free union of the sexes, we repel the thought of marriage ”

On the one hand, there were ultra-revolutionary phrases:

“We do not believe in the advent of the new order for which we are struggling by means of legal and pacific methods, and that is why we are revolutionary socialists . . . The study of history has taught us that the noblest conquests of man are written on a blood-stained book . . . To give birth to justice, humanity suffers a thousand tortures ”

On the other hand, Lane rejected both the Anarchist “propaganda by deed”—theft, arson, dynamite—and all methods of political and industrial struggle. “It appears hard”—he commented—“to call meetings of the unemployed, and tell them that they cannot be permanently benefited until the Revolution, and that they must starve in the meantime ” . . . But still, this was the truth which the Anti-Statist Communist must tell them . . . Equally, the struggle for the Eight Hours’ Day was useless and delusive. The trade unions were “little better than Benefit Societies . . . helpless in the meshes of capitalism”.

“With the practical break-down of Trades Unions, Socialism springs forth and says the day for this unequal and losing battle between the bloated capitalist and the starving workman for a mere increase or to prevent a decrease of wage is past . . . Today and from henceforth, the battle is by the workers as a whole, for the destruction of monopoly and tyranny of every description . . . ”

And for means, Lane had only one solution to offer—education.

Lane’s “obvious earnestness and good faith make him a convincing speaker”, Morris noted in his diary, but it is clear that he was anxious lest the tactics of his section would force a breach in the League. A group was gathering around Lane on the Council,

including Sam Mainwaring, C. W. Mowbray, Henry Charles,¹ T. Cantwell and one or two others, while—influential in the League although not on the Council—Charlie Faulkner (Oxford), Frank Kitz, and F. C. Slaughter (Norwich—known now in the movement as “Fred Charles”), could be numbered in Lane’s group. On the other side were Ernest Belfort Bax, T. Binning, A. K. Donald, H. A. Barker, W. H. Utley (Bloomsbury), and—after his experiences in Northumberland—J. L. Mahon, whose provincial propaganda meant that he was a rare attender at Council meetings. and the Avelings, neither of whom held office in the League after their American tour at the end of 1886. Morris—while declaring himself an anti-parliamentarian—tried to form a centre group arguing for unity and the postponement of a decision on the issues dividing the League, and could count upon a following on the Council, including his daughter May, Philip Webb (who was now Treasurer), H. H. Sparling, and the general support of the Glasgow branch, and of his own branch at Hammersmith (two of the largest in the country).

The inner politics of the months before and after the Third Annual Conference of the League on May 29th, 1887, are confused in the extreme. One or two general comments may be made. First, on all sides were to be seen the first signals of that re-awakening of the masses which was soon to give birth to the New Unionism among the unskilled, and was to lead to the formation of the I. L. P. Indeed, as early as May, 1887, it seemed to Engels that there was “an immediate question of organizing an English Labour Party with an independent class programme”.² It must have been as a result of his advice that, on the League’s policy sub-committee, Bax, Binning and, later, Mahon, were seeking to draw up a policy which might serve as the basis of such a Party.³ If the League was not to be left behind by the course of events,

¹ “Charles is broke and is going to America” Morris noted in his diary on March 31st. In America he linked up with the Anarchists, and became correspondent for *Commonweal* (see p. 592).

² Engels to Sorge, May 4th, 1887, *Labour Monthly*, December, 1933. “It is now an immediate question of organizing an English Labour Party with an independent class programme. If it is successful, it will relegate to a back seat both the S.D.F. and the Socialist League, and that would be the most satisfactory end to the present squabbles.”

³ J. Lane to A. Baker, 1912, declares Bax and Binning wanted the S.L. to be the nucleus of a Labour Party, Nettlau MSS, *Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.*

it was of the utmost urgency that it should adopt a more flexible attitude to industrial and political action.

Second, it should be said that the division within the League was not developing on strictly Anarchist versus Marxist lines.¹ Joseph Lane, it is true, now styled himself an "Anarchist-Communist" but such men as Kitz, Mainwaring, Mahon and Maguire (the last two both anti-parliamentarian until early in 1887) were sincere Socialists, hard-bitten by Leftism and sectarianism, as a result of their long isolation or their reaction against Hyndman's opportunism and intrigues. Morris's attitude—that such men as these, with their long service to the Cause, their serious conviction and enthusiasm—were true comrades who should not be driven from the movement, is understandable.

On the other hand, such Leftist views as those of Lane and Kitz, could degenerate rapidly into Anarchism proper (as Lane's were already doing) if allowed to flourish in isolation. With the mass movement already beginning, it was of the first importance that these ideas should be fought within the movement, and that the Leaguers should be brought into practical participation in the struggles of the masses. Without this corrective, Anarchist ideas were bound to gain influence daily, and the isolation of the League from the people was bound to grow. All this Engels, who had observed the same processes within the Continental Socialist movement, could foresee, and he therefore urged Bax and the Avelings to bring matters to a crisis without delay.

But Engels (while giving this advice) was too occupied to give time to considering the *manner* in which the theoretical battle should be fought. He did not for a moment think that he was directing the tactics of a Marxist group within the League. The leadership of this group was, in fact, in very inexperienced hands. Chief spokesman of the "parliamentarians" on the

¹ The avowed and active Anarchists in London until 1887 were mostly refugees. One of them, "Charles Theodor" (Theodore Reuss), was active at the formation of the League, and was expelled in 1886 as a police spy. He joined the "Autonomie" group, which made a lot of noise in Socialist circles, but which Morris noted in his diary (March 3rd, 1887), "only number about 17 persons." Mrs. C. W. Wilson, a leading follower of Kropotkin, was active not in the League, but in the Fabian Society at this time. The real Anarchist influence on the League dates from 1886, with the arrival of Kropotkin in England, the formation of a "Freedom Group", and the publication of the small monthly, *Freedom*.

Council was A. K. Donald, the young Edinburgh intellectual,¹ a man of inferior calibre, who appears to have inspired little confidence in the movement, and who had a knack of enraging both Morris and the "anti-parliamentary" group. Aveling's reputation was—perhaps unknown to Engels—sinking fast in 1887.² The weaknesses of Bax have already been discussed, and throughout the dispute he made no serious theoretical contribution to it. Indeed, not one piece of serious polemic came from the pen of any of the "parliamentary" group before the decisive vote at the Annual General Conference.

They were not alone in this. Morris's most considered statement on the matter, "The Policy of Abstention", was first delivered after the Conference, and Lane's *Manifesto* was certainly not representative of the views of the "anti-parliamentary" group as a whole. In the result, the struggle cannot be regarded as a fully serious and responsible political controversy, since more depended upon questions of personality and on juggling with the voting strength of the branches, than upon clear issues of conviction.

Bax's branch, Croydon, opened the fight by tabling a motion for the Annual Conference, amending the Constitution to include the sentence "Its objects shall be sought to be obtained by every available means, Parliamentary or otherwise".³ The choice of the parliamentary issue as the immediate battle-field was, perhaps, an error of tactics. Opinions within the League (of Morris, and of the Leftists) were already moving away from political and

¹ Engels cannot have known A. K. Donald personally at the time of the conflict within the League, since he refers in a letter (Engels to Sorge, June 4th, 1887) to him as a "worker" ("Naturally, Bax is with us, and from the workers, Donald, Binning, Mahon—the best"). Whatever occupation Donald followed in the 1880s (apart from that of agitator), in the early 1890s he was editing texts of the Early English Texts Society and was practising as a barrister. In the recollection of one old anti-parliamentarian, the late Mr. Ambrose Barker, Donald was a rather dandified young man and top-hat agitator. This may explain Morris's fury when criticisms of his over-intellectual approach came from this quarter. See his letter to Glasier, May 19th, 1887: "For myself I refuse to have 'my moral tone lowered' at Donald's bidding" (*Letters*, p. 291).

² It was in 1887 that Mahon declined to work with Aveling on personal grounds (see Appendix II, p. 866) and (in September) that Morris referred to Aveling as "that disreputable dog".

³ *Report of the Third Annual Conference of the Socialist League*, p. 12.

industrial "purism" on other issues.¹ But on this one question, parliamentary electioneering, the Leftists were united, and Hyndman's "Tory Gold" election fiasco was fresh in their minds as a warning of the dangers on this road while the reformist leanings of the Fabians were already attracting Morris's attention. This particular issue was the one most calculated to split the League. The League's attitude to the Unemployed, to the Eight-hour movement, even to local elections—these needed immediate clarification if the propagandists in the coalfields and in the East End were to make more headway. But the question of electing Socialists to Parliament was not one of equal urgency, and if Bax and Donald had agreed to Morris's proposal to postpone the parliamentary issue for a year, and at the same time had fought for a more positive attitude in relation to these other pressing questions, they might have carried the League with them.

However, the Croydon Branch pressed their resolution, and Morris countered it with a resolution from Hammersmith

"That whereas there is some difference of opinion among the members of the Socialist League as to whether it be right and expedient to put forward agitation in Parliament and through Parliamentary candidates as a means of Propaganda, and whereas the League has hitherto refrained from doing so, and also seeing that the principle work of the League must always be steadily educating the people in the principles of Socialism, the question of agitating for and by Parliamentary means be not considered at this Conference and be deferred for one year."²

He wished this resolution to be regarded as a genuine attempt at the reconciliation of the two sections. But it is clear that the resolution begged the question in its phrasing, although Morris was ready enough to alter it to any other formula of compromise. On May 19th he was writing to the Rev John Glasse (of the Edinburgh Branch) that "the parliamentary people are looking like driving matters to extremity, which means driving me out of the League if they succeed. I am quite ready to let the matter rest if they will really leave it alone."³ This is not as fair as

¹ For example, Norwich (a "Left" branch) had taken part in local unemployed agitation, January, 1887, Glasgow, another, had supported the miners strike, Morris himself was profoundly affected by his Northumberland experiences, even Frank Kitz was to contribute a letter to *Commonweal* advocating participation in local and municipal affairs by the League.

² Hammersmith Minutes, March 27th, 1887. ³ *Unpublished Letters*, p. 4

it seems, since "leaving it alone" would mean leaving the purist position of the League unchanged. It seems that Glasse was by no means satisfied with Morris's letter, and he drew from him a further and much more considered one on May 23rd

"My position as to Parliament and the dealings of Socialists with it, I will now state clearly. I believe that the Socialists will certainly send members to Parliament when they are strong enough to do so. In itself I see no harm in that, so long as it is understood that they go there as rebels, and not as members of the governing body prepared by passing palliative measures to keep 'Society' alive. But I fear that many of them will be drawn into that error by the corrupting influence of a body professedly hostile to Socialism. & therefore I dread the parliamentary period (clearly a long way ahead at present) of the progress of the party. and I think it will be necessary always to keep alive a body of Socialists of principle who will refuse responsibility for the action of the parliamentary portion of the party. Such a body now exists in the shape of the League, while germs of the parliamentary side exist in the S D F, Fabian, & Union."

Those who wanted parliamentary action within the League would, he suggested, be better advised to join one of the other bodies, "for whom I for my part feel a complete tolerance, so long as they are not brought *inside* ours". If the internal dispute continued, Morris felt, "the League will sooner or later be broken up".

"All this has nothing to do with the question of Collectivism or Anarchism, I distinctly disagree with the Anarchist principle, much as I sympathize with many of the anarchists personally, and although I have an Englishman's wholesome horror of government interference & centralization which some of our friends who are built on the German pattern are not quite enough afraid of, I think."

"As to my *behaviour* in this difficult crisis", he continued,

"I can only say that I do not feel the least bitterness to anyone, and shall do my best to get people to find a peaceable solution for present trouble, or even to accept a staving off loyally and with a single heart. But indeed I cannot go on nagging for ever. I loathe contention & find it unfit for serious work. My own belief is that we shall avoid a split but I *may* be forced to leave the League, but you may depend on it that I will not do so till I am driven out of it . . ."

Glasse seems to have questioned once again Morris's threat of leaving the League, and received a further letter on the day

before the Conference, May 28th. The tone of the letter is sharper and suggests that Morris was now determined to see that a decision was reached at the Conference. Should the League pass the Croydon resolution, then he could not honestly accept League policy.

"If asked whether I agree with such a policy I must either answer no, or lie. This is no mere abstract difficulty, for during the past year Donald and others have been lecturing to branches (with mixed audiences at them of course) and have been preaching a policy which I and others have been attacking. We can't say yes & no to this question."

Once again he suggested that the two groups would work more usefully in different organizations. "I hate schism as much as you do, as all our people know well. Indeed our parliamentary friends have been rather speculating on this knowledge . . . but now I must put my foot down." The prospects were, he thought, that the parliamentarians would be defeated—"a general negative . . . will, I think, be carried, which will not press on individuals unless they are on the Council. As to that body I think it would be far better for it not to have a 'government & opposition', & to cease to trouble itself about anything but obvious business. Heaven knows we can find plenty of that to do."¹

By this time—the week before the Conference—both sides were lobbying hard, and Morris was definitely lobbying with the anti-parliamentary group. In March he was looking to a compromise, in May for some reason the tactics of the parliamentary group had touched him to the raw. Mahon had declared for the parliamentary side, and was doing his utmost to swing the Scottish and Northern branches over.² But it seems to have been the behaviour of A. K. Donald which most aroused Morris's ill temper. Whatever the reasons, two days before the Conference he was writing urgently to Bruce Glasier of the necessity of delegates being present from Glasgow to vote on the anti-parliamentary side.

¹ *Unpublished Letters*, pp. 6-7

² On June 2nd, 1887, Morris wrote to Glasier: "Mahon was much enraged at both the Scotch bodies voting anti-parliamentary. Tuke [the Edinburgh delegate] told me afterwards that Mahon has misled them (at Edinburgh) into supposing the League generally was in favour of the change of policy, and that he was quite surprised to find it all the other way" (Glasier MSS).

"I apprehend that your people don't understand the situation if the parliamentary resolution is carried *the League will come to an end* that is certain & I shall invite you & some few honest men to form a new organization Between you and me the members of the parliamentary party are behaving so ill that I should feel it a relief to be no longer associated with them, though I can put up with a good deal."¹

If the parliamentary group valued Morris and his supporters (however much they may have been in error) they would have done well to have modified their tone and their tactics at this stage in the interests of the unity of the party.

Perhaps they could not do so, events were moving so fast Mahon, striving to form his North of England Socialist Federation, was being constantly asked by the Northumberland miners the difference between the outlook of the S.D.F. and the League. If the major tactical difference were in the attitude to Parliament, there is little doubt which organization the miners would prefer to join The purisms which seemed reasonable in Farringdon Road, were irrelevant where a mass movement was already under way It seemed to Mahon essential that the League should alter its policy without delay if it was to have any chance of gathering the fruits of its own propaganda. When the Annual Conference met it had before it not only the Croydon and Hammersmith resolutions, but also a long one from Mahon, which may well have been drafted with Engels's assistance, and which at last really went to the root of the matter, presenting a thoroughly positive new orientation to the whole League propaganda:

"Whereas the primary duty of the Socialist party is to educate the people in the principles of Socialism and to organize them to overthrow the capitalist system This Conference lays down the following line of policy for the guidance of the executive and branches of the Socialist League —That every effort be made to permeate the existing political organizations with Socialism, that all possible help be given to such movements as trades'-unionism, co-operation, national and international labour federation, etc., by which the working classes are trying to better their condition, that Parliament, municipal and other local-government bodies, and the contests for the election of members to them, be taken advantage of for spreading the principles of Socialism and organizing the people into a Socialist Labour Party, that while we share the common aspirations of the wage-earners to win better terms from the

¹ Morris to Glasier, May 27th, 1887 (Glasier MSS) See also *Letters*, p. 291

capitalist, we steadily insist that their complete economical emancipation can only be effected by transforming the society of to-day into a co-operative commonwealth”

So close are the terms of this resolution to the policy constantly advocated by Engels at this time that it may even have been the result of a last-minute intervention on his part to raise the controversy to a new level of importance, and to direct the debate towards the essential issues and the subsequent action of the parliamentarians in withdrawing their Croydon resolution in Mahon's favour suggests this possibility again. One thing only was seriously at fault with it. It was tabled at the last minute, without preliminary explanation, and—as events turned out—it is not surprising that Morris and the anti-parliamentarians saw in it only an extension of the Croydon theme.

On the afternoon of the Conference, Morris opened in conciliatory mood, withdrawing the Hammersmith resolution when it did not meet with unanimous approval. A further anti-parliamentary resolution (from Glasgow) was rejected, without any attempt on Morris's part to give it support. Mahon, however, pressed his resolution forward, Bax withdrawing in his favour. Morris and Faulkner then moved an uncompromising anti-parliamentary amendment which, after prolonged discussion, won the day by seventeen votes to eleven.¹

Defeated in the voting, the parliamentary group declined to stand for the Council. As Engels pointed out to Sorge, in reality very little had been settled, and (perhaps less fairly)—

“the decisive circumstance was Morris's threat to leave the League if

¹ In both 1887 and 1888 there was heated controversy as to the validity of certain of the votes cast. The basis of voting was one vote for each fifty (or part of fifty) of paid-up members on whom the capitation fee had been sent to the Centre. Clearly, branches with wealthy supporters were in a better position to pay up the dues on inactive and lapsed members in order to increase their voting strength than were the poorer branches (see note 4, p. 596, below). In 1887 the delegates of Hackney, Hammersmith, Marylebone, Mitcham, Merton, North London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Ipswich, Lancaster, Norwich, and Oxford, voted in the majority, with Hammersmith and Glasgow claiming two delegates, and Norwich four (17 in all) while in the minority were Bloomsbury (with two delegates), and Croydon, Clerkenwell, Hoxton (L.E.L.), Bradford, Hamilton, Hull, Leeds, North Shields, and Walsall, each with one delegate, making the total of eleven. The credentials of both Marylebone and North Shields were challenged. The voting powers of several of the provincial branches had been delegated to different members of the London factions.

any kind of parliamentary struggle be recognised in principle And as Morris covers the weekly £4 deficit of the *Commonweal*, that outweighed all else by far"¹

But the day after the Conference, the parliamentary group met in private and took further decisions According to a circular issued later by their opponents, Edward Aveling occupied the Chair, and Eleanor Aveling, Mahon, Bax, Donald, Binning, Utley and others were present. An organized faction within the League was set up, and a Treasurer and Secretaries appointed. It was agreed that they should join the Labour Emancipation League (an affiliate of the League) and use it as an organizing centre for the parliamentary supporters.² Engels's emphasis (in a letter to Sorge) was slightly different "Our people now want to organize the provinces, and after three or four months to call an extraordinary

¹ In justification of Engel's comment, see Morris to Glasier, May 19th, 1887 "I don't think the Donald party will be able to carry their resolution . . . You see, to speak nastily, since Webb and Faulkner will probably go with me, the parls cannot do without us moneyly as we have found most of the money, if you think it mean to say this I must say in turn that they have rather speculated on my known horror of a split, in their machinations" (*Letters*, p. 291 For dating see note ², p. 540, below)

² *To the Members of the Socialist League*, a handbill issued by J Lane and F Charles in preparation for the Annual Conference of 1888 The faction meeting is alleged to have taken place at 66 Fetter Lane on May 30th, 1887, and the name of the informant who took notes is not given It is alleged that the main contributions were as follows

"SHIRLEY proposed to make Bloomsbury a Head Centre of Socialism

"UTLEY —To become active working members of the Labour Emancipation League, without withdrawing from the S L Stay in League until we can work it for our own party

"E AVELING —Sorry we left the S D F Reverse our blunder made there, and get the League in our own hands Get a Conference in about three months, and reverse the decision of this last one Make W Morris give up the paper Work the L E L. and suggest that every parliamentary supporter joins the L E L Force the hands of the Council by joining the L E L, and if resistance is offered, resign and leave the League, but hold on to League for time being

"E M AVELING —Branches in harmony with party subscribe funds for working provincial branches That branches pay subscriptions to L E L and pay as affiliated bodies to League

"TOM BINNING — All business could be done through L E L

"J L MAHON —That Donald and Utley meet L E L to confer as to when a general meeting can be held"

L Wardle was then appointed Treasurer, and A K Donald and W H Utley Secretaries of the group.

congress to overthrow the decision"¹ Morris wrote in melancholy strain to Glasier

"I wish I could hope that this damned nonsense would end here, but I fear it won't the malcontents I am told mean to try to swamp the League by joining the Labour Emancipation League and getting new branches to join it and then calling a special Conference when they think they are strong enough. However, this may be an exaggerated statement"²

It was a curious reversal of the old positions, The Labour Emancipation League, formed by Lane and Kitz, and a breeding ground of the "leftists", had now become absorbed into the Socialist League proper but a branch still existed at Hoxton, and it had passed under the control of the parliamentarians. As an affiliated organization, the L.E.L. was only loosely controlled by the Council of the S.L., and yet had full voting powers at the Annual Conference. The plan appears to have been that the London parliamentarians should strengthen the L.E.L., while in the provinces Mahon, Donald and others should develop similar Socialist organizations—the North of England Socialist Federation and the Scottish Land and Labour League—connected only loosely with the parent body. But the plan was faulty in several respects. It could only be operated by breaking with any pretence of party discipline or loyalty within the Socialist League, and embarking on a policy of intrigue and factionalism, rather than open controversy. It left the Council of the League more firmly than ever in the hands of the anti-parliamentarians, who were now aided by men of more pronounced Anarchist views, such as F. C. Slaughter ("Fred Charles") and David Nicoll.³ From Morris's point of view, the tactics of the parliamentarians appeared uncomradely, and the breach between them and his "centre" group was embittered.

Whatever judgements are made, much of this was inevitable from the first. It was the logical outcome of the confused manner in which the first "Split" took place in December, 1884. "No movement absorbs so much fruitless labour as one which has not

¹ Engels to Sorge, June 4th, 1887, *Labour Monthly*, December, 1933.

² Morris to Glasier, June 2nd, 1887 (Glasier MSS)

³ David Nicoll, Librarian and Propaganda Secretary of League, 1887-8

yet emerged from the status of a sect"—this was Engels's comment—"At such times everything turns to scandalmongering" Nor was Engels much perturbed at the defeat

"It follows that our people, in face of the imminent outbreak of a *bona fide* labour movement, are not tied to an organization which claims to lead the whole movement In the provinces the workers are everywhere organizing local Leagues (Socialist) They have a colossal contempt for anything coming from London"¹

In the broad perspectives of his experience, Engels knew that only a genuine movement of the masses would bring these abstract disputes to an end.

Two conclusions may be suggested on the incident as a whole. First, Morris's purism—his hatred for "palliatives" and Parliament, his preference for educational propaganda over political action, his inexperience in industrial questions—was holding back the movement. It was encouraging Anarchist leanings on the lines of Lane's *Manifesto* which could only lead the League into a no-man's-land of revolutionary bluster. A show-down was inescapable within the League, and if it was to pioneer a Socialist Labour party, Lane and his followers would have to be ousted from leadership. In this light, the action of the parliamentary group in pressing a decision was correct. But (second) the apparent urgency of the situation led the parliamentarians to press their policy in a hasty and factionalist manner It is difficult to refute Morris's aggrieved comment on their tactics (in a letter to Glasier) "If they are right, time will show it and they will be able to have their way without breaking up the League."² Instead of differentiating between Lane's Anarchist horror of "the State" in the abstract, and Morris's healthy fear of reformism, their tactics united both sections against them

"You know, Lane", Morris is reported to have said at this time, "I am the man on the hedge." "You are nothing of the sort", Lane answered.³ By their bald-headed assault, the parliamentarians

¹ Engels to Sorge, June 4th, 1887, *Labour Monthly*, December, 1933, Engels's optimistic picture of developments in the provinces might perhaps have been a little coloured by the enthusiastic reports of J L Mahon

² Morris to Glasier, June 2nd, 1887 (Glasier MSS)

³ MS reminiscence by H A Barker (League Secretary in 1887) in the Walthamstow Collection

pushed Morris off his hedge into Lane's company. The educational value which the dispute might have had was lost through the failure of any of the parliamentarians (with the partial exception of Mahon) to raise it to a serious level in published polemic. In consequence, the parliamentarians—instead of emerging from the struggle (with or without Morris) with a nucleus of convinced and determined Marxists—emerged as a handful of scattered individuals without either organization or a clear policy. The Annual Conference of 1887 did not only strike a death-blow at the League it also signalized the disintegration of the parliamentary group itself. It would be foolish to condemn Mahon or Aveling or any of the others for intrigue in the months succeeding May, 1887, since the only policy which now lay open to them was the slow and painful process of making new contacts, and forming a new Socialist nucleus out of elements in the League, the S.D.F., and the mass organizations of the workers. But such a policy carried with it serious dangers—and not least the dangers of personal corruption, either by political ambition or by the vanity bred in the individual leaders who each felt that they themselves alone understood the correct line of advance for the movement, and that its future was bound up with their own influence. The years between 1887 and 1893 were to provide a melancholy series of illustrations of the personal degeneration or political confusion of individuals not subject to the support, correction, and discipline of a *party*—John Burns, H. H. Champion, Aveling—but no more forcible illustration can be found than in the actions of that ceaseless propagandist, J. L. Mahon.

V The Policy of Abstention

Just as in the months following the "Split" of December, 1884, Morris continued to debate the issues in his mind. His immediate reaction to any contact with "things parliamentary" was emotional rather than carefully considered:

"At present it is not even worth thinking of that, and our sole business is to make Socialists. I really feel sickened at the idea of all the intrigue and degradation of concession which would be necessary to us as a parliamentary party, nor do I see any necessity for a revolutionary

party doing any 'dirty work' at all, or soiling ourselves with anything that would unfit us for being due citizens of the new order of things."¹

This disgust at a Parliament of Podsnaps had been nourished in him during his early revolt, encouraged by Dickens and John Ruskin, intensified by his experiences during the "Eastern Question" agitation. Parliament (in his mind) was a word synonymous with sharp-tactics, intrigue, false promises: it was the "great myth" of modern capitalism, the greatest barrier to the advance of revolutionary ideas. His position before the Annual Conference he summed up thus

"We should treat Parliament as a representative of the enemy. . . We might for some definite purpose be forced to send members to Parliament *as rebels* . . . but under no circumstances to help to carry on their Government of the country . . . and therefore we ought not to put forward palliative measures to be carried through Parliament, for that would be helping them to govern us"²

After the Annual Conference he made a more serious attempt to argue his case, and to present an alternative to parliamentary action, in a new lecture, "The Policy of Abstention", first delivered at Hammersmith at the end of July, 1887, and afterwards read to private meetings of Socialists in several places.³ In this he sought to characterize two possible Socialist policies—the policy of parliamentary action, and that of abstention. Advocates of the

¹ Morris to Glasier, December 1st, 1886, Glasier, *op cit*, p. 187.

² *Ibid*, May 19th, 1887, Glasier, *op cit*, p. 193. This letter, like several others, has been misdated by Glasier. As a result, Glasier's whole picture of the controversy in the League is seriously confused, and has confused subsequent biographers. Glasier was present at the Annual Conference of 1888, but absent from the more important one in 1887, as a result, the 1888 Conference assumed more importance in his mind, and he dated several letters to cover the second incident. As a result of close scrutiny of internal evidence I have made the following corrections: letters dated May 19th and July 27th (Glasier, pp. 191-4) should definitely be 1887 and not (as given) 1888, letter dated August 15th (Glasier, pp. 198-200) I presume to be 1888, and not 1889, letters dated March 19th and April 6th, I presume to be 1889 and not 1890 (Glasier, pp. 201-2). Mr. Henderson follows Glasier's error on three occasions (*Letters*, pp. 292, 321, 322) and dates as 1888 a private letter to Glasier (*Letters*, p. 291) which is clearly intended to accompany the letter of May 19th, 1887 (Glasier, pp. 191-3), which Morris wrote for the Glasgow branch as a whole to read.

³ Hammersmith Minutes, July 31st, 1887, Morris to Glasier, July 27th, 1887, etc.

first, he said, "believe in what may be called a system of cumulative reforms . . . carried out by means of Parliament and a bourgeois executive". They hoped to elect sufficient Socialists to Parliament to transform it from "a mere instrument in the hands of the monopolizers of the means of production, into a body which should destroy monopoly" The policy of abstention he characterized in greater detail

"This plan is founded on the necessity of making the class-struggle clear to the workers, of pointing out to them that while monopoly exists they can only exist as its slaves so that Parliament and all other institutions at present existing are maintained for the purpose of upholding this slavery, that their wages are but slaves' rations, and if they were increased tenfold would be nothing more than while the bourgeois rule lasts they can indeed take part in it, but only on the terms that they shall do nothing to attack the grand edifice of which their slavery is the foundation Nay more than that that they are asked to vote and send representatives to Parliament (if 'working-men' so much the better) that they may point out what concessions may be necessary for the ruling class to make in order that the slavery of the workers may last on in a word that to vote for the continuance of their own slavery is all the parliamentary action that they will be allowed to take under the present régime Liberal Associations, Radical clubs, working men members are at present, and Socialist members will be in the future, looked on with complacency by the government classes as serving towards the end of propping the stability of robber society in the safest and least troublesome manner by beguiling them to take part in their own government. A great invention, and well worthy of the reputation of the Briton for practicality—and swindling! How much better than the coarse old-world iron repression of that blunderer Bismark . . ."

"The Policy of Abstention", he continued, "is founded on this view"

"That the interests of the two classes, the workers and the capitalists are irreconcilable, and as long as the capitalists exist as a class, they having the monopoly of the means of production, have all the power of ordered and legal society, but on the other hand that the use of this power to keep down a wronged population, which feels itself wronged, and is organizing for illegal resistance would impose such a burden on the governing classes as they will not be able to bear; and they must finally break down under it, and take one of two courses, either of them the birth of fear acting on the instinct to prolong and sustain their life which is essential in all organisms One course would be to try the effect of wholesale concessions . . . and this course would be almost

certain to have a partial success, but I feel sure not so great a success in delaying revolution as it would have if taken with the expressed agreement of Socialist representatives in Parliament in the latter case the concessions would be looked upon as a victory, whereas if they were the work of a hated government from which the people were standing aloof, they would be dreaded as a bait, and scorned as the last resource of a tyranny growing helpless. The other course . . . would be stern repression of the opinion and aspirations of the working classes as a whole for in England at least there would be no attempt to adopt this course until opinion was so grown and so organized that the danger to monopoly seemed imminent. In short the two courses are fraud and force, and doubtless in a commercial country like this the resources of fraud would be exhausted before the ruling class betook itself to open force."

Supposing the policy of abstention were adopted, what did it imply in immediate tactics? First, the preaching of the principles of Socialism as widely as possible. But, since a time comes "in such a movement as ours when it is ready to change from a mere intellectual movement into a movement of action" (and Morris thought that this time had not yet arrived), it was necessary to consider what forms of action would effect the Revolution. "The real business of us propagandists", Morris suggested, "is to instil this aim of the workers becoming the masters of their own destinies, their own lives". Once this was done, the workers should be organized through trade unions in "a vast labour organization—the federation according to their crafts . . . of all the workmen who have awoke to the fact that they are the slaves of monopoly". The one overriding aim of these unions should be the overthrow of capitalism, and the establishment of Socialism. All their tactics before achieving this victory should be looked upon "as so much necessary work . . . to enable them to live till they have marched to the great battlefield".

"Let them settle . . . what wages are to be paid by their temporary managers, what number of hours it may be expedient to work, let them arrange for the filling of their military chest, the care of the sick, the unemployed, the dismissed let them learn also how to administer their own affairs."

But Morris sketched only the general outline of this plan. "time and also power fails me to give any scheme for how all this could be done".

The problems of the building of such a Federation being thus

glossed over (and Morris never returned to them in any detail) he advanced to the point at which the labour organization was already established and powerful. The result would be the open and "conscious opposition of the two powers, monopolist authority and free labour", and this, in turn, could not fail to lead on to a revolutionary situation.

"Everything that tends to mask that opposition, to confuse it, weakens the popular force and gives a new lease of life to the reaction. If our own people are forming part of parliament, the instruments of the enemy, they are helping to make the very laws we will not obey. Where is the enemy then? What are we to do to attack him? The enemy is a principle, you say true, but the principle must be embodied, and how can it be better embodied than in that assembly delegated by the owners of monopoly to defend monopoly at all points? to smooth away the difficulties of the monopolists even at the expense of apparent sacrifice of their interests 'to the amelioration of the lot of the working classes' to profess friendship with the so-called moderates (as if there could be any moderation in dealing with a monopoly, anything but for or against)? in short to detach a portion of the people from the people's side, to have it in their midst helpless, dazed, wearied with ceaseless compromise, or certain defeat, and yet to put it before the world as the advanced guard of the revolutionary party, the representative of all that is active or practical of the popular party?"

The policy of abstention might be supplemented, he suggested, by creating a truly popular centre outside Parliament ("call it the labour parliament if you will"), deliberating at the same time, and whose decrees will be obeyed by the people "and not those of the Westminster Committee". Its weapons of enforcement would be those of the strike, co-operation, and the boycott above all, it would be continually educating the people in the administration of their own affairs. The plan of parliamentary action, by contrast, he prophesied would develop along the following lines.

"Starting from the same point as the abstentionists they have to preach an electioneering campaign as an absolute necessity, and to set about it as soon as possible they will then have to put forward a programme of reforms deduced from the principles of Socialism . . . they will necessarily have to appeal for support (i.e. votes) to a great number of people who are not convinced Socialists, and their programme of reforms will be the bait to catch these votes. and to the ordinary voter it will be this bait which will be the matter of interest, and not the

principle . So that the Socialist members when they get into Parliament will represent a heterogenous body of opinion, ultra-radical, democratic, discontented non-politicals, rather than a body of Socialists, and it will be their opinions and prejudices that will sway the action of the members in Parliament With these fetters on them the Socialist members will have to act, and whatever they propose will have to be a mere matter of compromise yet even those measures they will not carry because long before their party gets powerful enough to form even a formidable group for alliance with other parties, one section or other of ordinary politicians will dish them, and will carry measures that will pass current for being the very thing the Socialists have been asking for, because once get Socialist M Ps , and to the ordinary public they will be the representatives of the only Socialists So it will go on till either the Socialist party in Parliament disappears into the advanced Democratic party, or until they look round and find that they, still Socialists, have done nothing but give various opportunities to the reactionists for widening the basis of monopoly by creating a fresh middle-class under the present one, and so staving off the day of the great change And when they become conscious of that . what can they do but begin all over again, and try to form the two camps, each of them conscious of their true position of being the one monopolists, and the other the slaves of monopoly ”

He admitted a further possibility—that the Socialists in Parliament by good fortune or intrigue should capture power, but in this case it would not be a conscious revolution, since the people would have been “ignorantly betrayed into Socialism” instead of achieving it by their own conscious efforts, and, hence, a counter-revolutionary movement would quickly triumph. Finally he reiterated the policy of abstention. whatever patience it demanded now, he saw it as the only direct way to Socialism, and “in the long run the shortest way”, at the moment it meant enlisting “persons who are somewhat above the average” for the propaganda, and gradually laying the basis of the labour federation for the future struggle.¹

This lecture contains Morris’s most considered reflections during his anti-parliamentary period, and although he repeated them in a hundred different ways, he did not substantially modify them until 1891 or 1892. Whatever its errors and confusions, it was in some ways an effective reply to Lane’s *Manifesto*, and reveals the sharp difference between Morris and the growing Anarchist wing within the League. Already, in 1887, Morris strongly

¹ The lecture is published in full in May Morris, II, pp 434–52

resented suggestions that his policy had anything in common with Anarchism¹ While in practice the abstentionist policy might, and, indeed, *did* nourish Anarchist tendencies, the bases of Morris's argument were derived from his understanding of the class struggle and the class-character of the State His differences with the "parliamentary" section of the League were on questions of tactics rather than general theory, and his errors were derived from his feeling that the bourgeois myth of parliamentary democracy had taken on its most insidious and hypocritical forms in Britain (see p 793) The target for his attack throughout was Reformism, and it was his prophetic vision of the vista of compromise and careerism ahead which led him to over-balance in the opposite direction. Already in September, 1887, he was identifying his real theoretical opponents as being among the Fabians, and this despite the fact that Shaw was a close personal friend. "The attitude of Shaw . . . and his Fabians is very difficult to get over", he wrote to Glasse. "They are distinctly pushing forward that very useful association of lecturers as the only sound Socialist Body in the country. which I think is nonsense".

"I admit, and always have admitted, that at some future period it may be necessary to use parliament mechanically what I object to is *depending* on parliamentary agitation There *must* be a great party, a great organization outside parliament actively engaged in reconstructing society and learning administration whatever goes on in the parliament itself This is in direct opposition to the view of the regular parliamentary section as represented by Shaw, who look upon parliament as *the* means, and it seems to me will fall into the error of moving earth & sea to fill the ballot boxes with Socialist votes which will not represent Socialist *men*."²

If he could not win the Socialist movement as a whole to his view, still he believed it necessary for the League to exist alongside the parliamentary movement, keeping alive the propaganda of "principle" Increasingly between 1887 and 1890 he came to see the role of the League as being educational and propagandist within a larger Socialist movement. He was opposed to the amalgamation of the various Socialist groupings, but strongly in favour of joint action wherever possible. "Let those meet

¹ See, e.g., *Commonweal*, June 18th, 1887 ("Notes" by W M.)

² Morris to Glasse, September 23rd, 1887, *Unpublished Letters*, pp 7-8.

together who agree and like each other, however few they are", he wrote to Glasier in January, 1888.

"And not entangle themselves by joining bodies in which they must either quarrel or suppress part of their genuine opinions. In meantime the various bodies can always unite for specified purposes, and are much more likely to do so effectively if they are not always wrangling about their differences. The party cannot possibly be coterminous with one organization in it, or indeed with all the organizations together."¹

Such reflections were forced upon him increasingly in the next two years by the gradual disintegration of the League. There was nothing spectacular about this process—but there is no doubt that in relation to the general progress of the movement the League was hobbling far behind. In July, 1887, the circulation of *Commonweal* was in the region of 2,800 and Morris gave a general estimate of League membership at about 700.² Small as this number was, it was by no means negligible in relation to the movement as a whole. When three or four agitators could rouse the interest of the whole Northumberland coalfield, and a dozen energetic propagandists could spread the message widely in Scotland, 700 determined and energetic men were a considerable force. Yet there is no sign that the League was growing, either in numbers, discipline, or determination. In December, 1887, the *Commonweal* sales still stood at 2,850, but in June, 1889, the number "sent out" (not necessarily sold) had fallen to 2,331.³ The sharpest decline came after the Fourth Annual Conference in May, 1888, but a general decline may be presumed over the whole period. This decline is a fair index of the general activity of the League, since the bulk of *Commonweal* sales were in conjunction with the open-air propaganda. The Hammersmith Branch recruited over forty new members in 1887 (nearly all in

¹ Glasier MSS, January 28th, 1888

² Based on Morris's statement to Glasier, July 27th, 1887 (Glasier, *op cit*, p. 194), that 1½d a week from each member of the League would cover the weekly loss of £4 on *Commonweal*. This would give an exact figure of 720 members. The voting strength at the Annual Conference was twenty-eight, with at least one branch (Leicester) unrepresented, an analysis would give six full fifties, and twenty-three parts of fifty. Taking an average of twenty per branch, this would give about 760 members.

³ *Weekly Letter to Secretaries of Socialist League branches*, June 20th, 1889 (among papers of Hammersmith Society, Brit. Mus. Add. MSS 45893)

the second half of the year), and it was conducting a vigorous open-air propaganda. But the lectures were becoming of an increasingly intellectual character¹ and the Fabians (among them Hubert Bland, Shaw, Graham Wallas, Sidney Webb and Sydney Olivier), were becoming ever more popular among the members.

Hammersmith was a lively Branch, which put out new off-shoots (Fulham, Acton, North Kensington, Notting Hill) right to the end. Morris was always prodding forward new activities, in which he took his full share himself.² The Branch Secretary, Emery Walker, was painstaking, while H. B. Tarleton and James Tochartt, were unceasing propagandists. But few of the other Branches were gaining ground. Glasgow, although active in its propaganda, persistently failed to pay its full capitation dues to the central Council, and sometimes failed to return cash for *Commonweals* sold.³ Norwich, which claimed a membership of over 150 at the Third Annual Conference (May 29th, 1887), had fallen below 100 at the Fourth (May 20th, 1888) nevertheless, its propaganda was very much more vigorous than most. The Leeds Branch, which—together with the small Bradford Branch—was gaining influence in the working-class movement of the West

¹ Among lectures between December, 1887, and June, 1888, were "Peasant Life in Italy" (E. Carpenter), "The Origins of the Ornamental Arts" (Morris), "Copyright" (Shaw), "The Polity of Ancient Peru" (Beasley), and "Social Science 2,200 Years Ago" (Graham Wallas).

² E.g. Of seventy-two ordinary branch meetings between December, 1887, and September, 1888 (average attendance eleven), Morris was present at fifty-two, in addition, he spoke at many of the 150 open-air meetings held by his branch in the same period, and (when not lecturing elsewhere himself) was usually in the chair at the regular Sunday-night lecture (Hammersmith Minutes, *passim*).

³ We know this through the evidence of the Glasier MSS, e.g. "I find that Sparling cannot get in your money for Commonweal. Now you must understand that we cannot carry on the paper unless the branches pay what is owing. I really think it is treating people who are working as hard as they can, too badly not to help them by paying regularly. We are nearly at the end of our resources, & to speak quite plainly, we shall have to stop C'weal unless we get our money in. So please send us something at once and be regular in future. I am much dispirited by these troubles which ought not to happen at all." His next letter (August 16th, 1886, Glasier MSS) effected a reconciliation ("I have seen many societies get into a mess by not settling money matters at once"), and continued "Though I should be quite willing often to stop a gap with my own purse, I am sure you and everybody belonging to the League must see the necessity of its not being carried in my pocket in the way that other political movements have been in other people's pockets. . ."

Riding, still could not seem to climb above the charmed figure of thirty or forty members¹ The Annual Conference of 1888 saw four new London Branches represented, while only one (Croydon) had seceded But it is doubtful whether this can be taken to represent a real addition to the League's strength Morris's private letters of the summer of 1887 are profoundly discouraged. "I cannot say that I have encouraging news from London", he wrote to Glasier on July 23rd, 1887:

"I am afraid that our parliamentary friends if they cannot get their way will at any rate break up the League It is but right and proper to let you know how things really are, and you must remember that the parliamentarians are only running their heads into a sack, they have no chance of beating the S D F because that has been in existence so long that it has got that best of all titles 'prescription' The Ps will if they please succeed in breaking up the League, but they will not succeed in founding another body Their mistake is not joining the S D F at once they might raise its tone, or else get so many supporters in it that they could secede later on when they had done all that could be done in it

"All that we Londoners can do is to try to keep up the old status of the League as long as possible and altogether if possible, to be as little controversial as we can help and to push on London Propaganda though of course these wretched intrigues stop us very much, and make us dreadfully short-handed If after all our struggles we are beaten we must then begin again, as a sort of 12 or even 6 apostles but I am now more than ever determined that I will not go into the humbug business and promise people political successes and economical relief which I *know* we have no power to win for them. Our Hammersmith Branch is doing pretty well. very well as far as half a dozen members are concerned and all we of any character are really working like niggers at it "2

The factionalist tactics of the parliamentarians seemed to him to provide an illustration of the corrupting influence of political action in general³. On July 27th, 1887, he wrote again to Glasier.

¹ Notebooks and papers of Alf Mattison.

² Glasier MSS It is not certain whether this letter should be 1887 or 1888, but internal evidence suggests 1887

³ See Morris to Glasier, May 19th, 1887 (*Letters*, p 291, note 4, p 540, above) "Plainly speaking, the shadow of corruption which we should certainly tumble into if we became Parl is already on us, and there has been a great deal too much intriguing going on "

"From the time the Parliamentary section in the League made up their minds to press the question to extremities the League was practically split. Of course I shall do all I can to prevent a formal split, and shall work my hardest whatever happens, either in the League or out of it. But you will see that the *whole* of the work in London is now on our shoulders, and since we were but shorthanded before, you may imagine that it is hard work now"¹

It seems that a few of the Parliamentary group had resigned or had dropped into inactivity.² The plan of working through the L.E.L. had come to nothing,³ and—despite Engels's implicit advice to the parliamentarians to leave the League (see Appendix II, p. 867)—the Avelings and the strong Bloomsbury Branch remained within it, increasing their Branch membership considerably and directing their main attention to propaganda in the Radical Clubs and among the unskilled in the East End. By the autumn of 1887, indeed, things looked temporarily on the mend: the circulation figures of *Commonweal* showed a slight increase and the events of "Bloody Sunday" brought the two sections together.⁴ But compared with the general awakening of the people the slight recovery of the League was negligible, and when Morris wrote to Glasier in January that "our own branch here is doing very well", he added the realistic qualification—"which means simply that there are $\frac{1}{2}$ a dozen energetic & painstaking men in it".⁵ With the full onset of winter in early 1888 (and the consequent decline in open-air posts and sales of *Commonweal*) the temporary recovery of the League in London was at once—and finally—checked.

¹ Glasier, *op cit*, p. 193, see note 4, p. 540, above.

² The Croydon branch disappeared after the Annual Conference, and Bax remained in the League for another year only out of friendship for Morris: at the 1888 Conference, Bax was disqualified on the grounds that the Branch had lapsed (*Report of the Fourth Annual Conference*, p. 2).

³ The Council of the League forestalled the parliamentary faction by passing a resolution preventing any member of the League from being a member of more than one branch or affiliated organization.

⁴ "The less dissension the better if they will only leave us alone: all the more as the recent rough times have rather tended to unite us in London." Morris to Glasier, December 21st, 1887. Glasier MSS. To Glasier he was writing (September 23rd, 1887) that while no formal permission could be given to parliamentary branches to pursue their own policy, he was personally prepared to turn a blind eye in their direction.

⁵ *Unpublished Letters*, pp. 10-11.

The decisive failure was in the provinces Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hamilton, Hull, Ipswich, Lancaster, Leeds, Leicester, North Shields, Norwich, Oxford and Walsall (thirteen in all) were represented at the Annual Conference in 1887 at the Conference in 1888 only eight provincial branches sent delegates (although at least one other effective branch, Leeds, was still active), and Hamilton, Hull, Lancaster and North Shields had disappeared. After this date, it is true, the League occasionally promoted new branches, or gained affiliations from independent societies, at such various places as Yarmouth, Southampton, Wednesbury and Bristol. But, with the possible exception of Yarmouth, these did not constitute stable new propagandist centres. Propagandist visits to the South Wales coalfields, by Mainwaring and Kitz, resulted in good meetings but in no new branches. The foothold in Lancashire (in Manchester) was maintained, but the S.D.F. had the cotton towns to itself. In those branches which held their ground, a change in character was becoming marked. In 1887, Morris had noted the tendency for the Glasgow branch to attract petit-bourgeois elements and a few unusual workers (self-educated poets and aspiring artists), while the straightforward industrial workers joined the S.D.F. Only in Leeds and Bradford was a hard core of militant proletarians maintained after 1888, and this was due in part to the accident of the leadership of Tom Maguire—a man who combined the best attributes of the Leaguers (he was himself a really able poet, with a remarkable breadth of intellectual attainments) with a resolute and realistic understanding of the class struggle. But, in a sense, Maguire and the Yorkshire branches were only in the League by chance, they maintained only remote relations with the London Council, sold a quota of the *Commonweal*, and were held in the League more by admiration for William Morris (and distrust of Hyndman) than by acceptance of the anti-parliamentary view.

The reasons for this disintegration of the League in the provinces are not far to seek. The rising tide of the mass movement did not appear as a sudden desire amongst the workers for Socialism in the abstract, but as a tightening mood of militancy in their fight for industrial and political objectives, combined with a new receptiveness to Socialist propaganda. The decision of the

Third Annual Conference on parliamentary action had immediate repercussions. the Socialists of Clay Cross refused to affiliate to the League as a result,¹ and the Secretary of the Nottingham Socialist Club who had been trying to persuade his members to affiliate, wrote of his disappointment, and mentioned rumours of "general dissatisfaction" in the League and of a crisis in the Norwich branch.² The *Commonweal* was out of touch with the working-class movement, and was difficult to sell: where branches were small and poor, unsold copies became a burden. "2/3rds of our members are out of work or on short time", wrote the Secretary of the Leicester branch in January, 1888, complaining that only a dozen of their quota could be sold.³ "We cannot sell the *Commonweals*", he wrote in March, "simply because our members have no work and no money".⁴ The fact that there was a potential readership for a lively Socialist paper, in touch with events in the labour movement, is indicated by the progress of the *Labour Elector*, Keir Hardie's *Miner*, the *Cotton Factory Times*, and (in 1889) the *Yorkshire Factory Times*. The League was not failing through the apathy or opposition of the working class. It was being left behind and isolated by its own purism, and for this failure William Morris must bear a part of the blame.

VI John Lincoln Mahon

The career of J. L. Mahon in the last six months of 1887 provides a clear illustration of the dilemma in which the best elements in the League were being placed. Returning to Northumberland after the Third Annual Conference, he put into effect his policy of organizing a North of England Socialist Federation, independent of both League and S D F. The Programme of the Federation was taken clause by clause from the Draft Constitution of the League in the first months of 1885, which (it has been suggested) was drawn up with Engels's assistance (see p. 448). One change only was made—participation in *parliamentary*, as well as local, elections, being advocated. The Principles of the

¹ R. Unwin to Secretary, S L, September 18th, 1887, S L Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.

² *Ibid.*, A. Clifton to Secretary, S L, June 7th, 1887.

³ *Ibid.*, J. Fowkes to Secretary, S L, January 18th, 1888.

⁴ *Ibid.*, J. Fowkes to Secretary, S L, March 1st, 1888.

Federation embodied the main sense of Mahon's resolution to the Third Annual Conference, and won Engels's general approval (see Appendix II, p 863) In the rules it was explicitly laid down that the Socialist League and S.D.F. should be treated "on equal terms of friendship and equality".¹ Branches might be formed "in any district in the North of England".

Morris, welcoming the new organization in *Commonweal*, declared his support for the last two points of the Programme, congratulated the Federation on "not holding out the bait of a long string of "stepping-stones"; measures which no bourgeois Parliament would pass", but hoped that his friends would find out "the futility of sending (or trying to send) Socialists or anyone else to Parliament" ² The first results of the Federation were good. Mahon claimed about twenty branches in June, and up to 1,500 members—which, if it were true, outstripped the total membership of the League. The S.D.F. had got several branches established in Newcastle and Gateshead, and Tom Mann came up as organizer for them at the end of May, working amicably enough with the Federation whose branches were all in the coalfields With the prospects of success opening ahead Mahon began in earnest to "have ideas".

Mahon was a capable propagandist, with unusual abilities Two things only were against him. a tendency to personal vanity, and his inexperience—for in 1887 he was only twenty-three or twenty-four "He has more cheek and less chin than any man in the movement", Morris once said of a comrade who was almost certainly Mahon.³ Later, when Mahon had broken with the League, Morris wrote in sorrow to Glassey.

"I like him . . . and when I last saw him had no doubt of his sincerity but I think as I always thought that as things are the career of a professional agitator is not good for him, & I am afraid that he will do nothing else now. . . Somehow he has (though a good natured fellow enough) a fatal gift of breeding squabbles, I scarcely know how. . . When he was up in London he used to have 'ideas' from time to time, which always ended in a quarrel However he is still very young and if, as I hope, he is really 'straight' he will no doubt better"⁴

¹ *Commonweal*, June 25th, 1887

² *Ibid*

³ James Leatham, *William Morris, Master of Many Crafts* (1908), p 115

⁴ *Unpublished Letters*, p 10

The correspondence of Engels and Mahon in June and July, 1887, is of exceptional interest (see Appendix II, p. 861 f). In his first letter, June 14th, Mahon sketched out a policy which the movement in fact was to follow in the next five years, and which was to lead to the formation of the I L P. in 1893. He deprecated further secessions from the S.D.F. or League, and advocated the formation of an unofficial group "of influential people from all the organizations" who should draw up a proposal for the amalgamation of the various Socialist bodies. Only "a good & overwhelming force from the provinces" would be able either to silence the London factions or bring the London leaders together. Moreover, Mahon was already putting his plans into effect: first, by taking steps to develop semi-independent Socialist societies among the miners and iron-workers of Northumberland and Scotland; second, by promoting unofficial and private discussions among various individuals in different sections of the movement, among them A. K. Donald of the parliamentary section of the League, H. H. Champion, who had recently left the S.D.F., James MacDonald of the dying Socialist Union, E. R. Pease of Newcastle, and Ernest Radford, a young London lawyer on terms of personal friendship both with the Avelings and with Morris.¹

Mahon's policies were in theory excellent, and they won Engels's general assent. But the dividing line between political manoeuvring and corruption and intrigue, in such a delicate situation as this, was very fine. Mahon was a recent convert to the "parliamentary" side and already had a reputation for sudden changes of front.

¹ Among photostats sent to me by the Marx-Engels Institute is the copy of a fragment of a letter from an unknown correspondent, referring to one such meeting. The letter is addressed to "Lee" (H. W. Lee, Secretary of the S.D.F.) and includes the passage "I stated at the St. Pancras Branch in my address on Socialism in Northumberland that as a Workman I wanted the workers of the two bodies, S.L. & S.D.F., to try and find some means of coming together, & not leave it to the swells of the Party. Fiddle them about as they thought fit even at the Present Moment, and then that I believed H.H.C., E.R. Pease, J.L. Mahon [several words illegible] had held a meeting in London with the object of forming a new Body independent of either of the existing ones." Among the Mahon letters is one from Ernest Radford (June 11th, 1887) which includes this passage "I think your general idea as sketched is very good. I shall be glad to have a talk with Champion soon. If such a party is formed I shall certainly wish to join it. But please do not bring me into prominence which I have as yet done nothing to deserve. I believe it important that the known workers should take the lead."

Various phrases in his letter ("I wish our young lecturers could be got to pay more attention to these facts") suggest a degree of self-confidence bordering on conceit. The young man of twenty-three who so readily accepted the responsibility of correspondent for foreign Socialist papers and proposed to write a study of Luddism in the breaks between his agitational work clearly had no doubts about his own abilities. But Mahon's *policy* (which demanded the building of a new centre of personal influence within the movement) could not be divorced from his personality. Engels replied perfectly correctly. With the work of propaganda amongst the industrial workers in the provinces he thoroughly sympathized, but—while encouraging Mahon—he mildly rebuked him for experimenting with fresh attempts at organization. If he was to contribute money to Mahon, it would suggest that he necessarily endorsed whatever actions he (Mahon) was taking. Clearly, Mahon, whatever his abilities might be, could not expect to be freed from all responsibility for taking collective decisions on the policy of the movement, and if a serious effort was to be made to raise a fund for provincial propaganda it should be "got together and distributed by some *English* Committee." Engels did not want to give a handle to the enemies of Socialism (or to Hyndman) who could suggest that foreign Socialists were subsidizing a private agitation. It is not clear whether he hoped such a Committee would include elements of all the London groups, or whether he was thinking of the London faction of the League who had met under Aveling's Chairmanship after the Third Annual Conference. but, since Aveling was suggested as the proper person to handle the fund, he was probably thinking of the latter.

It was upon the position of Aveling in the movement that the proposal broke down (see Appendix II, p. 866). It is typical of Aveling's position in the movement at this time that Mahon levelled no political charge against him, and refused to reveal the nature of his private objections to Aveling's character. Engels was puzzled and exasperated.

"Of all the various Socialist groups in England, what is now the 'opposition' in the League, was the only one with which so far I could thoroughly sympathize. But if that group is allowed to fall to pieces from mere personal whims and squabbles, or from mutual suspicions

and insinuations which are carefully kept away from the light of day, it can only dissolve into a number of small cliques held together by personal motives, and utterly unfit to take any sort of lead in a really national movement. And I do not see on what grounds I should sympathize with any of these cliques more than with another, or with the S D federation or any other body."

It was a complicated situation. Mahon was not bound to reveal objections to Aveling which may well have been of a highly personal nature. On the other hand he realized perfectly well that Aveling might well prove to be a harmful colleague if he was identified as a leader of the movement for Socialist unity. Engels, realizing that Mahon should be controlled by some kind of collective discipline, was acting wisely. It is one of those political and personal dilemmas in which neither side can be said to be at fault.

At this point Mahon struck off on his own. In July he had conversations with Champion and others in London, and he then returned to the North, to act as agitator and organizer for the Scottish Land and Labour League for the next six months. A. K. Donald was left in Northumberland to keep the North of England Socialist Federation stirring. "A great deal of hard propagandist work must be done yet before we can call ourselves a party at all", Mahon wrote to Engels at the end of the Aveling incident. "In the meantime, I wish only to be of service to the cause in doing such part of that work as I can." "I am afraid Mahon has taken post to the Devil", Morris wrote to Glasier on July 23rd (possibly after some news of the Champion-Mahon meeting had come to his ears): "which is a pity, as I am sure he is sincere, but, O so weak! . . ." ¹ But Mahon cannot be accused at this time of seeking to gain support for his policy only by means of personal intrigue. Alone among the parliamentary party, he made a serious attempt to work out the policy he had learnt from Engels in terms of English conditions. During August and September he contributed a series of articles to *Commonweal* developing a positive attitude to trade unionism and industrial tactics. Writing on August 6th on "Labour Federation", he declared. "Everything that shows a growing feeling of solidarity amongst the wage-slaves is in the right direction." A Federation

¹ Glasier MSS.

of all industries and trades must become the declared object of the labour movement. "Everything in the direction of it is in the right. Everything that stops short of it is a delusion and a waste of effort":

"By thoroughly educating the workmen on this subject and pushing forward the laggard leaders of trades' unionism, Socialists will be at once forwarding their own cause and winning the gratitude of the workers for the practical help they are rendering in the labour struggle "

None of this was contradictory to Morris's own view in "The Policy of Abstention", and Mahon was careful to steer clear of the vexed parliamentary issue in his writings. But in fact Mahon was one of the first of the pioneers to write and think in a creative way about the "labour movement" as a whole, rather than the propaganda within it of strict Socialist theory. No doubt his contact with Tom Mann in Northumberland aided his development. "Socialism", said Mahon, writing in *Commonweal* on "A Labour Policy" on August 27th, "is simply [the] most advanced stage of the labour movement," the most conscious and complete expression of the class-struggle which already existed in spontaneous and instinctive forms:

"The Socialist party has no interests in antagonism to other labour organisations. Trades' unionism means securing to the workers a larger share of the fruits of their labour, Socialism means securing to the workers the full fruits of their labour. Co-operation means checking the shopkeeping section of the traders from cheating the people, Socialism means stopping all sections of traders from cheating the people. Therefore, there cannot be any antagonism between these movements and the Socialist movement. Socialism embraces all other Labour movements, and the very gist of the Socialist policy is to combine all sectional Labour movements into one solid array . "

On October 8th, in an article on trade unionism, he came out in flat opposition to the purism of the League. The Trades Union Congress of September, 1887, had seen the first serious challenge to the old Lib-Lab leadership. Keir Hardie had come into sharp opposition to Broadhurst. The fight for the Eight-hour Day was winning widespread support and (while Tom Mann and John Burns were championing this fight within the engineers) generally speaking both the S.D.F. and the League were standing aside from the agitation, and ignoring the importance of the new

militancy within the unions Mahon, touring the industrial centres of Scotland, could see the futility of this policy

"Socialism is on its trial' the Socialists generally must soon choose between broadening the lines of their movement so as to include the practical aspirations of the working class, or becoming a mere group of factions, preaching, it may be, pure enough principles, but preaching them to the winds and exercising no real influence with the masses. My view of the matter is that the method of Socialist propaganda must not be merely, or mainly, preaching rigidly pure principles which the masses of the people *cannot* grasp, but taking hold of the working-class movement as it exists at present, and gently and gradually moulding it into a Socialist shape "

Socialists—Mahon declared—should without any further delay enter the fight of the unions, struggle to get elected to trades councils, to send Socialists to the T U C., and organize a group to combat the "Burt and Broadhurst gang" One of his last contributions to *Commonweal* (on October 15th, 1887), was a positive and forthright appeal to the miners in Conference at Edinburgh. There is no doubt that with his defection in December, the League lost one of their best theorists.

They also lost one of their best agitators Wherever he went this year, Mahon seemed to have "green fingers" Small Socialist organizations sprang up in his wake. Glasgow was a regular branch of the League, but Edinburgh was still in affiliated relationship, as the Scottish Land and Labour League, and through this organization Mahon conducted his propaganda, forming new branches which were only in loose association with the League's Council Since he was operating with the support of the Edinburgh comrades (while Glasier and the Glasgow Branch looked on him with distrust), his propaganda was largely in the east—Forfarshire, West Fife, Aberdeen and Dundee Within a very few weeks he had actually formed branches with a fair membership at Arbroath, Carnoustie and Lochee in Forfarshire, Cowdenbeath and Dysart and Gallatown in Fife, while by the end of October he had formed firm branches at Aberdeen and Dundee, and opened up new centres at Galashiels, Lochgelly and West Calder

These successes were so striking (and in such marked contrast with Glasgow, which could only keep the Hamilton branch going with difficulty) that they give cause for reflection In some places,

as in the mining villages of West Fife, Mahon was on virgin territory. and yet found the miners willing to enroll in tens and twenties at the first or second open-air meeting. It was only necessary for him to put round handbills advertising his meetings, to get a large and eager audience. He succeeded where the Leaguers were failing in Lanarkshire because he took the trouble really to discover the aims and grievances of the workers whom he was addressing, and because he presented the case for Socialism in straightforward, practical terms. Wherever he went he found the minds of at least a section of the people prepared for Socialist propaganda. At Aberdeen Socialism reached the city with a spectacular episode in the fight for free speech which illustrates both Mahon's ability and the ready reception of the people. For some time a radical Unitarian minister, Mr. Webster, had been giving his support to Socialist ideas. Young James Leatham had been writing some articles with a Socialist slant which came to Mahon's notice. He wrote to the author (then unknown to him) asking if he would be prepared to make arrangements for a series of open-air meetings in Aberdeen. Leatham agreed.

"Mahon arrived on a fine harvest Saturday afternoon. He was only a year or two older than myself, but sported a small Swinburnian beard of sanguine hue, his fine head of red-gold hair was topped by a broad-brimmed soft black hat, and he carried, besides his satchel, two large bundles of pamphlets . . . He was a fine specimen of a type with which I was afterwards to have considerable experience

"In Aberdeen's great historic square, Castle Street, that same evening, as Chairman of a large gathering, I delivered the first avowed Socialist speech ever given in [that] arena.

"Mahon . . . was an experienced outdoor speaker—robust but leisurely . . .—and he gripped his audience at once with simple, pungent sentences such as 'You sing about your bonnie Scotland and your heather hills. It's not your bonnie Scotland. It's not your heather hills. It's the landlord's bonnie Scotland. It's the landlord's heather hills. And if you want enough earth to set a geranium in you've got to pinch it.'"¹

There was a large and responsive audience, which the police—by chivvying the speakers—succeeded in swelling. A few names were handed in at the end of the meeting of people willing to form a Socialist branch.

¹ *The Gateway*, November, 1941

On the Sunday further meetings were held, and in the evening Mahon was addressing a very large crowd in Castlegate when he was summoned to the police station and rebuked for lecturing on politics on the Lord's Day. Mahon then returned to his stand, finding that the crowd had swelled to huge proportions during his absence.

"He had not been speaking ten minutes when a hubbub arose, and presently through a lane in the swaying, shouting crowd a posse of policemen marched into the ring [The Superintendent] at their head, waving his walking-stick and thoroughly enjoying this display of force, stopped before us, and pointing with his stick at Mahon, shouted dramatically, 'Officers, do your duty' " ¹

Mahon was haled off again to the police station, charged with "breaking the law", and received an ovation from the sympathetic crowd lining the street outside.

Such an unlooked-for advertisement of Socialism was a god-send. On Monday evening a packed meeting was held in the Friendly Society's Hall, with the President of the Trades Council in the Chair, and Mr. Webster, the Unitarian Minister, moving a resolution of protest. A thoroughly hostile journalist (who described the working-class audience as being "of a low nature" and the Scottish Land and Labour League as a "newly-emerged abortion") could not refrain from giving, in spite of himself, a fairly favourable impression of Mahon's presence and speech.

"During all the preliminary speeches Mahon is writing hard what is evidently notes for his own address . . . It is only when he stands up to speak we see him properly for the first time. His long wavy hair comes down on the right side over a high broad forehead. His eyes are somewhat shifting, save when he concentrates all his passion in some argument,—they are then fixed and keen. His red beard does not completely hide his lower jaw which recedes far and is the worst feature in an otherwise interesting and powerful face. Mahon is of middle height, of spare build and has a slight stoop—in form, altogether a typical factory-worker . . . Open-air meetings have made hoarse and void of modulation his voice. His speech is on the whole logically arranged . . . His illustrations are capital and entirely suited to his audience." ²

When the case came up on Tuesday, Webster and Leatham had succeeded in getting influential witnesses for the defence, while

¹ *The Gateway*, January, 1941

² *The Northern Figaro*, October 8th, 1887

Mahon was successful in upsetting the police witnesses in his cross-questioning. the result was an acquittal, and further large open-air meetings in the next two or three days, leading to the triumphant formation of a branch which continued in the next year or two to grow in numbers and influence on the curious basis of affiliation to the League, while adopting the programme of the S D F. In view of Mahon's subsequent failures in agitational work, the honours of this encounter should in fairness be granted to him. The support of the Trades Council and the Radicals (who followed the lead of Mr Webster) was, of course, decisive in securing victory. But Mahon, as the sole representative of the organized Socialist movement in Aberdeen, behaved with a strength of character and common sense which raised the prestige of the cause.

Mahon's term as a League agitator came to an end in December, 1887. For some time, he must have been living upon the proceeds of collections and occasional donations from the Edinburgh Branch and possibly from Champion. The parliamentary group had—as he complained to Engels—given no assistance, and it is unlikely that Morris, Faulkner and Webb (the “financiers” of the anti-parliamentary group) would have been assisting him. At the end of November he had formed the plan of carrying on his propaganda in the West—the coalfields of Lanarkshire, Ayrshire, and in Glasgow itself. H. H. Champion came up in December to hold a series of meetings in the new centres opened by Mahon, and both Champion and Mahon were invited to Glasgow. Now, suddenly, the divergent views of Mahon and Glasier and the Glasgow purists came to a crisis: “the Glasgow chaps fairly quarrelled with him”, Morris wrote to Glasse. “I don't know all the story, but judge . . . that he, knowing the turn of mind of our friends there, unnecessarily irritated them.”¹ The Glasgow Branch appealed to Morris,² and he appears to have written an

¹ *Unpublished Letters*, p. 10

² G. McLean (Sec., Propaganda Committee, Glasgow, S.L.) and four others to Secretary, S.L., December 2nd, 1887. “Kindly let us know as early as possible the exact relation of the Scottish Land and Labour League to the Socialist League, also the personal attitude and relation of J. L. Mahon. He has been with us during the past week, and has attempted to suppress the name Socialist League in everything he has done for us.” S.L. Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.

official letter disclaiming Mahon's new policy To Glasier he wrote in private:

"As for Mahon . . . I don't know all the circumstances, but it was clear to me that he had been rather playing for his own side of things, so I had to write as I did write, though without any wish to exacerbate the quarrel . . . Yes, I think that Champion is going all awry with his opportunism . . . I cannot believe, however, that he is a self-seeker, and so hope that he will one day see the error of his ways."¹

Mahon retired to his old centre in Northumberland The North of England Socialist Federation still maintained a paper existence, but the great miners' strike had been defeated, and organized anti-Socialist propaganda had made some headway Several branches had, in Mahon's absence, linked officially with the League, the comrades at North Shields requesting in August, 1887, "to be properly connected with the Central Socialist League under Mr. Morris Socialism"² The branches were working under the greatest difficulty, without political leadership, or secretarial experience. Blyth was forced to reduce its order of *Commonweal* to twelve in the autumn, "as the pits are working short time and cannot get sale for them" East Hollywell, at the end of November, cancelled their order altogether. "the pits are working so bad and so small wages . . . we might make another Effort soon"³ The most effective organizer in the area in the previous six months had been Tom Mann of the S D F., who—while centred on the S D F. branches in Newcastle—had lent a fraternal hand to keeping the branches in the coalfields alive. Mahon and Tom Mann found that they were both looking in the same direction. Mann and John Burns were canvassing the possibility of amalgamating the best elements among the Socialists, launching a general Socialist newspaper, and thus cutting the movement free of the disastrous influence of Hyndman, who—despite what Morris called his "sham terrorist tactics"⁴—was ridiculing the engineer's demand for the "palliative" of an Eight-hour Day. Both Mann and Mahon were thinking less

¹ Glasier MSS, December 21st, 1887

² Secretary, North Shields, to Secretary, S L., August 22nd, 1887, S.L. Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc Hist

³ *Ibid*, Secretary, East Hollywell, to Secretary, S.L., November 28th, 1887.

⁴ Glasier, *op cit*, p. 190.

of a strict Socialist propaganda than of a Labour Party under Socialist leadership: and Mahon now saw the need of electing "three or four Socialist M Ps . . [who] could put Socialism in this country on a different footing . . [and] weld the party together" (see Appendix II, p. 870). It seemed the height of folly that the two comrades should work in opposition to each other. Mahon swallowed his pride and rejoined the S.D.F., bringing the remnants of the North of England Socialist Federation with him into formal union.¹

This result was inevitable. Mahon's career from June to December, 1887, discloses the true reasons for the collapse of the League in the provinces. At Glasgow, as at Hammersmith, the anti-parliamentarians who were sticking to their dislike of "soiling" themselves by political action, were not only purist, but becoming over-intellectual and precious. In December the Glasgow Branch was running, alongside their open-air propaganda, classes in shorthand and music. J Bruce Glasier, their most effective leader and speaker, gave few signs of making strenuous efforts to win political clarity, and preferred paddling around in general revolutionary sentiment of an Utopian character.² The appeal of the Branch to "Men and Women of the Working Class" carried the implication that proletarian converts to the movement must separate themselves *from* the workers in order to lead them from above.

"Towards Socialism, all philanthropy and reform—all that is noblest and best in modern thought and effort irresistibly bear us. Surely it is our duty to hasten the coming of a civilisation in which poverty will be utterly unknown, where the people will work to live, not live to work, where co-operation and ample leisure will enable the human body and mind to become beautiful, and to create beauty."³

Ruskin and the bourgeois philanthropists (the implication runs)

¹ Handbills in Mr J F Horrabin's Collection show that Mahon was lecturing in the coalfields for the S D F in February, 1888, and list Tom Mann and Mahon as Joint Organizing Secretaries of the S D F North of England Centre. Mann wrote to Burns (December 31st, 1887) "As far as I can judge of Mahon he is prepared to act square with our men . ." (Brit Mus. Add MSS. 46286)

² *Commonweal*, December, 1887, *passim*

³ Handbill of the Scottish Section of the Socialist League (Glasgow) October, 1885

were the true pioneers of Socialism. the Chartists and militant trade unionists are forgotten It was one thing for Morris, an intellectual and an artist, to declare for Socialism in part because he had reached a deadlock in his artistic aspirations but Glasier and his comrades were beginning to make the mistake (which Morris never made) of trying to make all or some of the proletariat artists in order that they should do the same

Mahon and those other Leaguers who sought to develop the agitation from the primary aspirations of the workers for bread, health, a decent standard of life, and an end to exploitation and injustice in their lives, were bound to follow lines of political action already adopted by the workers, but renounced by the Council of the League As the tide of militancy rose, the little islands of purists dwindled or became submerged It is true that if Mahon had been able to keep the Northumberland and Scottish branches alive, and within the League, they could have voted down the purists at the Annual Conference of 1888 with ease But events were moving fast the Council of the League was a London affair, and looked upon without much interest by the workers in the provinces. *Commonweal* was totally unsuited to the needs of a militant mining branch, and was becoming ever more an intellectual journal of the leftists It was a foregone conclusion that a realignment of the Socialist forces in the country should come

Tom Mann, selling all his personal possessions down to his kitchen table in order to keep the propaganda alive in Newcastle; John Lincoln Mahon, tramping the coalfields on his own with a satchel and a bundle of pamphlets, and "experiencing the untold hardships and humiliations of the life of a Socialist Agitator"¹ (see p 870) these two men represent what is finest in the pioneering spirit which first brought the propaganda of Socialism to the masses. But there is this difference between the two. Tom Mann—however erratic his course might appear from time to time—always maintained a fraternal affection and respect for comrades in every section of the movement, provided they were

¹ See Morris to May Morris, March 26th, 1888 (from Edinburgh) "Mahon was at my lecture last night . He was neatly dressed, which last fact was accounted for by the Aberdeen branch having presented him with a rig-out" (Brit Mus. Add MSS 45341)

not humbugs or self-seekers. Mahon was spoiled by his year of prominence and successful agitations in 1887. Cocksure, vain beyond his abilities, and impatient, he needed the criticism and support of a party to keep him "straight". Having once tasted leadership, he was reluctant to play a subordinate role, not because he was a self-seeker, but simply because he had become convinced that he could lead and direct the policy of the movement better than anyone else. He could see where both Hyndman and Morris were wrong, he had no respect for Aveling, and he therefore thought he must replace the whole lot. In 1885 and 1886 he had been one of the sharpest critics in the League, not only of Hyndman, but also of all the S D F. In January, 1888, he rejoined the S D F.¹ By November, 1888, he was ridiculing mercilessly the policy of his old comrades in the League and of the S D F. alike. He did not seem to see the inconsistency of abusing men for theoretical confusions which he himself had held a twelvemonth before. Although he argued for unity, he alienated potential comrades by his lack of humility in dealing with his own past mistakes. "I suppose you know that Mahon has definitely joined the S D F", Morris wrote to Glasier in January, 1888,

"which makes me grin somewhat considering the energy with which he once attacked it. However, I am not going to quarrel with him: though I am sincerely sorry that for the present he is chiefly of use as an example of . . . political intrigue. He certainly has a genius for setting people by the ears . . . I still hope there is some sincerity in him, though it is clear that there is no stability. . ."²

Mahon's defection from the League was a serious loss. But Morris was right: Mahon was already sliding on the slopes of personal intrigue, and was before long to become one more among the many men in this period lost to the movement for the lack of an effective party.

¹ See Morris to May Morris, March 26th, 1888 (from Edinburgh) "I am sorry to say that he has by no means gained golden opinions here: his organizing qualities being represented by a duck's egg. He however denies that he has deserted the League; says he has only joined the S D F locally." Allowance should be made for the prejudiced viewpoint of the Glasgow Leaguers.

² Glasier MSS., January 28th, 1888.

VII *The Jingo Jubilee*

While Mahon had been touring Scotland, the rest of the League had not been altogether idle, although Morris's letters suggest a falling-off in the general level of activity of the London branches. The open-air propaganda and *Commonweal* sales were being kept up, occasional prosecutions of free speech were still to be fought. But, in the summer, only one campaign of the London Leaguers really seemed to arouse their ready enthusiasm—the campaign against Queen Victoria's Jingo Jubilee.

This was real red meat for the old ultra-Radical leftists like Frank Kitz: it provided the Anarchists with an opportunity to take a bash at the State and all elements of the League were able to unite in some effective anti-imperialist propaganda. Comrade Kitz was in his element, and proposed the sending up of balloons laden with Socialist literature on Jubilee Day.¹ The Queen was well known to be both an arch-imperialist and an arch-enemy of Socialism. She was also suspected, among the old Leftist core, of being an arch-fraud and the mother of an illegitimate child whose father was the notorious John Brown.² As the supreme symbol of bourgeois sham and fraud, she presented them with a full-size target.

The Jubilee of 1887 may be taken as the inauguration of the "modern" concept of royalty. Although the Republican sentiment of the early 1870s had long subsided as an effective political force, it was still alive among the Radicals, and among the people generally indifference towards Royalty was the rule. Now the stage-managers of the monarchy cast the Queen for the three roles which she and her successors have played ever since. First, the Crown was to serve as a symbol of imperial unity. Properly speaking, it was Disraeli who hatched this idea in 1876, when

¹ Hammersmith Minutes, June 19th, 1887. The Hammersmith Branch turned down the proposal.

² See the pamphlet, *John Brown, A Correspondence with the Lord Chancellor, Regarding a Charge of Fraud and Embezzlement, Preferred against His Grace the Duke of Athole, K.T.* (printed and published by Alexander Robertson, 37a Clerkenwell Green, 1873). This pamphlet, which was in the hands of Joseph Lane and his circle, purports to give circumstantial evidence of the liaison between John Brown and the Queen and the birth of the child, citing dates, places, and witnesses.

he proclaimed the Queen "Empress of India". But 1887 was a Jingo Jubilee in good earnest. Maharajas and African tribal chiefs were paraded in the streets, as at a Roman triumph, to demonstrate the loyalty of the coloured people whose children missionaries were teaching to sing "God Save the Queen" even before they could learn the alphabet. As a climax to the imperial celebrations, no less than 23,000 prisoners in Indian jails (many of them political offenders) were released. Morris had an apt comment in his regular *Commonweal* notes on this piece of "Jubilee flunkeyism":

"To some people it will reveal depths of tyranny undreamed of before. Here is a dilemma for our Jubileists. 'If it was dangerous to the public that these men should be at large, why do you release them? If you can safely release this host of poor miserable tortured people, why did you torture them with your infernal prison?'"¹

Second, the occasion was used (as it is always used) to provide circuses and pageants to distract the people from their own problems—in this case, from the severe depression year of 1887. The Romans at least doled out some bread with *their* circuses. This one was different. The people had to pay for their flag-wagging. But the Jubilee was not all made up of ardour and enthusiasm, as the official historians suggest. The unemployed and the working-class movement in many towns stood like a rock against the mass-produced hysteria. The *Commonweal* assiduously gathered the reports. At a public meeting in Llanelly "Her Majesty's name was received with groans and hisses." The Neath Town Council refused to pay for celebrations. The Cardiff Trades Council refused "to do anything in the shape of servile admiration of a well-paid servant of the State." At Bristol a large open-air meeting was held in the centre of the city on Jubilee day, addressed by Socialists and trade unionists, at which two militant Republican resolutions were carried with enthusiasm.² In some parts of the country, at least, the League was swimming with the stream!

Third, the monarchy was employed as a focal point for all the humbug, "respectability", and orthodox herd instincts which can be employed to prop up bourgeois rule. In brief, the Crown was to be used as an occasion for jingoism, circuses and guff, as it has

¹ *Commonweal*, February 26th, 1887

² *Ibid*, June 25th, 1887.

been used ever since, and of the three, Morris found the guff the most distasteful "The powers that be", he wrote in his *Commonweal* notes,

"are determined to use the opportunity to show what a nuisance the monarchy and court can be as a centre of hypocrisy and corruption, and the densest form of stupidity"¹

The Leaguers set themselves athwart the insidious gathering pressure of orthodox emotion, distributing on Jubilee Day a leaflet in Kitz's style which included the words

"The discovery of gas, electricity, steam-driven locomotives and machinery and the vast extension of commerce, is all to be mixed up with the defecation of a mean old woman who has had as much to do with inventions or art as the man in the moon"

On the back was a poem by Fred Henderson of Norwich, at the time imprisoned in Norwich Castle for his part in addressing a riotous demonstration of unemployed (see p 595), which opened:

"Full fifty years o'er these fair isles
Plump lady Vic had held the sway . . ."²

On June 25th, 1887, the week after the main pageantry, Morris summed up his impressions in *Commonweal*

"Socialists feel of course that the mere abolition of the monarchy would help them little if it only gave place to a middle-class republic, such a one, for example, as that which butchered so many thousands of citizens at Paris in 1871 . . . Nevertheless, now the monstrous stupidity is on us . . . one's indignation swells pretty much to the bursting-point . . . We must not after all forget what the hideous, revolting, and vulgar tomfoolery in question really means nowadays . . ."

After recalling the position of the Crown in feudal times, when the monarch—for good or ill—has at least "to do the deeds of men and women, however faulty or perverse, and not the deeds of a gilt gibbiestick", Morris considered the role of the Crown in his own time, describing the Jubilee as "a set of antics . . . compared with which a coroboree of Australian black-fellows is a decent and dignified performance". The monarchy no longer represented the "extinct superstitions" of feudalism and the divine right of kings,

¹ *Commonweal*, June 18th, 1887

² *Socialists and the Jubilee A Word on the Class War* (Socialist League handbill)

"but commercial realities rather to wit, jobbery official and commercial, and its foundation, the Privilege of Capital, set on a background of the due performance of the conventional domestic duties; in short, the representation of the anti-social spirit in its fulness is what is required of it

"That is the reason why the career of the present representative is . . . so eminently satisfactory. It has been the life of a respectable official who has always been careful to give the minimum of work for the maximum of pay. All this it has performed in a way which has duly earned the shouts of the holiday-makers, the upholsterers, fire-work makers, gasfitters and others who may gain some temporary advantage from the Royal (but shabby) Jubilee Circus, as well as the deeper-seated applause of those whose be-all and end-all is the continuance of respectable robbery."

And yet from all this farce, Morris extracted some comfort.

"Even this vulgar Royal Upholstery procession, trumpery as it is, may deepen the discontent a little, when the newspapers are once more empty of it, and when people wake up, as on the morrow of a disgraceful orgie, and find dull trade all the duller for it, and have to face according to their position the wearisome struggle for riches, for place, for respectability, for decent livelihood, for bare subsistence, in the teeth of growing competition in a society now at last showing its rottenness openly."

- . In these days when the orthodox explain how the mass-produced gusts of commercialized hysteria contribute towards "stability", and even intellectuals who pose as advanced Socialists praise the institution of Royalty as satisfying "the underlying need for some sort of supreme father substitute",¹ it is worth remembering William Morris's words

VIII "Bloody Sunday"

The bourgeoisie could not lay on a Jubilee every month to provide a target for League propaganda. But more serious trouble was gathering. Throughout the spring and summer months the mood of the London unemployed had been rising. The S.D.F. had put forward demands for immediate relief and public works, and had led a number of successful demonstrations—a great Church Parade at St Paul's, a counter-demonstration to the Lord Mayor's Show, smaller church parades and deputations to the

¹ *The New Statesman and Nation*, February 16th, 1952.

local authorities in the East End and many other centres. Although individual Leaguers had helped in the agitation, Morris and the Council had held aloof. Morris applauded the major demonstrations and some of the local agitation, as drawing attention to the misery of the unemployed, but he suspected Hyndman of using the agitation for opportunist ends—on the one hand holding out prospects of relief to the starving men which a capitalist State would never grant, and on the other using their misery to advertise the S D F. and to brandish as a stick of sham insurrection at the Government.¹

Some colour was lent to Morris's view by the retirement of both John Burns and H. H. Champion from the agitation in the summer of 1887 (both of whom had become dissatisfied with Hyndman's attitude), and according to Shaw, "the result was that the unemployed agitation was left almost leaderless at the moment when the unemployed themselves were getting almost desperate." Early in the winter of 1887,

"the men themselves, under all sorts of casual leaders, or rather speech-makers, took to meeting constantly in Trafalgar Square. . . The shopkeepers began to complain that the sensational newspaper accounts of the meetings were frightening away their customers and endangering the Christmas quarter's rent. On this the newspapers became more sensational than ever, and those fervid orators who preserve friendly relations with the police began to throw in the usual occasional proposal to set London on fire simultaneously at the Bank, St Paul's, the House

¹ For the S D F's part in the unemployed agitation, see Lee, *op cit*, pp 125-30. Morris's comments in his *Diary* are published in part in Mackail, II, pp 175-6, and conclude "If a riot is quite spontaneous it does frighten the bourgeois even if it is but isolated, but planned riots or shows of force are no good unless in a time of action, when they are backed by the opinion of the people and are in point of fact indications of the rising tide." Of a torchlight procession organized by the Clerkenwell and Marylebone branches of the S D F in commemoration of the "riots" of 1886, Morris noted "a stupid thing to do unless they had strength and resolution to make a big row, which they *know* they have not got." On the other hand, Morris took part in several unemployed demonstrations, both in Hammersmith and in London (see Vallance, *op cit*, p 341), and Joseph Pennell recollected one church parade from Trafalgar Square to Westminster Abbey "An enormous crowd began to pour out of the Square down Parliament Street. . . On they came, with a sort of irresistible force, . . and right in front—among the red flags, singing with all his might the 'Marseillaise'—was William Morris. He had the face of a Crusader, and he marched with that big stick of his, as the Crusaders must have marched" (quoted in *Labour Leader*, October 10th, 1896).

of Commons, the Stock Exchange, and the Tower. This helped to keep the pot boiling, and at last the police cleared the unemployed out of the square . . .¹

Shaw's account, despite its mock cynicism, seems to be pretty close to the mark. At least one *agent provocateur* was unearthed in the subsequent court proceedings, and it is clear that the relatively unorganized nature of the agitation gave the police the opportunity, for which they had been watching, of forcing a show-down on the issue of free-speech in the Metropolis.

James Allman, an unemployed worker on the Council of the League, took a leading part in the agitation, but again in a haphazard way. "Returning from a meeting held early in October to protest against the murder of our Chicago comrades", relates Allman, he and three other Socialists passed through the Square, and seeing the unemployed gathered without leaders or purpose, determined that they and other unemployed Socialists would conduct a series of organized meetings:

"The first meeting was held next morning, the speeches being delivered from one of the seats and beneath the shadow of a black banner upon which the words 'We will have work or bread' were inscribed in large white letters. The result of this meeting was a series of daily assemblages in the same place. . . . Day by day the sansculotick workless multitude met, marched, and spoke, and daily their numbers increased. . . . The Press . . . began to notice the meetings. We were styled loafers, vagabonds, and paid agitators. . . . The abuse of the Press was seconded by the ruffianism of the police, who, acting under the instructions of that bloody-minded arch cut-throat Sir Charles Warren . . . frequently dispersed the demonstrations in a most savage and barbarous manner."²

On one occasion, Allman recounted, while the injury was still only a few weeks fresh in his mind.

"The processionists were proceeding towards Stepney Green via Strand and City, when, opposite Charing Cross Station, the police suddenly pounced upon them, seized and smashed up their black banner, and dispersed the procession. Strange to say, though, the red flag remained, and from that day till quite recently was borne before the

¹ G. B. Shaw, *The Fabian Society: What It has Done and How It has Done It* (Fabian Tract No. 41, 1892), pp. 7-10.

² "The Truth About the Unemployed, By One of Them", *Commonweal*, November 26th, 1887.

procession. The black banner, representing the dark prospects of unemployed workmen, and borne in our parades as an appeal to the commiseration of the wealthy and a symbol of despair, was torn from us. But the red flag, the emblem of sturdy revolt, remained with us, and henceforth we marched in the wake of the flame-coloured flag . ”

Strange, indeed! But it would not have been so strange to Allman and the unemployed if they had realized that the police were deliberately provoking them into an insurrectionary temper. It is no disgrace to them. They were inexperienced, and in no mood to trifle with subtleties of tactics. But they were walking into Sir Charles Warren's carefully-laid trap.

Morris and the Council of the League smelled danger, but instead of going to meet the unemployed workers and wresting the leadership out of the hands of the firebrands and spies, they took refuge in their old purism. They passed a resolution on the Unemployed Question which was definitely flabby.

“That the Socialist League do maintain officially the continuance of that policy of non-intervention pursued by it up to the present, and though it can prohibit no individual members from participating in unemployed agitation, it cannot undertake to support, either morally or pecuniarily, any member whose participation leads him into difficulties ”¹

This was backed up, on October 29th, by a Manifesto of the Council, signed by H. A. Barker, the Secretary, but certainly written by Morris. While expressing sympathy with the unemployed, and demanding (in an off-hand way) immediate relief, the Manifesto urged the futility of asking the capitalist State to

¹ *Commonweal*, October 22nd, 1887. The Glasgow Branch passed a vigorous protest against this resolution, which it accused of giving the impression of “callousness or indifference.” Glasier, in a well-argued covering letter (October 24th, 1887), said he had found it “no easy task to maintain the principle that we cannot secure any adequate amelioration of the condition of the unemployed under the existing system.” The comrades had maintained that “cases of *absolute starvation* must have to the living generation a claim above all abstract principles.” In Glasgow the City Council had a large fund for “the common good” and unreclaimed land on which to give employment to the unemployed, and the comrades urged an agitation for the employment of direct labour (“without middlemen or contractors”) on socially useful tasks. Such measures, so far from weakening Socialist support among the unemployed, “would be of immense advantage as means of creating a sympathy and interest in our propaganda if we took the lead in the matter” as in the case of the Lanarkshire miners’ strike” S.L. Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.

provide outdoor relief, since—while such relief might be given—the result would only be to throw more workers out of employment:

“While the present State lasts . . . there is no remedy possible for this huge misery and wrong. Must we Socialists tell this, then, to starving men seeking victuals and shelter for the passing day? Yes, we *must* tell it them . . . to give them lying and delusive hopes of a decent livelihood which they have no chance of obtaining is not doing them a service. . . . There is no salvation for the unemployed but in the general combination of the workers for the freedom of labour—for the REVOLUTION. . . .”

Premature rioting would bring no relief—and here Morris showed that he had seen through the police tactics, and had real and genuine cause for anger at Hyndman’s opportunism:

“Once for all, unless we Socialists are prepared to organize and lead such disturbances, and carry them through to the bitter end, we are bound, under penalty of being justly blamed for egging on people to do what we dare not heartily take part in, to point out to the unemployed what would probably be the results of a riot. . . .”

The riot, Morris declared, would be repressed with ease, unless part of a general revolutionary movement of the whole working class. Moreover, the brutal attacks at present being made by the police upon the unemployed demonstrations (against which the statement made a vigorous protest) “are made with the deliberate intention of forcing them into riot in order to give the authorities an excuse for another step in the suppression of free speech”.

The Manifesto was negative on the one hand, prophetic on the other. The mood of the authorities was a great deal sterner than it had been when they were taken unawares by the riots of 1886. Gladstone and the old Liberal Party had been defeated on Home Rule, and the Tory-Liberal Unionist Government was forcing coercion upon Ireland, and in a mood to destroy Socialism at home. Bismarck’s anti-Socialist laws had attracted favourable attention in England, and the judicial murder of the Anarchists in Chicago (the long public preparations for which were going on throughout October and November, until their execution on November 11th) had emboldened reactionaries to preach openly from the text, “Go thou, and do likewise”. On the day after the Chicago executions, and *the day before* “Bloody Sunday”, *The Times*

published a remarkable editorial, denouncing the public petitions throughout the United States for clemency to the Anarchists as a "mischievous practice . . . an unparalleled amount of illegitimate pressure" complaining at the "lax discipline which enabled Lingg [who committed suicide] to disappoint the hangman": and commending,

"the sternness of Americans in repressing offences against law and order . . . American police do not wait to read a Riot Act . . . They take little reck of the right of public meeting . . . They carry revolvers, and use them without mercy when they see signs of resistance . . . Judges and juries draw no distinction between incendiaries of the platform and the Press, and the men who do their dirty work. These things, which happen in the freest Republic in the world, may suggest whether there is anything so essentially incompatible with the liberty of the subject in the methods, in many respects milder, which are the objects of . . . vehement denunciation."

in Ireland, and (as the events of the next day were to show) in Britain as well. "If the people of the United States do not hesitate when order is persistently disturbed to restore it with a strong hand, why should we be afraid to give effect to the general will?"¹ Sir Charles Warren and the Government had got their stage properly set

The brutal assaults of the police upon the unemployed demonstrators were no mere fictions of the imagination of Allman and the Council of the League. Throughout October repeated assaults and arrests were made upon the demonstrators. On October 17th, 18th, and 19th, Trafalgar Square was cleared by charges of mounted police and the plentiful use of the baton. In the first week of November meetings were being held daily in the Square, and on November 4th, when the Square was once again cleared, the red flag was at last taken. On November 8th Sir Charles Warren banned all further meetings in the Square, on the pretext that it was Crown property. By now the best of the Radicals were alarmed. Although the *Daily News* and the rest of the Liberal and Tory Press were denouncing the unemployed as idlers and criminals, *Reynolds* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* (under the editorship of W. T. Stead) were championing the cause of free speech and exposing the worst cases of provocation and

¹ *The Times*, November 12th, 1887.

framed-up, charges of the police. Morris wrote to the *Pall Mall Gazette* proposing a Law and Liberty League, to defend the rights of free speech. The Metropolitan Radical Association and several prominent individuals—Annie Besant, W. T. Stead, Cunninghame Graham, the Rev. Stewart Headlam—took up the issue with vigour. The Radicals and the Irish proclaimed a demonstration in Trafalgar Square on November 13th, to protest against Coercion and the treatment in prison of the Irish M.P. O'Brien. It was an emergency decision, driven forward by Stead, under the slogan "To the Square!" Scarcely three days were left for preparations, but—as at Dod Street—the Radicals and the Irish turned out in their thousands on the day.

The events of November 13th have gone down in history as "Bloody Sunday". For action of *this* kind—the keeping of the streets and squares free for the work of propaganda—Morris and the Council of the League had no hesitation. The demonstrators—Radicals, Irish National League, and Socialists—formed up at various points in the east, before rallying for the procession to the west. Morris joined the contingent on Clerkenwell Green. According to *The Times*' report, the contingent was made up of "respectable artisans", and was addressed from a cart by Morris and Annie Besant, in speeches of a "determined character".

"Mr. William Morris . . . proceeded to say that wherever free speech was attempted to be put down, it was their bounden duty to resist the attempt by every means in their power. He thought their business was to get to the Square by some means or other, and he intended to do his best to get there whatever the consequences might be. They must press on to the Square like orderly people and good citizens. Mr. Morris's views were evidently the views of most of those he was addressing, and met with not a little applause . . ."

According to another report, he also added some advice as to how to deal with the police:

"When the procession was passing through the streets, those behind must not fall back, no matter what happened to those in front. This, he added, amid laughter, would only be offering 'passive resistance' to the authorities. He hoped they would shove the policemen, rather than hit them, for the policemen were armed and they were not. . . ."¹

It is clear that he had a better idea of what was to be expected

¹ *The Times*, November 14th, 1887

than most of the good-humoured but earnest crowd massing around the cart. But what took place far surpassed even his worst expectations. The main body of the foot police and the military (armed, and with twenty rounds apiece) lined the sunken part of the Square, while the mounted police and contingents of foot police guarded the outlying approaches. The defence, Morris wrote in the next issue of *Commonweal*, "was ample against anything except an organized attack from determined persons acting in concert and able to depend on one another." The Clerkenwell contingent of upwards of 5,000, who had marched in good order to within a quarter of a mile of the Square, were attacked as they were entering St Martin's Lane.

"It was all over in a few minutes our comrades fought valiantly, but they had not learned how to stand and turn their column into a line, or to march on to the front. Those in front turned and faced their rear, not to run away, but to join in the fray if opportunity served. The police struck right and left like what they were, soldiers attacking an enemy . . ."

The Socialist League banner was in the hands of a determined comrade, Mrs Taylor. According to *The Times*

"The police called upon her to give it up. She refused, and they seized hold of it. Several of the male members of the League rushed to the woman's assistance, and laid hold of the staff. A sharp struggle ended in the constables possessing themselves of the prize. The woman was carried off in a fainting condition. . . The processionists offered great resistance, but they could not stand the heavy blows of the batons"¹

Flags were torn from the hands of the processionists, "and their staves broken by the police laying them down . . . and jumping on them." The band instruments were captured, and—Morris recounted

"All that our people could do was to straggle into the Square as helpless units. I confess I was astounded at the rapidity of the thing and the ease with which military organization got its victory. I could see that numbers were of no avail unless led by a band of men acting in concert and each knowing his own part."

Morris himself was in the centre of the police attack. He had been walking in the middle of the column beside Shaw, but—

¹ *The Times*, November 14th, 1887

anticipating trouble—he had gone to the head of the procession, “where he saw the rout at its most striking moment”.¹ “I shall never forget how quickly these unarmed crowds were dispersed into clouds of dust”, he wrote to Andreas Scheu “I found myself suddenly alone in the centre of the street, and, deserted as I was, I had to use all my strength to gain safety.”² By some means he entered the Square and witnessed the last act of the assault

The other columns had met with even more brutality before they reached the Square. Cunninghame Graham, the aristocratic Radical-Socialist M.P. for N.-W. Lanark, headed an attack on the police cordon with John Burns. Graham’s head was cut open, and a neutral observer recorded.

“After Mr. Graham’s arrest was complete one policeman after another, two certainly, but I think no more, stepped up from behind and struck him on the head from behind with a violence and brutality which were shocking to behold. Even after this, and when some five or six other police were dragging him into the Square, another from behind seized him most needlessly by the hair and dragged his head back, and in that condition he was forced forwards many yards”³

Even the foreign Socialists were appalled at the behaviour of the “British bobby”. The Radicals were angry and astonished, “but by no means strung up to fighting pitch”, commented Morris. The many stragglers on the edges of the Square were treated to another demonstration of “firmness”, in the calling out of the soldiers, the reading of the Riot Act by “a sort of country-gentleman-looking imbecile”, and the totally unnecessary appearance of a regiment of Guardsmen with fixed bayonets, who proceeded to clear the Square. Seventy-five arrests were made: 200 people were treated in hospital for injuries, and countless scores more bore the marks of “law and order” to their homes: three sustained fatal injuries.⁴

The reactions of the various parties were immediate. In the

¹ Account of G. B. Shaw, quoted by Vallance, *op cit*, p. 338

² Scheu, *op cit*, Part III, Ch. VI

³ *Remember Trafalgar Square!* (*Pall Mall Gazette* “Extra”) Account by Sir E. Reed, M.P.

⁴ W. B. Currier and Connell died soon after Bloody Sunday another victim, Harrison died after a lingering illness, Linnell received his injuries on another occasion

police stations the prisoners were kept from sleeping by the "Hurrahs!" and choruses of "Rule Britannia" of the victorious police. *The Times* blossomed into a leader which far exceeded its "mingled feelings" of February, 1886, and which (not that it mattered) completely contradicted the accounts of its own reporters

"Putting aside mere idlers and sightseers and putting aside also a small band of persons with a diseased craving for notoriety the active portion of yesterday's mob was composed of all that is weakest, most worthless, and most vicious in the slums of a great city no honest purpose animated these howling roughs It was simple love of disorder, hope of plunder, and the revolt of dull brutality against the rule of law morbid vanity greed of gain hound ignorant debased ranting pernicious incitements nauseous hypocrisy ringleaders criminals"¹

On the 15th it reported "great rejoicings all over London, especially in the West End"

"If this meeting had been permitted, no other meetings, even if they had been held day and night, could have been put down"

The authorities consolidated their victory by swearing in special constables and trying to recall the panic of 1848. On the next Sunday mounted police galloped up and down the Square, pursuing irresolute and straggling crowds, and an innocent bystander, a Radical law-writer, named Alfred Linnell, was ridden down and sustained fatal injuries. Sentences of hard labour, ranging from one month to a year, were doled out on largely perjured evidence. Two months after the affair John Burns and Cunningham Graham were awarded the relatively mild sentence of six weeks.

The Gladstonian Liberals maintained a shameful complicity of silence—only Bradlaugh resuming his old championship of the rights of free speech. Among the Radicals and Socialists reactions were altogether different. "How fearful!" exclaims the narrator in *News from Nowhere* when old Hammond has described the bloodier massacre of Trafalgar Square in the 1950s which marked the beginning of the "Change." "And I suppose that this massacre put an end to the whole revolution for that time?" "No,

¹ *The Times*, November 14th, 1887

no", cried old Hammond, "it began it" "Hideous and overpowering as the first terror had been, when the people had time to think about it, their feeling was one of anger rather than fear. . ." Morris's feelings were ones of fury from the start "Harmless citizens were . . . beaten and trodden underfoot, men were haled off to the police courts and there beaten again", he wrote in his Notes on the year, 1887, after he had had time to check the evidence ¹ In the *Commonweal* he wrote, "Sir Charles Warren . . . has given us a lesson in street fighting", and stressed the need for crowd drill and discipline

"The mask is off now, and the real meaning of all the petty persecution of our open-air meetings is as clear as may be No more humbug need be talked about obstruction . . . The very Radicals have been taught that slaves have no rights" ²

Cunninghame Graham, as might be expected, took his own lesson thoroughly to heart. Whilst a captive in the Square, he saw plenty to cause reflection.

"I saw repeated charges made at a perfectly unarmed and helpless crowd, I saw policemen . . . under the express order of their superiors, repeatedly strike women and children . . . As I was being led out of the crowd a poor woman asked a police inspector . . . if he had seen a child she had lost His answer was to tell her she was a 'damned whore', and to knock her down . . ."

The main result of the brutality, in his opinion, was "to make the Liberal Party as odious and as despised as the Tory Party in the Metropolis". Three men killed (one of them a well-known local Radical leader),³ hundreds wounded and bruised, three hundred arrested, many imprisoned—and the great Liberal Party that was crying out against Irish Coercion did—nothing "I expected"—wrote Graham—"that it would be thought as cruel and tyrannical to break up a meeting at which thousands of Irishmen were to be present, in London as it would be in Ireland."

"I thought that freedom of speech and the right of public meeting

¹ Brit Mus Add MSS 46345

² "London in a State of Siege", *Commonweal*, November 19th, 1887

³ William B. Curner, a prominent Deptford Radical and Secularist, was buried with public ceremony on January 7th, 1888, William Morris's "Death Song" closing the proceedings

were facts in themselves, about which politicians were agreed I did not know the meanness of the whole crew even at that time I was not aware that freedom of speech and public meeting were nothing to them but stalking-horses to hide themselves behind, and under cover of which to crawl into Downing Street I soon found, however, that the Liberal party was a complete cur, that what they excelled in doing was singing, 'Gloria Gladstone in excelsis', and talking of what they intended to do in Ireland "1

Thousands of militant London Radical working men shared his views

This new unity between the Radicals and the Socialists found its complete and victorious demonstration in the solemn public funeral of Alfred Linnell Morris, together with Annie Besant, W. T. Stead, and others in the Law and Liberty League, played a prominent part in preparing the ceremony Despite the poor weather, the people—Radicals, Irish, and Socialists—turned out in their tens of thousands, in the greatest united demonstration which London had seen "It was a victory", wrote Morris, "for it was the most enormous concourse of people I ever saw, the number incalculable, the crowd sympathetic and quite orderly "2 Cunninghame Graham, Annie Besant, W T Stead, Herbert Burrows, Frank Smith (of the Salvation Army) and William Morris were the pall-bearers on the hearse were the flags of the Irish, Socialists and Radicals, and a shield with the lettering, "KILLED IN TRAFALGAR SQUARE" As the enormous procession moved behind a band playing the "Dead March" to Bow Cemetery, the streets were lined with vast crowds of sympathizers, and the police were greeted with cries of "That's your work!" They reached the graveside at about half-past four, with the light already failing in the rain, so that the Rev Stewart Headlam read the burial service by the light of a lantern. "The scene at the grave", Morris wrote, "was the strangest sight I have ever seen, I think It was most impressive to witness, there was to me something awful (I can use no other word) in such a tremendous mass of people, unorganized, unhelped, and so harmless and good-tempered."3 First, Mr Tims, of the London Liberal and Radical Federation, spoke to the crowd Morris followed, speaking with great simplicity and under the stress of strong feeling.

1 *Commonweal*, November 10th, 1888.

2 *Glasier, op cit*, p 190.

3 Mackail, II, p 193.

"There lay a man of no particular party—a man who until a week or two ago was perfectly obscure, and probably was only known to a few Their brother lay there—let them remember for all time this man as their brother and their friend Their friend who lay there had had a hard life and met with a hard death, and if society had been differently constituted from what it was, that man's life might have been a delightful, a beautiful one, and a happy one to him. It was their business to try and make this earth a very beautiful and happy place. They were engaged in a most holy war, trying to prevent their rulers making this great town of London nothing more than a prison. He could not help thinking the immense procession in which they had walked that day would have the effect of teaching a great lesson. He begged them to do their best to preserve order in getting back to their homes, because their enemies would be only too glad to throw a blot upon that most successful celebration, and they should begin to-morrow to organize for the purpose of seeing that such things should not happen again."¹

"He threw his whole soul into his speech", recorded one witness "There was fearful earnestness in his voice when referring to the victim we had just laid to rest. He cried out, 'Let us feel he is our brother.' The ring of brotherly love in it was most affecting."² The London organizer of the Irish National League and Harry Quelch of the S D F followed—the latter forcing his Socialist views a little sharply upon the mourners. The light was growing very dim as the crowd sang Morris's "Death Song" to the music of Malcolm Lowson, and with Walter Crane's design of a mounted policeman attacking the people on the front of the sheet

"We asked them for a life of toilsome earning,
They bade us bide their leisure for our bread,
We craved to speak to tell our woeful learning
We come back speechless, bearing back our dead
*Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day*

"They will not learn, they have no ears to hearken
They turn their faces from the eyes of fate,
Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies that darken
But, lo! this dead man knocking at the gate
*Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day*"³

¹ *Commonweal*, December 24th, 1887

² MS reminiscences of H. A. Barker in the Walthamstow Collection

Quietly the great crowd dispersed from the Cemetery Morris walked back in the rain with the comrades, deeply moved, and musing to himself. "Well, I like ceremony", he finally said.

For many weeks Morris was busy with the Law and Liberty League,¹ and was lecturing by choice upon "Trafalgar Square" in different parts of the country.² He was bitterly attacked in the Press for his part in the Linnell funeral But at the same time he gained, for the first time in his political agitation, real stature and affection in the eyes of the Radical London masses. It was perhaps in these days, more than at any other time, that he laid the basis for the love—almost veneration—in which he was held by great sections of the Labour movement at the time of his death. It is true that he did not regard the Radical-Socialist alliance as anything more than a temporary unity upon a limited issue he does not seem to have thought of attempting to forge a wider political unity upon other issues, although in repeated Notes and articles in the *Commonweal* he addressed the Radicals and showed the way in which Bloody Sunday illustrated the Socialist analysis of the facts of class power In some ways he even regarded the work of the Law and Liberty League as a distraction from the essential

¹ The Law and Liberty League (Organizing Secretary, Annie Besant) set itself the objects of defending the rights of free speech and meeting in every possible way, anticipating in many directions the National Council of Civil Liberties It also sought to organize Vigilance Circles (to take numbers of policemen guilty of acts of violence, report all infringements of liberties, etc) and Ironside Circles, under local "Captains" among whose duties were "To carry out directions as to boycotting, drilling, etc, that may come from headquarters", and "To be willing to face imprisonment or personal injury in carrying out directions" (handbills of L and L League) Both Morris and the Avelings were very active in the work of the League, Morris writing to Glasse (February 10th, 1888) "I suppose you saw that I am on the executive of the L L L & in close alliance with Mrs Besant & Stead In short I have little life now outside the movement—which is as it should be" Engels was delighted at the new development, writing to Mrs Wischnewetzky (February 22nd, 1888) of the "Law and Liberty League—a body gaining ground every day—[which] is the first organization in which Socialist delegates as such are seated at the side of Radical delegates" An ephemeral organization of the same sort, with Socialist and Radical delegates, had existed for a few months at the time of Dod Street

² See Morris to Glasse, March 2nd, 1888 "I don't think the Glasgow people have chosen a good subject who cares about history? I think I shall refuse to give it them I think I might make Trafalgar Square the subject of the lecture at Edinburgh I notice that out of London people are quite ignorant of the subject" (Glasse MSS)

work of the Socialist propaganda.¹ But where the unity existed he valued it—he understood and respected both the motives of his new allies and the limits of his agreement with them—when he acted with the Radicals, or spoke at combined meetings, he respected their prejudices and spoke upon the cause they had in common. He was looked on from all sides—S D F. and Radical alike—as a spokesman and arbiter. By contrast, Hyndman, who had never ceased to wither the Radicals with his scorn, saw the agitation as only one more platform from which to retail the red meat of his own brand of Socialist theory, irrespective of the occasion or the audience. On February 19th, 1888, Morris went down to Pentonville Jail early in the morning to greet John Burns and Cunninghame Graham and other prisoners on their release from their sentences. In the evening he helped to serve tea at a social in their honour, in which the Irish and the Radicals joined. The next evening a great public meeting was held to greet them, with Michael Davitt, the Irish leader, in the Chair, and William O'Brien (the Irish M P whose imprisonment had been the occasion for the calling of the demonstration on November 13th) Annie Besant, John Burns, Cunninghame Graham, W T Stead, Hyndman and Morris as the speakers—a considerable victory, Morris thought, since “it will mean no less than an acknowledgement by the Irish party that they are the allies of the London discontent & Trafalgar Sq.”² The hall was crammed, the audience at the height of excitement and taking their mutual differences in good humour until Hyndman rose. He began by attacking the cowardice of the Liberal party, and the Liberal M Ps for not being present—then suddenly he swung round upon twelve Radical M Ps, who—while certainly not conspicuous for their part in the earlier agitation—had at least made a tardy gesture of solidarity by accepting an invitation to sit on the platform, and—Morris afterwards remarked—“we were therefore prepared to accept their repentance I suppose”.³ “The sight of those twelve Radical M Ps”, Hyndman later wrote,

“who had never done anything for the unemployed nor helped our

¹ See Glasier, *op cit*, p. 190, where Morris writes (December 21st, 1887) “I shall be glad to let the *Pall Mall Gazette* go on its ways now. Ordinary meetings have been somewhat neglected for these bigger jobs.”

² *Letters*, p. 280

³ May Morris, II, p. 268.

fight for free speech in any way, stirred my anger, and turning on them I asked 'What on earth are these men doing here?'¹

And thereupon he began to direct his scorn upon their individual shortcomings, until one of the restive Radicals broke from the audience with a cry of "You infernal firebrand!" and rushed at the platform with the apparent intention of knocking Hyndman down. The meeting broke up in scimmages and disorder, with Morris's speech undelivered, and without even a vote of thanks. Its break-up signalized the end of the unity of Trafalgar Square.

The episode of Bloody Sunday affected Morris's imagination powerfully. It marked also a perceptible change in his outlook and perspectives. "Up to this time", Bax records, "he had more or less believed in the possible success of a revolutionary outbreak on the part of the populace of our great cities." Bax was attending the German Social-Democrats Congress in Zurich at the time.

"He wrote me a letter telling me that he had always recognized the probability of any scratch body of men getting the worst of it in a rough-and-tumble with the police, not to speak of the military, yet he had not realized till that day how soon such a body could be scattered by a comparatively small but well-organized force. When I had come back to London, he vividly described to me how, singly and in twos and threes, his followers began for a few moments to make a show of fight with the police, and how in vain he tried to rally them to effect a determined dash as a united body on Trafalgar Square itself. This incident certainly had a strong effect in making Morris pessimistic as to the success of any popular civil rising under existing circumstances."²

Shaw, also writing after Morris's death, was even more emphatic.

"If the men who had had the presumption to call themselves his 'comrades' and 'brothers' had been in earnest about cleaning and beautifying human society as he was in earnest about it, he would have been justified in believing that there was a great revolutionary force beginning to move in society. Trafalgar Square cured him and many others of that illusion."³

Most of Morris's biographers have accepted the evidence of these two friends, and especially that of Shaw, without question—and even embroidered on it, in the sense that it is suggested that after Bloody Sunday Morris passed out of the revolutionary phase of

¹ Hyndman, *Record of an Adventurous Life*, pp. 323-4.

² Bax, *op cit*, pp. 87-8.

³ Vallance, *op cit*, p. 339.

his political convictions into one of reformism or Utopian idealism

It must be said that both Bax and Shaw misunderstood the effect of Bloody Sunday—and that, in the case of Shaw at least, the misunderstanding was wilful. Shaw was, perhaps, reluctant to admit that it was Bloody Sunday which saw the parting of the political ways between him and Morris. Until this time they had been close colleagues in the movement and, indeed, they remained on friendly terms until Morris's death. Morris had been among the first to recognize the genius in Shaw's early novels.¹ He rejoiced in his company, and the wit with which he scourged their common enemy, the Bourgeois Shaw was—and remained—the most popular outside lecturer at the Hammer-smith Clubroom, and one observer recalled,

“there were few prettier sights than to see the rugged Saxon viking and the daring Celtic sabreur on the same platform. If you imagine a father and son deeply attached to one another—the elder man warmly admiring yet at times questioning the adroit cleverness of his boy, and the younger man eager to suppress himself and his sardonic humour when touched by a genuine regard for the dignity of his sire—you can picture Morris and Shaw together.”²

In the years between 1884 and 1887, Shaw had refused to join either Federation or League, finding various reasons to justify his own intellectual vanity and eclecticism. In October, 1884, he was complaining (justly) of the squabbles in the S.D.F. and Hyndman's lack of educational policy and preference for plying the membership “with stimulants” (see p. 401).

“This is what has kept me off, and finally determined me not to join the Fed. The one or two per cent of the members who understand anything are Collectivists, and I am at heart an Anarchist and Free Competition man, opposed to the present system more because I believe it to be the reverse of free than because I believe it to be in itself more mischievous than any other principle . . .”³

Later, he declared that he had remained uncommitted because he

¹ See G. B. Shaw, “William Morris as I Knew Him”, Preface to *May Morris*, II, p. xii.

² *Labour Leader*, October 10th, 1896.

³ G. B. Shaw to Andreas Scheu, October 26th, 1884, Scheu Correspondence, *Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.*

felt more at home among the middle-class milieu of the Fabians¹ His failure to throw in his lot with the League in 1885, and subsequent failures to support it on important occasions,² must have been a disappointment to Morris Yet it should not be supposed that Shaw's services to the movement at this time were unimportant Apart from his important fact-finding work with the Fabian Society, he addressed hundreds of meetings for the S D F, League, Radical Clubs and other bodies, and sometimes took part in the League's open-air propaganda William Morris was the one man whom Shaw in his maturity respected without reserve, and to the end of his life he always wrote of Morris with quite unusual warmth and humility Morris's influence upon him was perhaps the most positive and enduring of any other influence in his adult life

It was Shaw, however, and not Morris, who thought himself cured of "illusions" by Bloody Sunday, and his comments upon Morris's reactions are clouded by the attempt to justify his own The two men had marched in the column together, but had separated shortly before the attack of the police A few days later Shaw sent his comments to Morris

"The women were much in the way The police charged us the moment they saw Mrs Taylor But you should have seen that high-hearted host run Running hardly expresses our collective action We *skedaddled*, and never drew rein until we were safe on Hampstead Heath or thereabouts Tarleton found me paralysed with terror and brought me on to the Square, the police kindly letting me through in consideration of my genteel appearance On the whole, I think it was the most abjectly disgraceful defeat ever suffered by a band of heroes outnumbering their foes a 1,000 to 1 "

Shaw next objected to an article in *Commonweal* by Sparling (who now—married to May—was Morris's son-in-law)—not because it was revolutionary, but because if it got him into gaol it would do no good. Since Sparling's article was a fairly inoffensive parable, Shaw was probably criticizing in a roundabout way Morris's own comments in his article, "London in a State of Seige" He continued

¹ Fabian Tract, No 41 (1892), pp 9-10

² For example, the League wished him to be their protagonist in debate with Bradlaugh, but Shaw made so many difficulties about the wording of the resolution to be debated that it was impossible to continue

"I object to a defiant policy altogether at present. If we persist in it, we shall be eaten bit by bit like an artichoke. They will provoke, we will defy, they will punish. I do not see the wisdom of that until we are at least strong enough to resist 20 policemen with the help of Heaven and Mrs Taylor.

"I wish generally that our journals would keep their tempers. If Stead had not forced us to march on the Square a week too soon by his 'Not one Sunday must be allowed to pass' nonsense, we should have been there now. It all comes from people trying to live down ['up' deleted] to fiction instead of up to facts."¹

Five years later it was Shaw, once again, who looked back on this "defeat" as a turning-point for British Socialism.

"Insurrectionism, after a two year's innings, vanished from the field. In the middle of the revengeful growling over the defeat at the Square, trade revived, the unemployed were absorbed; the *Star* newspaper [which the Fabians for a brief season "captured"] appeared to let in light and let off steam. In short, the way was clear at last for Fabianism."²

In his most famous Fabian essay (written in September, 1888) he paid his parting tribute to the views of Morris, declaring his sympathy for those "enthusiasts" who refused to believe in the slow and cowardly course of winning Socialism through vestries and Parliament, and who still aimed at establishing the new society with one revolutionary stroke. The course he chose—he argued—was less heroic, but was inevitable. Such an "army of light" as Morris and the revolutionary Socialists envisaged "is no more to be gathered from the human product of nineteenth-century civilization than grapes are to be gathered from thistles." ³ From the outset Shaw's fine intellectual fury against capitalism had been blunted by his lack of faith in the conscious, revolutionary efforts of the proletariat. He saw the workers (as he was to describe them in *Major Barbara*) as corrupted and demoralized by capitalism. Bloody Sunday he took as confirmation of his disillusion. Henceforward the band of Fabian intellectuals were to plan to fool the people into Socialism by other means, and all but Shaw and the Webbs were to forget their Socialist faith on the way.

¹ Brit Mus Add MSS 45345

² Fabian Tract No 41

³ *Fabian Essays* (1889), p 201. For an excellent discussion of Shaw, Morris, and Bloody Sunday, see Alick West, *A Good Man Fallen Among Fabians*, pp 34-47, esp pp 40-1.

Morris knew all about Fabianism—that chip off the old Liberal block. He had thought it all out for himself several years before Shaw had started reading Henry George—in the days of the old National Liberal League—and he had become a Socialist because he did not like the thought. He knew, and publicly acknowledged, that “in economics Shaw is my master”,¹ but he also knew that Fabianism led in the end to “deadlock” and that it bred the kind of moral evasions and class attitudes which he abhorred. Morris’s reactions, both at the time of Bloody Sunday and in the months that followed, had nothing in common with those of Shaw. In what sense, then, did the episode mark a change in his outlook?

Trafalgar Square confirmed for Morris the train of thought which he had first stated in his article, “Facing the Worst of It”, at the beginning of the year. Throughout 1887 he had been abandoning his hopes of a speedy revolution, after 1887, to all intents and purposes, he had abandoned any hope of seeing Socialism in his own lifetime. Bloody Sunday showed him not so much the weakness of the people as the true face of reaction. He saw not only the mounted police and the batons, he also saw the complicity of almost the entire capitalist Press, the treachery of the professed fighters for freedom in Parliament and public life. He saw the need not only for organization, but for a vast increase in Socialist understanding on the part of the people, if a revolutionary movement were to stand any chance of success. Moreover, he saw the effect upon Shaw and others of his comrades of the “defeat”: he saw the turn towards Fabianism and gradualism, the spread of disillusion in revolutionary organization and tactics. He foresaw the whole story ahead of him, of blind alleys, betrayals and failure. In so far as this foresight damped his earlier optimism, and even made him feel less urgency in his own part in the propaganda, Shaw and Bax were right.

But this implied not a modification of his theory, but a change in his perspectives. There is no need to speculate about the effect upon him of his experiences during these months. They are written into every page of the remarkable chapter of *News from Nowhere*, “How the Change Came”. They are implicit in the date suggested for the beginning of the Revolution—1952—a

¹ May Morris, II, p. xx.

date which many of his comrades thought unduly pessimistic and which he himself would never have conceived in 1885. The first events of the Revolution are drawn from the main tendencies and events of November, 1887: the vacillating Government, the clever young General (Sir Charles Warren), the betrayal of the Press (worst of all in the "Liberal" *Daily News*), the horror of the people and their counter-demonstrations (Innell's funeral), the excitement of the young reactionaries who at last had something to do when the General Strike was proclaimed (comparable to the reactions of the young aristocrats enrolled as special constables after Bloody Sunday). The events take a different pattern in 1952 because the workers are more determined, better organized in their Federation of labour (despite repeated corruption of its leadership by opportunists and time-servers), and because there are younger determined Socialist cadres at work among the rank-and-file organizations of the masses, who in the struggle gain in ability and influence. After 1887 Morris more and more saw his work in this long-term perspective: whatever vagaries the movement as a whole might pass through, he saw the need for the establishment of a school of Socialist theory which would survive the failures and errors of opportunism. In the year before his death he reaffirmed once more his conviction that sooner or later the moment when the classes met each other face to face must come.

"I have thought the matter up and down and in and out, and I cannot for the life of me see how the great change which we long for can come otherwise than by disturbance and suffering of some kind. Can we escape that? I fear not. We are living in an epoch when there is combat between commercialism, or the system of reckless waste, and communism, or the system of neighbourly common sense. Can that combat be fought out without loss and suffering? Plainly speaking I *know* that it cannot."¹

The two policies of reaction Morris had characterized more than once as those of Force and Fraud. On Bloody Sunday the ruling class brandished the sword of Force, and then replaced it decorously in its sheath of Fraud. And Morris, seeing and understanding the power of both, knew that only a miracle could bring Socialism to Britain during his lifetime.

¹ "What We Have to Look For" (March 30th, 1895), Brit Mus Add MSS 45334

IX *Exit the Bloomsbury Branch*

"I am not in a good temper with myself", Morris wrote to "Georgie" Burne-Jones in March, 1888

"I cannot shake off the feeling that I might have done much more in these recent matters than I have, though I really don't know what I could have done but I feel beaten and humbled Yet one ought not to be down in the mouth about matters, for I certainly never thought that things would have gone on so fast as they have in the last three years, only, again, as opinion spreads, organization does not spread with it. ."¹

Morris could never fool himself for long Now he was coming to a realization that the League had little future as a mass Socialist organization, and that he himself had failed as a propagandist leader Somehow his organization and his ideas were being left outside the general line of advance of the broader movement During the early months of 1888 he did not slacken in the least in his propaganda work in March he paid a visit to Scotland, touring some of the new centres which had been opened by Mahon, encouraging the comrades and leaving them in good heart, the *Commonweal* now, more than ever, was filled with contributions from his pen—indeed, was overstocked with his lectures and political notes But gradually some of his older interests were coming to reclaim more of his attention—the Anti-Scrape, preparations for the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition, the Firm, and the first of his prose romances—*The House of the Wolfings*. The incessant faction fights and squabbles among his comrades were beginning to wear down his patience ²

Early in 1888, when the reverberations of Bloody Sunday had scarcely died away, dissension broke out once again in the League The Bloomsbury Branch, which included Edward and Eleanor Aveling, A K Donald, the two Binnings and most of the active London "parliamentary" Leaguers, had continued an

¹ *Letters*, p 280

² See letter to an unknown correspondent (*Letters*, p 274) probably written shortly after the Annual Conference "I am trying to get the League to make peace with each other and hold together for another year It is a tough job, something like the worst kind of pig-driving, I should think It is so bewilderingly irritating to see perfectly honest men, very enthusiastic, and not at all self-seeking, and less stupid than most people, squabble so "

active and semi-independent existence. It had played an important part in the agitation among the Radical Clubs after Bloody Sunday and had greatly increased its membership during the year. In April, 1888, it had united with the local S D F to run two candidates for the Board of Guardians elections. There had been one or two minor quarrels between the two sections but the angry faction fights of the previous year had died down. They revived when the branch put down a resolution for the Fourth Annual Conference.

"That the Conference take measures to call a meeting of all Socialist Bodies to endeavour to arrive at a scheme for the federation of the various Socialist organizations "

Morris thought the resolution to be "nonsense"—a mere symptom of faction.¹ In the 1890s he was to change his mind on this question. But in 1888 he thought that unity was valuable only on specific issues and he read the resolution as implying (in effect) the merging of the League once more in the S D F. Further resolutions from the Bloomsbury Branch raised once again the issue of parliamentary and municipal electioneering, and attempted to establish the principle of a National, rather than a London, Council for the League—a proposal resisted by the majority on the grounds of impracticability and expense.²

In general, the dispute followed the same lines as in 1887. Once again the parliamentarians failed either to raise the quarrel to a serious theoretical level, or to find common cause with Morris and his group against the increasing Anarchist influence. This was the more serious in that the Anarchists, who in 1887 had represented a sentiment rather than a party, had now become an effective, organized and coherent group.

It was clear as early as 1885 that the errors of the "Lefts" were breeding tendencies towards Anarchism within the League. But the declared Anarchists—few in numbers and mostly foreign

¹ See account in *Glazier*, *op cit*, p. 47.

² Morris explained his view of this matter on one of the rare occasions when he was stung to reply in *Commonweal* to a jibe in *Justice*. "While our Council sits in London branches in various parts of Britain cannot possibly send up one of their members to sit on the Council once a week. A real delegate Council would be impossible under such conditions, and a bogus one would not be desired by a body like the Socialist League, which has always shown a very laudable objection to 'bossing' " (*Commonweal*, June 18th, 1887).

refugees of Johann Most's old circle—had been scattered either in tiny intransigent organizations of their own, like the "Autonomie Group", or—like Mrs Wilson and her small following in the Fabian Society—within other Socialist bodies Prince Kropotkin's arrival in England in the spring of 1886 resulted in the formation of a small "Freedom Group", publishing its own monthly paper (*Freedom*) which was sold at open-air meetings, alongside *Commonweal* by members of League branches in London, Glasgow and Norwich Throughout 1887 Kropotkin's influence gained ground within the League To the Leftists thirsting for the revolution Kropotkin's was a name to conjure with—Scientist and Adventurer, "Apostle of Revolutionary Socialism" "The life of this remarkable man is itself a prophecy of a new and nobler civilization", declared a handbill of the Glasgow Branch.

"PRINCE KROPOTKIN has stepped down from his place beside the imperial throne to fraternise with the poor and the oppressed He has faced imprisonment and death in behalf of the cause of the people After escaping by a remarkable stratagem from a Russian Prison he came to Western Europe to associate himself with the struggle of the workers In 1882 he was thrown into a French prison Whilst in prison, Prince Kropotkin,—whose scientific and literary attainments are as remarkable as his humane sympathies,—occupied himself in writing scientific and literary essays"

The tone of the handbill is worth noting—for it was Kropotkin's romantic history even more than his writings which brought him support within the League. His was a name which could fill any hall. His great reputation, pleasant manners, and the note of high-toned idealism which was the main message of his *Appeal to the Young*, were exactly calculated to appeal to those earnest and self-educated comrades who had come to Socialism by way of Ruskin's *Munera Pulveris* and Morris's Lectures on Art, or who had been nurtured on the ethical idealism of the militant Secularists and where the infantile bluster of the "Autonomie Group" had repelled them, they now found an easier path leading them to the same political wilderness

The decisive factor in turning the League in an Anarchist direction, however, was not Kropotkin's teaching but the great and inspiring example of the Chicago Anarchists, whose brutal murder at the hands of "Law and Order" on the eve of Bloody

Sunday had both shocked and inspired Socialists of every opinion. For months the shameful proceedings of a brutal and perjured "justice" had dragged themselves out before the horror-struck Leaguers—seeming to their eyes as if they were a grotesque magnification of the petty perjuries and brutalities familiar to them in the British courts. Early in 1887 Henry Charles, one of the "Lefts" on the League Council, had emigrated to the United States. He quickly familiarized himself with the American Labour Movement, and kept the League informed, month by month, with letters to the *Commonweal* of the course of events. Henry Charles was an exceptionally gifted correspondent and his forthright accounts rose at times to high nobility of feeling.

The cause of the Chicago Anarchists was the cause of international Socialism. It is worth recalling the circumstances of their murder, since it played an important part in establishing the pattern of legal terror which—by way of Joe Hill, Sacco and Vanzetti, and the Rosenbergs—has been used as a major weapon of the American capitalist class against the American people. It exhibited to the full what William Morris termed "that spirit of cold cruelty, heartless and careless at once, which is one of the most noticeable characteristics of American commercialism".¹ The case arose directly out of the struggles for the Eight-hour Day in America in 1884 and 1885, culminating in the great strikes of May 1st, 1886, whose cockpit was Chicago. The Chicago Anarchist section gave their support to the strike movement. On May 3rd, 1886, a demonstration of strikers was fired on by the police, leaving six dead and many wounded. On the next day a mass protest meeting was held in the Haymarket, to which Anarchist speakers were invited. The meeting was unprohibited and peaceful, but towards its close was once again attacked by a large armed formation of police. A bomb was thrown by an unknown hand, killing a policeman and wounding others, and the police then fired indiscriminately into the dispersing crowd. After scores of arrests the seven Anarchists—editors, agitators and trade unionists—were selected as judicial victims. No serious attempt was made to implicate them in the actual bomb-throwing—this would have been impossible, since at least one of the victims was not even present at the Haymarket meeting. The aims of the

¹ *Commonweal*, September 24th, 1887

prosecution were quite simply this by selecting as victims those with extreme opinions they hoped at one and the same time to terrorize the Chicago workers, to split the Socialist movement itself, to discredit the Eight Hours' Movement, and to intimidate all Socialist and progressive opinion. Henry George¹ and Terence Powderley, the Grand Panjandrum of the Knights of Labour, by disowning the Anarchist's cause, helped on the work of the hangman Johann Most, by choosing this moment for publishing a manual of terrorism, provided ammunition in the American and British capitalist Press against his own party. Most's book was commonly used as conclusive proof of the guilt of the Chicago seven. "That is exactly the spirit of the Chicago trial", commented Morris. "One man has written a book, so seven others are to be hanged for it."² He did not allow the Radicals to get away without learning the lesson of these events.

"a country with universal suffrage, no king, no House of Lords, no privilege as you fondly think, only a little standing army, chiefly used for the murder of red-skins, a democracy after your model, and with all that a society corrupt to the core, and at this moment engaged in suppressing freedom with just the same reckless brutality and blind ignorance as the Czar of all the Russias uses."³

The proceedings were dramatic, brutal and prolonged—appeal after appeal failing to meet with a serious hearing. Albert Parsons, a leader with a notable record in the democratic and Socialist movement, returned voluntarily from a safe place of refuge to take his seat in the dock beside his other comrades. The appeals and statements of the accused were remarkable for their undocrinaire tone and noble expression of the broad ideals of international Socialism. Accounts appeared in the *Commonweal* of the proud bearing in prison of the comrades and the heroic efforts, in their defence of Mrs. Parsons and the other relatives. The cowardly complicity of the British Press—which rarely recognizes the justice of such causes until the victims are safely dead—gave to the events of Bloody Sunday a sombre prophetic colouring.

¹ See Morris's comment (*Commonweal*, November 12th, 1887) on the conduct of Henry George. "Henry George approves of this murder, do not let anybody waste many words to qualify this wretch's conduct. One word will include all the rest—TRAITOR!"

² *Commonweal*, October 22nd, 1887.

³ "Whigs, Democrats and Socialists" (*Signs of Change*, 1888, pp. 42-3).

The execution itself, on November 11th, 1887, was a climax of horror. Of the five condemned to die, one, Louis Lingg, took his own life with a smuggled stick of dynamite "Say, fix that — up in shape so that he can get the rope to-morrow", shouted one police sergeant in the jail while the surgeon gave anaesthetics to Lingg in his dying agonies. Every refinement of torment and indignity was employed. Mrs. Parsons was refused permission to visit her husband on the eve of execution, and at the time of the actual event she was locked in the jail and stripped naked before the police on the pretext of searching for bombs. The strangulation of Engel, Fischer, Parsons, and Spies, witnessed by 250 reporters and members of the Chicago respectability, and reported in detail in the Press, took fourteen minutes before it was accomplished.

But if the conduct of the capitalist authorities was such as to bring shame on the human race, the conduct of the condemned men brought pride to Socialists of every persuasion. "Pray for yourself, you need it more than I", Spies, who had married while in jail, declared to the prison chaplain. Parsons sang out loud and true the verses of *Annie Laurie* as a last farewell to his wife

"Maxwelton braes are bonnie, where early fa's the dew,
And it's there that Annie Laurie gi'ed me her promise true,
Gi'ed me her promise true,
Which ne'er forgot will be,
And for bonnie Annie Laurie I'd lay me down and die "

"Long live Anarchism", Engel shouted while standing on the trap, and Fischer added. "This is the happiest moment of my life." And the last words of August Spies have echoed ever since in history. "There will come a time when our silence will be more powerful than the voices they are strangling to death now."

It is no cause for wonder that this heroic example should have inclined many members of the Socialist League to listen with respect to the Anarchist case—and even to look with sympathy upon acts of terrorism and political assassination on the continent of Europe. From the time of the execution of the Chicago Anarchists, the small Anarchist movement in Britain, took on for several years a more determined and serious character. A pamphlet on the trial was widely sold by the Leaguers and biographies of the martyrs were published in *Commonweal*. The influence of

their example did not reach its climax until November, 1888, when Lucy Parsons, the heroic widow—a woman of American-Indian origin, of striking beauty, and a moving speaker—addressed a series of commemorative meetings in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Ipswich and Norwich, largely organized by the League.¹ But early in 1888 it is possible to identify a declared Anarchist group among the leadership of the League, and distinct from the old “Leftists”, such as Joseph Lane, Frank Kitz and Sam Mainwaring. Most prominent amongst this group were Charles Mowbray, the London tailoring worker who had come into prominence after receiving a vindictive sentence of nine months’ hard labour after addressing a meeting of Norwich unemployed who had later sacked a butcher’s shop,² “Fred Charles” (F C Slaughter), also of Norwich, David J Nicoll, a young man with a very small independent income—a highly-strung and unstable intellectual, who gave up most of his time to the propaganda of the London League, and helped to compile

¹ A letter from F Charles in Mr J F Horrabin’s collection shows that the League was the organizer of Mrs Parsons’s visit. Unfortunately, the occasion was marred by another wrangle among the Socialists. The League took the initiative in trying to organize joint commemorative meetings for the Chicago Anarchists and the victims of Bloody Sunday. The S D F declined to take part officially, but John Burns, Fred Lessner (on behalf of the German Marxists), Cunningham Graham, together with Kropotkin and other Anarchists, spoke at the main meeting. Annie Besant was the worst offender, making a public attack on the demonstrations in the *Link* but undoubtedly the Anarchists within and without the League, who wished to make as much capital as possible from Mrs Parsons’s visit, must bear some of the blame.

² J L Mahon to Council, S L, January 17th, 1887, declares that the unemployed demonstration was not organized by the Norwich League, but Mowbray and Henderson had been invited to speak by the unemployed. While some of the speeches were “rather wild and ill-judged”, it was the attitude of the City authorities in refusing to consider the demands of the unemployed which provoked the riots. MS Notes on the History of the Norwich League declare “The insulting tone of the Mayor, the unconcealed feeling of contempt for their fellows on the part of the aldermen and respectable councillors—angered the crowd.” The incident became known as the “Battle of Ham Run”, because the produce of a sacked butcher’s shop was handed from one to another over the heads of the crowd. After the arrest of Mowbray and Henderson, support in Norwich for the League grew to its height, Mahon writing to the Council of a meeting 5,000 strong in the market. “I never saw so much enthusiasm at an open-air meeting in a provincial town before.” Fred Henderson was sentenced to four months for his part in addressing the crowd (S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist, Reg Groves, op cit, p 100, and personal recollections of Mr Fred Henderson).

an excellent weekly "Revolutionary Calendar" for the *Commonweal*, and among other Londoners, H Davis, Tom Cantwell and J Tochatti, a tailoring worker and very active propagandist in the Hammersmith Branch

The real victory in the League's Fourth Annual Conference was won, not by Morris and the anti-parliamentarians, but by this small Anarchist section. Morris, in his alarm at the vision of reformism, overbalanced backwards into their arms "It is absolutely necessary that you should send delegates, as the division may be somewhat close . . .", he wrote at the end of April to Glasier. On May 8th he wrote again

"Nothing less is at stake than the existence of the League As for the Bloomsbury people they must go and what does it matter to them? if they drive us out, they cannot carry on, as all the money is on our side they had much better join the S D F at once for they will have to do it later on What a curse the whole silly business is!"¹

A week later he was writing in even deeper depression

"The engagement will be hot there was a preliminary skirmish last night in which both sides showed unexampled stupidity I am heartily sick of the job, but we must go through with it Donald & Co are determined to break up the League if they can"²

If there were intrigues and bad blood in 1887, feelings were even more embittered in 1888 Circulars were issued by the rival factions³ Even Morris was drawn under the shadow of corruption.⁴

¹ Glasier MSS, May 8th, 1888

² *Letters*, p 291

³ At least two handbills were issued from the anti-parliamentary side, "To the Members of the Socialist League" the first signed by J Lane and F Charles, and described in note 2, p 536 the second by "ALL the members Hackney Branch" and accusing the Bloomsbury Branch of swelling their membership by recruiting members of the S D F who then held a joint membership of both bodies From the parliamentary side there appeared a cartoon, showing the massed membership of the Bloomsbury Branch and the Hoxton L E L stretching into the far distance (with a slogan "Parliament Rampant") and four or five individuals holding the banners of the Stamford Hill, North London, Clerkenwell, Fulham, and Hammersmith, Marylebone, and "Colney Hatch" Branches, headed by a dismal caricature of Morris as a sandwichman placarded with a sentence from the League's Manifesto "No number of mere administrative changes until the workers are in possession of all political power would make any real approach to Socialism" The cartoon is entitled "Chorus of Bogus Branches and Packed Conference, 'Let's Chuck 'em Out'"

⁴ Morris on this occasion laid himself open to the charge that he had directly used his wealth to influence the decision Writing to Glasier, January 28th,

On the eve of the Conference, Glasier, who was staying with Morris at Hammersmith, found him looking forward to the proceedings "without anger, but with a sense of depression" The activities of the Bloomsbury Branch he regarded as "a sheer faction racket" ¹ Donald and his friends had clearly forfeited all Morris's respect, and he doubted not their policy so much as their intentions and motives On the following day (May 20th) discussion continued for nearly twelve hours At the end of the day the Bloomsbury resolutions were all rejected by large majorities, the Conference adopting amendments from the Hammersmith Branch which urged "cordial co-operation" (as opposed to "formal federation") with other Socialist bodies, and which evaded the old issue of parliamentary action Morris then rose "and made a deeply earnest appeal for unity and good-will".² But the split was beyond healing The parliamentarians refused once again to stand for election to the Council and a Council was appointed which showed a clear majority of "Leftists" (including Kitz, Lane, Mainwaring, Sparling, Philip Webb³ and Morris himself), with two of the pronounced Anarchist wing—Tochatti

1888, he reproved the Glasgow Branch for falling into arrears with their capitation fee (1s per member to the Centre) once again, commenting that it "looks bad" to "people who don't know you, and who sometimes belong to what was the other faction in the League" Shortly before the Conference (on May 8th, 1888) he was writing to Glasier again "I don't see any way out of it but the Branch must pay or our Bloomsbury friends will certainly Challenge its delegates out If I can do anything in the way of money matters that is not bribery and corruption I shall be very pleased to help I would lend you the money, e g" On May 10th, he wrote, "You are of course entitled to send two delegates for your 78 members", and on May 15th, "In any case let the Branch send their delegates and flatly if the cash is scarce I will pay you & you can repay me at leisure" (Glasier MSS and *Letters*, p 291) Since there is no evidence that Morris took equal pains to ensure the attendance of the Leeds delegate (a parliamentary branch unrepresented at the Conference), he could be accused of buying votes for his own side It is not clear whether his offer was accepted The Agenda paper for the Conference of the Glasgow Branch is in Mr J F Horrabin's collection, and it shows a membership of only fifty-three, with a MS note "Reduced to this figure by cutting off names of delinquents—as the Council have insisted on full capitation fee"

¹ Glasier, *op cit*, pp 47 ff

² Glasier, *op cit*, p 50, and *Report of the Fourth Annual Conference of the Socialist League*, *passim*

³ Philip Webb was now Treasurer of the League, but was inactive during much of 1887-8 owing to illness

and Charles Morris seconded a resolution recommending the Council "to take steps to reconcile or, if necessary, exclude the Bloomsbury Branch from the League" "The damned business is over at least for another year", Morris said, as he and Glasier went back on the bus to Hammersmith. But he was by no means satisfied with the outcome "We have got rid of the parliamentarians, and now our anarchist friends will want to drive the team. However, we have the Council and the *Commonweal* safe with us for at least a twelve-month, and that is something to be thankful for"¹ A week later he wrote to Glasier "We yesterday *suspended* (not dissolved) the BL[oomsbury] B[ranch] until they should withdraw their stupid defiance. I don't want to dissolve them if they would give us some pledge of peace"² Charges against the branch, tabled by Mainwaring, included the fact that some members held joint membership of the S.D.F., and that Mahon (still a member of the branch) had conducted a "largely political" propaganda in the North of England, and had acted as Election Agent for Keir Hardie in Mid-Lanark. But it was a melancholy reflection upon the level which the dispute had now reached that the actual occasion of the branch's suspension lay not in any question of principle, but in the fact that its members had "sold publicly in the streets" an "illustrated squib" lampooning Morris and his following.³

The breach was final, and the independent Bloomsbury Socialist Society was formed. A few days later, the Labour Emancipation League (Hoxton) withdrew its affiliation, adopting the first three points of the platform which Mahon had taken for the North of England Socialist Federation⁴ (see p. 552). On June 9th, 1888, the *Commonweal* published a new policy statement of the League's Council, drafted by Morris, which reaffirmed the League's rejection of parliamentary action, and declared once

¹ Glasier, *op cit*, p. 122.

² Glasier MSS, May 29th, 1888.

³ For the Squib, see note ³, p. 596, above. The MS of Mainwaring's motion in the Nettlau Collection, and reference to it in the Council's *Weekly Letter to Branches*, May 14th, 1888, also extract from the Minutes of the Council, June 4th, 1888, suspending the Bloomsbury Branch on account of "this insult to the League" (*Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.*)

⁴ Handbill, *To the Members of the Socialist League*, etc., signed by C. J. Young, Secretary, Hoxton L.E.L., June 23rd, 1888. The handbill states that the L.E.L. was originally founded in 1878.

again that "the education of the vague discontent of the workers into a definite aim, is the chief business of the Socialist League"

It was an inglorious conclusion to a dispute which was of serious importance to the British labour movement Morris in the previous twelve months—despite his contact with the Radical masses in the agitation for the right of public meeting—had fallen even further out of touch with working-class opinion Keir Hardie's election fight at Mid-Lanark was scarcely allowed to soil the pure pages of *Commonweal*.¹ Throughout the dispute Morris had persisted in equating parliamentary action with the road of opportunism, careerism and political corruption Many times after the break with his old comrades he felt doubts as to the wisdom of his own position At the end of July, 1888, he expressed them to "Georgie" Burne-Jones

"I am a little dissatisfied over our movement in all directions Perhaps we Leaguers have been somewhat too stiff in our refusal of compromise I have always felt that it was rather a matter of temperament than of principle, that some transition period was of course inevitable, I mean a transition involving State Socialism and pretty stiff at that, and towards this State Socialism things are certainly tending, and swiftly too But then in all the wearisome shilly-shally of parliamentary politics I should be absolutely useless and the immediate end to be gained, the pushing things a trifle nearer to State Socialism, which when realized seems to me but a dull goal—all this quite sickens me Preaching the ideal is surely always necessary Yet on the other hand I sometimes vex myself by thinking that perhaps I am not doing the most I can merely for the sake of a piece of 'preciousness' "²

Meanwhile, if any of the Anarchists within the League had hoped to find a convert in Morris for their last redoubt of individualism, they would have been swiftly disillusioned if they had glanced over his shoulder in his leisure moments for they would have found him busy on the manuscript of *The House of the Wolfings*, written "to illustrate the melting of the individual into

¹ Almost the only reference to this famous election fight in Morris's correspondence is in a letter to his daughter May, March 26th, 1888, referring to Mahon "He is on some electioneering job or trying to be for a candidate (labour) who is going to contest Mid-Lanark" (Brit Mus Add MSS 45341) For a good account of the circumstances of the Mid-Lanark election, see H M Pelling, *op cit*, pp 68-73

² *Letters*, p 291.

the society of the tribes"—and in its pages a rediscovery of that social sense which Victorian "self-help" had brought near to extinction everywhere except in the centres of working-class life.

For five years William Morris had been in the very forefront of the Socialist propaganda in England—setting the fire aflame in new centres, patiently explaining this or that point of theory, encouraging the doubters, putting himself in the van of scores of actions, bringing his own special qualities of vision and enthusiasm to the new movement, spending his own energies without thought. The last two years, in particular, had seen an unending series of committees, lectures, articles and editorial work, open-air meetings and correspondence, which he had undertaken without complaint. Was it all to end in a faction-fight within his own party, and alongside it the birth of a new movement, Socialist in name but Radical and opportunist in reality? Whatever he may have said, by way of encouragement to his comrades, by the summer of 1888 Morris knew that somehow he and the pioneers had failed in their aim of building a revolutionary party. And from that time onward he looked increasingly across the intervening years to the future in which he never lost confidence.