

# *'Don't be a Soldier!'*

**THE RADICAL ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT  
IN NORTH LONDON 1914-1918**

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I have included all major references in the footnotes to the main text; however I would like to make a special reference to the files of the *Islington Gazette* and the *Islington and Holloway Press* which provided essential background information. I would also like to thank all those librarians who have been continually helpful, in particular those at the reference section of Islington Central Library, Marx Memorial Library and the National Museum of Labour History. Last but not least I would like to thank Stuart Hathaway and Liz Willis for reading this text, correcting my abominable syntax, grammar and spelling, and for making numerous other valuable suggestions.

As far as I am concerned this text is simply a first shot at the subject; I

would consequently be very interested to hear from readers who have criticisms, corrections or additional information. I am engaged in a long term project to write the history of Islington's socialist and radical movement and I hope that anyone who knows the whereabouts of early documentation, minute books and similar material will get in touch with me.

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## *Introduction*

When I started to write this text I thought it would be a simple job of collating documentary material which I have been collecting for a number of years. I then managed to track down some survivors from those tumultuous times and the further I got into interviewing them the more I realised how difficult it is to do full justice to the tangle of personal and political relationships which constituted the socialist and anti-war movement in North London during the 1914–1918 war. On further reflection it occurred to me that this complexity is common to all real social movements past and present, and that if this text, warts and all, reflects that richness, it could contribute not only to an understanding of the past but even of the world of today.

Much of available labour and socialist history is about institutions — parties, trade unions and similar organisations, on the anatomy rather than the physiology of the movement; while another substantial chunk is about individuals — usually those who have reached some sort of prominence. Both of these approaches can be valuable but they do not usually help us understand the confused matrix of the grass roots movements from which these individuals and organisations emerged, or how they articulated together. At worst much of what has passed for labour/socialist history — particularly of the twentieth century — is little more than retrospective justification, a hunt for apostolic or demonic successions and the legitimisation of this or that organisation or ideology, rather than an attempt to describe the rich and fertile contradictions of the movement as it was, and for that matter still is.

The struggle against the 1914–1918 war is often seen in a partial way, as being embodied in either the established socialist parties or in the pacifist movement. I hope that this text will show that the reality was much more substantial, complex and fruitful. What is clear — certainly in London and I suspect nationally too — was that the main origin of the radical anti-war movement was not in the established socialist groups, or among middle-class pacifists, although both these currents made a contribution (and were themselves profoundly affected by the heat of the struggle); rather it lay in the ‘rebel’ milieu which had existed before the war — the syndicalist and industrial unionist movements

within industry, the radical wing of the women's movement and the wide range of networks and organisations which by and large were very critical of the established labour movement.

As the war progressed and its true horror in terms of carnage on the battlefield and deprivation at home became apparent, the courageous stand taken by relatively few at its start began to strike a deep chord among the working class. It was this wider movement which in its turn became the basis of the massive wave of industrial and social unrest which shook British society to its foundations in the first years of peace. This text is an attempt to document this process on a local basis.

What I have tried to do is to show the whole matrix of the radical anti-war movement, its roots in the past, its political interconnections, and its influence on the future. One of the methods which I have used to illustrate this complex of relationships has been to recover a wide range of biographical notes about participants. Most of these are printed as footnotes, but taken collectively they are an essential component of my main theme. The individuals I have been able to describe are not just interesting exhibits; they were active parts of a living movement, a political ecology. For each one detailed here, there were dozens of other contributors to the struggle about whom I have been unable to retrieve information.

This text grew out of work I have been doing for a number of years on the socialist and working-class movement in Islington from the 1850s until 1939. It necessarily bears the imprint of my own local chauvinism — although I am now living in exile — and it deals only superficially with events in other parts of North London except where they are directly relevant to my main themes. It should be remembered that while North London was without doubt a major centre of the anti-war struggle, events there can be closely paralleled in many other places.

This book is dedicated to those thousands of ordinary men and women who fought against the 1914–1918 holocaust and who, without a thought for their own future prospects, made enormous sacrifices for what they knew was right.

## 1. *Prelude: The Boer War and the Crisis of Socialism*

For socialists the Boer War of 1899–1902 was a prefiguration of their experiences in the First World War, and in many ways the similarities are quite marked. Jingoism had been growing for years, imperialism was at its height, the ‘rush for Africa’ — of which the Boer War was the culmination — all had contributed to a climate of the most extreme chauvinism.

War finally came on October 9th, 1899; on October 22nd, the local socialist movement had its first test, when an anti-War meeting at Newington Green Road was broken up by a mob singing ‘Rule Britannia’ and ‘We are Soldiers of the Queen’. The only arrest was the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) speaker Percy Kebab, a 21-year-old clerk.

But the meetings, and the attacks, continued. On March 5th, 1900, a ‘pro-Boer’ meeting at Highbury Corner was attacked by a mob which had gathered in response to leaflets calling on ‘all loyal Englishmen’ to turn up and oppose it. On March 11th and 19th there were further socialist meetings at the same venue, both of which were broken up by the police after there had been serious fighting. It was probably one of these meetings which is described in W. S. Cluse’s entry in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*:<sup>1</sup>

Will Cluse with other socialists was on one occasion holding a meeting at Highbury Corner, and the crowd were becoming hostile. The socialists decided it was time to go, if they wanted to escape manhandling. Making a sudden rush, they boarded a horse-bus at the junction of Holloway Road and Upper Street, with the crowd at their heels. They climbed the steep ladder to the top deck, and kept their opponents at bay by stamping on their fingers as they reached the top rung. Finally they were able to put themselves into protective custody at the police station in Upper Street.

T. A. Jackson, in his autobiography *Solo Trumpet*, described another of this series of Highbury Corner meetings which had a rather different outcome:

The Tories resolved to smash the meeting up; the radicals took the precaution of mobilising the gymnasium class of the Mildmay Radical Club [Newington Green] to act as ‘stewards’. Quite a pretty battle was in progress when the



issue was decided by the local SDF, who when the fight started were pitched nearby. Abandoning their own meeting the socialists, led by their Chairman, a useful middle-weight of local fame, fell upon the Tories and routed them with 'great slaughter'.<sup>2</sup>

The active participation of the Mildmay Club in the agitation against the Boer War was no accident. The Club was one of the few remaining working mens' political clubs which retained some remnants of the spirit they had embodied in the 1870s and 1880s. In particular these working-class radicals had a formidable record of anti-imperialism.<sup>3</sup>

The regular and systematic attacks on 'pro-Boer' meetings were an ominous foretaste of the World War, as was the fact that, as far as I have been able to discover, there was not a single arrest of those who attacked the anti-War meetings in North London. Another parallel with future events was the split in the 'socialist' movement. Both the Fabians and the *Clarion* supported the War. Robert Blatchford, the editor of the latter, which had by far the largest circulation of any of the movement's journals, wrote in its October 1899 issue:

I cannot go with those socialists whose sympathies are with the enemy. My whole heart is with the British Troops . . . until the war is over I am for the Government.

After the Boer War the socialist movement underwent a whole series of convulsions which reflected widely different approaches as to what socialism was and how it would be achieved. These divisions had deep roots, going back to and even beyond the formal emergence of the Social Democratic Federation in 1884. The Fabians, the Social Democratic Federation/British Socialist Party and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) all shared — although there were countervailing forces within all of them — a vision of socialism in which the main emphasis was on taking over the commanding heights of the economy by the state or municipal authorities.

In the early part of the century it was quite common for socialist lecturers to describe the Incas of Peru as being quasi-socialist<sup>4</sup> because they concentrated all economic power in that society into the hands of the ruling elite; or that the building of the Panama Canal by the American Army was an example of socialism in action. Later, massive state intervention during the 1914–18 War was welcomed by some as being socialist in content. It was a logical consequence of these attitudes to concentrate on municipal and parliamentary politics and the permeation of social institutions.

Side by side and overlapping — sometimes in the same individuals — with the dominating state-socialist current, was a direct action oriented libertarian tendency, and it was from this side of the movement, with all

its multitudinous facets, that the 'rebel' milieu described in this text drew much of its inspiration. The pre-War radical industrial movement shared these influences, and had in the period before the War been influenced by the socialist industrial unionism of Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labour Party,<sup>5</sup> the practice of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the USA, and the ideas of continental syndicalism.

The terms 'syndicalism' and 'industrial unionism' covered a wide range of different nuances and meanings — from the amalgamation of existing unions to the belief that industrial unions organising all the workers in an industry were a more effective weapon of struggle; to seeing the industrial organisation of workers as not only being the vehicle of revolutionary transformation, but also as a prefiguration of the socialist society of the future.

Tom Mann expressed mainstream syndicalist ideas at a large meeting at the Caledonian Baths on February 27th, 1911, when in a speech called 'Revolutionary versus State Socialism' he said:

Parliament is a class institution which merely prevents any real legislation for the people. This character will not be democratised by a few Labour men, I do not believe that a bit of nationalisation here and there is progress. Trifling concessions only serve to keep back socialism.

The ruling classes are not powerful because they have captured political institutions, but because they possess economic power. (Applause.)

I believe not in parliamentary representation but in more effective industrial organisation. It is in the seat of the trouble — the workshops and factories where the trouble is — where we should act. Direct action is the only way.

Mann went on to denounce 'the fooling away' of time by Labour men in Parliament. And in a vigorous appeal he called for the reorganisation of trade unionism on a broader and more complete base, not on sectional lines and not merely as 'ring fences' to keep out non-unionists, but for mass action by the whole workforce in any industry.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. For W. S. Cluse see note 4, page 27.
2. 1953, p. 47. I owe this reference to Ken Worpole.
3. Two leading members of the Mildmay Club deserve to be remembered as they illustrate both the links of the club with the tradition of working class radicalism and what happened to it. They are H. A. Fuller and Jesse Argyle. Fuller had been Secretary of the Patriotic Club in Clerkenwell Green in the early 1880s. The Patriotic Club had been formed in 1869 by a group of radicals, many of them ex-Chartists associated with Bronterre O'Brien, and it became a dominating

centre of London working-class politics in the 1870s and early 1880s. (For more information on the Patriotic Club and H. A. Fuller see Andrew Rothstein, *A House on Clerkenwell Green*, Marx Memorial Library, 1983, and Stan Shipley, *Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London*, Journeyman Press, 1982.) Fuller had also been a member of the Executive of the Democratic Federation — the forerunner of the SDF — until 1884, a lifelong republican and advocate of land nationalisation; he was also treasurer of the local branch of the National Union of Clerks in 1894. He was elected a member of Islington Vestry — which later became Islington Borough Council — and was a leading member of the first (11 strong) Labour Group from 1896 to 1899. Subsequently both he and the group seem gradually to have been reabsorbed into Liberal politics, albeit with a radical bent.

Jesse Argyle was born in 1859. A compositor and later a journalist, he had also been a vestryman and a member of the same Labour Group as Fuller. Argyle was heavily involved in the working class education movement and was at various times on committees of Ruskin College, the Workers' Educational Association and the Working Men's College; he was still active in the field as late as 1927. Incidentally, the Mildmay Club is still alive and well and living in Newington Green.

4. One example of this was a talk on the Incas given to the North London Socialist Club in April 1897 by Peter Rigby Pratt, a leading local Fabian.
5. The earliest local influence of De Leonism which I have been able to trace is again related to the North London Socialist Club, which subscribed to the SLP's paper *The People*. In 1896, P. Friedburg, who was a member of the club's committee, and a regular writer for *The People*, was also secretary of Islington SDF; he was expelled along with his branch for their views in 1902.
6. Mann's speech was reported in the *Islington Gazette*.

## *2. The Condition of the Working Class in Islington*

In 1911 the populations of the old boroughs of Islington and Finsbury — which were later amalgamated to create modern Islington — totalled 415,000, compared with the 1981 figure of 160,000. Housing conditions for the working class were appalling; at the turn of the century the Medical Officer of Health for Islington reported that 4,057 single-room flats contained 15,130 occupants, while 7,670 2-room flats housed 40,180 inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> This situation did not markedly improve during the period covered by this text. As late as 1933, 15,359 Islington families were living in one room, 1,460 basement dwellings had their ceilings at or below street level, and 15,000 families were living at a density of three or more to a room.

What this overcrowding could mean was spelt out in a report by Doctor Bulger to the Islington Board of Guardians in April 1909 in which he described conditions in 'furnished rooms' at Campbell Road, Holloway. Doctor Bulger commented:

In all classes the furniture consists of a broken chair, a broken table, a straw mattress and an old iron bedstead; in some rooms the mattress is dirty and verminous, and unfortunately it has been my misfortune to have attended some confinements under such conditions, when both the midwife and myself have come away covered with fleas. In some cases there is not room to stand between the bed and the wall; and in my opinion the wash houses should not be let out as furnished rooms. In none of the furnished rooms can I see the utensils necessary for a bedroom. Many a time I have had to return home from a parish case to get a wash. In many rooms there is serious overcrowding, and in some cases danger to life and limb going up and down the awful stairs. For instance No. — as seen today is a disgrace not only to the parish of Islington but a disgrace to civilisation. I should advise the Guardians to see it as it is today but beware of the stairs.

At the same meeting of the Guardians, Doctor Edwards, the Superintendent Relieving Officer, also reported on Campbell Road and gave the following figures about overcrowding in a house there:

(A) Front room, 8 persons and a dead child, oldest girl 18 years of age. (B) First floor back (July 1908) 9 persons. (C) Top front 9 persons now left. (D) Top front 7 persons wife about to confined. (E) Top back 6 persons wife about to be confined.

Campbell Road<sup>2</sup> was an extreme — indeed notorious — case but there were many other areas of Islington with comparable conditions, and from such pig-styes thousands of men went off to fight for democracy and Christian civilisation.

Wages were equally bad. In November 1913 unskilled Islington Council workers received about 6d an hour for a working week ranging from 56 to 63 hours. Many workers got much less, for example those working for the Water Board, and some male workers got as little as twelve shillings a week. Skilled men's rates ranged from 8d to 10d an hour. Women, of course, fared much worse. Those at the Idris Mineral Water plant in Camden Town, the Stephens' Ink factory in Islington, and laundry women in the Drayton Park area averaged between 9 and 12 shillings for a full working week, while many other women got much less. This was the situation 24 years after the struggle for the 'Dockers' Tanner' in 1889. Between 1900 and 1911 wages had remained static while the cost of food and accommodation had increased by about 10%, although the boom years and strike waves just before the outbreak of War had slowly begun to push wages up.

With these wages and conditions, many thousands of families in Islington lived permanently on the razor edge of disaster. Their only protection in the event of illness, accident, dismissal or old age,<sup>3</sup> was the support of their families, neighbours, or the pawn shop. When these options failed or dried up there was only one alternative — 'going on the parish' and applying for relief, which in nearly 50% of cases meant the workhouse. This was the fate of thousands every year. The apt contemporary 'sociological' term applied to this section of the population was 'ins and outs'. An Islington worker who was a youngster before the War described what happened to families on relief:

... if a man was unemployed he had to go to a Relief Officer for food. He would be given two long loaves, 1 lb of treacle, 1 lb rice and if he had someone sick at home, ½ lb mutton, and these supplies had to last the family all week. He was given no money. Generally, if the man applied for relief on the following week, he was given a ticket for all the family to be taken into St John's Workhouse. Their few sticks of furniture would be put either in the road or on the Borough dust-cart to be destroyed. If a man argued with the Relieving Officer, a Mr Scammell, he would be charged as a vagrant and given 14 days hard labour.<sup>4</sup>

The workhouses were sometimes known as 'bastilles', and this was no joke. More commonly they were nicknamed 'the spike'. Gradgrind ruled; the regime they operated was brutal in the extreme. The accepted wisdom was to make conditions so unpleasant that *any* alternative would be preferable. No able-bodied person could get relief without completing task work like oakum picking, corngrinding by hand, or

most commonly (for men) stonebreaking. Failure to complete this work meant that if you were on outdoor relief you were struck off, but if you were a workhouse inmate such non-completion was a criminal offence. I give two examples from many: in 1903 a 60-year-old man called Henry Cummings was charged with refusal to do task work of breaking up one ton of granite a day — he had only managed to do four hundredweight in two days. He was sentenced to 14 days' hard labour. In 1908, 4 men who seemed to have been engaged in a strike at the workhouse were sentenced to a month's hard labour each for the same offence.

Food and living conditions in the 'bastilles' were abysmal. There were several outbreaks of food poisoning at Islington Workhouse in the immediate pre-War years, with a number of inmates ending up in hospital. Corruption was rife in a system which also allowed wide scope for the sadistic proclivities of workhouse staff. Inmates were literally prisoners. They were only allowed off the premises on rare occasions and visits were severely restricted; families were broken up, and crude and ugly uniforms had to be worn.

In periods of heavy unemployment, especially in a winter like that of 1909–1910, the workhouses would fill up and paupers, many of them old and infirm, were given 'walking orders' to the overflow Belmont workhouse in Hertfordshire, 20 miles away. They were not given any food or other relief until they arrived. Since those who went to the Relieving Office were there as a last resort, and often in the last extremity of need, the systematic brutality of the system becomes clear.

The regime inside the workhouse was so bad that many inmates preferred prison; considering conditions inside prisons during the period, this speaks volumes for the inhumanity of the Poor Law system. In July 1910, Gustave Blankmayer was charged with refusing task work at Islington Workhouse; he pleaded guilty, stating that he preferred prison. Blankmayer had 23 previous convictions for the same 'offence'.

A sizeable proportion of the population of Islington and other parts of North London were born, lived and died in the shadow of the 'bastille' and this experience was burnt into their souls. A number of years ago the father of a friend of mine was dying, and in spite of having had a very rich and interesting life, all he could talk about in his last hours were his family's and his own experiences in the Hornsey Road workhouse which his own children had until then known nothing about.

In 1911 the first shaky beginnings of the welfare state had emerged with the passing of Lloyd George's National Insurance Act, a contributory scheme which 'gave' seven shillings a week unemployment pay for a maximum of 13 weeks and a low rate of sick pay to about two million workers, but these measures were too late to affect materially the

pre-War situation. James Hinton makes the interesting point that the bureaucratic apparatus which the Act set up was used as the basis for the application of conscription.<sup>5</sup>

It would be a big mistake to think of the submerged sixth of the population simply as victims; they could and did fight back. Struggles of the unemployed in North London go back to the 1850s, and some of these conflicts were extremely bitter and violent. Things were rather quieter in the early twentieth century, but in February 1903, for example, a demonstration of unemployed demanding work invaded a meeting of Finsbury Borough Council and threatened that if the councillors didn't accede to their demands they would visit their homes 'and make things warm for them'.

During 1908–1912 there were two organisations agitating among the unemployed, the Working Class Defence League and the Right to Work Committee. These were not competitors but allies, with a heavily overlapping membership made up of representatives from local trade union branches and socialist groups. The League dealt mainly with general questions like housing, rates of pay, workhouse conditions and similar issues, while the Committee concentrated upon the specific problems of the unemployed. Interestingly, the leading figures of both these bodies were skilled workers unaffected by unemployment; for example, the chairman of the Right to Work Committee was W. B. Parker, a compositor,<sup>6</sup> while the secretary of the Working Class Defence League was Tom Pearson, a painter.<sup>7</sup>

In November 1908 a meeting of the unemployed organised by the WCDL at Highbury Corner was brutally attacked by the police, and it wasn't an isolated incident. 1908 also saw the emergence of the first women's unemployed organisation that I have been able to trace; it was associated with the WCDL and its prominent figures included Claire Bell and Gertrude Louise Barry,<sup>8</sup> both of whom were members of the ILP. In its first year this group organised a large Islington women's contingent at an unemployed demonstration at the state opening of parliament.

Both the Working Class Defence League and the Right to Work Committee were infected with the malaise of the official labour movement of the period. They were for the unemployed rather than of them, and they seemed to be more interested in raising money to relieve the distress of the unemployed than in organising them in struggle. They collected very considerable sums for this purpose — over £1,000 in 1909 — much of it collected on 'church parades' which were virtually begging expeditions. The process of degeneration continued until 1910 when both organisations were signatories of a manifesto calling on the work-

ing class of Islington to vote Liberal in the absence of a Labour candidate.

These groups seem to have gone into hibernation in the boom years just before the War.

Side by side with the formal unemployed organisations there was a strong and longstanding tradition of informal resistance, of community support ranging from not grassing to the authorities to spontaneous strikes in the test-work yards. Other aspects of this resistance were the social acceptance of the midnight flit as a useful method of keeping the cost of accommodation down and a huge range of fiddles and dodges which helped people keep body and soul together. A notable tradition in some of the poorer areas was the raising of a hue and cry when the bailiff's men came to evict families or distrain their belongings, and there were huge numbers of distraints in Islington, over 16,000 in 1908 for rates arrears alone! The inhabitants of a street, tenement or court, men, women and children, would rush and mob the bailiffs and pelt them with anything which came to hand. The police often had to be called to protect the bailiffs, who, even if they managed to distrain goods often had them smashed up before they could leave the scene.

Not all of the population of Islington were poor. Substantial enclaves were inhabited by the well-off, the middle class and skilled workers, and these differences show up clearly in all of the public health statistics; thus in 1912 infant mortality in the poor area of Barnsbury was 297 per 1,000 while in better off Tufnell the figure was 136. This tendency was also apparent in the general mortality and life expectancy rates. George Leslie Tiley expressed the experience of the poor in relation to illness and death:

There were no free doctors and if the poor were ill they had to apply to the Poor Law Guardians at Barnsbury Street and when the doctor arrived he usually sent the ill person to St Mary's Hospital where most of them died. The hospital was dreaded by the poor. . . . If the sick person died at home, he was given a pauper's funeral. This consisted of a horse-drawn coach with room for two passengers inside, the coffin being placed crosswise under the seat of the driver and protruding over the width of the carriage.<sup>9</sup>

Islington's social complexity was mirrored in the huge range of occupations and industries represented in the area. The largest single category of employment was transport. Before the War it was estimated that about 15,000 railway workers lived in the borough, and when the closely related market and coal porters (there were something like 4,000 of the latter employed in the St Pancras Arches area alone) as well as carmen, carters, vanguards and bus, tram and tube workers, are all taken into account, it is clear that this sector must have constituted a



substantial proportion of the workforce.<sup>10</sup> But even this coherence is more apparent than real, for a respectable booking clerk or a lordly engine driver would have little in common with a casually employed coal heaver.

Islington, like most other parts of London was a dormitory area, and while there was a considerable amount of industry, mainly consisting of small or medium firms, there was little connection between place of work and abode. This fact is one of the most important building blocks of London's political and industrial life and helps to explain the differences between the radical movement in London and elsewhere in Britain. It must be remembered that the social composition of the population could vary widely from place to place; for example the ratio of skilled workers and others with more secure occupations was much higher in the outer portions of North London and this difference had a significant effect on political life.

The most prominent feature of London's economic situation in the pre-War period was the vast amorphous army of casual workers, who might be employed from street corners for a few hours, work by the week, or on a seasonal basis. These worked in a wide range of industries and jobs, were very difficult to categorise, and were often forgotten altogether. This submerged mass contributed more than its fair share to the War's casualties for a number of reasons. Their abysmal living conditions made it more likely that they would respond to the recruiting campaign in the early part of the War, a process which was reinforced by the fact that such workers were particularly vulnerable to being 'combed out' by employers. After the introduction of conscription, their lack of skills made it most unlikely that they would be in reserved occupations, and this same lack made it very probable that they would be in the infantry rather than the more specialised, and safer, arms. It could be said that the butchery on the Western Front was the logical conclusion of the poor law system. It is interesting that after the War there was a substantial diminution of the casual work milieu.

There is some evidence that many of the survivors who experienced the holocaust and had seen the enormous wealth poured into the mud of Flanders, compared it with the parsimony and mean-spiritedness they had experienced at home and were profoundly changed. A notable feature of the post-War radical movement was the much greater prominence within it of these previously suppressed groups. Certainly the War and the first years afterwards saw a huge growth in trade union membership among this section of the working population.

## Notes

1. *Islington Gazette*, January 1st, 1900.
2. For more information on Campbell Road see Jerry White's article, 'Campbell Bunks, A Lumpen Community in London Between the Wars', *History Workshop Journal*, Autumn 1979.
3. Old Age Pensions were introduced in 1908; this meant a maximum of 5s a week for those aged over 70. The aged in workhouses received nothing.
4. From the typescript 'Memories of Islington Between the Years 1899 and the 1930s, the journal of George Leslie Tiley Born 17th June 1899 — died 21st March 1975, written two years before his death.' This excellent text is a mine of information on the underbelly of Islington life during the period and badly needs publishing. I would like to thank Sheila Leslie, the author's daughter-in-law, for allowing me to print these short extracts. The loaves to which he refers were 8 pounds in weight, and were nick-named 'starvers'.
5. James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards Movement*, 1973 p. 31.
6. W. B. Parker was one of the founders of the SDF and a pioneer of the socialist movement in North London. He later joined the Socialist League and was then an active anarchist for several years. He then joined the ILP. He was chairman of Islington Trades Council in 1906 and vice-chairman of the Islington Trades and Labour Party at the outbreak of War. He was a Labour Poor Law Guardian for many years and died in the early 1930s.
7. Tom Pearson, like W. B. Parker, was a very early — mid 1880s — member of the Clerkenwell SDF. He then became a member of the Socialist League and an anarchist and was very active, along with Parker, in the 1889 Dock Workers' Strike. Pearson also joined the ILP and was a prominent local member of the Painters' Union.
8. Gertrude Louise Barry was later an active militant suffragette.
9. See George Leslie Tiley, *op cit*.
10. Vanguards were carmen's assistants, not professional revolutionaries.

### *3. Prehistory: Industrial Struggle and the 'Rebel' Movement*

The years leading up to the War were marked by massive industrial unrest; indeed the period 1911–1914 was called the 'labour war' at the time. In 1912 well over 40 million working days were lost due to strikes. The old leaderships of both the trade unions and the established socialist parties were found wanting, the former craft-ridden and fragmented, and the latter primarily oriented towards 'gas and water' socialism and deeply compromised with the Liberals. Both these strands were uncomprehending of and unsympathetic towards the growing movement of industrial and social unrest. The immediate pre-War period consequently saw the emergence of a wide range of industrially oriented groupings, the women's movements, and broadly based networks bringing together the various strands of the new 'rebel' milieu. These currents had little time for parliamentary and municipal manoeuvrings.

During the years 1911–1914 there were wave upon wave of strikes in North London. Among those affected, some of them several times, were: printers, mineral water workers (mostly women), carmen, coal porters, railwaymen, laundrywomen, whitelead workers, tram men, french polishers, envelope makers (women), schoolchildren, bootmakers, engineers, butchers, bakers (I am not sure if there were any candlestick makers involved in the various strikes in the gold, silver and allied trades in Clerkenwell), painters and decorators, busmen, building workers, and electricians. Many of these disputes were marked by violent clashes; for example, during the carmen's strike of August 1911 at least one man (and probably two) was killed on the picket line in North London, and there were also numerous arrests. In answer to this movement the government created its own strikebreaking organisation, the National Reserve, the Islington branch of which alone had nearly 1,000 members.<sup>1</sup>

In response to this situation, new types of radical industrially-oriented organisations emerged. These were very active in Islington and North London generally; for example, the Advocates of Industrial Unionism<sup>2</sup> had an Islington group as early as 1907, the Industrialist League<sup>3</sup> had a local branch by February 1909, the Industrial Demo-

crazy League<sup>4</sup> was active locally, and immediately before the War the Industrial Workers of the World had a strong Local.<sup>5</sup>

Alongside these specialised groupings were wider based organisations, of which the North London Herald League, formed in 1913, was the most important, although the local Clarion Fellowship — in spite of the chauvinism of Robert Blatchford — played a similar role. These tendencies shared a common critical attitude towards both the collaboration of the Labour Party with the Liberals,<sup>6</sup> and the failure of trade union leaders to support the industrial movement effectively. Other areas of common ground were the rejection of the tepid official Labour movement and the established socialist parties on the whole range of women's issues.

The membership of these 'insurgent' groupings included members of a wide range of political tendencies, the British Socialist Party (formerly the SDF), the ILP, the anarchists, the women's movement, industrial militants, the SLP, even ex-members of the Socialist Party of Great Britain,<sup>7</sup> as well as activists not associated with any particular group. It is interesting and significant that in this period of the most unparalleled industrial and social unrest both the ILP and BSP substantially declined in membership nationally.

It is worth mentioning here how different things were for the socialist movement — and indeed everyone else — before the advent of radio and television. All mass communication depended on either the printed or unaided spoken word. For socialists these two modes were closely associated, for the main source of sales of their literature was at open air meetings. To stop these meetings would have reduced the movement to impotence. It is not surprising, therefore, that from the 1880s a considerable proportion of the activity of socialists had been directed towards the defence and extension of the right to hold open-air meetings.

There was a very rich street life during this period, and many got the basis of a surprisingly wide education simply by attending these universities of the streets. There were large attendances at many of these meetings, sometimes several hundred. They often went on till late at night, even into the early hours, and the more prominent speakers were very well known indeed. I estimate that just before the War there was something like thirty reasonably regular speaking pitches in Finsbury and Islington alone, although some venues were much more important than others. This perhaps helps partially explain the determination with which open air meetings were continued during the War, for if they had stopped the socialist movement might as well have shut up shop.

R. M. (Dick) Fox, one of the founders of the North London Herald League, described its composition in his book *Smoky Crusade*:<sup>8</sup>

The League had thrown its net wide and we had a membership of active militant people — not all militant about the same things, but in sympathy with all rebel causes, all movements of the oppressed and downtrodden.

Of the more established groups, both the BSP and the ILP had branches on a constituency basis. In addition, local trade union branches, along with the ILP, were organised into the Islington Trades and Labour Party, which had about 45 affiliates at the outbreak of War. There were similar set-ups in other parts of North London. Besides these organisations there was a whole range of other groupings: The Clarion Cycle Club, the Clarion Fellowship, the Women's Labour League, two Socialist Sunday Schools, the Fabians, the Women's Trade Union League, even the North London Socialist Orchestra with its choir, and the Clarion Players, a drama group. Then there was the Co-operative movement, the Co-operative Women's Guilds, and the Brotherhood Church; even these do not complete the list.

But it was from the 'rebel' movement that the major components of the movement against the rapidly approaching War came, and as war fever mounted in 1914 these elements had already made their views clear. During the pre-War recruiting drive the North London Herald League issued the following leaflet:

#### A GOOD SOLDIER

A good soldier is a blind, heartless machine. At the word of command he will put a bullet in the brain of the bravest and noblest man who has ever lived. He respects neither the grey hair of age nor the weakness of childhood. He is unmoved by tears, by prayers or by argument. He is indifferent to human thought or human feelings. DON'T BE A SOLDIER — BE A MAN!<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the clearest expression of the views held by radicals — quite prophetically in view of events at the end of the War — was a speech by Jack Wills<sup>10</sup> at the North London Clarion Fellowship in January 1914. He said:

I have not forgotten what a shoddy part the Police and Army play. It is argued by Parliamentary Socialists that we will never be successful until we have captured parliament and thereby captured the forces of Army, Navy and Police. We say we do not think it possible to capture these forces, but what we do think is this, we realise that a large proportion of the Army, Navy and Police are made up of members of our class, that they are forced into these institutions through economic reasons, mostly because they are unemployed, we have got to teach them that they must not shoot their own class, but that they must use their weapons, if they have to use them, against the capitalist class. We are told this is sedition; of course it is! Almost every word of the Socialist philosophy is sedition. You will gradually get more revolutionaries in the Army and Navy.

In time they will do as we ask and refuse to shoot and bludgeon members of the working class. I do not think it is possible even today to use arms in a big industrial struggle. It is quite easy for the capitalist class with the power at their disposal to force some of the workers back, but they could not force back to work at the end of a bayonet over a million men who are on strike at one time. Another point, when the Army is split up looking after industrial quarters, it will come into contact with the workers, and into touch with their revolutionary ideas.

Even the official labour leadership became involved in the anti-War agitation and participated in a rally opposing the impending War at Trafalgar Square on August 2nd, 1914, which issued a manifesto signed by Keir Hardie and Arthur Henderson calling on the movement to:<sup>11</sup>

Hold mass demonstrations against war in every industrial centre, compel the governing class and their Press who are eager to commit you to co-operate with Russia to keep silence and respect the decision of the overwhelming majority of the people, who will have neither part nor lot in such infamy. . . . Workers stand together for peace! Combine and conquer the militarist enemy and the self-seeking Imperialists today, once and for all. . . . Proclaim that for you the days of plunder and butchery have gone by; send messages of peace and fraternity to your fellows who have less liberty than you. Down with class rule. Down with the rule of brute force. Down with the War. Up with the peaceful rule of the people.<sup>12</sup>

Two days later — on August 4th — War was declared.

*Notes* (All names marked \* in these notes were members of the North London Herald League.) *For the period before the War I have depended heavily for background on two books which I recommend heartily to those who want to study the subject further. They are: John Quail, The Slow Burning Fuse: the Lost History of the British Anarchists, 1978. Bob Holton, British Syndicalism 1900–1914, 1976. A third book which covers the whole period of this text and which is essential reading is Walter Kendall, Revolutionary Movements in Britain 1900–1921, 1969.*

1. The National Reserve was a forerunner of the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supply (OMS) which was used to strikebreak during the General Strike. The National Reserve never seems to have been used.
2. The Advocates of Industrial Unionism (AIU) was founded in August 1907; it was dominated by the De Leonist Socialist Labour Party (SLP), although by no means all its supporters were members of that party. Among its leading figures were W. O. Angilly, who was National Treasurer, and E. J. B. Allen who was editor of the AIU's paper *Industrial Unionist*; both were ex-members of the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB — see footnote 7). Allen had joined the SDF in the 1890s; he emigrated to New Zealand before the War where he was active until at least 1936. Active local members of the AIU included Fred Messer,\* a french polisher, and Les Boyne,\* a gasworker; Boyne was an interesting illustration of the political fluidity of the period. At first a member of

the SDF, by 1906 he was a member of the Islington Branch of the SPGB; he then joined the SLP, finally becoming an anarcho-syndicalist. After the war Boyne was an official of the Gasworkers' Union.)

3. The Industrialist League split from the AIU in 1908; its paper *The Industrialist* was edited by E. J. B. Allen; Les Boyne was also editor for a while. The League was associated with the Chicago anti-parliamentarian IWW, and had a strong local group whose members included Henry Sara\* and Walter Ponder,\* both active anarchists, and W. G. E. Smith, a sheet metal worker.
4. The Industrial Democracy League (IDL) emerged from the collapse of Tom Mann's Industrial Democracy Education League (IDEL) in 1913. Its paper *Solidarity* was edited by Norman Young, secretary of West Islington BSP. National figures of the IDL included Jack Tanner, J. T. Murphy — who incidentally was secretary of the Sheffield Herald League — Jack Wills and W. F. Watson.\*
5. Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Its British Section was formed in 1913, and its paper *Industrial Worker* was at various times edited by R. M. (Dick) Fox,\* an engineer and another ex-SPGBer, and A. B. Elsbury,\* a tailor. Other early local members included Albert Young,\* a glass blower, Victor Beacham,\* a painter, Lesley Boyne,\* and Charlie Lahr. The local IWW was closely associated with the North London Herald League (NLHL) and met regularly at the same premises, the North Islington BSP headquarters at Fellowship Hall, 473 Hornsey Road. This relationship continued throughout the War.
6. Of the 37 Labour MPs at the outbreak of War, 36 had been elected as a result of electoral deals with the Liberals. Collaboration, whether on a local or national level, did not stop at electoral pacts.
7. It is difficult to integrate the Socialist Party of Great Britain into any account of wider working-class politics because its policy of hostility to all other political groups, and rejection as an organisation of participation in any partial economic or social struggles, effectively excluded it from association with other tendencies. But no account would be complete without some reference to them. Before the War, they were a substantial presence in the area. Their Tottenham Branch had over 100 members, and there were also effective branches in Islington and Hackney. The SPGB also had a very high proportion of the ablest open-air speakers, notably Alex Anderson of Tottenham, who by common consent was the best socialist orator of his day. The SPGB's principled Marxism had perhaps a wider influence than it would like to admit.
8. R. M. Fox, *Smokey Crusade*, 1938, p. 157.
9. R. M. Fox, op cit, p. 160. This text is a paraphrase of a widely distributed piece attributed to Jack London, and was first published in the US in 1911. Ironically Jack London supported the War.
10. Jack Wills was a South London bricklayer and a leading syndicalist, he was a member of the IDL and one of the founders of *Solidarity*. Wills and other building trade militants were so disgusted with the record of the trade union leaders during the 1914 building workers' strike that they formed the Building Workers' Industrial Union a few days before the outbreak of War in August 1914. In spite of what must be one of the greatest errors of timing ever (the BWIU was one of the very few unions to oppose the War), the combined harassment of the authorities and leaders of the established unions, the union, which had a strong Islington branch, continued in existence until 1923.
11. Although this meeting was organised by the Labour Party, it had originally

24 'Don't be a Soldier!'

been suggested and convened by the national Daily Herald League and it was only taken over by the Labour Party later. See George Lansbury, *My Life*, 1928, p. 205.

12. See Wal Hannington, *Industrial History in Wartime*, 1940, p. 22.



#### 4. *The War and the Split in Socialism*

After the declaration of War on August 4th, the labour leadership's rhetoric evaporated. The national headquarters of the BSP supported the War; on September 5th its Executive Committee *unanimously* agreed to a manifesto supporting recruiting.<sup>1</sup> The Labour Party and the TUC took a similar position — they actively supported recruiting from August 1914 — while the trade unions declared industrial peace and abandoned strike action for the duration. Later, the Labour Party joined the government and its leader, Arthur Henderson (among others) became a member of the War Cabinet. Sidney Webb — hardly a hostile witness — wrote in 1920:

From the beginning of the War until the end, the Labour Party, alike in all its corporate acts and by the individual efforts of its leading members, stuck at nothing in its determination to help the Government win the war.

Of the trade union side of the movement Webb commented:

From the first to last the whole strength of the movement was thrown into the side of the nation's effort.<sup>2</sup>

Only the National Council of the ILP came out against the War, their position deeply influenced by the strong pacifist current within the party. However, the attitude of the national leadership of the party was by no means as clear as is generally supposed. Ramsay Macdonald, for example, was opposed to the *declaration* of war, but he also stated that since the War had begun, 'those who can enlist ought to enlist and those who are working in munitions should do so wholeheartedly.'<sup>3</sup> Macdonald was not alone in the ambiguity of his position, which was hardly the principled stance on the War which mythology has ascribed to him.

There was a similar split within the women's movement. Mrs Pankhurst and her followers in the leadership of the Women's Social and Political Union became ardently patriotic; they suspended the militant campaign, and the name of their paper *The Suffragette* was changed to *Britannia*. However, many suffragettes took an anti-War position, and created or joined groups like the Women's Peace Crusade which played a considerable part in the struggle against the War and associated social

problems like rent and housing, the food question, and the treatment of servicemen's dependants. Those involved in these issues, notably Sylvia Pankhurst and Mrs Despard, moved in an increasingly radical socialist direction.

The situation in North London was similar to the national. For example W. S. Cluse,<sup>4</sup> a compositor and leading local member of the BSP and the Islington Trades and Labour Party, was strongly in favour of the War. So were a number of local notables of the ILP; T. E. Naylor<sup>5</sup> also a compositor, resigned from the ILP immediately it opposed the War and William (Fire) Brand Parker,<sup>6</sup> yet another comp, was also pro-War.

Other leading figures in the local ILP and Islington Trades and Labour Party who supported the War were Messrs McKenna and Mackinlay (the latter was a carpenter), T. G. Fowler,<sup>7</sup> and A. Faux, who actually volunteered. With this composition (no pun intended) it is not surprising that the Islington Trades and Labour Party supported both the War and the recruiting drive.

Naylor, Parker, Fowler and Mackinlay went on to play an active part in the recruiting campaign, addressing many mass rallies — for example one in Trafalgar Square in November, 1915. However, all this patriotic fervour did not go unopposed; the main leader of the anti-War group in the Islington Trades and Labour Party was H. G. Coleman,<sup>8</sup> yet another comp!

The situation was that, on the one hand, the national committee of the ILP was opposed to the War while many of its local prominenti were taking an active part in recruiting; and on the other, the 'old guard' of the BSP were taking the patriotic line while many of its local activists were deeply opposed. It is not surprising therefore that the local established socialist movement was — to put it mildly — in a chaotic state in the first months of the War. A very similar situation to that in Islington prevailed in most areas of North London, for example in the Finsbury ILP, where Fenner Brockway became one of the leaders of the No Conscription Fellowship while Ernest Thurtle and Fred Montague,<sup>9</sup> who later became the Labour MPs for Shoreditch and West Islington respectively, both volunteered.

As the War progressed, the anti-War tendencies in the political groups began to get stronger, a process perhaps helped by the considerable numbers of those infected with jingoistic sentiments who had volunteered and thus removed themselves from the political scene;<sup>10</sup> a decision which many of them, or their surviving families, were later to regret bitterly. By November 1915, Islington Trades and Labour Party had reversed its decision to support recruiting. This in turn led to the

resignation or dropping out of many of the pro-War faction, although it did not stop some of them having long and successful careers in the labour movement. Apart from its decision not to support recruiting I can find no evidence of the Trades and Labour Party playing any part in the anti-War movement.

In parts of the movement there were bitter see-saw battles on the question of the War. North Islington BSP for example took a pro-recruiting position in June 1915; by November the same year it had reversed this stance, yet in May 1916 it elected H. M. Hyndman, 'grand old man' of the BSP and leader of the pro-War tendency, as its delegate to the BSP Annual Conference;<sup>11</sup> still later, it took a strongly anti-War position!

These internal conflicts within the established socialist groups perhaps explain why they played such a little part *as groups*, at least in North London, in the struggles which developed as the War continued. As one participant in these struggles put it, these parties '... with all their national prestige — virtually shut up shop during the War',<sup>12</sup> although it must be stated that many individual members of these same parties made major contributions to the anti-War struggle.

## Notes

1. Among the signatories of this manifesto along with the 'old guard' were E. C. Fairchild and Albert Inkpin, both of whom became leaders of the BSP's left wing; incidentally both were also members of Hackney BSP. Inkpin was General Secretary of the BSP and went on to become the first General Secretary of the Communist Party. This perhaps illustrates just how disoriented some parts of the socialist movement were in the first months of the War. See H. W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social-Democracy in Britain*, 1935, p. 225.
2. Beatrice and Sidney Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, 1920 edn, quoted by Hannington, *op cit*, p. 24.
3. See Macdonald's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Macdonald was not the only one who had an ambiguous attitude to the War. George Lansbury wrote an article in the *Women's Dreadnought* on August 21st, 1915, which included, 'The women of East London have sent their men to fight. Those of us who hate and detest war know that these men must be armed and fed, and while the War lasts we shall do our best to see that this is done.'
4. William Sampson Cluse, 1875–1955, Secretary of West Islington ILP 1896, joined the SDP — forerunner of the BSP — in 1900; he held joint membership. Joined the army in 1916; Islington Borough Councillor 1919, and served for about 9 years; Labour MP for South Islington 1923–31, and again 1935–50; held minor government office.
5. T. E. Naylor, President of Islington Trades and Labour Party, General Secretary of the London Society of Compositors 1906–1938, one of the founders of the

*Daily Herald*; after the war he was Chairman of London Labour Party; Labour MP for SE Southwark from 1920. However, while Naylor supported the War he campaigned strongly against the introduction of conscription.

6. For W. B. Parker see note 6, page 18.

The prominence of composers in Islington Labour politics was no accident; the London Society of Compositors had about 2,000 members in the borough, and while several prominent local comps were pro-War, it is worth recalling that the local committee of the LSC refused to support the recruiting campaign in February 1915.

7. Mackinlay had been Chairman, and T. G. Fowler Secretary, of Islington Trades and Labour Party. Fowler was also secretary of South Islington Socialist Sunday School.
8. H. G. Coleman 1878–1955, was conscripted later in the War; in 1919 he was elected a Labour councillor, and he was Secretary of the Islington Strike Committee during the General Strike. He was thrice Mayor of Islington.
9. Fred Montague, 1876–1966, was London Organiser of the ILP at the outbreak of War. He joined the army, served in France, and was later commissioned in the Army education department. He became a familiar figure locally, addressing recruiting meetings in his lieutenant's uniform. He was MP for West Islington 1923–1931 and from 1935 to 1947; he was created Lord Amwell in 1947.
10. I have no figures for 'socialist' volunteers in Islington but they were pretty numerous. In Leeds 120 BSP members volunteered and this was by no means unique.
11. This Conference reversed the BSP's pro-War policy. This decision led to a walkout by the 'patriots', who took *Justice*, the party's paper, and most of its assets with them. This faction then created its own organisation called — perhaps unfortunately — the National Socialist Party. The NSP later changed its name back to the Social Democratic Federation and they took a violently patriotic line. After the War the new SDF had its National Headquarters at 54 Colebrooke Row, Islington. It had a strong Islington Branch which included among its members W. S. Cluse and Fred Montague. The SDF finally went out of existence in 1939.
12. Letter to the author from Edward Hennem dated February 4th, 1980.

## 5. *The War and the Workers*

Before the introduction of conscription in January 1916, huge pressures were generated to 'encourage' enlistment. This pressure was aided by a massive reorganisation as industry went over to a war footing, allowing ample opportunity for employers to 'shake out' men of military age. At the same time the cost of living rose rapidly, and these factors led to a wave of industrial unrest in early 1915 — for example on the Clyde and in South Wales.

The government's reaction was to proclaim:

that the rise in the cost of living is not by itself sufficient reason at the present time for increasing the wages of their employees. They regard this rise as a burden which must be shared in common by all classes in the country.<sup>1</sup>

One of the actions which helped break the government's stand was the 19-day strike in support of a war bonus by London tram men in May 1915, when 7,000 workers stopped work. The depots at Holloway and Archway were among the main centres of the strike.

The dispute was very violent. On one day alone (May 30th) eight trams were smashed up outside Archway depot, and a number of blacklegs were assaulted. There were many arrests and several strikers were sentenced to six weeks' hard labour. The reaction of the London County Council (LCC), which owned the tramways, was to sack all men of military age, telling them to volunteer for the armed forces, and it issued a statement which read:

Notice is hereby given that since the majority of men above military age have returned to work, men who are eligible for the services will not be taken back.

- a) those who enlist will receive favourable consideration for re-employment, as far as may be possible, after the War.
- b) any man of military age unable to enlist may appeal to the Chief Officer and state his reasons, and he will consider whether any circumstances allow any exception in his case. . . .

These were the conditions on which the men returned to work. The action of the LCC in forcing their employees into the mincing machine of the Western Front exposes the hypocrisy of its multiple memorials to 'Our Glorious Dead'.<sup>3</sup>

The strike was defeated, but the men were not. Within a few months

the Islington Branch of the tram men's union had a membership of nearly 2,000. By August 1915 the LCC had conceded a 3s a week War bonus.

The case of the tram men was by no means unique. It illustrates the character of the pressure which the employers were encouraged to exert. This pressure was used as a potent source of propaganda by those socialist groupings which opposed the War. To quote from R. M. Fox again:

I resented this [the press campaign to encourage recruiting] and at enthusiastic meetings in Finsbury Park, Sunday after Sunday, I lampooned the press appeals. 'Have you got a sweating employer or a rack-renting landlord you can spare?' I asked. 'Let him join up to fight for humanity, for civilisation, for democracy, for the women and children, for all those causes in which he has always been so enthusiastic.' The audience was quick to take the point, and we were able to build up a centre of popular resistance to them on working class grounds.<sup>3</sup>

The recruiting campaign was backed by propaganda from the authorities retailing atrocity stories — mostly lies — and tales of German financing of all anti-War and 'anti-British' tendencies.<sup>4</sup> These allegations, coming on top of the already overheated jingoistic atmosphere, created a climate of spy mania and rabid anti-'alien' feeling. It is therefore not surprising that between May 12th and 14th, 1915 — possibly connected with the sinking of the 'Lusitania' in April — widespread anti-German riots raged in Islington, during which 51 shops owned by Germans or which had German-sounding names were smashed and looted (a bakery in Walthamstow called Strachan's was among the victims). There were also numerous and continuing assaults upon individuals. At least one of victims committed suicide.

Sylvia Pankhurst witnessed one of these riots in Hoxton, where she saw one woman — among many others — with her clothes half torn off and covered with blood, beaten and kicked until she was unconscious. When Sylvia Pankhurst appealed for help for the woman from soldiers in uniform who were watching and an officer who was passing by they took no action.<sup>5</sup>

On June 18th, 1916, there was a further wave of 'anti-German' rioting, and another on the 7th–8th July 1917 following air raids. There is no record of any arrests during these disturbances, although the police did make some attempts to protect property. A sinister if obscure part in these events, as well as the many attacks on anti-War meetings, was played by the Islington Anti-German League, whose Chairman was one Alderman Vorley.

Any account of industrial action in North London during the War

must of necessity be limited and fragmentary, for unlike the Clyde, South Wales or the other major industrial centres, there was no concentration of large plants doing similar or related work. Industry in the area consisted of a large number of small or medium firms with no common production theme. Further complicating the scenario was the extreme mobility of labour during the War period with large numbers of workers going from Islington and other parts of North London to work at plants situated as far away as Slough, Tilbury, Enfield and Woolwich, and it was at these places of work where their primary industrial commitment lay.

A further limiting factor in getting a full picture of the industrial scene during the War years, especially in small and medium companies, was that by and large substantial profits were being made, and workers could usually find other ways of getting wage rises than strike action; and that even if they did strike it was unlikely that the news would penetrate very far, particularly in view of the rigorous press censorship imposed during the War.

Workers in government, state-financed or municipal undertakings had little scope for sorting things out at plant level, and it is therefore not surprising that a very high proportion of the documentable local struggles were in these fields.

After the defeat of the tram men in May 1915 the next group of workers to take action were Islington Borough Council workers. Already in March 1915, workers at the municipally-owned electricity plant had unsuccessfully demanded a War bonus. In September 1915, council truck loaders had won some advances by tendering their notices — the wartime equivalent of strike notice — and in December 1915 delegates of the municipal workforce met at the Victory pub, George's Road, Holloway, and demanded a shilling a week War bonus. They stopped work on January 6th, 1916, and won their basic demands.

Later in 1916, the Council's electricity supply workers won a further penny an hour increase, while trimmers in the same department got 3s 6d a week. In July 1917, local cemetery workers demanded 10s a week War bonus, while in that November council dustmen, roadsweepers and carmen struck for a 2d an hour increase.

Meanwhile, public transport workers were keeping the pot boiling. In May 1916, 10,000 workers employed by the London General Omnibus Company struck; their demands included union recognition, a War bonus of 10s a week, and the reinstatement of 10 victimised men on the Palmers Green bus route. It speaks volumes for the change in atmosphere that the Company almost immediately agreed to go to arbitration and eventually conceded most of the workers' demands.

An outstanding example of the difficulties of describing wartime industrial struggle was the four week long engineers' strike in May 1917, which involved something like 200,000 workers nationally, directed against the extension of dilution (the use of non-skilled workers on skilled work) and the reduction of the exemption of skilled engineers from conscription. This struggle affected thousands of workers in North London; for example the Enfield Ordnance factories, the JAP engine works (Tottenham) and dozens of other plants in the area shut down. In some cases there were quite serious clashes with the police and what seem to have been organised mobs of 'patriots', yet there was little reference to this struggle in either local or national press, as the government had placed an embargo on all news of the strike until it was virtually over.<sup>6</sup>

As the War continued, thousands of jobs normally done by men were taken over by women, and nowhere was this process more marked than in public transport. By the end of the War, the London General Omnibus Company alone was employing over 3,500 women, and thousands more were employed by the other bus and tram operators in London as well as on the tubes.<sup>7</sup>

Both management and the unions had consistently opposed conceding the principle of equal pay for what was obviously equal work. On August 16th, 1918, there was a meeting of women at Willesden bus garage which decided, without consulting or even informing either the management or the trade union leaders, to strike the following day. The next morning Willesden stopped work; they were immediately joined by women at Hackney, Holloway, Archway and Acton depots or garages, and thereafter the strike spread like wildfire. By the evening thousands of women had stopped work. The striking was initially for a 5s War bonus, a demand which was superseded as the struggle continued by the straight issue of equal pay, or as the strikers put it 'Same work—same money'.

The strike continued to spread. By August 23rd, women bus and tram workers at Hastings, Bath, Bristol, South Wales, Southend and Birmingham had joined in, about 18,000 women out of the 27,000 employed in the industry had stopped work, and in addition women working on the tubes — supported by some men — had stopped work on the same issue. The strikers had a series of mass meetings at the Ring, Blackfriars, where 4,000 women, many of them with children, well supplied with sandwiches and lemonade, made a day out of it.

The strike was settled on August 25th after a tumultuous meeting at the Ring, and against very strong opposition, while the tube women remained out until the 28th. The women received the extra 5s War



bonus, but the principle of equal pay was not conceded.

The details of organisation of this important struggle are obscure; indeed it is rather surprising that this strike, which must be one of the largest ever engaged in by women for their own demands, has not attracted more attention from historians of the labour movement.

The history of industrial struggle during the War was deeply bedded in the conditions of life of the working class during that period. From the very first months of the War essential commodities began to disappear from the shops while prices escalated. The main effect of the government's attempts to restrict profiteering by controlling prices was the rapid disappearance of designated goods from the shops. Even in the first year of the War, food shortages, or rather the shortage of money to pay inflated prices, had begun to have an effect. By 1915 infant mortality rates had increased by over 10% and there was an increased incidence of tuberculosis among women.

	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
Wages index	100	105-110	115-120	135	175
Cost of living	100	125	147	180	205
Food prices index	100	132	161	204	210 <sup>a</sup>

While the poor had to make do, the well-to-do, who by and large did very well out of the War, could afford to pay the increased prices. There was a huge growth in the black market. Both the Caledonian Road abattoirs and Smithfield meat market were the centres of thriving unofficial trades in meat, while some shopkeepers simply put up their shutters and dealt completely 'on the side'.

There were ludicrous government attempts to reduce 'waste' — throwing rice at weddings and taking in stray dogs both became criminal offences. 1916 saw the attempt to introduce meatless days, a proposal which did not go down too well with those who had far too many of them already. Well-fed middle-class matrons were sent round the country to lecture working-class women at factory canteens and similar venues on how to cut their consumption of food; their captive audiences, some of whom didn't have enough to eat, did not take too kindly to this, and some of the lecturers had rough rides.

As the War continued the queues got longer. Women had to spend ever more of their lives travelling from shop to shop trying to pick up individual items, sometimes waiting for hours; tempers rose, fights would start, and eventually police had to be used to control the crowds.

Throughout late 1916 and 1917 the food problem grew worse and in the bitterly cold winter of 1917–1918 matters reached a crisis. Gas and electricity were controlled — if you used more than your entitlement you could be cut off — and the quality and pressure of gas was so reduced that it was sometimes almost impossible to use it for cooking. Coal was very difficult to obtain, so that poorer families froze at home and went without hot food. The government had to introduce national kitchens to provide families with some of the basic necessities.

Even the solace of beer was affected. Its price had gone up 500% since the beginning of the War, and its quality — if drinkers of the period are to be believed — had declined by the same amount. Bread was heavily adulterated with barley, rice, maize, beans and up to one-eighth potatoes! It was not at all uncommon in Islington and other working-class areas for grocers' and butchers' delivery boys — by definition supplying the better off, the poor had to queue — to be mugged and their baskets looted. Even the dead were affected; there was an acute shortage of coffins and long delays in funerals led to great distress among bereaved families.

Unrest grew and in early 1918 the government finally had to introduce compulsory rationing. But the damage had been done. The cumulative effect of deprivation in the War years, observation by ordinary people of the transparent injustice of the system, the complete imbalance of the level of sacrifice, all led to a collapse in confidence in the objectivity of the authorities. This had a corrosive effect on the internal cohesion of British society, which substantially contributed to turning the anti-War radicals from a minority group into part of a growing movement with real mass support.

## Notes

1. Wal Hannington, *op cit*, p. 44. It was the government's reply to an appeal for a war bonus for Post Office workers.
2. Even before the strike 2,000 tram men had already volunteered; the LCC had promised them half pay but in the event had only given these men 1s a week, which had not improved the men's temper. For further details of this strike see my article 'Lessons for the Past', published in *Busmen What Next?*, Solidarity Pamphlet 16, 1964.
3. R. M. Fox, *op cit*, p. 192.
4. This propaganda was echoed by H. M. Hyndman, a leader of the BSP, in a widely publicised letter to Clemenceau in 1915 in which he claimed that the ILP were receiving German money to finance their anti-War stand.
5. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Home Front*, 1932, p. 194. I recommend this book — which

unfortunately only covers events until the end of 1916 — to all who wish to understand the struggles in London during the early part of the War.

6. There is an account of this strike in *The First Shop Stewards' Movement*, by James Hinton, 1973, pp. 196–212. Like most histories of the period, it's a bit thin about events in London.
7. The struggle of women transport workers was not isolated. In the same month there was agitation among school teachers, and the unrest spread to workers at Woolwich in November — when 6,000 'munitionettes' took the day off and demonstrated in Whitehall. There were numerous other smaller strikes and demonstrations. For example, in October 1918 women street cleaners in Holborn struck; that they had strong local support was shown when there were violent clashes when housewives set about blacklegs with brooms. There was also a series of upheavals among the thousands of women 'temporary' workers at the huge Mount Pleasant postal sorting office at Clerkenwell; the unions representing 'inside' staff had refused the women membership, so they had to set up their own unofficial committees.
8. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Prices and Wages in the United Kingdom, 1914–1920*.

## 6. *The North London Herald League*

The *Daily Herald* began as a strike paper of the London compositors during their strike in the first three months of 1911. The success of this venture prompted an attempt to create a permanent socialist daily newspaper and the *Daily Herald* emerged in April 1912 with a working capital of £200.

The *Daily Herald* in this period was *not* the mouthpiece of the established labour movement. Indeed, six months after the launch of the *Herald* the TUC and the Labour Party started their own paper, the *Daily Citizen*, in competition. The *Citizen* lasted three years and then sank without trace, taking £200,000 of trade union money with it. The *Daily Herald* was deeply critical of the trade union leaderships as well as many of the attitudes of the established socialist parties.

The *Daily Herald* did not have a settled policy. It saw itself as a forum for the whole range of radical causes, from industrial unionism to the women's movement, and it attracted to itself support from activists within all these fields. Not surprisingly there were deep differences in its editorial group. The *Herald* had five editors during its first 18 months, after which George Lansbury took over and things settled down. In spite of these differences (the editorial group on occasions seem to have fought like cats and dogs) the paper was able to reflect all the currents of the rebel milieu.

The early *Daily Herald* is so identified with George Lansbury that it is often forgotten that he was part — as he was the first to admit — of a team. One of the back room boys heavily involved in the *Herald's* early struggles was H. W. Hobart. Hobart, a compositor and the grandson of a Chartist, lived at Gillespie Road, Drayton Park. He had joined the local SDF in 1886 and was active in North London socialist politics. He had played a notable part in organising unskilled workers in the wave of industrial unrest of the late 1880s. For example, he assisted Ben Tillett during a dock strike at Tilbury and was a leading figure in the organisation of the match girls' struggle, both in 1888. He was also actively involved in the great dock strike of 1889, and the subsequent growth and organisation of the Gasworkers' Union. Hobart illustrates the manifold links between the rebel milieu — epitomised by the *Herald* — and previous waves of militancy.

As could be expected the *Daily Herald* went from one financial crisis to the next, but in spite of this its circulation grew by leaps and bounds to a peak just before the War of 150,000. This chronic money problem and the need to create a network of committed newspaper sellers motivated the formation of the Herald Leagues late in 1912. At the same time, the militants thrown up by the pre-War wave of industrial and social unrest needed an organisation on which to base their activity. The Herald League spread very rapidly; for example, nearly 20 new groups were founded in July 1914 alone. By the outbreak of War virtually every major population centre was covered.

With the coming of War, the *Daily Herald* had to go over to weekly publication, and many of the Herald Leagues seem to have collapsed. But the more substantial groups, which were overwhelmingly anti-War, went on to play a notable, if so far largely undocumented, part in the revolutionary movement during the War years. They took on, for example, an important role in events on the Clyde and in Sheffield, as well as other parts of London.

The North London Herald League (NLHL), or to give its official title, the Northern Division 'Herald League', was founded in 1913. Its membership in the period before the War hovered around 50 but it was nevertheless able to play a significant part in a number of agitations, from combating the growing War fever to supporting the Larkin 'fiery cross' campaign and the Dublin strikers. The NLHL was also heavily engaged in the wave of industrial unrest immediately preceding the War, in particular the building workers' strike of 1914.

The NLHL's membership at this early stage seems to have come primarily from the libertarian anti-parliamentarian rebel milieu; its slogan 'unite and fight' indicated that its primary orientation was towards action rather than ideological purity. While there was substantial agreement on most questions within the League, differences within it were tolerated, indeed welcomed.

Among the North London Herald League's leading figures before the War were the brothers Leonard and Percy Howard, Walter Ponder, Albert Young, Jack Carney, Victor Beacham, Lesley Boyne and R. M. Fox.<sup>1</sup>

On August 5th, 1914 — the day after the declaration of War — the League held its first anti-War meeting — at Salisbury Corner, Haringay, near Finsbury Park. The speaker was Walter Ponder.<sup>2</sup> This meeting initiated the NLHL's campaign against the War. Ponder spoke regularly for the League right throughout the War until 1920, but this was only a small part of his activity; he was a prominent speaker at a number of other venues in London.

R. M. Fox described what happened:

At the next Herald meeting [after the declaration of War] I moved a resolution of opposition to the War on the ground that we should take neither side in international rivalries. On the contrary we stood for a united world movement of the working class. There was no mention in my resolution of abstract principles or the sacredness of human life. I believed that life was a conflict of forces, that principles were bound to clash. It was not our war, that was all. We still accepted the slogan *'Workers of the World, Unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains. You have a world to win!'*<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the meetings in Finsbury Park continued. The position of the NLHL was clear, but it still had to sort out the attitude of the national Herald League. Fox continues:

As delegates of the North London Herald League, I went to a conference of League branches, and there moved the same anti-war resolution as we had adopted locally. . . . The overwhelming majority of delegates were on my side, although the National Secretary of our organisation — George Belt — was not. He had fallen victim to jingo propaganda. The resolution was carried in spite of attempts by the secretary to create disorder. To make our decision clear, I moved that the secretary be instructed to publish our anti-War resolution in the League Notes column of the *Herald*. I did not foresee at this early stage that even such a man as George Lansbury, with the reputation of a pacifist, who was then editing the paper, might not care to publish this outspoken resolution. In the course of a week or two we received a letter addressed to the North London Division from the National Secretary informing us that Lansbury would only consent to insert the resolution if we could show that it represented the attitude of 90 per cent of the League. The labour movement, we were told, must show a united front, a remark which — if it meant anything at all — meant that we should support the war-mongers. . . .

At our next business meeting we had a letter from Henry Sara<sup>4</sup> saying that he thought it was essential for these meetings to be carried on, and volunteering to speak at the next one. We accepted his offer. I spoke first, opening the meeting and Sara continued. This anti-War activity in the early days of the War was not without its dangers, for an atmosphere of terrorisation was created. But though we got violent opposition, we had enthusiastic support too. Our membership mounted; from under 50 we reached a total of five or six hundred. From all over London, from the East End, from south and west, came supporters who rallied to the anti-War standard which was raised openly in Finsbury Park. Gradually the authorities tightened the bonds. The Defence of the Realm Act was passed. [March 1915] . . . Should we carry on? It was a serious meeting we held, for everyone knew the risks we were facing. I moved that we continue our propaganda in spite of DORA. The resolution was passed in silence and grimly. But it was passed.

Our meetings were almost the only meetings in London — certainly the only meetings held regularly — at which participation in the War was flatly opposed. The labour movement on its anti-War side had shut down.

We were successful at our meetings partly because we gathered support from all quarters and partly because we always struck the Labour vote. We appealed to the workers' experience. They knew that profiteers and sweaters were getting rich<sup>5</sup> out of this war, because they knew these gentry and had suffered from them. We helped them to rate at its true worth the whinings of politicians about the protection of women and children, whose weakness and helplessness had always been taken advantage of without protest from them.<sup>6</sup>

The League soon had to face the growing threat of conscription, which was finally introduced in January 1916. The League devoted much of its activity towards facing this threat. Among the many meetings at Finsbury Park was one described many years later by Fox, at which the main speakers were Sylvia Pankhurst and Alex Gossip.<sup>7</sup> The press had got word of this particular demonstration and had agitated for 'patriots' to oppose the meeting 'and put the case for Britain'. When the meeting started it was surrounded by a dense mass of violently hostile jingos, but with the help of a friendly soldier in uniform who believed in free speech they managed to get the meeting started and Gossip began to speak. After a short time the crowd surged forward and succeeded in toppling the platform. Fox goes on:

Fights went on all round the area but a cordon of socialist supporters succeeded in clearing a ring and holding hands. As Chairman of the Herald League I then called upon Sylvia Pankhurst to speak from the ground which she did with great effect.

Presently the applause attracted the attention of a park ranger who pushed his way through and called upon us to bring the meeting to a close. He said the authorities would not be answerable for our lives if the meeting went on. I think he exaggerated the danger, though undoubtedly we risked a bad beating. But Sylvia replied that she had made arrangements to speak for the Herald League that morning and she intended to fulfil her engagement. She did this with such effect that the crowd grew to enormous proportions and the hooligans ceased their sideshow activities and converged on the meeting.

When it was no longer possible to continue, the pressure of the crowd forced Sylvia and the rest of us towards the park gates. Suddenly Sylvia announced she wanted to go in the opposite direction. So we had to turn round and fight our way back. There were cries of 'Get the women out and bash the men!' If it had been at night there would not have been this spark of chivalry. The women would have been 'bashed' too in the dark.<sup>7</sup>

The Herald League finally managed to extricate themselves from the mêlée without too much damage. But the meetings and the attacks upon them, continued; week after week the fight went on, a sustained record of determination and courage.

## Notes

1. See notes 2 to 5 on pages 22 and 23.
2. Walter Ponder seems to have been something of a specialist in anti-militarism; in May 1913 he had been one of the prime movers in a large demonstration organised by anarchists with the support of the North London Herald League at Trafalgar Square. This was a large affair with tributary marches coming from Highbury Corner, St Pancras Arches and several other venues. See John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse*, p. 279.
3. Fox, op cit. pp. 1901-1.
4. Henry Sara had been an anarchist before the War. After it he joined the Communist Party and in 1929 he was their parliamentary candidate in South Tottenham; still later he was one of the founding fathers of British Trotskyism. Ironically, Sara's successful Labour opponent in the 1929 election was Fred Messer, who had also been a member of the NLHL. Fred Messer (1886-1970) was born in Islington — his father was the workhouse master! — and a french polisher by trade. He had been a member of the SLP and was later an active syndicalist. During the War he was involved in several strikes. After a number of years as an MP he was knighted. Messer was not the only one who had cut his teeth in the NLHL to be 'honoured'; others were Eric (Dick) Plummer who became editor of the *Daily Express*, Labour MP for Deptford, and boss of the groundnut scheme in West Africa; Val McEntee, an ex-SPGBer, who became MP for Walthamstow, and A. G. Tomkins who was a founder member of the Communist Party and became a trade union official in the furniture trade.
5. In early 1915, the Herald League was associated with a campaign against sweated work along with Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes, some BSP and ILP branches and the Dockers' Union. See Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History*, 1973, p. 89.
6. Fox, op cit, pp. 192-5.
7. Alex Gossip was a well known figure in the trade union movement; he became General Secretary of the Furniture Workers' Union.
8. See the article by R. M. Fox called 'Years of Glory' in the *AEU Journal* of November 1960. This was written when Fox heard of Sylvia Pankhurst's death.



## *7. The Herald League, the Clyde, and the Irish Connection*

The Herald League was not only committed to the anti-War struggle—it continued its involvement in the whole range of social issues. For example, very soon after the War started the League supported the League of Rights for Soldiers' and Sailors' Wives and Relatives, which had been formed by Sylvia Pankhurst, Mrs Despard and Minnie Lansbury. It was very effective and its success prompted the government to step in and create its own welfare organisation. One of the main campaigns of the LRSSWR was against the pernicious regulations introduced by the government and the local military authorities against servicemen's wives, who were kept under police supervision. 'Unworthy' women could have their dependents' allowance withdrawn. Some military commanders went even further and introduced curfews for wives under the DORA regulations—in South Wales this was set at 7 p.m. and five women caught breaking it were court-martialled and sentenced to 62 days in prison. These measures were finally defeated by a combination of the agitation led by the LRSSWR and women's organisations, and by the acute need for women workers in industry.

One part of the DORA regulations relating to women continued in operation throughout the War. This was Sec. 40, which made it a criminal offence to infect servicemen with VD. Numerous women, including some in North London, were convicted and sentenced to prison sentences with hard labour, and many more were subjected to humiliating interrogations and medical examinations.

The NLHL was also involved in tenants' struggles. In November 1915, some of its members were active in supporting a series of rent strikes in Edmonton involving over 1,000 tenants. There is substantial evidence that in the early part of the War, when working-class areas were feeling the full effect of inflation but before the introduction of the War bonus system, there were numerous local rent strikes. These were often a forced deferral rather than a refusal of payment; there were sometimes banners across the street or tenement entrance telling the rent collector in no unfriendly terms not to call for the duration. There was a long tradition of such strikes—for example they were common during the great industrial struggles of 1889; they were the working-

class equivalent of a bank overdraft. As a result of this agitation among tenants the government was forced to take action and in December 1915 it introduced the Rent and Mortgage Interest Restriction Act which stopped any further increase in the rents of working-class homes.

In the autumn of 1915, some of the League's members were among the founders of the London-based Trade Union Rights Committee.<sup>1</sup> This committee, whose formation preceded that of the Clyde Workers' Committee, was in close touch with developments on Clydeside. There was also another more direct source of information, Tom Bell and his mate Jim Morton, who in the spring and summer of 1915 were working at Aston's Foundry, Eagle Wharf Road, Islington. Both Bell and Morton, who were members of the SLP, and who played prominent parts in later developments in Glasgow, were in contact with the NLHL and more particularly with its industrial membership.<sup>2</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that when events in Glasgow came to the boil the NLHL reacted positively. R. M. Fox described what happened in March 1916:

The Press rang with denunciations of the Clyde strikers. We expected that. What we did not expect was a statement by George Lansbury, which was featured in all the papers, saying that the Clyde men should go back, and the spirit in South Wales and the Clyde was deplorable, and that there should be more trust between the workers, the employers and the Government.

As ill luck would have it, Lansbury was due to speak at an indoor meeting of the Herald League the week the statement appeared. Our anti-War propaganda was quite definite, we stood with the Clyde, with South Wales, and with all the Labour militants who wanted freedom and fair dealing at home. . . .

I found myself in the position of having to oppose Lansbury at the meeting. We could not sell the *Herald* that week and had the bundle waiting for him to take back. . . .

In opening the meeting I told Mr Lansbury, who sat next to me, that there was only one thing we wanted to hear from him that night, and that was an apology or explanation of his statement on the Clyde strike. If the spirit of revolt there was deplorable, then our own movement was deplorable, for that was the reason for our existence. The pennies and enthusiasm of working people had made the *Herald*, and Kirkwood<sup>3</sup> had only stood for their human rights. Finally, if workers should trust employers and the Government, why should we have an independent workers' movement at all?

I reminded him that the anti-conscription issue of the *Herald* had suggested a strike against conscription. He replied that they should not strike on a petty question of wages.

Several engineers in the audience shouted that the strike was against the deportation of trusted leaders who were suffering because of their services to the workers.<sup>4</sup>

The NLHL invited two speakers from the Clyde Workers' Committee

to address a Finsbury Park meeting to protest at the deportations. The meeting was very successful, with groups of workers from many factories attending. Fox described the consequences:

Our large and successful meeting for the Clyde deportees — the only manifestation of support from London — annoyed a section of the Press, which was loud in its abuse. Next Sunday a party of soldiers wearing little Union Jacks made a noisy demonstration during my opening speech . . . [and] they made a determined rush at the platform. Our people turned and fought them back. From the platform I had a grandstand view. One negro supporter,<sup>5</sup> in particular, fought like a hero. If our side had been beaten I suppose it would have ended disastrously for me.<sup>6</sup>

As can be imagined, defence of meetings was essential if the work of the NLHL was to be continued, and it is clear that an informal defence group emerged, committed to protecting speakers at the Finsbury Park meetings. There were attempts to formalise the situation from time to time; for example, Ted Hennem in a letter to me remembers Sylvia Pankhurst proposing that members should be drilled in the garden of the NLHL's premises, but the suggestion was rejected.

Strong links with the Clyde continued throughout the War. In late 1918, the NLHL was the prime mover in the formation of the London-based John Maclean Defence Committee to agitate for his release from prison. It organised a huge meeting on November 24th, 1918 — about 10,000 were present — at which the speakers were John Arnall, Arthur McManus, W. F. Watson and Melvina Walker. Maclean was released on December 3rd.

There was another link with the Clyde: George Ebury,<sup>7</sup> who lived in Lady Margaret Road, Kentish Town, and who in February 1914 had been the proposed parliamentary candidate for North Islington BSP. In 1916 he had become the National Organiser of the BSP, continuing in that position throughout the latter part of the War. After 1918 he spent most of his time in the industrial centres, particularly Glasgow, where he played a prominent part. Ebury was arrested several times, most notably during the 'Battle of George's Square' in January 1919. He kept close contact with events in North London and was a frequent speaker at socialist meetings in the area. So it's quite clear that connections between North London and the Clyde were quite close.

Another example of the extent of the contacts of the NLHL is Ireland. From well before the War, Ireland had been one of the League's main preoccupations. In December 1913, the NLHL and North Islington BSP organised a rally at the Caledonian Road Baths in support of the Dublin strikers; in January 1914 there were two more joint NLHL/BSP meetings on Ireland; this campaign culminated in February at a big

meeting at the Allison Hall, Green Lanes, at which the main speakers were George Bennett and Jim Larkin.<sup>8</sup>

The spokesman representing the NLHL at these meetings was Jack Carney, one of its earliest members. Carney was a close friend of Larkin, who had converted him to socialism in 1906.<sup>9</sup>

After the outbreak of War the NLHL continued its interest in Irish events, especially after the Dublin Easter uprising in 1916. Fox is again the best source for what happened:

In the midst of our preoccupation [with the situation on the Clyde] came the news of the Easter Rebellion in Ireland. I knew of the united and successful resistance to conscription, and I knew that Connolly was urging, week by week, that if Irishmen had to fight it would be better to shed their blood in a struggle for their own National Freedom. But the Easter Rebellion and the executions which followed the week's desperate fighting added a new tragedy.<sup>10</sup>

When the first news of the uprising reached London, Patricia Lynch, a member of the WSF as well as the NLHL,<sup>11</sup> left for Ireland immediately and managed to smuggle herself into Dublin in spite of it being sealed off by the authorities. On her return to London she wrote the first radical report of the fighting, which appeared in the *Women's Dreadnought* in May 1916. This text was also published as a widely distributed pamphlet called *Rebel Ireland* which was also translated into French. She reported her experiences to both indoor and outdoor meetings of the NLHL. R. M. Fox described the League's reaction:

We in North London hailed the Irish Rising as the first crack in the yet undisputed rule of the Imperialists.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

1. See Chapter 11.
2. For an account of this visit, but without details of his political activities while in London, see Thomas Bell, *Pioneering Days*, 1941.
3. David Kirkwood, convener of the Parkhead Forge, whose arrest and deportation had sparked off the strike.
4. R. M. Fox, op cit, pp. 202-4. The strong Glasgow Herald League also refused to sell the offending issue of the *Herald*.
5. This was almost certainly Reuben Gilmore, an active member and occasional speaker for the NLHL. Gilmore, a ship's steward, was also a member of the WSF. After the War he became Secretary of the Poplar Unemployed c. 1920-21, and he was one of those arrested on January 3, 1921, when he was one of the assault party which tried to seize Islington Town Hall during a massive unemployed demonstration. For more information about this incident see my article 'Direct Action and the Unemployed', *Solidarity*, July 1964.

6. R. M. Fox, op cit, p. 213.
7. George Ebury was born in 1867 and was converted to socialism in Glasgow in 1884. He worked as a carpet designer in Heckmondwike until 1908, when he was sacked following his election as a socialist councillor. In 1911 he moved to London, and in 1913 he became a Clarion Vanner. In 1916 he was National Organiser for the BSP, and with the formation of the Communist Party he became the Yorkshire organiser; he later moved to Plymouth where he was local organiser and National Treasurer of the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement. He subsequently left the CP and died in 1939. The 'Battle of George's Square' was the culmination of what was virtually a general strike in Glasgow in support of the 40 hour week. A huge demonstration was attacked by the police and there was heavy fighting, as a result of which the government brought in troops and tanks as a demonstration of strength. The strike was defeated.
8. Jim Larkin needs no introduction here, but George Bennett might. He was a plumber who lived locally, joined the SDP/BSP about 1901, and was a leading figure in the building workers' strike of 1914. He was a prominent member of the London Society of Plumbers, which was one of the component parts of the Building Workers' Industrial Union (see Chapter 3). His relationship with the NLHL is obscure but in 1923 he was the unsuccessful Labour Party Parliamentary Candidate in North Islington.
9. Jack Carney was active in the NLHL until he went to America in 1916. While there he collaborated with Larkin in producing *The Irish Worker*, and later in the War he edited *Truth*, a socialist paper in Duluth, Minnesota. Carney kept in close touch with the NLHL. After the War he returned to Ireland where he became an official of Larkin's union.
10. R. M. Fox, op cit, p. 213.
11. Patricia Lynch, 1898–1972, was born in Cork. Before the War she had already joined Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes and various Irish organisations. After the War she returned to Ireland, married R. M. Fox, and wrote over 50 books, most of them for children. Her brother, Henry Lynch, was also an active member of the NLHL but died in 1916.
12. R. M. Fox, op cit, p. 216.

## 8. *The Development of the NLHL*

With the influx of members after the outbreak of War, the character of the NLHL changed. From a small, active, relatively homogeneous group, it turned into a much larger and broadly-based movement in opposition to the War. While this did not stop the League from engaging in a wide range of activities, it made for some strange bedfellows.

This is described by Edward Hennem:

It was not until the outbreak of the War that the League blossomed and became a natural haven for those who opposed the War. The grounds for their opposition varied — some were simply humanitarians and pacifists, others viewed the War as a ‘capitalist and imperialist conflagration’. The Herald League, however, seemed to provide a common platform for all rebels.

It had no constitution — no political dictums — no rigid conditions for membership — merely a common ground for opposing the War.

As can be expected, it attracted a motley crowd of support but it stood firm in opposition to the War — and there was an amazing degree of tolerance between its members. The Christian and the Anarchist seemed to find something in common.<sup>1</sup>

R. M. Fox’s account of the League ended with his imprisonment in early 1916, and while his book gives a vivid first-hand account of the NLHL’s activity up to that point, it is one man’s story and gives only a limited impression of the wide range of the League’s activities and of the spectrum of people and ideologies involved. The League’s open-air meetings were not confined to Finsbury Park — although it was by far the most important venue — but took place all over North London.<sup>2</sup> And although Sara and Fox were without doubt the most prominent speakers at the Sunday meetings at Finsbury Park they were by no means alone. Victor Beacham<sup>3</sup> and Walter Ponder were also prominent, as was Reg Sorenson.<sup>4</sup> While not active as speakers, other members did the backroom organisational work. First and foremost of these before, during and after the War were the brothers Percy and Leonard Howard. Other members of the NLHL did its printing, distributed leaflets, held education classes and carried on all the other activities which constitute a living movement.

The papers which the League sold give a good impression of the range represented within it. These included the *Weekly Herald*,<sup>5</sup> the

*Labour Leader*,<sup>6</sup> the *Glasgow Forward*,<sup>7</sup> *The Spur*,<sup>8</sup> the *Women's/Workers' Dreadnought*,<sup>9</sup> *Satire*,<sup>10</sup> and *The Socialist*.<sup>11</sup> This list is by no means complete, it is simply one participant's recollection,<sup>12</sup> but nevertheless gives some idea of the range of viewpoints represented.

Another aspect of the League's activity was its printing and publishing work. Before he went to prison, R. M. Fox had edited the first issue of the NLHL paper *The Rebel*. It was originally duplicated due to the extreme difficulty of bringing out new printed journals in wartime conditions, but it was later printed at the League's own printshop.<sup>13</sup> It continued to come out monthly until December 1920. The editor of *The Rebel* after R. M. Fox went to prison was Percy Howard.

The League did a fair amount of other printing and publishing work. It produced a range of leaflets and 'sticky-backs' as well as at least two larger pamphlets — *Red Dawn*, a book of poems by Albert Young,<sup>14</sup> and *Factory Echoes* by R. M. Fox.

The League was not a political organisation in the normal sense. Its members were active in a wide range of other organisations — the BSP, ILP, IWW, WSF, the No-Conscription Fellowship, the Socialist Sunday Schools, the various anarchist groups, the industrial rank-and-file movement, and many many more. The NLHL was part of an enormous matrix in which it is often difficult to isolate tidily the various currents. One person could be, and often was, active in half-a-dozen different organisations; at one time the League would be peripheral, at another central.

The breakdown of party divisions was one of the characteristics of the period; extreme organisational mobility was the norm. Where one stood on the War and a wide variety of related issues was infinitely more important than which political group one joined. It is therefore very difficult to understand what was going on in the radical movement during and after the 1914–1918 War in terms of institutions. It was from this milieu of political ferment that the post-War political dispositions emerged.

## Notes

1. Edward Hennem, op cit, 4.2.80.
2. After the end of the war the NLHL was still holding over 30 open-air meetings a month and this was exclusive of the many small meetings held on an 'ad hoc' basis.
3. Victor Beacham had been an anarchist and a member of the IWW before the War, as well as being one of the earliest members of the NLHL. After the War, Beacham joined the CP and became a trade union official in the Painters'

- Union. He left the CP in 1929 and joined the Labour Party. He died in 1961, aged 72.
4. Reg Sorenson, born in Islington in 1891, became Minister of the Free Christian Church in Walthamstow and joined the ILP. After the War, he was the Labour MP for West Leyton 1921–31 and 1935–1950 and for Leyton 1950–1964. He was created a life peer in 1964 and died in 1971.
  5. The *Daily Herald* became the *Weekly Herald* shortly after the outbreak of War.
  6. The ILP paper.
  7. Unofficial paper of Glasgow ILP, closely connected with industrial events on the Clyde.
  8. *The Spur* was an anarchist paper edited by Guy Aldred and, after his arrest in April 1916, by Rose Witcop. Aldred was connected with the NLHL from its earliest days and he resumed speaking for it after the War. Both Percy Howard and R. M. Fox of the NLHL wrote occasionally for *The Spur*.
  9. The paper of Sylvia Pankhurst's WSF.
  10. *Satire*, a monthly, was published at the Freedom Press between December 1916 and its suppression in April 1918. It was managed and edited by a remarkable duo, Leonard Motler and George Scates, who were both deaf-mute working-class anarchists. After the banning of *Satire*, Motler wrote a weekly column for the *Workers' Dreadnought*; he also produced a book of poems. After the War, in May 1920, Motler and Scates started a new paper, *Labour's Voice*, at their own printshop, the Satire Press at Crowndale Road, Camden. I believe Motler died in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1967.
  11. *The Socialist*, was the paper of the Socialist Labour Party; both R. M. Fox and Harry Lynch of the NLHL wrote for this journal early in the War.
  12. Edward Hennem, op cit.
  13. Called the Rebel Press, the printshop was situated at the League's premises. The printer Jack Smith was a member of the IWW. Smith died in 1942 of tuberculosis.
  14. *The Red Dawn, A Book of Verse for Revolutionaries and Others* was published in late 1915. Of it R. M. Fox says — op cit, p. 222 — that 'everywhere — especially in the militant centres of South Wales and in Glasgow — the book was in demand. They were ordered by the hundred.' *Red Dawn* had to be reprinted early in 1916. Albert Young, the author, died in December 1946, aged 62, in abject poverty. After the War, Albert Young lived in two rooms over a tailor's shop in Brunswick Place, off City Road; this shop and Young's flat belonged to Harry Boulter, who advertised in the socialist press as 'The Socialist Tailor'. Harry Boulter was a notable and widely respected figure in North London radical circles. He seems to have been mainly interested in anti-religious propaganda — in June 1909 he had been imprisoned for a month for blasphemy uttered at a meeting at Highbury Corner, and in November 1911 he had been sentenced to three months for the same offence. During the War, Boulter was a financial contributor to Guy Aldred's *The Spur*.



## 9. *The NLHL and Conscription*

Conscription was introduced in January 1916. Initially it applied to single men only but its scope was rapidly expanded. There had been widespread opposition to its introduction; even the TUC had voted overwhelmingly against, and some of the most ardent supporters of the recruiting campaign opposed it. When the Bill was passed, however, only one minister (Sir John Simon, a Liberal!) resigned, the Labour Ministers stayed put, and the TUC tamely accepted the decision.

Conscription was a very serious matter for the NLHL, not simply in terms of its effects on individual members, but also on the consequences for the League and the anti-War movement as a whole, since a large proportion of activists and speakers were men of military age.

Henry Sara, R. M. Fox, and a number of other members of the League<sup>1</sup> had to go before Conscientious Objectors' Tribunals almost immediately; Fox, an engineer, and some of the others could have claimed exemption but refused to do so. Predictably, they were refused CO status, but were given six weeks' grace before they were liable for arrest. Their reactions were described by Fox:

I had a glorious six weeks. I said everything I wanted to say about the War, irrespective of DORA. Moving a resolution at the weekly park meeting against the prohibition of our literature sales, I asked everyone to buy a paper from me to reinforce their protest. I sold hundreds from the platform handing them out as fast as I could. I felt that sense of freedom of the man who knows he is going to be hanged, and so doesn't care for threats from any quarter.<sup>2</sup>

But it wasn't all beer and skittles. The early COs had a very rough time. Henry Sara, for example, was arrested on April 13th, 1916. He was badly beaten, forced into uniform, and beaten again for refusing to obey orders, before being transferred to a civilian prison where he was kept until well into 1919. Many League members in prison took the 'absolutist' position in that they refused any alternative forms of service or any collaboration with the authorities. Consequently, they had a pretty rough time — bread and water, solitary confinement, and sometimes over three years in prison were their lot.

In some cases the authorities went even further in their attempts to intimidate COs. In June 1916, the army shipped 34 COs to the War

zone in France, where they were sentenced to death. After a long pause this was commuted to 10 years' imprisonment; they were eventually released in 1919. The No-Conscription Fellowship functioned efficiently, traced the men en route, and alerted sympathetic MPs who intervened and possibly saved the men's lives. Among this group of COs were five men from Edmonton and one each from Tottenham and St Pancras. One of them, Stewart Beavis from Lower Edmonton, wrote to his parents the day before he was to be sentenced:

Just a line. We have been warned today that we are now within the War zone. The military authorities have absolute power, and disobedience may be followed by very severe penalties, and possibly the death penalty, so I have dropped you a line in case they do not allow me to write after tomorrow. Do not be downhearted; if the worst comes to the worst many have died cheerfully for a worse cause.<sup>3</sup>

The names of the other North London men sentenced to death also deserve to be remembered; they were Alfred W. Taylor, Wilfred Thomas Frear, E. H. Walker and A. F. Walling from Edmonton, Edward J. Murfin from Tottenham and J. B. Lief from St Pancras.

But not all liable members of the League reacted in the same way. Some, as described above, took the absolutist path; others accepted alternative service,<sup>4</sup> still others went on the run or avoided service by a variety of subterfuges — it must be remembered that up to the First World War Britain simply did not have the detailed personal records necessary for conscription, so there was ample opportunity to avoid becoming enmeshed in the system. Of this opportunity many availed themselves — while still others, for family or other reasons, bowed to pressure and allowed themselves to be conscripted.

The question of attitudes to conscription is further complicated by the fact that many of those who had been infected by the War hysteria, had, as a result of their experiences, changed their attitude, so there was a growing body of anti-War feeling within the forces themselves, a classic example of the complexity of real social forces. Quite a number of men associated with the League went on the run. Edward Hennem mentions the case of Bill Savage,<sup>5</sup> who after he had been arrested and taken to Mill Hill Barracks managed to walk out and vanish, and still spent the rest of the War as an activist in the League. Hennem goes on to describe how the League protected its members:

If we went out in a group to a dance or cinema and there was a police raid for absentees, those who had registration cards gave them to those on the 'run' who then returned them at once to our homes; and we told the police that we had left them at home where they would be if the police checked.<sup>6</sup>

There was another story going around at the time of two young men,

only one of them with exemption documents, who were walking near Kings Cross, when they were approached by police checking papers. Immediately the man *with* exemption started running with the police in hot pursuit. After dashing through some back doubles and up Caledonian Road he reached the Canal Turn and waited for his pursuers, leaning on a wall with his arms crossed. Meanwhile the man on the 'run' quietly disappeared.

There seemed to be quite a considerable underground helping men on the run. Many older socialists and others who weren't ready to stick their necks out in open opposition to the War were prepared to provide accommodation and sometimes work for 'conscientious evaders'. There was at least one secret dormitory for men on the run at Woodford. The local IWW even seemed to be plugged into an 'underground railway' capable of smuggling men out of the country and to the USA. Charlie Lahr was offered a passage which he was unable to accept, while F. L. Kerran, alias Kerhahn, of Hackney BSP was actually arrested in the USA after escaping from the Cornwallis Road internment camp in Holloway. Both Lahr and Kerran were Germans and spent the rest of the War as internees.<sup>7</sup>

The authorities went to considerable lengths to catch the large numbers of men who were on the run, frequently raiding possible meeting places and setting up large operations to sweep particular areas. In mid-1916, a lion tamer was actually arrested on the stage of the Edmonton Empire.

For those men imprisoned the most important organisation was the No-Conscription Fellowship which had groups in most parts of North London, including one based on the NLHL. The NCF, which consisted entirely of men of military age, provided the essential organisation linking up the majority of those who were prepared to go to prison rather than fight. It built up an efficient intelligence network connecting those in prison with each other and the outside world, and it was able to intervene via sympathetic MPs to counter some of the worst abuses.

The NCF is often seen as purely a pacifist organisation. In fact three out of four of those imprisoned were opposed to the War on political grounds.<sup>8</sup> What is more, many of those who went into prison protesting against the War on religious or ethical grounds were converted to radical socialism by the 'hedge universities' and discussion groups which sprung up in most of the prisons and work gangs where COs were gathered.

The NCF also provided a valuable support organisation for the wives and dependents of men in prison. The pressure on these families could

be intense. Certainly, some jingos believed in visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generations. Minnie Vandome, nee Baynton, whose father was one of those imprisoned, described what happened to her:

About the time my father was arrested I took the scholarship exam at Detmold School. The *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* had made a feature of 'Conscientious Objector arrested in Clapton' on their placards placed outside newsagents. Anyone who read the *Gazette* knew about Dad. The consequence was that although I was the only pupil to pass the scholarship exam that year from that school, the Headmistress made a determined effort to have the award taken away from me. My mother had to fight for my right to the scholarship and, though I do not know what steps she took, she won, and I duly went to Laura Place Grammar School where the Headmistress and two of the teachers were Quakers and where I was treated with more sympathy than I might have found elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, as the War 'progressed', the armed forces began to be deeply affected by the change in political climate. Many of those who had so blithely volunteered, as well as conscripts and even regulars, began to see the futility of it all, and quite a few servicemen began to participate in, and support as far as they were able, the activities of the NLHL and other anti-War groups.

The growing War-weariness, and the massive troop casualties had an impact on the civilian population too. The habit early in the War of recruiting local battalions, which were then often brigaded together into Divisions with a regional base, meant that when these units had heavy losses — and sometimes they were virtually wiped out — the areas from which they were raised would face mass tragedy overnight. I have heard recollections of times after heavy battle when nearly every other house in some parts of North London had the blinds drawn in mourning.

Unrest began to grow in the forces. This discontent culminated after 1917 in wave upon wave of mutinies, literally hundreds of them, involving hundreds of thousands of service men and women and which went on well after the end of the War.<sup>10</sup>

It is very difficult, and outside the scope of this text, to document these subterranean currents. After all, those involved were not anxious to draw attention to themselves (this was one occasion when it didn't pay to advertise). However, I have been able to trace some connections between the upheavals in the armed forces and subsequent events. An example is Dennis Jennett. Aged 37 in 1919, Jennett was a shoemaker who lived in Cross Street, Islington. He had actively participated in unrest in the Army which might have explained his relatively early

demobilisation. By early 1919 Jennett was heavily involved in the Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers (FDDSS) and in May 1919 he was one of those arrested at a violent demonstration at Constitution Hill. He went on to become one of the most prominent figures in the Islington unemployed movement in the early 1920s. In November–December 1920 he played a leading part in the occupation of the Essex Road library by the unemployed and, following their eviction from there, was a leading light in the very violent mass demonstration in protest (which included an attempt to seize the Town Hall!)<sup>11</sup>

The Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers was one of the groups which formed the basis of the later unemployed organisations; there was a similar group, the National Union of Ex-Servicemen, which in 1920 had a local branch based on the NLHL's premises, and there was a considerable amount of joint agitation.

Individuals with similar backgrounds to Jennett played significant parts in several areas of local radical activity after the War. In particular, the whole unemployed movement in North London seems to have been dominated by an unholy alliance of ex-service militants and ex-anti-War activists.

## Notes

1. Apart from Fox and Sara, 'absolutist' League members included Victor Beacham, G. H. Hebbs, Teddy Knight, G. Mabbs, J. Mathews, L. Simon, J. G. Stone and Leonard J. Simcox; they all served long sentences and were only released — after a hunger strike — in early 1919.
2. R. M. Fox, *op cit*, pp. 218–9.
3. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Home Front*, *op cit*, p. 334.
4. Altogether there were about 16,000 COs, of which 3,300 accepted service in the Non-Combatant Corps, 3,000 did various forms of ambulance work and 4,000 did alternative work. About 6,000 went to prison, of which 3,750 accepted work after serving a term in prison. There were about 1,500 absolutists.
5. Bill Savage, who had been an anarchist and a member of the WSF, went on to become a leading member of the Islington Communist Party. In the 1920s he edited a paper for Kings Cross railwaymen called *The Star*, while his wife Dora was the secretary of the Islington branch of the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement in 1924. In the 1939–45 War, Savage moved to Essex where he edited another paper called the *Rural Crusader*. He died a few years ago. Other NLHLers who went on the lam included Eric Fox, R. M.'s brother, who like him worked at the JAP engine plant in Tottenham. After serving one term in prison as a CO, Eric Fox decided he didn't want another helping. After the War he became a diplomatic official in the Canary Islands. Another evader was Fred Peet; born in 1900, Peet was the cousin of Harry Young (see note 18, page

92) and before the War had been an active member of the local BSP; with the coming of peace he became secretary of the London Hands Off Russia Committee and a founder member of the Islington CP — he was a member of the Party's Executive in 1921 — but in 1929 he left the CP and joined South Islington Labour Party. He died in the mid 1950s when he was a businessman in the garment trade.

6. Hennem op cit.
7. This network seems to have continued after the War, in this case smuggling revolutionaries to Russia and elsewhere, rather than COs on the run.
8. See for example *Conscription Conflict*, by Dennis Hayes, 1949, p. 257.
9. Letter to author, from Minnie Vandome, March 1980. Mrs Vandome later became an active member of Hackney ILP. She married Albert Vandome, an engineer who was a member of the BSP before and during the War and a founder member of the CP after it. The friendly Headmistress to whom Minnie Vandome refers was Kate O'Brien Harris, who had been secretary of the Brotherhood Association at the turn of the century (see Chapter 16). Her husband, Theodore Harris, also a Quaker and an active member of the Brotherhood Church, was the manager of Hackney Labour Exchange. After the War he played an active part in finding jobs for returned COs. Incidentally, various elements of the Brotherhood Church movement seemed to have played a very significant part in the informal networks helping men on the run.
10. For a description see Dave Lamb, 'Mutinies 1917–1920', *Solidarity*, 1979, and Andrew Rothstein, *Soldiers' Strikes of 1919*, Journeyman, 1985.
11. Another less savoury connection between the unrest in the armed forces, the ex-servicemen's organisations, and the labour movement was John Beckett of Hackney. Beckett, born in 1894, was leader of the local National Union of Ex-Servicemen. When this organisation was dissolved in 1921 he joined — with about 60 other members — the Hackney ILP. He was a Hackney Borough Councillor between 1919 to 1922, the Labour Group of which was then led by Herbert Morrison. In 1924 Beckett became MP for Gateshead and from 1929 until 1931 he was the left-wing MP for Peckham. Beckett left the Labour Party and the ILP with Oswald Mosley and he became a leader of the British Union of Fascists until 1934 when, along with William Joyce ('Lord Haw Haw'), he left the BUF and created the National Socialist League of which he was secretary. Beckett was interned in 1940.

For an account of the occupation of the Essex Road Library and the assault on the Town Hall see my article 'Direct Action and the Unemployed', op cit.

## 10. *The NLHL and the Russian Revolution*

After Fox, Sara, Beacham and all the others went to prison, a new generation took over the main brunt of public speaking. This new wave included John Arnall<sup>1</sup> and Henry Stenning,<sup>2</sup> and these regular speakers were backed up by a wide variety of others who spoke occasionally.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, with the introduction of conscription, more of the League's work was devoted to supporting men in prison or on the run. It collaborated with other anti-War groups such as the Union of Democratic Control, which had local groups in Islington and Hackney. The League also participated in the printing and distribution of anti-War leaflets and 'sticky backs'; one campaign of swamping south Islington with anti-War material in December 1916 led to a vigorous but unsuccessful police hunt to find the culprits.

Leaflet distribution could be a dangerous activity. In the summer of 1916 Stephen Hobhouse, who lived in Aske Street (Hoxton) between 1911 and 1923, and a friend were canvassing with a peace petition in Hoxton. The word quickly spread that they were German spies and a mob quickly gathered with every intention of throwing them in the Regents Canal. Hobhouse and his mate managed to escape by the skins of their teeth owing to the timely arrival of a tram on which they were able to make their departure.<sup>4</sup> Others were not so lucky.

There were strong and longstanding local connections with revolutionary Russians, some of whom had left Russia following the pogroms or the failure of the 1905 uprising. There were hundreds if not thousands of socialists from the Russian empire living in London, and many of them were in close touch with the anti-War movement.

Kentish Town branch of the BSP had among its members before the War, Maxim Litvinov,<sup>5</sup> Georgy Chicherin,<sup>6</sup> probably Aleksandr Shlyapnikov,<sup>7</sup> and Peter Petroff; the last was by far the best known Russian active in the British movement.

Peter Petroff was a member of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party<sup>8</sup> from 1910; he was wounded during the 1905 uprising and exiled to Siberia whence he escaped. He then arrived in Glasgow where he was befriended and taught English by John Maclean. After a while he came to London and joined the Kentish Town BSP.<sup>9</sup>

Petroff, and to a lesser extent Litvinov and Chicherin, were well known figures in North London socialist circles, and even before the War had visited the NLHL on a number of occasions.<sup>10</sup> After the outbreak of War, Petroff had been invited back to the Clyde by John Maclean where he worked closely with the Clyde Workers' Committee. This led to an attack on him in *Justice*<sup>11</sup> on December 23rd, 1915, more or less inciting the authorities to arrest him. Sure enough, a few months later he was arrested and interned.<sup>12</sup> There was a large campaign for his release in which the NLHL played an active part, but Petroff was not released until January 1918 when, following the intervention of the new Soviet government he was deported to Russia.<sup>13</sup>

Kentish Town was not the only refuge of Russian revolutionaries. There were also a number in the various BSP branches in Hackney, notably a man called Holtzmann, who returned to Russia in the summer of 1917,<sup>14</sup> and Joe Fineberg who also returned there in June 1918 and was apparently Lenin's secretary for some time.

The NLHL also had its contingent of Russians. Few of their names are remembered. Joe Fineberg, mentioned above, was one of them. There was another man called Alfred Morris, and his companion, a beautiful woman from the Ukraine, called Seema; they returned to Russia soon after the revolution but Morris came back to Britain some time later deeply disillusioned, and apparently several others had the same experience.

News of the fall of the Tsar in March 1917 created the socialist equivalent of the relief of Mafeking. Within 14 days — on March 31st — the Herald League national organisation had convened a huge meeting at the Albert Hall with 10–12,000 people present and 5,000 more turned away. The Herald League formed what was virtually a front organisation called the Anglo-Russian Democratic Alliance, while in North London the defence of the revolution became a central theme of the NLHL's activity.

Following the Leeds Convention of Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates in June 1917,<sup>15</sup> a debate was organised between Havelock Wilson, General Secretary of the National Union of Seamen, and leader of the extreme patriotic wing of the TUC, and the NLHL, which took place on June 24th at Finsbury Park. Wilson arranged for his main henchman in the NUS, 'Captain' Tupper, to bring a gang of 200 'torpedoed seamen' from the East End to the meeting. According to Tupper's account, when he gave the prearranged signal his men 'went berserk' and attacked the rebels, many of whom were beaten up and robbed; while some were hung up on the park railings by their trousers, others were pursued through the neighbouring streets, and at least one was followed



to his music shop which was then looted. There were no arrests.<sup>16</sup> Tupper's men were not the only organised 'patriots' present. There was also a contingency of Australian troops whom Harold Edwards remembers attempting to throw him and his comrades into the park lake.

Tupper's attack on the Finsbury Park meeting was no isolated event. He seemed to have been called in by the government to sort out a number of little problems for them. For example, in July 1918 he and his troupe of 200 'torpedoed seamen' were brought in by Winston Churchill and provided with special trains to help break the strike of Coventry munition workers; it was alleged at the time that these men were paid £1 a day plus expenses. There seems to be an untold story of secret intervention in labour affairs during the War. Some light was thrown on the government's corruption of labour leaders by Mr W. M. R. Pringle, a Liberal MP who had on 5th August, 1917, in the House of Commons accused the authorities of offering large pecuniary inducements to trade union officials, 'sometimes with success', to make secret reports on 'agitators' and 'anti-patriots'. Havelock Wilson was charged by Arthur Henderson, no less, with handling £50,000 for which he couldn't account, while Tom Richardson, a Labour MP, alleged that the clerical work of Wilson's Patriotic Crusade was done by the War Office.<sup>17</sup>

After the October revolution the League's campaign of support continued. As early as November 18th, 1917, the NLHL held a meeting at Finsbury Park welcoming the new regime (incidentally, this meeting was also attacked by a howling mob) and in the ensuing months there were many further meetings of support, some with many thousands in attendance. In mid-1918 a new speaker became fairly prominent at Finsbury Park in this context, Harry Pollitt, who had joined the Stepney Herald League and the WSF when he arrived in London early that year.<sup>18</sup> In January 1919 the NLHL was one of the founding groups of the 'Hands Off Russia Movement' in which it remained a very active participant.

Meanwhile, harrassment of meetings continued. In May 1918 the NLHL convened a meeting in Finsbury Park to commemorate the centenary of the birth of Karl Marx at which Charlotte Despard was one of the main speakers. This meeting was first banned and then broken up by a large force of foot and mounted police. It is perhaps indicative of the change of political climate during the latter part of the War that this meeting was officially supported by over 100 trade union branches and six trades councils, with converging marches coming from Holloway Prison, Edmonton, Tottenham, Walthamstow, Highgate and Camden Town.

## Notes

1. John Arnall, of the BSP, was imprisoned for three months in early 1918 for 'seditious' statements made in French, uttered at a meeting in Finsbury Park. Later he was the unsuccessful Labour Party candidate for North Islington in the November 1918 general election.
2. Harry Stenning was a member of the ILP; after the War he went to work at the ILP's bakery in Bermondsey.
3. Among these speakers was Fred Easton of the ILP, a methodist Sunday school teacher, who had been thrown out of his church because he took 'thou shalt not kill' literally. He also ran the NLHL's Socialist Sunday School on a non-religious basis. And there were John Murphy (no relation to J. T. Murphy), a member of the Secular Society, and S. G. Warr, a member of the BSP from Southend who became a founding member of the Communist Party, and was later a member of the Labour Party in Barking; he died only recently.
4. See Stephen Hobhouse *Forty Years and an Epilogue*, 1951, p. 154.
5. Maxim Litvinov, who was a close collaborator of Lenin from 1902, was in Britain from 1907 until the October revolution. He lived in London under the name of Harrison and was secretary of the London Bolshevik Group. After the revolution he was appointed Soviet Ambassador to Britain and, on returning, the Russia Commissar for Foreign Affairs; he died in 1951.
6. Georgy Chicherin joined the Bolsheviks in 1905, but was later associated with Trotsky; he came to Britain just after the outbreak of War, was interned for a short time in 1917, and returned to Russia in early 1918. He used the name Ornatsky while in exile. He became Commissar for Foreign Affairs, and he died after a long illness in 1936.
7. Aleksandr Shlyapnikov, engineering worker, was active in the 1905 uprising, was imprisoned several times, was in Britain often between 1908 and 1916; a member of the Chiswick Branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers(!), he used his union card to good effect as a sort of workers' passport in Scandinavia. He played a leading part in the 1917 revolution, and afterwards was one of the leaders of the Workers' Opposition, which was one of the first groups to develop a critique about the way the regime was developing. He died in disgrace in 1937.
8. The Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party was the unified party which included both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks as well as other groups.
9. Kentish Town BSP was a pretty polyglot branch — as well as the Russians it contained a strong contingent of Italians.
10. Hennem and A. Vandome, *op cit*; Albert Vandome and his brother George were both members of Kentish Town BSP before the War.
11. *Justice* was at this time still the official paper of the BSP!
12. Petroff's wife Irma was also imprisoned and sent to Aylesbury prison where she was made to use baths and utensils immediately after they had been used by prostitutes suffering from advanced syphilis.
13. Petroff was released in January 1918 from Cornwallis Road Internment Camp, Holloway, to a hero's welcome organised by local socialists. On his return to Russia he became Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Growing disillusioned, he left the Communist Party in 1925 and went into exile in Germany where he was active in the socialist movement. On Hitler's rise to power the Petroffs came to Britain, where he died in June 1947. Petroff's break with the CP perhaps explains the vitriolic and completely unjustified attacks

upon him in William Gallacher's *Revolt on the Clyde*, first published in 1936. In fact Petroff was the best known and most trusted, as well as the most active in the British movement, of all the Russians in Britain in that period.

14. Edward Holtzmann, 1882–1936, was in London from 1910 until 1917. I am indebted to Walter Kendall for this information.
15. See Chapter 16.
16. See E. Tupper, *Seamen's Torch — The Life Story of Captain Edward Tupper*, 1938, pp. 192–195.
17. See Fred Anstey MP (Australia) *Red Europe*, 1921, p. 116.
18. Harry Pollitt spoke often at the NLHL's Finsbury Park meetings.

## 11. *The Workers' Committees*

There was a substantial industrial dimension to the rapidly developing revolutionary movement in the last part of the War and immediately afterwards, and this was reflected in the emergence of the London Workers' Committees. These had their origins as far back as 1910 when the Provisional Committee for Amalgamating Existing Unions was founded. From this time until virtually the end of the War, the movement's most prominent figure in London was W. F. (Billy) Watson. Watson, an engineer, was a member of the BSP before the War but he had strong connections with the syndicalist wing of the movement, notably the Industrial Syndicalist Education League.

After the outbreak of War there was a short hiatus in radical industrial activity in London, but in 1915, following a dispute at Woolwich Arsenal, the London Workers' Committee (LWC) emerged with Watson as president and T. F. Knight as secretary.<sup>1</sup> Typically, the LWC received its share of police repression. In February 1916 its premises in Featherstone Buildings, Bloomsbury, were raided; in December the same year Watson was arrested, charged with sedition, and fined for an article he had written in *The Trade Unionist*, which was closed down. Watson went on to write a regular weekly column for *Workers' Dreadnought*.

The London Workers' Committee began to spawn offspring. In late 1918, the North London Workers' Committee was born; it met at Fore Street, Edmonton. The NLWC had been initiated by a group of workers at the Gothic Works, Angel Road, Edmonton, and it had substantial support at the Ordnance works at Enfield and the JAP engine works at Tottenham. While the geographical scope of activity of the North London Committee ranged ostensibly from Kings Cross to Enfield, its main base of support seemed to be in the northern half of their constituency.

The East London Workers' Committee came into being about the same time as its northern neighbour. Among its leading figures were our old friends Walter Ponder, who was its chairman, and, after their release from prison, Vic Beacham and Henry Sara, as well as Miriam Price,<sup>2</sup> all of whom were active in the NLHL. Indeed, this committee

seemed to be more active in Hackney, Shoreditch and South Islington than the NLWC.

In February 1919, Watson was arrested for sedition for a speech at a 'Hands Off Russia' meeting at the Albert Hall. In March he was sentenced to six months' imprisonment; after an appeal he finally went to prison in July. While he was inside there was a considerable campaign for his release in which the East London Workers' Committee played a leading part; and it was this committee which organised a mass meeting in his support at Trafalgar Square on August 24th. It also organised a number of other meetings and fund-raising functions. Watson was finally released on December 5th, 1919.

While Watson was still in prison the bombshell burst; it was announced in parliament — in reply to a question from a Labour member — that he had been an informer for the authorities and that he had been paid £3 a week from the summer of 1918 until his arrest in return for information. Four days after his release Watson went before a sort of people's tribunal convened by the West and East London Workers' Committees at the International Club in City Road, which found the charges against Watson essentially proven.

Watson did not deny the charges of receiving money, either at the Tribunal or in his pamphlet *Watson's Reply*, published in June 1920 (which, incidentally, was published from the address of the NLHL) but he denied that he had ever supplied the Special Branch with any confidential material. All he had given them was chickenfeed which the police could easily have garnered from the radical press.

A shock wave went through the movement. Radicals were only too aware of the amount of police spying and the use of police informers. But there was also a strong feeling that the whole business was a set-up aimed at discrediting the revolutionary left. Indeed, there were some very peculiar features about the whole affair; for example it seems unlikely that the authorities would have sent a valuable secret informant to prison for six months. The general opinion of survivors with whom I have communicated is that Watson allowed himself to be used. Hennem expresses this attitude well when he writes:<sup>3</sup>

Yes, I remember Billie Watson. He was a quite attractive and, I thought, sincere character — suffering from a little too much ego. The police allowed the information to come out that he had been accepting government money for information . . . we all tried to suspend judgement until he came out of prison and addressed a meeting [of the NLHL] to answer the complaints.

He was quite open about it — he took the money and said he gave the police no confidential information. This was probably true because there was not much confidential information to give. Any rank and file member knew pretty

well what was going on. Watson tried to be clever, and the meeting felt that he should have told other members what he was doing and given the money to the movement.

I think that although it ended Watson's position — and rightly so — he was more fool than rogue. There are too many clever people in the movement who have failed to understand the socialist position and that our task is to convert people to socialism and not play clever games.<sup>4</sup>

### *Notes*

1. Both Watson and T. F. Knight were associated with the NLHL.
2. Miriam Price was an activist within the WSF, she was secretary of its Islington Branch, as well as the NLHL. She had been a member of the ILP before the War, as had her father; after the War she married H. G. Coleman (see note 8, page 28).
3. The best source of information on W. F. Watson is his entry in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* by Edmund and Ruth Frow and John Saville. After his release from prison Watson was living at Inderwick Road, Hornsey.
4. Hennem, op cit. Watson lived until 1943, and although he remained active in the Amalgamated Engineering Union he seemed to have played no significant role in politics.

## 12. *The Industrial Workers of the World*

The IWW was another part of the complex jigsaw of North London revolutionary politics. Many of the founders of the NLHL had been 'Wobblies' and a close relationship continued throughout the War. Up to about 1916 the North London Local of the IWW had met at the NLHL's premises, but it then moved to its own headquarters in unfurnished rooms in Theobalds Road, Bloomsbury.

With the introduction of conscription several local Wobblies went to prison, while others went on the run. Some of them even managed to leave the country, while at least one member, Frank Ginger (alias Grainger),<sup>1</sup> had joined the army, fought on the Somme, and then deserted and spent the rest of the War avoiding arrest. Nevertheless, some of the 'old guard' remained active; these included Albert Young, A. B. Elsbury and Jack Smith, who were joined by a new wave of members who included Harold Edwards<sup>2</sup> (later secretary-treasurer of the Local), Arthur Titley,<sup>3</sup> Dick Beech and Esther Archer.<sup>4</sup>

The Local had a wide range of activities; for example, several of its members worked at the Hispano Suiza factory in North London where Arthur Titley was a shop steward. The Local was also heavily involved in the Workers' Committee movement; one of its members, Tommy Walsh,<sup>5</sup> a carpenter, was apparently secretary of the London Building Workers' Committee, while Vic Beacham was also active after his release from prison.

The Local maintained a regular speaking pitch at Finsbury Park. To raise cash it even printed its own money, designed and printed by Jack Smith. Members could purchase these notes, which were in 2s 6d, 5s, 10s, and £1 denominations, and could redeem them later if they needed the money. No examples of these notes (which were apparently rather beautiful) seem to have survived.

The Local printed many of its own leaflets and 'sticky-backs' and it seems that one of these leaflets led to a drama which could have ended in tragedy. The authorities, possibly with the aid of an informer, managed to track some of those responsible and in March 1918, five men associated with the Local were arrested. Three of them, including Arthur Titley, were sent to prison for up to six months, while two others

(who seem to have been American seamen) were deported. The imprisoned men had a very bad time: Arthur Titley was beaten up on several occasions and lost three stone in weight.

Meanwhile, back in the Local, the hunt for the alleged informer was on. The fear of informers was *not* simple paranoia. The authorities did have networks of spies, and there was massive interception of letters and (for the first time) systematic telephone tapping. Earlier in the War, the infamous *agent provocateur* Alex Gordon<sup>6</sup> had been active in the London area, and he later admitted that his visits to the German Communist Club in Charlotte Street, Tottenham Court Road and the IWW Hall in Whitechapel had been the prelude to police raids on them. Plainclothes police were familiar figures at meetings as they gathered material for prosecutions. The relationships between radicals and the Special Branch men who haunted their meetings were apparently quite complex. Edward Hennem in a letter to me describes them thus:

I knew of no police *provocateurs* in the Herald League. The blokes who came to our meetings were almost close to us – in fact, one was quite influenced by our philosophy and I think he excluded from his notes some of the stupid remarks of the idiots, such as drilling with broomsticks in Epping Forest. Of course there were some of the other type.

The spy fever within the North London Local of the IWW culminated in a 'trial' at which the man in the dock was A. B. Elsbury, who was ably defended by his brother Sam. It is the unanimous opinion of survivors that Elsbury was completely innocent; fortunately he was acquitted — if the verdict had gone the other way it is difficult to estimate what would have happened. The Local contained some tough customers who had cut their teeth in the turbulent workers' movements of Australia, Latin America and the American West; they had a short way with narks.<sup>7</sup>

There seem to have been a considerable number of firearms floating around the movement after the War, most of them originating with returning servicemen. The going rate for a Lee Enfield rifle was about £2 10s. One of the features of this murky underbelly of the revolutionary movement in the immediate post-War years was a quite considerable gun-running operation to the Irish republicans. Much of this material apparently left the country via Liverpool. There were even rumours of arms stockpiled for potential domestic consumption. Quite a few survivors recall that this trade had considerable North London ramifications, not only in the radical milieu but also among the large local Irish population.

One of the most remarkable members of the Local was Dick Beech. Born about 1893 at Hull, Beech was a huge man some 6ft 3in tall. He



had run away to sea with his brother Charlie and they had spent their early lives travelling the world, working in gold and copper mines in Australia, Mexico and Colorado. They presumably joined the IWW in Colorado. At the outbreak of War they were seamen on the Liverpool–USA run, which may have had something to do with the Local's ability to smuggle men from one side of the Atlantic to the other.<sup>8</sup> While serving at sea they were torpedoed twice, on one occasion only surviving by a miracle after spending some time in the water.<sup>9</sup>

In August, 1920, Dick Beech represented the IWW at the 2nd Congress of the Comintern in Russia, and it was during this period that he and his brother fought with the Red Army and apparently did illegal work in Finland behind the white lines.

By 1921 Dick Beech was back in Britain. By this time he was a member of the WSF and he represented it under its temporary name of the Communist Party–British Section of the Third International (CP–BSTI) at the Leeds Convention of the Communist Party of Great Britain in January whence he was elected to the CP's Provisional Executive Committee.

The Beech Brothers were, perhaps significantly, in Ireland for some time in the early 1920s. One consequence of this was that Dick married Moira, the daughter of James Connolly. Dick was also extremely active in the early unemployed movement, where his size made him a favourite target for police batons during demonstrations; on at least one occasion he was badly beaten.

In the 20s, Dick Beech seems to have worked primarily for one of the Soviet trading agencies but he also apparently acted as a courier and maritime specialist for the Comintern. In the late 1920s, he was editor of a journal called the *International Seafarer*. Some time in the early 1930s, Dick Beech left the Communist Party with some bitterness, although the exact reasons are obscure, and joined the ILP. He then became active in the Chemical Workers' Union and was for many years a lay member of its executive and editor of the Union's journal. In 1944–5 he became the union's president.

Dick Beech had many international links, many of them dating from the pre-War syndicalist movement. He knew Trotsky personally and was deeply influenced by his ideas, although he was never a member of a Trotskyist group. In his last years Beech was a member of the Labour Party. He died in Harrow in 1955.<sup>10</sup>

In the latter part of the War the British IWW had a period of substantial growth. It had its own hall in Whitechapel, and was very active in a number of industries in the East End of London. By January 1919 it was substantial enough to be one of the four national convening

bodies of the Hands Off Russia Movement (the others were the BSP, ILP and the SLP).<sup>11</sup> Frank Grainger was a prominent speaker, representing the IWW at many Hands Off Russia meetings. The IWW with its strong international connections always had a contingent of workers from abroad within its ranks, especially a number of American seamen.

The most famous American Wobbly associated with the NLHL was George Swazey, who was the National Organizer of the British IWW. Hennem writes:

He came to England and linked up with the Herald League during the War. He could speak for five hours at a stretch on an open-air platform and could keep an audience convulsed. He was perhaps the most humorous speaker I have ever heard.<sup>12</sup>

With the formation of the Communist Party in 1920, the British IWW decided to dissolve itself and join, but many Wobblies didn't stay members for long. Some departed after the suppression of the Kronstadt Commune in 1921, while others quietly left in the ensuing years. The experience of Charlie Lahr perhaps illustrates this process. Lahr had joined the CP — after a short spell in the WSF — and was a member of its Central London branch, whose catchment area included Bloomsbury and Clerkenwell. While in Berlin in 1921, Lahr managed to obtain, and have translated, the text of the New Economic Policy of the Soviet Government. On returning to London, Lahr and Esther Archer found that two other members of the branch, Eden and Cedar Paul,<sup>13</sup> had quite independently translated the same document. The four of them were so opposed to the new policy that they closed down the branch and left the Party.<sup>14</sup>

Of the 16 members of the North London Local of the IWW about whom I have relevant information, at least 12 joined the CP. The amount of time they remained members varied widely, but only two became lifelong adherents. At first glance it might seem surprising that so many activists from the anarchist and syndicalist traditions joined the CP. However, many of these militants saw the revolutionary overthrow of the Tsar and the Kerensky regime, and the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets', as the embodiment of everything they had stood for, and while many of them soon became deeply disillusioned with Leninism and everything it represented, others stayed with the Communist Party for the rest of their lives.

The confused attitude of the anti-parliamentarian wing of the revolutionary movement at this time towards Bolshevism was startlingly expressed in an article by George H. V. Rose<sup>15</sup> in *The Communist*, organ of the Communist League,<sup>16</sup> of May 1919.

Therefore we identify ourselves with the Third International, with the Communism of Marx, and with that personification of the spirit of revolt, Bakunin,<sup>17</sup> of whom the Third International is but the natural and logical outcome.

## Notes

1. Frank Ginger, alias Frank Grainger, went on to be a foundation member of the CP; he later left it and was prominent in the SPGB; still later he was a lecturer for the Economic League.
2. Harold Edwards was born in 1900 at Theobalds Road. He became an anarchist at a very early age. When he became liable for military service in 1918 he went on the run but remained politically active and was a strong supporter of the NLHL. While he was living 'underground' in Soho he came into close contact with the considerable colonies of Spanish and Italian anarchists living in that area; the most notable of these was Errico Malatesta, who once had an electrical engineering shop in Upper Street, Islington. Edwards was also a member of the Communistischer Arbeiter Bildungs Verein, the German Workers' Communist Club in Charlotte Street, founded in 1840, which included among its alumni both Marx and Engels. In 1920 Edwards became secretary of the club for its last six months of existence.

Harold Edwards dropped out of political activity in the 1920s and became an antiquarian bookseller. He and David Goodway have produced an unpublished manuscript, *Harold Edwards, a Revolutionary Life*, on which I have heavily depended for both these notes and the section on the IWW as a whole. I would also like to thank both the authors for the considerable individual help they have given me.

3. Arthur Titley was born near the Angel in Islington. After the War, unable to find work, he became a window cleaner. He was an early member of Islington CP, in which he apparently stayed until his death. This, I am told, was in an air raid in the Second World War.
4. Esther Archer, 1897–1969, born Esther Argeband. Her family lived in White-chapel. During the War she was a well known open-air speaker, noted for her flaming red hair. Her main associations seem to have been with the IWW and the WSF. Esther worked at the Rothman's cigarette factory in the East End, which she organised for the IWW. She first met Charlie Lahr while he was interned; after he was released in 1919 they joined up and lived together for the rest of their lives. They had two daughters.
5. Tommy Walsh was a carpenter; he had been a member of the North London Industrialist League (see note 3, page 23) since at least 1912. He was also an early member of the British IWW. After the War he was for a while secretary of the International Club — the successor of the German Workers' Club. Unable to find work at his trade, he seems afterwards to have made a living as a racing tipster.
6. Alex Gordon was the person responsible in March 1917 for the entrapment of Alice Wheeldon of Derby, and her daughter and son-in-law, who received 10, five, and seven years' imprisonment respectively for a 'plot' to assassinate Lloyd George and Arthur Henderson. Gordon, posing as a man on the run, had been

sheltered by Mrs Wheeldon and had repaid her by setting her up and then informing the authorities. Mrs Wheeldon had a hard time in gaol and became seriously ill, after serving two years, she was released; fourteen months later she died.

7. Harry Young remembers being in a pub with Dick Beech and Arthur Titley when a fight broke out in another part of the bar; Beech immediately produced a knife while Titley produced a revolver. Incidentally Titley was a very good boxer.
8. The British IWW was pretty strong in Liverpool; it also had substantial Locals in Glasgow and Hull.
9. Dick Beech wrote an account of this experience in *Torpedoed, and other short stories*, Progressive Publishing, Harrow 1943, 62pp. One wonders if the brothers Beech and their comrades ever met Captain Tupper's 'torpedoed' seamen; it would have been an interesting encounter.
10. I would like to thank John Archer, Bob Edwards and Dick Beech (the nephew of Dick Beech senior) for providing me with much information about Dick and Charlie Beech.
11. There were a number of North London trade union branches, as well as the Herald Leagues of Battersea, Croydon, Fulham and Stepney, also represented at the founding meeting of the 'Hands Off Russia' Movement.
12. Hennem, op cit.; Swazey later returned to the USA.
13. Eden (1865–1967) and Cedar Paul (died 1972) were leading Marxist intellectuals, responsible for translating many of Marx's writings into English, notably the Everyman edition of *Capital*. They also jointly wrote several books on birth control. Both rejoined the Communist Party later in the 20s.
14. Charlie Lahr (1885–1967) was a fascinating man whom I knew quite well. Born in Germany, he came to Britain in 1905. A life-long anarchist, Lahr joined the IWW before the First World War. Interned in both World Wars, Lahr ran bookshops at various sites from the early 20s until well into the 1960s; the most notable of these was at Red Lion Street, Bloomsbury, the shop becoming a centre of radical and advanced literary ideas. Lahr introduced many people, myself included, into the highways and byways of political and social thought. The best single source for Charlie's life is a memoir by David Goodway, 'Charles Lahr; Anarchist, Bookseller, Publisher', in the June–July 1977 issue of *The London Magazine*. I would also like to thank Charlie's daughters Oonagh and Sheila for their unstinting help.
15. G. H. V. Rose was living in Hammersmith at this time. He had left Islington in 1915. He had been active in the local ILP in the first decade of the century. About 1909 he became closely associated with Guy Aldred, a connection which lasted until the early 30s, when he rejoined the ILP. Rose was a hairdresser and played a leading part in the hairdressing section of the shopworkers' union; so did his two sons who were also active in the ILP in the 1930s and the 40s.

The Rose family connections are interesting as they illustrate the familial links which occur again and again in the socialist movement of the period: G. H. V. Rose's father, Frederick Rose, was secretary of the Mildmay Club (see note 3, pages 10 and 11) while his father-in-law was G. W. Patterson (1859–1939), who from the mid-1880s had been an activist in the socialist movement both locally and nationally. Patterson went on to become a prominent propagandist and played an important role in the formation of a number of trade unions. He was friendly with major figures in the movement, such as William Morris, Tom

Mann and George Lansbury. Patterson had also been Assistant Organising Secretary of the National Daily Herald League.

16. The Communist League was a short lived organisation which had emerged in March 1919 from a conference called by the London District Council of the SLP; it rapidly attracted to itself a number of recruits from the anti-parliamentarian wing of the socialist movement, strongly laced with anarchists and syndicalists. At its peak the Communist League had well over 20 branches, mostly in London and Scotland but with a few elsewhere, notably in South Wales. The Communist League seems to have lasted about a year, after which it rapidly dissolved into the Communist Party.
17. Bakunin was a major anarchist figure and opponent of Marx in the First International!

### 13. *The Police Strikes*

The police had a rough time during the War. Added to the already existing draconian discipline there was a massive amount of unpaid overtime and cancellation of leave. At the same time their wages had lagged far behind inflation — by 1918, police constables with 20 years' service were receiving less wages than the average rate for unskilled labourers *before overtime*. In such a situation petty corruption was rife; for many policemen it was a choice between accepting the occasional backhander from local bookmakers and publicans for looking the other way, and starving.

The National Union of Police and Prison Officers had been founded in 1913 by ex-inspector John Syme.<sup>1</sup> Syme, a notable figure in radical circles, who had been victimised in 1909 for 'undue familiarity' with his men, had been waging a campaign for his re-instatement ever since. The union had a largely underground existence until 1918, although five union members had been sacked in December 1916.<sup>2</sup> In February 1917 there were a further 17 dismissals following a raid by the military police on a meeting of the London Branch of the Union.<sup>3</sup>

The first strike started on August 30th, 1918. There were two issues: the dismissal of PC Tommy Thiel for union membership, and the demand for a wage increase. One of the first stations to be affected was Kings Cross Road, where meetings were held in the station yard, the men then forming a procession and marching to Whitehall.

The strike spread like wildfire. Over half the men at Upper Street Station joined in immediately, and within a few hours 6,000 men throughout London were out, and with more joining all the time; even the Special Branch was affected.

The strike was robust. Flying pickets forcibly entered a number of stations and section houses in search of blacklegs who, if found, were forced to join the strike. There were also a number of assaults on special constables who had been hurriedly drafted in to take over strikers' work.<sup>4</sup>

The next day — August 31st — began with a mass meeting of nearly 1,000 strikers at the Finsbury Park Empire. These then marched to Whitehall where they joined up with contingents from other parts of

London. The men's delegates negotiated directly with Smuts and Lloyd George; the authorities caved in; the wage demand was conceded and Tommy Thiel was reinstated. The men returned to work triumphant.

In the months which followed, the police union mushroomed to a claimed 50,000 members, and it became an accepted part of the labour scene. Its Islington Branch met at the NLHL's premises in Green Lanes, and was affiliated to Islington Trades Council. It is possible that there were subliminal connections and influences between the police and the radical movement long before the strike. The police in those days were far less isolated from the working class than is the case today, whether it was standard of living, style of life, or their fundamental value system. While this in no way undermined the role of the police as an institution in defending the established order, it is an interesting fact that there had been considerable police unrest in both 1872 — which began in 'N' Division, covering Islington and Stoke Newington — and 1890, both years of industrial unrest in their own right. The police on both occasions tried to form unions, in the latter case with the help of the socialist movement. Edward Hennem indicated another possible route of influence, when he describes how in 1917 he:

and one or two other youngsters [from the NLHL] took an apple box to Fairfax Road, Harringay, outside the baker's shop at 8 pm one murky November evening, to proclaim our baptism for the Red Flag — one chairman, one heckler, plus me — 17 years of age.

We got no audience, a cat sitting on the hot grills of the bakehouse, and a policeman. . . . after a speech lasting 25 minutes . . . the copper asked us if we were going home — we were depressed that we had not influenced the nation. But, that policeman became the local leader of the police strike and an active worker in the movement. I like to think that my speech started him thinking.

Among the local activists of the Police Union were Alf Pack<sup>5</sup> of Upper Street Station, who was a member of the Union's Executive, and Sergeant Fred Hillier who was the local Branch Secretary. Both stayed at work during the 1919 strike and left the Union.

The authorities had been caught unawares by the first strike and used the breathing space created by the settlement to prepare for the next round. General Cecil Macready was appointed Metropolitan Commissioner<sup>6</sup> and he used the ensuing months to get ready. Militants were isolated, moderates won over, and a number of partial reforms introduced, and when everything was ready the authorities introduced a new Police Bill which, apart from wages, nullified the men's gains.

The second police strike started on July 31st, 1919. It was a disaster. Only about 1,000 men struck in London, all of whom were instantly dismissed, and although a bitter struggle continued for some time—for

example, strikers broke into the Islington section house to force the inmates to join them, eventually being forcibly ejected — the strike was absolutely crushed, and along with it the Police Union.

There were numerous arrests during the strike, and there were even a couple of sympathetic stoppages — of railwaymen at Nine Elms, and the tube motor men. One other interesting feature of the dispute was when Inspector Dessent of Stoke Newington Station — the only Inspector to strike — formed his men up in a body and marched them to the main strike meeting at Tower Hill.

The sacked men never got their jobs back, but many of them became active in the socialist and labour movements. After the defeat, the NLHL's paper, *Rebel*, noted a large influx of new members from the Police Union. Tommy Thiel,<sup>7</sup> on whose behalf the first strike had been fought, joined the Communist Party, as did a number of others. A local striker, Henry Goodridge, joined the Labour Party and eventually became Mayor of Hackney. Another Islington man, Sergeant William Sansum, who had been arrested and bound over during the 1919 strike, was arrested again for his support of the General Strike in 1926. Sansum, by this time a boot salesman, got three months in prison.

There had been considerable support for the 1919 strike from the socialist movement, but many supporters, looking back on police harassment, or police inaction while they got bashed by jingoos, felt a bit awkward — to put it mildly — with their new allies.

## Notes

1. John Syme, 1872–1945. In his incredible fight against his victimisation, Syme was arrested literally scores of times and was frequently imprisoned, when he would go on hunger strike. In this struggle Syme destroyed his physical and mental health and in 1924, after making threats against the King, he was certified and sent to Broadmoor. He was released the following year. There were two official enquiries into his case. The first, in 1924, found against him, but the second substantially supported him, and he was then granted an inspector's pension back-dated to the date of his sacking. Syme never fully accepted this decision and continued to protest for the rest of his life.
2. One of these sacked men was PC Horace Herbert of 'Y' Division (Highgate and West Islington) who had become prominent in the Union. After his victimisation he refused to be dragged into the army, became a CO, and went to prison.
3. PC Ernest Harrison was one of these men. He lived in Islington and became the Union's secretary; as a result of his dismissal he too became liable for military service, refused to serve, and got six months' imprisonment. (While he was inside his wife acted as the Union's secretary.) After his release, Harrison still refused to be conscripted and got a further sentence. On his release from the second term he



did a deal with the Police Commissioner, joined the Military Police and was reinstated in the Met, but he was then expelled by the union.

4. 'Specials' became deeply hated in working-class areas. For years afterwards children used to follow them in the street shouting 'blackleg', and they weren't much loved by the regular police either.
5. In later years Alf Pack became Secretary of the Police Federation.
6. Macready was an expert in 'aiding the civil power'; in 1910 he had commanded the troops during the unrest in South Wales which culminated in Tonypandy; the following year he was called in for the same job in Manchester and Salford; and in 1914 he was in charge in Belfast.
7. Thiel died only a few years ago in South East London.

In this section I have depended heavily on *The Day the Police Went on Strike*, by G. W. Reynolds and Anthony Judge, 1968.

## 14. *The Workers' Socialist Federation*

Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes/Workers' Socialist Federation had a substantial presence in North London. It had a longterm relationship — and an overlapping membership — with the NLHL, going back to well before the War.

The ELFS/WSF has been rather badly treated by posterity, partially because it doesn't fit snugly into the apostolic successions of some historians. The reality — as always — is more complex and interesting. Sylvia Pankhurst's break with her mother in February 1914 was due to Sylvia's orientation toward working-class women and her willingness to work with the radical wing of the socialist movement. This division was made total at the outbreak of War when Mrs Pankhurst and the rump of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) took a strongly patriotic position.

In my view, the continuity with the WSPU, while important, has been too much stressed. There is ample evidence that the ELFS had struck a strong chord with many women socialists of an earlier generation who had serious reservations about the WSPU; for example, Amy Hicks of Hampstead, who had been on the executive of the SDF in 1884, had been supporting the ELFS from its start, while another 'blast from the past', Louisa Somerville of Islington, a socialist from 1885 and a member of the Clerkenwell Branch of the Socialist League,<sup>1</sup> also became a supporter.

Another connection with the earlier socialist-feminist tradition was Emma Boyce of Hackney. Mrs Boyce (1867–1929) was an early member of the ILP.\* She had 12 children only four of whom survived. During the War, although she was much older than most other ELFS/WSF activists, she was a roving organiser travelling the country from end to end; for example, in 1916 she spent some time in both Newcastle and Glasgow. What she had to face is described by I. Renson.<sup>2</sup>

When we were in Reading, me and my brother witnessed the breaking up of a 'Stop the War' meeting in the Market Place in about September 1918, by soldiers. It was a deliberately organised effort. The meeting was organised by the ILP and the chief speaker was Mrs Boyce of Hackney. Soon after this elderly lady got on to the platform it was pushed over and she fell off back-

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\*I would like to know more about her early history.

wards but she appeared to have been caught by her friends who were behind her.

In spite of many similar experiences Emma Boyce survived the War. She was elected as a Hackney Labour Councillor from 1918 until 1923; from then until her death her main remaining activity was a life governor of the London Maternity Hospital.

Self-evidently, the base of the ELFS was in the East End, but even before the War it had begun to spread its wings into North London. By April 1914 the Hackney, Kingsland and Stoke Newington Men's Political Union was already holding open-air meetings. This MPU seems to have been a sort of male auxilliary of the ELFS. With the coming of War this expansion continued with the founding of the North London MPU which held regular meetings at Regents Park, Highbury Corner and Finsbury Park. These meetings received the normal harrassment; for example, in October 1915 territorials smashed up a meeting of the North London MPU at Regent's Park. The North London MPU was closely associated with the Brotherhood Church and met there. As the War continued and the ELFS became a less exclusively women's organisation, these MPUs seem to have merged with it.

As for the ELFS proper, its first North London Group — Hackney — was active by April 1914 and had its own premises at 175 Dalston Lane. By August the ELFS was already geared up to agitate on the whole range of social issues like the treatment of soldiers' wives and families, sweated work, and conditions in schools. While many ELFS activists were clearly against the War, and some were already active in the anti-War movement, the ELFS decided not to take a stand on the War question.<sup>3</sup> This policy seems to have continued, with decreasing force, until early 1916. In March 1916, Nellie Best of the WSF was sentenced to six months' imprisonment for making statements prejudicial to recruiting. The radicalising process had the effect of substantially changing the composition of the ELFS; it lost some members who were primarily oriented towards its social work and recruited more who were opposed to the War.

Meanwhile the ELFS steadily spread in North London. In October 1915 there was a Holborn Branch, with its own bookshop in Hart Street; in May 1916 there was a group in St Pancras; by June 1916 there were branches in Hoxton — which also had a bookshop — and in Islington, and by August 1917 a Holloway Group was active.

Early in 1916 the ELFS changed its name to the Women's Suffrage Federation, in early 1917 to the Workers' Suffrage Federation, and in July 1918 to the Workers' Socialist Federation, while the name of the paper was changed from the *Women's Dreadnought* to the *Workers' Dread-*

nought. These changes reflected a considerable alteration in both the composition and the political emphasis of the WSF. Men played an increasingly significant part in the organisation and it became more and more explicitly revolutionary. (I am not implying a causal connection between these two processes!)

As the ELFS/WSF developed it attracted a remarkable cadre of women, for example Patricia Lynch, Miriam Price,<sup>4</sup> Melvina Walker, Jessie Stephens and Lillian Thring, all of whom were well known in North London. They were incredibly active, sometimes doing four or five open-air meetings a day *each*, and covering an area from St Pancras to East Ham, with occasional forays into the transpontine wastes of South London.

It is worthwhile to make a digression here to deal with one of these WSF women at greater length — although such a short account fails to do proper justice to the subject — since a rather more detailed biography illustrates how such activists were not simply WSF members; they emerged from a living milieu and they went on to enrich the movement for decades to come.

Lillian Thring (née Harris), 1888–1964, was born in North London. She was already a militant suffragette in the first decade of the century. In 1911 she went to Melbourne, Australia, where she continued her involvement in the women's movement. Here for the first time she came into contact with the revolutionary movement, joined the IWW, and threw herself into radical activity, which remained her primary concern for the rest of her life. Already in this Australian episode her brilliance as an open-air speaker was apparent.

In 1913 she married a postal official in the Sudan where she lived for about two years, returning to Britain in 1915, with one young baby and already pregnant with another (which she lost), only to find that her husband had died. Understandably, Thring was fairly inactive for a period although she seems to have retained her membership of the IWW.

Towards the end of the War, Thring became active again. She joined the NLHL but was more closely associated with the WSF which combined her own preoccupations with the women's movement and revolutionary socialism. By 1918 she was a frequent speaker for both organisations. She was also active in the 'Hands Off Russia' campaign and the Workers' Committee movement.

In 1920, Thring was a founder member of the Communist Party, and joined its Islington branch. By December the same year she was already a prominent member of the Islington Organised Unemployed, taking part in the seven-week occupation of Essex Road library and subse-

quent demonstration and assault on Islington Town Hall. For the next few years Thring was titanically active.

By 1921 she was a prominent speaker and organiser for the newly-formed National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (NUWCM); also in that year she was the founder and first editor of the movement's national fortnightly paper, *Out of Work*, which she built up to a circulation of 50,000. Incidentally, Thring was far from being the only woman alumna of the WSF to play a major part in the early unemployed movement; others involved included Minnie Birch and Clara Cole.

Already by August–September 1921, Thring had been the victim of a press campaign which had tagged her as 'Red Rosa', the mystery woman with hypnotic eyes who was behind the unemployed agitation. In November she was one of a commando of 13 unemployed who occupied a piano factory in St Pancras, persuading the workers there to refuse to work massive overtime, and the management to concede a wage increase. In December she was one of a 'deputation' which, backed by a mass demonstration outside, held the worthy councillors of Bexley captive for 12 hours inside their own council chamber; while incarcerated, the corporation were harangued in relays by their captors. One wonders what they had done to deserve such a fate. Also in December 1921, Thring was arrested and fined for an article in *Out of Work* for alleged incitement to disaffection of the police.

In August 1922, Thring's marine stores shop in Huntingdon Street, Caledonian Road, was raided by the police who found two German machine guns there; she was charged with their possession and held in custody for some time but was later acquitted. While Thring was inside, the headquarters of the Finsbury unemployed was named Thring Hall in her honour.

In November 1922 Thring was the election agent of Shapurji Saklatvala who, although a member of the Communist Party, was the successful official Labour Party candidate at Battersea. (Saklatvala was later re-elected as a CP candidate.) About this time Thring lived in the Battersea area for a while.

In 1923 Thring left the CP in deep disagreement with the way it was functioning. Soon afterwards she joined the ILP. In 1924 she was heavily involved in Fenner Brockway's election campaign in Westminster at which one of the other unsuccessful candidates was Winston Churchill. Thring made such an impact at this and similar campaigns that in 1927 she was approached by Westminster Labour Party to stand as their parliamentary candidate. She was asked on several other occasions to stand for parliament; she always refused.

During the 1926 General Strike, Thring was a member of the Battersea Council of Action. In 1927 she remarried and between that date and 1935 she was known as Harvey. (At various other times in her career she used her maiden name and the *nom de guerres* of Martin and Thurston.) Her connection with the unemployed continued; as late as 1932 she helped to organise the reception of the women's contingent of the Hunger March at the Co-op Hall, Seven Sisters Road. In the very early 1930s she was active in the anti-fascist activities in North London long before it was fashionable. Thring was also engaged in industrial organising, particularly among women shopworkers. Throughout this period, and until the end of her life, Thring was heavily involved in the Women's Co-operative Guild, in which she was one of a group of 'young Turks' who were radicalising the movement.

In 1934 Thring, representing the Holloway Guild, made a strong contribution in support of a successful resolution in favour of abortion at the Women's Co-operative Guild conference, thus continuing her longstanding involvement with birth control and related questions going back to — at least — her days in the WSF.

In 1935 she moved to Ashington near Rochford in Essex. She remained active in the left wing of the ILP and with the coming of the Second World War — which she opposed — was involved in helping men on the run from conscription.

After 1945, Thring supported the strong local squatters' movement, and was secretary of the Rochford Branch of the Agricultural Workers' Union which she built up to be a strong force in the area. Between 1946 and 1948 she was an ILP local councillor. She joined the Labour Party in 1950, in which she remained a left-wing gadfly.

Lillian Thring died in March 1964 after a long illness which had left her bedridden for her last three years. She had three children, and was survived by George Tasker, her companion for the last 30 years of her life.\*

In the last two years of the War, the WSF was without doubt the most active anti-War political group in London, and it had started to build up national support. At its peak, the WSF had over 30 branches, was represented in most of the important industrial centres, and had forged strong links with like-minded groups. The struggle against the War had an eroding effect on formal organisational divisions; attitudes to the conflict and the nexus of related issues, and the willingness to do something about them, became much more important than party allegiances.

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\*George Tasker has been the source of most of the information in these notes, and I would like to express my deep gratitude for his continual kindness and help.

In North London too this growth had its effect. There was an influx of extremely able new members who worked side by side with the existing membership. The better known of these new recruits included H. S. and Mrs Redgrove,<sup>5</sup> Monica Ewer,<sup>6</sup> and Lancelot Hogben,<sup>7</sup> all of whom were incidentally also members of the NLHL. Lancelot Hogben in particular was very active. He spoke at many open-air meetings, ran classes on economics and public speaking, wrote regularly for the *Workers' Dreadnought*, and was also on the National Committee of the WSF.

Many familiar pens appeared in the *Workers' Dreadnought*. Leonard Motler and W. F. Watson wrote regular weekly columns, while both Walter Ponder and Guy Aldred wrote occasionally. The fact that all these contributors were anti-parliamentarians is no coincidence — there seems to have been a strong anarcho-syndicalist current within the WSF, and one participant<sup>8</sup> recalls a large anarchist contingent within WSF demonstrations of the immediate post-War period.

In the last part of the War and the first days of peace the WSF pioneered a number of new departures in socialist politics. In June 1918, Norah Smythe of the WSF proposed to Poplar Trades Council that 'the Russian example be followed and that families made homeless by air raids and lodged in the workhouse, should have empty houses commandeered for them';<sup>9</sup> the resolution was passed. The WSF dominated the Poplar unemployed movement which was probably the best organised and militant group in London until well into the 1920s, and it was also deeply involved in the industrial scene. In particular, it was firmly entrenched in — if not dominating — the River Thames Shop Stewards' Movement (where Harry Pollitt was a leading light) which had its own membership cards and its own paper *The Consolidator*. The RTSSM was probably London's nearest approach to the levels of rank-and-file industrial organisation achieved on the Clyde and at Sheffield.

I leave the last word to Harry Pollitt: 'The WSF was made up of the most self-sacrificing and hard working comrades it has been my fortune to come in contact with.'<sup>10</sup>

Any account of the 'rebel' milieu should refer to the current within it in favour of birth control and sexual emancipation, although this aspect tended to keep a low profile and so the evidence is rather patchy.

Even before the War, the anarchist Guy Aldred<sup>11</sup> was widely known as an advocate of 'free love', while his companion Rose Witcop was a pioneer of the birth control movement. They had close links with Margaret Sanger, the American advocate of family planning,<sup>12</sup> who stayed with them at their home in St Pancras. During the War these

issues were discussed at the NLHL and at least one member — Bonar Thompson<sup>13</sup> — made a living out of selling birth control literature. Many years later he used to say jokingly 'that thousands of people not walking around today have me to thank for not having been born', and he was not the only War-resister to combine radical attitudes with personal profit in this way. Indeed the role of unsung private 'entrepreneurs', some of them deeply committed to the cause of birth control, made a profound contribution in providing knowledge and material to ordinary people; in fact it might be true to say that it was they who were the true trailblazers of family planning.

After the War there was a flowering of discussion, and the beginning of action, in these areas. In 1920 a conference on Birth Control for the Workers was held at the International Club, East Road off City Road, at which Rose Witcop and Margaret Sanger were the main speakers. A year later, Marie Stopes founded her first clinic at Marlborough Road, Holloway<sup>14</sup> and later Rose Witcop had a clinic in Highgate. Other illustrations of the close connections between family planning and the local radical movement were that both Stella Browne<sup>15</sup> and Lillian Thring were members of the Islington Branch of the Communist Party from 1920 until late 1922 and 1923 respectively, while our old friend Leonard Motler was the distributor in Britain of Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review*. I would dearly like to have more information about this aspect of 'rebel' life during this period, but it is clear that there were many interconnections between the radical anti-War movement and the birth (sic) of modern family planning.

## Notes

1. Louisa's husband, Ben Somerville, was also active in the Socialist League and an anarchist, later one of the founders of labour politics in Finsbury; he had also been a prominent member of the Amalgamated Painters' Society. Ben Somerville died in 1913. I would like to thank A. Whitehead for data on Ben Somerville.
2. I. Renson, letter to the author 2.5.80.
3. I would like to thank Sheila Rowbotham for this information.
4. Miriam Price was Secretary of Islington WSF.
5. The Redgroves were university graduates and ex-ILP members. Mrs Redgrove was Secretary of St Pancras WSF. After the War they were active in West Islington Labour Party.
6. Monica Ewer and her husband, W. N. Ewer, were leading guild socialists; after the War they joined the Communist Party.
7. Lancelot Hogben, a graduate biologist, went on to be the well known author of such books as *Mathematics for the Million* and *Science for the Citizen*.



8. Albert Vandome, op cit.
9. I owe this information to Sheila Rowbotham.
10. Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time*, 1940, p. 110.
11. Guy Aldred, 1886–1963, was born in Clerkenwell and had a remarkable career. Starting as a 'boy preacher', he went rapidly through Deism, Atheism and Socialism until he became an anarchist in 1907, which he remained for the rest of his life. He was a well known open-air speaker in North London. He had strong connections with the NLHL and spoke from their platform before and during the early part of the War, until he went to prison. On his release after the War he picked up the connection and was again a fairly regular speaker at Finsbury Park; he then went to Glasgow where he produced a series of papers, the last being *The Word*, and through his own printshop, 'The Strickland Press', published a remarkable corpus of radical literature, including his autobiography *No Traitor's Gait*, which is a useful source for the radical movement in North London in the early part of the century.
12. Margaret Sanger was a member of the American IWW before the War.
13. After the War, Thompson dropped out of formal politics and became a professional speaker at Hyde Park; he wrote an autobiography *Hyde Park Orator*, 1934. I owe the anecdote to Phillip Sansum.
14. Marie Stopes had no connection with the socialist movement, but it is possible that the ground work that had been done in the area was not without influence on her choice of site. There was however one connection with the WSF. The first nurse at the Stopes clinic was Nurse Hebbes, who had previously run the WSF's welfare centre, the 'Mothers Arms' in the East End.
15. For Stella Browne see Sheila Rowbotham, *A New World For Women; Stella Browne, Socialist-Feminist*, 1977.

## 15. *The Last Years of the NLHL*

In late 1917, the NLHL moved from its premises at 75 Grand Parade, Haringay, to its final resting place, Liberty House, 318 Green Lanes. The new home became the centre of all the League's activities. One new departure was the formation of the 'Liberty Club' at the new address; this was open all day every day, and it became a refuge in a hostile world. Indeed, the social side of the anti-War movement deserves some attention, struggling against the current as the participants were, subjected to attacks on their meetings, treated as pariahs or victimised at work, harrassed at home or localities where they lived, having their children assaulted at school, and, if they were 'aliens', becoming victims of racist attacks in the streets. In such an environment there was strong need for mutual support and friendly companionship.

The League had a well-developed 'social' life, creating a milieu in which personal relationships could develop and a multitude of informal discussions — usually much more important in the development of ideas and attitudes than formal meetings — could take place. The NLHL organised a large number of dances, concerts and similar events, where a number of 'show biz' personalities who were supporters of the League provided much of the entertainment. These included the young Elsa Lanchester, who danced,<sup>1</sup> and John Goss who sang,<sup>2</sup> and actors like Victor Starr and Miles Malleon.

In the last months of the War the political climate rapidly changed. There had always been some servicemen involved with the NLHL, but this trickle turned into a steady stream. A participant recalls that a number of wounded soldiers joined the League, while the League's campaign on Ireland and its support for the strikes of busworkers, police, and, after the end of the War, piano workers<sup>3</sup> each brought in new converts.

In early 1918 there was a food crisis which hit working-class areas hard. Members of the NLHL were active on this issue, particularly among women. The campaign led to some pretty tense confrontations which culminated in a near riot when Tottenham housewives besieged the local Food Office.

Meanwhile — as always — the Finsbury Park meetings went on.

Among the speakers in this last period were Shapurji Saklatvala, Harry Pollitt, Mrs Mary 'Ma' Bamber of Liverpool, and Arthur McManus,<sup>4</sup> as well as many of the old favourites. Many of these meetings were very large with audiences of thousands.

The end of the War came almost as an anti-climax. There was so much unfinished business. In the months which followed, socialists who had been in the forces began to be demobilised and some CGs began to trickle home, but it wasn't until May 1919 that the 'absolutists' were released — and only then after a long hunger strike. Many of these men were in a poor state of health after years in prison and a considerable proportion of the League's energies were devoted to their rehabilitation.

The scene at Finsbury Park after the War reflected the changed situation. Where previously the venue had been dominated by the Herald League, with the coming of peace out came all the groups and parties which had kept a low profile during the War. I. Renson, who was a teenager in that period, remembers Sunday mornings in the park:

There were numerous platforms, sometimes up to 20 if one included the religious ones. I remember seeing the Herald League, the BSP, the National Socialist Party, the ILP and the Socialist Party of Great Britain. There was also the Labour Party and quite a few small organisations which folded up in a few years' time, some of them getting absorbed into other groups and parties like the Communist Party. Trade Unions also had platforms there.<sup>5</sup>

In October 1919, *Rebel*, the League's paper, reported the emergence of a 'vigilance committee' within the NLHL. This was the origin of the Communist Group of the NLHL which participated in the foundation conference of the CP on August 1st, 1920. According to Harry Young, about 30 NLHL members joined the Communist Party; many more joined the Labour Party.

It had been the War which kept the League together, and when peace came fissiparous tendencies rapidly developed. Some members, burnt out by the struggle, retired into private life with the rebirth of normal political activity, others returned to their primary political allegiances. Ted Hennem comments on what happened:

The League did not disintegrate. Its members found employment miles away, others went into activity with the ILP, and a group with George Deacon<sup>6</sup> felt that the Communist Party with its international loyalties was the party of the future. The Labour Party had about this time set up its individual membership sections. All these factors together convinced us that the League had fulfilled its function and should disband — we went into voluntary liquidation.

By August 1920 the NLHL was in serious financial difficulties, and the lease of its premises — Liberty House — was coming to an end. The last issue of *Rebel* came out in December 1920 and the NLHL dissolved itself

shortly thereafter. There was an ironic aftermath — 'Liberty House' became an Army recruiting centre.

### Notes

1. Elsa Lanchester came from a radical background. Her mother Edith Lanchester was a member of the Executive of the SDF in the 1890s, and became a *cause celebre* when she lived in a free union; her family committed her to a lunatic asylum in consequence. In 1918 Elsa had founded the Children's Theatre in Soho, which seems to have had strong radical connections. Elsa Lanchester was a member of the ILP after the War.
2. John Goss, 1894–1953, was a noted baritone; after the War he joined the Communist Party.
3. Piano workers might seem a pretty obscure group of workers, but the industry had been switched to aircraft production during the War. With the coming of peace the industry boomed as never before as people began to spend money accumulated during the War years. There were something like 6,000 workers in the industry in North London at the time.
4. Saklatvala, who lived in St Pancras, went on to become the Communist MP for Battersea North for several years. Harry Pollitt at this time was a member of the WSF; he went on to become the General Secretary of the Communist Party for many years. Mrs Bamber was a formidable woman agitator from Merseyside who had been active since the turn of the century, and who went on to play a prominent part in the Liverpool unemployed movement in the early 1920s. She was the mother of Bessie Braddock MP. Arthur McManus was a member of the Clyde Workers' Committee during the War and he became the first Chairman of the Communist Party.
5. Letter to the author in May 1980.
6. George Deacon was the NLHL's last Chairman. He became a member of the Executive of the Communist Party and was employed fulltime by them until the late 1920s. He then joined the Labour Party in South West London, where he remained active for many years.

## 16. *The Brotherhood Church*

The NLHL was not the only centre of the anti-War movement in North London. Another was the Brotherhood Church in Southgate Road. But to understand its role it is necessary to make a historical digression.

The Church was founded in 1662, as an independent congregational chapel. In 1862 it moved to its final site in Southgate Road; at this time it was a conventional chapel, although it had some fairly radical connections. In 1892 the Reverend Bruce Wallace became the Minister. Wallace was a Christian Socialist. In 1887 he had founded the socialist paper *Brotherhood* at Limavady in Northern Ireland, in which he developed the ideas he was later to put into practice.

When Bruce Wallace took over he renamed the Southgate Road Chapel the Brotherhood Church, and it rapidly became the centre of a whole range of radical and socialist activities. The Brotherhood Association, the Church's 'political' wing, had about 15 branches by the turn of the century, mostly in London but one or two elsewhere. There were also several associated churches, for example those at Croydon, Harrow Road, Forest Gate and Walthamstow.<sup>1</sup> Also connected with the Church was the Co-operative Brotherhood Trust which operated several workshops and shops, of which at least one, the shop at 37 Newington Green, seems to have lasted until after the 1914–1918 War.

About the turn of the century, the Brotherhood movement spawned a number of communities in the countryside where members lived together. There were four of these in Essex alone, and while many were relatively short lived, one at least, 'The Commune' at Stanford-le-Hope, was in existence until the Second World War. 'The Commune' and some other Brotherhood-connected groups seem to have played quite an important part in the informal network helping 'dodgers' on the run. After the end of the War 'The Commune' provided a recuperative haven for a number of anti-War activists, notably Reg Sorenson and Fenner Brockway and their families.<sup>2</sup>

The politics of the Church were basically christian socialist and pacifist — a number of its members were Quakers. There was a strong Tolstoyan anarchist current and William Morris was an important influence.<sup>3</sup>

The Church had strong links with the socialist movement, exemplified by the record of one of its prominent members, H. A. Barker. Barker also illustrates how, whenever you look at the wartime radical movement, you have only to scratch the surface to find strong connections with previous radical waves embedded within them. Barker (1858–1940) was a Trustee of the Brotherhood Church for its last 30 years. A builder by trade, he was born in Shoreditch and seems to have lived in the general area all his life; as a boy he had been confirmed at the Southgate Road Chapel before it was taken over by Bruce Wallace.

Barker was a pioneer socialist. He was probably a member of the Labour Emancipation League, a forerunner of the SDF, and he was certainly a very early member of the latter. In December 1884 Barker left the SDF with the Socialist League split, and he became a very active member of the new body, of which he eventually became National Secretary between 1886 and 1888.

In 1888 Barker left the Socialist League with a number of other members who objected to the growing anti-parliamentarianism of that organisation, and he helped to found the Labour Union, a short-lived socialist group which played a prominent part, with H. A. Barker much to the fore, in the industrial struggles in North London in the 1889–1890 period, notably the successful and pretty violent strike of coal porters at the St Pancras Arches complex in July and August 1889, which led to the formation of the Coal Porters' Union. The Labour Union was also heavily involved in the disastrous strike of postmen at Mount Pleasant and other local post offices in July 1890, which was completely smashed by the authorities.

Barker went on to play a leading part in the formation of the ILP and he was a member of its first executive. He was an active member of the Brotherhood Church from its formation until its closure.<sup>4</sup>

A notable event at the Church under Bruce Wallace was the Congress there in 1907 of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party which was attended by virtually all the prominent figures of both the Bolshevik and Menshevik wings of the Party.<sup>5</sup>

In January 1911 the Church was taken over by F. R. Swan, who got the job with the help of the Reverend R. J. Campbell of the City Temple. Campbell had been Secretary of Finsbury ILP.<sup>6</sup> Swan had lost his previous living because of his support for Victor Grayson, the successful independent socialist candidate in the Colne Valley election of 1907. He was a member of the ILP and had joined the staff of the *Daily Herald* virtually from its foundation.

Under Swan's ministry the Church became even more explicitly political. Its service took the form of a reading from the Bible — in

accordance with a clause in the Church's trustee agreement — readings from other books, the singing of songs from the *Labour Songbook*, and a speaker. Among the huge number of speakers before the War were Annie Besant, Sylvia Pankhurst, Keir Hardie, Tom Mann and George Lansbury.

The same month that War broke out the Church had its first anti-War meeting, at which the main speaker was Herbert Burrows.<sup>7</sup> From then on the opposition of the Brotherhood Church to the War remained constant, although its attitude was pacifist rather than militant. By and large the importance of the Church during the War was as a place for meetings. Those involved in the anti-War struggle found it very difficult to obtain halls for meetings and the existence of the Brotherhood Church as a friendly reliable venue made it much in demand, so much so that George Lansbury described it as 'the Mecca, the meeting place of those who wanted peace'.<sup>8</sup>

As an illustration of what this meant, we can take the first six months of 1916. On January 16th, a 'Stop the War' meeting at the Church was attacked by hooligans who, as well as assaulting individuals, pelted the meeting with thunderflashes and other missiles. On January 30th, the 'Anti-German League' held a meeting of about 700 people outside the Church, calling on the authorities to close down peace meetings there. The Chairman of this meeting was Alderman Vorley.

On March 10th, Sylvia Pankhurst spoke at a meeting organised by the WSF. This meeting was attacked and broken up by a mob which included many soldiers in uniform led by an officer; Canadian troops were prominent. An interesting feature of this meeting, and perhaps an omen of things to come, was that quite a few of the soldiers who had come to disrupt found that they were in agreement with the WSF's case.

Finally in June 1916 there was a series of large meetings at the Church called by the No-Conscription Fellowship at which the main speaker was Clifford Allen. There seems to have been no substantial disruption of these meetings.

Perhaps the peak of the Brotherhood Church's involvement in the anti-War struggle came in July 1917 when, in response to the February Revolution in Russia, the Leeds Convention met to set up Councils of Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates.<sup>9</sup> The Convention decided, among other things, to hold a series of regional meetings, one of them to be held in London. The original London hall having failed to materialise due to police pressure, the meeting was moved to the Brotherhood Church.

This meeting took place on July 28th. There were about 250 delegates including a number of servicemen. There had been some attempt to keep the venue of the meeting private but even so the authorities were

well prepared. Basil Thomson, head of the Special Branch, noted in his diary on 27th July in relation to the meeting:

They will have a rude awakening tomorrow, as I have arranged for the *Daily Express* to publish the place of the meeting and strong opposition may be expected.<sup>10</sup>

Leaflets were also distributed in the area stating that a pro-German meeting was taking place and that 'scores of old soldiers and others are going to march to the canal bridge to show these traitors what we think of them'. The leaflets called on the local population to 'remember the last air raid and roll up'.<sup>11</sup> Part of the job of mobilising the mob was taken on by Horatio Bottomley,<sup>12</sup> then MP for South Hackney, who ran a sort of mini-Tammany Hall locally which had a 'stable' of roughs on call.

Long before the meeting was due to start the mobs had begun to gather. It was estimated that they eventually totalled 8,000, many of them in uniform. The leaders of the military contingent seem to have been a Canadian soldier and two Royal Naval Air Service men. Also present were our old friends the Anti-German League. There was also a strong force of police in attendance.

By 3 pm the Church was completely surrounded. At 3.15 a sledgehammer mysteriously materialised and the front door of the Church was smashed in and the fight started. The delegates who had already arrived were trapped in the small hall at the back. Meanwhile the crowd systematically smashed up the main hall; windows and fanlights were broken and frames ripped out, the furniture was almost completely destroyed, water pipes were pulled out of the walls and the hall was partially flooded.

Bertrand Russell — who was there — described what happened to the trapped delegates:

A few people, among them Francis Meynell,<sup>13</sup> attempted resistance, and I remember him returning from the door with his face streaming with blood. The mob burst in led by a few officers; all except the officers were more or less drunk. The fiercest were viragos who used wooden boards full of rusty nails. An attempt was made by the officers to induce the women among us to retire first so they might deal as they thought fit with the pacifist men, whom they supposed to be all cowards. Mrs Snowden behaved on this occasion in a very admirable manner. She refused pointblank to leave the hall unless the men were allowed to leave at the same time. The other women present agreed with her. This rather upset the officers in charge of the roughs, as they did not particularly wish to assault women. But by this time the mob had its blood up, and pandemonium broke loose. Everyone had to escape as best they could while the police looked on calmly. Two of the drunken women began to attack me with their boards full of nails. While I was wondering how one defended



oneself against this type of attack, one of the ladies among us went up to the police and suggested they should defend me. The police merely shrugged their shoulders. 'But he is an eminent philosopher', said the lady, and the police still shrugged. 'But he is famous all over the world as a man of learning', she continued. The police remained unmoved. 'But he is the brother of an Earl', she finally cried. At this the police rushed to my assistance. They were, however, too late to be of any service, and I owe my life to a young woman whom I did not know, who interposed herself between me and the viragos long enough for me to make my escape. But quite a number of people, including several women, had their clothes torn off their backs as they left the building.<sup>14</sup>

Another illustration of the violence of the situation and the attitude of the police was what happened to Leonard Howard of the NLHL. With blood streaming down his face he was attacked again and again. He eventually took refuge in a furniture van, and the police finally acted — they grabbed him and threw him back to his attackers.<sup>15</sup> It seems that Howard and other League members present played an active part in the physical defence of the Church.

Needless to say the conference broke up; when John Maclean turned up a bit later all he saw was 'a howling mob of male and female dervishes'.<sup>16</sup> Among the consequences of this rather one-sided fighting were numerous injuries, including lacerated heads and serious cuts; one delegate nearly had his eye gouged out by a stick; and a young woman had her throat badly cut when someone in the crowd tried to grab her necklace.

A. M. Barker the 18-year-old son of H. A. Barker — was present at the time and wrote of his experience to me:

But I will tell of an awful scene of a woman being swung around by her hair, the technique of women's fighting in those days — and which could cause terrible scalp wounds — and a crowd of god knows how many howling 'do her in' and horrible language . . . . The next morning I found the Church itself wrecked, a shameful shambles of broken windows, broken down doors, smashed pews, piano, organ, and the floors of the Church almost solid with brickbats. I almost broke down and cried at this terrible shameful sight.

The police arrested only one man — one of the delegates. The excuse given for the police inactivity by the sub-inspector in charge was 'that to have attempted to arrest anyone would have depleted our force and given them [the rioters] the opportunity of attacking the Church.' In actuality the role of the police consisted entirely of gently shooing the rioters from the ruined hall after they had worked themselves out — a classic example of low-profile policing?

The events at the Brotherhood Church raise questions which have never been satisfactorily answered as to the extent to which the authori-

ties were involved in the attacks on, and harrassment of, the anti-War movement. They were certainly involved — as the Basil Thomson evidence establishes — in sometimes making sure that potential attackers were informed of the venues of private meetings; what is not clear — although there were deep suspicions at the time — is to what extent the authorities were involved in the attacks themselves. Certainly the presence of large numbers of troops in uniform is significant, as is the total lack of any arrests, in spite of the prior presence of ample police. What happened at the Brotherhood Church was not an isolated event as I hope this text shows, and what happened on a local scale was repeated nationally.

To take two more North London examples of harrassment of meetings. On September 1st, 1917, a meeting was called at Highbury Corner by the WSF and the Women's Peace Crusade.<sup>17</sup> The advertised speakers were Sylvia Pankhurst, ex-inspector Symes, Nellie Best, Patricia Lynch and Reg Sorenson. At the last moment the organisers moved the meeting to the corner of Lofting Road and Caledonian Road, leaving a large hostile crowd — which had been roused by leaflets calling on all good 'patriots' to oppose the meeting — soaking in the rain. The Anti-German League was again in evidence, led on this occasion by a man called Richard Glover.

On October 17th, 1917, there was another attack on a meeting at the Brotherhood Church, at which the speaker was Bertrand Russell and the chairman was F. R. Swan. There were about 200 foot and 40 mounted police in attendance, but 'in spite' of the strong force of police, large numbers of rioters got into the Church, broke up the meeting, poured petrol over the rostrum and set it alight. The ensuing fire did considerable damage and was eventually put out by the fire brigade which had been present before the meeting started.

After these attacks the Brotherhood Church received partial compensation amounting to £400 from the Government. This was only a fraction of the total damage done, and the wrecked Church was surrounded by an eight foot high hoarding. The damage received by the building made it unsuitable for any further large meetings during the War, but smaller gatherings continued.

With the coming of peace the Church continued to function, but it was in severe financial difficulties, having to foot the bill for repairing the damage it had received during the War. It continued to be a centre for a wide range of political activities. For example, the first two conferences of the Young Communist League was held there<sup>18</sup> and trade union branches, local Labour Parties, the SPGB, the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Shoreditch Unemployed all met at the

Church. Eventually funds ran out and the Church finally closed its doors on March 18th, 1934. Regular meetings of the congregation continued at the Essex Road Library until the death of F. R. Swan in October 1938; the last meeting was held on January 12th 1939.<sup>19</sup>

After the final closure, surviving members of the Brotherhood Church apparently used to meet in Walthamstow until the early 1960s. As I was writing this text I was surprised to discover that a Brotherhood Church still exists at Stapleton, near Pontefract, Yorkshire. This community is a direct descendant of the Brotherhood community at Purleigh in Essex, which was itself an offshoot of the Brotherhood Church at Croydon.<sup>20</sup>

### *Notes*

1. I suspect that the Walthamstow Brotherhood Church was connected with the Walthamstow Free Christian Church, whose minister, Reg Sorenson played an important part in the anti-War movement in North London.
2. For information on some of the Brotherhood communities see Dennis Hardy *Alternative Communities in Nineteenth-Century England*, 1979, pp. 165–210.
3. In the 1890s, the Croydon Brotherhood Church was the main publisher of Tolstoy's social writings; its minister J. C. Kenworthy was also a well known anti-War campaigner.
4. The best source of information on H. A. Barker is his entry in *The Dictionary of Labour Biography* by Barbara Nield and John Saville. I am also grateful for considerable help given me by A. M. Barker.
5. Among those present at the Brotherhood Church on this occasion were Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Plekhanov, Gorky, Zinoviev and Rosa Luxemburg.
6. R. J. Campbell died in 1956.
7. Herbert Burrows was a civil servant who lived in Highbury. The son of a Chartist, he was a founder-member of the SDF, and for many years he was one of its most notable leaders. He stood as the SDF parliamentary candidate in Haggerston in 1908 and 1910, but resigned from the party in 1911 in protest at the leadership's growing chauvinism. Burrows was quite active in the anti-War movement in spite of growing ill health. In September 1916 he represented Shoreditch Trades Council at a WSF conference on women in industry, which must have been one of his last public appearances. He died in 1921 after 6 years of serious illness.
8. See the *Daily Herald*, March 27th, 1934.
9. The Leeds Convention was called by the United Socialist Council, an alliance of the BSP, the ILP and the Fabian Society. Incidentally, the joint secretaries of the Convention were Francis Johnson of Finsbury ILP and Albert Inkipin of Hackney BSP, both National Secretaries of their respective organisations. However, the movement towards the Convention had been initiated by the National Herald League. One oft-forgotten aspect of the Convention was that the jingoist opposition to it culminated in what was virtually a pogrom in the Jewish area of Leeds.

10. See Sir Basil Thomson, *The Scene Changes*, 1939, p. 383, quoted in Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism*, 1977. I can recommend this book which, while primarily dealing with the SLP is a valuable source of background information about the period covered by this text.
11. *Workers' Dreadnought*, August 4th, 1917.
12. Bottomley, with a long record of dubious financial dealings behind him, was elected MP for South Hackney in 1906. Funnily enough, Islington Trades and Labour Council issued a manifesto supporting him in 1910. During the War his paper, *John Bull*, led the pack with the most virulently 'anti-German' rhetoric, while Bottomley himself made a fortune 'giving' recruiting and patriotic speeches for money. In 1922 he was sentenced to 7 years' imprisonment for fraud and had to resign his seat.
13. Francis Meynell, 1891–1975, typographer, worked on the *Daily Herald*, of which he became a director between 1918 and 1920. Meynell wrote the first explicit attack on the War to appear in the *Weekly Herald* in December 1914. At the time of the riot at the Brotherhood Church he was a member of the WSF. After the War he joined the Communist Party and for a short time was the editor of their journal *The Communist*. He seems to have left the CP some time in the 1920s. He was knighted in 1946.
14. See *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 2 (1914–1944) pp. 31–32.
15. *Workers' Dreadnought*, August 4th, 1917.
16. See Nan Milton, *John Maclean*, 1973, p. 142.
17. The Women's Peace Crusade had emerged in Glasgow in 1916. It rapidly expanded into a national network, much of its support coming from working-class women and socialist-feminists. It was not only engaged in the anti-War struggle, but also in a whole range of other issues, notably rent strikes.
18. These two conferences were held in August 1922 and October 1923. Harry Young, who was the YCL's first National Organiser, had also been a member of the NLHL. In 1926 he represented the YCL on the Executive Committee of the CP and he also spent some time in the Soviet Union. Harry left the Party in the mid-1930s and from 1940 until the present time (1982) he has been an active member of the SPGB. Harry has been a most valuable source of information on the NLHL and on radical events in North London generally. I would like to make special acknowledgment here of my debt of gratitude to him.
19. The minutes of the Brotherhood Church, 1926–1939, are held at the Islington Central Library.
20. There is a most interesting account of the Stapleton church in A. G. Higgins, *A History of the Brotherhood Church* published by the Brotherhood Church, Stapleton, Nr. Pontefract, Yorkshire. (Price £4 plus postage.)

## 17. *Aftermath*

What happened to the anti-War movement after the disappearance of the simple purities of opposition to the War? The answer is a complex one. The fact is that the movement fragmented. Some found that they were not so radical after all, that they were opposed to the War — or war in general — rather than the social system which produced it. This category included most of those whose opposition had been primarily religious or ethical, although many of this group went on to play substantial parts in the wider labour movement.

Others, exhausted by the tensions and stresses of the struggle, felt the need to pick up the pieces of their disrupted lives, and retreated temporarily or permanently into private life.

But many of those actively involved in the radical anti-War movement went on to participate in one way or another in the socialist movement, which had itself been profoundly changed by the War. As we have seen, some went into the Communist Party when it was formed in 1920, while others joined the ILP and a whole range of other socialist organisations; still others, like Walter Ponder, Guy Aldred, and — eventually — Charlie Lahr ploughed their own independent path as they always had. But without doubt, ironically in view of its record during the War, the greatest single beneficiary of the dispersal of the movement was the Labour Party.

In 1918 the National Labour Party was reorganised, and it began to allow individual membership. At the same time there had been a huge growth in the trade union movement during and just after the War. In 1913 the membership of registered unions had been 3,205,000, in itself the highest figure ever until that time; in 1918 it had reached 5,259,000, and by 1920 the total was 6,929,000. A very high proportion of this new membership came from the ranks of semi- and unskilled workers, many of them women.

The experience of Islington Labour Party is instructive. In April 1918, the old Islington Trades and Labour Council, announced that its affiliated membership had doubled since the beginning of the War, mainly due to the growth of affiliated trade union membership. In May 1918 it formally restructured itself on a constituency and individual membership basis.

In the November 1918 'Coupon' General Election all the Labour candidates in Islington were defeated, albeit with fairly substantial votes. In April 1919, however, Labour won 15 of the 30 seats on the Board of Guardians, and in the November 1919 council elections 44 of the 60 council seats were won. For the first time Labour was in power locally.

Many of this first generation of Labour Party members were determined that Labour politics should not degenerate into the clique-ridden secrecy so characteristic then and now of municipal politics. It was because of this determination — frustrated, as it turned out — that just before the 1919 council elections the South Islington Labour Party passed the following resolution:

That in the event of the Labour Party winning the municipal election — that the Chief Whip and the Chairman be elected by the whole party and that reports should be given from time to time by its members, and that decisions on all matters of principle should be sought at the centre [the central Islington Labour Party] which consists of delegates of the whole party.

This decision seems to have sunk without trace.

The new Labour Party both nationally and locally was largely an amalgam. It contained elements ranging from renegade liberals with a layer of 'socialists' and trade unionists who had for the first time tasted the fruits of power and patronage during the boom of committees, commissions and councils which had been set up to support the prosecution of the War; to a wide range of radicals and ordinary working people who, without any previous experience to go on, felt that the time had come to make Islington a borough fit for heroes to live in.

The process of growth continued. In May 1920 Islington Labour Party announced that its membership had increased by 150% in the previous year. There seems in this period a strong climate of euphoria, a belief in the imminence of the New Jerusalem, and a feeling that for this to come about bygones must be bygones, that the lion must lie down with the lamb, the dove with the hawk, and the rabid 'patriot' with the 'absolutist'.

This spirit couldn't last and fundamental differences began to emerge. In December 1920 E. H. King, Islington's first Labour mayor, called on the police to eject the unemployed from the disused Essex Road Library, after previously granting them use of it. King followed this up with a violent attack on the unemployed — the vast majority of whom were ex-servicemen — describing them as 'unemployables' and accusing the men's organisation of financial dishonesty.<sup>1</sup> The growing radical disillusionment with the Labour Party was reinforced in September 1921 when the majority of the Labour Guardians voted to

rescind an increase in outdoor relief to which they had earlier agreed following a large unemployed demonstration.<sup>2</sup> From then on there was virtual civil war between the right and left wings of the party, with the right generally on top; many radicals left the party in disgust, the honeymoon was over, and the struggle inside the Islington parties culminated in 1926 with splits within at least two Islington constituencies.<sup>3</sup> *Plus ça change!*

The early unemployed movement was one of the areas where the spirit of the radical anti-War movement was kept alive. In the early 1920s, ex-members of the NLHL played a prominent part in struggles in Poplar, Shoreditch, Islington, Finsbury, Tottenham, Walthamstow and even Battersea.<sup>4</sup>

Just as the struggles and changes which took place in 1914–1918 were rooted in the pre-War movement, these wartime conflicts had a huge influence on the shape of the post-War political and industrial scene. It is important to emphasise the massive changes which the War wrought upon the political environment, but it is also essential to recognise the continuity with the previous epoch not only of class struggle but of class collaboration too. Many of those who were ardent patriots during the War went on to become leading figures in the Labour Party. On the other hand, the War and the complex matrix of struggle which took place during it played a central part in radicalising a whole new generation of socialists, who in turn helped ensure that the immediate post-War years were among the most tumultuous in our history.

## Notes

1. This was ironic, as in May 1922 E. H. King was accused by South Islington Labour Party of selling their furniture for his own benefit. The matter was eventually smoothed over but not before several leading members had resigned in disgust.
2. Among the leaders of this unemployed agitation were Harry Lynch and H. E. Martin, both of whom seem to have been associated with the NLHL; Martin had also been a member of the WSF.
3. These were the East and North Islington constituency parties. The split-off parties joined the Communist Party-dominated National Left Wing Movement, and had a separate existence until about 1929, when the Left Wing Movement was ditched by the CP.
4. There was a notable struggle in Shoreditch in the autumn of 1921 when a 'no rent' strike was organised by the Shoreditch Unemployed Committee, which incidentally met at the Brotherhood Church. The borough was divided into 16 divisions, each with a marshal, while each street had a picket. The whole area was swamped with stickers printed with the slogan 'No work, No rent'; a

policeman was even seen walking down Pitfield Street with one stuck on his back. A leading participant in this struggle was A. B. Elsbury, secretary of the Shore-ditch Unemployed Committee, who had been a member of both the IWW and the NLHL. By the time of these events he was a member of the Communist Party; later on he became an early Trotskyist. (For accounts of the rent strike see, *Islington Gazette*, September 9th, 1921, and an article by Elsbury in *The Communist*, October 8th, 1921.) (The 'no rent' slogan goes back to the late 1880s and early 1890s when an agitation along these lines were carried out in Clerkenwell, South Islington and the East End by anarchists and socialists, some of them associated with the Socialist League.)