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***People, Place and Party: the Social Democratic
Federation 1884-1911***

David Murray Young

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Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Durham

Department of Politics

August 2003



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Abstract

David M. Young

People, Place and Party: the Social Democratic Federation 1884-1911

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Durham 2003.

This study presents a social and political history of the Social Democratic Federation from the early 1880s to the end of the Edwardian era with a focus on the London area. The SDF has often been portrayed as an intransigent and alien organisation by the existing historiography but this study outlines the relationship between the political journey of individual members, the constraints and potential of the local area and the resultant politics of the SDF as an organisation.

With the aid of under-utilised sources such as branch minutes and publications this thesis builds a profile of SDF membership in London and the factors affecting membership in the metropolis. There then follows sections on branch culture and propaganda followed by chapters on the cultural/political questions of gender, religion and education. The second half of the thesis deals with the more political questions of strategy, ideology, internationalism (and racism), trade unionism and relations with the Labour Party.

The title 'People, Place and Party' is meant to indicate the tension between those elements that affect the development of an organisation. With an awareness of these elements and by using a breadth of source material it is possible to overcome the obstacle of the 'dogmatic' stereotype of the SDF.

Declaration

No material contained in this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other university.

Statement of copyright

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Abbreviations

ASRS	Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants
ASS	Adult Suffrage Society
BSP	British Socialist Party
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
EC	Executive Committee
GWGLU	Gasworkers and General Labourer's Union
ILP	Independent Labour Party
ISEL	Industrial Syndicalist Education League
LCC	London County Council
LRC	Labour Representation Committee
LSC	London Society of Compositors
LTC	London Trades Council
MRF	Metropolitan Radical Federation
NAC	National Administrative Committee (ILP)
NRWC	National Right to Work Committee
NSP	National Socialist Party
NSS	National Secular Society
NUC	National Unemployed Committee
RSDLP	Russian Social-Democratic and Labour Party
SACC	South Africa Conciliation Committee
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
SPGB	Socialist Party of Great Britain
SWC	Stop-the-War Committee
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WNHC	Workmen's National Housing Council
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

Abbreviations in footnotes

BLPES	British Library of Political and Economic Science, London
BMML	Bulletin of the Marx Memorial Library
BSSLH	Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History
IISH	International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam
IRSH	International Review of Social History
LHR	Labour History Review
NMLH	National Museum of Labour History, Manchester

‘Some day, I suppose when we are all dead and gone somebody who knows nothing about [the SDF] will write it all down.’

Harry Quelch to H.M.Hyndman in *How I became a Socialist*, [nd. 1902], p1.

Introduction

a) The Received View

In his study of the ILP David Howell writes: 'the image of the Social Democratic Federation as a narrow dogmatic sect unsuited to the rigours of British politics is a tendentious, partial and misleading one, in which the polemical judgements of ILP contemporaries have been canonised into firm historical verdicts. Clearly the reality was more complex than this.'¹ The SDF has been a victim of the nature of history in that historians as researchers have a tendency to look for the origins of institutions, ideas and movements. In this case the SDF has most often been referred to in connection with the origin of the Labour Party and has seldom been seen in a favourable light.

The first generation of Labour Party historians regarded the SDF with some hostility. Early commentators on labour politics such as G.D.H.Cole and the Fabian R.C.K.Ensor certainly regarded Britain's first Marxist party as an example of failure against the Labour Party's paradigm of success. Ensor (who opposed the SDF in London from the 1890s) described Hyndman² as a dilettante financier, Morris³ as an unworldly aesthete and their activities as 'incurable exoticism'.⁴ G.D.H.Cole, although admitting that the SDF were 'the pioneers of modern Socialism in Great Britain', claimed that they 'uttered an unintelligible Marxian jargon devoid of propagandist appeal'.⁵ This is a theme supported by E.Halevy who suggested that the SDF professed 'a sour creed, imported from abroad' and had a leadership in which 'the intellectuals seemed to outnumber the workers'.⁶

¹ David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906* (Manchester 1983), p389.

² **Henry Mayers Hyndman** (1842-1921), Gentleman, journalist, stockbroker. Active in Democratic Federation then SDF from 1881 until 1916. Left to form National Socialist Party.

³ **William Morris** (1834-1896), artist poet and designer. Active in Democratic Federation then SDF 1883-4. Left with others to form the Socialist League 1885-1890. Contributor to *Justice* after 1890.

⁴ R.C.K.Ensor, *England 1870-1914* (Oxford 1939), p222.

⁵ G.D.H.Cole, *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement 1789-1947* (3rd Edition 1948), p251.

⁶ E.Halevy *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century: Epilogue: 1895-1905, Book 2 The Internal Policy of the Unionist Cabinet* (Harmondsworth 1939), p147.



In later works the Labour Party's pragmatism is seen as the over-riding virtue. Philip Poirer accepts the importance of the SDF as an agent of Socialist propaganda claiming that 'perhaps one of its greatest services was a negative one: it served as a warning to other socialists of what not to do'.⁷ In *The Origins of the Labour Party* the doyen of post-war labour historians Henry Pelling was more generous to the influence of the Federation and stated that it was 'clear that the competition of the ILP did not cause a decline in the membership of the older body', but he remained critical of its uncompromising stance when he wrote that 'the failure of the SDF to expand can be put down to the dogmatic, sectarian character of their propaganda', and possibly because they were led by 'a unique "old guard" of bitter dogmatic sectaries'.⁸

Other socialist historians have been more sympathetic to the SDF. Writers such as John Saville, James Hinton and Ralph Miliband in their works on the labour movement have emphasised the labourist/socialist schism in British politics which is often overlooked.⁹ Saville characterised the SDF as a 'political organisation of importance to the left of the Labour Party that [was] developing the organisational channels to transmit ideas and policies into the main bodies of the Labour movement.'¹⁰ Although these historians have put the SDF into a better perspective as a socialist counter-balance in the British labour movement, they have not cleared up the picture of the character of the Federation.

Two writers who have put the SDF into the context of London politics, and have given it some credibility, have been Paul Thompson and Gareth Stedman Jones.¹¹ Thompson's work was intended to trace the origins of the London District Labour

⁷ P.P.Poirer, *The Advent of the Labour Party* (1958), p26. See also Ann Stafford, *A Match to fire the Thames* (1961), p42 where the SDF 'appealed chiefly to middle class intellectuals'.

⁸ Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party 1880-1900* (1965), p168, p92, p173. Pelling in the main takes a very negative view of the SDF. See for example the numerous references to their 'extremism', 'intransigence', and 'sectarianism' in *The Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910* (1967), pp59, 110, 131, 255, 265, 390.

⁹ John Saville, *The Labour Movement in Britain: A Commentary* (1988). James Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement 1867-1974* (Brighton 1983). Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (1961).

¹⁰ John Saville, *op.cit.*, p135.

¹¹ Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London 1885-1914* (1967). Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (1971).

Party and was often critical of the SDF as representatives of working-class politics. Yet he noted not only the diversity in the membership and the strategies that they used, but also that it was the mainstay of the capital's socialism for over thirty years. 'In London so far from being the dogmatic sect with little significant support... the SDF was winning more hard working men than any other political movement.'¹² *Outcast London* by Gareth Stedman Jones, although mainly a study of underemployed workers in late nineteenth century London, devoted a chapter to 'Socialism and the Casual Poor'. In this he described the Federation as 'the first and most important London socialist organisation.'¹³ Stedman Jones' and Thompson's assessments stand out against the majority of the received view.

Criticism or characterisation of the SDF has concentrated on the following points: that it was tiny, middle class, had an inflexible Marxist ideology, was hostile to trade unionists, suffragettes and Jews, and its main function was to obstruct the progress of the Labour Party.

Clearly, this is not a complete fiction. The membership did contain leaders who were quite obviously middle class and a number who lived on independent incomes. H.M.Hyndman, who was a leader of the SDF, SDP and BSP for over thirty years, was born of a plantation-owning family, spent some time as a stockbroker and later lived on the earnings from his investments and journalism. Others, such as Ernest Belfort Bax, Edward Aveling and Charlotte Despard¹⁴, were in a similar position. Other prominent upper and middle-class members included William Morris, Lady Warwick, Dora B. Montfiore and Herbert Burrows.

However, it was not merely its class composition which historians have identified as giving the SDF a middle-class mien. James D. Young writes that 'victims of their own middle-class prejudices, and lacking the conviction of Marx and Engels that working people could sometimes "feel for those in trouble", the SDF consistently worked to create an academically educated elite of proletarian and

¹² P. Thompson, *op.cit.*, p108.

¹³ G. Stedman Jones, *op.cit.*, p344, p321.

¹⁴ **Charlotte Despard** (1844-1939), author and child welfare worker. Active in (Battersea) SDF from 1895 to mid-1900s. Later active in the ILP, the women's suffrage movement and for Irish nationalism.

middle class cadres. They also systematically proceeded to criticise almost every aspect of working-class life.' He claims that if the SDF members were not entirely middle class in composition, they at least isolated socialists from working class culture and they 'soon discovered a strong, if not always acknowledged, emotional identity with the educated elements of the middle class.' Hence, even if the SDF did contain a majority working-class membership, their consciousness seems to have been a middle class one, and so Young claims, alienating in that 'what some workers disliked was not socialism, but the representatives of "socialism" in the English labour movement.'¹⁵

With such a strong representation amongst the leadership and a middle-class flavour to its ideology, it seemed plausible to describe the SDF as a middle-class organisation. In view of the size of the SDF's membership, historians have suggested that the middle class were the dominant group. According to P.A. Watmough, the national paying membership was 'extremely small' in the 1880s and never numbered above three thousand in the years before 1902.¹⁶ This compares with an ILP membership which at times was in excess of eight thousand. The SDF therefore could be described as a sect rather than a mass party of the working class.

The ideology of the SDF has been described as oppositional, dogmatic and inflexible, at odds with the evangelical and optimistic tone of the ILP propaganda. A recent work by an authority on the period describes the SDF as 'trapped in its rigid Marxist perspective' and contrasts them unfavourably with the ILP.¹⁷ SDF Marxism had a reputation for 'dwelling on the defects of the existing order and seldom pointing to a preferable alternative. Its reputation was that of the trouble maker, the rebel, the hard case.' The works of Marx that were available to British readers at the time encouraged 'rather distorted notions', which might easily have led to economic determinism.¹⁸ As a result of a partial reading of Marx, the SDF referred to their programme as 'palliatives' and some leading SDFers regarded

¹⁵ James D. Young, *Socialism and the English Working Class: A History of English Labour 1883-1939*. (Hemel Hempstead 1989), p24-25, p23.

¹⁶ P.A. Watmough, 'The Membership of the Social Democratic Federation 1885-1902', *BSSLH* (1971), p35-40.

¹⁷ Martin Pugh, *The Pankhursts* (2001), p63, p56.

¹⁸ Stuart McIntyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain 1917-1933* (Cambridge 1980), p58, p68.

trade unions and strikes as a means of delaying the inevitable process of increasing misery. A misreading of scientific socialism, and on occasions a misreading of the political potential of a situation, could easily have led the SDF to be labelled as dogmatic or sectarian.

This confrontational attitude was typified in the SDF's approach to the British trade union movement. Perhaps because of the respectable Liberal background of the trade union leaders, the SDF leadership rejected the revolutionary potential of trade unionism from the 'New Unionism' of the 1880s to the Syndicalism of just before the First World War. Hence Walter Kendall describes their approach as 'lordly disapproval, insisting that the workers would be better occupied directing their energies towards the ballot box, towards the preparation of the political revolution.'¹⁹

The leadership was also held to be hostile to the suffragettes and the nascent feminist movement, thinking that the women entering the labour market and the workers' movement were acting as a drag on the emancipation of the male working class. Hyndman, Quelch²⁰ and Belfort Bax all spoke out against the suffragettes. For example, Belfort Bax had argued that women were originally inferior because they had smaller brains whilst Quelch was openly critical of the role of women through the columns of *Justice* which he controlled as editor. The SDF criticism has been described by James D. Young as 'vociferous', which 'instead of challenging ruling-class hegemony head-on, helped to reinforce it.'²¹

Although the ILP and later historians' portrayal of the SDF draws attention to some aspects of the Federation, they ignore others. They overlook the influence of the mass of the working-class membership and the example of the working-class leadership such as Tom Mann, Will Thorne and George Lansbury in London,

¹⁹ Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-1921* (1969), p29.

²⁰ Harry Quelch (1858-1913), printer's warehouseman and editor of *Justice*. Leader of South Side Protection League during the 1889 dock strike. (Bermondsey) SDF activist from 1883. LTC president 1904-6, 1910.

²¹ Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History* (1973), p95. James D. Young, *op.cit.*, p63.

W.K.Hall and A.A.Purcell²² in Manchester and later John MacLean in Glasgow. The flexibility of the SDF is ignored in regard to their co-operation with other members of the labour and socialist movement in West Ham Borough Council and at numerous parliamentary elections in the local LRCs, the unemployed workers' movement or in the relentless search for 'Socialist Unity' from the 1890s onwards. It forgets that most leading SDF members were active trade unionists. They led the 'New Unions' of the 1880s (Will Thorne and Ben Tillett), the Great Dock Strike of 1889 (John Burns, Eleanor Marx and Tom Mann), Syndicalism (Tom Mann, Guy Bowman and A.A.Purcell) and the London Trades Council (Jem McDonald, Fred Knee and John Stokes). The same may be said of the women's movement. Although some members were opposed to women's suffrage, an equal number were unusually active in support, notably Charlotte Despard, Dora B.Montefiore and George Lansbury.

So it seems that the characterisation of the SDF has been taken from the leadership and from Hyndman in particular. It is typical that the first modern history of the SDF should be entitled *H. M. Hyndman and British Socialism*.²³ The dominant personality of Hyndman has been overshadowing the SDF – the SDF should be 'de-Hyndmanised' to indicate, as David Howell suggested, the complexity of the membership, ideology and organisation.²⁴

There has been a desire to write out the involvement and influence of the SDF from the early history of the Labour Party and the labour movement more generally. This has not been solely from historians of the right. Almost as much effort has come from the left to explain why the Labour Party is *not* a party committed to, or able to achieve, a revolutionary form of socialism. We may identify three broad schools of thought in terms of how they have viewed the SDF influence on Labour.

²² **Albert Arthur Purcell** (1872-1935), French Polisher and trade unionist. Active in (Hoxton) SDF from mid-1890s until leaving for Manchester in early 1900s. Continued as SDF/BSP activist in Manchester. Active Syndicalist 1910-12. Labour MP for Coventry 1923-4, Forest of Dean 1925-9,

²³ Chushichi Tsuzuki, *H.M.Hyndman and British Socialism* (Oxford 1961).

²⁴ Howell, *op.cit.*, p389.

One view, associated with the work of Henry Pelling, sees the revolutionary Marxism adopted by the SDF as 'alien' to the British tradition and the Labour Party as the political expression of industrial trade unionism and Protestant non-conformism. In essence Pelling is presenting a cultural explanation of Labourism. The view seems to point to a particularly ethical or moral brand of radical politics or, in the words of Alistair Reid, 'a non-rationalist psychology'.²⁵ The influence of Pelling as a writer on labour history is felt in other works, many of which have been cited in this introduction. Pelling characterises the SDF as 'intransigent', and Robert E. Dowse goes so far as to state that, since

'...the Social Democratic Federation was committed to a Simon-pure revolutionary policy, consisted mainly of doctrinaire Marxists and was led by the autocratic and colourful H.M. Hyndman, it was hardly likely that association with it would have appealed to the ILP's chosen ally, the trade unions.'²⁶

The Marxist view of the Labour Party, as expressed by writers and commentators such as Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, is that the Labour Party is an obstacle to revolutionary action.²⁷ It stands in the way of the overthrow of capitalism and therefore the realisation of socialism. Such Marxists declare that although the Social Democratic Federation did disseminate Marxist theory, it did not do so properly, i.e. they were too dogmatic, made theoretical mistakes, and failed to grasp the political nature of the class struggle. 'The SDF', Alex Callinicos writes, 'functioned as a propaganda group, spreading ideas, and on standing candidates at local and national elections. Its internal structure [reflected] the fact that the SDF did not regard intervention in workers' struggles as important.'²⁸

Thirdly the revisionist approach suggests that the Labour Party was never intended to be the political expression of the industrial working class or a tool of that class to gain control of the capitalist state. The Labour Party in this view shows continuity with the political radicalism of the mid-nineteenth century which focused on institutional or political reforms. In terms of the SDF it minimises

²⁵ Alastair J. Reid, 'Class and Politics in the work of Henry Pelling', Unpublished paper presented to the PSA –Labour Movements Group conference 6 July 2001.

²⁶ Robert E. Dowse, *Left in the Centre: The Independent Labour Party 1893-1940* (1966), p8.

²⁷ Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, *The Labour Party: A Marxist History* (1988).

²⁸ Alex Callinicos, 'Politics or Abstract Propagandism?', *International Socialism* (11), Winter 1981, p114. See also David Renton, *Classical Marxism* (Cheltenham 2002), p26.

their Marxian intentions and emphasises the Radical influence; Radical in this sense meaning supporting fundamental political, as opposed to economic, changes in the basis of power. Jon Lawrence stresses the role of the Radical press such as the *Star* and *Reynold's Newspaper* in providing a continuity with a past Radical tradition and the idea that it 'both nurtured and profoundly influenced the 'socialist revival' of the 1880s.'²⁹ He continues by pointing out that 'Historians have often underestimated the Radical identity of the SDF...local SDF activists frequently welcomed cooperation with their working-class Radical counterparts...' In his view 'the SDF represented the last great flowering of metropolitan ultra-Radicalism...'³⁰

Hence, the SDF has been used by different schools of historians with different political agendas, rarely in favourable terms and almost never on its own terms. However, Martin Crick has raised the profile of the SDF recently with his book *The History of the Social Democratic Federation* and takes the history beyond the caricatures. This book provides us with a very solid chronological survey of the SDF and looks at various incidents in the Federation's history. However, it continues to view the SDF from the point of the foundation of the Labour Party and sees the exit from the Labour Representation Committee as 'a fundamental error and the SDF's fall from grace.'³¹ The SDF and the long-term radical tradition to which it belongs are given some credence but the notion is that after 1911 it had run into a cul de sac.³² Furthermore, Crick's work is neither a political history nor a social history; neither, what I would call, the 'great tradition' nor the 'little tradition' are approached successfully or brought together.³³

Graham Johnson has concentrated on the political ideas of the SDF. In his recent book and a variety of journal articles he has focused on the party's interpretation and application of Marxism and socialism using organising themes such as

²⁹ J.Lawrence, *op.cit.*, p172.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p175, p176, p178. See also Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class 1860-1914* (Cambridge 1991) p75.

³¹ Martin Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation* (1994), p97.

³² Crick in his book follows the trajectory of the 'Old Guard of the SDF after 1916 (i.e. through the NSP and then into the resurrected SDF in the 1920s) rather than follow the majority who stayed with the BSP and formed the bulk of the CPGB after the First World War.

³³ For great tradition/little tradition see section b) of this chapter.

economics, historical materialism, imperialism and reform and revolution.

However, as he makes clear in the introduction to his book, he does not take an approach which focuses 'one's attention on the views of the members rather than those of the leadership'³⁴. This is regrettable.

Karen Hunt in *Equivocal Feminists* has relocated the SDF within the broader stream of the British socialist and labour movement. Indeed the SDF is placed alongside the German socialist party - the SPD - and other Second International parties in Hunt's work. Her argument, she says, 'does not put these SDF men beyond criticism: but, more importantly, it makes a more general and telling point about the nature of socialism as an ideology, particularly in its Second International form.'³⁵ It is through the SDF that Hunt illuminates the socialist movement's attitude towards the 'Woman Question' before the First World War. The equivocal feminists of the title are such because of, Hunt says, 'the ambiguous theory of the founding fathers and the Second International's economistic definition of socialism.'³⁶

Hunt, and in many ways Crick and Graham Johnson, have in recent years both rehabilitated the SDF and have justified it as an arena for academic work. However, what still needs to be addressed is the history of the long-term political labour movement in Britain from a perspective that could include the standpoint of the SDF. As inheritors of the Chartist tradition and as chief exponents of Second International Marxism, the SDF could act as a prism through which to view socialism and the labour movement in Britain.

b) People, Place and Party³⁷

One of the criticisms made by Jeffrey Hill of Crick's work is that it does not explain the organisation from a branch level.³⁸ With this in mind I have adopted

³⁴ Graham Johnson, *Social Democratic Politics in Britain 1881-1911* (Lampeter 2002), p5.

³⁵ Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question 1884-1911*. (Cambridge 1996), p253.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p253.

³⁷ An expanded version of this section appears as David M. Young, 'People, Place and Party: describing party activism', *Politics* (forthcoming).

the approach suggestive in the title of the present work. Frequently the structure of studies of party – where they also address location and membership - begin with the ideology or the politics of the party. For example, in Duncan Tanner's work the activities of the constituencies are prefaced by the ideology ('a discussion of debates over ideology at the political centre') and then the politics of the Liberal and Labour parties.³⁹ While activities are related to ideas, parties, it seems, are explained through their ideas. Indeed it is a standard textbook definition of political parties that they are 'broad based coalitions of opinions and interests... which aim to win power'.⁴⁰ Hence the individual activist is likely to be primarily motivated by these ideas and opinions.

However, ideology can be understood in *relation* to other aspects of parties. The initial pairing for this idea has been borrowed from anthropology of the Great Tradition/Little Tradition. This set of complementary 'traditions' explains how a formalised practice (for example the caste system of Hinduism) is understood and worked out by different communities in different locations in different ways.⁴¹ Drucker's *Ethos and Doctrine in the Labour Party* is informative. Drucker describes doctrine as 'a more or less elaborated set of values about the character of ... social, economic and political reality', while ethos 'arises out of experience – in the case of the British working class [for the Labour Party], out of an experience of exploitation'.⁴² While doctrine may be equated with ideology, ethos is derived from a shared experience, in this case an experience of economic inequality. However, I felt that these binary formations left out or conflated a further set of factors which in my view needed to be teased out further.

The relationship can be understood as a set of three points (see figure 1) – People, Place and Party. Party, the first of these 'poles' of attraction, represents the aim and the ideal of the organisation. It is the place where policies and theory are developed and written. It is the location of Dumont's 'Great Tradition' and

³⁸ Jeffrey Hill, 'Requiem for a Party? Writing the History of Social Democracy', *LHR*, 61.1 (Spring 1996),

³⁹ Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900-1918* (Cambridge 1990), p15.

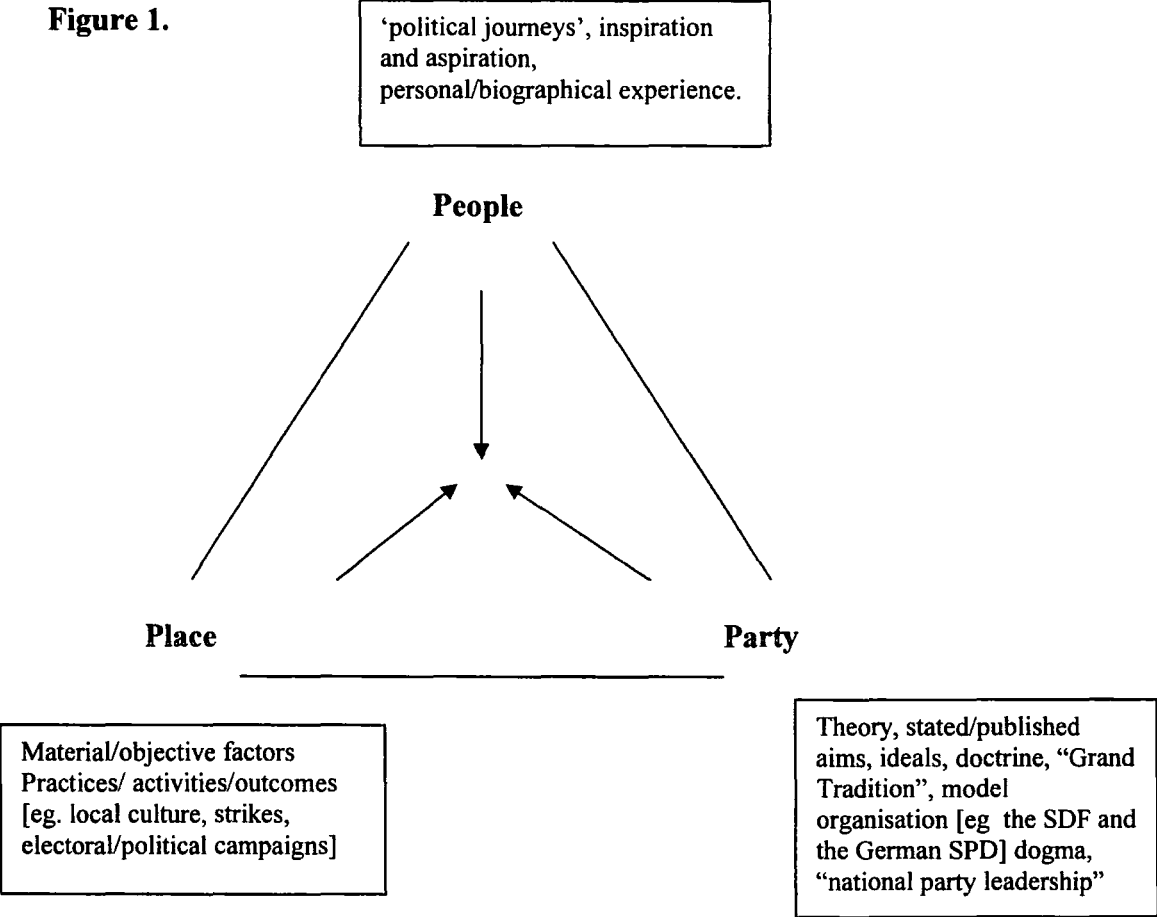
⁴⁰ B. Coxall and L. Robins, *Contemporary British Politics* (Basingstoke 1998), p105.

⁴¹ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (English Edition 1970), xii-xiii, pp75-9.

⁴² H.M. Drucker, *Ethos and Doctrine in the Labour Party* (1979), pp8-9.

Drucker’s ‘Doctrine’. In research on the SDF a good deal of work has focused on the life and writings of H. M. Hyndman. Hyndman and Quelch had a great deal of influence over the politics of the SDF through their control over the party newspaper *Justice*. Through the newspaper and through the publications of the semi-autonomous Twentieth Century Press they produced a body of work which subsequent historians have used to represent the party. Hyndman was certainly a central figure in SDF politics but his views on trade unionism, feminism and anti-semitism did not go unchallenged within the SDF and so these tensions between different gender, ethnic, social, occupational and regional groups within the party can help to explain further the organisation and its membership.

Figure 1.



The second pole I have labelled ‘Place’. For me this is a series of material factors that bear an influence on doctrine. Each place will have a different level of economic development which will influence employment, trade unions, migration, education and so on. They are likely to produce different collective practices such as trade unions, strikes, electoral and political campaigns but also churches,

secular societies, self-education and access to information. It is difficult to equate this with either 'ethos' or the 'Little Tradition', but it is closer to Mike Savage's political geography – 'the local bases of practical politics'.⁴³ Again, this is similar to, but not the same as, the explanation given by Paul A. Lewis from the point of view of critical realism whereby a political outcome can be constituted through the inter-relationship between the efficient cause (the individual or other agent) and the material cause (the social structure).⁴⁴

A recent biography of George Lansbury has emphasised his relationship with Bow and how it formed his political outlook throughout his long career. It is this relationship – how political activities can be motivated by an experience of living in a particular community – that is described here.⁴⁵ In Tanner's work he follows the outline of ideology and politics with how these were interpreted by the local parties in the constituencies, what he describes as 'the way in which party images were received locally, i.e. it involves recognising that constituency parties could emphasise particular aspects of the "national" image'.⁴⁶ For Jon Lawrence the relationship is between the party and supporters in the locality (rather than the activists' understanding of party), between 'political activists, of whatever persuasion, and those they seek to represent politically.' However, he goes on to point out that 'because this relationship is one of "representation" it must constantly be negotiated and renegotiated – the "formal" politics of political organisations can never be a complete and faithful reflection of the interests (objectively or subjectively defined) of those who are represented.'⁴⁷ The idea of negotiation and change is a significant addition to understanding of how parties develop, although in this instance the focus is on parties as an organisation within the locality.

⁴³ For the importance of place and local culture as the basis of political representation see also John Marriott, *The Culture of Labourism* (Edinburgh 1991) and Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People. Party Language and Popular Politics in England 1867-1914* (Cambridge 1998).

⁴⁴ Paul A. Lewis, Agency, Structure and Causality in Political Science: A Comment on Sibeon', *Politics*, Vol. 22.1 (February 2002), pp17-23.

⁴⁵ John Shepherd, *George Lansbury: At the heart of Old Labour* (Oxford 2002), p202-3.

⁴⁶ Tanner, *op.cit.*, p15.

⁴⁷ J.Lawrence, *Speaking*, p61.

In the study of contemporary politics the literature on the relationship between the party and the voter is vast and is the stuff of newspaper headlines. Studies of party activists are less common but are necessarily synchronic rather than diachronic – taking a slice through the present day political party.⁴⁸ What could be added is the individual interpretation of this, what Karen Hunt and Jane Hannam have described as the ‘political journey’ of the activist, where a more ‘complex reading of biography should enable us to move beyond an approach which seeks to classify women into distinct political groups, or to label them as feminist and non-feminist.’⁴⁹ In the conclusion to their book *Socialist Women* they write that an ‘archetype “socialist woman” does not explain very much unless she is seen as the aggregate of all [her] individual choices. For the socialist woman was a figure who was constantly in tension, albeit usually in creative tension, between her class and her gender politics.’⁵⁰ Hence, the third pole ‘People’ brings into account the lived experience, both the inspiration and aspiration of the political actor. An example might be how an individual inspired by Dickens and Carlyle might develop an interest in economic and social history to read Thorold Roger and then tackle Marx. The journey of a reader might be replicated by secularists who became socialists or those who, like Tom Mann, started as anti-Malthusians. A collective study of these journeys can also tease out a ‘process’ within an organisation. The writing of biography can be used as a tool to study Communist Party history, but Kevin Morgan stresses that ‘not only did the interaction with different circumstances give rise to different patterns of behaviour, as wars, revolutions and the exercise of power always have, but prosopographically the actual personnel of these parties often changed dramatically.’⁵¹ Hence, while the figures showing the rising and falling Communist Party membership are illuminating, a more enlightening view would also include some analysis of the political journeys of the individuals who make up these figures.

To a degree this triangular understanding of the process is paralleled by E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* with a structure of:

⁴⁸ P. Seyd and P. Whiteley, *Labour's Grass Roots: The Politics of Party Membership* (Oxford 1992).

⁴⁹ June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women Britain 1880s-1920s* (2002), pp31-56, p51.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p204.

⁵¹ Kevin Morgan, ‘Parts of People and Communist Lives’, J. McIlroy, K. Morgan and A. Campbell (eds.), *Party People, Communist Lives: Explorations in biography* (2001), p21.

experience – economics - politics. Thompson arranges the work in three parts: Inherited Traditions – Objective Conditions – Political Consciousness.⁵² I would also adhere to the idea of this being a process or in Thompson's words something in the making. The three 'poles' attempt to explain a series of relationships between the different influences on party members. Few people can maintain a consistent level of activism in an organisation. In the words of Kevin Morgan, the individual is 'located not in a self-referential world of her own, but in a series of temporal, spatial, social and institutional contexts whose precise interrelationships distinguish that individual and help explain the dramas and dilemmas of that particular life.'⁵³ Temporal is the significant word. These three intersecting spheres – people, place and party - act as poles of influence and the individual is drawn (or repulsed) by the 'magnetism' of these poles. The relationship changes, develops and is in flux.

The structure of the present work in part reflects this idea. The scope of the project was limited to the SDF in London (defined as what used to be known as Greater London) between 1884 and 1911 although some of the examples I use break free from these limits. Wherever possible I have tried to use the local branch minute books, leaflets, pamphlets and newspapers to illustrate points. There are twelve themed chapters before reaching the conclusion. Each theme is weighted more towards people, place or party, although I feel that none of them escapes the triangle entirely. These themes, as with the individual activist's experience of them, intersect, overlap, react with and respond to one another. The initial chapter on membership introduces the men and women of the SDF and is based on a survey of the London membership. This leads on to a brief outline of the relationship between the city of London and the SDF. The following five chapters on Culture, Propaganda, Gender, Religion and Education have more of a cultural focus. The last five chapters on Strategy and Tactics, Ideology, Internationalism, Trade Unionism and Industrial Politics and Labour and Socialist Unity have more of a political focus. In the conclusion I will attempt to draw

⁵² E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968), p11. See also Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist historians* (1984), pp176-7.

⁵³ Morgan, *op.cit.*, p15.

together this material to present a history of the SDF as an organisation of thousands rather than from the point of view of leading individuals.

Chapter 1

SDF Membership in London

a) Introduction: the sources

This chapter is based on a database built up during the years it has taken to write this thesis. The database currently contains over a thousand names of members of the SDF in the London area. I have defined London as the area covered by the metropolitan boroughs and the Greater London Authority. The names have been drawn from a variety of sources and do not come anywhere near a comprehensive cross section of the party. However, I believe that there is sufficient breadth and depth to warrant some conclusions about the membership and to challenge some of the caricatures that still prevail. The results of any survey like this are likely to reflect the sources that are available.

The list of names started as I was trawling through the printed secondary works, biographies and autobiographies which record the names and careers of the principal protagonists. Reference works such as the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, the *Labour Annual* and the *Socialist Annual* and the *Labour Who's Who* have been useful for providing personal details.¹

There are six London branches for which records still exist – Canning Town, Erith, Hackney and Kingsland, Hammersmith, Peckham and Dulwich and Stratford. They do not, however, give us a full picture of the life of a branch. The fullest is perhaps that of Erith and that only covers part of 1906 and the period from 1910-1913. For a record of birth (and death) of a branch, the Annual Conference report often indicated such events together with the (very rare)

¹ The two volumes of the *Labour Who's Who* consulted were both published in the 1920s. Individuals who were perhaps prominent Labour MPs by then, such as Margaret Bondfield, omitted their SDF activities. The number of SDF activists may have been underestimated because there was a concerted attempt on their part to forget about the past.

quarterly reports.² The conference report also gives us lists of delegates and SDFers elected to public bodies. For the short period of August 1910 to August 1911 the *SDP News* provides us with a good deal of detailed internal politics, commentary and administrative notes. It has been especially useful in building up and cross-referencing the database.

Undoubtedly the most useful source of information has been the SDF newspaper *Justice*. This contains on a weekly basis a list of speakers at branch and open-air meetings and a list of branch secretaries. I have also used the correspondence columns to add to certain sections of the database. For practical reasons I have concentrated my search on papers from the early 1890s and the early 1900s. However, this is not to say that only these papers have been used.

b) Branches: distribution and longevity

In 1884 the SDF had 14 branches and by the end of 1886 there were 21 branches in the London area. The organisation grew steadily over the long term to reach 69 branches in London by 1911.³ (See Figure II). Paul Thompson suggests that the SDF's strongest branches were in the growing working-class suburbs such as Battersea, Peckham and Wandsworth in south London, Barking and Canning Town in the east and Tottenham and Wood Green in the north.⁴ After the turn of the century the SDF branches in outer London such as in Walthamstow and Edmonton were amongst its strongest. The growth of the organisation represented the growth of industrial suburbs in the city. To a large extent the growth and change in the distribution of SDF branches is similar to the changes in the secularist movement. This would suggest that rather than the SDF and other socialist organisations being unrepresentative of the working class, leading to an

² I have only been able to find two of these quarterly reports for 1908 amongst Joseph Edwards' papers in the John Johnson collection at the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

³ Paul Thompson records the following: 1884 (14), 1887 (24), 1892 (27), 1895 (39), 1900 (40+), 1911 (69). See Thompson, *op.cit.*, pp114-5, 195, 307. These figures are based on notices in *Justice* and may account for the discrepancy with P.A. Watmough's slightly reduced figures of: 1885 (11), 1887 (22), 1892 (30), 1895 (36), 1900 (37). Watmough's figures are based on the membership dues accounted for in the pages of *Justice* and suggest that they 'may be conservative' (p36). See Watmough, *op.cit.*, pp35-40.

⁴ *Ibid*, p115.

alienation between socialists and the class – as suggested by Gareth Stedman Jones - they represented the new working-class communities of London.

The branches listed in Appendix A support these conclusions. The table shows that many branches had a very short life span as satellite branches of larger and more successful branches such as those in Canning Town or Islington. It can also be seen that later in the life of the SDF and certainly after the turn of the century, they expanded into the suburbs – particularly in the north and the east of the metropolitan area. One curiosity is the lack of activity in the west between Kingston and Willesden/Acton.

c) Branches: size

There were three types of membership by 1910: Honorary, Ordinary and Associate. The notion of Associate membership (at 1/- per annum) appears to have been an attempt to broaden the membership base,⁵ or perhaps to formalise what was often happening in many branches where members were attached to the SDF without necessarily paying the membership fees. This problem had been acknowledged by both Quelch and Hunter Watts at the Annual Conference of 1900. Yet despite Hunter Watts hoping that the SDF would remain open to 'the poverty stricken proletariat', a motion to raise the weekly subs to 2d was carried.⁶

Paul Thompson puts the average membership for SDF branches in London at around 40.⁷ P.A.Watmough's more 'conservative' estimate of dues-paying members is of branches between thirteen and twenty-six members.⁸ However, it is difficult to be precise about what is typical. Branches were born and died in epidemic proportions. The changes in the size of these branches reflected their political successes and failures. The points I make below should make it easier to describe the range within which SDF branches fell, although given the size of this range I do not think it is possible to make calculations about the total membership of the SDF from an average branch size. Some provincial branches numbered well over a hundred members. For example, in 1910 Accrington had 160

⁵ *SDP News* September 1910.

⁶ SDF Annual Conference Report 1900, p7.

⁷ P.Thompson, *op.cit.* p307.

⁸ P.Watmough, *op.cit.* p38.

members while Padiham had 162.⁹ In an article in *SDP News* in January 1911 H.W.Lee made some comments on the success, or otherwise, that some branches were having in distributing *Justice*. He referred to 'small' branches as having 15 or 16 members while large branches had 70 to 90 members. He compared the success of eight 'small' but active branches with a combined membership of 204 (or an average of 25.5) with the difficulties endured by eight 'large' branches with a combined membership of 1,579 (an average of 197.37).¹⁰ These sorts of figures make Accrington and Padiham look quite modest. On the basis of the extant branch records available for the London area I have been able to make the following estimate of branch size.

Between June 1884 when it was founded and January 1885 when it became a part of the Socialist League the Hammersmith SDF could expect between three and sixteen members to attend the business meetings with an average for the period of 8.3. However, it is clear from a reading of the minute books that the branch had many more members than attended the business meetings. Frequently individuals' names come up for membership only for them to never reappear in the minutes. The numbers attending Canning Town branch meetings between January 1890 and October 1893 were between nine and thirty-nine with an average of 18.4. In September 1893 they recorded that they had 110 members. Clearly not everyone was active or turned up to the meetings. Perhaps it was the business content that put them off. Whenever there was a matter of general concern the branch held a special meeting for which individual notices were sent out.¹¹ Between July 1893 and March 1899 the total membership of the Peckham and Dulwich branch moved between 22 and 59 with an average for the period of 40. The Hackney and Kingsland branch for the years 1903 to 1906 had a membership of between 9 and 20 who turned up for weekly meetings out of a fee-paying membership of between 24 and 33.¹² From June 1904 until March 1906 the Stratford branch could expect between five and twenty-six members at their meetings with an average of 13.1. During 1906 fully 67 members turned up at some time or another to meetings of

⁹ *SDP News*, September 1910.

¹⁰ *SDP News*, January 1911.

¹¹ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 3 September 1893, an example of a special meeting of 'all members' is for Keir Hardie's candidature 19 July 1891.

¹² Hackney and Kingsland SDF Minutes, 1903-1906.

the Stratford branch although individual meetings never attracted more than 28. The Erith branch, in two distinct phases, had mixed fortunes in attracting members to their business meetings. Between October 1905 and June 1906 they had between four and nine members while the average was just 6.2. In the period from April 1910 and December 1911 they had between six and twenty-seven members at their meetings with an average of 13.4. However, the minute book states that in July 1910 they had a branch membership of 91 while in the September of the same year the branch boasted twenty-one office holders. Perhaps so many were given positions of responsibility in order to cement them more fully into the life of the branch. The above figures suggest that although some branches were relatively healthy in terms of numbers, only a small proportion of members – around 20-25 percent – could be regarded as active members.

At the SDF Annual Conference of 1909 Will Thorne announced that twenty years after its foundation, he was the oldest surviving member of the Canning Town branch.¹³ While this may be a boast of the solidity of Thorne, it is also an indication of the turnover of members. The Peckham and Dulwich account book gives us some indication of the comings and goings within that particular branch. We do not have enough sources to measure what was typical but all the minute books suggest something similar. For the third quarter of 1893, out of a total for the period of 52 members, eighteen were new while a further 18 either resigned, dropped out or left to join a new branch (seven went to Camberwell). Over the period between June 1893 and the first quarter of 1899 a very large proportion of the membership – somewhere between ten and twenty percent - had either moved in or had left the branch. Out of the thirty-eight members' names listed in the account book for the first quarter of 1899, only eight (twenty-one percent) appeared in the same list for the third quarter of 1893. One way of measuring the turnover of the branch is by recording the years (or part thereof) where an individual stayed with the branch.

There are a number of reasons why a member may leave the branch. It was very common in London for workers to move short distances for their work and to

¹³ SDF Annual Conference Report 1909.

change their accommodation frequently. It may be that a member left the branch because a new branch was being set up closer to home. This was certainly the case with a number of Peckham members. It could also be that members moved further distances for their work and continued activities within the national organisation. For example, Krause of Peckham became a member of the Salford branch, while A.A.Purcell went from the Hoxton SDF to prominence in the Manchester SDF and labour movement nationally. Despite these reasons, what can be seen from the example of Peckham and Dulwich is the high turnover in the branch. Figure III illustrates that a full 59.8 per cent of the membership stayed for less than two years. These figures reflect, to a large extent, the figures generated by the gross membership

It may be symptomatic of a London branch, or it may be typical of an organisation like the SDF, that it has a high turnover of members. With the sort of turnover indicated here, the claim by both Engels and Bernstein that 100,000 temporary members had been through their doors does not seem such an exaggeration.¹⁴ My research suggests that it is indeed typical of an 'activist' organisation.¹⁵ However, those who remained were likely to be the most committed.¹⁶

d) Members: gender

The attitude of the SDF towards the 'woman question' has led some commentators to describe the SDF as a 'misogynist' party.¹⁷ On the basis of this alleged misogyny one would expect an absence of female activists in the SDF or at least a reduced incidence of female activists. This is not the case from the figures.

¹⁴ Eduard Bernstein, *My Years of Exile: Reminiscences of a Socialist* (1921), p256.

¹⁵ See section g) below 'Length of Activity'.

¹⁶ In a letter to Edward Pease in 1887 Sidney Webb wrote of the Fabians that the 'difficulty is that only 10 members do any work to speak of, in connection with the Society and not more than 20 help us at all. The SDF puts us to shame in this respect...' Sidney Webb to Edward Pease 16 November 1887. Letter 63. Norman Mackenzie (ed.), *The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Vol. I. Apprenticeships 1873-1892* (Cambridge 1978), p108.

¹⁷ See for example, Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (1978) pp162-3 and Rowbotham, *op.cit.* p95. See also Chapter 5 of the present work for the activities of women members in SDF branches.

Of the 1437 names on the list 128 (8.90%) can be counted as females. This accords well with the work of Deian Hopkin on the ILP who suggests around 6.84%, and the estimate of Karen Hunt for the SDF of around ten percent for a strong branch and for a few hundred women members in a national membership in excess of four thousand.¹⁸

However, it is probable that there is room for doubt with regard to the accuracy of these figures. It is possible that this estimate is both an overestimate and an underestimate. Given the class composition of London, a greater number of monied, middle-class women (such as Dora Montefiore and the Duchess of Warwick) are likely to be active in the politics of the capital than in Lancashire or central Scotland. Since the above figures are based on the aggregate London membership they could be an overestimate. Yet there is also room for an underestimation in that women were less likely to be speakers or office holders and so they are less likely to appear in a database constructed from these types of sources.

However it is difficult to generalise. In the records of resolutely industrial working class branches such as Canning Town and Stratford, women are only mentioned in their connection as “members’ wives” or with forthcoming entertainments. For example, of the 67 members listed as attending meetings in Stratford during 1906 none are women. In more mixed areas such as Hammersmith, Hackney and Kingsland and Erith women could take up positions of responsibility, such as Mrs McGregor’s stint as Erith branch secretary. In the – albeit smaller- Peckham and Dulwich branch women never made up less than 5% and at times almost reached 20%. The class of a district clearly affected the participation of women in the work of the party.

It is difficult to gauge the class composition of the women membership. Because of the number of middle-class women who became involved and who are easier to

¹⁸ Deian Hopkin, ‘The membership of the Independent Labour Party, 1904-1910: A spatial and occupational analysis, *IRSH* (1975) p192, Hunt, *op.cit.*, p204. J.Hannam and K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, p8, p81, suggest approximately 10% for both the SDF and the ILP.

‘spot’ and subsequently describe, the women appear very upper-middle class if not outright aristocrats as is the case with Evelyn Greville and Charlotte Despard.

e) Members: occupation

In 1886 in a pamphlet entitled *Why I am a Socialist*, Annie Besant wrote that ‘At present the Socialist movement in England is far more a middle-class than a working class one; the creed of Socialism is held as an intellectual conviction by the thoughtful and the studious, and is preached by them to the workers.’¹⁹ In 1977 Stephen Yeo wrote that ‘as research proceeds it is likely that it will be discovered, with a mock air of surprise and a real feeling of satisfaction among some historians that the ILP, the SDF, or whatever were “not working class”.’²⁰ But, specifically the SDF has in the past been characterised as a party that was both not ‘of the working class’ and distant from them. For example, W.W.Craik in 1964 in writing of the Central Labour College could write that the ILP was more successful in recruiting members because ‘its founders and active members came more from the workers than those of the SDF and adapted their appeal and their tactics more closely to the immediate needs and interests of the workers and to the level of their thought and feelings.’²¹ This has led some to the boundaries of hyperbole claiming that in the SDF ‘the intellectuals seemed to outnumber the workers’, or ‘appealed chiefly to middle-class intellectuals’.²²

However, W.S.Sanders who joined the Battersea SDF in 1888, described the branch as being largely made up of working men: ‘There were the so-called respectable artisan, the skilled worker in fairly permanent employment; the general labourer, usually connected to the building trade; and a few individuals who might be reckoned to belong to the middle class. One only of the latter would be an “intellectual”, he took but a small part in branch affairs.’²³

¹⁹ Annie Besant, *Why I am a Socialist* (1886), p6.

²⁰ Stephen Yeo, ‘A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain 1883-1896’, *History Workshop Journal* (4) Spring 1977 p25.

²¹ William W. Craik, *The Central Labour College 1909-1929: A chapter in the history of adult working-class education* (1964), p33.

²² E.Halevy, *op.cit.*, p147, A.Stafford, *op.cit.*, p42.

²³ W.S.Sanders, *Early Socialist Days* (1927), p17.

Figure IV shows an attempt to illustrate the distribution of occupations among the London membership. The chart is based on the known occupations of 244 members or 16.9% of the total record.

There is clearly a bias in favour of the more notable members – those whose lives are recorded in biography or in indices and almanacs. This may explain the large number of journalists in the sample. Frank Harris, H.W.Nevinson, Margaret Harkness and Edith Bland may have had only a limited sojourn with the SDF but their activity has been left to posterity by biographers. Journalism at the turn of the century is difficult to classify. Some of the writers wrote in the Augustine manner of the early nineteenth century as gentleman authors. Hyndman's or Bax's approach to journalism was in this character. On the other hand, the end of the nineteenth century saw the opening of the mass popular press and the 'penny-a-line' scribe cannot be compared to the Augustine gentleman. At the same time there were some who were able to maintain a febrile existence as journalist/lecturers within the socialist movement. Clearly, it is the newspaper the journalist wrote for which will determine which end of the profession s/he occupied. For the purposes of this survey I have erred on the side of conservatism and I have grouped journalists as a part of the 'Professions' (Group 4).

Although the group of 'teachers' includes Edward Aveling as a crammer for university entrance and, at some time, for the University of London, I have decided to include them as a part of the 'white-collar' (or to use the contemporary phrase 'black-coated proletarians') group (Group 3). This is because the board school teachers – who make up the bulk of the sample – were often little removed socially from their working-class pupils.²⁴ For much the same reason I have included the group of 'agitators' – party workers and lecturers – within the same group.

²⁴ See Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* (New Haven 2001), pp151-172. Hilda Kean notes that although she had found 'much evidence of teachers' political involvement and activities in [the 1900s... She had] only come across one example of a BSP member and no examples of SDF members.' Hilda Kean, *Challenging the State: The Socialist and Feminist Educational Experience 1900-1930* (1990), p83.

There were two individuals who I found hard to classify because of the vagueness of their description as 'railwaymen' (Group 6). As Frank McKenna describes classification and grades of rail worker, it is difficult to classify rail workers as either unskilled, skilled or even white-collar workers.²⁵

The biggest single occupation group is made up of printers and compositors at 26 individuals or 10.6% of the total, followed in this section by the 17 (6.9%) engineers.²⁶ This accords with certain expectations of socialist groups in this period. As a whole the group of skilled workers and craftsmen (Group 2) – such as compositors, printers, bookbinders and tailors – makes up 50.0% of the total. The number of unskilled workers (Group 1) – dockers, labourers, factory workers – is much lower at 11.8%. The 'black-coated proletarians' such as clerks, shop assistants, commercial travellers and teachers, make 17.6%. Altogether we can see that – even when using a measure that might be biased in the opposite direction – almost four fifths of the membership can be classified as outside of the middle classes.

Early on in the history of the SDF it was this class character of the organisation which Bernard Shaw gave as the reason for him joining the Fabians rather than the SDF. In 1884 he had doubts about joining the SDF not because of snobbery, but because 'I wanted to work with men of my own mental training'. However the very name Fabian was appealing to him because that suggested an educated body appealing to middle-class intelligentsia: 'my own class in fact.'²⁷ Conversely, George Lansbury gave his reason for joining the SDF rather than the Fabians as he 'always had a feeling... that Fabians were much too clever and superior for ordinary persons like myself to be associated with.'²⁸

²⁵ Frank McKenna, 'Victorian Railway workers', *History Workshop Journal* (1) Spring 1976, pp26-73.

²⁶ The prominence of printers and compositors in the membership shows a continuity with earlier working-class radical groups. Iorwerth Prothero, *Radical Artisans in England and France, 1830-1870* (Cambridge 1997), p237, p239. See Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats* (Oxford 1994), p136 for the comparable role of printers for the SPD in Leipzig.

²⁷ Bernard Shaw cited in Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw. Volume 1: 1856-1898 Search for Love* (Harmondsworth 1990), p131.

²⁸ *Labour Leader*, 17 May 1912.

Hence the balance of occupations (and classes) revealed in Figure IV closely resembles the background of socialist militants across Western Europe as described by Michael Mann. 'Militants', he writes, 'came from three main social backgrounds: artisanal trades, the three core industries [mining, iron and steel and transport], and the lower professions, especially teaching and journalism.'²⁹ Hence, rather than being the preserve of a middle-class metropolitan elite, the SDF looks increasingly like a typical socialist party of the Second International.³⁰

Stuart McIntyre described the 'crucial feature of British Marxism' of this period as its 'working class character' and claims that from the turn of the century it was becoming more markedly proletarian in the sense that a larger number of industrial workers were becoming involved in Marxist parties. While middle-class members were active in the early days, and

'the intermediate strata of shopkeepers, clerks, schoolteachers and tradesmen were prominent at an early stage in SDF branches, just as they were in the other socialist organisations. But by the turn of the century, the class basis of the doctrine was fully apparent: the breakaway SPGB and SLP were aggressively proletarian and a new generation of working men were assuming control of the SDF.'³¹

The data presented here shows the full array of known trades and occupations of SDF members for the period 1884-1911; and so while the figures in this survey support the first half of this statement, they do not measure change over time and so it is not possible to deliberate at this stage on the second half of the contention.

²⁹ Michael Mann, 'Sources of variation in working-class movements in twentieth century Europe', *New Left Review* (212) July/August 1995, p17. According to Hyndman addressing the 1911 SDF Annual Conference, it was a problem for the SDP that 'their best recruits came from the best paid and not the worst paid workers.' Annual Conference Report printed in *SDP News*, May 1911, p13. See also Raphael Samuel who wrote of the CPGB that it 'made its recruits from working-class aristocracies, those who, whatever their walk of life, were proud of their knowledge and skills, and also, in some sort, protected from victimisation. Thus in the Amalgamated Engineering Union, for some forty years the bedrock of the party's trade union strength, Communists were drawn exclusively from the 'Class I' members, the "time served" (ie apprenticed) men...' R.Samuel, 'The Lost World of British Communism III', *New Left Review* (165), Sept/October 1987.

³⁰ The proportion of skilled and semi-skilled workers among new party members in Dusseldorf between 1896 and 1908 ranged between 65.2% and 94.4%. Mary Nolan, *Social Democracy and society: Working-class radicalism in Dusseldorf, 1890-1920* (Cambridge 1981), pp100-112.

³¹ S.McIntyre, *op.cit.*, p93.

g) Members: age and length of activity

At the Sixteenth Annual Conference in 1896, in his opening address in chairing the conference George Lansbury pointed out that 'looking round this hall today: I see, for the most part, comparatively young and vigorous men.'³² Socialist organisations of the period were typically made up of young single men, some of them very young indeed. Herbert Morrison joined the Pimlico branch of the SDF in 1907 at the age of nineteen, while Walter Southgate joined the South Hackney branch at the age of fifteen.³³ Reflecting on the socialist movement of the 1890s, Joseph Clayton calculated that 'the average age of the delegate to the 1895 [ILP] Conference was well below thirty.' As evidence he pointed to the desire for old age pensions at fifty, which to the majority of the delegates was 'a remote and far off day'.³⁴

The evidence collected seems to bear this out. There is information on the date of birth of some 124 individuals or 8.6% of the total. On this basis it is possible to chart the age at which an individual is first recorded as being active in the SDF in London (see Figures Va and Vb). The range of ages is quite extensive reaching from Walter Southgate at 15 to the former Owenite socialist Edward Thomas Craig who, at eighty years of age, joined William Morris's Hammersmith branch in 1884. In measuring when an individual becomes active I have relied either on external biographical information such as a memoir or on information from the various contemporary records. In using the latter it is likely that the individual will only appear in the record, for example as a Conference delegate or as a branch secretary, later in his or her political career, and hence this data is likely to produce an older age range. Secondly, where individuals have migrated to London after they have been involved in SDF activities, such as Harry Snell in Nottingham or Thomas Kennedy as the SDF organiser in Scotland, I have taken their arrival in London as the starting point. This is again likely to increase the age range. Despite these caveats the figures show that 76 of the 124 or 61.3% of the members are recorded as active in the SDF before the age of 30, and of these

³² SDF Annual Conference Report 1896.

³³ Walter Southgate, *That's the way it was: A working-class autobiography 1890-1950* (Oxford 1982), p104.

³⁴ Joseph Clayton, *The rise and decline of socialism in Britain 1884-1924* (1926), p87.

almost ten percent were active before the age of 20. If we exclude the venerable E.T.Craig as an anomaly, the average age for the first register of activity in the London SDF is 28.4 years of age. This certainly seems to fit Clayton's description of a young man's movement.

One of the criticisms made against the SDF after the turn of the century was that it was a movement that was led by an ageing old guard and was out of touch with younger, more contemporary socialists.³⁵ This is one of the reasons given for the two 'impossibilist' splits from the SDF in 1903 and 1904.

By taking the ages of the 113 individuals for whom that information is available it should be possible to work out the average age of the membership for each of the years from 1883 to 1911. Figure VI clearly shows a steadily ageing membership. The average seems to be increasing by a rate of between nine and ten months in every year. This seems to bear out the contemporary criticisms and subsequent commentary.³⁶ One possible problem with this chart is that the individuals tend to be those who stuck with the organisation and hence as they aged, so does the measurement of the average age. However, this is a tendency. A large proportion of the names on the list are people who visited the organisation and who left for the ILP, the SPGB or Australia.

On many occasions the pages of *Justice* and *SDP News*, branch minute books and the Annual Conference platform were filled with exhortations to the organisation to retain members. For example, at the 1907 Conference Albert Inkpin, a delegate from the Hackney and Kingsland branch (and a future General Secretary of the CPGB), suggested a more vigorous educational programme for 'keeping in their ranks the number of new members who were joining the SDF', while at the 1904 conference Bill Gee, a full-time collector and organiser for the SDF, recognised that the 'present number of members constituted a microscopical quantity in proportion to the number that had passed through the branches.'³⁷ It was clear that they could attract support but could not retain members: the door to the SDF was a

³⁵ See for example, Douglas J. Newton, *British Labour, European Socialism and the Struggle for Peace 1889-1914* (Oxford 1985), p199.

³⁶ W.Kendall, *op. cit.*, p14.

³⁷ SDF Annual Conference Report 1907, 1904.

revolving one. This, after all, was the meaning of Engels' backhanded compliment about the potential membership of a hundred thousand.

Figure VII gives some indication of the problem. The graph is based on those members who recorded two or more years of activity. Those who are mentioned as active in just one year are excluded, as I believe that their inclusion would not be representative given the fragmented nature of the sources. The total number with two or more years of activity comes to 641.³⁸ Of these, 265 or over 41% are recorded as active for just two years. This is more than two and a half times as many as the next largest period of three years. From then on there is a steady decline in the duration of activity.

There are a number of reasons that may explain this phenomenon. It could be that workers at the turn of the century, although becoming increasingly affluent and with more leisure time, still found it hard to commit themselves to voluntary organisations. Many young men may have found time for politics when they were single, but may have found it increasingly difficult when married with a family. The SDF did not portray itself as utopian organisation and so many may have become disillusioned after political setbacks. Critics of the SDF have pointed to the sterility of the organisation's politics and propaganda although with the haemorrhaging of membership that seems to be going on here one can see the political relevance of the club life that so many branches saw as important. Personal anecdotal evidence would also point to many activists becoming burnt out after a number of years. Tom Mann and Ben Tillett both left the country for long periods and both resorted to heavy drinking to sustain themselves.³⁹

³⁸ Nine individuals, including Tom Mann and Ernest Belfort Bax left and then returned to the SDF. Their years of activity have been counted as two separate stints. Those SDFers who were migrants to or from London have only been counted during their years of activity in London.

³⁹ See also for a comparison Andrew Thorpe, 'The membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', *Historical Journal* (2000), 43.3, p797. 'The sheer magnitude of the work expected of members... led to a high wastage of new recruits, which in turn, of course, made the burdens of those who remained still heavier.'

i) Conclusions

The fragmentary nature of the sources means that there will always be a substantial question mark hanging over the validity of these results. However, a small sample has not inhibited others in the past. Precedent has been set in John Foster's analysis of Oldham Chartism as well as studies of the ILP and the WSPU.⁴⁰ Yet even with these qualifications it is still possible to make some statements about the membership of the SDF in London.

In early 1886, in the wake of the Trafalgar Square riots, the *Daily Telegraph* had declared that the SDF had 'a considerable following in London and the provinces... Taking into account the Socialist clubs affiliated to the Federation, and their adherents connected with the Radical clubs, they could probably muster on a great occasion 10 000 men in the metropolis...'⁴¹ They may have been exaggerating for effect, but on the whole it seems that the SDF is best likened to a sieve rather than a sponge. The organisation, whether measured at branch level or London regional level, had a high turnover in members.

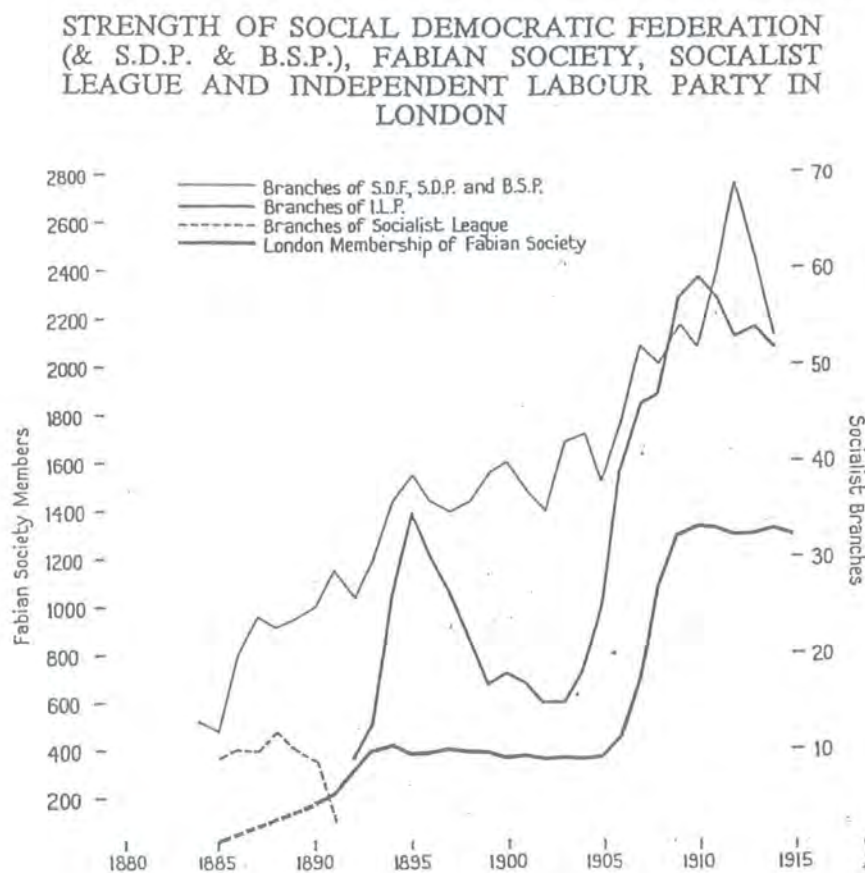
Despite this, the growth in branches in London was steady from the 1880s until the emergence of the BSP at the end of 1911. It was also steady and consistently greater than any of the other socialist organisations in the capital. Branch size remained pitifully small and as with other voluntary organisations, active members, of even those branches that reached three figures, were a small minority. Women were also a minority at a little under ten percent of the total. However, this stands comparison with other socialist organisations. Although it pales in comparison with an organisation like the Primrose League, a significant difference is that throughout the period women were able to act as branch secretaries and as conference delegates. The average age at which members become involved in the work of the organisation is around their mid to late twenties and it appears from the figures available that the SDF was an ageing organisation.

⁴⁰ John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial revolution* (1974), Deian Hopkin, *op.cit.* [sample of 738], Jihang Park, 'The British Suffrage Activists of 1913', *Past and Present* 120 (August 1988) [sample of 692].

⁴¹ *Daily Telegraph* 15 February 1886.

Finally, the point needs to be made about the occupational and hence class composition of the London SDF - that it was largely made up of skilled workers and white-collar members of the working class. Intellectuals were influential in the leadership of the party and hence may have been over-represented in an analysis of the London membership. It is possible that the middle-class element became less influential after the turn of the century and a generation of self-educated working-class Marxists came to the fore thereafter. However, despite the prevailing myth, the SDF closely resembled many other socialist parties of the Second International in its class composition.

Figure II



The Fabian Society London membership is given from annual reports; for the other organisations membership figures for London are unobtainable, but the numbers of branches gives an indication of strength. Membership fluctuated more than this. Such evidence as exists (Chap. 9, no. 29, Chap. 10, nos. 72 and 79) suggests that an average branch in the 1900s had at least 40 members, and the graph is drawn to this scale. The number of branches is taken from conference reports, *Justice*, *Labour Leader*, *Commonweal*, local newspapers, etc. The evidence for 1913-14 is less good than for previous years, and the fall in B.S.P. strength is probably exaggerated.

(From: Paul Thompson, *op.cit.*, p307)

Figure III

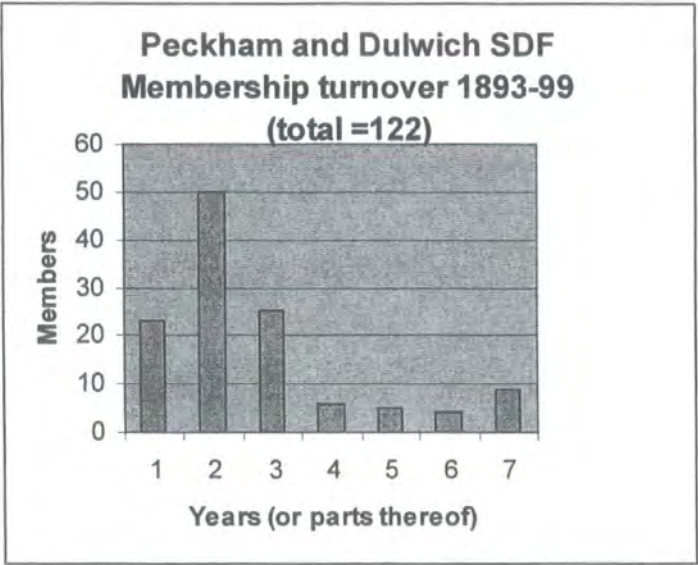
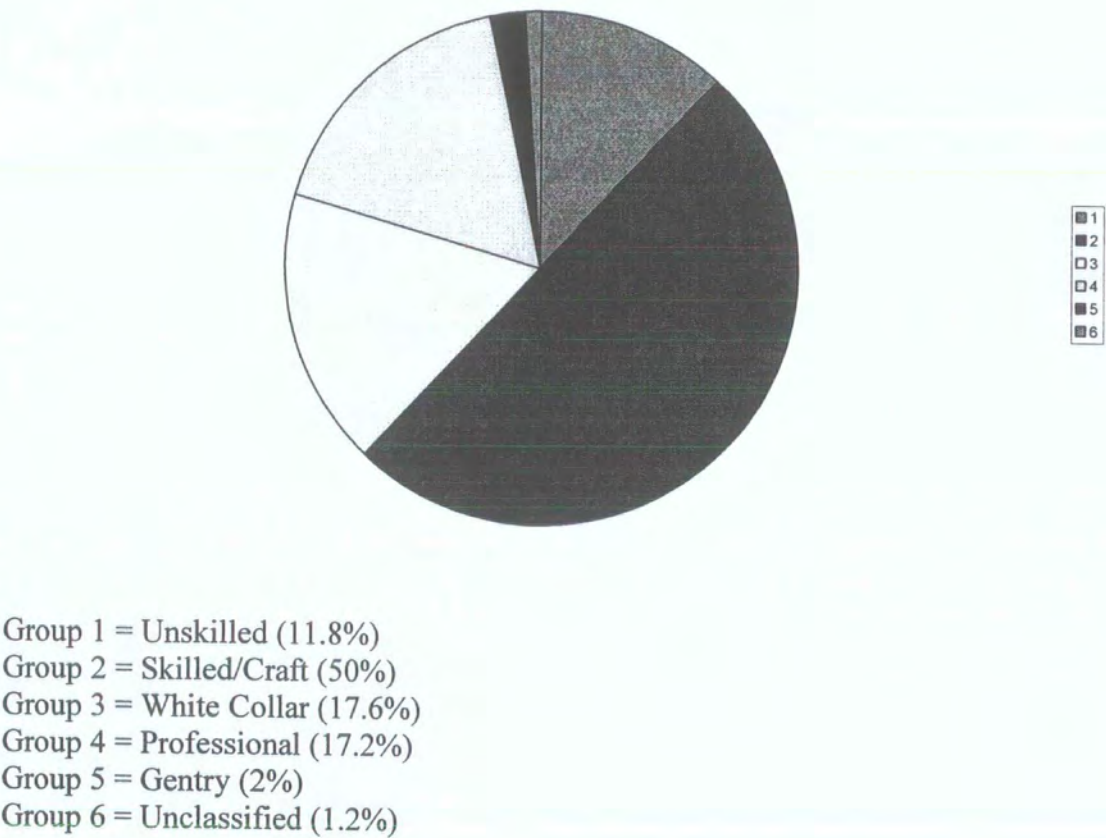


Figure IV

Occupations of London SDF members (Total = 244)



See Appendix B for a full break down of occupations.

Figure Va

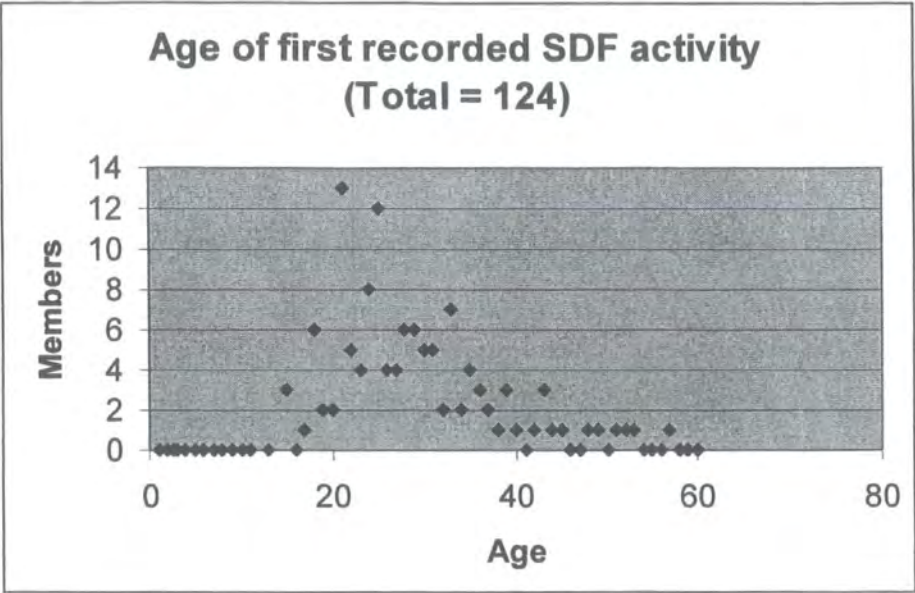


Figure Vb

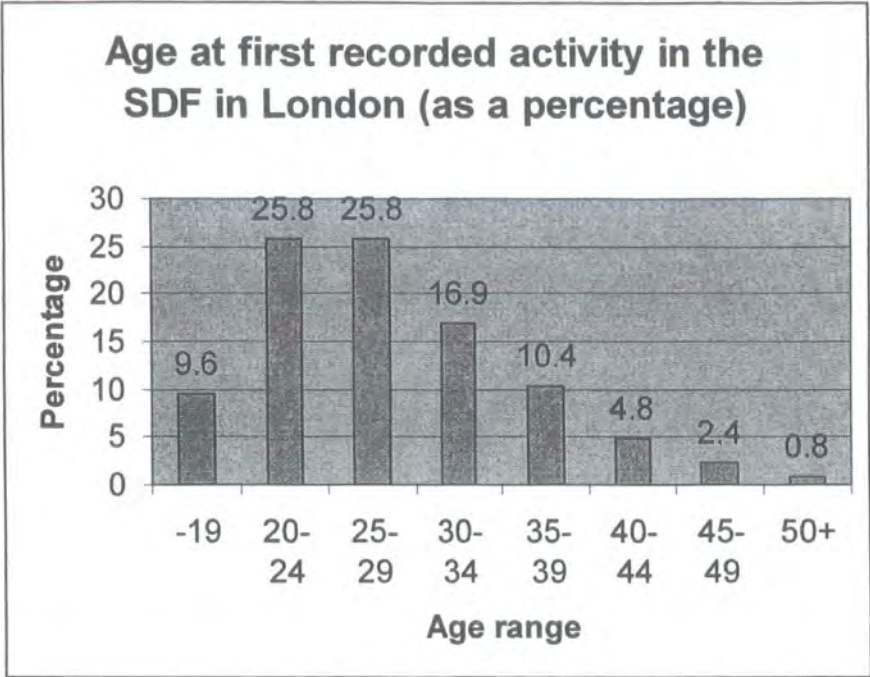


Figure VI

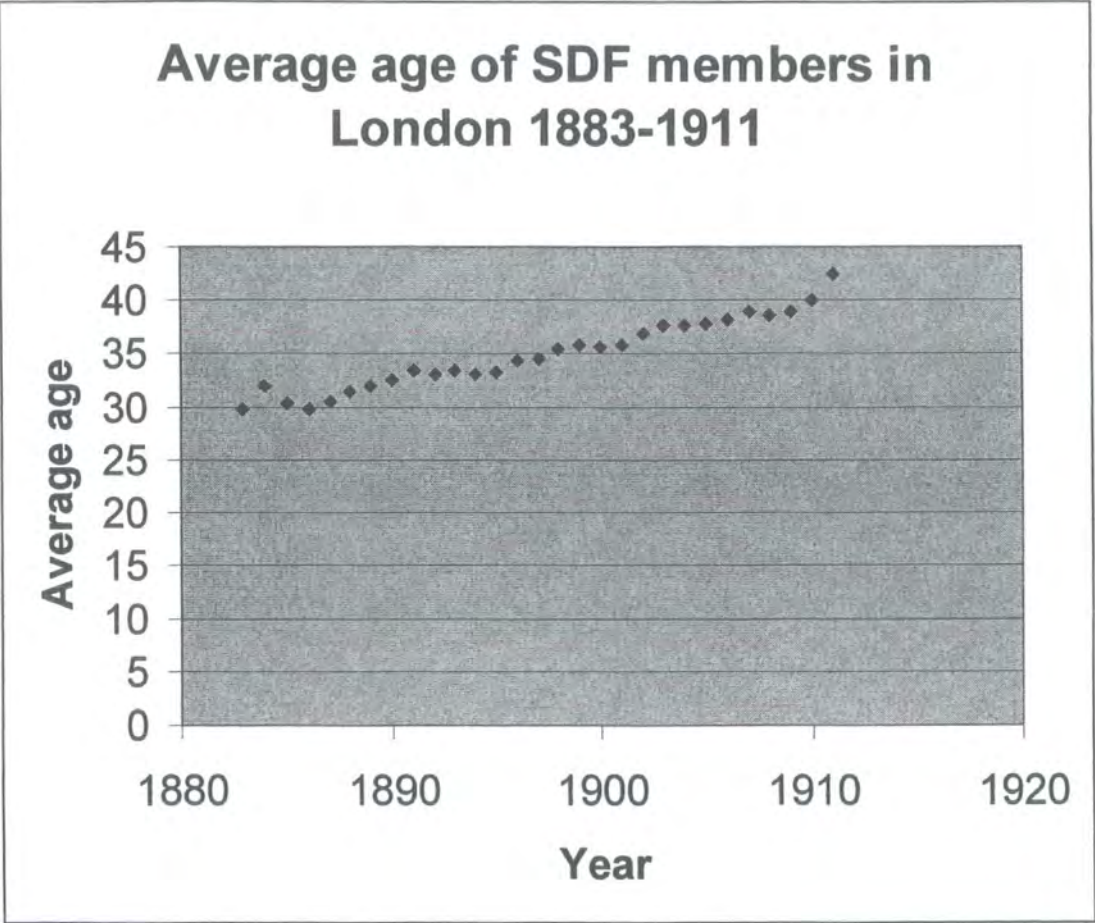
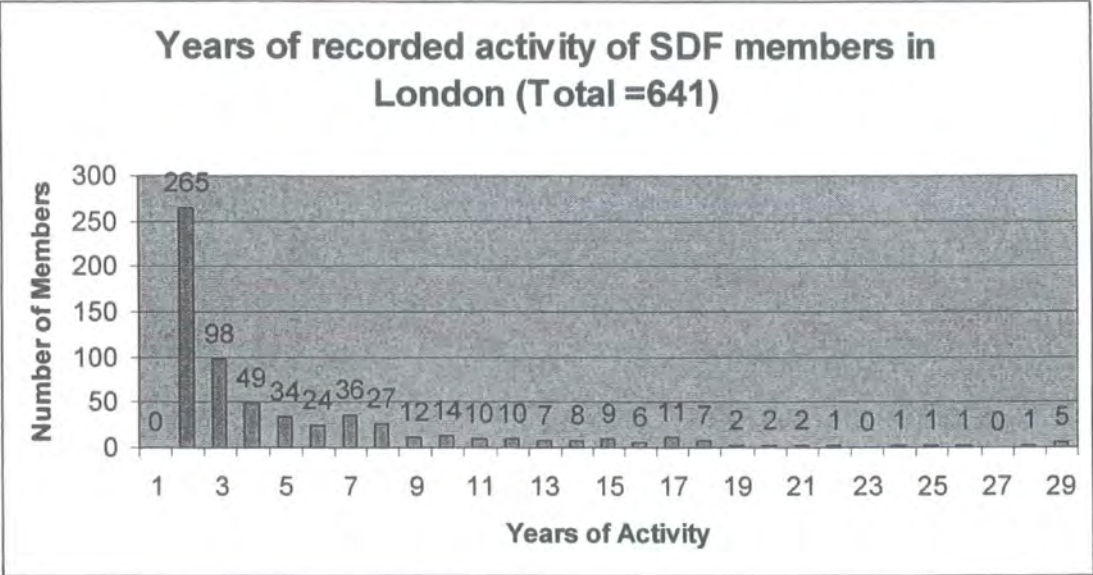


Figure VII



Chapter 2

London and SDF Socialism

The purpose of this chapter is firstly to draw connections between the location and the development of politics in the city, to outline the role of 'place' and the ability of the Social Democratic Federation to represent that. It has already been mentioned that the SDF was the dominant socialist formation in London before the First World War while the ILP in London never really made the strides it took in northern England. Hence a second purpose is to comment on and attempt an explanation for this difference.¹

It is a tenet of Marxist theory that changes in the economic bases of society will bring about changes in the social and political organizations of that society. Cities, as a social organization, reflect the economic base of society. Asa Briggs in *Victorian Cities* presents his examples as political or social zeitgeist: Manchester in the middle of the century representing the triumph of industrial capitalism, and the Anti-Corn Law League and London at the end of the century representing the height of the imperial epoch. The non-Marxist Daniel J. Olsen put forward the notion that the variety of buildings, streets and services of late Victorian London reflects the free market of London in that period in contrast to the attempts by Wren or the Georgian estate builders at planned and ordered development.² This link between human geography and the economy is the point made in the work of Mike Savage on the politics of the labour movement in Preston after 1880. However, no work has been done on the link between London as a social and cultural entity and the ability of the SDF to represent that. In terms

¹ One of the focuses of Martin Crick's work is on the Yorkshire/Lancashire SDF but no explanation is put forward for the varied growth. M.Crick, *op. cit.*, pp105-152

² A.Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Harmondsworth 1968) chapters on London, Manchester and Birmingham, D.J.Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (1976). See also P.J.Waller, *Town, City, and Nation. England 1850-1914* (Oxford 1983). For the classic longitudinal study of the 'functional classification of cities' see Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (1961).

of political organization the SDF can be seen as a reflection of London conditions and the ILP those of West Yorkshire.

a) London social structure

London between 1880 and 1914 was at its peak of influence as a world city. In terms of trade and population it was the world's premier city. Greater London experienced periods of extremely rapid growth in population at the end of the nineteenth century – 18.2% in the ten years to 1891, 16.8% up to 1901 and 10.2% up to 1911. Between 1861 and 1911 the population of Greater London grew by 125% compared with a growth rate of 80% for that of the whole of England. In the same period, Greater London was never less than 20% of the total population of England. Of the migrants into London the majority were young, aged between 15 and 30 and unskilled. London also had a larger proportion of foreign and Irish immigrants.³

The social structure of London was largely determined by history and geography. Historically the twin cities of London and Westminster were split between trade in the east and the court in the west, with the legal profession in the middle. The City of London retained its commercial function throughout this period and was the centre of a series of offices, and also docks and warehouses, which stretched eastwards on both the north and south banks of the river until it went beyond the LCC boundary. Geography added to this social segregation. As the prevailing wind was from the west, industrial developments, such as the 'dirty trades' of soap making or chemical works, took place in east London and soon spilled over into metropolitan Essex. High ground and clean air was favoured for middle class housing and hence areas in the north west such as Hampstead were desirable while low lying areas such as Kilburn were not. The poor needed to be close to their

³ One curious factor in SDF history in London is that many of the working class leadership were themselves migrants from outside of the metropolis. P. Joyce, *Visions*, pp279-304, points out that the working class in Lancashire and Yorkshire were staunch local patriots and supported a vibrant dialect literature. However, because of the degree of in migration within London the conurbation did not have a strong ground for the development of such patriotisms. Jack Williams and - to a greater extent - John Burns were known to have a flair for London, idiomatic speech but it would be interesting to know whether Tom Mann or Will Thorne had pronounced West Midlands accents or whether Ben Tillett sounded like he came from Bristol and if so, whether it ever jarred with the audience.

work and so the areas closest to the docks in Bermondsey or Stepney and Poplar contained the poorest, while at the end of the century the districts that formed the inner suburbs – such as Hackney, Islington, Lambeth and Camberwell – were changing in social structure as the middle classes moved further out and the more prosperous working classes moved in. For the commuting working classes the suburbs beyond the LCC boundary provided affordable housing. The London working class were mobile – commuting some distance within London for work, moving short distances to change residence. This movement is likely to have reduced the degree of – often conservative - community and trade identity associated with mining villages or mill towns.⁴ This would make a trade union based political organisation more difficult to develop. Therefore, while the employer as paternalist factor was less in evidence so was the role of trade solidarity.

In general, however, London's housing was notoriously poor and expensive with a greater population than other British cities classified as living in overcrowded accommodation. However, as with the case in Germany, the type of housing may in turn have led to a type of social organisation where overcrowding in towns and cities both from natural increase in population and migration to the industrial west 'deprived most German workers of the possibility of a home-centred and privatised culture, which in turn may explain why the leisure and educational organisations of German social democracy proved so popular.'⁵ In a London context this can be seen in the activities of a number of young male immigrants and residents such as Fred Knee⁶ and Tom Mann who sought recreation and association in Church, scientific and later political organisations.⁷ London therefore, contained a rich source of individuals looking for the associational culture provided by organisations such as the SDF.

⁴ See for example Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics* (Brighton 1980). See Chapter 11 of this work on the relationship between the SDF and trade unions in London.

⁵ D.Geary, *European Labour Politics from 1900 to the Depression* (1991) p28.

⁶ Fred Knee (1868-1914), compositor. Moved to London from Somerset in 1890 and was active in the SDF (Willesden and Wimbledon) from 1891 until his death. Battersea B.C. Alderman 1900-06. Sec. Workmans National Housing Council from 1898. First Sec. London Labour Party.

⁷ D.Englander (ed.), *The Diary of Fred Knee* (1977), D.Torr, *Tom Mann and his Times* (1956)

Parts of London in the 'inner industrial ring' were among the boom areas of a boom town - places such as East and West Ham, Leyton, Battersea, Tottenham, Hornsey, Willesden, Walthamstow and Croydon. It is not coincidental that it was in these areas that the SDF grew from the 1890s.⁸ Chris Wrigley describes Battersea as

'an area which experienced a great influx of working-class people from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The rural Battersea ...[of 1831], expanded into a suburb containing over 107,000 people in 1881 and over 150,000 in 1891. The area of Wandsworth (of which Battersea is a part) experienced a 200 per cent increase in population in the two decades 1861-1881... As Eric Hobsbawm has observed, "...the south contained by far the strongest concentration of trade unionists in the metropolis and before 1889 probably the only real concentration."' ⁹

'Here it is,' wrote Charles Booth the following year of the Shaftesbury estate in Battersea, 'that the most intelligent portion of the Socialism of the district is chiefly to be found, and the colony represents perhaps the high-water mark of the life of the intelligent London artisan.' Edward Royle describes it as a 'good breeding ground also for secularism and the Battersea branch [of the National Secular Society] acted as midwife to the socialism of the area.'¹⁰ By 1900 the Shaftesbury estate was the stronghold for John Burns'¹¹ re-election during the Khaki election of that year.¹² Therefore, it is fair to say that socialist growth took place in the industrial suburbs amongst the respectable skilled working class.¹³ This, to my mind, is a significant point. The London working-class suburbs were areas of rapid growth and areas of equally rapid growth for the SDF. They contained the 'respectable' working class with money enough to take the

⁸ P.J.Waller, *op.cit.* p3 Walthamstow is an interesting case in point for independent working class political activity in this period. See Chapter 1 – (Membership) of this work for the distribution of branches in London. It was the home of H.A.Barker, the SDFer turned Socialist Leaguer turned anarchist, up to three SDF branches publishing their own local paper the *Socialist Critic* and from 1911 the Syndicalists around Guy Bowman and the Buck brothers produced the journals for Tom Mann. From 1903 the Secretary of the local branch of the ASRS was W.A.Osborne whose objection to the adoption of A.E.Holmes, an SDF compositor, as parliamentary candidate by the local LRC, led to the famous judgement in the House of Lords.

⁹ C.Wrigley, 'Liberals and the desire for working-class representation in Battersea, 1886-1922' in K.D.Brown (ed), *Essays in Anti-Labour History* (1974), p126. E.J.Hobsbawm, 'The Nineteenth Century London labour market', p8 cited in C.Wrigley, in K.D.Brown (ed), *Essays* (1974) p128.

¹⁰ C.Booth, 1st Series 'Poverty' 4 Volumes. Vol. I p242, cited in E.Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans* (Manchester 1980) p50.

¹¹ **John Burns** (1858-1943), engineer. Born and brought up in London, joined SDF in Battersea in the autumn of 1883 and was a leading member until the summer of 1889. Joint leader of the dock strike in the summer of 1889. He stood at the 1892 Gen. Elect. as a Labour and Social Democratic candidate. MP for Battersea from 1892. President of the Local Government Board 1905-14.

¹² J.Schneer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven 1999), pp248-59.

¹³ See Chapter 1 of this work for the occupational profile of SDF members in London.

workman's trains and travel to work. They had an increasing amount of free time to devote to associations and to political life. This is in contrast to the situation presented by Gareth Stedman Jones in his 1974 essay. The conservative working-class culture he portrays is based on inner London and does not consider the Walthamstows and the Willesdens.

b) Work, Employment and Trade Unions

London at the end of the nineteenth century had developed an industrial structure based on its role as a centre of distribution and consumption. The trades associated with London include furniture making, tailoring and printing as well as the 'dirty trades' of metropolitan Essex such as soap making and chemical works. There were islands of large scale production, such as the Woolwich armoury, in a vast sea of small workshops. For example, in the inner London region the vast majority of enterprises were small; firms employing more than 500 men were exceptional. There was an over-riding distinction between skilled and unskilled workers in the nineteenth century London Labour market. As Thomas Wright put it in 1873: 'Between the artisan and the unskilled labourer a gulf is fixed... The artisan creed with regard to the labourer is that they are an inferior class, and that they should be made to know and keep their place.'¹⁴ According to Gareth Stedman Jones this condescension did not arise just from their craft exclusiveness, but also from the immense 'moral and intellectual' differences between the two groups. Stedman Jones sees the close social relations between master and men in these workshops and their dealings with rich customers as the basis for political conservatism 'amongst the unskilled and semi-skilled, where the labour market was always over-filled, the retention of employment in small firms often depended on the employer or the foreman. To step out of line was to invite dismissal. Independent working-class politics was unlikely to result.'¹⁵ This skill consciousness which pervaded trade unionism before the New Unionism of the 1880s explains, to a degree, the pessimism of leaders such as Hyndman for the role of trade unions in the socialist movement.

¹⁴ T. Wright, *Our New Masters* (1873) pp5-6 cited in G.S. Jones, *London* p338.

¹⁵ G.S. Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge 1983), p213.

Yet I believe it would be wrong to suggest that the political radicalism of skilled workers had disappeared by the last quarter of the century. Craft distinction and exclusiveness was equally fierce in coal mines and textile factories. The close work of tailors, compositors and engineers, as with miners and textile workers, did not always result in political conservatism. T.A.Jackson and Frank Galton record that the discussions in the workshop were a part of their early political education. In addition, recent work has suggested that even 'casual work' such as dock labour was not as disorganised as was once claimed, although it was still irregular. And hence the task of organising the unorganisable was in fact led by Will Thorne¹⁶ and Ben Tillett, a gasworker and a docker respectively.¹⁷

London at the end of the nineteenth century was a difficult breeding ground for trade unionism because of this prevalence of small workshop trades and the division between unskilled and casual labour. As a result of this London trade unionism had particular characteristics, such as the variety of small scale unions in tailoring, the divisions of skill in the docks and of the localism of the building trades. The figures presented by Stedman Jones show that in 1897 trade unionists composed 3.5 per cent of the population of London compared with 8 per cent in Lancashire and 11 per cent in the North East of England. Furthermore, despite the origins of new unionism from a base in the capital, 'London unions remained parochial and exclusive'. Of the 250 London unions listed in 1897, 75 were purely London-based and only 35 had a membership of more than 1,000. In the cabinet-making trade alone there were more than 23 competing unions.¹⁸ With this sort of diffusion there was never the likelihood of a London constituency electing a trade union MP in the manner of a mining or textile district. It also explains to a large extent the scepticism of leading SDFers – particularly after 1906 - to a political accommodation with the trade unions. Within the London

¹⁶ **William James Thorne** (1857-1946), gas stoker and trade union leader. Member of SDF (Canning Town) continuously from 1884. Founder and leader of Nat. Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers. Parl. Comm. of TUC 1894-1921. Labour MP West Ham (Sth) 1906-18, Plaistow 1918-45.

¹⁷ See T.A.Jackson, *Solo Trumpet* (1953). See also for engineers R.Fox, *Smokey Crusade* (1938), T.Mann, *Tom Mann's Memoirs* (1923), Marc Brodie, 'Artisans and Dossers: The 1886 West End Riots and the East End Casual Poor.' *London Journal* Vol. 24(2) (1999) pp34-50, Frank Galton MS Autobiography BLPES Coll. Misc. 0315 p38. Chapter 1 of this work outlines the predominance of skilled workers among the membership of the SDF in London.

¹⁸ G. Stedman Jones, *Languages*, p212.

political spectrum the political alliance (with radical clubs and associations) seemed more viable than industrial organisation.

Amongst the Radical clubs what seemed to be taking place was that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century London labour politics moved from a 'work-centred politics to one based on neighbourhood and community.' With reference to London Radical clubs John Davis writes that organisations like them 'which derived their strength and identity from the increasing social homogeneity of working class areas rested on a firmer base.' In Radical clubs politics in this period was being forced out by entertainment but 'at the same time it became clear that questions which had an obvious bearing upon the class concerns of the working man continued to arouse a general interest.' Hence, an organisation such as the SDF which identified itself with class politics – especially in places like West Ham and Poplar – could resonate more with the London working class than elsewhere. However, outside London the trade unions fulfilled a role which the clubs could not in organising workers 'with the efficiency of a centralised leadership and bureaucracy'.¹⁹

c) Political Traditions

A major strength of London working-class politics was the artisanal radicalism that can be traced back to the end of the eighteenth century. This was kept alive in the many working men's clubs that grew up. London in particular was the base for the anti-establishment scepticism of the secular movement and the entry point of the waves of the radical political refugees which fed London club life from the 1840s²⁰. The formation of the Federation of Metropolitan Radical Clubs during 1886 was a significant feature in the political development of working-men's clubs. According to John Taylor, the Metropolitan Radical Federation brought together 'dissenting' working-class clubmen to the left of the Liberal Party, yet at the same time was allied with the Liberals in both local and School Board elections. However, the MRF was also associated with the socialists. The MRF

¹⁹ John Davis, 'Radical Clubs and London politics, 1870-1900', D. Feldman and G. S. Jones (eds.), *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations since 1800* (1989), p114, p115, p123. See Chapter 3 on the role of Radical Clubs on the development of the SDF in London.

²⁰ I. Prothero, *op.cit.*

worked in alliance with the SDF in causes such as Irish coercion, free education and free speech.²¹ The SDF gained from this network of radical clubs, a base for organised working-class politics in London and grew from this milieu, but in the end superseded it. The extent to which Social Democracy had replaced radicalism among the politically-minded working class by the end of the nineteenth century is shown in the fact that the National Democratic League, set up in 1900 to stimulate a radical revival, was obliged to rely for its London secretary on a prominent Camberwell SDFer, and for its national organiser on Jim Connell of Deptford, another active SDFer and the author of the *Red Flag*.²²

Stedman Jones sees this division between the labouring majority and the artisanal minority as a reason for the SDF's 'failure'. He writes that the

'dream of creating a united and Marxist-based metropolitan labour movement never came to fruition.... The particular configuration of social strata in London had produced sects rather than parties. The SDF, rather like the secularist organisations which preceded it, had remained largely a preserve of artisans. It had catered not for masses but for the elite. It had not been able to bridge the enormous gulf – cultural and economic – that separated skilled workers from the poor. The oft-cited sectarianism was not a cause but a symptom of this failure.'²³

There is, however, much evidence which contradicts this view of the SDF. While it appears true that the SDF was dominated by skilled workers, this does not mean that either they were divided or differentiated from the rest of the London labour movement, or that they had no hand in the organisation of the unskilled. Two activities which the SDF were noted for were their involvement in the development of New Unionism from 1889 and their organisation of the unemployed in the 1880s and the early 1900s. As I hope I demonstrate elsewhere in this work²⁴, the SDF's oft-cited sectarianism is a complex of political forces that says much about the direction of the whole labour movement at the turn of the century and little about the class exclusiveness of London skilled workers.

²¹ J.Taylor, *From Self-Help to Glamour* (nd. 1972) p53. See also Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock, *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement 1880-1914* (Cambridge 1996).

²² Paul Thompson, 'Liberals, radicals and labour in London 1880-1900', *Past and Present* (1964), p93. **James Connell** (1852-1929), Member of Deptford Radical Association in the 1880s and the National Democratic League from 1900 and Irish nationalist. Speaker from SDF platforms from the 1880s and the author of Britain's labour hymn the 'Red Flag'.

²³ G.Stedman Jones, *London*, p349.

²⁴ Chapters 8, 11 and 12.

e) Regionalism

Different social realities are likely to lead to different political formations. Hence the SDF/ILP division is as much a London/West Yorkshire schism as an Anglican/non-conformist or even an alien/British one. In attempting to provide an explanation for this Henry Pelling writes that

‘it was in London that the SDF was by [the 1890s] most strongly rooted. In addition ...the ILP had acquired the Nonconformist sentiments of the North of England, which did not go down well in London. Devout, hymn-singing fervour did not square with the requirements of London audiences, so much more cosmopolitan and secular, and so much less friendly to the sentimental radicalism in the North... In 1894 [Hardie] remarked in the *Labour Leader*: “Hitherto no ILP club has opened in London, which is something to be thankful for, as club influence in the metropolis seem to have a distinctly deteriorating effect.” At the end of 1895 he admitted that the ILP in London was “still in the chrysalis stage” and two years later, after more set-backs at the School Board elections, he said: “The ILP spirit of breadth and strength has never been shown in London. The movement has not an individuality of its own. It is a bad reflection of something else.”’²⁵

Paul Thompson states that no other party organised as much outdoor propaganda in London as the SDF and that ‘so far from being the dogmatic bitter sect with little significant support traditionally pictured by historians, was winning more hard-working and idealistic members among working men than any other political movement.’²⁶ It was the dominant force in the capital’s labour movement and formed the core of the budding local LRCs forming at the turn of the century.²⁷

The socialists of this period ‘dreamed of turning London into a great “commune”’. They gained inspiration not so much from the earlier record of agitation in the English provincial cities as from the revolutionary struggles in foreign capitals...’²⁸ London was also a capital city which meant that the intellectual middle class were in close proximity to – although not among – the working class. This allowed Booth, Beatrice Webb and Hyndman to investigate social problems on their doorstep and take an active interest in working class organisation. It allowed SDFers, Fabians and ILPers to mix and debate with the Radical Liberal

²⁵ *Labour Leader*, 15 September 1894, 23 December 1895, 4 December 1897, cited in H.Pelling, *Origins*, p159.

²⁶ P.Thompson, ‘Liberals, radicals and labour’, p93.

²⁷ See Chapter 12 (Socialist Unity and the Labour Party).

²⁸ A.Briggs, *op.cit.*, pp330-1.

politicians and journalists of the Rainbow Circle.²⁹ London was the centre of printing and publishing which not only provided a large number of literate, skilled workers for the SDF but allowed for a greater dissemination of SDF material and reporting of their activities in the national and regional press.

However, London was not like Paris and St. Petersburg. Despite greater London containing almost one fifth of England's population, the city existed more in terms of *primus inter pares* rather than an overwhelming dictatorship.³⁰ A fierce regionalism existed in England (as well as nationalism within Britain). Patrick Joyce points out that the dialect literature in Lancashire characterised London as populated by either the demoralised slum dweller or the idle and profligate aristocracy. This picture is contrasted with Lancashire where these extremes do not exist, 'where people are not sunk in vicious idleness but exalted by productive labour.'³¹ This perception of London by the workers of Lancashire and elsewhere may begin to explain the relative success of the SDF in London and its apparent failure in the industrial swath of Lancashire and Yorkshire. The SDF may have been treated with suspicion not only because many of the apostles were middle class – Hyndman, Morris and Burrows³² – but also because they represented the effete South rather than the 'grit' of the North of England. On the other hand the ILP was born in Bradford and grew up in the north and so escaped the negative characterisations associated with the capital. As Steadman Jones puts it, 'London had not led the "social revolution" as Hyndman had foretold, but had lost the initiative to the syncretic but more stably-based socialism of the provinces.'³³

²⁹ Michael Freeden (ed.), *The Minutes of the Rainbow Circle 1894-1924* (1989).

³⁰ For an analysis of the difficulty of this capital/province relationship in an earlier period see Edward Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia?* (Manchester 2000) pp148-151.

³¹ Patrick Joyce, *Visions*, pp293-4. See also Gareth Steadman Jones, 'The "cockney" and the nation, 1780-1988', in Feldman and Jones, *op.cit.*, pp272-224.

³² **Herbert Burrows** (1845-1921) civil servant (Excise Dept.) Active in SDF continuously from 1884. SDF Parl. Cand Haggerston, 1908 and 1910.

³³ G.S.Jones, *Outcast London*, p349. It is perhaps significant that when the ILP finally rejected the Labour Alliance by disaffiliating in 1932, the strongest support came from the London District of the party. See Gideon Cohen, 'From "Insufferable Bourgeois" to Trusted Communist: Jack Gaster, the Revolutionary Policy Committee and the Communist Party', McIlroy, Morgan and Campbell, *op.cit.*, pp190-209.

f) Conclusions

This chapter has aimed to show how the social and economic structure of London facilitated the development of the SDF. The city had a different economic base and development when compared with other cities and regions in Britain such as West Yorkshire and as a result of this development the political orientation of working class organisations was different, and it remained different after 1914: a structure based more on “political workers” clubs than on industrial organisation. In 1914, with the formation of the London Labour Party, the Social Democrats were still the largest and most influential element in the London socialist movement with Fred Knee taking on the post of party secretary. After the war former SDFers provided a rich source for the development of a Communist party in the capital and ‘it shows the persistence of London’s social democratic tradition that in 1939 two fifths of the Communist Party’s 18 000 members were Londoners.’ However, their ‘characteristics, their inconsistencies, were thoroughly English, produced by London and successful because they met its needs.’³⁴ Hence a closer look at the London SDF in an arena where the trade unions were less dominant further questions the notion of British ‘exceptionalism’ in labour history and places them closer to the socialist movements of continental Europe.. However, rather than accepting ideology uncritically, the SDF were relatively successful in London – compared with other socialist organisations - because they reflected the requirements of the city’s workers. Hence, the environment of the metropolis has as much to explain the divisions between the ILP and the SDF as other ideological and cultural factors.

³⁴ P.Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour*, p297, p292. London made up 31.4% of CPGB membership in 1922, Thorpe, *op.cit.*, pp777-800.

Chapter 3

Branch Life: The Culture of the SDF

The branch life or 'culture' of the SDF went beyond the purely 'political' ends of the organisation. The word 'culture' can be interpreted in at least two different ways. On the one hand it can be seen as an interest in artistic expression – music, theatre, literature or painting. For some socialists the arts were spaces in which the class struggle with bourgeois society could be fought and hence a look at how SDF branches viewed these products can give us some insight into how they viewed their contemporary civilisation. Equally the attempts by SDF branches to develop their own 'cultural' activities, such as drama and music, goes some way to supplying us with their critique of what was available elsewhere.

On the other hand an alternative, more political, understanding of the word 'culture' is of culture as a set of values and ideas that are an explanation for actions. In this sense the culture of the SDF, how they conducted their meetings and organisation, can give us some insight into what they regarded as the appropriate way to run a society. For this reason I have also looked at how they ran their branches and organised public meetings.

a) Club life at the end of the nineteenth century

From its foundation in 1881 the Democratic Federation was based on the affiliation of working men's clubs. These clubs were generally based on the membership of the skilled workers of their locality. Many clubs had been founded with a specifically political intent, as a place for free radical debate or to advance a particular course or campaign. They reached a peak of political commitment in the 1880s where apart from the active socialists and Irish nationalists, there were clubs to advance free speech and to oppose coercion in Ireland. This commitment was reflected in the activities of the clubs; for example some clubs had special

political evenings, others engaged in debates on current events whilst some mixed politics and entertainment as readings from the 'democratic poets' were common.¹

Socialist clubs like the Rose St. Club in Soho, the International Club in Poland St. or the German Communist Club in Tottenham St. were of a pronounced political, and radical political nature. They were open to the political views of workers from Europe such as Adam Weiler² or Johann Most who brought with them the socialist ideas of Bakunin, Lassalle and Marx.³ It is unlikely that the SDF could have had the impact it had in London without the presence in the clubs of these European workers.

Before the formation of the SDF it was these working men's clubs that were synonymous with socialism. In 1880 the *Pall Mall Gazette* commissioned George Gissing, who had a knowledge of German socialism, to write a series of articles on the subject. In one of these he describes a club in London, possibly the Tottenham St. Club, in the following way:

'The visitor who has been duly introduced finds himself in a comfortless, tobacco-reeking clubroom where politicians of both sexes, at times accompanied by children, sit at tables, dividing their attention between the orator on the platform and the refreshments steadily renewed by the obliging *kellner*. All have put on their best attire, and in their mutual intercourse prevails a pleasant courtesy: when rising to speak they mention each other by the title of 'citizen'.the majority it must be confessed are given to ranting at the expense of good German as well as good sense, and the debates at time prolonged till almost dawn, have seldom any result save that of confirming the speaker in his prejudices.'⁴

From this description it is possible to see that the emphasis at this date is on the associational aspect of branch life. Socialism may be discussed or debated, lectures may still take place but they do so without disturbing the eating and drinking. It is possible that this conviviality and almost family atmosphere may have been peculiar to a club for workers living in what was to them a foreign city,

¹ T.G.Ashplant, 'London Working Men's Clubs 1875-1915', Stephen and Eileen Yeo (Eds.), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590-1914* (Brighton 1983) p247. There were 21, 966 Germans in London in 1881 rising to 26, 920 by 1891. They were concentrated in the inner working-class areas of St Pancras, Islington, Whitechapel, Marylebone, St Georges in the East and Hackney. A.Shadwell, 'The German Colony in London', *National Review* (26, 156), February 1896.

² Adam Weiler (d. 1894). Cabinet maker originally from Germany. Active in the First International and the German Club in London. Campaigned for the Eight Hour day with the TUC. An obituary in *Justice* (17 March 1894) describes him as an 'active worker for the SDF'.

³ *Justice* 17 March 1894. See also Margaret Ashton, *Little Germany* (Oxford 1986).

⁴ George Gissing, *Notes on Social Democracy* (1968) p1.

but it was also an atmosphere that attracted a large number of young British male workers and introduced them to socialism.⁵ There is also the possibility that it was this atmosphere that attracted such notable activists as James MacDonald⁶, Tom Mann and Fred Knee,⁷ who were themselves migrants and single and perhaps saw in the club a substitute for family life.

Most commentators on the working-men's clubs in the last quarter of the nineteenth century point out the way in which political activities were being superseded by entertainment. John Davis also considers that this commercialisation of the clubs 'allowed a more muted form of political enthusiasm to embrace larger numbers' – Liberal Party politics could give way to more general working class campaigns such as one for the eight hour day.⁸ Hence, even in the twentieth century the 'political' club was far from anachronistic or obsolete.

The smaller SDF branches always met in private houses and were unable to provide anything more than the most basic club-like activities. However, it was the associational activity that provided succour for members. As Paul Thompson points out 'there is little doubt that a major reason for the tenacity of the Social Democrats was the extent to which the movement provided a satisfying way of life'.⁹ In the words of Herbert Morrison 'political groups such as [Westminster SDF] were... a pleasant form of social club apart from providing fuel for our political forces.'¹⁰

The extent to which club life may have sustained the life of the SDF branches is illustrated by the Stratford SDF. In December 1904 it was 'the unanimously expressed opinion that a club was absolutely necessary if the branch was to be continued'. However, six months later their club was experiencing 'lack of

⁵ See Chapter 2 of this work for comments on housing and associational culture.

⁶ **James (Jem) Macdonald** (1857-1938). Tailor and trade unionist. Active in (Marylebone) SDF from 1881. Left after 1885 to work with the Socialist Union but returned by the 1890s. Labour candidate for Dundee 1892. Secretary London Trades Council 1896-1913.

⁷ See, Anon, *How I Became a Socialist* [nd. 1896?] and D.Englander, *op.cit.*

⁸ J.Davis, *op.cit.*, p121.

⁹ P.Thompson, *Socialists*, p207.

¹⁰ Herbert Morrison, *An Autobiography* (1960), p39.

interest' to the point that collections at their weekly open-air propaganda meetings at the Grove went towards sustaining the club. In the case of Stratford, rather than the club being an adjunct to the branch it became the purpose of the socialists to contribute to the club.¹¹

c) Branch meetings and internal organisation

However, before they reached the convivial atmosphere of the working men's club or even the debating society atmosphere of a radical club, most SDF branches started off as groups of comrades meeting in private houses. The minimum number to constitute a branch according to the SDF constitution was six and if a pioneer lacked socialist friends then an advertisement in *Justice* might produce some replies.¹² At other times a larger branch might divide into a series of smaller branches, as was the case with the Canning Town branch in the mid-1890s.¹³ Herbert Morrison's Westminster branch of the SDF consisted of between six and twelve members who met in the front room of Joe Butler, the founder and Secretary of the branch.¹⁴

From these lowly beginnings it was usual for the branch to rent a room or possibly a hall. Very few even by the 1900s had the privilege of their own purpose-built hall. W.S. Sanders¹⁵ was an active member of Battersea SDF which was one of the more established branches and met at Sydney Hall in York Road. Sanders describes the 'hall' in Biblical terms as an 'upper chamber'. However, he says

¹¹ Stratford SDF Minutes, 1 December 1904, 4 May 1905, 1 February 1906. The North London Socialist Club, although it started with the intention of being a teetotal club, came to depend on the sale of beer. North London Socialist Club Minute Book, Committee Meetings, 18 April, 20 June, 1 August 1899 cited in R.Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class* (1972) p63. Cf Stephen Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organisations in Crisis* (1976), p170. 'The *Occasional Magazine* mocked in 1900: "when we were told to see to it that the Gospel should be preached to the whole world, it was intended (though not mentioned) that the money should be raised by a bazaar." An elision between means and ends had indeed taken place. Churches were evidently needed to support bazaars, not vice versa.'

¹² *Justice*, 31 March 1894 shows an advertisement that started the soon to flourish Stratford SDF branch.

¹³ A committee was set up to consider the formation of a branch in Plaistow. Canning Town SDF Minutes, 10 September 1893

¹⁴ B.Donoghue and G.W.Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician* (1973) p15. H.Morrison, op.cit., pp38-9. For the St Pancras branch and their meeting place above a baker's shop see Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left* (1942), p19.

¹⁵ William Stephen Sanders (1871-1941). Labour MP for Battersea (North) 1921-31, 1935-40. Active in (Battersea) SDF c1886-1889.

that there was little about it to 'inspire a youthful enthusiast to take part in a mighty movement.' Situated above a site for caravans, the hall was in fact a large room with a capacity of between 100 and 150. It was furnished with wooden forms supplemented by windsor chairs. At the furthest end from the staircase was a door leading to a smaller room used for committee meetings, and as a library and reading room. According to Sanders there were few volumes in the solitary bookcase that made up this library. A portion of the hall near the staircase was used on occasions as a co-operative store which carried on a 'ramshackle and precarious existence'. All the rooms he describes as being 'innocent of any kind of decoration; they were mean and grubby rather than plain and simple.'¹⁶ This aspect was particularly objected to by Bernard Shaw, a regular speaker at SDF halls. In a letter to Janet Achurch in 1895 he described how he had 'just done the wretched hour of lecturing and arguing in a den full of tobacco smoke in Camberwell.'¹⁷

It appears, however, that some branches tried to provide an environment in contrast to the beery, smoky atmosphere of a working men's club. Of the four branches in the Hackney area in 1896, the Stoke Newington branch met at Baxfield's Coffee House, whilst the Kingsland branch met at 105 Dalston Lane where before the Sunday evening meeting they met for 'a social cup of tea'. The Hoxton branch met at Lockhart's Cocoa Rooms while the Hackney branch met initially at the Rendezvous Café and then later at Goddard's Cocoa Rooms.¹⁸ According to Raphael Samuel, the CPGB - the descendants of the SDF - 'met in cafes rather than pubs: there was quite a strong inhibition against drink.'¹⁹

According to Harry Young who grew up before the First World War in the Islington BSP on the Holloway Road, the meetings he remembers were often 'argumentative' and 'discursive' and rather than being dominated by Party

¹⁶ W.S.Sanders, *op.cit.*, p25.

¹⁷ Letter dated 3 March 1895. Dan H. Lawrence (ed.), *George Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters. Volume I 1874-1897* (1965) p493.

¹⁸ B.Burke and Ken Walpole, *Hackney Propaganda: Working Class Life and Politics in Hackney 1870-1900* (1980) pp32-33.

¹⁹ R.Samuel, 'The Lost World of British Communism', *New Left Review* (154) November/December 1985 p11. In Bradford in the 1890s the local SDF branch met at the Central Coffee Tavern with the intention of avoiding licenced premises. See Martin Crick, "'A Collection of Oddities": The Bradford Branch of the Social-Democratic Federation', *Bradford Antiquary*, Vol. 5, pp24-40.

business, they were used as a means of developing the Party line.²⁰ Young's view is in contradiction to Sanders' description of the Battersea branch in the 1880s which, although it might have been taken from the procedure of the working men's clubs, later when Young was active took a formality that mirrored parliamentary practice which perhaps indicates the seriousness with which they took their mission. There was as much importance laid on the style as the content of branch meetings:

'We were punctiliously democratic according to our lights and therefore had no permanent chairman. The proceedings were conducted by anyone who happened to be elected to the chair at that time. The resulting chairmanship was not seldom remarkable for its eccentric vagaries. Probably none of us had ever seen or read a chairman's handbook, and our ideas regarding procedure were vague and conflicting. Still... we managed to arrive at decisions by devious methods, our indefatigable and genial secretary usually being able to straighten out the tangles and knots which an inexperienced occupant of the chair may have permitted us to tie ourselves; or to moderate the heat and cantankerous nature of our discussions.'²¹

It is difficult to measure the veracity of Sanders' account and it is probable, however, that in the 1920s he had an interest to muddy the reputation of the SDF, an organisation he had earlier in his book described as 'uninspiring'. However, this account is at odds with the procedure of branch meetings recorded in the minute books. For example the Hammersmith branch of the 1880s was frequently reduced to just four or five members and yet would still go through the motion of electing someone to chair the meetings and take the minutes as correctly as ever. In the Stratford branch in the early 1900s they carried out elections for all posts including the bazaar committee.²²

Each branch would have its secretary who was responsible for keeping records and planning meetings, a literature secretary who maintained the stock of books and pamphlets, and a treasurer. In Lansbury's opinion the treasurer should be 'a comrade in whom all members have complete confidence and if possible also one

²⁰ Interview, David Young/Harry Young, 6 January 1993.

²¹ W.S.Sanders, *op.cit.* pp14-15. Lansbury's opinion was that 'each branch needs a weekly chairman... it is a good thing to elect the chairman weekly and by this means train men to take the chair outside at public meetings.' *Justice*, 12 October 1896. See also D.Englander, *op.cit.* for Knee's membership of a Workers' Parliament and concern for parliamentary procedure.

²² Hammersmith SDF Minutes, 1884-5. Stratford SDF Minutes, 22 February 1906.

who is known outside the movement, so that when special appeals are made outsiders may be more likely to subscribe.²³ In other cases someone was responsible for corresponding with the local press, for example John Maclean was on the Press Committee which served the Glasgow branches of the SDF, scrutinising the local press and responding to topical issues with letters from a Party (or Federation) point of view. The scrupulous Stratford branch set up a Visiting Committee to encourage reluctant members to attend the weekly meetings.²⁴ The Bow branch had a novel way of reminding lapsed members of their commitments. On Christmas Eve 1910 a group of about twenty-five SDFers 'obtained musical instruments and went round to the houses of various members singing songs from the SDP Songbook.'²⁵ Hence, even this visiting could be turned into a propaganda/solidarity activity.

Hence, a typical branch in the 1900s of between 20 and 50 members (not all of whom would make it to the meetings) was based on routine. In particular it was customary after the minutes and correspondence to fix the arrangements for the Sunday propaganda meetings and for any weekday meetings there might be. George Lansbury, writing about the same time as Sanders, describes the meetings of the Bow and Bromley SDF in the 1890s as 'about 40 strong... Our meetings were usually well-attended and orderly. Our branch meetings were like revivalist gatherings. We opened with a song and closed with one and often read together some extracts from economic and historical writings.'²⁶ The life and activity of the branch centred around those propaganda meetings. If the branch possessed a hall or meeting room, one meeting would take place there as a matter of course, usually on the Sunday evening. A morning meeting or meetings – perhaps also an afternoon one – might be held at some customary spouting place (for example The Grove, Stratford) to advertise the indoor meeting, to gather a collection and to sell literature. If the branch had elected representatives such as Councillors or Poor Law Guardians, it would take a regular report from them. It was necessary to keep

²³ *Justice*, 12 October 1896.

²⁴ George Lansbury, *My Life* (1928) p171, Tom Bell, *John Maclean: Fighter for Freedom* (Glasgow 1944) p10, Stratford SDF Minutes 16 November 1905. Canning Town SDF would visit members who had not been in attendance for more than three weeks. Canning Town SDF Minutes, 19 February 1893.

²⁵ *SDP News*, February 1911, p3.

²⁶ G.Lansbury, *op.cit.* p78.

a close watch on their representatives (or rather delegates) as branches frequently instructed them on how to vote on particular issues. Occasionally there was time for a discussion on political topics such as *Capital and Labour* or *Socialism and Industrial Efficiency* but this sort of staged discussion was usually left either to the education classes or to the debates and classes open to non-members.²⁷ Therefore, the SDF can be seen as building on a well-established working-class tradition of self-organisation.

d) Public meetings

The Sunday evening meeting was the main event that regulated the tempo of the life of the branch. A lively debate or an interesting series of lectures was an important means of gaining members. The indoor public meetings were an indispensable way of attracting future members. An early BSP booklet – perhaps learning from mistakes in the past – advised members that these should be ‘organised rather more as services and not as lectures only,’ ensuring that the surroundings were comfortable and convivial.²⁸

The branch minute books show the energy with which branches sought out popular or famous speakers. Branches would try to book big names in advance. Solidly working class Stratford tried hard to get Hyndman and Lady Warwick for a demonstration on unemployment.²⁹ Good lecturers were always in demand. The 1896 SDF Conference reported that since the rise of New Unionism there had been ‘a perfect craze for lecturing’ and that many well-known labour leaders were charging £3 3/- with expenses for each lecture. There were frequent invitations in the party press for speakers coupled with warnings against professional lecturers. The system was further reinforced late in 1910 with an announcement in *SDP News* that ‘only speakers who had received permission were entitled to charge fees

²⁷ Hammersmith SDF Minutes, 3 December 1884. Stratford SDF Minutes, 30 March 1905. T.A.Jackson, *op.cit.*, p54.

²⁸ British Socialist Party, *Special Propaganda Effort. Can we enrol a million members? An Appeal* (1912), p7.

²⁹ Stratford SDF Minutes, 7 September 1905. . Whilst it may seem incongruous to have two members of the upper classes at such a demonstration, Harry Young claims that many of the ordinary members of the Islington BSP ‘saw it as a great honour’ that a man of ‘Hyndman’s class’ was a leader of the party. Interview with Harry Young 6 January 1993.

for lecturing, and a list to whom permission had been given was also to be published' – evidently the SDF actively restricted lecturers making a living from speaking.³⁰ According to Joseph Clayton – a labour activist from the 1880s onwards – the SDF in contrast to the other organisations tended to rely for speakers on its own local branch members rather than paid lecturers. 'The professional speaker had no chance of a living in the SDF.' The ILP, Clayton states, took up the system of the paid lecturers in order to retain activists within the movement. It appears, from Clayton's testimony at least, that there was a difference in attitude between the ILP and the SDF.³¹

The idea that the SDF could not afford or did not want to pay for lecturers but intended using home-grown stock is borne out by frequent demands in *Justice* for speakers from among the membership. From the mid 1890s there were impassioned pleas for new – and improved – speakers. In April 1894 a writer in *Justice* claimed that 'the SDF wants speakers badly. There are some new comrades, but not nearly enough,' and that there was some need to do 'a fair amount of reading and thinking; otherwise the result is monotonous.' At the 1898 Annual Conference, Jack Williams proposed the Walthamstow branch resolution that aimed to ensure that branches 'decline to engage lecturers who make a practice of charging fees for lecturing.' This motion was passed and in an attempt to increase the availability of lecturers, the Conference agreed that the Executive would try to defray the expenses of speakers.³² This attitude to the payment of speakers is one clear difference between the SDF and the ILP and perhaps shows the SDF emphasis on self-organisation.

SDFers and socialists used their image to send out messages about their politics. When he entered Parliament as the member for West Ham Keir Hardie famously

³⁰ *SDF News*, October 1910.

³¹ J. Clayton, *op.cit.* pp85-7. Keir Hardie was known to charge 3 guineas for his lectures. See C. Benn, *Keir Hardie* (1992) pp79-82. In contrast, Harry Snell describes the difficulties – both physical and financial – of a travelling lecturer in the 1890s. [Harry] Lord Snell, *Men Movement and Myself* (2nd Edn 1938), pp114-6. In the 1890s ILP NAC members were given expenses of 10/- a day while on ILP business. Pete Curran charged ILP branches 15/- a lecture including expenses. BLPES M890/1/2 ILP NAC Minutes, 3 July 1897, M890/1/2, 1 July 1898.

³² *Justice*, 7 April 1894, 28 April 1894. SDF Annual Conference Report 1898. *Justice* also noted that the SDF hoped to supply its speakers and organisers with bicycles. 'This will save pounds on railway fares.' 13 January 1894.

wore a soft cap to emphasise his connection with his constituents. Socialists would often sport a red tie in public. For some, in the 1890s 'you knew a socialist from the length of their hair.' But as C. Desmond Greaves points out both this 'youth and the touch of bohemianism repelled the trade union movement.'³³ However, by 1911 A.P. Hazell could remark that those engaged in door-to-door propaganda 'should be dressed in their best and fortified with their most winsome smile and friendly demeanour.'³⁴ Clearly there was a conflict within the SDF between 'respectability' and 'bohemianism'.

Beyond the Sunday lecture and the routine of branch life, it was the way in which the SDF provided a satisfying way of life that perhaps explains some of the attraction of what Harry Pollitt, who was a member of Openshaw BSP, called the 'whole round of local labour life and work.' Like many of his London comrades at this time, he was out chalking the pavements to advertise meetings, collecting subscriptions, cleaning the branch premises, selling literature, carrying the speaker's platform to the street corner and then taking the collection at the end. 'Every night of the week, something or other was going on: classes in industrial history and economics, socials to raise money, choir practice, lectures...'³⁵ This blur of activity could have had the dual purpose of giving even the lowliest a responsibility within the organisation and hence keeping them involved and tied to the party.

e) Social and cultural life

The extent to which the political life of the SDF branch overlapped with the social life of its members probably increased as a result of the change in the role played by the traditional working men's club. From the mid-1890s, politics ceased to be of importance to club life and entertainment no longer relied on the amateur efforts of the members but on the professional touring showbusiness acts. By the

³³ C.Benn, *op.cit.*, C.Desmond Greaves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly* (1976), pp80-1. Of the inter-war period Joe Jacobs writes that young communists in Whitechapel 'were fond of dressing in an outlandish way... There were frequent arguments in the YCL and CP because some of us felt that these outlandish dressers were behaving in a "sectarian" way.' Joe Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto* (1977), p80.

³⁴ *SDP News*, March 1911, p6.

³⁵ Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time* (1940) p33.

1890s club lectures were clearly declining as a draw in working men's clubs and this decline was matched at the same time by an increase in the demand for entertainment. As their newspaper the *Club and Institute Journal* put it, 'there seems an insatiable thirst for entertainments and those of the lightest kind so that the educational side of club life is quite forgotten.'³⁶ Hence the SDF provided a dual role of a resort for socialist activists and a place where those who wanted to could sample the homely traditions of the working men's club in an era when the once-radical Borough of Hackney Club could boast of a boxing kangaroo as one of its highlights.³⁷

The self-sustaining life of the SDF branch might include activities such as the cycling corps of revolutionary propagandists set up by the Southwark and Lambeth branch or the Socialist Sunday Schools set up in Battersea and elsewhere, or perhaps a choir such as that of the Hammersmith Socialist Society conducted by Gustav Holst.³⁸ Yet the majority of branches did not need to rely on a celebrity artist for the choirs, bands, concerts, amateur dramatics, lectures, educational classes, parties or other entertainments. In 1893, for example, the Kentish Town branch announced that they were having a Christmas party with songs, sketches and a Christmas tree with presents for the children. Harry Young recalls similar scenes from the Islington BSP before the First World War when the hall was in use on a Saturday night for a regular social, where a 'member's wife' would play the piano or there would be dancing to a gramophone. The branch therefore not only acted as a surrogate family for young male members but the entertainment could have a useful function (especially given the SDF's loose federal structure) of bringing neighbouring branches closer together. This is brought out in the example of the concert and dance at the Grafton Hall, Fitzroy Square, advertised by the Marylebone and Paddington branch in December 1893, where 'a dramatic sketch will be given by comrades from Battersea. The proceeds will be handed over to the Fund for the Unemployed agitation.'³⁹

³⁶ *Club and Institute Journal*, 6 June 1891 cited in Taylor, *op.cit.*, p59.

³⁷ Burke and Walpole, *op.cit.* pp28-9. See also R.Price, *op.cit.*, pp66-7.

³⁸ P.Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends* (1967) p311.

³⁹ *Justice*, 20 January 1894, 10 February 1894, 30 December 1893. Interview with Harry Young, 6 January 1993. *Justice*, 2 December 1893.

Amateur dramatics had of course been a staple of the traditional working men's club before the 1890s. However, it seems that the SDF were particularly fond of these productions as fund-raising events, benefit concerts for members out of sorts, or for workhouse entertainments. Eleanor Marx⁴⁰ and Edward Aveling saw themselves as aspiring professionals rather than as talented amateurs whilst others saw these performances as structured practice for socialist oratory. It is more difficult to categorise the 'impersonations of well-known SDF members' given at the Hoxton SDF concert of 1893.⁴¹

A further aspect of branch life was the many co-operative stores that were in existence in branches around the country. It was hoped that these stores would alleviate the financial difficulties of many branches by providing their members with necessities such as tea, sugar or tobacco.⁴² SDF enterprises included a draper's store run by E.C.Fairchild in Hackney, another was the *Red Flag Toffee and Chocolate Company* set up by the Leeds branch, whilst the Sheffield branch manufactured cutlery in order to help the movement and offered razors made of 'the finest Sheffield steel.' Comrades could take their pick from the 'Revolutionist' at 3/- 6d, the 'Clarion' at 2/- 6d or the mere 'Proletarian' at a modest 1/- 6d, while a 'Red Flag' pocket knife could be had for the same price. The money brought in by these branch stores helped to subsidise the propaganda efforts. The Peckham and Dulwich branch could even celebrate (ironically?) that their 'Steward is developing into a capitalist of the most virulent type.'⁴³ On a national scale some of these socialist co-operatives such as the Pioneer Co-operative Boot Works of Northampton contributed useful funds to central finances. In 1910 the Unique Clothing Company, run by J.R.Burnett⁴⁴ and

⁴⁰ Eleanor Marx (1855-1898). Journalist and translator. Active in SDF 1884-5 and from early 1890s until her death. Member SDF EC 1894.

⁴¹ Y. Kapp, *Eleanor Marx. Volume II 1884-1898 The Crowded Years* (1976) p103-5. *Justice*, 7 April 1894, 30 September 1893. See also the report in the *West Ham Citizen*, 6 January 1900, of the Plaistow SDF annual dinner to which Councillor Ward gave a 'recitation "Proputty" rendered in the Yorkshire dialect.' Canning Town SDF held a Elicitation [sic] class presumably to help with public speaking. Canning Town SDF Minutes, 18 June 1893.

⁴² SDF Annual Conference Report 1894.

⁴³ Peckham and Dulwich SDF Accounts Book, September 1893.

⁴⁴ J.R.Burnett, clothier. SDF Conference delegate (Bow and Bromley) 1906. Labour candidate Poplar BC 1912.

E.C.Fairchild, could announce that they had contributed £200 to the funds of the London Committee of the SDP.⁴⁵

Like the co-operative movement within the SDF and their response to other commercial activities, the Co-operative Holiday Association set up by an SDF member in the Colne Valley and most popular in northern England, was an attempt to provide rational recreation which would educate workers into socialism. Similarly the many rambling and cycling clubs set up by London SDF branches provided not only fellowship with like-minded people, but also a form of propaganda. Harry Pollitt recalls his cycling club going through villages calling to one another. In some of these villages he would make a ten-minute speech; 'Very few ever stopped to listen but we felt we had done our duty.' It seems that the fellowship of the event was purpose enough.⁴⁶

For Chris Waters access for workers to a perceived musical heritage was important to socialist thinking. This musical heritage was English in the main and reflected the *Merrie England*-ism, Morris dancing and maypole rites of many May Day celebrations. 'The poetry of earlier radical and romantic critiques of industrial society was also significant, while it was a "national asset", it was also considered to be rooted in the people.' This to a large extent reflects the broader revival in interest in folk music in this period typified by people such as Cecil Sharpe and Vaughan Williams. It was perhaps easier to make a connection between folk music as an idealised indigenous popular/working class culture.⁴⁷ Socialists also considered music to be important for more political reasons. Waters quotes *Justice* as saying that 'the one reproach to our movement is that we neglect music. Apart from the pleasure and the refining influence of music it is ... or would be if practised, a great aid to us in propaganda work.'⁴⁸ The correspondent was not alone in this view as there is evidence of choirs and

⁴⁵ *SDP News*, November 1910, p8. The South West Ham branch ran a bakery, BSP Annual Conference Report 1912.

⁴⁶ C.Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture 1884-1914* (1990) pp75-6. Pollitt, *op.cit.* p4 See for example, S.Bryher, *An Account of the Socialist and Labour Movement in Bristol* (1931), p69. See also *Justice* (Hackney Edition), 21 August 1909 where the Uxbridge SDF branch appealed for 'cyclists and others [as] the branch has to encounter a good deal of rowdy opposition.'

⁴⁷ This is a significant contrast to those socialists such as Bax, Shaw and the Marx-Avelings who were enthusiasts for *avant garde* culture such as the music of Wagner and the theatre of Ibsen.

⁴⁸ *Justice*, 25 June 1910, in C.Waters, *op.cit.* p31.

musical events being developed by SDF branches, such as the Blaendydach Marxian Choir that performed at the close of the 1910 SDF Annual Conference, or the various musical evenings arranged by the London members.

The importance of music to the SDF is illustrated by the national appeal made in *Justice* in 1893 when a writer – probably Quelch – had asked ‘Why doesn’t the SDF in London get up a band or two among the members? ... The Burnley branch has its own string band and surely London ought not to be behindhand.’⁴⁹ The singing itself became a part of the SDF’s propaganda effort. Recalling SDF activities in Erith, William Hampton wrote that the

‘children, with our piano mounted upon a pony trolley attended our outdoor meetings. Their singing drew crowds and our Socialist songs became popular, so much so that there was scarcely a meeting of working people of whatever political colour but opened with singing the “Red Flag” and closed with the real “International”’.⁵⁰

However, as with much of the SDF cultural activity, their interest in music is as much a part of their repulsion from the decadent capitalist music hall as a desire to create an alternative socialist popular culture. For example, a character in a novel by the SDF member Margaret Harkness⁵¹ visits a London music hall to find the songs ‘chiefly political, “England for the English and Heaven for us all” was encored over and over again. The chorus expressed a fervent wish to “chuck” the foreigner back to “his own dear native land”...’⁵² This criticism was not an attempt to explore the ideological content of the music hall songs, instead SDF members’ point was that attending the music hall was not ‘rational recreation’ and lacked ‘respectability’. Will Thorne, for example, judged the music halls of Birmingham respectable as they enforced a strict dress code.⁵³

A preference for one type of music over another and suggesting an alternative to the commercial music of bourgeois cultural hegemony is common currency

⁴⁹ *Justice*, 23 September 1893. See [Walthamstow] *Socialist Critic*, 21 April 1900, for the progress of the Walthamstow SDF Brass Band. See also for music Canning Town SDF Minutes, 19 March 1893, Erith SDF Minutes, 11 December 1910.

⁵⁰ W. Hampton, ‘Socialism in By-Gone Erith’, *Bexley Heath Observer*, 11 February 1944.

⁵¹ **Margaret Harkness** (1854-1923). Writer/journalist. SDF member c1885/7-1889. Cousin of Beatrice Webb.

⁵² John Law [Margaret Harkness], *Out of Work* (1888) p165.

⁵³ C. Waters, *op.cit.* p127, p97.

amongst socialist and other revolutionary groups, but there is an underlying criticism that their choice of music was itself conservative, elitist and, because it did not catch on, it was therefore 'unpopular'. By the beginning of the twentieth century compilations of socialist songs began to appear, many of which had been written in the 1880s and 1890s.⁵⁴ A good example is the selection available in the non-party collection *Chants of Labour* put together by Edward Carpenter. Many of the songs are by contemporary writers including Carpenter himself, William Morris, Edith Nesbit⁵⁵ and Walt Whitman but also less well-known socialists such as Herbert Burrows, Tom Maguire, J.L. Joynes and Fred Henderson. Non-contemporaries included Shelley, Burns and the Chartist Ernest Jones.⁵⁶ SDF anthologists included songs emphasising the revolutionary tradition of Ernest Jones and the Chartists while including many from international socialists. Waters notes that the Fabians and the ILP tried to stress socialism's Englishness, concentrating on the Romantic poets as if trying to put forward socialism as the new literary establishment.⁵⁷

In terms of the SDF in London there was at least a twofold process. Firstly, they were trying to build their organisation within the various working-class communities in London. It was crucial not to alienate potential members or supporters and so their culture might be regarded as representative of the culture of working class London. Culture is also a way of defining the ideology of the SDF: a way of defining the values of the organisation, but importantly, defining them in relation to the 'power block'. This is a process which is sometimes referred to as disarticulation/articulation - the disarticulation of particular commercial forms and the articulation of an independent form of organisation and recreation.⁵⁸ The SDF therefore was also a community and an oppositional organisation. As a result, SDF culture was supposed to be not just *different* but also *better* than contemporary commercial (bourgeois) culture. This in turn brought down upon them the criticism that they were elitist.

⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that one of the few songs still in the contemporary socialist canon, 'The Red Flag', was written by the SDF member Jim Connell.

⁵⁵ Edith Nesbit (1858-1924). Author. Fabian and member of (Westminster) SDF c1883-1885.

⁵⁶ Edward Carpenter (ed.), *Chants of Labour: A Song Book of the People* (6th Edn. 1922, 1st Edn. 1888).

⁵⁷ C. Waters, *op.cit.* p112.

⁵⁸ See J. Storey, *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Hemel Hempstead 1993) pp12-17.

f) Drink

One often finds glowing references to the temperate character of the leadership of the ILP as if their advocacy of teetotalism made them one of the non-conformist churches. As with much labour history, the ILP plays Belle to the SDF's Bete and there is some division over whether the SDF was the drinking man's socialism. It might have been a London trait that did not go on outside the metropolitan branches or it might have been that drink – and whisky in particular – was the chosen recreation of leaders like Hyndman, Quelch and Tom Mann. It might also have been the fact that the membership were in fact temperance supporters.

Although Gareth Stedman Jones cites Walter Kendall's book in his assertion that 'provincial socialists were often shocked by the Social Democratic Federation's tolerant attitude towards beer', Kendall in turn cites Tom Bell's autobiography *Pioneering Days* when he claims that in the early 1900s the SDF leaders tried to 'inveigle promising young comrades from the provinces into public houses to stupefy them and win them over.' Yet the sentence continues in Bell's version '...to the side of Possibilism.' Tom Bell in short is giving an explanation for the Impossibilist split.⁵⁹

Brian Harrison points out that 'Local Option and teetotal policies attracted many Labour pioneers – even the Social Democratic Federation.'⁶⁰ There is enough evidence to provide this counter-balance to the SDF's reputation. There was a trend towards teetotalism and vegetarianism amongst leading members. If Hyndman and Quelch were known for their indulgence then Burns, Mann (in his early years), Knee and Lansbury were known for their abstinence, whilst Dennis Hird, a Church of England priest and head of the Church of England Temperance Society, was also in 1894 a member of the SDF. As a tentative measure of abstinence at a lower level in 1893 at least nine of the London branches met in

⁵⁹ G.S.Jones, *Languages*, p198, W.Kendall, p14, Tom Bell, *Pioneering Days* (1941) p42. See also C.D.Greaves, *op.cit.* p160 for a further repetition of Bell's claim.

⁶⁰ B.Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians* (1971) p395.

temperance or coffee houses whilst none are known to have met in pubs.⁶¹ Tom Mann⁶², the SDF New Unionist, broke with past practices and while other unions met at local pubs, this was discouraged in the Dockers' Union. 'Mann regarded the Union not merely as an industrial, but also an "educational institution"'.⁶³

There is enough evidence to show that the SDF itself, rather than being non-committal on the drink question, took on an active role towards advocating self-improvement, moderation and public control of alcohol. In a letter from 'One of the SDF' the writer stated that the 'SDF has ever endeavoured to instil into the mind of the worker he is not sent into the world to consume unlimited "beer and bacca"'.⁶⁴ The Party also issued at least two pamphlets on the subject.⁶⁵

However, both put forward the view that the temperance movement had the wrong focus as it stated that one should not 'confine yourself to the extermination of drink slavery, but fight with us for the complete emancipation of the worker'.⁶⁶

Local veto was seen as a 'class measure' but state control of the drink trade would remove the profit motive and hence 'under this system of public monopoly, consumption would largely decline.' But 'drunkenness and its attendant evils will only be cured when the causes which make for excess are removed, these causes are deeply rooted in our social system...'. Reid concludes that 'the Socialist Party is seeking to remove the conditions which make the life of the workers a

⁶¹ *Justice*, 24 February 1894, 30 September 1893. This contrasts with Ross McKibbin's description of the early Labour party; '...the Labour party then [1918] was forced to meet in a centrally located pub. In such circumstances temperance could not be taken up with vigour. The fact that delegates were prepared to meet in a pub, and the practice was almost universal, also suggests that they were not ready to take up temperance in any case.' R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1900-1924* (Oxford 1974) note p215. [my emphasis]. Trade unions had been meeting in pubs from early in their history. See I. Prothero, *op.cit.*, p57. The Chelsea ILP met at the 'Star and Anchor', Kings Road, Chelsea Pick and Shovel, January 1900.

⁶² Tom Mann (1856-1941), engineer. Moved to London from Warwickshire in 1877. Joined the SDF in 1885 and was active in London and elsewhere from then until 1890s. Joint leader of 1889 dock strike and active in New Unionism. Sec. ILP 1894. Left for Australia 1900 and returned in 1910 as an advocate of syndicalism. Rejoined SDF 1910-11. After 1st World War was an active member of the CPGB until his death.

⁶³ *Labour Elector*, 1 January 1890 cited in J. Lovell, *Stevedore and dockers: A study of trade unionism in the Port of London 1870-1914* (1969) p118.

⁶⁴ *Weekly Times and Echo*, 5 October 1890 [S.E. London].

⁶⁵ H.W. Hobart, *The Logic of Teetotal Arguments* [nd.] and William Reid, *Socialism and the Drink Traffic* (1908). See also articles by H.W. Hobart on alcohol (and responses) in *Social Democrat*, January-March 1909. H.W. Hobart, compositor. Active in (Finsbury Park) SDF from 1886. Helped lead Bryant and Mays strike 1888. Co-founder Workmens National Housing Council.

⁶⁶ H.W. Hobart, *op.cit.* p4.

continuous round of misery, and is at the same time doing a work which must end in sweeping the drink curse for ever from the land.'⁶⁷

g) Conclusion: The SDF and socialist culture

Rather than describing the SDF as elitist in the Matthew Arnold tradition, I would locate them within the Hoggart school of placing value in working class culture generally – working men's clubs, sports, music, etc. – whilst adopting a conservative attitude to its future corruption from 'outside commercialism'.⁶⁸ SDF culture was profoundly political. The main aim of the activities was political, yet the *forms* they took reflect to some degree the political intent of the organisation. I would contend that they were seriously committed to their aims which is shown in their conduct of branch meetings and the crucial role of outdoor propaganda and weekly lectures in their activities.

Speaking of the religious organisations of this period, Stephen Yeo writes that they expressed a 'feeling that [the cause] should involve everybody and every activity'. Yet this feeling was not a specifically Christian view of organisation and, citing the Reading SDF as a parallel case, was 'encouraged by the ideologies and organisations of particular periods.'⁶⁹ With the non-political activities of the London SDF and their attempts to develop a socialist culture, the purposes could be many and varied. There were those who saw these activities in a more practical political light where the bazaars, dances, parties and concerts would bring in revenue. They saw the propaganda opportunities in the rambling and cycling clubs and even recognised theatrical evenings as a way to school orators. There were those who viewed the types of entertainment provided by the SDF as important and insisted on worthy and improving forms of culture which respected the established canon in literature, music and art and hence used their socialism as a means of rational education.

⁶⁷ W.Reid, *op.cit.* p12, p13, p14.

⁶⁸ Some contemporary socialists such as Lenin felt that avant garde culture was non-proletarian and hence non-revolutionary. However, socialist advocates of modern literary works by those such as Ibsen and Zola, and in Britain Gissing and Harkness, could point to their rejection of bourgeois society in their choice of themes such as truth, divorce and iniquities of poverty.

⁶⁹ S.Yeo, *Religion*, p180.

There were also those who felt that they were developing a popular culture that maintained the tradition of the working men's club in the face of the brash commercialism of the music hall and what became known as show business.⁷⁰

Hence, exhibiting a marxian hostility to the division of labour, William Morris opposed capitalist society for the alienation of the worker as a craftsperson or an artist while John Maclean, exhibiting the Glaswegian passion for football, supported Queens Park, the local amateur side, over the professional teams.⁷¹

The attempt to build fellowship amongst workers was itself an attempt to develop a culture from which socialism could be built. It was a positive creative force for many members who were hostile towards or alienated from commercial culture. The culture of the SDF, rather than being defensive or inward looking, might be better described as both *affirmative* and *transformative*. Where the former would establish the socialist's position in bourgeois society, the other role would seek ultimately to transform that society. Hence to see SDF branch activities as a retreat or a haven is to overlook the bivalent nature of its role. This is essentially important in London where there was a diverse working class cut across by trade and religion and who were, in the main, migrants. Hence, despite the apparently conservative and at times atavistic forms which it took, SDF branch life in London was not an attempt to capture the cultural hegemony or to create new cultural forms, but can be best characterised as an attempt to create a sense of community for young male workers and their families and to try, in George Lansbury's words, 'to dance our way to socialism'.⁷²

⁷⁰ Edward Royle describes how secularists had a similar struggle to balance social and secular activities, 'a running battle between the two aspects of society work.' E.Royle, *Radicals* pp136-145.

⁷¹ T.Bell, *John Maclean*, p19.

⁷² G.Lansbury, *op.cit.* p78.

Chapter 4

Propaganda and the Art of Ranting

In this chapter I hope to show the following: how the SDF organised its propaganda, the degree to which propaganda was central to SDF methods and branch life, the ability of the SDF to communicate to working class people and lastly, how the SDF fitted in with other forms of street life. With the Fabians as permeators of the Liberal party and the ILP as the forgers of the Labour Alliance, the propaganda path of the SDF is to some degree a contrast with that of their contemporaries. Hence, a study of this activity can give us insight into both the politics and the culture of the organisation and its relationship with the world in which it existed.

In the thirty years before the First World War, London was peppered with 'ranting spots' or 'spouting places'. Highbury Corner, Mile End Waste, Manor House Gates, Finsbury Park, Angel Corner Edmonton, Battersea Park, the Serpentine, 'The Plough' at Kilburn Lane, they were all junctions, markets, parks and other public places that were used by the SDF as the focus of their propaganda activity. These were sites that had been established before the formation of the SDF and it was felt that the right to free speech had been acknowledged through repeated use. A comparison of the sites used in the 1880s and the 1900s shows a significant dispersal of locations but the type of spot remained very similar. In the summer of 1885 the most northerly spot was Stamford Hill while in the south of the city (aside from Croydon) Battersea Park and Walworth formed the outer reaches. Paddington and Victoria Park acted as the east/west axis.¹ However, by 1905 Ponders End in the north, Ilford in the east, Croydon and South Norwood in the south and Acton in the west are the limits of activity. Yet the type of locations

¹ *Justice*, 6 June 1885.

remain constant over this period in the form of pubs, open spaces, parks, park gates and busy road junctions.²

These Sunday morning meetings at 11 a.m. or in the evening between 7 and 8 p.m. were the rock on which the SDF was established. By the 1900s they were, as T.A.Jackson - an SDF member in north London - described them, 'the peak point of Socialist activity... The proletarians would be virtually turned out of their homes while the Sunday dinner was being prepared, and as the pubs didn't open 'til 1pm they would be glad of anything to help pass the time.'³ William Morris, who spoke regularly for the Hammersmith SDF (and later for the Hammersmith Socialist League) at their spot on Hammersmith Bridge Road, described a characteristic meeting in his diary as 'quite mixed, from labourers on their Sunday lounge, to "respectable" people coming from church: the latter inclined to grin: the working men listening attentively trying to understand, but mostly failing to do so.'⁴ Outdoor propaganda was a direct means of communication to the working class. In some ways it could be seen as aspirant representatives reporting back to their constituency. In 1893 the Canning Town SDF delegate to the Zurich International gave an open-air report to a gathering on Beckton Road.⁵ The habit of politicians and socialists addressing the people on Sunday was extended into the 1920s when W.S.Cluse⁶, a member of Islington SDF who later became the Labour MP for Islington, gave weekly reports to his constituents of proceedings in the House on Sundays from Highbury Corner.⁷

Usually the branch had a speaker who was their mainstay, although other speakers, either from neighbouring branches or perhaps national luminaries chosen from the pages of the *Labour Annual*, would be obtained if necessary. By 1907 E.C.Fairchild⁸ suggested a lecture scheme where the announcement of

² *Justice*, 3 June 1905.

³ T.A.Jackson, *op.cit.*, p70.

⁴ Diary entry for 7 February 1885. F.Boos (ed.) *William Morris's Socialist Diary* (1985) p27.

⁵ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 17 August 1893.

⁶ **William Sampson Cluse** (1875-1955), printer. Active in (West Islington) SDF and ILP from 1896 Conference delegate 1903-8. Labour MP for Islington South 1923.

⁷ Interview David Young/Harry Young, 6 January 1993.

⁸ **Edwin C. Fairchild** (1874-1955), bookbinder, co-operative manager. Active in (Hackney) SDF from 1895. SDP/BSP EC member 1909-1918. SDP National Organiser 1910-12. Hackney Borough Councillor 1904-6

meetings would be centralised by Head Office and the speakers allocated to branches.⁹ A small branch, or a larger one without indoor accommodation, would rely exclusively on its outdoor pitch – save for special occasions when a crowd-pulling name could be obtained.¹⁰

An activist like Tom Mann in Battersea in the mid-1880s would spend his Sundays 'near the Bricklayer's Arms, Old Kent Road at 11 a.m., Victoria Park in the East End, 3.30 p.m. and indoors... in the evening, rarely reaching home before 11 p.m., to be up at five o'clock the next morning.'¹¹ John Burns, another member of Battersea SDF, frequently left for work at three or four in the morning in order to speak to fellow workers at street corners or factory gates on the way.¹² A popular speaker therefore could often spend all of his (but rarely her) time on a Sunday in travelling to and from engagements. Alex Anderson, a member of Tottenham SDF in the early 1900s who later became a leading member of the SPGB, could be seen all over north London. Besides Finsbury Park, his main speaking stations were at the junction of St Ann's Road and Seven Sisters Road, Highbury Corner, High Cross in Tottenham Hale and on the corner where West Green and Seven Sisters Road flow into Tottenham High Road. On Sundays he would either ride by tram or walk from one to another of these places which were no more than a mile apart, from morning, afternoon and evening meetings, subsisting between them on coffee-shop snacks, drinking from a lemonade bottle on the platform to ease his voice. At the meetings later in the day he would 'cast an irresistible spell upon his hearers: up to and after midnight he would stand above a sea of faces in the gaslight appealing with out-stretched hands for the world to be cleansed.'¹³

Whatever the mixture of sincerity and theatricality that was achieved, socialists took the training of speakers seriously. In Erith on the South East edge of Edwardian London the SDF were active in the local political arena as speakers and agitators. One leading activist remembers how they 'took some trouble to

⁹ *Justice*, 1 June 1907.

¹⁰ T.A.Jackson, *op.cit.* p54.

¹¹ T. Mann, *op.cit.*, p26.

¹² K.D.Brown, *John Burns* (1977) p13.

¹³ Robert Baltrop, *The Monument: The Story of the Socialist Party of Great Britain* (1975) p19. R.M.Fox, *op.cit.*, pp36-7, pp43-4.

understand Marxian Socialism, held classes and insisted upon their members knowing what they were talking about before they were allowed to mount the "soap box".¹⁴ James Connolly, in a branch report to *Justice* in July 1892, put forward his idea of conducting speakers' class and invited 'suggestions as to the best manner in which such a class should be conducted'.¹⁵ John Maclean of Pollockshaws SDF included public speaking in the syllabus for the Scottish Labour College.

The quality of the language used by the speakers was something they were conscious of. Eduard Bernstein felt that 'the English language has remained more colloquial than the German. The direct form of address and the more precise form of the verb consequent thereon gives the language a directness and a natural power of expression.'¹⁶ Ben Tillett, for example, often used words like 'dignity' and 'manhood' to convey his view of trade unionism and socialism which 'existed above all to restore to the labourer his self respect.'¹⁷

This desire to improve as public speakers may help to explain the over-riding popularity of amateur dramatics as branch entertainment in London. Many activists, however, tell of their almost painful introduction to public propaganda, overcoming inhibitions and in Ben Tillett's case overcoming a stammer. 'As I stood on that table... my tongue was dry in my mouth, my throat was constricted. But I knew the meeting wanted direction, a clear indication to proceed. I knew we wanted machinery; a base, a starting point; a controlling authority. So my stammering lips, tripping me the more rapidly I spoke, urged the necessity of organising.'¹⁸ John Lovell claims that Tillett 'possessed considerable natural ability' and that he overcame his stammer to 'become the great orator of the waterfront. He was a flamboyant character, a man of grand gestures, sweeping generalisations, extravagant denunciations and considerable vision...'¹⁹

¹⁴ W.Hampton, *Bexley Heath Observer*, 11 February 1944.

¹⁵ Cited in C.D.Greaves, *op.cit.*, p48.

¹⁶ E.Bernstein, *op.cit.*, p269. Clara Zetkin herself was very strict about a 'correct and good German' avoiding anything that might have lacked clarity or undermined her contact with her audience. D.Reetz, *Clara Zetkin as a Socialist Speaker* (Leipzig 1978) p51.

¹⁷ J.Lovell, *op.cit.*, p96.

¹⁸ Ben Tillett, *Memories and Reflections* (1931) pp96-7.

¹⁹ J.Lovell, *op.cit.* p95.

Not everybody appreciated the abilities of SDF propagandists. In a critical report of a speech by Harry Quelch to a Sunday meeting outside a church in Bermondsey in 1887 the local reporter described how

‘in exaggerated terms anything but consistent with the facts, [Quelch] ridiculed the sermon and also the events which had led to [an SDFer’s] arrest. The whole speech was a strained attempt to produce laughter at any cost, and was not only unworthy of the speaker, but a reprehensible contrast to the higher toned speeches which he is able to make.’

The reporter suggested that the small amount of cash collected at the meeting ‘appears to prove that the crowds who gather in [Bermondsey] square have no real sympathy with the present tactics of the Socialists.’²⁰

Early in the life of the BSP the new executive, perhaps learning from the experience of earlier activity, issued a small booklet to encourage a ‘Special Propaganda Effort’. On the subject of open-air meetings it pointed out that they should be

‘conducted with greater dignity than usual. There should be a good platform. A few forms or light seats for women should be placed in front of the platform and a literature stall should be provided. The meeting should always be enlivened with music and singing. In both indoor and outdoor meetings an inflexible punctuality should be preserved.’

Given that this was regarded as best practice and it was felt that the new party needed to emphasise this, it is likely that SDF meetings were not always as structured as this.²¹

In most cases there seems to have been little discussion about appointing a speaker from among the branch members. Some comrade would establish himself or herself as a local favourite and would take the stump as a matter of course. Where there was no obvious local speaker the London District Council of the SDF tried to keep branches supplied with suitable orators. In the year 1909-10 they supplied 257 speakers for indoor meetings and around 1200 speakers for outdoor pitches.²²

²⁰ *South London Chronicle*, 19 February 1887.

²¹ British Socialist Party, *Special Propaganda Effort. Can we Enrol a Million Socialists? An appeal to Comrades, Friends and Supporters.* (1912), pp9-10.

²² *SDP News*, December 1910, p3.

The appointment of a platform carrier left more room for argument but was generally delegated to the younger members. The left groups that used Highbury Corner during the First World War got around the problem by leaving the platforms in the backroom of the bicycle shop in the Holloway Road kept by Harry Young's²³ father. Most of the 'platforms' were stylised soap boxes with a wooden lectern-like attachment with the name of the party on the front. They were both light and possible to dismantle to make them easy to transport.²⁴

The chairing of meetings was often as important as the speakers themselves and many speakers graduated from being chairmen to being speakers themselves. According to Bill Gee, the SDF/BSP organiser in Lancashire before the First World War, the art of chairing meetings consisted of 'always start meetings on time; always boost the literature; always finish the meetings before the pubs close – the workers like to have time for a drink.'²⁵

a) Violence and Public Space

However, it seems that many 'chairmen' were selected on their crowd control abilities as much as their organisational qualities. The chairman was often required to silence rowdy interrupters by 'laying-out' one or two per meeting. A comrade who could 'use 'em' was, in these circumstances, much in demand. The young Herbert Morrison was not always able to soothe a hostile crowd. Once he was nearly thrown in a duck pond by his audience and so he bought a book on judo and practised the holds on the small daughter of his landlady.²⁶ In Lancashire Dan Irving, who had a wooden leg, was a skilled orator with a reputation for strong language. On one occasion he was attacked physically and 'despite his disability was able to defend himself and gained a reputation for physical

²³ Harry Young (b1898), engineer. Son of Islington BSP member, attended Islington SSS. Later activist in the CPGB and attended Lenin School in Moscow. EC Young Communist League 1925-6. Left CPGB in the late-1920s and became active in the SPGB.

²⁴ H.Pollitt, *op.cit.*, p33, p92. Interview Harry Young/David Young 12 May 1993. See also C.D.Greaves, *op.cit.* p48, Canning Town SDF Minutes, 20 July 1890. The Canning Town branch 'rostrum' was obviously an important piece of branch property as 'Comrade Little' after a lengthy hearing was almost expelled for not painting it. Canning Town SDF Minutes, 5 March 1893. The price for a rostrum for any SDF branch was 32/- but 19/- 'to anybody else'. *Justice*, 29 July 1893.

²⁵ H.Pollitt, *op.cit.* p43.

²⁶ T.A.Jackson, *op.cit.*, p55. Donoughue and Jones, *op.cit.*, p20.

prowess.²⁷ The SDF throughout London were clearly used to this kind of violence and intimidation and knew how to deal with it. In 1894, after encountering some difficulties in Enfield from a group of rowdies in the market place who disrupted the meeting of the usual SDF speaker, *Justice* urged comrades to turn up 'to secure a peaceful and orderly meeting.' The train times from central London were printed below the article to assist those members who wished to attend. The following week a sizeable meeting was broken up by what *Justice* described as 'ruffians hired by Tory shopkeepers and publicans.' SDF members were called upon to 'roll up in strong force' to assist the speaker for the following week - George Lansbury of Bow and Bromley SDF, who in the 1930s made his mark as the Christian pacifist leader of the Labour Party.²⁸ As meetings continued to be disrupted, the Enfield SDF felt that they were not being afforded sufficient protection from the police. A suggestion was made that a group of non-socialists should be encouraged to 'watch the proceedings of the police, more especially the inspector.'²⁹

Violence was an ever-present aspect of street politics and was offered to experienced agitators such as John Burns in Hyde Park as early as 1884 as well as the novice Herbert Morrison in the 1900s. In a letter to Andreas Scheu, William Morris described a franchise meeting in Hyde Park in July 1884 with Hyndman, Champion and Burns addressing a crowd of between four and five thousand. Burns 'began very well' until a derogatory reference to John Bright brought 'hooting and howling' soon followed by a charge from the crowd and an attempt 'for putting Burns in the Serpentine.' He was saved when the police took him away.³⁰ However, the police often used violence themselves to halt meetings. At a large demonstration organised by the SDF in Hyde Park on 21 February 1886,

²⁷ L.Chew, 'Dan Irving and Socialist Politics in Burnley 1880-1924', *North West Labour History* (23) 1998/99 p8.

²⁸ *Justice*, 18 August 1894, 1 September 1894. For a similar contest between socialists and local tradesmen in Tottenham in which music rather than violence was involved see R.M.Fox, *op.cit.*, pp38-9.

²⁹ *Justice*, 13 October 1894. See also W.Hampton, *op.cit.*

³⁰ Letter 987, N.Kelvin (ed.), *William Morris: Collected Letters. Volume IIa 1881-1884* (Princeton 1987) pp308-11. See also letter 959, pp270-71 for Morris' experience of violence at Marx memorial meeting.

the *Times* reported that the police 'were compelled to draw their batons and use them without mercy on all who encountered them'.³¹

According to Edward Royle, violence was 'the easiest way of preventing a public meeting' and it 'appears to have grown worse from the mid 1880s'.³² However, some biographical evidence suggests that the height of this violence was reached during the Boer War when there was organised disruption of SDF meetings by pro-war 'loyalists'.³³ To combat these attacks Harry Quelch of Bermondsey SDF had early on considered starting a street army and was known to have drilled members in the club yard. In his memoirs Lansbury recalls that 'the original policy we were all expected to stand for was the "Bullet, bomb or ballot-box", though none of us believe in the efficacy of the first two, because the SDF leaders and the rank and file always opposed ...all forms of violence against individuals'.³⁴ A more practical response was that of the Croydon SDF which co-operated with the Merton Abbey Socialist League over open-air meetings in the area to deal with the 'organised interruption and opposition'. Numbers were needed as 'our members are few and the middle class roughs are many'.³⁵

Socialists seem to have been a particular focus of police prejudice. There were reports that the police were seen pulling down SDF posters³⁶ while Herbert Burrows was fined 40/- for lecturing on Sunday morning in East India Road although the Salvation Army met with impunity on the Sunday evenings. However, it was not just the socialists who were affected as in 1888 'all lecturers were banned on Camberwell Green after complaints about the freethinkers'.³⁷ Even Christian evangelists were affected by the police action against open-air meetings as a notice in the *Commonweal* pointed out in 1886.³⁸

³¹ Cited in P.Henderson, *op. cit.*, p339.

³² E.Royle, *op. cit.*, p284.

³³ G.Lansbury, *op. cit.*, p201. K.Weller, *Don't Be a Soldier! The radical anti-war movement in North London 1914-1918*. (1985) p8, 9.

³⁴ G.Lansbury, *op. cit.* p80.

³⁵ J.Green, Assistant Secretary Croydon SDF to J.L.Mahon Secretary Socialist League, ? June 1885. Socialist League Correspondence K1586, IISH.

³⁶ *Justice (Hackney Edition)*, 7 August 1909.

³⁷ E.Royle, *op. cit.* p285.

³⁸ *Commonweal*, 28 August 1886.

b) Propaganda and 'selling the paper'

Fred Knee, a member of the Chelsea SDF from the 1890s, recalled in 1913 that 'it was rarely that a London branch held a Sunday propaganda meeting without having the paper on sale and pushing it at a branch meeting. *Justice* would be eagerly awaited.' Frank Jackson, a member of Tottenham SDF, recalled that 'sales were affected mainly at public meetings and by members of the SDF at railway stations and other populous points.'³⁹ The sale of *Justice* at their meetings became so significant that the Executive of the Fabian Society ruled that the SDF should be prevented 'from selling literature in our lobbies'.⁴⁰ As with other revolutionary organisations, much SDF activity was built around the sales of their publications. Meetings would provide people to sell the paper to and the paper would, in turn, advertise the meetings. Every member of the SDF seemed to be aware of this and it is this activity that perhaps separated it early on from its spawning ground in the London radical working men's clubs.

Justice was first published in January 1883 after a loan of £50 from the SDF supporter Edward Carpenter, although soon after it was first published it was placed under a boycott by wholesale newsagents and the members of the SDF were obliged to organise its sale themselves. Led personally by Hyndman, they began to sell copies in the streets. Carrying bundles of the newspaper they paraded through Ludgate Circus, Fleet Street and the Strand calling out '*Justice!* The organ of Social Democracy. One Penny.' Jack Williams⁴¹, who took part in this procession, wrote many years later: 'There was Hyndman in his frock coat and high hat, there was Morris in his usual blue serge suit and soft hat, Joynes in his aesthetic dress; Champion looking every inch the military man, Frost looking every inch the aristocrat; Quelch and myself in our everyday clothes. I am sure we made an impression on that day.'⁴²

³⁹ *Justice*, 27 September 1913 cited in Englander, *op.cit.*, p11. F. Jackson, 'On the Advent of *Justice*', *BMMML*, January/March 1966 p8.

⁴⁰ Fabian Society Executive Committee Minutes, 28 October, 4 November 1890.

⁴¹ John Edward Williams (c1854-1917), labourer, docker. Active in SDF from 1881. SDF EC 1884-7.

⁴² *Justice*, 15 January 1914 cited in C.Tsuzuki, *Hyndman*, p52.

The paper itself was published, as were all other SDF publications after 1892, by the Twentieth Century Press. The TCP was owned by the shareholders rather than SDF members although branches, such as the Canning Town SDF, might take out a 5/- share in the company.⁴³ The chairman of these shareholders happened to be Hyndman and so it was the company and not the SDF which appointed the editor of *Justice*. The Hyndman loyalist Harry Quelch was the editor from the 1880s until his death in 1913. Hyndman invested a considerable amount of his income into the loss-making TCP but his proprietorial control of *Justice* led to the split with the Scottish branches in 1903 and the formation of the Socialist Labour Party.⁴⁴ *Justice* included a women's column from 1907 which was a little later than other socialist papers of the period. While some saw a separate section as demeaning to women, others recognised that women needed to be reached by means other than strikes or soap box oratory. Equally having a separate women's column allowed women, who were often short of reading time at home, to acquire a condensed form of propaganda.⁴⁵

The SDF managed less flamboyant ways of selling *Justice* and eventually secured sales through sympathetic newsagents and in some cases in local public libraries, while unsold *Justice*'s were sometimes distributed gratis to workshops in the locality.⁴⁶ However, even giving away the paper could provoke the forces of coercion. A letter to *Justice* from Mary Gray described an instance on a Socialist Sunday School picnic. 'Just as we were leaving Croydon', she wrote,

'a *Justice* was thrown to a man in a pony trap but missed him. One of the boys picked it up and gave it to him when a policeman knocked him down and held him by the neck in a most brutal fashion, but nothing daunted the boy got away and caught us up. The boy was doing no harm in simply handing *Justice* to a passer-by.'⁴⁷

⁴³ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 20 December 1891, 17 January 1892, 24 April 1892, 17 July 1892.

⁴⁴ SDF Annual Conference Report 1903. See also chapter 12.

⁴⁵ K.Hunt and J.Hannam, 'Propagandising as Socialist Women: the case of women's columns in British socialist newspapers 1884-1914', B.Taithe and T.Thornton (eds.), *Propaganda: political rhetoric and identity, 1300-2000* (Stroud 1999), p171.

⁴⁶ Erith SDF Minutes, 17 May 1906, Canning Town SDF Minutes, 30 April 1893, [Walthamstow] *Socialist Critic*, 21 April 1900. The Buck brothers distributed their SDF newspaper the *Socialist Critic* gratis; see issue of 27 October 1900. See also *Bow and Bromley Socialist*, October 1897.

⁴⁷ *Justice*, 8 September 1894.

By the 1890s *Justice* was made up of eight pages with the front page taken up with one major article related to current news. The following pages would contain further short articles on the news, Quelch's editorial (under the name of *Tattler*), a serialised pamphlet or book such as Bax's *History of the Paris Commune*, branch notes from the regions such as Scotland and Lancashire and the occasional song like the 'Carol for Capitalists', thrown in for good measure.⁴⁸ On the back page there was the directory of who was speaking at the SDF meetings that week, where and when. There were also advertisements for branch bazaars and the like and by the early 1900s a list of SDF members offering their services as traders and craftsmen.

From 1897 the TCP also produced the monthly *Social Democrat* for the SDF. The *Social Democrat* was a lengthier journal with more theoretical items such as 'Woman and Her Place in Society' by K. Fitzgerald or 'Socialist Unity' by Quelch. There were also translations from German Social Democrats and hagiographic sketches of socialist and radical luminaries from home and abroad. *Justice* and the *Social Democrat* were not the only items of literature pushed by the SDF. The Twentieth Century Press published pamphlets in editions of 5, 10 or 15 thousand and branches might take up to two quires [50] to sell.⁴⁹ From August 1910 they also produced a monthly internal bulletin the *SDP News* which carried correspondence from the centre to the branches as well as letters and advice on subjects such as the effective use of propaganda. Local branches might also collaborate in a local labour publication such as the *Erith Labour and Socialist Advocate* or the *Bow and Bromley Worker*, while the *Young Socialist* would be taken by members of the Socialist Sunday Schools. In addition to these publications there was also propaganda material such as photographs, cartoons, badges, song sheets and Christmas cards that could deliver a message.⁵⁰ Tom Quelch⁵¹ in an article in *SDP News* emphasised that propaganda such as leaflets should be 'clear and simple, not clogged with heavy phrases, nor made dull and

⁴⁸ *Justice*, 30 December 1893.

⁴⁹ Stratford SDF Minutes, 28 June 1906.

⁵⁰ For the variety of material see Erith SDF Branch Literature Secretary's Cash Book, October 1909-December 1912.

⁵¹ **Tom Quelch**, clerk. Son of Harry Quelch active in SDF from 1907. Later active in BSP and CPGB. BSP representative to the 2nd Congress of the Communist International. EC CPGB in the 1920s. Member of London Trades Council during the General Strike of 1926.

uninteresting by academic words. They should be printed in fairly large type if possible and the subject matter broken up into small paragraphs.'⁵² The fact that he needed to remind members of this suggests that this type of leaflet was not always the norm.

There were frequent exhortations throughout the period to sell *Justice* and other party literature at SDF meetings and elsewhere.⁵³ The Fabians were sufficiently irritated with the SDF members selling *Justice* at Fabian meetings that they were considering banning sales of all literature. SDFers were exhorted in *Justice* and elsewhere to push SDF literature in particular because, as *SDP News* put it, 'our first duty is to ourselves.'⁵⁴ Some branches could offload their papers with some success. For example Erith SDF managed to sell 413 papers in the month of July 1910.⁵⁵ This determined attitude towards the sale of literature was continued in the CPGB where the members' commitment to socialism/communism was measured in their sales. Harry Young, however, commenting on the end of the BSP period has suggested that there was never a direct compulsion to sell the paper but a genuine willingness amongst the members to sell and amongst the public to read.⁵⁶ To a degree the sale of the newspaper may have been incidental to the activity of selling. The selling of the paper had the advantage of involving members in a distinct task that required very little in the way of skills or formal qualifications. Not every member could conduct a class of economics or act as an effective soap box orator but everyone could show their loyalty to the party by selling the paper.

However, a correspondent suggested in *Justice* in 1894 that it was only in London that all SDF members were buying the paper themselves and put forward the notion that 'when members are admitted to the SDF they should be told plainly that they will be expected to purchase a copy of *Justice* when they have the means

⁵² *SDP News*, February 1911, p4.

⁵³ On the need to sell literature see for example Letter 987 to Andreas Scheu, 20 July 1884 in N.Kelvin, *op.cit.*, pp308-11.

⁵⁴ *SDP News*, August 1910.

⁵⁵ Erith SDF Minutes, 27 August 1910.

⁵⁶ C.M.Gabbidon, 'Party Life: An examination of the branch life of the CPGB between the wars'. DPhil Sussex University 1991. Interview David Young/Harry Young 12 May 1993.

to do so.⁵⁷ Fred Knee was equally critical twenty years later of how many branches had organised the work of literature sales. Whenever a decent crowd was drawn up, it seems that little preparation had been made to exploit the opportunities for increased sales and recruitment. 'We are not systematic enough as a rule in this respect,' he complained. It was only after his arrival in the 1890s that Knee's branch decided to go forearmed with SDF cards to register new members on the spot.⁵⁸

c) Street Culture

The speeches at these open-air meetings usually took the form of a general statement of socialist aspirations, a general criticism of capitalism and its evils with a special application to current happenings, particularly with the doings of the local Borough or Town Council. A well-established speaker with a regular following would give an account of the latest meeting of the local authority, with a running commentary on the manifest wickedness of each non-SDF member – whose name, business and personality were usually well-known to the listening audience. In these circumstances the branch politics of the SDF led in the direction of the parish pump rather than towards international socialism, dealing with topics which speakers deemed to be more relevant to the workers who stood to listen than the 'Marxian dogma' which was supposed to have been their stock in trade.⁵⁹

The locations of many of the speaking platforms were at prominent public places. These spots, such as those listed at the head of the chapter, were probably chosen for the obvious reason that they were likely places to pick up an audience. These places today are busy traffic junctions which would put a strain on a speaker's lungs in more ways than one. Public speaking before the First World War was physically demanding in the sense that it was necessary to be heard above the noise or be able to deal with the rowdies.

⁵⁷ *Justice*, 1 September 1894.

⁵⁸ *Justice*, 27 September 1913 cited in D.Englander *op.cit.* p11.

⁵⁹ T.A.Jackson, *op.cit.* p55. Clara Zetkin's speeches seem to have had a similar structure and content. See D.Reetz, *op.cit.* pp25-7.

As a result this type of speaking may have produced physically domineering speakers. H.H.Champion described John Burns in the 1880s as having 'a powerful voice, absolutely necessary for the control of large bodies of men in the open air and the physical strength to stand a tremendous strain without losing health, head and temper,'⁶⁰ whilst W.S.Sanders lists Burns' 'powerful and vibrant voice which could be heard for a tremendous distance in the open air' together with his use of 'epigrammatic and telling phrases; his physical strength and energy.'⁶¹ Jack Williams, whose career took a very different course to that of John Burns, was described similarly by Tom Mann as 'the picture of pugnacity. He had a fine command of language, was well-informed and full of apt illustrations. He could hold an audience with the best and was an effective propagandist... He knew the East End particularly well, speaking its peculiar tongue and using its characteristic phrases.'⁶² Herbert Burrows was, it seems, 'a facile talker and emotional orator'.⁶³ William Morris is described by his biographer as naturally shy and speaking with great difficulty but by J.Bruce Glasier as 'Racy, argumentative, declamatory and bristling with topical allusions and scathing raillery... it was a hustings masterpiece.'⁶⁴ Hyndman was an impressive sight and could be regarded as something of an oddity in many working-class districts. He was a tall, robust man with a sumptuous grey and later white beard who always wore a frock coat and frequently wore a silk top hat. He could easily have been the cartoonist's crude caricature of a capitalist preaching on a street corner against capitalism.⁶⁵

All the speakers mentioned above, together with the other SDF stalwarts like Tom Mann and Ben Tillett, were noted for a particular physical presence. This may be interpreted crudely in the shape of Hyndman's appearance or Burns' 'rude health', but there was more to holding a crowd. Eduard Bernstein, who was a spectator to British socialism during his exile in the 1880s and 1890s, put it down to the idea

⁶⁰ H.H.Champion, *The Great Dock Strike in London, August 1889* (1890) p13.

⁶¹ W.S.Sanders, *op.cit.*, p24. See also J.Clayton, *op.cit.*, p61.

⁶² T.Mann, *op.cit.*, p28.

⁶³ H.J.Stenning, '1906 and all that', *The Journal of the William Morris Society* Vol. II No. 4. Summer 1970.

⁶⁴ J.W.Mackail, *The Life of William Morris. Volume II* (1899) p7. J.Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (1921) p29.

⁶⁵ T.Mann, *op.cit.* pp26-7.

that 'to bawl out an interrupter with a witty rejoinder is almost obligatory upon the speaker,' later suggesting that the audience is *only* there to witness a form of street entertainment.⁶⁶ This latter point would appear to be supported by J.Bruce Glasier's account of a Socialist League meeting which over-ran past 1 p.m. 'with the result that three-fourths of the audience had melted away into the neighbouring public houses.' He describes the audience on Hammersmith Bridge Road as consisting 'for the most part of working-men, who were accustomed to spend an hour or so on Sunday morning lounging on the bridge before dinner hour – or public house time.'⁶⁷

The tenor of meetings at factory gates or in Trafalgar Square was certainly different from the Sunday morning meetings, but it was those on the Sunday that kept the SDF going and ensured the sales of *Justice*. However, the question arises of whether the SDF was anachronistic in their attempts at street corner propaganda. In response it is clear that the SDF was a part of a vigorous street life that existed in London before the First World War. Whether the audience saw the SDF as a crude form of theatre or as an excuse to start a fight, they were sufficiently interested to stand and listen and in many cases debate with the Party. Ken Weller describes the 'very rich street life' as 'universities of the streets' and claims that many gained a 'surprisingly wide education' as a result.⁶⁸ The secularist activist Chapman Cohen, for example, noted in the *Freethinker* how outside London 'the halls usually form the chief strength of the movement, open-air lecturing being chiefly incidental and having a secondary value; but here in London the positions are reversed, outdoor propaganda occupying the position of honor [sic], and serving as the recruiting ground for indoor attendances.'⁶⁹ On the other hand, in the same period Charles Booth described 'the open-air evangelistic

⁶⁶ E.Bernstein, *op.cit.*, p27. The verbatim report of the Hyndman/Bradlaugh debate of 1884 gives some flavour of the type of interruptions that a speaker could expect and the instant response from the speakers. It is likely that a smaller and less publicised meeting would have fewer and richer interruptions. The chairman at the Hyndman/Bradlaugh debate, Professor Beesley, congratulated the audience on their fairness. *Will Socialism Benefit the English People? Debate between H.M.Hyndman and Charles Bradlaugh* (1907).

⁶⁷ J.B.Glasier, *op.cit.*, p114.

⁶⁸ K.Weller, *op.cit.*, p20.

⁶⁹ *Freethinker*, 1 August 1897 cited in E.Royle *op.cit.*, p154.

effort [as] almost ubiquitous'.⁷⁰ In discussing the working men's clubs and their open-air activities Booth comments that it 'may be that those who make up the crowds who surround the speakers and who join in the wordy warfare, or split into groups of eager talkers, are the same individuals over and over again. But I do not think so. I believe keen dialectic to be the especial passion of the people at large. It is the fence, the cut and thrust, a skilful parry, that interests rather than the merits of the subject, and it is religious discussion which interests people most.'⁷¹

However, according to Stephen and Eileen Yeo, from the turn of the century the bourgeois control of the streets became increasingly important. This control of the street meant control over street football, unregulated street trading, street religion (such as the Salvation Army), street processions, street gambling, street music and of course street politics.⁷² Harry Young, who was active in London left politics from the First World War, dates the decline in the prevalence of street meetings from after the 1945 election and suggests that the advent of television – which takes politics out of the street and seemingly personalises it by placing the politician in the home – has hastened this decline. Certainly many different forms of entertainment have replaced the Sunday afternoon lounge to listen to socialist ranters.

In conclusion I would suggest that a look at the propaganda techniques of the London SDF lead to the following notions. Firstly, the SDF fitted into an already developed world of street politics in London. Secondly, the SDF were interested in making converts to socialism outside of election time. Lastly, outdoor meetings and the distribution of the loss-making newspaper were the basis of their organisational technique. Hence, the type of propaganda adopted by the SDF is a reflection of both their politics and an indication of the local audience they wished to reach. As a result of the above, one might contrast the propaganda techniques of the London SDF with their nearest rivals/allies - the Fabians and the ILP. One aimed at permeating the bourgeois state whilst the other became the party of

⁷⁰ C.Booth, Third Edition Third Series Volume VI cited in A.Fried and R.Eلمان (eds.), *Charles Booth's London* (Harmondsworth 1969) p363.

⁷¹ C.Booth, First Edition, Volume I pp94-124 cited in A.Fried and R.Eلمان, *op.cit.*, p309.

⁷² Eileen and Stephen Yeo, 'Perceived Patterns: Competition and Licence versus Class and Struggle' in E. and S. Yeo, *op.cit.*, p295. See also P.J.Waller, *op.cit.*, pp50-1.

political trade unionism. The SDF, on the other hand, albeit by default, developed as an activist propagandist party which had to go out to preach socialism to the working class face to face.

Chapter 5

Gender and the 'Woman Question'

a) The SDF as Misogynists

The SDF are often represented as a misogynistic Party. Their role is contrasted with that of the ILP which is seen as pro-suffrage while the SDF is perceived as anti-suffrage. As Olive Banks puts it, the ILP was 'feminist from its inception' while the SDF was 'anti-feminist'.¹ SDF policy on women trade unionists, woman and the family, and woman and the Party is given as anti-feminist, if not anti-socialist. Angus McLaren writes that there 'was always a strong misogynist current evident in the writings of the SDF... The SDF, which prided itself on its political radicalism, revealed a pronounced social conservatism when dealing with any issue relating to women.'² Martin Pugh claims that Richard Pankhurst 'disapproved' of the SDF because its 'leaders were rather anti-feminist'.³

There is a lot of evidence to support this view. Bax and Quelch were the most openly anti-feminist. Bax, the author of *The Fraud of Feminism* (1913) and *The Legal Subjection of Men* (Second Edition 1908) believed women to be both physically and intellectually inferior to men. The women's movement had progressed *too far* as far as he was concerned and had established legal rights and advantages even without the political responsibilities of the suffrage. In his opinion 'so far from women being oppressed, the very contrary is the case; that the existing law and its administration is in no essential respect whatever unfavourable to women, but, on the contrary, the legal system is, on the whole grossly unfair to men...'⁴ Quelch from his vantage point as editor of both *Justice* and the *Social Democrat* and as overseer of the Twentieth Century Press allowed Bax and other non-Party anti-feminists such as H.B.Samuels full access to SDF publications.⁵ It

¹ Cited in J.Hannam and K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, p21.

² A.McLaren, *op.cit.*, pp162-3.

³ M.Pugh, *op.cit.*, p56

⁴ E.B.Bax, *The Fraud of Feminism* (1913) p152.

⁵ *Social Democrat*, October 1909, pp450-8.

is therefore easy to see the SDF as an organ of anti-feminism. This was made worse by Quelch himself with recorded remarks such as describing women as 'sheep'.⁶ The attitudes of Bax and Quelch were compounded by Hyndman who seemed to view it all as a lot of fuss about nothing. 'The most amusing part' of Bax's misogyny, he wrote, was that it was 'the truth of some of his statements which has made the women socialists so furiously angry.'⁷

The SDF branches themselves were not helpful in involving women members in the organisation. Women members rarely played a significant part in the SDF. SDF women members were often characterised as wives or sisters of SDF members. When they could attend meetings they were often isolated in bazaar work or other ancillary domestic function. And yet, as with many aspects of the history of the SDF, this view of the SDF as the misogynist socialist party is too simplistic and their contribution to the 'woman question' and gender politics generally deserves investigation.

It is difficult to approach this subject without acknowledging the work of Karen Hunt who has been able to produce a valuable analysis of nineteenth and early twentieth century socialist feminism through the prism of the SDF. The aim of this chapter is to look at the role of leading women in the SDF, the SDF's handling of the 'Woman Question' and women's suffrage and the relationship between men and women in the trade union movement. It should also reflect on the ways in which the SDF was involved in issues surrounding marriage, extra-marital relationships, reproduction and birth control. Finally, I hope to look at the degree of machismo in the SDF and the way it was 'gendered' through the involvement of women at branch level and the relationship between men and women in the organisation.

b) Women in the Party

It is difficult to measure the exact proportion of women who made up the SDF membership. According to the data gathered for the London region between 1883

⁶ *Justice*, 21 May 1894.

⁷ H.M.Hyndman, *Further Reminiscences* (1912), p287.

and 1911 it was between eight and ten percent. A branch with a strong female membership was that of Northampton where in 1897 around ten percent of the members were women.⁸

On occasions the SDF executive elevated women to the position of national leaders. In its first two years of existence three of the twenty-four members were women but in the following years no more than two women at a time were on the Executive. Only two women, Mary Gray and Dora Montefiore⁹, served for more than two years.¹⁰

In addition to widowed or separated middle class women such as Charlotte Despard and Dora Montefiore who had an ability to act independently, the SDF also contained active working class and lower middle class women. Margaret Bondfield, Britain's first woman Cabinet minister, joined the SDF when she moved to London as the Assistant Secretary of the Shop Assistants' Union. In the 1890s she was active in the Adult Suffrage Society and the Women's Labour League. Mary Gray was a member of the Battersea SDF and set up the Socialist Sunday School Union. She was elected to the Battersea Board of Guardians and served on the Executive of the SDF for seven years from 1896.¹¹ Mary Bridges Adams joined the SDF and was an active member of the Gasworkers' Union from the end of the 1880s. She was a member of the London School Board and was active in education and trade union politics.¹² Annie Hicks and her daughter Margaretta were active throughout the life of the SDF and particularly involved in women's trade unionism. Annie Hicks as the representative of the East London

⁸ 8.9% (128 in a sample of 1437 London members from 1884 to 1911). See Chapter 1. K.Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, p242. Branch activity by women obviously varied from branch to branch. In the four years covered by the Canning Town SDF minute books (1890-93), when branch meetings catered for over thirty members, women members or the 'Woman Question' are not mentioned. In the fluctuating membership of the Peckham and Dulwich branch between 1893 and 1899 the female membership was never less than 5% and sometimes reached almost 20%. On female membership generally see the 'Membership' chapter of this work. J.Hannam and K.Hunt, *op.cit.* p81 point out the similarities between the SDF and the ILP in terms of female representation.

⁹ **Dora B. Montefiore** (1851-1927), private income. Active in SDF from mid-1890s-1911. Also active in WSPU and ASS. Later active in BSP and CPGB.

¹⁰ Mary Gray for seven years and Dora Montefiore for four years. See K.Hunt, *op.cit.* p259.

¹¹ *Social Democrat*, November 1899.

¹² J. Martin, 'An "Awful Woman"? The Life and Work of Mrs Bridges Adams, 1855-1939', *Women's History Review* Volume 8, No. 1 1999.

Ropemakers' Union on the London Trades Council was the first woman to sit on a trade's council.

If the SDF really was the misogynist's socialist party then it would place in doubt the reason and role of these and other women SDF activists. However, as Sheila Rowbotham and Karen Hunt have pointed out, it appears that the SDF did contain committed socialist-feminists who had to struggle for a voice inside the party.

c) The Woman Question – theory and practice

The basis of the SDF's view of the role of women in the socialist movement was based on classic Second International Marxism. The key texts with regard to the 'Woman Question' were August Bebel's *Woman in the Past, Present and Future*, and to a lesser extent Friedrich Engels' *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. These texts focus on the historical and economic sources of sexual oppression. For Engels, earlier societies had had equal respect for both sexes and in some cases were matrilineal, although both Engels and Bebel accepted that there was a primitive sexual division of labour. In contrast, the growth of private property had resulted in the patriarchal which was the first form of family to be based on economic conditions. Engels also introduced the sex/class analogy where in the patriarchal family the man is the bourgeois. It was assumed that both forms of oppression had economic causes. Bebel incorporated much of Engels' work into later editions of *Woman*. For Bebel, 'all social dependence and oppression had its roots in the economic dependence of the oppressed on the oppressor'.¹³ With sex and class oppression both having economic causes, the end of capitalism will hence bring an end to sexual oppression.¹⁴

The SDF therefore came to feminism with a limited economic definition of socialism which marginalised women, together with the theoretical construction of the Woman Question which aimed to see it as a part of the greater Class Question.

¹³ A. Bebel, *Woman* (New York 1971, 1st English Edn 1885) p9, cited in K.Hunt, *op.cit.* p25

¹⁴ Dora B. Montefiore in her pamphlet *The Position of Women in the Socialist Movement* (1909) pp6-8 conflates sex and class using classical historical examples.

Quelch writing as 'Tattler' put this position succinctly in *Justice* when he stated that 'working women form part of the working class and their emancipation is bound up with the emancipation of the class... The issue is a class issue and not one of sex.'¹⁵ In this way it allowed the SDF and other Second International socialists to accept the status quo on the understanding that only socialism itself could answer the Woman Question.

However, in practice the SDF's formulation of the Woman Question allowed liberty for what were in many ways misogynist attitudes. Women as a block were often seen as a conservative force within society and as such were regarded as an enemy of socialism. It was observed that 'a very large number of women have municipal votes. These women, in the main, all vote, and whenever they do so they vote reactionary.'¹⁶ With comments such as these, the habits of a minority of propertied women were taken to typify all women.

A further element of the conservatism was the strength of the domestic influence of women as an obstacle to the development of socialist activity. This influence of women over the domestic sphere was supposed to make 'blacklegs' of their menfolk. As a commentator in *Justice* put it,

'For one woman who would strengthen a man's hands in struggle against injustice, there are twenty who would strike them down. If the women are the greatest sufferers by the present system – which I do not deny – it is but just for they are the greatest sinners. "Submit, submit", is always their cry to the men. "What do you think you can do to alter it?", they ask, with a sneer, of any man who tries to rouse his fellows to revolt... They dominate the men, and make blacklegs of them.'¹⁷

If women were not an obstacle to socialist activity then they were a brake. In *Justice* it was noted with an image of perhaps Biblical provenance that in 'many instances they hinder men from joining the movement, and keep many who have

¹⁵ *Justice*, 25 June 1904. As an indication of how far Bax's position diverged from orthodoxy the following quotation serves as a good example. 'Certain Socialist writers are fond of describing the Social-Democratic State of the future as implying the "emancipation of the proletariat *and the woman*." As regards the latter point, however, if emancipation is taken to include domination, we have not to wait so long... So far as the relations of the sexes are concerned, it would be the task of socialism to emancipate *man* from this position, if sex equality be the goal aimed at. The first step on the road towards such equality would necessarily consist of the abolition of modern female privilege.' E.B.Bax, *The Legal Subjection of Men* (2nd Edn 1908), p63.

¹⁶ *Justice*, 1 January 1894.

¹⁷ *Justice*, 18 August 1894.

joined, from taking the active part they otherwise would.'¹⁸ Women were caricatured as those who 'would consider a man a terrible bore who spoke to them on politics. The delight of women is to gossip about other people and a thousand other frivolous things.'¹⁹

However, many SDF socialists believed that it was vital to integrate women into the movement precisely because of this domestic influence. Dora B. Montefiore for one argued in favour of a feminising of politics, appealing to women as mothers as much as workers. 'Much, very much, will depend on Socialist mothers of the present day giving right thought and right learning to their boys and girls. ... I am convinced', she wrote, 'that if we had woman, the mother element, represented in legislation we should have a Board or Department for Life and Life Culture as we now have a Naval, a Military, and a Post Office Department.'²⁰

Furthermore, women's lack of interest in socialism was taken as an obstacle to SDF membership. This apathy was explained by some as a result of long term social conditioning. As Ellen Batten of Walworth SDF put it: 'Most women are intensely conservative. How can it be otherwise, when their whole training is opposed to free thought? Centuries of subjection and repression have forced women to centre their minds on trivialities, and long habit is hard to break.'²¹ And hence attempts would have to be made to 'feminise' political activity to induce women to take part. Some of these suggestions came from women SDF members themselves. For example, Sarah Ley of Reading asked male members to 'read to the "missus" of an evening and try to explain what is the reason she has to work so many hours, then now and again stay home and mind the babies, so she can attend a lecture or branch meeting', while a 'Social Democrat's Wife' suggested that a 'good Socialist story in *Justice* might encourage women to read it.'²²

¹⁸ *Justice*, 9 September 1893.

¹⁹ *Justice*, 7 October 1893.

²⁰ D.B. Montefiore, *The Position of Women in the Socialist Movement* (1909) pp12,15-16. An interesting point is made by Martin Pugh that as a Poor Law Guardian in Manchester in the early 1900s Emmeline Pankhurst was able to provide a female perspective to problems. The female workhouse inmates were reluctant to talk to male Guardians about their need for new underwear 'because they thought it an improper subject for discussion'. M.Pugh, *op.cit.*, p66.

²¹ *Justice*, 30 September 1893.

²² *Justice*, 23 September 1893. See also a similar letter by 'Hopeful' in the same edition. *Justice*, 21 October 1893.

In an attempt to bring women members to the SDF the *Justice* columnist 'The Sage of the Northern Heights' illustrates the attitude of many members. He suggests that they should emphasise the 'rosy side' of socialism where women could spend their time shopping for beautiful items for themselves and their families. With regard to meetings he claimed that the 'only opportunity that a Socialist has of getting women to attend a Socialist gathering is to paint a glowing picture of a tea night, of a concert where certain celebrated artists will appear, of a soiree and dance where there will be a possibility of witnessing new fashions.'²³

For SDFers the Woman Problem had two principal sources. Firstly, there was the domestic burden of most working class women. The solution was seen as coming from men relieving women of this burden and giving them access to political activity. A second related cause was the isolation of women from the unionised workplace. Annie Oldacre argued that the 'conditions of a woman's life tend to make her individualistic. Men live more in Public and have more opportunities and leisure to discuss things among themselves. Especially it is difficult for married women and mothers. The work and care of motherhood and household life is trying, tying and absorbing.'²⁴

The problem the SDF had in formulating the Woman Question was compounded by their masculinising the concept of 'class'. Women were often ignored, or simply not seen, as members of the working class. There was a belief that politics inhabited the public sphere while the private, domestic and informal sphere was apolitical. Gender relations were, like religion, an issue which the SDF regarded as a personal issue.²⁵ The rhetoric was of 'workers and their wives', while the reasons for the apparent lack of class consciousness of women were never really dealt with and were seen as obstacles to be overcome.²⁶

²³ *Justice*, 16 June 1894, 18 August 1894. See also A. Bebel, *Society of the Future* (Moscow 1971) p35. According to P. Hilden, the French socialist movement addressed women in three ways; through their families, as workers and as 'a special group among the proletariat.' P. Hilden, *Working Women and Socialist Politics in France 1880-1914* (Oxford 1986) p183.

²⁴ *Justice*, 10 October 1896.

²⁵ See Chapter 6 of this work on the SDF and Religion.

²⁶ See P. Hilden, *op.cit.* p189 for a similar 'theoretical muddle' between women as workers and women as wives/mothers. Richard Johnson pointed out in 1979 that till then, most socialist thought and history had concentrated on 'formal politics at the expense both of less formal movements and of the whole

d) The Suffrage Question

For the pro-feminists within the SDF the suffrage question became a focus of activity from the early 1890s and for Lansbury and others like him the women's suffrage question became a motivating factor in their move from Liberal radicalism to socialism.²⁷ However, his acceptance of the separate spheres gives an indication of the position of one of the more advanced male feminists in the SDF. Raphael Samuel echoes this point suggesting that it had a 'character of chivalry.' For Lansbury (and Hardie) 'women were seen as the weaker, as the victim of society, being helped by those men who took up the women's cause.'²⁸ However, over time, Lansbury moved forward from this 'separate spheres' position. In speaking of his wife Bessie he wrote that not merely should she have the opportunity to act but that she 'should have the opportunity of thinking and doing too.' Giving women the vote would not 'do everything', he wrote, but it would 'be the first step towards making men, myself among the number, understand and realise what a woman's life should really be.'²⁹

In 1909 Dora Montefiore wrote as a revolutionary socialist feminist when she stated that

'nothing but a social and economic revolution, in which, women themselves take a conscious and active part, can make for them complete emancipation. For this reason, we militant women strongly protest against the idea that Socialism can be given us by men... It is in working for our own emancipation that we shall gain that inner freedom, that sense of striking off our own chains, that really frees the individual.'³⁰

The ILP is often typified as more woman-friendly than the SDF with regard to women's suffrage. This is partly because of the WSPU's Pankhurst origins in the

reproductive sphere. Since this is the sphere of much of women's labour, orthodox labour history structured women firmly out of its concerns. It wrote, in effect, about a single-sexed class.'

R.Johnson, 'Culture and the historians', in, John Clarke, Chas Critcher and Richard Johnson (eds.), *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (1979) p52.

²⁷ J.Schneer, *George Lansbury* (Manchester 1990), p79. See also his 'Politics and Feminism in "outcast London": George Lansbury and Jane Cobden's campaign for the London County Council', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. XXX (1991).

²⁸ Raphael Samuel, 'A Spiritual Elect? Tressell and the Early Socialists', David Alfred (Ed.), *The Robert Tressell Lectures 1981-1988* (Rochester 1988), p65.

²⁹ G.Lansbury to Marion Coates Hansen, 31 October 1912. Lansbury Collection, BLPES, cited in J. Schneer, 'Politics and feminism', p79.

³⁰ D.B.Montefiore, *op.cit.*, p8.

ILP as well as Keir Hardie's enthusiasm for the issue. However, the Pankhursts did not give their aid exclusively to the ILP. In 1895 Lansbury stood as the SDF Parliamentary candidate for Walworth and was assisted in the effort by Emmeline Pankhurst and her husband Richard. It was 'the enthusiasm in Mrs Pankhurst's face... that tied me to [her] from that day to this,' he wrote in 1912.³¹ It was Dora B. Montefiore who established the first WSPU branch in London in 1906 amongst working women in Canning Town; and when Sylvia Pankhurst and Annie Kenney extended the propaganda campaign they focused on the East End 'because during 1905 large numbers of women had been involved in marches from the East End to Westminster in protest over unemployment', led in some cases by the SDF. In terms of tactics and audience the early WSPU in London had to look to the SDF.³²

The SDF had a commitment from its foundation to universal adult suffrage. Yet the activities of 'Old Guard' luminaries such as Bax, Quelch and Hyndman make anti-suffrage an issue within the SDF. Some anti-women's suffrage campaigners believed, like the more progressive Liberal 'antis', that votes for women would best be obtained through universal adult suffrage. Others could see the women's movement as undermining the labour movement, moving the focus away from class and towards gender. Bax therefore was only really a leading anti-suffragist among *socialists* – the majority of whom were in favour of women's suffrage. In their much reprinted *New Catechism* Bax and Quelch tried to distance sex and class with a biological argument which was against the accepted view of contemporary Marxists. 'People forget', they wrote,

'that the relation of sex is largely unique in its character as implying an *organic* difference, and not a mere *social* one and hence quite distinct from the relation of class and race. The relation of man and woman has none but the most superficial analogy to that of an exploiting class with an exploital class or of a dominant race with a subject race.'³³

Bax was the most prominent of the SDF 'antis' but even he, as Brian Harrison points out, was 'hardly likely to attract the official anti-suffrage leadership'

³¹ *Votes for Women*, 5 July 1912 cited in J.Schneer, *Lansbury*, p110.

³² Harold L. Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign 1866-1928* (1998), p32, M.Pugh, *op.cit.*, p135, Harry Quelch, *Deputation of the Unemployed to the Right Hon. A.J.Balfour* (1905), Kenneth D. Brown, *Labour and Unemployment 1900-1914* (Newton Abbot 1971), pp35-67.

³³ E.B.Bax and H.Quelch, *New Catechism of Socialism* (1909), p39.

because of his socialist views.³⁴ However, Bax's stance on the suffrage question did not go unanswered.³⁵ One particularly fierce critic was Herbert Burrows. For example, when *The Legal Subjection* (1897) was advertised in both *Justice* and the *Social Democrat*, Burrows answered with a letter to *Justice* claiming that

'the pamphlet is doing more for the woman's cause than a hundred lectures from her advocates. Malignancy always produces a corresponding reaction in the minds of impartial people. What is it that Bax thinks is going to be destroyed? I do not know. A movement on behalf of the majority of the human race will not be extinguished by a six penny mud squit.'³⁶

The majority of the SDF and indeed the labour movement were critical of the organisations of the women's suffrage movement. For example, Emmeline Pankhurst had encountered opposition to a women's suffrage motion when it was superseded by an adult suffrage proposal at the 1902 ILP Annual Conference³⁷ and by the beginning of the twentieth century, labour women such as Margaret Bondfield³⁸, Mary McArthur and (from 1913) Sylvia Pankhurst argued more in favour of universal suffrage rather than a limited female franchise.³⁹ The SDF's organisation of the Adult Suffrage Society set it apart from the ILP merely in the strength of its advocacy. The SDF - or rather Quelch as the LTC delegate - successfully led an adult suffrage motion to the 1905 Labour Conference. The motion itself mentioned the class nature of a partial women's franchise and thus recommended adult suffrage as Labour policy. The motion - or rather an amendment which became the substantive motion - was carried by 483 to 270 despite the opposition of Philip Snowden and Emmeline Pankhurst.⁴⁰

The Adult Suffrage Society was formed in 1904 and held its first meeting in January 1905. Between 1905 and 1907 there seems to have been little involvement by SDFers in the activities of the Society. However, this changed in

³⁴ Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (1978), p141.

³⁵ Dora Montefiore was drawn into a 'scientific' refutation of Bax's arguments in measuring respective brain sizes. See *The Position of Women* (1909) pp2-5. NB. The executive had pointed out that Bax's membership of the Men's Anti-Suffrage League 'was not in harmony with the objects and principles of the Party.' SDF Annual Conference Report, 1909, p25.

³⁶ *Justice*, 30 January 1897.

³⁷ M.Pugh, *op.cit.*, p100.

³⁸ **Margaret Grace Bondfield** (1873-1953), shop assistant and trade unionist. Moved to London and active in SDF from 1894. Ass. Gen. Sec. Nat. Union Shop Assistants from 1898. Seconded of motion at 1899 TUC calling for the estab. of LRC. Joined ILP by the end of 1900s. Labour MP for Northampton 1923-4, Wallsend 1926-31. Minister of Labour 1929-31.

³⁹ B.Harrison, *op.cit.*, p48.

⁴⁰ Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1905, pp55-7.

1907. The change took place for two principal reasons. The first was that in August 1907 the Socialist International in Stuttgart came out strongly in favour of adult suffrage, much to the disappointment of the ILP contingent. Kathleen Kough of the SDF and the ASS was elected as the British representative on the International's Women's Franchise Committee. At the end of the year the SDF produced their manifesto on the *Question of Universal Suffrage*.⁴¹

The ASS could not be regarded as a 'front organisation' of the SDF. It was more like a part of the penumbra surrounding the SDF.⁴² Among the more notable non-SDFers were included Margaret Macmillan, Mary Macarthur, Fred Jowett, Emily Hobhouse, Mrs Vaughan-Nash and Lady Ottoline Morrell.⁴³ Some branches affiliated to the ASS and all of the Women's Circles were instructed to do likewise, but the SDF did not affiliate as a national organisation. Some SDF branches such as Canning Town formed ASS branches⁴⁴ but SDF/ASS activities seem to have been carried out by SDF members on an individual basis and to have lacked any form of co-ordination. Margaret Bondfield, who became Chairman of the ASS in 1909, attended the Labour Party Conference as a delegate of the Women's Labour League and there presented an adult suffrage amendment which, as much as anything else, illustrates the overlapping nature of Bondfield's political 'personality'.⁴⁵ The SDF never made their involvement in the ASS a campaigning priority and hence, after the departure of Montefiore, their involvement declined. Indeed, the ASS decided in effect to 'lie low' during the constitutional debates of 1910.⁴⁶ The commitment to adult suffrage remained in the party programme but it seems that practical steps to attain it were not taken.

e) Production

For Engels the role of women in the workplace was crucial to women's emancipation as only when they were engaged as wage labourers could women

⁴¹ *Justice*, 14 December 1907, cited in K. Hunt, *op.cit.*, pp170-171.

⁴² For a sympathetic discussion of the Adult Suffrage Society by a then Fabianesque journal, see the *New Age*, 23 May 1907.

⁴³ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (1948), p85.

⁴⁴ K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, p178.

⁴⁵ M.Bondfield, *op.cit.*, pp85-6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p179.

become members of the working class and hence obtain their liberation through socialism.⁴⁷ Herbert Burrows saw the socialist future as one of economic equality based on voluntarism. He saw all as having

‘equal duties, and should have corresponding equal rights,... there will be no further question as to whether women shall always make beds and men always bake bread, and whether these things shall for all time be their allotted functions, and no others. If a man shows he can make a bed better than a woman, and a woman shows she can bake bread better than a man, then they shall be each encouraged to do their best, and thereby the whole community, both men and women, will gain.’⁴⁸

However, the role of women in the workplace was problematic for the labour movement to come to terms with as it challenges the masculinity of class.⁴⁹ The SDF, like the majority of the labour movement at the time, argued in favour of the ‘family wage’ in order to maintain workers’ living standards. Hyndman stated that the balance of the contemporary economic system was put in jeopardy by the introduction of women and children into the labour force, which meant that ‘a man’s foes are literally they of his own household.’⁵⁰ However, in both their analysis and their practice, SDF men and women saw their socialism as coming through the workplace. In 1894 Enid Stacy wrote in *Justice* that ‘women who join the movement to obtain a freer outlet for their faculties find themselves confronted with the economic problem. The economic problem, the position of women under the competitive system, brings them to politics, and that is what happened to me.’⁵¹

With their poor pay and conditions, women workers should have been the natural constituency for SDF efforts. However, the SDF, like other socialist organisations, were divided over the need for protective legislation for women workers. For Harry Quelch, protective legislation was necessary both to protect women and the conditions of male workers. In 1894 he wrote, as the ‘Tattler’, that ‘the economic freedom which permits women to work at most disagreeable and often dangerous occupations for a bare pittance, to the displacement of men, is neither more nor

⁴⁷ F.Engels, *op.cit.*, pp137-8.

⁴⁸ Herbert Burrows, *The Future of Woman* (1909), p4.

⁴⁹ N.Hart, ‘Gender and the rise and fall of class politics’, *New Left Review* (175) May/June 1989. See also Bax and Quelch *op.cit.*, p39.

⁵⁰ H.M.Hyndman, *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England* (1883) p152.

⁵¹ *Justice*, 13 October 1894.

less than economic slavery for both sexes.⁵² This opposition encompasses two separate points. Firstly, that the woman's role in the labour market was an indication of the degradation brought about by capitalism and secondly, that as workers women were competition for male workers and hence this led to dilution and a reduction in workers' wage-bargaining power.

Dora Montefiore was one of those who were arguing against protective legislation on grounds of sex equality, while Harry Quelch, as the 'Tattler', and Amie and Margaretta Hicks were, for different reasons, speaking for it. What remained at the centre of the dispute amongst those women who wanted to see a real improvement in women's working conditions was the question of which strategy would be most effective.⁵³ Both Margaretta Hicks and Amie Hicks⁵⁴ wrote in support of protective legislation as working class women and as women with experience of trade unionism.

To Margaretta the actual conditions of workers and keeping them in work was important for women. Moreover, her mother Amie Hicks argued that as working women did not face equal economic conditions with men, they needed legislation for their own protection, and that the middle-class women should find out the truth before they spoke on the matter.⁵⁵ For these women, protective legislation was clearly a class question.

There is a history of SDFers working with the women's trade unions and of women SDFers of working in the general trade union movement. In London, Herbert Burrows and Annie Besant helped organise the Bryant and May matchgirls' strike of 1888. In 1889 the local SDF tried to unionise laundresses in Wandsworth.⁵⁶ Eleanor Marx helped Will Thorne with the gasworkers while both she and Clementina Black helped the dockworkers' strike in 1889. Black went on to launch the Women's Trade Union Association which had H.H.Champion, John

⁵² *Justice*, 17 March 1894.

⁵³ K. Hunt, *op.cit.*, pp127-8.

⁵⁴ **Amelia Jane Hicks** (1839/40-1917), teacher and midwife. Active in Democratic Federation and SDF 1883-c1907. SDF School Board candidate 1886 and 1888. Sec. East London Ropemakers' Union and on the Exec. Women's Industrial Council 1894-1908.

⁵⁵ *Justice*, 22 November 1902. K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, pp126-8.

⁵⁶ *Justice*, 24 August 1889, cited in K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, p133

Burns and Mrs Ben Tillett on its committee. The Association went on to unionise confectioners and ropemakers. The SDF activist Amie Hicks became the main force behind and first secretary of the East London Ropemakers' Union.⁵⁷

However, this attempt started to dissolve in 1893 and the Association itself disbanded in 1894. In a time of trade depression, fewer male trade unionists saw it as their 'duty' to unionise women workers.

However, there was a strong negative image of women's relation to trade unions opposed to that put forward by women SDFers. It saw women as the cause of their own and men's problems. Although this view did not receive a particularly large amount of space within the SDF press, it was reinforced by the dominant, negative representation of women.

The idea of the 'woman worker' was not unproblematic for the SDF. Many believed that the phrase was self-contradictory and that under socialism women would not be a part of the workforce. One Erith SDFer in her column 'For Women Workers' looked forward to a system 'which will give back to all women their homes and their womanhood'.⁵⁸ Thus a challenge to the sexual division of labour was not regarded as a political issue. The SDF, as with other parts of the labour movement at the time, assumed the necessity of campaigning for a 'family wage' and hence did not analyse its function. It was thought by many SDFers that women's wages, and especially those of married women, merely dragged down standard of living of all workers. Despite the efforts of Dora Montefiore and others the impression remained that the SDF was hostile to women workers.

f) **Reproduction**

For many SDFers, sexual inequality was based on the woman's role in human reproduction. James Connell in his pamphlet *Socialism and the Survival of the Fittest* suggested that a reproductive instinct in women was stronger than any class feeling. 'The instinct of self preservation,' he wrote, 'prompts the female to seek

⁵⁷ Teresa Olcott, 'Dead Centre: The Women's Trade Union Movement in London 1874-1914', *London Journal* Vol. 2 (May 1976), p41. K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, p133.

⁵⁸ *Erith Labour and Socialist Advocate*, January 1910.

first of all an assured living, and it is not easy to see how this can be found among men of no property, whose only living is precarious.’⁵⁹

However, population control was an early issue in which socialists and freethinkers united. Before the formation of the SDF, Annie Besant had published the *Law of Population* (1st edition 1877) which advocated birth control. Some activists such as Tom Mann came to socialism via anti-Malthusianism,⁶⁰ while Edward Aveling was also a strong advocate of birth control. S. Gardiner defended birth control by pointing out that pregnancy kept women from the social world and political life. ‘Socialists should teach women comrades,’ she wrote, ‘how to lessen their families, have fewer children and healthy ones, and then perhaps, more women would join our ranks, as they would have more time to learn about socialism.’⁶¹

However, many socialists opposed birth control for a variety of reasons. Firstly, because it diverted attention from the social question, secondly, because over-population could be avoided by ‘natural’ means, and thirdly, because women’s control over reproduction would upset the relationships between men and women and undermine the family structure. Lastly, sexual pleasure which may be a result of birth control ‘was not a true measure of happiness and should not be pursued.’⁶² In many ways socialists tried to uphold conservative morals as a counterbalance to their radical economic analysis.

Much of the opposition to birth control in Britain was opposition to Malthusianism, in the same way as many socialists opposed emigration, as it was seen as a palliative that did not address the real issue of class oppression. However, as Angus McLaren points out the SDF leadership followed a similar socially conservative policy. He attributes much of the ‘separate spheres’ anti-feminism, and hence the opposition to birth control which appeared in *Justice* and elsewhere, to a romantic medievalism in British radicalism which stretched back

⁵⁹ J. Connell, *Socialism and the Survival of the Fittest* (4th Edition 1910) p14.

⁶⁰ T. Mann, *op.cit.* p25-8

⁶¹ *Justice*, 23 June 1894.

⁶² A. McLaren, ‘Sex and Socialism: The opposition of the French Left to birth control in the nineteenth century.’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* (37), 1976, p477.

through Morris to Ruskin and Carlyle which regarded women as mothers and helpmeets but as little else. It therefore elevated motherhood and childbearing to a point where it could be seen as a productive role in a future socialist society.⁶³ For example, Charlotte Despard stated that 'the woman of the future [would be] well-developed in mind and body; capable of bearing and rearing a race that will be truly imperial.'⁶⁴

g) Marriage and extra-marital activities

The SDF marriage was not a model for the future. In Germany Clara Zetkin claimed that the Bebel's marriage was a model one for socialists where the 'fighting husband received refreshment and comfort'.⁶⁵ The marriage of Hyndman was sometimes given as an exemplar in that his partner actively supported him in his political work. On the other hand, Lansbury's marriage was unusual in its acknowledgement of the desire for equality.

The SDF view of marriage was that the relationship between men and women was a product of the economic epoch and a transformation of the economic situation would bring overall change. As Tom Mann put it in 1905, echoing Engels, the 'present marriage system is based upon the supposition of economic dependence of the woman on the man, and as a result, sex domination obtains. Political freedom will, we hope, result in economic freedom for both sexes alike.'⁶⁶

According to Bax and Quelch, the monogamic marriage reflected property relations and 'developed in proportion to the accentuation of the institution of private as against communal property,' and hence under socialism 'any attempt at coercion, moral or material in these relations... must necessarily become repugnant to the moral sense of the community.' Hence the post-socialist

⁶³ A. McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (1978) pp166-70. See also W. Morris, *News from Nowhere* (1890) pp60-62 for Morris's view of the contented domesticated woman in a socialist future. Despite Morris's dislike of the book, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* also has a domestic and maternal future for women in a future socialist utopia -see especially Chapter XXV.

⁶⁴ Cited in H. Burrows, *op. cit.*, p10.

⁶⁵ Tania Unulag, 'Bourgeois Mentality and Socialist Ideology as exemplified by Clara Zetkin's constructs of femininity', *IRSH*, (April 2002), p56.

⁶⁶ T. Mann, 'The War of the Classes' (1905), John Laurent (ed.), *Tom Mann: Social and Economic Writings* (Nottingham 1988), p113.



marriage will not be bound in this way and may be described as *open*.⁶⁷ However, the SDF and other like-minded socialists had to fight shy of the accusation that socialism led to free love and immorality.

The opinion of Annie Besant was that she was against the state regulation of any relationship except where children are involved. She claimed that free unions would be more stable because indissoluble marriages led to unhappiness and immorality.⁶⁸ Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, the most famous free love couple in the SDF, could be said to be a free love couple by default and so it did not become a campaign issue.⁶⁹ When the SDF had to deal with the publicity of the Edith Lanchester case of 1895, it showed them as upholders of traditional morality. While supporting her claims over wrongful detention for lunacy, Hyndman and others were against her actions on the grounds that it identified socialism with free love and hence alienated the working class.⁷⁰ Yet the ambivalence of the SDF to 'free love' can be seen in the more sympathetic response (in turning a blind eye) to the relationship between Dora Montefiore and a working-class man.⁷¹ Rather than campaigning on free love and birth control the SDF chose to ignore them, these being issues which their detractors could easily use against them and which could prove divisive for the organisation. There was no sustained view of whether marriage and the family was oppressive or whether it was simply the current 'bourgeois' version that was a problem to be overcome with the advent of socialism.

h) SDF activists and female involvement

In the early 1890s a female SDFer had complained about

⁶⁷ Bax and Quelch, *op.cit.*, p39. NB this is not the implication given in E. Marx Aveling and E. Aveling, *The Woman Question* (1886) where ironically they see monogamy as a natural form of human relationship.

⁶⁸ L.Bland, *op.cit.*, p153.

⁶⁹ Beatrice Webb evidently thought Eleanor Marx was a *type*. Her comment on meeting her in the British Museum was 'I should think [she] has somewhat "natural" relations with men!' N. and J. MacKenzie, *op.cit.*, p88 Entry for 24 May 1883.

⁷⁰ Lucy Bland points out that most feminists were similarly unenthusiastic, *op.cit.*, p159-61. See also K.Hunt (1996) pp94-104.

⁷¹ See C.Collette, 'Socialism and Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the Early Labour Movement', *History Workshop Journal* (23) 1987.

'many Social Democrats who ...look on women Socialists as a nuisance, or at best as mild enthusiasts, who must be tolerated, but who would be better engaged in gossip, tea drinking and other feminine frivolities. When one sees the half contemptuous remarks when women are mentioned as workers or speakers, one cannot help feeling that Socialists are not as advanced or as true to their principles as they ought to be.'⁷²

This description seems to typify the reaction of many woman socialist activists to their inclusion in the political labour movement and the SDF in particular. The degree to which women were treated as external to the process of 'making socialists' is exemplified by a correspondent to *Justice* who suggested that outdoor meetings should have 'half a dozen good looking girls [who] would treble and quadruple the collection.'⁷³

Dora Montefiore objected to the marginalisation of women in what amounted to the 'domestic work' of the socialist movement. For example, in Erith SDF between 1910 and 1912, when women were relatively active in the life of the branch, they dominated the Premises and Bazaar Committees, the organisation of the children's Christmas party and so on. However, they were sufficiently trusted for a Mrs McGregor to be an EC member and branch secretary for a while. Montefiore wrote that socialists ought to oppose bazaars because they reflected female domestic labour. This was because the bazaar work, although it involved many women in the work of the SDF, did not challenge or change traditional gender roles but merely reflected and reinforced them. This was acknowledged by the 1910 Annual Conference which announced, without irony, that 'most of the circles have helped to get money, goods and materials for the Christmas Bazaar; and also assisted various funds and socials and in the work of elections.'⁷⁴ The amount of bazaar work taken on by the Women's Circles was the reason behind Dora Montefiore's decision to resign from the Women's Committee of the SDF in 1905.⁷⁵

The earliest women's groups within the SDF went back to 1884 when one such group was based at the party headquarters in London.⁷⁶ Similar short-lived

⁷² *Justice*, 2 September 1893.

⁷³ *Justice*, 29 July 1893.

⁷⁴ *SDF Annual Conference Report 1910*, p31.

⁷⁵ *Justice*, 11 March 1905.

⁷⁶ For Women's Circles in general see K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, pp118-150.

women's groups grew out of the Battersea and Chelsea branches in the years between 1884 and 1888 but little is known of their activities. However, it was not until the early 1900s that some concerted effort was made to set up Women's Circles. In March 1904 Dora B. Montefiore announced in *Justice* that a Women's Social Democratic Party would be founded. To the Annual Conference in April she said she was 'sorry it was a women's branch, as she would rather see the women coming in to work with the men.'⁷⁷ This emphatic statement covered up the division in the SDF between those who felt that women should be organised separately for them to gain access to the party and those who felt that sex should not be prioritised over class. Hence the title 'Women's Circles' was ultimately adopted as a compromise position.

The Women's Circles were designed to appeal to 'wives, daughters and sisters of comrades'.⁷⁸ The circles were not meant, therefore, as an SDF women's section but as a means for non-SDFers to encounter socialism and subsequently join the party. It was hoped that meetings in members' homes and meetings in the afternoon would be more accessible. This attempt at a gendered socialist organisation was reiterated by Margaretta Hicks in 1912 when she wrote in *Justice* that

'the difficulty is that most of the propaganda of Socialism has been carried on in terms of political economy or political action, both of which are far more used by men than by women; and beside that, we must all recognise that women who have young children find it very difficult to attend evening meetings, or meetings of any kind, if it means travelling any distance. So we must find other ways of propaganda.'⁷⁹

In order to establish their independence some circles were 'women only' and did not accept men visitors. In 1904 in the London area circles were formed in Edmonton and Croydon, led by the energetic Rose Jarvis⁸⁰, and a further Women's Circle in West Ham the following year. In 1906 the twenty members of the Circle helped Thorne to his victory at the General Election. By 1908 there were Women's Circles attached to a number of London branches including Bow

⁷⁷ *SDF Annual Conference Report 1904*, p19.

⁷⁸ *Justice*, 19 March 1904.

⁷⁹ *Justice*, 27 January 1912, cited in J.Hannam and K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, p89.

⁸⁰ Rose Jarvis (d1923), settlement/social worker. Active in (Croydon) SDF c1893-1906 when she moved to Northampton. Delegate to Socialist International 1896. Elected to Croydon Board of Guardians 1905-6.

and Bromley, Willesden, Central, Deptford, Fulham, Hammersmith, Islington and Southwark.⁸¹ Despite the edict that every branch should form a circle, the high point of women's organisation in the SDF came in 1909 with a grand total of 30 circles nationally.⁸²

From 1907 the Circles put a much greater emphasis on their role as a 'training ground' as they adopted and publicised a more educational programme. For example, the Central Women's Circle formed an elementary economics class and education meetings were held by the Women's Committee, with papers read by prominent male and female members of the SDF.⁸³ However, this growing emphasis on education also highlighted the involvement of men in the Circles, whether as lecturers – for example A.A. Watts ran the elementary economics class – or even as members of the audience at Circle events.

However, some SDF branches did form women's circles. Annie Gordon, a member of the Glasgow College SDF branch, remembered that there were not many women members as

'it didn't appeal to women much, the SDF organisation – there was not much gaiety in it the same as the ILP and, later on, the Labour Party had. You see it was always "life was real, life was earnest" sort of style in the SDF, but it appealed to me. But we did form, and I think John McLean was one of the instigators... helped us... gave us ideas... we did form a women's circle. There was this women's circle outwith the organisation but still part of it – and it was John McLean who advised all the young women like myself to get into the co-operative movement and to try a lot of work there, and he also advised us to get into the suffrage movement. ...we had magazine nights and nights where you would have an essay, and what you called tract nights: we kept no minutes because we had no money.'⁸⁴

The Circles found it difficult to escape the role of bazaar organisers although some groups managed to act as reading circles as well as having occasional lectures. By 1908 the SDF Women's Conference claimed that the approach was predominantly educational. Attempts were made at a national level to organise the circles. In

⁸¹ *SDF Annual Conference Report 1908*, p24.

⁸² K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, p230.

⁸³ *Justice*, 8 June 1907, 6 July 1907.

⁸⁴ Interview Annie Gordon (d.1979) to Michael Donnelly in 1967, cited in H.Savage and L.Forster, *All for the Cause: Willie Nairn 1856-1902, Stonebreaker, Philosopher, Marxist* (Glasgow nd. 1991) pp59-60. Kim Yoonok Stenberg also notes that London working class women were politicised through their involvement in the co-op movement. 'Working-class women in London local politics, 1894-1914' *Twentieth Century British History* (Vol. 9, No. 3) 1998 p325, pp337-8.

1907 a women's column started to appear in *Justice* while the Women's Educational Committee produced two pamphlets by Dora Montefiore in 1908 and 1909. Montefiore's *Some Words to Socialist Women* was translated into Dutch in 1908.⁸⁵ From 1909 the National Women's Committee of the SDF was elected by the branches, that is by all members, both men and women. In proposing the motion to the 1909 Conference, Mrs Murray of Leyton SDF claimed it would allow women to be 'educated in the principles of Socialism as understood by the SDP' and hence 'draft women into the Party.'⁸⁶ This was seen as a step forward for women's organisation within the SDF as it integrated them closely within the party. To a degree it was also a recognition of their status within the party and had the advantage of bringing fees from the party. This was further acknowledged when Emma Boyce of Kingsland SDF was appointed by the WEC as organiser of the Circles in 1909.

Although the influence of Dora Montefiore was reduced when she went abroad, there were still other committed SDF women to continue the work. Margaretta Hicks⁸⁷ was elected to the WEC in 1910, and she became its Chairman (*sic*) later that year.⁸⁸ As someone who had been involved in the Women's Circles, it was clear to her what difficulties they continued to face. Margaretta Hicks listed these as lacking a meeting place, no money to pay the rent, the inability of most working women to leave home for long or to go any distance with a baby to carry, and the difficulty of getting speakers. She looked to branches to help in some of these matters; for example, providing a meeting place.⁸⁹ One of her major contributions to women's self-organisation in the SDF was to start a rather ecumenical socialist womens monthly paper, *The Link*, which was first published in September 1911. This was designed for 'easy, light reading' and to be 'accessible to women.' In its opening number the editorial stated its aim as to 'be light, and try to be interesting,

⁸⁵ *SDF Annual Conference Report 1908*, p24.

⁸⁶ *SDF Annual Conference Report 1909*, pp18-9.

⁸⁷ **Margaretta Hicks**, Daughter of Amie Hicks. Active in (Kentish Town) SDF from mid 1880s. Delegate to Socialist International 1910 and editor of the *Link* from 1911. BSP's Women's organiser from 1912.

⁸⁸ *Justice*, 2 April 1910, 6 August 1910.

⁸⁹ *Justice*, 6 August 1910.

leaving to students the study of Socialist theory – being just content to be a link sufficiently strong to unite the stronger chains.’⁹⁰

k) Conclusions

From the above we can see that there are significant grounds on which to view the SDF as a negative force in gender relations. It is true that they did not promote and prioritise women’s suffrage on the same lines as the WSPU, Hardie and some elements of the ILP. It is equally true that the SDF reflected many of the negative elements in contemporary society with regard to gender relations.

However, it would be an anachronism to suggest that the SDF were anti-feminists in the sense of being obstructive or even anti-liberal. Late nineteenth century feminism itself contained a range of opinions which included eugenicism, racism and social imperialism as well as social conservatives.⁹¹ Many of these ideas would be opposed by SDFers on ‘political’ grounds rather than on simply ‘anti-feminist’ grounds.

What the SDF lacked was a formation of socialist feminism. This goes back to the class/sex dichotomy that was never effectively tackled. The struggle within the SDF was the struggle to come to terms with the contradictions in the sex/class analogy used by Bebel and Engels. Attempts were made, within the restrictions of their understanding of ideology, to politicise women and several women did actively participate in the organisation. While not being advocates of women’s suffrage they were significant supporters of adult suffrage. However, as with so much of the history of the SDF, these attempts were overshadowed by the pronouncements of prominent SDFers such as Bax and Quelch who controlled the party press and hence gave the impression that the SDF was anti-feminist.

⁹⁰ *Justice*, 2 September 1911 cited in K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, p238 *Link*, September 1911.

⁹¹ L.Bland, *op.cit.*

Chapter 6

Religion

In this chapter I aim to examine the link between religious activity and the membership of the SDF in London, together with the attitudes of SDF members towards religious belief and organised religion. In addition I will look at the relationship between the SDF and organised irreligion and, in particular, the notion that the move to secularism was a step on the road to socialism for members. As a theoretical frame or context for looking at this relationship, Stephen Yeo suggests that the development of socialism in Britain took the form of a religious revival in both its rites and its vision of the socialist future.¹ This view of socialism as the 'New Jerusalem' – the socialism/religion confluence – is most often associated with the non-conformist socialist preachers of the ILP (Phillip Snowden is perhaps the best known) and of organisations such as the Labour Church. I will try to see whether this view is applicable in a London context.

There is also the idea that socialism assisted in the general secularisation process which some commentators claimed to witness during the nineteenth century.² This view of the relationship between socialism and religion might be termed the *substitution* of socialism for religion, where individuals have lost faith in organised religion and looked to a temporal politics to provide meaning and purpose. I would regard this as different from the idea of a 'religion of socialism'.

Finally, I would hope to examine whether there is anything which might be regarded as a London tradition, and to challenge the view that is often used to explain the comparative strength of the SDF in London. This view, in short, is that whereas the ILP was the socialism of the Liberal, non-conformist working

¹ S. Yeo, 'A New Life', pp5-56.

² O. Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge 1975). See also S. Yeo, *Religion*.

class, the SDF was the socialism of the Tory, Anglican worker. Bealey and Pelling, for example, point out that 'for every [SDF] branch in an administrative county or county borough of weak Anglican influence, there were two in areas of strong Anglican influence'.³ I would rather want to put forward that London radicalism had a tradition of secularism and religious heterodoxy and hence the official line of the SDF towards religion (similar to that of the Second International parties such as the German SPD and the Russian SDLP) allowed for a party with Jews, Anglicans, atheists, freethinkers, Catholics and non-conformists amongst the activists.

a) Secularism, socialism and the working class

Rather than being the socialism of the Tory Anglican working man, there is some evidence to view the SDF as the socialism of the secularist worker. There are a number of examples such as Annie Besant and Edward Aveling⁴ who moved from being leaders of the National Secular Society – in Besant's case she was second only to Charles Bradlaugh – to being SDF activists. Although Besant, Aveling and Herbert Burrows are very middle-class examples, there are an equal number of workers such as Will Thorne, Harry Snell⁵, Tom Bell or John Burns to make the case for secularism among SDF activists. Many travelled the route of Guy Aldred from religion to atheism and to socialism (and thence in Aldred's case on to anarchism) but perhaps few so widely or quickly. I would suggest that from the early nineteenth century, a contact with secularism was a part of the questioning process that took activists in the metropolis from organised religion and brought them to political radicalism and socialism.⁶

³ F.Bealey and H.Pelling, *Labour and Politics 1900-1906: A History of the Labour Representation Committee* (1958) p9. See also P.F.Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge 1971) p41.

⁴ E.Royle, *op.cit.*, p10-21. **Annie Besant** (1847-1933), writer and campaigner. Active with the SDF 1888-1890/91. SDF election treasurer and elected to London School Board 1888. Helped, together with Herbert Burrows, organise 'Match Girls' strike at Bryant and May's. Previously secularist, later theosophist and supporter of Indian Nationalism. **Edward Aveling** (1849-98) Chemist and lecturer. Active in the SDF 1884-5 and c1893-8. NSS 1879-1885, Socialist League 1885-88, ILP 1893-98.

⁵ **Harry Snell** (1865-1944), clerk. Active in SDF in Nottingham 1885-1890 and then in Woolwich 1890-c1893. Fabian lecturer and Secretary Secular Education League. Labour MP for East Woolwich 1922-31. Later Baron Snell of Plumstead and Deputy Labour leader in the House of Lords and Chairman of the LCC.

⁶ 'From my own experience, and as a consequence of my changed religious outlook, I, quite early in my life, became interested in political and religious questions.' H.Snell, *op.cit.*, p52.

Firstly, it is important to establish who the secularists were to illustrate the common background with SDF activists. Both Susan Budd and Edward Royle point out that secularism and freethought were essentially urban phenomena, mainly in 'London or parts of Northern England and Scotland with either coalfields or heavy industry',⁷ while Royle emphasises that it was 'overwhelmingly a movement of workers in towns and industrial villages, not in agriculture'⁸ – a movement which was particularly strong in London with twenty-nine out of sixty four branches of the National Secular Society (NSS) in 1886.⁹ These workers tended to be men as Budd finds little evidence of conversion among women.¹⁰

There is further evidence from Budd that the secularists were of the *organised* working class, a large part of which saw the churches as bastions of 'corrupt ruling groups' and 'reactionary politics'. Priests were working to keep 'the poor acquiescent'.¹¹ The link between Secularism and radical politics seems to have drawn activists towards the secular movement rather than caused their loss of faith, but 'often Freethought and Radicalism spring from a common root in working-class thought and organisation.' The connection is shown, Budd writes, 'by the number of Owenites and Chartists who moved to Freethought when their movements had decayed and by some of the detailed instances of conversion.'¹² Secularism then was a movement with a predominantly working-class membership, which had a radical political critique of Christianity overlapping with organised working class groups and was particularly strong in London.

Edward Royle notes that the period of growth for the NSS in London was the late 1880s and the early 1890s which saw the extension of Secularism deeper into the

⁷ S.Budd, 'The Loss of Faith: Reasons for unbelief among members of the secularist movement in England 1850-1950.' *Past and Present* (April 1967) p107.

⁸ E.Royle, *op.cit.*, p128.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp333-342.

¹⁰ S.Budd, *op.cit.*, p108. Royle confirms this view. E.Royle *op.cit.*, p131.

¹¹ Cf Enid Stacy's account of her conversion to socialism. 'The Church looks upon women as entirely inferior beings. This "riled" me... and then I began to think seriously about and to take an interest in the Women's Rights Movement, and by that partially was led into Socialism...' *Justice*, 13 October 1894.

¹² S.Budd, *op.cit.*, p114.

suburbs, themselves expanding rapidly at this time.¹³ Secularist branches were set up across London from Kensington to Kilburn, through Camden Town, Holloway and Hackney, to Old Ford and Mile End, while another swath stretched from the West Ham and Stratford societies through Leytonstone and Walthamstow, to Edmonton, Wood Green and Southgate. In the south the older centres of Southwark and Lambeth gradually gave way to Walworth, Camberwell and Peckham, while new groups appeared out in Wimbledon, Streatham and Forest Hill. As the inner London societies began to decline, Secularism lost its traditional footholds on the fringes of the City and became increasingly more of a suburban movement. According to Royle this development 'partly reflected the change in secularism itself, but was also a part of the wider change in London radicalism as the inner areas became socially depressed and skilled workmen moved out to the more salubrious suburbs'. For example, West Ham was a new working-class suburb 'populated by families from Finsbury who were attracted by the low rents and the ease of travel offered by workmen's trains...' and where there was also a strong branch of the NSS at the Cromwell Club in Plaistow. The case was much the same with Forest Gate 'where a Secular society was founded in 1892 by the former secretary of the West Ham branch.'¹⁴ The extension of secularist branches described by Royle closely follows the growth of London and the movement of the skilled/employed working class. The development of the SDF as a movement of the new suburbs is similar.¹⁵

Secularism was on the lecture list of many radical and working men's clubs in London while secular societies, radical and socialist groups often shared premises as well as members, which again led to a degree of overlapping. The Finsbury Secular Society was able to remain independent of Bradlaugh's Hall of Science in Old Street as they had their own base in the London Patriotic Society's club on Clerkenwell Green. The Patriotic Society had, in turn, grown out of the Holborn branch of the Reform League in 1871 and had started out at 37a Clerkenwell Green in the July of the following year. The Finsbury Secular Society was then started at this address in 1880 as a branch of the NSS and continued as such until

¹³ NSS and SDF grew in the new working-class suburbs such as Stratford. See also P.J.Waller, *op.cit.*, pp24-32. Cf. G.S.Jones, *Languages*, pp179-238.

¹⁴ E.Royle, *op.cit.*, p47.

¹⁵ See Chapter 2 of this work.

1905 except for a brief period in the mid-1890s when it joined the Freethought Federation. 37a Clerkenwell Green was at this time the office from which Harry Quelch and others edited *Justice* and administered the Twentieth Century Press and from which Lenin issued *Iskra* in 1902. 'The link between the Society and one of the foremost of the London radical clubs,' Royle goes on to note, 'is an important example of the way in which Secularism became the creed of the London working-class life.'¹⁶

This overlapping of premises and activists between Freethought and socialism in London does not seem to have been beneficial to the Freethought movement. As Royle points out in one case,

'whilst it was true, as the Camberwell branch [of the NSS] argued in 1902 when they let their hall monthly to the SDF, many members of the SDF were freethinkers and so the connection with socialism was of benefit to the Secularists, the socialist movement remained much wider than Freethought. Just as Secularism could unite individualists and socialists against religion, so socialism united freethinkers and Christians against capitalism.'¹⁷

Early on in the life of the SDF Herbert Burrows had seen secularists and freethinkers as potential recruits to the Federation. In a letter to H.H.Champion¹⁸ he wrote that the South Place Institute lectures were a good place to sell *Justice* as 'many of the people who go are I know ready for more light.'¹⁹ Royle sees that the 'main cause of the weakness of the NSS (in the 1890s) was the relationship between Secularism and socialism.'²⁰ It seems that as secularism declined, after its brief period of growth, so socialism grew in its place.

The co-alignment of socialism and secularism was not always a smooth or peaceable one. The debate between Hyndman and Bradlaugh in April 1884 over the question 'Will Socialism Benefit the English People?' did not actually focus

¹⁶ Royle, *op.cit.*, p48. See also Snell, *op.cit.*, p56 where he writes of Nottingham that 'many of these early Socialist meetings were held at the meeting-place of the local Secular Society, and frequently under its auspices.'

¹⁷ Royle, *op.cit.*, pp 238-9

¹⁸ **Henry Hyde Champion** (1859-1928), army officer and publisher. Active in SDF 1883-87. SDF Secretary 1884-6. Secretary Labour Electoral Association from 1888. Emigrated to Australia 1894 but remained active in labour politics.

¹⁹ Herbert Burrows to H.H.Champion [nd. Sept 1884?] BLPES Coll. Misc. 522/2/6.

²⁰ Royle, *op.cit.*, pp39-40. See also Paul Thompson, 'Liberals, radicals and labour', p95 who writes that in 'London politics between 1880 and 1900 there had been two great changes. [One of which was] the decline of secularist radicalism as the typical creed of the politically active working class and its gradual replacement by the Marxist socialism of the SDF'.

on religion.²¹ According to those who actually witnessed the event it was Bradlaugh who had the better of the exchanges. However, the publication of the debate in *Justice* and later as a pamphlet allowed secularists and socialists to continue the discussion of the issues within the NSS.²² Harry Snell had taken an active interest in secularism but found the political content of the debate illuminating. 'It was only after I had made a careful study of the debates ...,' he wrote, 'that I finally abandoned the individualism of which the former of these distinguished men was then the most powerful exponent...'²³

The following distinctions can be made in the use of the words adopted by secularists. An *atheist* was a person who might deny the existence of God or refuse to do this on the grounds that the word 'God' had no meaning for him/her. At this time both atheist and agnostic were taken to be purely negative philosophical positions, with no direct implications for any constructive social or political creed or action.²⁴ The *freethinker* declined to accept the 'divine inspiration of the bible'. The *secularist* was a freethinker who aspired with other freethinkers to expose religion to the logic of material facts and sought by these means 'to weaken organised religion at the same time as he was enhancing morality by giving it a natural basis'. The secularist felt confident that the course of human history was advancing against the myths of christianity 'because this was disclosed by knowledge.'²⁵

It was Aveling's scientific background that brought him to attack Christianity. Aveling in many ways came to interpret Marxism in a highly positivistic way through his understanding of Darwin.²⁶ He laid a great emphasis on science as the foundation of life and experience and therefore he equally stressed the scientific aspects of his understanding of socialism. In 1884 he wrote in *To-Day* that to describe socialism with 'such a limiting adjective as Christian is fatal. It would be quite as fatal to label it with the adjective Atheistic... Socialism has nothing to do

²¹ George Lansbury was in the audience for the debates. See J. Shepherd, *op.cit.*, p37.

²² G. Johnson, 'British Social Democracy and Religion, 1881-1911', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (Vol. 51. No. 1) January 2000 pp96-7.

²³ H. Snell, *op.cit.*, p55.

²⁴ Royle, *op.cit.*, pp 111, 115-7.

²⁵ See S. Shipley, 'Science and atheism in mid-Victorian London', *BSSLH* No. 29 (1974) pp9-10.

²⁶ For Aveling see C. Tsuzuki, *Eleanor Marx*, pp75-100.

with religion or irreligion.' Religion to his mind would be 'quietly but swiftly and firmly rejected' while socialism would 'pursue its majestic way humanising people, unhampered by dreams of the supernatural.'²⁷

The secularist movement had a continuity from the 1830s and hence might be regarded as a bridge between the Chartists and the SDF in that it retained many of the same activists in a coherent organisation. The political edge of secularism is mentioned by Shipley as 'they felt themselves to be an organized party of the workers, and this idea was encouraged by them having a well-produced newspaper, the *National Reformer*, to read and to sell, and meetings to go to on four nights a week. These meetings were well attended and sometimes a hall would be crowded for a lecture by a well-known and favourite speaker.'²⁸

London SDF secularists include Edward Aveling, Guy Aldred,²⁹ E.Belfort Bax, Annie Besant, Herbert Burrows, John Burns, T.A.Jackson, Harry Snell and Will Thorne.³⁰ This short list is limited to those SDF secularists who left biographical details and hence does not fully reflect the working-class nature of secularism in the capital. Although some seemed to have moved from secularism to the SDF and on to other points of activity (for example Besant and her journey to Theosophy), the majority seem to have retained by the labour movement (if we include Aldred and Burns in this definition) as their main focus of public activity.

One explanation for the movement from 'unbelief' to socialism is that politics was a 'substitution' for the loss of faith. For many, unbelief was a general rejection of the conservative and respectable values of the bourgeois world.³¹ As has been alluded to above, 'conversion to unbelief was part of a shift from a religion which was resented and opposed primarily as an agency resisting or indifferent to social

²⁷ *To-day*, January 1884, p32, p38 cited in G.Johnson, *op.cit.*, p98.

²⁸ S.Shipley, *op.cit.*, p9. During G.W.Foote's imprisonment for blasphemy in 1883 the *Freethinker* and his other periodical, the monthly *Progress* were edited by Edward Aveling, assisted by Annie Besant and Eleanor Marx respectively. E.Royle, *op.cit.*, p33

²⁹ **Guy Aldred** (1886-1963). Active in Clerkenwell SDF 1905-6. Formerly boy preacher and advocate for the Anti-Nicotine League, later anarchist.

³⁰ See Chapter 2 of this work for the link between socialism and secularism in London's working-class suburbs.

³¹ S.Budd, *op.cit.*, p115. See also E.J.Hobsbawm, 'Religion and the rise of Socialism', *Worlds of Labour* (1984) p38.

improvement.' And hence according to Sally Budd, 'For many individuals, Secularism was a temporary detour in their movement from religion to left-wing politics. But the association with radicalism [the overlapping mentioned above] is not sufficient to explain secularism, since many radicals and socialists remain[ed] Christians.'³²

While for some there seems to have been a process of substitution, for others it does not appear to be an explanation for socialism or the SDF in London. What can be said is that the SDF benefited from the organisational, speaking and intellectual skills of former secularists and from the 1890s seemed to gain at the expense of the secularist movement as the base for critics of society and organised religion.

b) Religion and the SDF

In contrast to the substitution idea, we have those who managed to combine religion and politics, never fully moving *from* religion to politics. There are those who might see socialism as a realisation of Christianity although, I would argue, these were a minority in the SDF.

SDF members such as Tom Mann, George Lansbury and Dennis Hird³³ did move into print to voice their belief in the socialist movement as a vehicle for Christianity. For example, in 1896 Tom Mann contributed to a volume on the social work of the Church entitled *Vox Clamantium* with the chapter 'Preachers and Churches'. His commitment to socialist solutions to social problems is perhaps made plain by the statement that 'we cannot do well unless we know something of the laws that underlie and control the forces with which we shall have to deal.'³⁴ To which in his *Memoirs* he adds the comment 'It seems to me

³² S.Budd, *op.cit.*, pp108-9.

³³ **George Lansbury** (1859-1940), timber merchant. Active in Bow and Bromley SDF c1892-c1900. SDF EC member 1896-8 and National Organiser 1895-6. John Shepherd points out that Lansbury was closer to secularism than Anglicanism during his years in the SDF. J.Shepherd, *op.cit.*, p40. **Dennis Hird** (185?-1920), Anglican clergyman. Active in SDF in Battersea 1880s to 1894. Later lectured at Ruskin College at the time of the student revolt.

³⁴ T. Mann, *Preachers and Churches* (1896), in J.Laurent, *op.cit.*, p60.

that I could better fulfil the spirit of this contribution outside any Church than by becoming an ordained churchman.’³⁵

In a later pamphlet published in Australia Mann declares that

‘Socialism saddles upon each of us the responsibility of being our “brother’s keeper”. If a child, woman or man is starving, Socialism says there is something wrong in our social system and upon us all individually and collectively rests the responsibility of righting the wrong...

To understand the Socialist position one must have some root grasp of morals. ...right conduct or morality means proper relations between ourselves and others, i.e. behaviour of a helpful and useful character. Under no set of circumstances must one take advantage of one’s fellows; fair play between each and all, universal honesty and right conduct...’³⁶

In this account of society, underlying historical forces or laws of social change disappear, and the basis of socialism becomes essentially ethical.

Another SDF member, Dennis Hird - an ordained Church of England minister - wrote in 1908 the pamphlet *Jesus the Socialist*.³⁷ The pamphlet is divided into three parts: ‘I What had Jesus been taught as a Jew?’, ‘II What evils did he chiefly attack?’, ‘III How did he propose to change this world into “the kingdom of God”?’ In this work, Hird uses New Testament texts such as Matthew XIX. 19 and XXII. 39 (‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’) to show Christ’s vision as essentially a socialist one. In his conclusion he writes:

‘Was Jesus a Socialist? And if proof means anything, I have proved it up to the hilt... His standard is that every man shall so love his neighbour that the believer does not know his own interests from those of his neighbour. His whole life is outside all class interests. He has scarcely left the world before His chosen and trained apostles establish a socialistic society in which there is no paid official, no rich man, no private property, and no poor. ...a few fishermen of Galilee scattered the seeds of the divine Socialism of Jesus; and even yet these seeds may grow and spring up through the dust of centuries.’³⁸

Mann and Hird both have socialism as a realisation of the Christian message rather than what I would see as the ‘religion of socialism’ thesis where socialism becomes a substitute for religion in both form and content. However, statements of this sort are few and far between in the London SDF and it is perhaps

³⁵ T.Mann, *Memoirs*, pp96-7.

³⁶ T.Mann, *The War of the Classes* (1905), in John Laurent (ed.), *Tom Mann: Social and Economic Writings* (Nottingham 1988) pp95-6.

³⁷ See *Justice*, 24 February 1894 for Hird’s membership of the SDF.

³⁸ D.Hird, *Jesus the Socialist* (1908) p18.

significant that Mann wrote in Melbourne in 1905 and Hird in Ledbury in 1908. Mann at that time was not an SDF member (although he was working in the Australian labour movement).

John Trevor's Labour Church is perhaps the clearest example of socialism as a realisation of Christianity. His theology was teleological and trusted in 'our own natural development towards God.'³⁹ In 1894 Trevor stated that the 'Labour Church was founded for the distinct purpose of declaring that God is at work, here and now, in the heart of the Labour movement; and that the religion of today consists in co-operating with the divine energy which is still operating on our planet.'⁴⁰ The belief was that God's purpose would lead in due course to socialism, but to a socialism of 'universal brotherhood' rather than the collective ownership of the means of production. The fulfillment of this purpose would come through individual conversions and of the development of inner spirituality rather than economic relationships.⁴¹

However, very little of this seems to have touched the work of the SDF in London and indeed elsewhere. Many Labour Churches appear to have been created by a local branch of the ILP as an extension to their activities. Indeed in 1894 the NAC of the ILP passed a resolution encouraging branches to 'run a Sunday meeting on Labour Church lines.'⁴² Over half of the fifty churches that appeared between 1891 and 1902 were in Lancashire and Yorkshire.⁴³ Little is recorded of the Labour Church in London.⁴⁴ Mark Bevir stresses the link between the Labour Church and non-conformity and this to a degree explains the weak connection of the Labour Church in London and amongst SDFers in general.⁴⁵ Ben Tillett, George Lansbury and Tom Mann are recorded as 'preaching' in Labour Churches

³⁹ John Trevor cited in Stanley Pierson, 'John Trevor and the Labour Church movement in England 1891-1900.', *Church History* (Vol. 29) December 1960, p474.

⁴⁰ *Labour Prophet*, September 1894, p120.

⁴¹ See M.Bevir, *op.cit.*, p223.

⁴² *Labour Prophet*, September 1894. S.Pierson, *op.cit.*, p467.

⁴³ M.Bevir, *op.cit.*, p230.

⁴⁴ S.Pierson, *op.cit.*, p467-8 and K.S.Inglis *op.cit.*, pp445-60 only mention one church in Tottenham. *The Labour Prophet* (January-December 1894) records a London church in Brondesbury and the work of four 'Pioneer' members in the London area. The Tottenham church is the only one recorded in the Labour Annual for 1897, (J.Edwards (ed), *The Labour Annual 1897* (1896) p166). The *Labour Church Record* between January 1899 and October 1901 mentions three congregations in the greater London area – Croydon, Tottenham and Watford.

⁴⁵ M.Bevir, *op.cit.* p229.

– although Tillett's activity coincided with his candidacy in Bradford. Whereas a good deal of overlapping seems to have taken place between the SDF and secularism in London, it is quite the opposite in the case of the Labour Church.

There is also the point that there were difficulties encountered by many socialists who tried to work within the orthodox churches. As has been mentioned, Dennis Hird lost his post as secretary of the London Diocesan Board of the Church of England Temperance Society because of his SDF connections, while a Croydon SDFer was ostracised by his fellow members of the Croydon Free Christian Church where he had been a minister.⁴⁶ Harry Snell pointed out that in some ways Anglican socialists had more freedom than non-conformist ministers 'whose livelihood might depend upon the approval of a few perhaps intolerant and uninformed chapel notables.'⁴⁷ Fred Knee, when he came to London from Somerset, had been an active member of the Congregational Church. However, the demands on his time, particularly on a Sunday morning when both the SDF and his Church were active and holding meetings/services, meant that his Church activities soon suffered.

London had a strong radical tradition and was not immune to non-conformity. As Stedman Jones points out, temperance was never really an issue amongst London radicals and so 'there was no common ground between artisan secularism and middle-class non-conformity.'⁴⁸ Hence the Labour Church and the sentiments which came in its train seemed to bypass socialists in London. On the other hand, London led the way as church attendance declined across the country. By the 1880s church attendance in working class areas was down to between 15 and 20 percent and figures for London barely made the lower end of this range.⁴⁹ Where in other parts of Britain Methodists or other non-conformist sects gained communicants lost to the established church, this was not the case in London.

In focusing on London, the idea is that the London Socialists of the 1880s and 1890s were more interested in 'theory' than their counterparts in the provinces and

⁴⁶ SDF Annual Conference Report 1894, cited in G.Johnson, *op.cit.*, p103.

⁴⁷ H.Snell, *op.cit.*, p117.

⁴⁸ G.S.Jones, *Languages*, p198.

⁴⁹ H.McLeod, *Religion and the Working Class in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1984), p13, p14.

this led both to 'resistances and to complications'. According to Eric Hobsbawm, although the Secularists were in a small minority even in London, 'secularism is the ideological thread which binds London labour history together from the London Jacobins and Francis Place, through the anti-religious Owenites and co-operators, the anti-religious journalists and book-sellers through the free-thinking Radicals who followed Holyoake and flocked to Bradlaugh's Hall of Science, to the Social Democratic Federation and the London Fabians with their unconcealed distaste for chapel rhetoric.'⁵⁰ These problems were also exacerbated by the secularism of many London socialists. This is a somewhat different explanation to the Anglican/SDF, Dissenter/ILP view of labour politics, but again it is a view that does not reveal a full enough picture of the relationship between London, the SDF and religion.

c) The SDF and other socialists on religion

The link between scientific socialism as understood by the SDF encouraged a 'scientific' criticism of the history outlined in the Bible and the role the Church and religion played in the dialectical development of history. This was perhaps the most obvious intellectual connection between secularism and socialism. However, socialists in the SDF criticised the moral claims of Christianity and what they might call the hypocrisy of Christianity.

This institutional critique was the basis of Tom Mann's *Vox Calamitatum* chapter. 'The Church is in a helpless backwash,' he wrote, 'having lost the true courage, mental and moral vigour, power of discernment and hence capacity, to apply what humanity now demands. The parsons, clergymen and ministers are, for the most part, a feeble folk, who, daring not to lead, are therefore bound to follow. I am not condemning religion,' he continues,

⁵⁰ E.J.Hobsbawm cited in A.Briggs, *op.cit.*, p330. The link between radicalism and secularism in London is also made by Henry Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in late-Victorian Britain* (1968) p27. See also, H.McLeod, *op.cit.*, p20.

'but the lack of it. Religion to me consists of those ethical principles that serve as a guide in all matters of conduct – social, political and industrial alike; and the essence of the whole thing is that: the choice between a life whose actuating motive shall be self, either in acquiring wealth, renown, prestige or power and life which shall have primary regard for the well-being of the community as a whole. ...I desire to see every person fired with a holy enthusiasm to put a stop to wrongdoing.'⁵¹

On the other hand, in a far more hostile and philosophically based criticism Belfort Bax also focused on the principle of the individualism which he saw as central to Christian teachings. Christian theory for Bax 'rests in a supposed direct relation of the individual soul with its God,... in contradistinction to a direct relation with the social body.'⁵² He believed that Christianity in its bourgeois capitalist Protestant form had not emphasised the individual's relationship with the community.

'... the society of the future, to which socialists look forward [will] be a society in which all interests are again united, since they will all have a definite social aim: in other words, since the interest of the individual will be once more identified and this time *consciously*, with the interest of the community; and lastly, since our ideal will cease to have for its object God and "another world" and be brought back to its original sphere of social life and "this world".'⁵³

Mann develops a second strand of criticism in the idea that the Church lacked a social conscience.

'What I want to expose is the demoralising effect produced by the individual being taught that salvation for him consists in reflecting upon and believing in his acceptance with God, because of Christ's sacrifice, irrespective of the life he leads. "No one says this", some will cry. Yes; but indeed, it is said and taught in nineteen churches out of twenty, and the effect is to cause the individual to think of himself or herself, and to value, out of all proper proportion, his or her own personal salvation. Selfishness begins this, and with selfishness it usually ends.'⁵⁴

Yet Mann's criticism of the church seems to be strongest when he suggests that its work is counter-productive in social reform.

'A general condemnation of "sin" and urgent advice to "flee from the wrath to come" and find salvation by reliance upon the sacrifice in the crucifixion of Jesus sums up the teaching of the average school, church and chapel. Where does this land a man? Judging by a lengthened

⁵¹ Tom Mann, *A Socialist's View of Religion and the Churches: Reprinted from Vox Clamantium* (1896) p3, p9.

⁵² E.B.Bax and H.Quelch, *op.cit.*, p27. See also M.Bevir, 'Ernest Belfort Bax: Marxist, Idealist and Positivist', *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1993) p132.

⁵³ E.Belfort Bax, 'Universal History from a Socialist Viewpoint', *Religion*, p36.

⁵⁴ T.Mann, *A Socialist's View*, pp7-8.

experience, I unhesitatingly declare that I find that the average church or chapel goer, who is influenced primarily by what he obtains from his functions becomes a narrow, saving, squeezing creature, taking little or no part in the vigorous life of the community but very commonly becoming by his isolated action, a source of weakness in any real democratic movement.'⁵⁵

The SDF as an organisation adopted the line prevalent among most parties of the Second International that religion was a matter of private individual conscience and not one to be dictated by the Party or the State. As was stated clearly in *Justice* in 1894, 'Socialism does not interfere with any religious belief whether it be pagan or Christian.'⁵⁶ Yet for SDF members like Belfort Bax the policy did not imply neutrality or merely that 'at a particular stage in its progress [socialism] may take up a position even of active hostility to these religions...' He continues stating that 'Socialism is essentially neither religious nor irreligious, inasmuch as it reaffirms the unity of human life, abolishing the dualism ... the antithesis of religion.'⁵⁷

The issue within the International went back to before the foundation of the SDF. The Gotha programme adopted by the SPD in 1875 incorporated the phrase *religion is a man's private concern*. Members of the SPD could argue that it left them free to be as religious as they liked and enabled members to be both a good Socialist and a good Christian. The Marxist wing of the Party preferred to see it as a statement that religion should be eradicated not only from public life but from public influence.

A similar approach as the SPD to religion by the SDF and other socialist parties did not endear it to the more committed anti-clerics like Guy Aldred, and some like him may have seen it as a basis for leaving the Party. Aldred attacked those socialists who merely criticised Christianity when it directly threatened labour. For Aldred Christianity was an entire system which was fundamentally opposed to labour. To be both a Christian and a socialist was for him to have a 'sorry

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p2.

⁵⁶ *Justice*, 20 February 1894. See also the resolution passed without debate at the 1908 Annual Conference that stated 'the Socialist movement is concerned solely with secular affairs, and regards religion as a private matter.' p13. See also the *Erith Labour and Socialist Advocate*, October 1910, for a local statement of the party. In his biography Lansbury, a Christian pacifist socialist, writes that 'On questions of religion I have always been more than tolerant.' G.Lansbury, *op.cit.*, p8.

⁵⁷ E.Belfort Bax, 'Socialism and Religion' [First published in *Justice*, 21 June 1884], *Religion*, p48.

ignorance of the economics of Marx and the teaching of history.’⁵⁸ Likewise, James Leatham felt that there was a fundamental contradiction between socialism and Christianity and therefore using Christianity as some form of justification of socialism severely undermined the socialist’s case. ‘Socialism in its positive aspects,’ he wrote, ‘is grand enough to stand without any Christian props: and it is as reasonable to speak of Christian Socialism as it would be to speak of Christian Arithmetic or Christian Geometry.’⁵⁹

Aldred, Bax, Leatham and others on the more atheistic wing of the SDF seem to have agreed with Engels and Lenin’s interpretation that a socialist state should be a rigorously secular state. On the other hand, Lansbury and Quelch were more in line with the SPD’s looser understanding that religion should not be an obstacle to socialism. It was not – unlike the policy on parliamentary elections, industrial tactics or chauvinism – a subject on which even a sizeable minority thought strongly enough about to cause a split in the SDF. For example, in *A Socialist Ritual* the SDF is described as having

‘no desire to say or do anything to offend the religious prejudices of any. We are neither Christian nor anti-Christian and we have always carefully avoided publishing anything which could be described as profane or blasphemous. We are not concerned with theological truth or falsehood but with the material conditions of social life.’⁶⁰

A majority of the membership were probably secularists in the sense described above, and believed that the state should not play a role in religious life which of itself should be an individual’s right, and with the withering of the bourgeois state so too would bourgeois religion wither away. Although not as actively atheistic as Lenin or Aldred may have wished, the SDF, I would argue, were sufficiently secularist to eschew the revivalistic rhetoric of some ILP leaders and the confluence of religion and socialism this sometimes led to.

⁵⁸ *Agnostic Journal*, 18 August 1906 cited in E.Royle, *op.cit.*, pp240-241.

⁵⁹ J.Leatham, *Was Jesus Christ a Socialist?* (190?) p17, cited in G.Johnson *op.cit.*, p108.

⁶⁰ *A Socialist Ritual*, (1893) p3.

d) SDF Socialism as a Religion

An example of the 'socialism as religion' rhetoric may be taken from a pamphlet by Katherine St. John Conway and J. Bruce Glasier. Neither of the authors was at the time a member of the SDF.⁶¹ 'Socialism,' St John Conway writes, 'gives us our highest ideal of the conduct of life, and calls from us the highest service of thought, emotion, and need – that is our aim and prophesy, and to it is due the utmost and gladdest devotion of all our gifts and powers.'⁶² These ideals require a dutiful band of followers to put them into practice (again there is no class struggle or laws of history here). The martyrs of the Christian past - the Christian soldiers - are likened to the socialist martyrs of the nineteenth century giving their lives for the Cause and hence religion, for the authors, could be used to provide ethical examples from history. Yet here socialism becomes consciously a religion.

'And so... we stand by the altar of a Religion for which many of the bravest and most gifted souls of this age have offered their lives; the Nihilist men and women who have been done to death in Siberian mines and on Russian scaffolds – the men and women who stood behind the barricades of the Commune of Paris till their bodies fell riddled and mangled in the ditches – the Chicago Anarchists who elected to die together rather than alter one word of their principles – these, and all the hundreds of men and women of all lands who have incurred persecution, imprisonment and death for the Religion of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.'⁶³

This then is the rhetoric of the 'religion of socialism' but not the version of socialism that was propagated by the SDF.

The socialism of the SDF, however, can be seen to have at least the flavour of a religion. It had similar structures to organised religion together with a language of duty, mission and morality. The Socialist Sunday Schools, for example, which Guy Aldred objected to, were an organisational form clearly borrowed from the

⁶¹ Glasier had been a member of the Glasgow SDF before the split with the Socialist League in 1885 and St John Conway had come to the socialist movement through the SDF-affiliate the Bristol Socialist Society in 1890. See L. Thompson, *The Enthusiasts: A biography of John and Katherine Bruce Glasier* (1971) pp34-5 and pp65-6.

⁶² K. St John Conway and J. Bruce Glasier, *The Religion of Socialism: Two Aspects* (1895) p10.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p16. French Socialists of the 1830s expressed their beliefs in deist, if not Christian, terms. See Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French Left: Studies on Labour and Politics in France 1830-1981* (Oxford 1986), p58.

church as a means of forming the moral foundations of the next generation.

‘While working in the SDF soup kitchens,’ Mary Gray⁶⁴ of Battersea SDF

‘was profoundly moved by what she saw of the sufferings due to trade depression of the children in London’s East End. It filled her with enthusiasm to make some more positive contribution towards the advance to Socialism. Her mind returned to the experiences of her youth as a Sunday school teacher and she proposed that the Battersea SDF should establish a Sunday school for the teaching of socialism to children. It is indicative of the secularism of London Socialist circles that her plea fell on stony ground and she had to proceed with her plan single-handed. The reason she gave for her determination is significant: “I could see that unless we could teach the children, we should not make a very quick advance.”’⁶⁵

Here already was the idea that the transition to Socialism would depend upon the education of a new generation. In November 1892, Gray held the first meeting of her Sunday school in the SDF rooms in Battersea attended by one girl and one boy. In 1894 Gray, together with Charles R. Vincent of Canning Town SDF and T. Partridge of Walworth, set up a Socialist Sunday School Union in connection with the SDF so that ‘the “good tidings” of Social Democracy [could] reach [the children] before they get older’.⁶⁶ By 1903 she was still running the Sunday school single-handedly with an attendance of some ninety children. She was found to be teaching elementary ethics in the most practical manner. As the *Young Socialist* described it, ‘What proper things to do on entering their homes: wipe their feet,... ask mother whether they could help her and so on.’⁶⁷

The schools movement expanded considerably in the first decade of the twentieth century, surviving the decline of the Labour Churches. The 1907 SDF Annual Conference affirmed the Socialist Sunday School movement as ‘the most promising recruiting ground for the Socialist Party of the future’ and urged SDF branches to form schools whilst the Conference two years later voted for the Socialist Sunday Schools to become an integral part of the SDF.⁶⁸ At the 1911 conference of the Young Socialist League the organisation voted against affiliating to one political party. On the other hand, John Scurr, the ‘official

⁶⁴ Mary Gray (1854-1941) domestic servant and housewife. Active in Battersea SDF from 1887. SDF EC 1896-1903, delegate to Socialist International 1896, Battersea Poor Law Guardian 1895.

⁶⁵ *Young Socialist*, April 1903. F.Reid, ‘Socialist Sunday Schools in Britain 1892-1939’, *IRSH* (Volume 11) 1966.

⁶⁶ *Justice*, 10 February 1894.

⁶⁷ *Young Socialist*, April 1903, cited in F.Reid *op.cit.*, p21.

⁶⁸ SDF Annual Conference Report 1907, p20, SDF Annual Conference Report 1909, p26.

representative of the SDP', was also the President of the YSL. In his address he promised the support of the SDP in the work of the League.⁶⁹

By 1909 there were twenty-five schools in the London area alone and by 1910, when a national union had been formed, about 100 schools were in existence attended by nearly 5000 children and over 1000 adults. Apart from their weekly activities these schools now took part annually in the great demonstration on May Day. 'Our children carried hundreds of flags,' runs a report of the 1909 demonstration, 'and to add to this were the School banners high above the brakes floating in the air'. The children's demonstration is said to have 'reached nearly half a mile in length'.⁷⁰

The Socialist Sunday Schools – unlike the Labour Churches – were a venture which the SDF in London supported and in some cases initiated, and were sometimes taken to the extent of trying to create the religion of socialism. For example, Archie McArthur claimed that Young Socialists should 'build up the City of Love in our own hearts and so, by and by, help to build it up in the world.' Using this example, Fred Reid points out that 'in the course of a very short time, Socialist Sunday School workers came to think and speak of socialism not only as a system of ethics but as a religion.'⁷¹ Mr and Mrs Bailey had to suffer the trials of Christian martyrs and leave Burnham on Crouch and their Socialist Sunday School which had 'contained a splendid set of scholars.' The *Essex Socialist* described them as working 'amidst a persecution and isolation that would have broken the hearts of orthodox people. Talk about religious zeal.'⁷²

A feature of the Sunday meeting was the singing of hymns from the *Labour Church Hymn Book* or later from the *Socialist Sunday School Hymn Book*. Brian Simon claims that the schools organised by SDF members 'tended towards concrete socialist teaching and a materialist outlook', while ILP schools were more 'ethical'. The minute book of an un-named school (but what is likely to

⁶⁹ *Link*, October 1911, p14.

⁷⁰ *Justice*, 31 July 1909. *Young Socialist*, May 1909, cited in B.Simon, *Education and the Labour Movement. 1870-1920* (1965) p50.

⁷¹ *Young Socialist*, March 1901, cited in F.Reid *op.cit.*, p25.

⁷² *Essex Socialist*, 1 January 1909.

have been a Hackney school) from 1907 presents a highly structured format. The school was attended by between thirty and forty people, about a dozen of whom would be adults. The meeting began with a song – often ‘England Arise’ or the ‘Labourers Battle Song’. There then followed a talk such as ‘My experiences in Russia’ by Comrade Blumenthal or ‘Native Life in India’ by Comrade Roden. With adults attending, the school provided separate classes on topics such as ‘Back to the Land’ for the children and ‘Labour’ for the adults. The meeting closed with ‘a few songs’ and the Socialist Sunday School declaration.⁷³

Some idea of the content can also be gleaned from the pamphlet produced in 1907 by A.P.Hazell entitled *The Red Catechism*, which was based on lessons written for the North Islington Socialist Sunday School.⁷⁴ The pamphlet contained 12 different items including a poem (‘A Compensation Case’), the Socialist Sunday School Ten Commandments (‘I – Love your school fellows, they will become your shopmates and companions in life’) as well as stories (‘Do Capitalists become Millionaires as a result of Merit’), but also a series of Question and Answer ‘catechisms’ such as ‘Hospitals’ and ‘The Blind’. This catechism appears to have been a popular mode of instruction at all levels of the SDF.

Aside from the Socialist Sunday Schools, the SDF also adopted the symbols and ceremonies of religious celebrations such as Christmas. Stephen Yeo cites Eleanor Marx Aveling urging the Socialist League to adopt a Christmas tree in 1885 saying ‘Is not socialism the real “new birth” and with its light will not the old darkness of the earth disappear?’⁷⁵ From the mid-1880s there was a long succession of songbooks used by the SDF and other socialists.⁷⁶ Stratford SDF

⁷³ B.Simon, *op.cit.*, p49. [Hackney] Socialist Sunday School Minute Book 1907-1909. Other subjects for adult classes included ‘Capital’, ‘Value’, ‘Commodities’ and ‘Surplus Value’.

⁷⁴ A.P.Hazell, *A Red Catechism* (1907). See also [A.A.Watts (ed.)], *The Child’s Socialist Reader* (1907). Alfred Pung Hazell, compositor/printer. Active in Islington and Finsbury Park SDF from 1884. SDF EC member 1896-8.

⁷⁵ S.Yeo, *op.cit.*, p6. The Kensal Town branch of the SDF put up a Christmas tree ‘for the children’ and held a party with sketches, presents and songs. See *Justice*, 30 December 1893. See also Stratford SDF Minutes, 10 November 1904.

⁷⁶ *A Songbook for Socialists* [nd], W.Morris, *Chants for Socialists* (1885), T. Binning, *Revolutionary Rhymes and Songs for Socialists* (1886), J.L.Joyes, *Songs of a Revolutionary Epoch* (1888) – this contained German songs and poems from the early/mid nineteenth century, E.Carpenter (ed.), *Chants of Labour: A Song Book of the People* (1st edition 1888), James Leatham (ed.), *Poems for Socialists* (Aberdeen 1891), *The SDF Songbook* [nd. 1894?], the *SDF Songbook* used musical notation from *Chants of Labour*.

used three dozen SDF songbooks to hand out at Sunday morning meetings.⁷⁷ Hymns and songs are another measure of this, with the revolutionary songs sung to familiar hymn tunes – as in John Glasse’s ‘Onward Friends of Freedom’ sung to ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ – and socialists adopted the rhetoric of Christian martyrology as in Andreas Scheu’s ‘Song of Labour’ (‘The mists of night disperse and die; Her chains at length are burst and broken, and Labour’s triumph last for aye’)⁷⁸ or in Jim Connell’s ‘Red Flag’ (later sung to the tune ‘Tannenbaum’ despite Connell’s desire for it to be set to the tune of the ‘White Cockade’).⁷⁹

George Bernard Shaw said that socialism had given him a ‘religion’.⁸⁰ According to Raphael Samuel, Marxists spoke of having their whole life bound ‘within the obedience of faith’.⁸¹ Even as ardent an atheist as Belfort Bax could write that socialism ‘brings back religion from heaven to earth’ and ‘looks beyond the present moment or the present individual life... to another and a higher social life in this world.’⁸² Will Thorne was a man who found reading and writing difficult and hence the work of Secretary of the Gasworkers must have seemed terribly demanding. However, he said that ‘I was working for the lives of men, women and children. The work was a religion, a holy mission. I gloried in it.’⁸³ Whereas George Lansbury described his ‘conversion’ to Socialism as a ‘new vision, a new inspiration ... I took no thought of where I should find myself but went out as a missionary on behalf of Socialism with all the reckless enthusiasm of a crusader.’⁸⁴ Harry Snell, later in life, after he had moved from secularism to a central place in the ethical movement in Britain, described how the ‘young

⁷⁷ Stratford SDF Minutes 9 November 1905.

⁷⁸ Andreas Scheu (1844-1927), cabinet maker. Austrian émigré, active in the SDF 1883-5 then leaves to the Socialist League. Returns to Strand SDF, a speaker from SDF platforms 1893, writes for *Justice* as Andrew Joy c1900-1907. Returned to Austria 1911.

⁷⁹ R.Samuel, ‘British Marxist Historians 1880-1980’, *New Left Review* (120) March/April 1980.

⁸⁰ M. Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw. Volume I 1856-1898. The Search for Love* (1988) p118.

⁸¹ R.Samuel, ‘The lost world of British Communism. Part I’, *New Left Review* (154) November/December 1985 p42.

⁸² E.Belfort Bax, ‘Socialism and Religion’, p52.

⁸³ W. Thorne, *My Life’s Battles* (1925) p78.

⁸⁴ *Lansbury’s Labour Weekly*, 16 July 1927, cited in J. Schneer, *Lansbury*, p24. George Lansbury in the late 1880s before he joined the SDF invited William Morris to lecture on socialism to the ‘Young Mens’ Group’ of his church stating that he was ‘on the same lines’ as the Socialist League ‘only I start from Jesus Christ and his doctrines.’ G.Lansbury to H.A.Barker 1888?, Socialist League Correspondence K1944, IISH, Amsterdam.

Socialist advocates [of the 1890s] were not political adventurers; they were preachers filled with the Holy Ghost'.⁸⁵

However, there is a difference between someone adopting a system of values and beliefs wholeheartedly and expressing a sense of mission, and the statement that this is a 'religion'. If someone has meaning in his or her life then it is possible that they are driven by a sense of duty, purpose and mission, but this does not mean that socialism is a religion. For the most part the SDFers used religious metaphors when speaking of their purpose but more often resorted to materialist analysis when referring to the bourgeois present and the socialist future.

e) Conclusion

The religious influence was relatively weak amongst the London SDF. Where it was present – for example among the Socialist Sunday Schools – it was generally a form that was adopted whilst the content was much less religious.⁸⁶ There is a contrast between the ILP and the SDF on this question but it is not a simple Anglican/Non-Conformist split.

The SDF had a heterodox attitude to religious belief. There was a strong atheistic current within the Party which meant that the Socialist Sunday Schools were often policed by SDF members (by Bax, Aldred and others) but there were also activists – Lansbury, Mann or Hird – who held strong religious convictions. A party that contained ordained clerics and committed atheists not surprisingly adopted a 'neutral' interpretation of the standard Second International line on religion. However, as Graham Johnson puts it, 'Despite Christian members and favourable attitudes, Christianity on the whole was attacked, criticised and occasionally considered in a sympathetic light before being rejected.'⁸⁷

As has been indicated above, there are two principal reasons for the attitude of the SDF towards religion in London. Firstly, because of the nature of metropolitan

⁸⁵ H. Snell, *op. cit.*, p99.

⁸⁶ Harry Young describes how the content of the Islington Socialist Sunday School was taken from the pages of the *Freethinker*. Interview Harry Young/David M. Young 12 May 1993

⁸⁷ G. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p104.

society and secondly, because the tenor of SDF materialist analysis (not the rhetoric of conversion) attracted SDFers to socialism. However, where the crux might lie in the difference between the ILP and the SDF is not in a Non-Conformist/Anglican split or even in a Non-Conformist/Atheist split, but in a division between a community-based religious experience and the metropolitan freethinker's experience. The SDF did, at times, adopt a rhetoric of religion, and it did contain committed Christians who saw socialism as a fulfilment of their faith, but the London tradition of secularism was stronger.

Chapter 7

Education

a) Radical Education in the Nineteenth Century

A passion for education variously manifested in the coffee-house reading rooms, Owenite Halls of Science and the growing popular press was a distinctive feature of many of the radical movements from the early nineteenth century. These developments with the middle class input helped to fix the distinctive character of late nineteenth century adult education with an earnest and generally uncritical tone and progressive assumptions; however, it would be short-sighted to regard them as simple products of the middle class or as instruments of social control. Even at the high point of the Victorian era, when the Chartists had given way to a new generation of orderly and respectable labour leaders, education remained a powerful catalyst of the proletarian consciousness and worker-students continued to discover that 'Knowledge is Power'.¹

From the mid-nineteenth century there was an attempt to construct an alternative to 'bourgeois' education, and to produce a 'radical' education. According to Richard Johnson there were four aspects to this radical education.² Firstly, radicals conducted a running critique of all forms of *provided* education. It embraced all institutions, clubs and media designed to influence the more mature pupil – everything from tracts to Mechanics Institutes. Plans for a more centralised state system of schooling were also opposed. This tradition therefore was sharply oppositional: it revolved around a contestation of orthodoxies, both in theory and practice.

¹ See S.MacIntyre, *op.cit.*, pp69-70, I.Prothero, *op.cit.*, pp32-3.

² R. Johnson, 'Really Useful Knowledge: Radical Education and Working-Class Culture 1790-1848', J.Clarke, C.Critcher and R.Johnson (eds.), *op.cit.*, pp76-7.

The second main feature of early nineteenth century radical education was the development of alternative educational goals. At one level these embraced a vision of a whole alternative future in which educational utopias, among other needs, could actually be achieved. At another level, radicalism developed its own curricula and pedagogues, its own definition of 'really useful knowledge', a characteristically radical content and sense of what was important to know. As well as the accepted academic subjects (with a strong emphasis on natural science), there was to be a special attention to moral training and the development of social and political awareness in children.³

Moreover, radicalism conducted an important internal debate on the effectiveness of education as a political strategy or as a means of changing the world. Like many aspects of counter-education, this debate was also directed at dominant middle-class conceptions of the relation between education and politics, especially the argument that 'national education' was a necessary condition for the granting of universal suffrage.

Finally, radical movements developed a vigorous and varied educational practice. The distinctive feature was at first an emphasis on informing mature understandings and upon the education of men and women as adult citizens of a more just social order. Radicals were also concerned with men and women as educators of their own children and hence developed practice for this task too. These radicals therefore were moving in a different direction to more orthodox Victorian educators who saw school and education as a rite of passage into adulthood. Adults and children were encouraged to learn together and the child-adult distinction was less stressed by many radicals – especially when contrasted with the growing Victorian middle-class concept of *childhood*.

The way in which Radicals' curricula were developed was itself a critique of bourgeois authority. Thus an appreciation of the field of education as the battleground of hegemony was held by many working-class radicals from the 1840s, and provided the context in which socialists from the 1880s onwards

³ Michael Sanderson, *Education, Economic Change and Society in England 1780-1870* (Second Edition 1991) p60.

viewed education. Many of the strategies adopted by such groups as the Social Democratic Federation and the debates conducted by them were similar to those of the Chartists and radicals at mid-century.

However, from the 1850s and more surely from the 1860s, the strategy of substitution – the establishment of an alternative, independent working-class educational system - was replaced by the demand for a more equal access to the facilities that were to be provided by the state. It was this demand for state provision that was to become the main feature of the Labour Party's (and to a degree the SDF's) educational policy, a move that was generally promoting state or collectivist measures in contrast to using local or voluntarist methods. Thus, while radicals had opposed state education except as the work of a transformed state, later socialists actually fuelled the growth of state schooling with their agitation. As Richard Johnson points out the consequences of this adaptation were immense: it involved 'accepting in a very sharp form, the child-adult divide. The tendency to equate education with school, the depoliticisation of educational content and the professionalisation of teaching. In all these ways the state as educator was by no means a neutral apparatus.'⁴ Thus we have the paradox in the attitudes of some radicals to education, focused on the role of the state as the tool for the liberation of the working class.

With the demise of the Chartists, the working-class activists attempted to provide self-education through the network of Radical clubs. Clubs of a new type began to be formed in the 1860s, especially in London and above all in the East End – they were unambiguously political Radical clubs. These clubs played a persistent and vigorous role in, for example, the campaign for free, secular and compulsory education, administered by democratically elected local committees. This campaign continued up until the passing of the Education Act of 1870. Once passed, the clubs then campaigned for the election of working-class representatives to the newly formed School Boards.

⁴ R.Johnson, *op.cit.*, pp94-5.

Attractions available to members of these clubs were further broadened from the mid-1860s: from skittles and tea they went on to offer other entertainment but also importantly a circulating library, lectures, essay competitions, courses in book-keeping and other subjects of immediate practical utility. Women were given the privilege of borrowing books and of attending concerts and classes 'when efficient female superintendence could be procured.'⁵ Hence the second wave of socialists in Britain from the 1880s had the oppositional tradition of the Chartists to build on and the educational environment of the Radical clubs to work within.

b) The SDF and Self-Education

The SDF developed as an organisation in a period of significant change for education in the United Kingdom. The 1870 Education Act supplemented the church foundation schools with state schools governed by locally elected school boards. This dual provision remained in place until 1903 when school boards were abolished and all schools became the responsibility of county councils or county boroughs as they took over the role of local education authority. The SDF had included a demand for free, secular, state education from the 1880s. Many non-conformists and secularists opposed the move as they claimed that state subsidy of church schools was 'Rome on the rates', while others opposed the ending of the elected element of the school board. This in particular hit the SDF after 1903 as it removed an area of elected government in which they had some (limited) success. What success they did have lay largely in the method of cumulative voting in which each voter had as many votes as there were positions to be filled. In this way with a limited number of candidates it was possible for socialists to be elected. In addition it also removed an area of local government in which women could vote and stand as candidates.⁶ This changing situation in education policy at the start of the century coloured SDF attitudes to the state provision of education.

⁵ P. Bell, 'The Working-Men's Clubs' *BMML*, (October/December 1965) p9.

⁶ D.R.Pugh, 'A note on School Board elections: some north-western contests in the nineties', *History of Education*, 6 (1977), pp115-120.

The first generation of SDF members were on the whole too late to benefit from the availability of education. The research of Jonathan Rose would suggest that most pupils in board schools appreciated the experience and felt that they had learnt from their teachers.⁷ Walter Southgate⁸ (b1890), an SDFer who attended Mowlem St. Elementary School, Cambridge Heath, remembered his school days with some fondness recalling a prize for attendance and some of the stories read to him by his teachers. On the other hand, Herbert Morrison (b1888) wrote that Stockwell Road School, Brixton, had 'a certain air of gloom about it which frightened me from the beginning.' His sister and a friend 'had to drag [him] there'. At a later school Morrison believed that there was 'a general impression among the staff that small boys could absorb knowledge quite efficiently through the nether portions of the anatomy'⁹ while Frank Galton (b1867) remembered 'sitting down and reciting in a dull and monotonous way the alphabet and multiplication table up to a dozen...'¹⁰ On the basis of these mixed experiences of state elementary education it is possible to see how the demand for independent working class education remained strong even among those who had been through state education.

The SDF, Britain's first socialist group of this second wave, used education in a variety of ways. Primarily they used education for propaganda purposes; the successful branch often split its programme between open-air meetings in the summer months and indoor lectures and classes for the winter. Many working-class socialists used the education provided by the party as a means of lifting themselves above the run of the mill, above the ordinary - a process they thought necessary for a worker to take an active part in politics. Also, the second wave of socialists carried on the Chartist tradition of using education as a means of challenging the state by providing a parallel structure and curriculum and through Socialist Sunday Schools and Independent Working Class Education.

⁷ J.Rose, *op.cit.*, Chapter 5 'Willingly to School', pp146-186.

⁸ Walter Charles Southgate (1890-198?). Clerk, activist and administrative officer with the National Union of Clerks. Active in the SDF from 1905. Secretary South Hackney SDF 1909.

⁹ W.Southgate, *op.cit.*, p21, p53-58, H.Morrison, *op.cit.*, p17-8.

¹⁰ F.Galton, MS Autobiography, pp11-12.

Finally, there was also the idea that as Marxism was the 'science of history', it was possible for workers to be taught the rational basis of the class struggle. These early British Marxists emphasised that new converts should *learn* the new tenets of socialism. Many SDF members believed that as the education of the working class improved so they would see the rationality of scientific socialism and be converted to the cause. As Annie Besant declared, 'once let the working classes understand what Socialism really is, and the present system is doomed.' Almost twenty years later Hyndman declared much the same but with a note of bitterness. He believed that 'one of the main reasons why Socialism in England holds the unsatisfactory place it does today, is the fact that our education is very bad.' In the minds of these socialists it was clearly in the interests of a bourgeois state that the working class were 'miseducated' to limit the awareness of the people. As Annie Besant put it, it is a 'vital necessity [for the state] that [the working class] shall be prevented from calmly studying [socialism's] proposals, and shall be so deafened with the clamour against it that they shall be unable to hear the "still small voice" of reason'.¹¹ John Burns at his trial for sedition in 1886 managed to use the promise of education to veil the threat of violent revolution. 'I have deprived myself', he wrote,

'as many of my class have done, of hundreds of meals on purpose to buy books and papers to see if we could not possibly by peaceful consultation, by deliberate and calm organisation, do that which I am inclined to think the middle and upper classes by their neglect, apathy and indifference, will compel artisans to do otherwise than peacefully.'¹²

Education therefore provided a route to the mass conversion of the working class to socialism but also indicated that working-class socialists were different and superior to the unlettered (and unwashed) mob.

The members of the SDF came to socialism along a number of different routes but many came through education, study and reading. The biographies of the socialist worthies of this generation are cluttered with the titles of the works that started them off on this road. However, it was rarely aimless reading which occupied

¹¹ A. Besant, *Why I am a Socialist* (1886) p1, H.M. Hyndman, *Social Democracy: The basis of its principles and the causes of its success* (1904) p2. This attitude was also displayed with regard to state education. Herbert Burrows at the 1904 Annual Conference stated that 'The Party which got hold of the children got hold of the future nation.' SDF Conference Report 1904.

¹² John Burns, *The Man with the Red Flag* [nd. 1906?], p3.

them. It was supposed to be, as Richard Hoggart has described it, 'wide, solid and inspiring'.¹³ Reflecting on the 1880s Bruce Glasier wrote that 'our reading – and in most instances Burns and Shelley, Carlyle and Ruskin were among the authors mentioned – had further aroused our minds of the subject [of politics]. Then had come the crofters' revolt [of 1882] and Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* and the 'Land for the People' agitation [1882]. Lord Beaconsfield's *Sybil*, Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, Miss Lynn Lyton's *Joshua Davidson* and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* were also mentioned among the books that had proved stepping-stones out of the old ways of thought.'¹⁴

It is noticeable that the intellectual development of many working-class activists began as a process of individual self-discovery. Since formal education ended between the ages of ten and thirteen and provided only basic skills in literacy and numeracy, the worker-students initial efforts were often based on a cheap second-hand dictionary. His or her first steps might be among the burgeoning popular literature of the period, leading on to Eugene Sue, Dickens or (later) Jack London, or it might be among the cheap editions of Shakespeare, Milton, Scott and other nineteenth century authors of the canon. George Sims¹⁵, for example, afterwards a carpenter member of Bermondsey SDF and the original secretary of the Central Labour College, began work at the age of eight and whetted his intellectual curiosity in reading *The Times* to the master of the Park Lane mansion in which he worked as a page.¹⁶ Irrespective of the initial impulse, these intellectual odysseys were likely to share certain common features.

Religion was usually important, if only because the Bible was one book which most had read and a great many autodidacts came to base their education on the secular press and related literature. In whichever direction their interests lay, these autodidacts, according to Stuart Macintyre, exhibited a characteristic intellectual tone: they were great respecters of intellectual authority; earnest, even reverential in their treatment of the text and they brooked no short-cuts in the search for

¹³ R.Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) p319.

¹⁴ J.B.Glasier, *op.cit.*, pp67-68.

¹⁵ George Francis Sims (1877-?), Ruskin College student 1908-9, Bermondsey SDF (Annual Conf. Delegate 1910).

¹⁶ S.MacIntyre, *op.cit.*, p70.

knowledge and understanding. Although there was this deference to literary authority, one must add the fact that it remained *their* education for they defined both the purpose and the boundaries of their intellectual exploration and the books they read assumed significance in this light. Thus an original interest in the doctrine of the creation could lead from the *Freethinker* to Darwin and Huxley and hence to Haeckel's *Riddle of the Universe*, Morgan's *Ancient Society* and sometimes on to Engel's *Origins of the Family*. Similarly an interest in history might commence with Gibbon, Macaulay, Lecky and Buckle and subsequently assume an increasingly sharp focus on the basis of the current social order, thus leading to Marx's historical writings.¹⁷ Although many worker-students may have based their reading on the recommendations of workmates, it remained a solitary experience in the main. Harry Snell commented that he realised later in life 'how much misdirected energy was used,' and he was 'regretfully conscious of the fact that, had friendly guidance and a prescribed course been at [his] disposal, better results might have emerged from [his] endeavours.'¹⁸ However, it was a solitary experience in which the scholarly text retained near-absolute authority. As Jonathan Ree puts it, 'socialists were bookish, but their books were not socialist'.¹⁹ This was a profound problem for proto-socialists with a text-based pedagogical strategy.

Instead, the autodidact socialist movement grew mostly from books about science, philosophy or history. Books about socialism were few and far between in the 1880s and 1890s. In addition to summary works of sympathetic non-socialists like John Rae (*Contemporary Socialism*, 1884) or Kaufmann (*Socialism and Communism in their Practical Application*, 1883), there were some self-consciously socialist works by Hyndman, the first and most notable being *England for All*; several novels, such as Shaw's *An Unsocial Socialist*, Morris's *News From Nowhere* and Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and a few tracts ranging from Blatchford's *Merrie England* and J.L.Joynes'²⁰ *The Socialist Catechism to Fabian*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p71.

¹⁸ H.Snell, *op.cit.*, pp43-4.

¹⁹ J. Ree, *Proletarian Philosophers: Problems in Socialist Culture in Britain 1900-1940* (Oxford 1984) pp9-10. See also J.Rose, *op.cit.*, Chapter 4 'A Conservative Canon', pp116-145.

²⁰ James Leigh Joy nes (1853-1893). Schoolmaster (Eton). Active in the Democratic Federation, then SDF from 1881 until his death in 1893.

Essays.²¹ From these it was possible to glean something of the difference between feudal and capitalist forms of exploitation, about class struggle and about the supposed 'Iron Law of Wages' within Marxism. However, there was almost nothing before 1890 that was actually by Marx. Some individuals, such as Hyndman or Bax, who could read Marx in German or French translation, would have a wider choice, but the range of works available in English was very limited. In 1885 J.L.Joyes brought out a translation of *Wage-Labour and Capital*; then Engels edited the English translation of *Capital* which came out in 1887. Only a tiny selection of other works (extracts from Engels' *Anti-Duhring* and the *Condition of the Working Class* and some of his articles in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany in 1848* together with Marx's own *Value, Price and Profit* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*) could be added to the British socialist's bookshelf by the end of the century.²² Even the Communist Manifesto was hard to get, as T.A.Jackson mentions, until the English edition of 1888, which shortly became unavailable and readers had to seek out stray copies of the translation which had appeared in Harney's *Red Republican* of 1850.

Tommy Jackson²³ was one of these bookish socialists who described his experience of trying to obtain socialist literature in the early years of the twentieth century:

'I had ordered the *Communist Manifesto* through the [SDF] branch literature secretary, and though he was an old stager, and the SDF prided itself on being "Marxist", he had never even heard of the *Manifesto*. He got himself a copy, also, and was nearly as amazed and delighted as I was. Engels' *Socialism [Utopian and Scientific]* had been published by Sonnenschien's as also had his *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany in 1848* (then wrongly attributed to Marx). Copies of Marx's *Capital* could be got – if you knew where you could – as a "remainder" from a bookseller in Holborn; but the older SDF members knew it mostly from a bad translation of the first nine chapters published separately. An edition of Marx's *Wage-Labour and Capital* had been issued (but was then out of print), and a translation by Harry Quelch of Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy* could be obtained. These, supplemented, as we could pick them up second hand, by a poor translation of Bebel's *Woman* and also Lafargues' *Evolution of Property* were all the Marxist works of "classic" rank there were available, at that time – most of Morris' Socialist works being then unobtainable. We supplemented the list later..., but since it included Marx's *Capital* the list was long enough to give us material for a solid year of study and more.'²⁴

²¹ An indication perhaps of the centrality of some texts in the socialist canon is the comment in the *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* when *Happy Britain* and *England for the English* (sic) are described as the 'two very best'. R.Tressel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1965), p226.

²² S.MacIntyre, *op.cit.* provides a list of Marxist literature available in English before 1914.

²³ Thomas (Tommy) Alfred Jackson, (1879-1955) compositor later writer and lecturer. Member of the SDF (Tottenham) 1900-1904 later active in SPGB, SLP and CPGB.

²⁴ T.A.Jackson, *op.cit.*, pp59-60.

A significant feature of this process is the sheer energy and determination with which these self-taught worker-intellectuals pursued knowledge - men such as Harry Quelch who came to London in the 1870s as a shop boy and was later a factory worker and warehouse packer. Quelch taught himself French in order to read *Capital* and subsequently progressed to German and Latin as well. He became Secretary of the SDF, edited its newspaper and translated Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy* into English for the first time.

He may also be taken as illustrative of some of the tensions in the relationship between the worker-intellectual and his untutored fellows. Quelch and others like him commonly manifested a contempt for the mentality of the ordinary worker. Tressel's narrator speaks of the workers who

'were so muddled with beer, and others so besotted with admiration of their Liberal and Tory masters, that they were oblivious of the misery of their own lives, and in a similar way, Owen was so much occupied in trying to raise them from their lethargy and so engrossed in trying to think out new arguments to convince them of the possibility of bringing about an improvement in their condition that he had no time to dwell upon his own poverty: the money spent on leaflets and pamphlets to give away might have been better spent on food and clothing for himself, because most of those to whom he gave them were by no means grateful; but he never thought of that; and after all, nearly everyone spends money on some hobby or other.'²⁵

This apparently patronising attitude and others such as those represented in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* by the Hastings SDF member Robert Noonan (Robert Tressel) can be interpreted in a number of ways.

Rather than seeing socialists as a working-class elite or as working-class socialists attempting to ape bourgeois intellectuals, this attitude could also be seen as a critique of the debasement of the majority of the working class which is a result of capitalism. The attitude is frustration not at the low cultural standards of their fellow workers but at their lack of class-consciousness. However, rather than developing new cultural/educational goals obtained through a new working-class educational methodology, Tressel, Quelch and others like them aimed towards the attainment of the cultural values of a bourgeois society and hence often argued in

²⁵ R. Tressel, *op. cit.*, p425. See also p46 where the working class in their 'apathy' and 'indifference' are described as the real oppressors. Harry Quelch wrote similarly 'moral' stories collected in E. Belfort Bax (ed.), *Harry Quelch: Literary Remains* (1914).

favour of a bourgeois or 'traditional' educational methodology and curriculum. This aim was focused on state provision rather than independent working-class education.

c) **The SDF and Radical Methodology**

In terms of their internal organisation of education at branch level, the SDF did not seem to hold with this elitist view. The SDF borrowed and built on many of the methods that had been utilised earlier in the century. The typical forms of Chartist education were improvised, haphazard and therefore ephemeral, having little permanent existence beyond the immediate needs of individuals and groups. Educational forms were closely related to other activities or inserted within them. Men and women learned as they acted through participation and action and were encouraged to teach their children, to have an accumulated experience. The distinction between education (i.e. school) and not-education-at-all (i.e. everything outside school) was in the process of construction in this period but - radicals tried to breach it all the time. Their educational resources included the family, neighbourhood and even the place of work, whether within the household or outside it, the acquisition of literacy from mothers and fathers, the use of a knowledgeable friend or neighbour or the 'scholar' in a local town or village. The workplace discussion, the extensive networks of private schools and, in many cases, the local Sunday Schools were adapted to working class needs.

On top of this legacy, which in the nineteenth century conditions was very fragile, radicals and nascent socialists made their own cultural inventions. These included the various kinds of communal reading and discussion groups, the facilities for newspapers in pub, coffee house or reading room, the broader cultural politics of Chartist or Owenite branch-life, the institution of the travelling lecturer who, often indistinguishable from the 'missionary' or demagogue, toured the radical centres, and above all, the radical press, the most successful radical invention and an extremely flexible educational form.²⁶

²⁶ R.Johnson, *op.cit.*, p79-80.

At the end of the nineteenth century the SDF borrowed and developed the Chartist critique of educational structures and their methods of self-education, especially the reading circle. If no lecturer – or tutor as they were generally known – was available, then the SDF students usually worked by the collective reading of a text, possibly with the help of a more able or more experienced student-leader. The text might be *Capital*, the *Communist Manifesto*, or perhaps Gibbin's *Industrial History* or Dietzgen's *Positive Outcome of Philosophy*.²⁷ A further continuation of the Chartist tradition was that these classes, in the experience of George Lansbury, were open to both men and women and Lansbury and his wife Bessie attended the same reading classes.²⁸ The WEA did not adopt the tutorial class until four years into its life in 1907. Stephen Yeo points out that in Reading 'small, sect-like, face-to-face groupings of this kind seemed to be culturally attractive and economically possible for the working class.'²⁹

T.A.Jackson writes of the range and complexity of studies in the 1900s and that socialist autodidacts in the SDF or the SPGB would 'form classes for the study of Marx's economics. In London they were formed by the members individually, usually from different branches as they got to know each other in club-rooms and places of resort, and as we could find a comrade qualified and willing to act as tutor.' The economics class, which put Jackson through Marx's *Capital*, was taken by a London Irishman Jack Fitzgerald³⁰ who, Jackson says,

'encouraged me to try my teeth on Monsel's *Bampton Lectures* and Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* both of which he picked up second-hand and gave me as a sort of prize for my proficiency in the study of Marx's economics. It was Fitzgerald who brought to our notice the works of Marx published by the Socialist Labour party in New York. One of these – the *Value, Price and Profit* – he forced us to read through in class before he would allow us to begin upon *Capital*. It was an extremely wise precaution. Without it, not one in a score of us would have surmounted the difficulty of the highly abstruse and abstract first chapter. With that precaution we were able to go on to reach and revel in the fascinating historical chapters which form the latter half of the volume. Fitzgerald, a keen student of history, drew our attention to Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* which also, we could get from New York (in Daniel De Leon's translation), and from the same source, Marx's manifestos written for the IWMA, the First International, on the occasions of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune, now obtainable under the title of the *Civil War in France*.'³¹

²⁷ Harry Young claims that this form of self-education continued in the IWW and the early CPGB. Interview D.Young/H.Young, 6 January 1993 and 12 May 1993.

²⁸ G.Lansbury, *op.cit.*, p79.

²⁹ S.Yeo, *Religion*, p237.

³⁰ Jack Fitzgerald, bricklayer. Active in London SDF until expelled at the Annual Conference of 1904 as an 'impossibilist'. Later active in the SPGB.

³¹ T.A.Jackson, *op.cit.*, pp60-61.

However, Ralph Fox, another of Fitzgerald's students in the SPGB classes, was singularly dissatisfied with the focus of the classes which, he believed, had become an end in themselves. The class leaders, Fitzgerald, Anderson³² and Neumann³³, were 'completely satisfied with preaching Socialism. They had no real desire to accomplish any change,... All they wanted was to gain artistic expression, to put into words the dreams that formed in their consciousness, to feel the joy of creation and the sharing of that creation with an audience.'³⁴

One further common form of instruction was the catechism. At least three SDF programmes came in the form of a catechism. These texts were structured as a series of questions and answers. For example, '*How do you define LABOUR economically?* Labour, economically, means productive labour, or labour employed in producing useful objects, i.e., wealth, as above defined.'³⁵ This format – as well as digests such as Edward Aveling's *Student's Marx* or Hazell's *Summary of Marx's Capital* – allowed the students and potential lecturers to learn the basic building blocks of theory in a highly structured way.

d) Independent Working Class Education

As has been suggested above, the SDF used education in a number of ways. Perhaps the more class-conscious workers in the Federation saw the revolutionary potential of education to provide the intellectual weapons for the class struggle. It was this aspect of 'independent working-class education' that divided reformists from revolutionaries in the SDF.

³² Alexander Anderson (c1878-1926), housepainter. Originally from Edinburgh, moved to London (Edmonton SDF) after 1902. Expelled at 1904 conference. Afterwards active in SPGB.

³³ Hans Neumann (d1918). Active in SDF from 1896 (Chelsea, Fulham, Peckham and Dulwich). Active in SPGB from 1904.

³⁴ R.Fox, *op.cit.*, p43.

³⁵ E.B.Bax and H.Quelch, *op.cit.*, p11. See also J.L.Joyes, *The Socialist Catechism* (1884) and A.P.Hazell, *The Red Catechism for Socialist Children* (1907). Francis Wheen points out that this question and answer format dates back to the initiation rituals of the French underground sects of the first half of the nineteenth century. Early drafts of Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* used this format. F.Wheen, *Karl Marx* (1999), p117.

Reformist socialists saw knowledge itself – without concerning themselves too much about what that knowledge was – as power. On the other hand, some more revolutionary socialists tried to situate learning and education within the broader context of the class struggle. It was not a question of learning for learning's sake – although there was, as has been mentioned, a feeling among many that socialism was a self-evident truth and that any sort of learning would bring students closer to socialism – but of how knowledge could assist in building the class struggle.

Although not universal to the whole Federation, the extent to which SDF members relied on education as the basis of their socialism was clearly visible to some members. For example, Herbert Morrison said that he learnt 'his economics from the SDF and his politics from the ILP'. Whilst a member of the SDF between 1907-1910, he had acquired the belief that change would come through revolution rather than reform and in 'a Marxist way of looking at society and its development'.³⁶

The notion of 'independence' was construed as a fundamental class and political position. The working class movement had to forge and control its own education, if only to defend itself against the wiles and depredations of capitalism. Workers had to build trade unions as independent, basic, defensive organisations; and they had to be forced to build their own independent political parties and organisations to combat the two capitalist political parties. They were now realising the need to build and sustain their own independent working-class education to counter middle class domination of the press and other media.

The perspectives and insights to be derived from Marxist theory would be used whenever and wherever possible to interpret the world and to serve as the foundation for criticising other ideas and theories. Thus the study of economics would be firmly grounded on Marxist writings but would also involve a critique of orthodox and radical political economy. Economics was regarded as the key subject underpinning the social sciences and, treated either from a labour or a

³⁶ B. Donohughe and G.W.Jones, *op.cit.*, p33. For Bert Morrison's views on the Liberal reforms see 'The New Liberalism', *Social Democrat*, December 1909, pp529-36. See Chapter 9 for the SDF idea of revolution through Parliament.

working class perspective, the primary objects of studying this subject were to gain an understanding of the inner workings of the capitalist system, the reasons for working class exploitation, the nature of the crisis of British and international capitalism and also of imperialism. The study of economics from this standpoint was also intimately linked to gaining an understanding of the theory and history of the class struggle and of the general laws of historical development, emphasising the conflict between capital and labour.

Education classes also gave members opportunities to gain basic skills in public speaking and debate, in writing and word power, in applied arithmetic, book keeping and accounts. The inclusion of such courses compensated for the inadequacies of formal schooling which, for so many workers, had ended at the age of thirteen or less.³⁷

The concept of 'independent working-class education' was in sharp contrast to the university extension movement typified by the Workers' Educational Association. The WEA, founded in 1903, was an organisation that tried to develop a meritocratic solution to class antagonism. WEA districts promoted University Extension Courses and rounded up audiences for them; they lobbied their local education committees; 'they conducted propaganda for their local art galleries and museums; they formed clubs, libraries, discussion groups and reading circles; they organised educational excursions; they fastened upon local pundits and incited them to speak to the people.' While this view and methodology of education had distinct advantage in an organisation with little money and resources and few personnel, it had a specific social aim. 'In every way and all the time', the WEA's historian writes, 'they aimed at drawing into the orbit of educational endeavour, the "keener spirits" of their local trade union branches and co-operative societies.'³⁸

³⁷ R.Duncan, 'Independent Working-Class Education and the Formation of the Labour College Movement in Glasgow and the West of Scotland 1915-1922', R.Duncan and A.McIvor (eds.), *Militant Workers: Labour and Class Conflict on the Clyde 1900-1950* (Edinburgh 1992) pp110-111.

³⁸ M.Stocks, *The Workers' Educational Association: The First Fifty Years* (1953) p35. See also J.Rose, *op.cit.*, Ch. 8 'The Whole Contention Concerning the Workers' Educational Association', pp256-297.

A number of university professors and churchmen, primarily from Oxford, supported the WEA view and believed that Oxford should continue its role as the education of the governing class even if that class should come from the working class. In other words, the WEA together with Ruskin College in Oxford saw its role as a bridge between bourgeois high culture and the working class. The 1908 report on Oxford and working class education produced jointly by the University, Ruskin College and the WEA proclaimed that the Trade Union Secretary and the 'Labour Member' needed an Oxford Education as much as the civil servant or the barrister. And so the idea of a separate working class educational system began to fade among the reformist labour leaders and some in the labour movement were glad to see it fade.³⁹

The Plebs League was founded in 1909 by SDF and SLP members at Ruskin College as a revolt against the imposed curriculum.⁴⁰ They set out their self-consciously 'independent' manifesto in the first number of their journal:

'If the education of the workers is to square with the ultimate object of the workers – social emancipation – then it is necessary that the control of an educational institution must be in the hands of the workers. Any other kind of control means ultimate disaster... Beware of the sounding brass and tinkling cymbal of ruling-class professed sympathies for Labour. All history justifies us in sounding this warning note. Inability to recognise the class cleavage clearly was responsible for the downfall of the Plebs of Old Rome. Let the Plebs of the twentieth century not be so deluded.'⁴¹

In their opinion, by the early years of the twentieth century the more class-conscious workers had formed their own collective bargaining association (the trade unions), their own distributive agency (the co-operative societies), and their own reformist political organisation (the Labour Party). They objected to the idea

³⁹ C. Jefferson, 'Worker Education in England and France 1800-1914', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (April 1964) p341. See also J. Ree, *op. cit.* p20. George Sims proposed a motion to the 1910 SDF Conference, passed on a show of hands, to request all branches to withdraw from the WEA because it 'was frankly an attempt to bring a unity of interest between employers and employed.' SDF Annual Conference Report 1910, p86.

⁴⁰ George Sims, a carpenter from Bermondsey SDF was 'a leading spirit among the students'. The principal of Ruskin College, Dennis Hird, was one of the few lecturers to provide a Marxist input into the curriculum. He had been a member of the SDF in the 1890s. See Chushichi Tsuzuki, 'Anglo-Marxism and working-class education', J. Winter (ed.), *The Working Class in Modern British History* (Cambridge 1983), p188. For Hird's SDF membership see *Justice*, 24 February 1894.

⁴¹ *Plebs*, February 1909. For the strike at Ruskin College see Paul Yorke, *Ruskin College 1899-1909* (Oxford 1977) pp23-37.

that orthodox education - which Oxford University above all epitomised - was impartial. Nearly all forms of education claimed impartiality but were in fact more or less biased. Orthodox education was one of the main sources of power of the governing class in Britain. Labour's struggle therefore was to be extended to the educational arena. To achieve victory in its struggle for political and economic power the labour movement must create and vigorously control its own educational machinery, and above all provide a content reflecting the interests of the working-class movement.⁴² The rejection of the common, and by implication neutral, culture promoted by the WEA was, according to Bernard Waites, among the 'most explicit statements on class and class consciousness emanating from a working class source.'⁴³

The Plebs rapidly developed a brand of working-class education among the SDF, ILP and unattached socialists in Britain and by the outbreak of war in 1914 it was claimed that approximately 1000 students were attending classes under the supervision of the Plebs League and the Central Labour College.⁴⁴ The typical independent working-class education scheme had, not surprisingly, a heavy emphasis on social science. For example in the 1919-1920 session the Scottish Labour College programme in Glasgow (run by John Maclean formerly of the Glasgow SDF) totalled 30 classes, namely 15 classes running over two terms of four months, and covering economics, history, English composition, public speaking, mathematics, political science, co-operation, trade unionism, economic geography (imperialism), world revolution, labour law, shorthand and Esperanto, whilst the National Labour College in London before the First World War included in their curriculum political economy, industrial history, general history, the history of social movements, English, formal logic, theory of knowledge, dialectical materialism, literature, elocution and sociology.⁴⁵

⁴² J.P.M.Millar, *The Labour College Movement* (1979) p3. See also C.Jefferson, *op.cit.*, p363 for a similar movement in late nineteenth century France.

⁴³ B.Waites, 'The Language and Imagery of "Class" in Early Twentieth Century England (circa 1900-1925)', *Literature and History* (Autumn 1976) p41.

⁴⁴ J.P.M.Millar, *op.cit.*, p16. The NCLC was kept afloat in the early 1920s by individual trade union affiliations. One of the principal affiliations was from the Amalgamated Union of Building Trades Workers whose General Secretary, George Hicks, had been a member of the SDF before joining the SPGB in 1904. See Tsuzuki, 'Anglo-Marxism', p191.

⁴⁵ B.Duncan, *op.cit.*, pp119-120, J.P.M.Millar, *op.cit.*, p15.

However, there seems to have been an apparent conflict in *etatist* policy outlined by the SDF leadership on the one side and these educational structures developed by the SDF membership together with the community of interest shown between the SDF, the SLP, the ILP and the industrial syndicalists in the development of independent working-class education on the other side. The revolutionary content of this method of education was soon to disappear and the reformist element that was clear in the SDF before the First World War was more obvious in the NCLC and the CPGB after 1918. For example, by the late 1920s the NCLC had become the educational wing of the TUC and in the CP there were student groups and university branches, which by the early 1930s existed alongside branches in London, Oxford and Cambridge. Members were, according to Jonathan Ree, 'not in any way interested in challenging the intellectual values of the university. They saw the education system as the repository of objective knowledge and expertise, rather than as a propagator of ruling-class ideology.'⁴⁶

e) The Socialist Sunday Schools

If the Plebs League provided higher education for class-conscious members of the SDF, then the Socialist Sunday School developed by the SDF provided an elementary education. The Socialist Sunday Schools were initially set up by Mary Gray, an SDF member from Battersea, in 1892. Yet the movement went very much beyond just SDF members. For example, Canning Town SSS provided for the Poor Law children as well.⁴⁷ By 1910, when the National Union had been formed, about 100 schools were in existence attended by nearly 5000 children and over 1000 adults.⁴⁸ The Socialist Sunday Schools were often the focus of women within the SDF as is illustrated by the Socialist Sunday School column in the *Essex Socialist* newspaper entitled 'For the Children – By Mother'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ J.Ree, *op.cit.* p91. For the changes in method and content of NCLC courses see C.Tsuzuki, 'Anglo-Marxism'.

⁴⁷ *West Ham Citizen*, 3 February 1900.

⁴⁸ F. Reid, 'Socialist Sunday Schools in Britain 1892-1939', *IRSH*, (XI) 1966 p21, B. Simon, *Education and the Labour Movement 1870-1920* (1965) p50.

⁴⁹ *Essex Socialist*, 1 January 1909.

The Socialist Sunday Schools under the SDF, according to Brian Simon, tended towards 'concrete socialist teaching and a materialist outlook'.⁵⁰ The men, women and children gathered together on a Sunday morning under the leadership of a 'Superintendent'. Since one of the objects of the Socialist Sunday Schools was to train boys and girls to take their places as leaders in the working-class movement, the children were encouraged to undertake minor offices – such as minute secretary. In the classes the youngest children might be introduced to juvenile fiction and nature study as a way of producing a factual understanding of the world. For the older children there were tales of past reformers and historical novels to introduce the notion of human progress. From the age of thirteen, when the child would normally be out at work, they would be expected to deal with aspects of capitalism.⁵¹

Harry Young, who from 1909 attended Islington Socialist Sunday School run by the SDF, remembers singing 'England Arise', the 'Internationale' and the 'Red Flag' but he says he only understood the latter. The Islington School was run by women in the main and had between 20 and 30 children in attendance. They would usually learn their socialist catechism, sing some songs, listen to a story 'of an ethical nature' taken from the *Freethinker* or play games in the yard at the back. Some of the children were doubtless from non-socialist families left there to give their parents some peace.⁵²

The Socialist Sunday Schools, according to Hilda Kean, performed the 'important role in building the socialist *cultural* alternative to the dominant ideology. The children of socialists, often portrayed as the future hope of socialism, were gradually introduced to the values and ethos of socialism in a broader context than that offered by the family.'⁵³ This point was emphasised in a 1907 Conference resolution proposed by Miss K.B.Kough⁵⁴ (Enfield). From personal experience

⁵⁰ B.Simon, *op.cit.*, p49.

⁵¹ [Hackney] Socialist Sunday School Minutes, 1907-8.

⁵² Interview – D.M.Young/H.Young 6 January 1993 and 12 May 1993. This structure and content is very similar to that described by Lansbury in his article in *Justice*, 14 March 1896. See also Chapter 6 of this work for the 'religious' content of the Socialist Sunday Schools.

⁵³ H.Kean, *Challenging the State: The Socialist and Feminist Educational Experience 1900-1930* (1990) p54.

⁵⁴ Kathleen B. Kough, active in the SDF(Enfield and St. Pancras) from 1905. Also active in ASS. Hon Sec. Socialist Dramatic Society (1909).

she was convinced of the 'exceedingly good work' of the Socialist Sunday Schools and supported the motion that 'in the Socialist Sunday school movement there exists the most promising recruiting ground for the Socialist Party of the future', and that the Conference 'advises all branches of the SDF where no school yet exists to at once form such schools'.

f) The SDF and State Education

The educational positions of the SDF leadership however were clearly statist. Since its inception in the early 1880s it had favoured the state maintenance of children.⁵⁵ This demand had featured prominently in the manifestos for candidates standing in School Board elections. For example the manifesto of Harry Bird⁵⁶ for his (successful) Walthamstow School Board election of 1900 included the following:

- Total abolition of the School Board Rate, the entire cost of the children to be borne by the Imperial Exchequer.
- Secular education, the principles of Truth, Justice and Moral Courage to be taught.
- Free Maintenance for all children attending schools.
- Abolition of the Half-Time System. The age of school leaving to be raised to fourteen.
- No teacher to have a class of more than thirty scholars.
- All workpeople employed by the Board to be paid a minimum wage of thirty shillings per week.
- Facilities to be offered for children to obtain technical, higher, and university education, such to be free and accessible to all classes; workshops and other necessities to be provided.
- Instruction to be given in the laws of health, with special reference to physical effects upon the system of various foods and drinks, together with simple expositions of the general principles of sanitation.

⁵⁵ B.Simon, *op.cit.*, p127.

⁵⁶ **Harry Young Bird** (b1860), Carpenter/Joiner. Active in Walthamstow SDF c1894-1901. Delegate to Bristol TUC.

- National colleges to be founded and maintained for training teachers.
- A thorough physical training, including gymnastics, swimming, outdoor games, etc., to be given to the children of both sexes.
- The Board to obtain powers to establish boarding schools in the country. All employees, whether male or female, to be paid equal wages for the performance of equal duties.⁵⁷

Although their demands were oriented towards the state maintained children, the SDF also organised its own attempts to feed hungry children in working-class areas. In speaking for the inclusion of the maintenance of children in the SDF programme, F.G.Jones⁵⁸ (Fulham) at the 1904 Conference stated that this programme was 'the simplest, the most revolutionary and most beneficial' of policies for working-class children and that 'alone by this method could the hideous physical deterioration of their people be ended.' Dora B. Montefiore continued the debate in the same vein and 'pointed out that great loss to the nation intellectually from the number of children who would not accept the education that was put before them.'⁵⁹

In the words of J. Hunter Watts⁶⁰ 'the children are neither "mine" nor "thine" but "ours", and it is for "our" children that we make this appeal.'⁶¹ The demand for state maintenance was based on the needs of working-class children as future members of the nation. The claim of national efficiency as a reason for state intervention had been given by many outside the SDF and in this case the children's hunger was not described in terms of their class oppression but rather in

⁵⁷ H.Bird, *Walthamstow School Board Election Address* (1900). An item of the curriculum that is often mentioned is the demand for the teaching of modern foreign languages, perhaps as a means of fostering internationalism. See for example Canning Town SDF Minutes, 16 July 1893, Richardson, op.cit., p8.

⁵⁸ F.G.Jones, active in SDF (Chelsea, Fulham), c1891-c1907. SDF EC 1897-1905. Unsuccessful School Board candidate 1900, polled 10,718 votes.

⁵⁹ SDF Annual Conference Report 1904. In the leaflet circulated before the 1906 General Election the SDF put state maintenance of children in poll position in their list of reforms followed by provision for the unemployed and state pensions. SDF (EC), *Election Manifesto* (1906).

⁶⁰ John Hunter Watts (d1923), Commercial Traveller. Active in SDF (Peckham and Dulwich) SDF from 1884. SDF treasurer 1885, SDF EC 1902-8. Secularist and supporter of Socialist Sunday Schools.

⁶¹ J. Hunter Watts, *An Appeal for the Children* (1907), p3.

terms of the contribution they could make to the nation as a whole.⁶² This view permeated the pamphlet *A Nation's Youth* written by the Countess of Warwick⁶³, an energetic member of the SDF despite her aristocratic connection. This SDF grandee, regarded as something of an educational expert by many in the party, was perhaps more of a social-imperialist than a socialist as is indicated in this passage from her pamphlet: 'on no subject is it more necessary for us to "think imperially". ...To remove inferior physique or morale we have but to "give the children a chance!" and we may literally "make a new race of them"'.⁶⁴ State maintenance of children – free education, meals and so forth – bridged a gap between education and public health.⁶⁵ The campaign gained the support of the physician Sir Victor Horsley who spoke at a meeting of the Gasworkers' Union chaired by Will Thorne. He later led a deputation to McKenna at the Board of Education calling for a Medical Department within the Board. The *New Age* commented that there 'is no suggestion that the distinguished surgeon has committed himself to Socialism; nevertheless, for one of the most vital principles of the Socialist policy, Sir Victor Horsley has offered to stand on our political platform. The SDF is to be congratulated on one more sterling piece of work.'⁶⁶

While in arguing for the maintenance of children and of raising of the school leaving age to 16, and exceptions to the raising of the school leaving age, Lady Warwick states that 'the school for girls would be separate, and would probably give special attention (say) to laundry, dress-making and cookery. This would be of a similar type to the present Domestic Economy day schools of the London County Council'. She later maintains that 'we must recognise that the family is a

⁶² For national efficiency see Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English social thought 1895-1914* (1960).

⁶³ Francis Evelyn Greville, Countess of Warwick (1861-1938). Active in the SDF from 1904. Later active Labour Party supporter.

⁶⁴ F.Greville [Countess of Warwick], *A Nation's Youth: Physical Deterioration; Its Causes and Remedies* (1906) pp2, 4. However, this view was voiced by Robert Tressel in the *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* through Owen, his working-class socialist character. Those in charge of distributing charity 'seemed to think that the children were the property of their parents. They did not have sense enough to see that the children are not the property of their parents at all, but the property of the community. When they attain to manhood and womanhood they will be, if mentally or physically inefficient, a burden on the community, and if they are healthy, educated and brought up in good surroundings, they will become useful citizens, able to render valuable service, not merely to their parents, but to the community.' R.Tressel, *op.cit.*, p342.

⁶⁵ See for example the bar charts showing the physical development of children printed in Hunter Watts, *op.cit.*, pp8-9.

⁶⁶ *New Age*, 16 May, 13 June 1907.

human institution, maintained for the purpose of elevating the race and advancing its higher interests' and that '...children after all, are primarily the children of the nation, and that it is the nation's first concern to secure their health and well-being, if possible through their parents, of course, but if not so, then by whatever other means which seem most feasible.'⁶⁷ The same position based on policies to strengthen the nation was also seen in a letter by Hyndman to the *Morning Post*: 'Lack of good food, good clothes, and good air is the main reason why some 50% of our urban working-class population is unfit to bear arms. Even from the new "imperialist" point of view this is a serious matter.'⁶⁸

It is important to clarify what is meant by the 'complete popular control' of education, for at first it appears that the SDF was arguing for state resources to be brought under workers' control. What was intended, however, was that education should be brought under the control of a directly elected body responsible for education. This is some step away from both the early socialist views of holistic education and the Plebs' (and others') views on independent working-class education.

It was argued that the needs of the working class should be met by the existing structures of the state. Hyndman, for example, saw education as a way of elevating the working class. 'I long to see... girls as well trained and as healthy as the best specimens of Newnham or Girton. I know that this can only come with Socialism...'⁶⁹ In advocating this approach – that the current bourgeois education was the ideal for the working class to aspire to – the SDF leadership around Hyndman and after 1904 the Countess of Warwick consciously aligned itself. With these forces the SDF endorsed the legitimacy of the state's intervention in social welfare and deliberately rejected socialist strategies intended to challenge the role of the state. Thus in a pamphlet from 1907 reiterating the SDF's policy, J.

⁶⁷ F.Greville, *op.cit.*, p27, p29. See also Richardson *op.cit.*, p10, who writes that children 'who are fortunate enough to have little workshops of their own, with plenty of good tools, not unfrequently from pure love of it, manufacture elegant pieces of work, and immensely enjoy the doing of it.' See also *ibid*, p12 for 'workshop education'.

⁶⁸ Cited in H.Kean, *op.cit.*, p25. Local control of education had been favoured by earlier working-class radicals. See I.Prothero, *op.cit.*, p231.

⁶⁹ *Justice*, 19 May 1894.

Hunter Watts was at pains to differentiate the statist line of the SDF from the anti-statist SLP:

'Certain irreconcilables who make up in noise for their paucity of numbers, and who limit their activities to chewing the cud of revolutionary phrases, repudiate our agitation for "mere palliatives". In other words, they accept the pessimistic creed that fate, which made men object, will preserve them, and thus aver that the object of Socialism – social freedom, is unattainable, for if a physically regenerate race will still subject to wagedom, it is absolutely certain that physical degenerates will never attempt to break the chains that bind them. The truth is that State Maintenance for the children is essentially a revolutionary proposal, and when it is accepted, Socialists of the "old guard" will be able to chant cheerfully their *Nunc Dimittis*.'⁷⁰

One of the few SDF members with an active interest in education who tried to encourage an alternative pedagogy was Mary Bridges Adams.⁷¹ Bridges Adams was an elementary school teacher and for a time a member of the London School Board. Although her educational priorities included state maintenance for children, free school meals and medical inspection for children, she also opposed statism and embraced the spirit of the substitutionist strategy of independent working-class education embodied in the Plebs' revolt. She tried to popularise reading circles and study groups and like many others was active in defending the Socialist Sunday Schools. In 1912 she launched an appeal through *Plebs* for a similar Labour College for Women. Jane Martin describes her as envisaging 'a system of universal state education based on community schools organised on democratic lines. The teacher's role would be based on comradeship rather than authority, with the emphasis on education rather than training. In her opinion the best way to achieve the second objective was to abolish the system of payment by results that imposed a mechanical system of rote learning on elementary

⁷⁰J. Hunter Watts, *op. cit.*, pp10-11. H. Kean quotes Hunter Watts in similar fashion in 1904 writing: 'if we belong to the "let the pot boil over" school of revolutionaries, which we do not; if we taught it well to let the seething cauldron of discontent boil and bubble till it scalded capitalism to death, we should not be found advocating state maintenance for children, for it will transform into customers so many tiny human beings so cruelly condemned by the poverty of their parents to experience what it means to be non-effective consumers that we can not be sure that the adoption of the proposal will not give a fresh lease of life to capitalism.' *op. cit.*, p26. Kean suggests the SDF's demand for state maintenance did not challenge the state. The community of interest between the working class and the state is clearly expressed in the definition of children as consumers within capitalism rather than as a part of an oppressed class. 'In the educational strategies of the SDF leadership one thus sees a position which differentiated itself from the classic Marxist position in respect of the role of the state in maintaining capitalism.'

⁷¹ **Mary Bridges Adams** (1855-1939), teacher. Active in the SDF from mid-1880s. Member of NUGWGLs. Elected to London School Board (Greenwich), 1897. See Jane Martin, 'An "Awful Woman"? The life and work of Mrs Bridges Adams, 1855-1939.' *Women's History Review*, Vol. 8 No. 1 1999, pp139-161.

schools.’⁷² She remains an example of someone who, while challenging and defining the role of the state in public education, sought alternative forms of education.

g) Conclusions

The priority that members of the SDF gave to education is indicative of a number of aspects of late nineteenth and early twentieth century socialism. The skilled workers who made up the bulk of the SDF membership were dissatisfied with any education they might have received at elementary school and saw the acquisition of skills, primarily literary skills, as the route to betterment and (at least) equal status with the middle class. However, these skills separated them from the mass of the workers and they in turn looked down in disdain at the ignorance of the masses and saw state provision of universal education as the surest route to socialism – the rational explanation of the social situation under capitalism was the most common form of propaganda used by the SDF.

However, the form of education adopted by these early Marxists was based on the over-riding authority of the printed word, a situation that did not always assist the political tactics of the SDF. The syndicalists of the ‘Great Unrest’, for example, initially organised themselves into an Industrial Syndicalist Education League but they felt that the education provided should not be pure ‘theorising’ as an abstract exercise but based on the generalised experience of working men and women under capitalism.⁷³

A study of the SDF attitude to forms of education therefore highlights the division within the party over reform and revolution. It was official party policy to call for the adoption of educational palliatives and stand for election for school boards (this was the SDF’s most successful electoral arena) whilst at the same time the membership were actively engaged in constructing and developing anti-statist educational structures such as the Socialist Sunday Schools and later the Plebs

⁷² J.Martin, *op.cit.*, p152.

⁷³ *Industrial Syndicalist*, November 1910 pp8-10, also B.Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900-1914: Myths and Realities* (1976) p19.

League. However, it is entirely possible for an SDFer to be committed to working class self-education for political purposes and to see state control (or socialist influence on state provision) as an additional route to the emancipation of the working class. In the practice of branches at a local level the SDF can be characterised as containing more of the first – those prioritising self-education - and fewer of the second – those with state provision as a priority - and hence, with the formation of the BSP, it was regarded by their ILP splitters as a better potential home.⁷⁴ Whatever the malaise, the SDF suffered by having two parallel, and sometimes contradictory, lines on the role of education in contemporary society.

⁷⁴ See Logie Barrow, 'Determinism and Environmentalism in Socialist Thought', in R. Samuel and G.S.Jones (eds.), *Culture, Ideology and Politics* (1982) p204.

Chapter 8

Strategy and Tactics

In an article in which he enumerates the 'Merits of the SDF' John Foster writes that the SDF deserves notice because it survived for more than thirty years (and outlasted other socialist groups), educated a generation of labour movement activists, had a significant presence in London and Lancashire but also that they had a belief in mass action and demonstration which they used to particular effect to promote free speech and the plight of the unemployed.¹ It is this last point, or rather the methods the SDF used in their furtherance, which is the focus of this chapter. It is the aim of this chapter to look at the way in which the SDF dealt with politics beyond election time and the extent to which their activities reflected their socialism. The SDF differentiated between (what were known to a later generation of activists as) 'popular front' and 'united front' organisations and unfailingly put forward the socialist viewpoint in popular front organisations in contrast to a Fabian-like permeation. Their work in united front organisations and their work towards establishing national socialist unity effectively gives the lie to the sectarian label. This myth, I believe, has arisen largely as a smokescreen to justify the activities of the ILP leadership, and then those of the Labour Party, over the trajectory of the Labour Alliance.

It seems appropriate at this point to deal with the SDF's approach to united front and popular front organisations. A united front organisation can be defined as a grouping of self-defined socialists, while a popular front organisation is one in which all shades of political opinion are joined for or against an issue, event or cause, such as many anti-war movements. The SDF was in many ways a united front organisation before it was a political party. As the Democratic Federation it brought together a politically ill-defined collection of groups such as the Labour Emancipation League and

¹ John Foster, 'The Merits of the SDF', *BMML*, (105), Autumn 1984, pp25-37.

various Radical clubs allied around such issues as anti-coercion in Ireland and land reform. The very title of Federation, which was retained until 1907, suggests an alliance rather than the rigidity of a party line.

a) **Direct action and physical force**

In the early 1880s Morris believed that the revolution would come in a Norse 'Night of the Gods' and that 'true civilisation may have to be reached through the destruction, and not the transformation of the existing order.'² At the same time Hyndman could paint a picture of impending doom for the readers of the *Nineteenth Century*. 'I despair of a peaceful solution to the inevitable class struggle even in England;' he wrote, 'and I fear that we must pass through the fiery furnace of "some fatal natural catastrophe" to the goal of full economical freedom and organised work for all.'³

With images of the Paris Commune within recent memory there was reason to believe revolution would be accompanied by violence. However, many like Morris in *News from Nowhere*, believed that the violence would be initiated by counter-revolutionaries, and that ardent socialists should be prepared for the eventuality. On a day-to-day basis socialist speakers were subjected to violent attacks for merely speaking, but at other times their confrontational tactics sometimes courted a physical response. According to George Lansbury, 'leading men in the SDF, like Harry Quelch, Hunter Watts and J.E. Williams all believed that it was necessary to arm and drill guards for the same purpose... Quelch and others could be found almost any night drilling raw recruits for Labour's army.'⁴ However, by 1911 Quelch claimed that any insurrection required 'the inspiration of the revolutionary spirit' but 'that spirit is entirely lacking except in a microscopic minority.' As a result, direct action was not a viable option.⁵

² J.W. Mackail, *op.cit.*, p26.

³ H.M. Hyndman, 'Something better than emigration', *Nineteenth Century*, Vol. XVI (1884), p998.

⁴ G.Lansbury, *op.cit.*, p80.

⁵ Harry Quelch, *Social Democracy and Industrial Organisation* (1911), p2.

One valid form of direct action was the church parade.⁶ For example, in 1887 Burns led four hundred of the unemployed on a church parade to Battersea Church for a service and then on to the Princes Head, a favourite spot for Socialist meetings.⁷ On 12 February 1907 Jack Williams led a march of the unemployed to Westminster to coincide with the state opening of Parliament.⁸ However, although threatening for some, these church parades could equally inspire sympathy or pity and by the 1900s the church parades of the SDF-led Working-Class Defence League had degenerated into 'virtually begging expeditions.'⁹ For example, in the 1890s the Canning Town SDF organised a 'brigade' of the unemployed to sell wood and oil 'around the streets.'¹⁰ However, as Karen Hunt notes, women's involvement in marches and demonstrations was not deemed appropriate. Women's events, such as the deputation to the Prime Minister, were organised separately.¹¹

b) Unemployment: a 'united front'?

The SDF in London, however, had to develop an ability to work within United Front organisations if it was to have influence amongst the working class, given that the majority of working people in London did not have the vote in parliamentary elections until after 1918. Examples of these might include: the Eight-Hour Movement (1884-5), the free speech campaigns (1885-1888)¹², the organisation of the first London May Day demonstration (1890) and the National Right to Work Council (1904). This last example illustrates the difficulties involved in establishing effective United Front organisations. As often as not, separate political organisations exist because

⁶ This tactic dated back to the Chartists. See I.Prothero, *op.cit.*, p225.

⁷ Chris Wrigley, 'Liberals and the desire for Working-Class Representatives in Battersea, 1886-1922', K.D.Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History* (1974), p130.

⁸ SDF Annual Conference Report, 1907, p13.

⁹ K.Weller, *op.cit.*, p15.

¹⁰ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 17 September 1893.

¹¹ Karen Hunt, 'Fractured universality: the language of British socialism before the First World War', J.Belcham and N.Kirk, *Languages of Labour* (Aldershot 1997), p73.

¹² Canning Town SDF organised a 'Free Speech Defence Fund' in the 1890s. Ibid, 29 November 1891, 6 December 1891, 10 January 1892.

of a difference in theory or tactics and not merely because of the characters of personalities contained within that organisation.

The work with the unemployed is ever-present in the, albeit limited, documentary evidence of the branch minute books.¹³ What can be said is that the unemployed were a constant rather than a fleeting concern of the SDF, perhaps because, as J. Hunter Watts once put it when discussing subscriptions, 'there would always remain room in the SDF for the poverty-stricken proletariat' and branches often waived subscriptions for out of work members.¹⁴ In a period when the very concept of unemployment was being developed by economists and social scientists,¹⁵ the SDF could point to capitalism as the root cause; 'the existence of the unemployed class is an essential characteristic of the capitalist system.' The unemployed were the 'reserve army of labour' used by capitalism to control access to and wage levels within the labour market.¹⁶ As a result, the SDF felt they could organise the unemployed to put pressure on local and national government to provide for them. This was the point made by a deputation of unemployed before the Conservative Prime Minister Balfour in 1905. They declared that it was 'wrong in principle for the working of the Act to depend on charity at all' and therefore asked for a recall of Parliament 'so that it can vote the necessary measures to enable the machinery you set up to be put in operation.'¹⁷ In this role the SDF filled a space left by the trade unions and the Progressive parties.

In the wake of the Trafalgar Square events of 1886, H.H.Champion could point out that the SDF had been concerned with the fate of the unemployed from 1883 when they had spoken against emigration as a solution to the

¹³ Amongst the Canning Town SDF the topic appears throughout the summer, autumn and winter of 1892. Minutes, 29 May, 26 June, 14 August, 21 August, 4 September, 16 October, 6 November, 4 December, 11 December, 18 December 1892.

¹⁴ SDF Annual Conference Report, 1900, p7.

¹⁵ See Jose Harris, *Unemployment and Politics* (Oxford 1972), pp7-50.

¹⁶ Harry Quelch, *The Social Democratic Federation: Its Objective, its Principles and its Work* (1907), p5, p6.

¹⁷ Harry Quelch, *Verbatim Report of the Deputation of Unemployed to the Right Hon. A.J.Balfour* (1905), p10.

growing numbers of people out of work.¹⁸ The build up to the 1886 agitation had itself involved a series of house to house enquires during the winter of 1885-6 and the presentation of the results before local Boards of Guardians. At the time Champion proposed a combination of public works and national legislation to alleviate the problem. Public works included developing the Thames embankment and workers' housing as well as free school meals to School Board children. The legislative proposals were an eight hour day and a 48 hour week as well as international agreement on the hours of work.¹⁹ Even into the 1890s, without the perceived threat of civil disturbance, the SDF were able to keep pressure on vestries to provide for the unemployed. For example, the Battersea Vestry 'under pressure [from] the SDF in particular' set up a labour exchange and insisted that vestry labour be employed through it. In 1890 and 1891 between £600-700 was spent on snow clearing, while in 1892 between £6,000 and £7,000 was spent on public works which specifically employed the out of work.²⁰

The National Unemployed Committee was set up by the ILP at the end of 1902 to deal with the rising number of unemployed, which was partly a result of the demobilisation of soldiers from the Boer War. The SDF had its own local groups using different tactics. The NUC aimed to agitate for the establishment of a government department solely with the task of the provision of work for the unemployed. The SDF committees in London and elsewhere aimed to spur the unemployed into action. Pressure in some quarters was interpreted as direct action, which led to violence and police reaction in the case of Manchester. The aim, said *Justice*, was that 'pressure from without [would] prove salutary' and force the Government to take action.²¹ What it did spur was middle class donations to the Lord Mayor's fund (as in 1886-7), both in London and in Manchester.²² The SDF, unlike the NUC, put pressure on local authorities to provide work for the

¹⁸ H.H.Champion, *The facts about the unemployed. An appeal and a warning. By one of the middle class* (1886), p13. See also, H.M.Hyndman, 'emigration'.

¹⁹ H.H.Champion, *op.cit.*, pp13,7-8, 10.

²⁰ C.Wrigley, *op.cit.*, p140.

²¹ *Justice*, 7 February 1903.

²² A.J.Kidd, 'The Social Democratic Federation and Popular Agitation Amongst the Unemployed in Edwardian Manchester' *IRSH* Vol. XXIX (1984) pp346-8.

unemployed. In London meetings were held at respectable venues and in conjunction with the LTC. For example, in Stratford in East London during the winter of 1904 unemployed agitation at the Grove and at a special Town Hall meeting was the central activity of the local branch. There was a house to house distribution of handbills advertising the Town Hall meeting. The respectable venue had ultra-respectable SDF speakers: Hyndman and Lady Warwick.²³ Yet despite this attempt at courting the respectable, the SDF were still excluded from broad-based ('united front') organisations such as the National Unemployed Committee. As Kenneth Brown puts it, 'Once the TUC, the ILP and the LRC began to interest themselves seriously in the unemployment problem it was almost inevitable that the voice of the much smaller SDF would be drowned. But this should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the campaign for a special parliamentary session at the end of 1904 was started by the Social Democrats.'²⁴ In negotiations with the national government the SDF lost out to the TUC and the ILP, as they had no parliamentary representation.

It was only after an SDF meeting of the unemployed led to a riot and the diluted Unemployed Workmen's Act was passed in 1905 that the National Right to Work Council was set up and the SDF invited to participate. The 'Right to Work Manifesto' issued in January 1906 (and printed by the Twentieth Century Press) called upon activists to form Right to Work Committees in each district where the Act was due to go into operation. It called upon the unemployed to register and agitate for work, for the national government to fund schemes – such as Farm Colonies – and for local authorities to 'put in hand works of utility, in order to give employment, such as, Afforestation, Reclamation or improvement and cultivation of Land.'²⁵ In London the SDF was 'instrumental' in setting up the London Central Workers' Committee which aimed to press local councils to exploit the (limited) legislation. Five SDFers were on the West Ham Distress

²³ Stratford SDF Minutes, 24 November 1904, 8 December 1904. Also 31 August 1905 for further activity.

²⁴ K.D.Brown, *Labour and Unemployment 1900-1914* (Newton Abbott 1971) p43.

²⁵ *Right to Work Manifesto* [nd. 1906], p1. Stratford SDF, for example, elected two delegates [Keenan and Keiller] to the Stratford Right to Work Committee. Stratford SDF Minutes, 14 December 1905.

Committee set up by the local authority to administer the Act while in Battersea the National Right to Work Committee was 'in practice run by the SDF'.²⁶ However, in both Manchester and London the SDF were marginalised within these attempts at united front organisations, MacDonald describing them as 'only another SDF dodge to hamper the LRC'.²⁷

The SDF were among those who believed that labour colonies were a possible solution to unemployment. Support for this idea can be traced back to the Chartist Land Plan of the 1840s. Like the SDF forty years later, the O'Brienites were opposed to emigration and proposed 'home colonisation' as an alternative.²⁸ The delegation to the Prime Minister in 1905 had claimed that 'there is hungry land and the hungry people needing each other.' The occupation of such land could be a pump-priming activity as 'their needs would give employment in other directions to those who are not capable of work on the land.'²⁹ Others hoped that if children were apprenticed away from towns and on farms they would escape the degeneracy of the city.³⁰ For J.G. Webster³¹ the purchase of land by the state to be worked by the unemployed was 'a practical step towards the complete organisation of industry by the community in the interests of all.'³² After 1906 SDFers in Manchester, Bradford and West Ham, together with groups of unemployed, took direct action and occupied uncultivated land. Ben Cunningham, an SDF 'Land Grabber' in Plaistow claimed that rather than providing a practical solution to unemployment they were responding to a call from the people of West Ham and that unemployment was 'owing to our rotten economic system.'³³

²⁶ M.Crick, *op.cit.*, p176, C.Wrigley, *op.cit.*, p144.

²⁷ J.R.MacDonald cited in M.Crick, *op.cit.*, p176.

²⁸ I.Prothero, *op.cit.*, pp133-4.

²⁹ H.Quelch, *Verbatim Report* (1905), p5. In 1893 the Canning Town SDF called for the Board of Guardians to 'open up land for the [workhouse] inmates to Cultivate + the Unemployed.' Canning Town SDF Minutes, 12 February 1893.

³⁰ *Bow and Bromley Socialist*, February 1898.

³¹ J.G.Webster, active in Southwark SDF c1901-1911. London Executive Council member 1906-8

³² J.G. Webster, 'The Problem of the Unemployed', Theodore Rothstein (ed.), *The Socialist Annual 1906* (1906), p26. For labour colonies see also *Justice*, 3 and 10 February 1894. For a critical view see *New Age*, 25 July 1907. For a variation on the theme see A.P. Hazell and W. Cook, *Work for the Unemployed! A National Highway for Military and Motor Traffic* [nd. 1909].

³³ Ben Cunningham, *Land Grabbers in Plaistow. Why we formed Triangle Camp* (Canning Town 1906), p2.

With the election of the Liberal Government in 1906 the SDF was again isolated in the unemployment campaign. In August 1908 SDF branch secretaries were instructed to reply to the centre with information about the 'state of trade and numbers of out of work and what action the comrades think should be taken by the SDP locally and whether they will take such action in conjunction with other organisations.' H.W.Lee went on to say that the 'SDP must be well to the fore in a vigorous agitation on behalf of the unemployed.'³⁴ Between October 1908 and February 1909 the Joint London Right to Work Committee – with E.C. Fairchild as Secretary - brought the SDF and the ILP together in London to agitate using a combination of demonstrations and parliamentary lobbying.³⁵ Keir Hardie believed that if the 'Right to Work' Bill was to succeed it should be coupled with extra-parliamentary pressure, preferably from the capital, an area where the SDF was strongest. This led Hardie to work closer with Fairchild and the Joint London Right to Work Committee.³⁶ The joint venture collapsed because of 'the reaction of trade unionists against co-operation with the Social Democrats'³⁷ and the violent tactics employed by some SDFers. However, in the Battersea Borough elections of 1909 the SDF followed up their agitation by running candidates with unemployment and rent rises as their main issues. The campaign attracted over 6,000 votes in the Battersea parliamentary area or 9.4% of the vote.³⁸

The brief period of united front participation highlights two principal problems the SDF had in working with other socialist and labour groups. The SDF saw the disenfranchised unemployed as their constituency and indeed some SDFers such as Jack Williams were *of* the unemployed. From the 1880s the SDF had a tradition of street politics and the organisation of the unemployed. At times this led to disruption, violence or law breaking which alienated some in the ILP and the LRC. Secondly, the SDF had not

³⁴ SDP Quarterly Report, August 1908, p4.

³⁵ *SDP News*, December 1910.

³⁶ K.D.Brown, *Unemployment*, p103.

³⁷ M.Crick, *op.cit.*, p180.

³⁸ C.Wrigley, *op.cit.*, p145.

been as successful as the ILP or the Labour Party in gaining representation in Parliament and this meant that SDF pressure was often localised and that the party was marginalised when trying to change Government policy. They were rabble-rousers who could not act on a national stage.

c) **The SDF and cross-party organisations**

The party's policy on participation in progressive organisations as outlined by Bax and Quelch in the *'New Catechism'* was essentially pragmatic and even-handed. They said that it 'depends entirely on the character of [the] movements. All, which tend in the direction of Socialism, are encouraged by Socialists. All which, no matter how reasonable or attractive they appear on the surface, are essentially antagonistic to Socialism, Socialists are bound to oppose as misleading and dangerous.'³⁹

There are further examples of SDF participation in what might be regarded as cross-party or popular front organisations. Unlike the Socialist League, the SLP and the SPGB, the SDF was, on occasions, prepared to see some merit in non-socialist politics and politicians, particularly 'advanced radicals', who supported elements of the Federation's 'stepping stones'. Thus the candidates of Deptford Liberal and Radical Club were praised for promising to resign from office if so instructed, as were Fenwick, the Lib-Lab miners' MP, for supporting payment for MPs, and Labouchere for his general democratic radicalism and in particular for his commitment to abolish the House of Lords.⁴⁰ A willingness to work with non-socialists has been ascribed to the Chartist heritage of the SDF⁴¹ in which a concern for the 'political' issues (as opposed to the economic or social ones) could lead to cross-party co-operation. Hence one of the SDF's earliest campaigns was for freedom of speech where they worked with other socialists and Radicals in

³⁹ E.B.Bax and H.Quelch, *op.cit.*, p39.

⁴⁰ *Justice*, 12 November 1887, 14 July 1888, 17 March 1888, cited in L.Barrow and I.Bullock, *op.cit.*, p26.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp9-29, 141-6.

Dod Street in Canning Town, Paddington and famously for the re-opening of Trafalgar Square.⁴²

During the Boer War the National Democratic League was set up as a conscious revival of the Chartist programme. It attracted support from 12 SDF branches. Walthamstow SDFers gave it a cautious welcome noting that political reforms did not spell social reform but that the NDL would be 'supported by the SDF when need arises and possibility exists.' However, while emphasising the need for social change, they did believe that proportional representation was 'the most important political reform.'⁴³ At a time when the party was facing opposition from the impossibilists (which led to the withdrawal from the LRC) it is perhaps clear why response of the SDF leadership was cautious. However, individual branches and individual members still pursued the 'radical' or 'progressive' alliance, which some felt was the core of SDF ideology and pre-dated the Marxian content of social democracy. For example, Herbert Burrows, the son of a Chartist, was a member of the 'Rainbow Circle', a discussion group which also contained Ramsay MacDonald, Eduard Bernstein, J.A.Hobson, Herbert Samuel and Charles Trevelyan.⁴⁴

However, it is not surprising that there was a move to popular front organisations. As I have mentioned in the chapter on religion, one of the reasons for the overlap between secularism and socialism was the common premises, while both the Canning Town and Erith SDF branches shared their premises with the local section of the Irish National League.⁴⁵ A further example is that of Tom Mann who, sometime around 1900, in his guise as the landlord of the *Enterprise* public house in Long Acre played host to the Young Ireland Society, the Central Branch of the SDF, the Friends of

⁴² For Trafalgar Square see Rodney Mace, *Trafalgar Square: Emblem of Empire* (1976).

⁴³ [Walthamstow] *Socialist Critic*, 29 December 1900.

⁴⁴ David Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition: Socialists, Liberals and the Quest for Unity. 1884-1939* (Cambridge 1992), p58 and M.Freeden (ed.), *op.cit.*

⁴⁵ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 4 January 1891.

Russian Freedom and the Cosmopolitans, while membership of Stratford SDF's club was open to non-socialists and 'run as a democratic club'.⁴⁶

The issue of individual participation in what might be regarded as community organisations may seem to dilute the concept of political activity too much. However, John Maclean, an SDF member in Glasgow, certainly felt that community groups were an effective basis for the propagation of socialism. Harry Quelch could provide an economic explanation for the SDF's non-involvement in the co-operative movement. He felt that because of the low and irregular wages of Londoners the co-op movement never really took off and hence the SDF could not have a space for influence.⁴⁷ However, work in the co-operative movement was 'officially sanctioned' by the SDF and individuals like E.C.Fairchild in Hackney, Mary Bridges-Adams in Greenwich or the Stratford branch in West Ham did play a prominent role in their local movement but, according to Ripley and McHugh, 'the overall contribution of the SDF in this area was slight and sustained involvement by individual members unusual'.⁴⁸

e) **The Workmen's National Housing Council: the politics of consumption**

One further initiative that is worthy of mention is the Workmen's National Housing Council. Housing reform had always been a major issue within the SDF in London and had been the focus of local branch publications.⁴⁹ The Council was founded by Fred Knee and two other SDFers in 1898 and Knee subsequently took on the role of secretary. The organisation was successful to the extent that it obtained state aid for local authority housing in the Housing Act of 1914 which, according to Crick, was 'largely due to Knee'.

⁴⁶ T.Mann, *op.cit.*, p121, Stratford SDF, Minutes, 20 July 1905.

⁴⁷ Harry Quelch, *Trade Unionism, Co-operation and Social-Democracy* (1892), pp10-11.

⁴⁸ B.J.Ripley and J.McHugh, *John Maclean* (Manchester 1989), pp19-20, Jane Martin, 'Working for the people? Mrs Bridges Adams and the London School Board, 1897-1904', *History of Education* 29:1 (January 2000), pp49-62. See also H.H.Champion and B.Jones, *Co-operation -vs- Socialism: Being a Report of a Debate Between Mr. H.H.Champion and Mr. Benjamin Jones* (Manchester 1887).

⁴⁹ See for example, John Ward, *England's Sacrifice to the God Mammon* [nd. 1890?], Brixton Branch SDF, *What we want! An address to our neighbours* [nd. 1890s?], F. O. Pickard-Cambridge, *Social-Democracy and the Housing Question* (1900), Social Democratic Federation, *Protect the Home* (1906).

However, it is possible that this was a successful personal initiative rather than an SDF intervention.⁵⁰

By 1905 the WNHC consisted of a delegate body of 150 organisations drawn from the labour movement such as trade unions, local working-class housing groups such as the Tottenham Working Men's Housing League, trades councils and co-operative societies, with their stated object as 'the provision by public authority of good house for all people.' They sent out lecturers and published leaflets, pamphlets and the *Housing Journal*. They claimed they had 'a great effect in arousing the interest alike of politicians, Government officials and the public, in the problem of better housing of the people as a whole.'⁵¹ In other words the Council adopted the tactics of an orthodox political pressure group, focusing on putting pressure on local authorities to use the full powers granted to them by legislation. They avoided using confrontational tactics such as the rent strike in a bid to secure housing reform.

Jane Hannam and Karen Hunt point out that the Council 'was not an SDF "front" organisation but gained broad-based support across and beyond the socialist and labour movement.'⁵² However, there was a remarkably close relationship between the SDF and the Council in the way they supported each other at election time. For example, the SDF LCC elections committee asked Fred Knee to draw up a leaflet on housing for circulation during the 1907 election and tried to secure the architect Robert Williams as an SDF LCC candidate in Lambeth. In the run up to the LCC elections the Council called a conference and created a sub-committee to keep the issue of housing before the electorate. One of the committee's members was C. Cook⁵³, who was also a member of the SDF's LCC elections committee.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ M.Crick, *op.cit.*, p105, pp310-311. For Fred Knee see D.Englander (ed.), *op.cit.*, and D.Englander, *Landlord and Tenant in Urban Britain 1838-1918* (Oxford 1983).

⁵¹ Robert Williams and Fred Knee, *The Labourer and his cottage* (1905), p88.

⁵² J. Hannam and K. Hunt, *op.cit.*, p148.

⁵³ C.Cook, active in Islington (N) SDF c1905-7. London Executive Council member 1905.

⁵⁴ SDF LCC Elections Committee Minutes, 25 September 1905, 9 April, 21 May, 18 July, 30 July, 1906.

f) The SDF in government

The attitude of the SDF towards elections and 'parliamentarianism' caused some division in the organisation. In the schism of 1884, which brought about the formation of the Socialist League, the debate over whether to participate in elections was fuel to the fiery discussions. The 'Tory gold' scandal of the following year brought the departure of some more activists such as Jem MacDonald. In the 1900s the debate following the SDF's support for the Kautsky resolution at the 1900 International brought the 'impossiblist' split and the decision to leave the national LRC in August 1901. From this short summary it is clear that the parliamentary road was neither broad nor smooth for the SDF.

Like many parties of the Second International the SDF envisaged a revolution that would come through parliament. In Collins' words they 'genuinely believed in Parliament and in the possibility of using it to win reforms, even while society remained capitalist'. For example, speaking of that time George Lansbury writes that 'Hyndman, Quelch and all the early Socialists urged that the Parliamentary machine should be captured, not to perpetuate it as an institution, but solely for the purpose of transforming it into a machine for social reconstruction and revolution',⁵⁵ where the working class would gain control of the political high ground through the contemporary constitution. Reform in the situation would usher in the revolution. The SDF 'envisaged a period of transition in which reforms of a generally progressive nature, but stopping well short of complete socialism, would be secured.'⁵⁶

These reforms, or 'palliatives', would strengthen the position of the working class and hence hasten the final acquisition of power. With their faith in the parliamentary road to socialism the SDF, in Collins' opinion, 'followed in the traditions of Marx.' By taking the contrary view, such as all reform is tainted in a class society and therefore it is futile to pursue it, led to the

⁵⁵ H.Collins, *op.cit.*, p57, G.Lansbury, *op.cit.*, p277.

⁵⁶ H.Collins, *op.cit.*, p57.

degeneration and the break up of the Socialist League. To that degree, the path of the SDF was the more practical.⁵⁷ The SDF were not the only ones who believed that Parliament could be the vehicle for rapid and radical change. A broad spectrum of opinion in the 1880s and 1890s - from Salisbury to Engels - subscribed to this view. Salisbury, for example, believed that after the 1884 Reform Act 'all that could be done by Conservative forces was to discipline the masses in their inexorable march to political ascendancy.'⁵⁸ Thus pessimistic conservatives as well as the more optimistic socialists saw an inevitable link between democracy and socialism. From a socialist point of view the task was to steer the soon-to-be dominant class in the right direction by way of agitation and education.⁵⁹

The SDF were socialist educators and elections gave them a good opportunity for such. SDF branches focused a great deal of time, effort, and perhaps more importantly money, on elections. Much of the local branch publications such as leaflets, newspapers and pamphlets that survive in the archives were produced for local elections. The Southampton SDF produced a leaflet to explain their non-participation in the 1895 general election.⁶⁰ The local newspapers produced editions to cover elections. For example, the whole of the November 1897 issue of the *Bow and Bromley Socialist* was devoted to the candidacy of W.G.Pearson for the School Board. Aside from the political rhetoric that, both parties were as bad as each other, with this level of expenditure – in whatever form – it is little wonder that the branches took political apostasy seriously. The minute books reveal that disciplinary action, suspension or expulsion, was taken against those shown to have supported another, usually Liberal, candidate.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p58.

⁵⁸ Cited in Neville Kirk, *Change, Continuity and Class: Labour in British Society 1850-1920* (Manchester 1998), p183.

⁵⁹ Beatrice Webb's view of democracy was that 'if unqualified it will tend to become a class tyranny and, what is worse, a tyranny by the most ignorant class; it will be by measures securing to numerical minorities, representation, that you will avert this...' Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie (eds.), *The Diary of Beatrice Webb Volume One 1873-1892. Glitter Around and Darkness Within* (1986), p61. Diary entry for 22 September 1882.

⁶⁰ For this see chapter 12.

The SDF made no real impact in electoral politics even in London where it had some influence in the labour movement. Individuals such as E.C.Fairchild were elected to the local borough council, board of guardians or school board. C.A. Gibson's advice was that 'whenever SDF members get on public bodies they should devote themselves above all things to bring shady transactions to light.'⁶¹ Harry Bird gave detailed reports of school board activities in the *Socialist Critic* produced by the Walthamstow SDF and Hackney and Kingsland SDF. It put aside the third Friday of every month for a report from Fairchild of the work of the borough council.⁶² However, there are two instances where the SDF did have some influence on local government: on the Poplar Board of Guardians in the 1890s and on the West Ham Town Council in the late 1890s and early 1900s.

The SDF view of the Poor Law was that because the board of guardians was elected by the people of the district, it could therefore respond to the local employment needs of the community. This was certainly the view put forward by Poplar Guardians in the 1890s. In the summer of 1893 George Lansbury – who was amongst a group of labour Guardians of three SDFers and two Gasworkers' representatives – tried to put pressure on the Board with deputations of the unemployed and tried to call a local conference on unemployment. Instead, the Board set up a Labour Bureau at which the unemployed would be selected for up to three days' work. In the severe weather of February 1895 Lansbury led further deputations to the Guardians which led to them opening a stoneyard for the unemployed. When this stoneyard was closed the following month 150 men broke into the workhouse to demand relief.⁶³

This example shows firstly that Lansbury and his fellow SDFers could provide contact with and leadership for the unemployed from within the Board and secondly that they could use it to put pressure on the Guardians to

⁶¹ *Justice*, 13 October 1894.

⁶² Hackney and Kingsland SDF, Minutes, 12 February 1904.

⁶³ P.A.Ryan, 'Poplarism, 1894-1930', P.Thane (ed.), *Origins of British Social Policy* (1978), pp58-62, J.Shepherd, *op.cit.*, pp51-60. Will Thorne led similar demonstrations/deputations to the West Ham Guardians during the same winter. See J.Harris, *op.cit.*, pp85-7.

provide relief through public works. The Davy Report (1906) into the workings of Poplar Union pointed out that 'some excuse for the policy of the Guardians may be found in the fact that many of them actually live among the applicants for relief, and know, or think they know, the individual circumstances of each case.'⁶⁴

In 1898-9 in West Ham twenty-seven socialist and labour councillors (including eleven SDFers) – backed by the Trades Council and the influential Gasworkers' Union - used their powers to 'undertake socially useful tasks' such as house building. The council labour force was paid at trade union rates and worked a 48-hour week. In this way, it was hoped, the council could have an impact on employment in the area. In the words of Duncan Tanner, the council 'saw their action as a struggle for justice and human decency conducted by local working-class people, for local working-class people.'⁶⁵

This first 'Labour' local authority was weakened over a controversy about the issue of the *Freethinker* in public libraries and issues of union sectionalism, and in the long term the West Ham councillors had to pare back their spending as the threat of bankruptcy loomed over the council. However, in 1906, Will Thorne captured the parliamentary seat of West Ham (South) with over 67 per cent of the vote, while the SDF could still provide ten councillors in the borough.

g) Conclusion

There is some record of success in involvement by individuals, branches and (sometimes) nationally in popular front campaigns for free speech, housing, against the Boer War and unemployment. Yet there was little success in establishing united socialist or even labour movement campaigns on issues such as unemployment. However, it was significant that the major splits in

⁶⁴ Cited in P.A.Ryan, *op.cit.*, p68-9.

⁶⁵ D.Tanner, *op.cit.*, p177, p178. For a summary of the work of the SDF group on Edmonton UDC see *Enfield Chronicle and Herald*, 23 January 1903.

the SDF were to the left by those who believed that the leadership were making too many compromises and were too conciliatory.

Critics of mass demonstrations, such as Guy Aldred, saw them as a cynical means of propelling the leaders into the limelight and into Parliament.⁶⁶

While this certainly fits the case of John Burns, the consistency with which the SDF took up the cause of the unemployed – and financially weakened the organisation in the process – does not smack of this opportunism. However, it is difficult to find a pattern in the tactics utilised by the SDF in London.

While support for a Liberal or a Tory at election time was a disciplinary offence in SDF branches, it seems to have been acceptable to build coalitions of support to include non-socialists. The 'old guard' of the SDF could criticise the anti-parliamentarian syndicalists but Quelch, for one, was not above the intimidatory church parade.⁶⁷ The politics of the tactics to a large extent reflect the breadth of the policy within the SDF. While most regarded themselves as parliamentary socialists, there were others who could always hint at the possibility of alternative action.

⁶⁶ J.T.Cauldwell, *Come Dungeons Dark. The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist* (Barr 1988).

⁶⁷ See the incident in Bermondsey from 1887 cited in Chapter 4.

Chapter 9

Ideology

The aim of this chapter is to describe the theory and ideology of the SDF rather than to evaluate the implementation of the politics of the organisation. In this sense this chapter is closely related to Chapter 8 which has the politics of the London SDF as its primary focus. While this chapter is about theory, the other is about practice. Both are concerned with doctrine. While H.M.Hyndman (or Belfort Bax or Harry Quelch for that matter) certainly 'dominated' the SDF and his theoretical writings and pronouncements were widely used throughout its history, he is but one current within the stream of SDF ideology¹. Therefore a variety of influences and representatives may be called upon to illustrate ideological features.

One of the principal criticisms labelled against the SDF is that its ideology was inflexible and dogmatic.² While an opponent of the SDF such as Glasier in his rant against the SDF at the 1897 ILP Conference might describe them as narrow and Calvinistic, the charge of reducing Marxism 'into the rigid dogma of an orthodox sect' was made by Engels.³ Hence the SDF's interpretation of Marxism deserves examination – as well as a comparison with the Marxism of other Second International parties.

a) **Continuity from Chartism and English Radicalism**

In his survey of labour history Neville Kirk describes a three-stage model which held sway in the historiography from the 1960s. The first phase is from the 'making' of an industrial working class from the 1780s to the 1840s, while the

¹ Mark Bevir, 'H.M.Hyndman: a rereading and a reassessment', *History of Political Thought*, 12.1 Spring 1991, pp125-6.

² The present Chancellor of the Exchequer described the SDF's politics as 'narrowly cataclysmic'. Gordon Brown, *Maxton* (Edinburgh 1986), p31.

³ Engels to F.A.Sorge, 10 November 1894, cited in H.Collins, *op.cit.*, p48.

second phase is given as from the late 1840s until the late 1870s where a 'less heroic' adoption of cross-class political and cultural ties took place. The third phase is given as from the early 1880s until the First World War when there was a 're-making' of the working class typified by the 'development of a mass labour movement, especially the massive extension of trade unionism... to the non-skilled, significant periods of labour unrest ... the revival of socialism and the birth and development of the Labour Party...' ⁴ This view of the development of the labour movement in Britain is closely associated with E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm.

The alternative account is termed 'liberal revisionism' by Kirk who lists Jon Lawrence, Gareth Stedman Jones, Alastair Reid, Eugenio Bagini and Patrick Joyce amongst the proponents. These writers 'draw our attention to a long-established tradition of popular political radicalism which, it is claimed, maintained its powerful inter-class appeal throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.' ⁵ For these liberal revisionists the radicalism of the SDF is its over-riding feature rather than being a resurgence of class-conscious socialism. What might be connected with this is the view that individuals continued their adherence to Chartist political principles (rather than Marxist economic and social principles) which diluted the purism of the Marxism of the SDF. What I aim at below is an attempt to balance the two historiographical schools in order to come to some evaluation of the ideology of the SDF.

It is important to differentiate between Radicalism and radicalism. The former is the term applied to the reformist faction of the nineteenth century Liberal party committed to political reforms such as an extension of the franchise to working-class men. This faction, led by parliamentarians such as Charles Dilke, George O. Trevelyan and John Morley, commanded tremendous support from skilled workers across the country. The Radical clubs were important for Liberalism in London until the 1890s. ⁶ On the other hand, radicalism can be characterised as a

⁴ N.Kirk, *op.cit.*, p8. See also Jon Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 31 (April 1992), and *Speaking*, pp11-25.

⁵ N.Kirk, *op.cit.*, p9.

⁶ John Davis, 'Radical clubs and London politics, 1870-1900', D.Feldman and G. Stedman Jones, *Metropolis London* (1989), pp103-128.

set of ideas which were not always consonant with Liberal party policy. These ideas included such things as opposition to privilege and 'Old Corruption', defence of producer over the *rentier*, extension of democracy, freedoms of speech, religion, the press and association and (for many) support for republicanism.⁷ Given the origins of the SDF in London's clubland, the Federation necessarily found the backing of both Radicals and radicals.

As an organisation which grew out of a federation of radical working men's clubs, there is certainly a large amount of evidence that supports the claim that, in Jon Lawrence's phrase, 'the SDF represented the last great flowering of metropolitan ultra-Radicalism...'⁸ M.S. Wilkins is explicit in titling his article 'The non-socialist origins of England's first important socialist organisation'.⁹ Hyndman in 1881 planned to 'form a federation of "advanced clubs" around a radical program'¹⁰ and the initial meeting adopted policies similar in aim to those of the Chartists. A further clue is that the second meeting on 5th March 1881 was presided over by Joseph Cowen, the well-known Radical MP.

At the inaugural conference of the Federation in June 1881 a largely radical set of policies was adopted and the word 'socialism' was not used, while Hyndman himself likened their programme to that of the Magna Charta Association.¹¹ This is the point made by Patrick Joyce in stressing the 'populism' of the SDF's radical origins and their closeness to the agitation over the Tichborne claimant and for the Magna Charta Association. 'The marriage of intellectual Marxism and artisan proto-socialism', Joyce writes, 'was presided over by H.M. Hyndman, its offspring being the SDF. What is so striking, however, is the extent to which the SDF was rooted in the Tichborneite kind of populism.'¹²

⁷ I. Prothero, *op. cit.*, pp22-45.

⁸ J. Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism', p178. See also G. Stedman Jones who writes 'It is true that the first socialist groups began as a direct extension of artisan radicalism.' *Languages*, p211.

⁹ *IRSH*, (Vol. IV) 1959.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 200.

¹¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 8 September 1881, cited in *ibid*, p205. This programme of constitutional reform forms a large part of the policy put forward in the pamphlet in Yiddish issued by the East London (Jewish) branch of the SDF over twenty years later. It suggests that this adherence to constitutional reform ran deeper into the organisation than merely being a hangover from Chartism or Radicalism. See East London (Jewish) SDF, *What is Social Democracy?* [In Yiddish] (1902).

¹² P. Joyce, *Visions*, p75.

In addition, even after the departure of a number of clubs in the summer of 1881 over the Liberal government's policy in Ireland¹³, the SDF still continued to work with Radical clubs on local campaigns such as free speech. For example, Lawrence cites the joint work of Harry Quelch and F.W.Soutter in Southwark where they 'led a joint campaign to unseat the borough's corrupt Vestry Board during which Quelch even agreed to stand as a "Radical, Democratic and Labour" candidate.'¹⁴ According to Lawrence this joint work extended to the 'endorsements of socialism' given by traditionally Radical newspapers such as *Reynold's Newspaper*.¹⁵ In conclusion Lawrence writes that the Radical legacy coloured the politics of the SDF beyond the 1880s. The SDF espoused a 'revolutionary rhetoric' while adhering to a set of traditional constitutional demands. This stance, which he describes as 'Jacobin', was not 'Radicalism in a new guise' but rather the SDF, like the other socialist groups of the period - the ILP and the Fabians - produced 'different socialisms borrowed selectively from preceding political discourses'. In the case of the SDF it was one of constitutional reform.¹⁶

The connection with the radical past was maintained by a number of individuals who had been active in the Chartist movement of the previous generation. People like James Murray who was on the Executive Committee of the Democratic Federation, and his brother Charles had been close to the Chartist leader Bronterre O'Brien.¹⁷ Another personal connection with past radicalism was the Chartist family links of those such as Herbert Burrows, Amie Hicks or H.W.Lee.¹⁸ At this personal level it is easy to see continuities rather than the spontaneity of a 'socialist revival'. Mark Bevir writes of the influence of Bronterre O'Brien's supporters in the early years of the SDF. He notes that the policies adopted by the Democratic Federation in 1881 were the demands of the Charter which had not yet been met together with O'Brien's main social reform, the nationalisation of land.¹⁹

¹³ C.Tsuzuki, *Hyndman*, pp44-48.

¹⁴ J.Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism', p176.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp176-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp177, 185.

¹⁷ Mark Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation 1880-1885: From O'Brienism to Marxism', *IRSH* Vol. XXXVII (1992), pp211-214. I.Prothero, *op.cit*.

¹⁸ J.Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism', p172. H.W.Lee (1866-1932), clerical worker. Active in SDF from 1884. Secretary of SDF from 1887 and then became Secretary to BSP.

¹⁹ M.Bevir, *op.cit.*, p216.

While the O'Brienites saw political advancement through a struggle between capital and labour, they believed in 'political power as the crucial prop of economic oppression' and hence constitutional reform was a prerequisite of economic and social change.²⁰

A further point can be made with reference to Hyndman's reluctance to acknowledge the influence of Marx on *England for All*, the book he presented at the foundation conferences of the Democratic Federation. In public he pointed out that he felt that English people were not happy being led by foreigners and so did not name Marx in person. In private, in a personal letter to Marx, Hyndman explained the situation in more political language. 'I am decided of the opinion,' he wrote, 'that to have named the Capital and its author would have been a big blunder. Party programs [sic] ought to keep free of any apparent dependence upon individual authors or books.'²¹

However, one criticism that can be made of this view of the origins of the SDF is that it still explains the organisation in terms of change and movement. It is often the case when we are trying to write of the beginnings of a party that we re-trace the route taken. While its roots may lie in metropolitan Radical clubs and their radicalism, the SDF soon journeyed from that starting point to a different location.

On the other hand, even from the early days of the Democratic Federation there are some signs that the new organisation would be one which would distance itself from Radicalism. Edwin Dunn –a future anarchist - who took the opportunity to speak up against the rule of capital, took the chair at the first preliminary meeting of the Democratic Federation in March 1881 and hence early on the language of class-confrontation was introduced. A more political conception of working class

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp216-8. Hyndman would look back to Radicalism and cite the foresight of O'Brien well over twenty years later when he wrote that 'Bronterre O'Brien and other Chartists... foresaw the dangerous results of making a schism in the ranks of labour when they had against them a great class interested in keeping wages as low as possible.' H.M.Hyndman, *Social Democracy: The Basis of its Principles and the Causes of its Success* (1904), p3.

²¹ H.M.Hyndman to Karl Marx, 2 July 1881. Marx/Engels Correspondence, IISH, C262. The correspondence between Hyndman and Marx covers the period of almost two years between January 1880 and December 1881. It is difficult to describe this correspondence as unfriendly.

and labour politics had clearly been the intention of Robert Banner²² when he wrote to Karl Marx late in 1880. 'With a work dealing with economics from the standpoint of socialism,' Banner wrote, 'you would soon see a movement in this society, that would put the night cap on that bastard thing Trades Unionism.'²³ While the original programme reflected the demands of the Chartists forty years before, from the third preliminary meeting land nationalisation was included, with adult suffrage and the abolition of the House of Lords soon to be added at the foundation conference in June. With these amendments in mind Hyndman felt obliged to change the contents of *England For All* between the June and September 1881 editions. As Wilkins notes, the

'changes in *England for All* indicate Hyndman's developing position. As 1881 drew to a close and 1882 began, Hyndman moved more and more toward a revolutionary socialist point of view. By the end of 1882, Hyndman was a complete and thorough-going revolutionary socialist.'²⁴

An example of Hyndman's adoption of socialist language is provided in a letter he wrote to Robert Banner in the early 1880s. In this letter he describes the aims of the newly formed Democratic Federation. The extract also illustrates Hyndman's view of the potential of the working class as a political force. 'Our hope', Hyndman writes, 'is to form a real proletariat party with the same end in view as the Social Democrats in Germany though unfortunately the people are not sufficiently educated to accept or even to consider the whole programme yet.'²⁵

However, it is not simply Hyndman's odyssey in the early years of the 1880s that casts doubt on the 'continuity from Radicalism' thesis. The degree to which the SDF adopted the Marxist canon – a body of work that was soon identified in Britain with the notion of class struggle – as their own points to a further break from the Radical past. Kirk Willis cites the intellectuals of the SDF, Hyndman, Bax, Morris and Joynes, as influential propagators and translators of Marx – 'their success in propagation was outstanding'.²⁶ The first full exposition of Marx came

²² Robert Banner (1855-1910), bookbinder. Originally from Scotland. Active in (Woolwich) SDF from 1884. Joined ILP 1890. Chairman Woolwich BC Library Comm. 1903-6.

²³ Robert Banner to Karl Marx, 6 December 1880, IISH D132.

²⁴ M.S. Wilkins, *op. cit.*, p207.

²⁵ H.M. Hyndman to Robert Banner, 27 April [1882?]. BLPES, Coll. Misc 492C [HX/249 P3400].

²⁶ Kirk Willis, 'The introduction and critical reception of Marxist thought in Britain 1850-1900', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 20.2 (1977), p437.

from Belfort Bax²⁷ in the journal *Modern Thought* in December 1881. From April 1883 *To-Day* published a translation of *Das Kapital*, the first available in English. In 1885 – before the authorised translation of Samuel Moore - Bax and Joynes published the first ten chapters of *Capital*, while Joynes translated and published *Wage Labour and Capital* the following year. Later the Twentieth Century Press and the SDF produced a cheap five shilling edition of *Das Kapital*. Harry Quelch's 1900 translation of the *Poverty of Philosophy* is still in print. Thus from early on the Federation identified itself with continental revolutionary socialism.

Additionally, each of the commentators who posit a continuity of Radicalism thesis qualifies the degree of radicalism. It seems that rather than it being a new Radicalism it was a form of socialism influenced by the radical experience of a previous generation. For Mark Bevir 'the process involved subtle not absolute changes in the O'Brienite social theory, though subtle changes did give rise to a new demand for collective ownership of the means of production.'²⁸ The acquisition was as much a dialectical as an evolutionary process, with debate over policy between O'Brienite Radicals and socialists from the beginning of the Federation. In Bevir's view, the change in political views was linked to changes in the labour market, as artisanal production changed to factory production. And so a generation of artisanal activists faded from view while another with an experience of different work practices rose to prominence. While the radical experience was important in providing a lens through which to view socialist ideas, it is misleading to describe this – in relation to the SDF – as a continuity of radicalism.

b) Second International Marxism

While its origins may have been in a marriage between metropolitan radicalism and Marxian socialism, the SDF came to resemble the parties of the Second International. With the departure of the anti-parliamentarians of the Socialist League in 1885 and the SDF's attendance at the possibilist congress of the

²⁷ Ernest Belfort Bax (1854-1926), lawyer, writer. Active in SDF 1882-5, 1888-1911. Joined Socialist League 1885-8. SDF EC 1900. Editor *To-day* (1883), *Justice* (1892).

²⁸ M.Bevir, *op.cit.*, p219. For the adoption of socialist policies by the O'Brienites see pp219-224. See also J.Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism' pp185-6, M.S.Wilkins, *op.cit.*, pp106-7.

international at Brussels in 1891, the SDF was the closest of Britain's socialist and labour parties to the Marxist parties of the Second International. Marxism was given an added lustre when in 1891 in the Erfurt Programme the German SPD – the most successful socialist party in Europe – adopted Marxism as their official ideology.²⁹

At this point qualification needs to be made about the extent to which the formal adoption of Marxism meant the adherence of the membership. In writing of SDF activity in Lancashire Jeffrey Hill notes that 'what has become clear is that, on the whole, theory did not play as large a part in the thinking of local militants as it perhaps did in the minds of the national leadership. The variety of local action is in itself a demonstration of the absence of any hidebound attitudes.'³⁰ Despite this coda it is clear that there was an increasing availability of Marxist texts for those who wanted to study them.³¹ The efforts made by those in the SDF to translate and publish the works of Marx are outlined above. With the establishment of the Twentieth Century Press in 1893 the SDF was able to produce a number of works by contemporary foreign Marxists including: F.A.Sorge, *Socialism and the Worker* (1904, 1910)³², George Plechanoff, *Anarchism and Socialism* (1895), Jean Jaures, *Socialism and the Political Parties* (1905), Karl Kautsky, *The Social Revolution and on the Morrow of the Social Revolution* (1907, 1909), *The Class Struggle (from the Erfurt Programme)* (1909), *The Capitalist Class (from the Erfurt Programme)* (1909), *The Proletariat (from the Erfurt Programme)* (1909, 1912) and *The Socialist Commonwealth* (1909, 1912).

The prevalence of Kautsky in this list is an indication of his standing and stature as an ideologist in the Second International after the death of Engels. According to Donald Sassoon the works of Kautsky and Bebel were more widely read by socialists around Europe - and in Britain Hyndman, Blatchford and Morris - than those of Marx and Engels. However, Marxist theory was reduced to a simple formula. Firstly, capitalism was seen as inherently unjust and the wealth of

²⁹ Herbert Morrison points out that Hyndman was 'too adulatory of European socialist movements, particularly the German Social Democratic Party.' H.Morrison, *op.cit.*, p33.

³⁰ Jeffrey Hill, 'Social Democracy and the Labour Movement: the Social Democratic Federation in Lancashire', *North West Labour History Society Bulletin* 8 (1982-3), p53.

³¹ See Chapter 6 for SDF study groups.

³² An earlier edition published by H.H.Champion's Modern Press came out in 1884.

capitalists based on surplus value, and on this basis they secured power within society. Secondly, as history advances in stages so capitalism is not everlasting and the present ruling class will not rule forever. Hence the role of the working class is to unite and prepare for the future socialist society.³³

This, in a simplified form, was the 'vulgar Marxism' of the Second International propagated by the SDF in numerous pamphlets and books. The schematic form led to the analysis being treated as articles of faith rather than motivating militants. W. Stephen Sanders, who was a member of the Battersea SDF in the 1880s, claimed that he had learned from his 'study of the Marxism system' in the SDF that 'man is entirely a creature of his circumstances: that social and economic evolution takes its own course regardless of man's will or desire, and that he cannot broadly speaking affect it in any way, at least consciously'.³⁴ Sanders later became the secretary of the Fabian Society and so may not be a sympathetic witness, but in his words SDF Marxism was not a plan of action.

The inheritance from the Marxism of the Second International outlined in the second proposition led to the belief that their ideology was 'scientific socialism', a notion certainly encouraged by Engels' work of 1892 *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Where –for some– the stress lay on the objective conditions of socio-historical development, for others it required the rather more subjective principle of the working class learning from the experience of the class struggle. A scientific approach encouraged a gradualist, determinist approach. For example, A.P.Hazell described the work of the Social Democrat as the study of society and its history in order to 'trace the laws which govern its evolution from the past to the present and endeavour to forecast how the laws will affect the future'.³⁵ It was also important that this was a *newly discovered* scientific solution to political problems and that, once learnt, this theory could be applied.

As Larry Portis puts it in reference to the critique of Georges Sorel in France at the same period, the scientific socialists

³³ See Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (1996), p6. See also H.Collins, *op.cit.*, p51.

³⁴ W.S.Sanders, *op.cit.*, p29.

³⁵ A.P.Hazell, *A Plea for Social Democracy* (Social Democratic Tracts No. 2) [nd. mid-1890s?], pp3-4.

'fear that the slow unfolding of events will be interrupted. The pursuit of electoral politics as a revolutionary strategy is preferable to direct conflict between capital and labour that strikes, sabotage and boycotts represent, because it is tacitly assumed that the normal, uninterrupted workings of the system will inevitably create socialist pre-conditions in the shortest possible time.'³⁶

Hence, the interpretation of Marxism used in many parties of the Second International – in Germany, France, Italy and Britain – led to what was meant as a 'guide to action' being turned into a rigid dogma.³⁷ It also led to a view of action that looked doubtfully upon 'non-political' working class organisations such as the trade unions and the co-operative movement which were 'regarded with mistrust or contempt – at best as "palliatives" at worst as props of capitalism.'³⁸ Yet a belief in economic determinism instilled by this 'vulgar' Marxism did not necessarily lead to a passive view of working-class politics. Given Marxism as a route map to the future, it could also be a solace and source of hope for political change in the future and hence sustain the labour movement activists through the defeats and set backs that they went through.

c) Class and the Class Struggle

Despite the faith most SDFers put into the 'process' of historical change and the reservations some of them had for working-class organisations, a belief in the necessity of class conflict was a dividing line between the Federation and the other socialist groups of the period. For example, in 1907 Harry Quelch proclaimed that the SDF was a 'militant Socialist organisation whose members – men and women – belong almost entirely to the working class. Its object is the realisation of Socialism – the emancipation of the working class from its present subjection to the capitalist class.... To this end the SDF proclaims and preaches the Class War.'³⁹

³⁶ Larry Portis, *Georges Sorel* (1980), p55. See also Carl Boggs, *Gramsci's Marxism* (1976), p24 on Italy at the turn of the century. 'Theory became an academic project, remote from and even hostile to political practice – part of a materialist paradigm that excluded all "subjectivity"....'

³⁷ On the 'deep theoretical inadequacy of what passed for marxism in France' at the end of the nineteenth century, see T.Judt, *op.cit.*, p105.

³⁸ Dona Torr, *Tom Mann* (1936), p17, and *Tom Mann and his Times* (1956), pp12-13, Portis, *op.cit.*, p 56.

³⁹ Harry Quelch, *The Social Democratic Federation: Its Objectives, its Principles and its Work* (1907), p1.

In the conclusion to the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels had pointed out the unity of purpose of bourgeois and proletarian revolutionaries. This point was taken up by Bax and Morris in their exposition of socialism in the 1890s when they claimed that the 'new socialism' united the intellectual theorist with the working class movement.⁴⁰ Hyndman, Bax and others believed it was their duty as educated men to lead the workers to the point of class-consciousness. This can explain Hyndman's rhetorical flourish of thanking his working class audiences for his unearned income.⁴¹ In print he proclaimed in 1905 that 'Nowhere more than in England do we need the help of the class which has absorbed all the higher education.'⁴² This view of class-consciousness being brought from outside by a 'compact minority of revolutionary socialists' rather than being learnt through experience was in contradiction to what many Marxists believed. Under the critical view of James D. Young, 'the SDF consistently worked to create an academically educated elite of proletarian and middle class cadres. They also systematically proceeded to criticise almost every aspect of working-class life.'⁴³

A good example of Hyndman's attitude to the potential for political organisation among the working class comes in a letter to Karl Marx in the early 1880s. Before even embarking on an involvement with the labour movement Hyndman is pessimistic. 'I must confess,' he writes, 'it seems hopeless to attempt to form a Labour party here... The men are so,... given over to beer, tobacco and laissez faire. I really do think the younger men are inferior to the old Chartists and the workers in the Reform agitation. Certainly they are much more ignorant.'⁴⁴

Young is to a large extent contradicted by Ross McKibbin⁴⁵ who evaluates a number of factors in answering this question of the weak base of Marxism in Britain and one of them is the absence of an intelligentsia in Britain – a group of disaffected educated people whose 'values and way of life are largely outside and

⁴⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* ([1848] Oxford World's Classics Edition 1998), pp38-9. William Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (1893), pp277-8.

⁴¹ T.Mann, *op.cit.*, p26-7.

⁴² *Justice* 11, March 1905.

⁴³ James D. Young, *Socialism*, p21, p22, p25.

⁴⁴ H.M.Hyndman to Karl Marx, 29 October 1881. Marx/Engels Correspondence, IISH, D2398.

⁴⁵ This 1984 essay 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?' is reprinted as a chapter in his *Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain* (Oxford 1990).

hostile to the ruling values of civil society'⁴⁶ claiming that Marxism failed to take root in Britain because there was no people to do, what in Young's view the SDF were doing. For McKibbin 'the sort of men who were so prominent in European socialist parties – marginal bourgeois, journalists, 'theoreticians', professional orators – were comparatively rare in Britain.'⁴⁷

One of the anomalies outlined by Henry Collins is the SDF's adherence to the so-called Iron Law of Wages. In short this 'law' contended that wages would be necessarily held at a subsistence level and that any benefit from trade union activity was at best short term and at worst counter-productive. This law had been a basis of Lassalles' thought in the 1870s but had been refuted by Marx.⁴⁸ However, SDF publications such as the 1901 *New Catechism of Socialism* still carried explanations of the Law well into the twentieth century. For example, in Harry Quelch's oft-reprinted *Economics of Labour* – a pamphlet used as a study text by branches such as that in Erith in 1905⁴⁹ – he writes that

'as with all commodities, competition is constantly operating to force down the price of labour – wages – to its normal [sic] level.

Once you have clearly understood the workings of this economic law this "iron law of wages", this fact that the return to labour is governed, not by the productivity of labour, but by its cost of production,... you see how useless are many of the proposals of your social reformers and how fallacious are many of the teachings of political economists.... The operation of this law is imperative and inexorable as long as present conditions obtain.'⁵⁰

The advantage of the 'Iron Law' to the SDF was that it undermined the role of the trade unions and the industrial sphere in achieving advances that could be made through the class struggle. By implication it encouraged working class activists to put their efforts into organisations – such as the SDF – that claimed to secure

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p33. For Eric Hobsbawm (*Labouring Men* (1964)) it was this class of activist that made up the Fabian Society. They also make up a substantial part of Groups 3 and 4 in the membership survey in Chapter 1.

⁴⁸ Collins, *op.cit.*, p53. Marx criticises the 'Iron Law' and Lassalles in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. This was not available in English until 1890s. See also Chapter 11 of this work.

⁴⁹ Of the branch minute books I have been able to locate and study, all of them contain references to economic and political education classes or discussion groups. For example, the Erith branch discussed 'economic rent', 30 November 1905, 'the general strike', 7 December 1905 and 'the Communist Manifesto', 17 May 1906. The *Economics of Labour* was used as a study text on 9 November 1905.

⁵⁰ Harry Quelch, *The Economics of Labour* [nd. c1893], p13. The TCP had printed fifty five thousand copies of the pamphlet by 1912.

advances in the political arena. The last words of Quelch's sentence cited above focus on the need to change the present state of things.

d) The role of the Party

Late on in the life of the SDF John Maclean revealed his thinking on the prospects of socialism and the role of the party in its eventual triumph. 'If our principles are true,' he wrote, 'then we shall win. Facts prove them to be true, and yet we are not winning. Some obstacle intervenes, and I think it is insufficient organisation.'⁵¹ The SDF, like other socialist parties of the period, were constrained by their conception of the role of the party in bringing about socialism. The party was seen largely as an educational organisation which would enlighten the working population to the iniquities of capitalism and the potentialities of socialism. The SDF, and other Second International parties, aimed to build socialism using a core of teaching adherents who would give lectures, hold public meetings and fight elections for propaganda purposes while the party press gave this organisation some structure.⁵² This was acknowledged by leading members of the SDF. James Gribble, a Northampton SDFer who reached the heights of the town council, declared to the 1905 conference that 'during the last twenty five years our work has been principally educational. When we fought elections, the object has been propaganda, or testing of our strength.'⁵³ Mark Bevir has argued to the point that the SDF's lack of political direction was a result of

'a rigid dialectic and breakdown theory. These doctrines encouraged Marxists to adopt a policy of inaction and isolation: inaction because the collapse of capitalism was inevitable and there was little anybody could do to either hasten or to prevent collapse, and isolation because if capitalism was bound to collapse irrespective of human agency then there was little point in forming pacts for mere political advancement. Certainly the largest Marxist party of the time followed a policy of inaction and isolation.'⁵⁴

This is not proven in the actions of most members. A belief in the kingdom of God does not make every Christian a fatalist and a belief in the certainty of

⁵¹ Letter to *SDP News*, December 1910. See also Peckham and Dulwich SDF Accounts Book.

⁵² Ransom, *op. cit.*, p66 for Connolly and the Irish Republican Socialist Party. See also V.I.Lenin, *What is to be done?* [1902] for a Bolshevik view of these tactics.

⁵³ SDF Conference Report 1905, p1.

⁵⁴ M.Bevir, 'H.M.Hyndman', p137.

socialism could equally make socialists optimistic and dynamic. However, this notion of the party as a small group of teaching activists whose time would be spent equally on agitation and education has led at least one commentator to claim that it was but one step removed from Leninist vanguardism. Karen Hunt has used the word to describe the party's role as a 'trustee for socialist theory in a hostile environment.'⁵⁵ In an article criticising this trait amongst English (sic) marxists, James D. Young traces its origin to the SDF which claimed that socialism would be ushered in by a 'compact minority' of revolutionaries.⁵⁶ Young cites Belfort Bax as an explanation of the SDF's condescension towards the working class. In the *Religion of Socialism* he wrote that the majority

'under a capitalist system will necessarily for the most part vote for the maintenance of that system under one guise or another, not because they love it, but out of sheer ignorance and stupidity. It is by the *active minority* from out of the stagnant inert mass that the revolution will be accomplished. It is to this socialist minority that individuals, acting during the revolutionary period, are alone accountable.'⁵⁷

The appeal to a class-conscious minority was indeed a tactic in both Britain and Russia and hence can be described as Leninist vanguardism.

However, given that socialists viewed the revolution to be the outcome of a crisis in capitalism – and that crisis was coming ever closer given the increasing peaks and troughs of the economic cycle⁵⁸ – then a task of the party was to prepare the working class to take advantage of the disintegrating situation. This belief in the imminence of the crisis also explains why the SDF viewed strikes and trade unionism as a waste of time, money and effort. What was needed was to build the revolutionary party. In the words of one SDFer 'We know we must wait! Wait and work continuously until the slow creeping hour arrives, when [the working class] will realise the full import of our message in mind and heart.'⁵⁹ Hence, economic determinism did not necessarily lead to a passive fatalism but could equally galvanise the believer into preparing and building an effective party for the coming final crisis of capitalism.

⁵⁵ K.Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, p8.

⁵⁶ *Justice*, 11 July 1885.

⁵⁷ *Religion*, p119, cited in James D. Young, 'Militancy, English Socialism and the Ragged Trousered Philanthropists', *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 20 (1985), p293.

⁵⁸ H.M.Hyndman's *Commercial Crises of the Nineteenth Century* (1892), plots these economic troughs.

⁵⁹ D.Campbell, *The Unemployed Problem: The Socialist Solution* (1894), p13.

e) Revolution

According to Marx, economic change would lead to a polarisation of social classes and thence class conflict and a growth in class-consciousness. This in turn would lead to revolution and a period in which the working class would be the dominant class before the final stage, communism. A lack of democracy may lead frustrated citizens to call for fundamental change and political revolutions such as those which took place in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and in Russia in the twentieth century. In 1881 Britain had a franchise which gave the vote to approximately one in every three adult males which was to increase to around two in every three adult males after 1885. For many working-class activists this limited growth showed the potential for peaceful political change in Britain.

However, defining the revolution and describing its outcome remained problematic for most of the history of the SDF. According to the *Socialist Catechism* of 1884 a revolution would be a 'revolution in the methods of the distribution of wealth corresponding to that which has taken place in the means of production'. Hence, there is no mention of a fundamental change in political power. Even the workers' control of the state was viewed in terms of a rational and efficient reorganisation rather than a forceful acquisition of power. It was not the supremacy of a class because socialists 'insist that every able-bodied person of sound mind should do a fair share of necessary work. When all are workers, the workers will no longer be a class, but a nation.'⁶⁰ This reassuring, almost non-conflictual view of the revolution continued for much of the life of the SDF. Twenty years after the *Socialist Catechism* Hyndman could write that 'social revolution is certain. It rests with us to decide what form the transformation shall take.'⁶¹ However, for some activists the purpose of socialist revolution was a fundamental transformation rather than economic amelioration. In his inaugural address to the 1898 Conference John Leslie pleaded that they should 'see to it that

⁶⁰ J.L.Joyes, *The Socialist Catechism* (1884), pp13-4.

⁶¹ H.M.Hyndman, *Social Democracy: The Basis of its Principles and the Causes of its Success* (1904), p22.

Socialism does not become a movement for the mere bettering of the working class.'⁶²

Amongst the parties of the Second International there was a faith that the revolution would come through parliament but that parliamentary or bourgeois democracy had to become more fully developed (as in Britain) for this to be realised. In the 1891 Erfurt programme the SPD left unspecified the form in which the revolution would take place so as not to offer up to the state authorities an excuse to further repress the party. However, they were also sure that they were living in politically progressive times and 'that the parliamentary struggle and the broadening of the scope of democracy were the decisive tasks in the current situation, [and so the SPD] was determined to put the onus for the possible violence of a future clash on its adversary.'⁶³ From its earliest pronouncements this was also the view of the SDF. In a manifesto from 1885 they announced:

'Let the governing classes face the inevitable downfall of a decaying civilisation without hypocrisy and without panic. On them rests the responsibility of a peaceful or forcible issue to the last great class struggle of our times. Here in the centre of capitalist domination and commercial greed we at least are resolved to continue our efforts, confident that they must lead to the final emancipation of labour and to the conquest of the future by the workers of the world.'⁶⁴

Similarly, Morris and Bax point out that while 'armed revolt or civil war may be an *incident* of the struggle,' they are at pains to say that the real revolution will come as a result of the 'change in popular feeling' that must precede it. However, the political change associated with this revolution, whether involving violence or not, will come through 'an administration whose every act will be of set purpose with a view to Socialism'.⁶⁵ Most revolutionary socialists of the period took this to mean the conquest of the state through parliament.

⁶² SDF Conference Report 1898, p6.

⁶³ Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution 1880-1938* (English Edition 1979), p31. Later in this passage Salvadori notes the extent to which Kautsky and the Erfurt programme influenced Lenin at that time. See also Hyndman's comments in 'Something Better than Emigration', *Nineteenth Century* (December 1884), p998. 'I despair of a peaceful solution to the inevitable class struggle even in England; and I fear that we must pass through the fiery furnace of some fatal "natural catastrophe" to the goal of full economical freedom and organised work for all.' See also Ransom, *op.cit.*, pp40-41 on the situation amongst Irish socialists.

⁶⁴ The General Council of the Social Democratic Federation, *The Unemployed: The Manifesto of the Social Democratic Federation* (1885), p15.

⁶⁵ W.Morris and E.B.Bax, *op.cit.*, p285.

In his influential commentary on the Erfurt programme Kautsky made an 'indissoluble' connection between achieving a majority in parliament and the conquest of the state. 'In a great modern state', Kautsky wrote, the proletariat, like the bourgeoisie can 'acquire influence in the administration of the state only through the vehicle of an elected parliament.... So long as the great modern state exists, the central point of political activity will always remain in its parliament.'⁶⁶ Hence, the views of the SDF, in a country which had a mature parliamentary system and the prospect of a widening franchise, seemed entirely in line with the thinking of Marxists in countries with less propitious conditions. This faith in a revolution through parliament brought splits from the SDF in 1885 and in the early years of the twentieth century. The lively rhetoric in a leaflet from the 1880s does not reveal demands for change in the structure of Parliament as a seat of power beyond the payment of MPs:

'What then is the use of the Suffrage? It has but one use, to enable the workers, as a class, to take peaceful possession of the power of the State, so as to use that power for social purposes. But to do this you must have paid delegates from your own class, not time-serving unpaid representative from the classes which rob you: you must put your servants, not your masters, at Westminster: you must have a National Convention of the People, not a House of the Confiscating Classes.'⁶⁷

Hence, participation in elections, campaigning for specific reforms – the palliatives - and trying to secure positions on public office from School Boards and Library Committees to Parliament became central to many SDFers' understanding of the steps towards socialism. The SDF remained optimistic about the potential of Parliament – even with a 'bourgeois' Commons elected on a limited franchise partnered by a powerful aristocratic second chamber. Some could claim that the House of Commons 'obeys a Parliament larger than itself... Parliament obeys the Parliament of organised public opinion. ...It has to be preached to, informed, argued with, and even threatened by its master, public opinion, before it will stir.'⁶⁸

One response to this state of affairs was to hope for the further immiseration of the masses. This was thought to come about inevitably as a result of capitalism which

⁶⁶ M.Salvadori, *op.cit.*, pp35-6.

⁶⁷ Social Democratic Federation, *What Use is the Vote? Leaflet No. 1* [nd 1885?]

⁶⁸ John Tamlyn, *The Truth about Parliament and the Political Parties* [nd 1894], p3. See also p15 where he writes that the 'way out (the only way out) is for all labour movements to join hands with the Socialists to capture the legislative bodies...'

would produce a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Few socialists wished poverty on anyone. To suggest that Marxists were against reforms because they would 'ameliorate the conditions of the poor and thereby break their revolutionary spirit' is, I think, misplaced.⁶⁹ The immiseration of the working class was inevitable and any gain that could be obtained in the process had the advantage of being gained in opposition and of helping to build a strong and healthy working-class movement.⁷⁰

f) The State

Alongside the longevity of the SDF John Foster puts its role as an 'educator' of working-class militants among its strengths. However, their attitude towards the state is high up among its weaknesses.⁷¹ The view of the state as a disinterested institution that could be controlled by a majority in the legislature shows a great faith in the British constitution but little analysis of the political structures of that period. This view of a neutral state led to demands from the SDF for state control of education and state solutions for unemployment. In education they opposed denominational schools and interpreted 'complete popular control' of education as directly elected school boards rather than putting state resources into the hands of working class communities.

On the other hand, the view of Hilda Kean is that the SDF saw children as 'consumers within capitalism rather than as part of an oppressed class.' Hence their demand for state maintenance did not challenge the position or power of the capitalist state.⁷² For example, in 1906 the Countess of Warwick wrote that 'children, after all, are primarily the children of the nation, and that is the nation's first concern to secure their health and well-being, if possible through their

⁶⁹ Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (2nd Edn. Harmondsworth 1985), p81. Lenin, who Donald Sassoon describes as 'arguably the chief strategist of the [communist] "end state"', believed that social reforms, such as the public provision of nurseries, were 'embryonic elements of communism' or, in Lenin's words, 'shoots of communism'. D.Sassoon, *op.cit.*, p148.

⁷⁰ See Harry Quelch, *Social-Democracy and Industrial Organisation* (1911), pp4-5. Marx and Engels wrote in the *German Ideology* that 'Communism is for us not a stable state which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.' Cited in D.Sassoon, *op.cit.*, p148.

⁷¹ John Foster, 'The merits of the SDF', *BMML*, (105), Autumn 1984, pp25-37.

⁷² H.Kean, *op.cit.*, p27, pp25-6. See also K.Weller, *op.cit.*, p9 for how some socialists welcomed the extension of the state's powers during wartime..

parents, of course, but if not so, then by whatever other means seem most feasible.⁷³ However, it would be wrong to suggest that there was no criticism of the role of the state in this period. Many socialists accepted Hilaire Belloc's notion of the 'servile state' and SDFers and syndicalists after 1910 criticised social welfare legislation because they felt that its workers would be working for and would be restricted by the state.⁷⁴ This, however, remained a minority view. For the majority of socialists the fact that the Post Office was a state monopoly was regarded as the first collectivist step towards socialism. Any form of collectivism could be seen as a rejection and refutation of individualism and its laissez faire economic philosophy.⁷⁵

Morris and Bax envisaged that in a post-revolutionary period the state would function in a different way from the contemporary state. There would be a gradual decentralisation of the state which would 'give place to the federation of local and industrial organisations'. The national role of the government in foreign policy would be substituted by international arbitration through a League of Nations type body.⁷⁶ This confederation based on industrial organisations may have influenced some of the SDFers and other socialists in the Syndicalist and Guild Socialist movements nearly twenty years later.⁷⁷ William Morris goes further in his description of a decentralised post-revolutionary state in *News from Nowhere* (1891) – although it must be said that both these descriptions of the future state appeared during the period when both Bax and Morris were with the anti-parliamentary Socialist League. Despite the influence of Bax and Morris on the British socialist movement it was still felt that a socialist state would be popularly controlled collectivism.

⁷³ Francis Greville, Countess of Warwick, *A Nation's Youth. Physical Deterioration: Its causes and some remedies* (1906), p31. See also H.M.Hyndman, *Social Democracy* (1904), p25.

⁷⁴ Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900-1914: Myths and Realities* (1976), p182.

⁷⁵ Take, for example, the series of articles on the nationalisation of railways by A.G.Wolfe in *Justice*, 18 August 1894 and 13 October 1894.

⁷⁶ W.Morris and E.B.Bax, *op.cit.*, p282, pp280-5. See also J.Hunter-Watts who wrote that 'the gradual extinction of the capitalist class would follow the capture of local "administrative" bodies by the SDF.' *Justice*, 3 March 1894.

⁷⁷ Geoffrey Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History* (2nd Edn. 1986), p107, writes that G.D.H.Cole, a major force behind Guild Socialism, had been 'converted to socialism by the literary writings of William Morris.'

g) The reception of theory

A question that arises in relation to the SDF as the first professed Marxist organisation in Britain is whether the lack of Marxist texts led to a weakness in their understanding of theory and whether this in turn led to an undue emphasis on the 'scientific' elements in the theory, which was easily transmogrified into economic determinism. To try to assess the extent to which SDF members in the branches understood or used the SDF version of Marxism is difficult because it means entering what Jonathan Rose has described as 'the history of audiences' - a region distinct from the history of ideas or even the history of the book, but rather dealing with how texts were interpreted and read (in all the meanings of that word) by the readership.⁷⁸ For example, at a meeting at the Westminster Democratic Club in 1894 Shaw is reported as saying that there was nothing 'a revolutionary Social Democrat was more convinced of than that his strength was in having a definite scientific, economic, historical and philosophic basis to go on, yet most of them knew nothing whatever of political economy, history or philosophy. [Laughter].'⁷⁹ There are a number of ways to interpret this comment. Was Shaw really analysing the paucity of political education in the SDF or was he playing for laughs? Hence, it would be hard to criticise Bernard Shaw as a reader of Marx and as an observer of the SDF, yet it would be equally difficult to credit Shaw's comments as being unbiased.

From the comments of critics and from the memoirs of readers it is possible to present an image of how SDF ideology was received by its audience. Shaw's comment does reveal the intentions of the SDF in that they were publicly serious about theory. This is often given *pace* Rose as a reason for the failure of the SDF - in that an interest in theory alienated socialist activists. Writing in 1904, John Penny, the Secretary of the ILP described the SDF as the sterile, dogmatic and un-British organisation in a clear contrast to the friendly and flexible ILP. However, Penny did point out that the SDF took theory seriously and instead of 'go-as-you-please methods' required 'discipline'. He went on to explain that the SDF showed 'a strong belief that Socialism will come by revolution. Hence the Socialists must

⁷⁸ J. Rose, *op. cit.*, pp1-11. See also his chapter on 'Alienation from Marxism', pp298-320.

⁷⁹ *Westminster Gazette*, 18 January 1894.

be well drilled, With this idea firmly planted in the organisation it naturally follows that theory occupies a prominent position.'⁸⁰ If two prominent critics of the SDF state that theory was an important element in the life of the party then we may be on to something. This atmosphere of discipline and focus on theory may have alienated many members but whether this was a reason for the political 'failure' of the SDF remains unproven.

At least one activist was appreciative of this focus. Herbert Morrison, who was a member of the SDF in Westminster and Lambeth in the 1900s, said later in life that

'he had learned his economics from the SDP and his politics from the ILP. From the SDP he had acquired the belief that no long-lasting social reforms could be achieved without the acquisition by the state of the means of production and distribution. From the SDP he gained his belief in the materialist conception of history, the labour theory of surplus value, economic causation and the class struggle: a Marxist way of looking at society and its development.'⁸¹

Hence, for this member, he was not 'alienated' from Marxism but assimilated it and used it to inform his later Labour Party career.

For those who were interested, a focus on theory may have been useful to explain long-term trends and political priorities for the future. However, as one participant from the period has noted, this interest (or consciousness) was found among very few people. He claims that a principal reason why socialism and the SDF failed in Britain was 'the positive refusal of the working class to study economics and make politics the chief interest of life. In this respect the working class did not differ from the rest of the community.'⁸² From this one can re-make the comment on 'working-class apathy' or perhaps note that there was an expectation from some in the socialist movement of the period that political emancipation would come through immersion in theory.⁸³

⁸⁰ John Penny, *The Political Labour Movement* [nd 1904], pp5-6.

⁸¹ B.Donoughe and G.W.Jones, *op.cit.*, p33. See also Bert Morrison, 'The New Liberalism', *Social Democrat*, December 1909, pp529-36. "...with those members of the working class movement whose political policy is based upon economics and history the attempt [by the New Liberals to gain support] will be unsuccessful", p536.

⁸² J.Clayton, *op.cit.*, p30.

⁸³ See the comments made in [Walthamstow] *Socialist Critic*, 27 October 1900. 'Karl Marx's "Das Kapital", the text-book of Socialist political economy, is called the Bible of the working classes. Do

g) Conclusion

In conclusion a number of points can be made to clarify the position of ideology in the SDF. Firstly, it is possible to say that there was a continuity in personnel from Chartism and through the socialist revival period of the 1880s. As a result a great deal of the vocabulary and specific campaigns and policies were inherited from Chartism and English radicalism. Nevertheless, Marxism, and materialism in particular, was sufficiently influential to make this a new political movement where politics was a science that needed to be studied and learnt. Perhaps there was the feeling that if they studied hard enough then they would be closer to the realisation of their goal. Certainly the study of theory was given a high priority. In 1907, in a growth period for the SDF, Albert Inkpin⁸⁴ asked the annual conference to institute educational lectures dealing with the principles of socialism. Inkpin spoke of 'the necessity of educating and keeping in their ranks the number of new members who were joining the SDF.'⁸⁵

Secondly, the Marxism of the SDF – like that of other parties in the Second International – has been characterised as vulgar or dogmatic. They had a reliance on simplified vulgar versions which had a stress on economic determinism. This in turn led to a belief in inevitability rather than a stress on action or agency. However, determinism need not be interpreted as a route to fatalism but can also be seen as a catalyst to activity. The majority of branches used in this study did not sit back and wait for the 'crisis of capitalism' but were active in and involved themselves in a number of working-class organisations and associations.

you not think, therefore, that there might be some amount of truth in our ideas, and that they are worthy of at least a little consideration.

Don't be afraid of putting us to any trouble in this matter, friends, as we are only too anxious to propagate the ideas of Socialism.'

All SDF branches for which there are minute books available conducted classes and discussion groups on political and economic theory. See Canning Town SDF Minutes, 16 August 1891, Erith SDF Minutes, 30 November 1905 and 24 July 1910, Hackney and Kingsland SDF Minutes, 27 May 1904, Hammersmith SDF Minutes, 3 December 1884, Stratford SDF Minutes, 30 March 1905. See also the regular classes outlined in the minute book of the [Hackney] Socialist Sunday School

⁸⁴ Albert Inkpin (1884-1914), clerk. Active in (Hackney) SDF from 1904. SDF Ass. Sec 1908-11, BSP Ass. Sec from 1912, CPGB Sec from 1921.

⁸⁵ SDF Annual Conference Report 1907, p6.

Believers in an inevitable, apocalyptic creed are apt to present themselves as prophets. The role of the party became a means to open the eyes of the working class to the terrible truths of capitalism. Hence, there was a focus on teaching and preaching. When the workers refused to see the truth, SDF members either became frustrated and left the party or assumed a contempt for the ignorance of their fellow workers. For example, in his opening address to the 1904 conference, Peter Walker claimed that the SDF's 'real difficulty was the ignorance of the workers, which was used against themselves by those who desired to keep political power and administration in their own hands.'⁸⁶ Palliatives and reforms were campaigned for but for many (not all) SDFers, these policies were only seen as necessary short-term compromises.

In truth, their view of the revolution and how it would be realised was a remarkably limited one. The SDF were encouraged in that view by a whole range of political contemporaries. Socialist commentators of the period tended to look on Britain with envy as a place with a growing labour movement and an expanding franchise. Time would provide opportune economic circumstances which would propel the socialists into power with the SDF in the vanguard. This would be the revolution and the tool for its realisation would be the state controlled by a majority of socialists in the legislature. A great deal has been written since by socialist commentators about the class nature of the state in capitalist society to make this belief seem naïve. However, as a consequence it tended to encourage campaigns and policies that increased the power of the state rather than challenged it.

Finally, what should be noted is the importance the SDF gave to their ideology, compared with the administrative empiricism of the Fabians or the emotional appeal of the ILP. This was pointed out as a failing by their critics. However, the fact that they believed that policy and practice should come as a result of serious study or that politics was more than the pursuit of office marked them out from many other political organisations. Their belief in propaganda through their

⁸⁶ SDF Annual Conference Report 1904, p2.

ideology led to the publication of Marxist texts in English for the first time which undoubtedly added to the political life of the country in general.

Chapter 10

‘The Worker has no Country’: The SDF as Internationalists

Soon after the Anglo-Boer war the SDF issued a short tract in which they declared that

‘capital is international; Labour must be international too. Socialism, as the political expression of the working-class movement, is international. It is the one international party; the one party which is the same in all countries; which ignores the divisions of frontiers, and knows nothing of the differences of race, colour or creed.’¹

With this bold statement the SDF put forward their internationalist credentials. However, they had to operate within the context of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century politics. They had to deal with life in the metropolis of the world’s largest empire: a city where Jewish and other immigrants arrived from the east, while from the west Irish nationalists won the support of many working-class activists. With current imperial wars and a European conflict on the horizon, the pull of patriotism and militarism was always present. This chapter deals with the attempts of the SDF to manage these issues and tries to account for the often tortuous course steered through these political difficulties.

a) Socialism as an ‘alien creed’

In January 1885 after the split with the SDF, the newly formed Socialist League issued their *Manifesto*. ‘Fellow Citizens’, it began, ‘We address you as Socialists. That is the reason, many of you will think, for not listening to us. Socialists such will say, are unpractical visionaries with foreign notions in their heads, on whom they as practical British workmen have no time to waste.’² Hence, within the first sentences of a new political organisation there was an apologia for the perceived foreign-ness of socialism and its association with foreigners. Eight years later at

¹ Social Democratic Federation, *Socialism and Foreign Policy* [nd. 1904?], p4.

² The Socialist League, *The Manifesto of the Socialist League* (1885) p3.

the inaugural conference of the ILP, Ben Tillett stated that the new party should be for stolid trade unionists and not 'hare brained... Continental revolutionaries'.³ It seems that Halevy's statement that the isolation of socialism – or at least Marxian socialism – was because it was regarded as an alien graft, was recognised by contemporary socialists.⁴

The idea of the international conspiratorial movement was brought out to the novel-reading public by George Gissing, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. Together with the idea of propaganda by deed, the novelists interpreted the early British socialist movement as influenced by and as a part of the international current. The association of socialism with foreigners had a double difficulty for the socialists themselves. If they claimed that socialism was an international ideology, they could easily be criticised for ignoring indigenous British political tradition and economic circumstances. However, if on the other hand they claimed that socialism was a part of a British political tradition, then they would be divorcing it from the universalising scientific nature of Marxism which, many believed, was its greatest strength.

However, one can also view this 'foreign-ness' as what Francis Wheen describes as 'the quieter but no less enduring' tradition of internationalism.⁵ Nineteenth century London was a city of refugees and those streams fed the British current. The refugees from the revolutions of 1848, of which the most notable was perhaps Karl Marx, kept the British - and London workers in particular - in touch with events on the continent. As Morris and Belfort Bax described it, from around 1883 'the British working classes knew nothing of Socialism, and, except for a few who were directly influenced by the continental movement, were, on the surface and by habit, hostile to it.'⁶ It is no coincidence that the First International was formed of a combination of these milieux.⁷ The Germans were joined by almost continuous

³ Ben Tillett, cited in C.Benn, *op.cit.*, p99. See also D.Howell, *op.cit.*, p293. See also Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack* (Woodbridge 1998), pp49-50, 95 for the contrast made by Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald between the ILP's 'Britishness' and the SDF's 'foreign-ness'.

⁴ E. Halevy, *op.cit.*, p147. Francis Wheen notes that 'foreign influence' was the 'standard mid-century euphemism for the dread virus of socialism.' F.Wheen, *Karl Marx* (1999) p275.

⁵ F.Wheen, *op.cit.*, p273.

⁶ W.Morris and E.B.Bax, *op.cit.*, p269.

⁷ R.Ashton, *op.cit.*

waves of Russians and a considerable number of French after the collapse of the Commune in 1871.⁸ However, the event which provided the greatest number of seasoned recruits for the nascent British socialist movement was the imposition of Bismarck's Anti-Socialist laws in Germany from 1878 to 1890. These brought Johann Most, Andreas Scheu, Adam Weiler and others who, via clubs such as the Rose Street Club, Soho and the Communist Club in Tottenham Street, were among the first members of the SDF.⁹ According to Eduard Bernstein, who spent much of his years of exile in London, the Germans in London were 'always and everywhere... the first to bring into mutual connexion the socialists of different nations.'¹⁰

From the 1880s until 1918 London was a major centre for Russian refugees. Many Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe continued to be active in Russian-Jewish politics whilst living in London, while many of Russian-Jewish origin became active in London socialism (for example Theodore Rothstein, Zelda and Boris Kahan¹¹). The Polish Socialist Party could afford to organise (and affiliate to the SDF).¹² The Russian Social Democratic Party held their 1907 conference in the Brotherhood Church in Islington, assisted by their fellow members of the International, the SDF¹³ while the Stratford branch gave their Sunday morning collection to the Russian's Duma Election Fund.¹⁴ Lenin edited and printed editions of *Iskra* from the *Justice* office at 37a Clerkenwell Green, Peter Petroff, a participant in the 1905 Russian revolution, worked for both the RSDLP and the

⁸ Y.Kapp, *Eleanor Marx: Family Life 1855-1883* (1972) for influence of Commune refugees in London socialist circles.

⁹ See Frank Kitz, *Recollections and Reflections* (1976), pp8-20 and J.Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse* (1978) pp5-14. The Homerton Social Democratic Club took Most's *Freiheit* during 1881-2. Papers of the Homerton Social Democratic Club, IISH. For Weiler see obituary in *Justice*, 17 March 1894. Bax met Johann Most at the London Dialectical Society in Poland Street. For this and other connections see Mark Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation', p224.

¹⁰ E.Bernstein, *The International Working Men's Congress of 1889: A Reply to Justice* [nd. 1889] p3.

¹¹ **Zelda Kahan (1883-1967)**, chemistry teacher. Active in (Hackney and Kingsland) SDF from 1904. Married W.P.Coates, sister-in-law to Theodore Rothstein. Later member BSP executive and active in the CPGB. **Boris Kahan (1877-1951)**, brother of Zelda. Active in SDF (inc. East London (Jewish)) from 1904.

¹² A London branch of the Polish Socialist Party was affiliated to the SDF from 1904. See SDF Annual Conference Report 1904, 1909.

¹³ L.Trotsky, *My Life* (Harmondsworth 1975) pp208-210, see also W.Kendall, 'Russian emigration and British Marxist socialism', *IRSH* (1963) p355. Harry Quelch was a 'fraternal delegate' to the conference while the SDF organised a reception at Holborn Town Hall for the delegates. Tish Collins, 'Lenin, *Iskra* and Clerkenwell', *BMML* No. 135 (Spring 2002), p27.

¹⁴ Stratford SDF Minutes, 24 January 1907.

SDF in London and Glasgow¹⁵ whilst Georgei Chicherin, the future Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, was also a member of the same Kentish Town branch of the SDF.

The almost continuous flow of political refugees into London provided the early British movement with an experienced cadre, linking it into the structure of the International movement whilst informing the British workers of events, conditions and the political situation in other parts of Europe. An interest in the continental movement is apparent at a local level. For example, Canning Town SDF discussed the translation of 'foreign literature' and the need to make it available for 'the convenience of members of the SDF.'¹⁶

The awareness of political repression abroad and the participation of the British government in repression at home and abroad was often the route by which socialists – from a variety of backgrounds – became involved in politics. Many of those involved in politics could empathise with the Paine-ite principles involved in the democratic and nationalist struggles of the period just as a generation before the defeats of the liberal revolutions of 1848 had spurred some onto more socialistic enterprises. William Morris, for example, became involved in public life via the Eastern Question Association¹⁷ and hence with his contact with Radical workers became involved with the foundation of the Democratic Federation in 1881. Hyndman's early politics have been described by Tsuzuki as that of a 'Tory Radical' but it was his experience in Italy during the *Risorgimento*, later in India and Australia, and decisively the Eastern Question in the late 1870s that brought him in touch with Radical workers and drew him from the traditional Tory field. Jack Williams put his experience of Fenianism in the 1870s as the basis of his Radicalism which led a workhouse boy and casual labourer to being one of the most energetic agitators for socialism until his death and paupers' grave in 1917.¹⁸ In the early 1870s George Lansbury had developed an interest in politics through his contacts with John Hales, the Irish working-class

¹⁵ W.Kendall, *op.cit.* p366-7.

¹⁶ Canning Town SDF Minute Book, 27 January 1890.

¹⁷ E.P.Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (Second Edition 1977) pp202-225.

¹⁸ Anon, *John E.Williams and the Early History of the Social Democratic Federation* (1886). Anon, *How I Became a Socialist* [nd. 1896].

radical and the former secretary of the First International.¹⁹ The interest of E.Belfort Bax was drawn to socialism and hence to the writings of Karl Marx and later the Democratic Federation by the events of the Paris Commune.²⁰ The events of the campaign against Irish Coercion in the early 1880s provided the basis for the organisation of the Democratic Federation.

Hence it can be seen that the idea of socialism as a foreign import had some basis in experience. However, as such it is also possible to see the British socialist movement, and the London SDF in particular, as having close links with the refugee community and through them with the international movement. However, it has been claimed with some justification²¹ that the ordinary membership of the SDF left international affairs to the leadership group around Hyndman and Quelch (who were clearly motivated by international issues – the historical forces). According to Walter Kendall 'the marxist character of the SDF proved it to be [the refugees'] natural home'²² and hence these foreign refugees provided a solid core of political experience and, especially in the years following the Boer War, also a leaven from within the branches to any chauvinism or social imperialism propagated by the Hyndman group.

b) Race and racism

The British socialist movement was operating in an era when a hierarchy of nations and races was regarded as a fact and political decisions were taken on that assumption.²³ This ideology often spilled over into racism amongst some socialists such as that of the Webbs who stated that Irish Home Rule was 'an absolute necessity – in order to depopulate [Great Britain] of this detestable

¹⁹ J.Shepherd, *op.cit.*, p10.

²⁰ Anon, *How I Became a Socialist* [nd. 1896]. J.Cowley, *The Victorian Encounter with Marx: A Study of Ernest Belfort Bax* (1992). The Commune was an important event for this generation of socialists. Bax wrote pamphlets on the Commune for both the SDF and the Socialist League. James Leatham's pamphlet went through numerous editions. The Commune celebration brought the SDF and the Socialist League together briefly in 1888.(see Socialist League letter files, IISH).

²¹ G.S.Jones, *Languages*, p211. In a letter to Kautsky, Rothstein wrote that 'At our last Annual Conference on Easter Day we simply were afraid to raise the question [of an international meeting], as we felt sure that the authority which Hyndman commands will prove sufficient to inflict a crushing defeat upon us which will make matters worse than at present.' Rothstein to Kautsky, 18 May 1909, Kautsky Archive DXIX589, IISH., cited in D.J.Newton, *op.cit.*, p213.

²² W.Kendall, *op.cit.*, p353.

²³ See J. Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (Harmondsworth 1993), pp233-7.

race.’²⁴ Dora B. Montefiore in her memoirs writes that before the First World War the British working class were ‘necessarily, and to some extent unconsciously, fellow exploiters with our bourgeoisie of our coloured colonial dependencies were not class-conscious on this point [ie. racial exploitation]...’ She ‘found it a difficult and troublesome task’ to get workers to ‘realise that their fellow workers of a different colour are used to keep down the white workers’ wages and as a consequence, the cause of the coloured workers is, in the last resort, the cause of the white workers.’²⁵ In a body that was made up primarily of working-class activists, this point hangs heavily with the SDF. A good example of what Montefiore was referring to can be found in a pamphlet issued under Will Thorne’s name soon after the Boer War. The author alerts the reader to the use of Chinese labourers in South Africa with the observation that ‘an indigent population apprehends with an agony of suspicion and horror the possible corruption of its children by the yellow invader. Add to this that the Chinaman is filthily dirty in his personal surroundings, according to even the least fastidious European standards.’²⁶ Hence, rather than seeing the situation in class terms the focus is on a racial threat.

There is quite a body of scholarly work which goes to show the racism and in particular the anti-Semitism of the SDF. Edmund Silberner in his ‘British Socialism and the Jews’ states that ‘None of the British Social Democrats seems to have liked the Jewish people’ although he is willing to admit that ‘there is hardly any avowed or consistent anti-Semite among them’.²⁷ What seems to have been

²⁴ M.Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw. Volume I*, p265. Anti-semitism appeared amongst other socialist groups. See for example the complaint about the Liberal foreign policy makers handing ‘their souls over to the Jew brokers of the international money market.’ *New Age*, 18 July 1907. *Freedom* (the ‘Journal of Anarchist Socialism’) for February 1888 refers to the ‘Jewish gamblers who hold the strings of European politics.’ The anti-semitic interpretation of the Anglo-Boer war was even used by the British Committee of the Indian National Congress, Schneer, *op.cit.*, pp196-7. See also N.Etherington, *op.cit.* pp98-100 and *Justice*, 1 July 1899 for further examples of SDF racist rhetoric. Curiously Jonathan Rose writes that prior to 1914 ‘the working classes in Britain were considerably less racist than the governing classes. They merely engaged in racist violence and they had not absorbed the scientific racism fashionable among the university educated.’ J.Rose, *op.cit.*, p385.

²⁵ Dora B. Montefiore, *From a Victorian to a Modern* (1927), p120.

²⁶ Will Thorne, *Chinese Slavery in the Transvaal and White Slavery and Poverty at Home* [nd. 1904], p2.

²⁷ E.Silberner, ‘British Socialism and the Jews’, *Historia Judaica* XIV, 1 (April 1952) p39. See also Claire Hirschfield, ‘The Anglo-Boer War and the issue of Jewish culpability’, *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 15 No. 4 (1980) and L.P.Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England 1870-1914* (1960). Steve Cohen, *That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Anti-Semitic: An anti-racist analysis of left anti-semitism* (Leeds 1984), pp19-37.

the target of the SDF's general racist comments and remarks is the caricature of the Jewish sweater and of Jewish international capitalism. Austria was described as 'that Jew-ridden empire', Cecil Rhodes was backed by a 'whole Jew clique of bankers and loan mongers', George Goschen, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was 'the Hebrew loan monger.'²⁸ Silberner points out that this sort of anti-Semitism disguised as anti-capitalism could lead to a 'pogromist' threat. In reporting pogroms in Austria or Russia, *Justice* - despite 'the abominable treatment of the Jews in Russia' and expressed sympathy for 'the poor Jews' - found it appropriate to observe at the same time that 'it would not be difficult to get up a Jew-bait even in the City [of London], civilised as we are.'²⁹

As noted above, the Boer War was heralded by Hyndman as 'The Jews' War on the Transvaal'.³⁰ According to Silberner, the reaction of the membership to Hyndman brought a swift and decisive end to the casual anti-Semitism published in *Justice*. After 11 November 1899 'never again did *Justice* publish anti-Semitic material in its columns'.³¹ At the same time in the East End a vigorous anti-Jewish campaign led to the formation of groups like the British Brothers' League and ultimately the Aliens Act of 1905. As David Feldman notes, 'an unfavourable view of Jewish immigration was commonplace and extended beyond the ranks of those who supported the anti-alien legislation.'³² At the 1900 Conference after an intervention by a delegate from the East London branch the resolution was passed regretting 'that any impression should have gained ground that *Justice* by its articles, or the SDF generally, is in any way anti-semitic.'³³ Walter Kendall comments that the 'need to pass the resolution was however a sufficient indication of the attitude in a certain echelon of the party.'³⁴

²⁸ *Justice*, 12 July 1884, 6 February 1897, 5 February 1887 cited in E.Silberner *op.cit.*, p43.

²⁹ *Justice*, 20 December 1890, cited in E.Silberner, *op.cit.* p43. See also H.Quelch in SDF Annual Conference Report 1900, p18. Hyndman manages to combine both of these views on 'international' Jewry in his pre-SDF article 'The Dawn of the Revolutionary Epoch', *Nineteenth Century* (Vol. IX No. 47) January 1881, pp10-11. Paul Ward, after acknowledging Hyndman's position, points out that the 'ILP seemed to outdo Hyndman in anti-semitism.' P.Ward, *op.cit.*, p67.

³⁰ See for example the 'Critical Chronicle' in *Justice*, 1 July 1899.

³¹ E.Silberner, *op.cit.*, p49.

³² David Feldman, 'The importance of being English: Jewish immigration and the decay of liberal England', D.Feldman and G. Stedman Jones, *Metropolis London* (1989), p66.

³³ *Justice*, 11 August 1900 cited in W.Kendall, *op.cit.*, p362.

³⁴ W.Kendall, *op.cit.*, p362.

However, anti-Semitism was an issue dealt with outside the pages of *Justice*. In the view of Claire Hirschfield, Quelch 'reluctantly' curbed the anti-Semitic rhetoric in November 1899,

'though Hyndman stubbornly continued for many months to play the Jewish menace at public meetings. So closely was the Marxist leadership identified with anti-Semitism that the growth of the movement was appreciably slowed in Tower Hamlets where SDF canvassers encountered the increasing hostility of the Jewish population.... In December [1899] the popular vote for the Social Democratic candidate in the London school board election fell off by over two thousand in Tower Hamlets because an SDF organiser in the East End noted, "the vast majority of the Jews gave us the cold shoulder."' ³⁵

However, the position of the SDF and the Jews was fluid throughout its history.

For many Jewish socialists, particularly those immigrants from Poland and Russia,³⁶ the SDF was the fraternal branch of international social democracy.

According to *Justice* 'the success of the movement amongst the Jews in East London has already been quite remarkable. Thousands of them, we speak without exaggeration whatever, have already taken up with the doctrines of Socialism in a greater or lesser degree'. But, according to William Fishman, it was only twenty years later that 'this comment would be more valid'.³⁷

From its foundation the SDF put down roots among the Jewish community in East London.³⁸ Hyndman, Quelch and Burrows all spoke for the East London (Jewish) branch. At Whitechapel SDF there were 'various Socialist periodicals in the Hebrew language, printed in America' and it was promised that 'any comrade who can speak in German or Yiddish, or both, will be heartily welcomed at meetings.'³⁹ There were a number of non-Jewish critics of anti-Semitism such as Belfort Bax, while in 1895 the SDF nationally supported the 'levelling up' of the alien Jew and denounced 'all restrictive legislation against alien immigration.'⁴⁰ A motion at the 1903 conference moved by the East London (Jewish) branch condemned anti-alien legislation because it divided workers and denied the right of asylum. The logic was that as Britain was 'one of the greatest emigrating

³⁵ C.Hirschfield, *op.cit.*, p622.

³⁶ See W.Kendall, *op.cit.*, and W.J.Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914* (1975).

³⁷ *Justice*, 10 January 1885 cited in W.Fishman, *East End 1888* (1988), pp150-1. J.Rose, *op.cit.*, p227 states that 'many of [the Jewish immigrants] were socialist or anarchist intellectuals' [my emphasis].

³⁸ For the foundation of the Whitechapel branch of the SDF see *Justice*, 9 December 1893.

³⁹ *Justice*, 24 March 1894.

⁴⁰ *Justice*, 7 December 1895 cited in E.Silberner, *op.cit.*, p40. See also *Justice*, 12 March 1904 on Chinese labour.

countries', anti-alien legislation could lead to reprisals elsewhere.⁴¹ They had supported those imprisoned after the police raids on the Berner St. Club in March 1899 and the strike of Jewish tailors led by Wolf Weiss in September and October of that year.⁴²

From 1902 the East London (Jewish) branch had already commenced propaganda in Yiddish in the form of a pamphlet.⁴³ The SDF also had links with the Jewish socialist group the *Bund*. For example, at a meeting in Hyde Park called to demonstrate against pogroms at Kishinev in April 1903, the two SDF delegates called for a resolution 'which would bar the Zionists from the conference and secondly that a resolution be adopted expressing sympathy and support for the *Bund* in Russia and Poland.' This, however, was rejected as seeming too much like dictation, yet East London SDFers responded by threatening 'to accuse the London Jewish trade unionists as enemies of the *Bund* in the Russian press.'⁴⁴

Walter Kendall notes that

'in the years that preceded Hyndman's dethronement in April 1916, sections of the east London membership would prove to be amongst his most relentless opponents. That this was largely political there can be no doubt. That it was heightened and bound together by a common resentment of Hyndman's prejudice against these "Jews" and "foreigners" who constituted such a large part of the party's membership and supporters in this area would seem equally certain.'⁴⁵

Certainly the vociferous criticisms of Rothstein, Kahan and the Hackney branches seem to support this view.

However, it was not just Jews who had to suffer the tension of potential and real racism in the SDF as Irish members took steps to disguise their Irishness. For

⁴¹ SDF Annual Conference Report 1903. See also SDF Annual Conference Report 1907, p25 for a similar motion.

⁴² W.Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914* (1975) p168, p176.

⁴³ Social Democratic Federation, East London (Jewish), *What is Social Democracy?* [in Yiddish] (1902).

⁴⁴ W.Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914* (1975) pp250-1. However, Fishman points out that the SDF chairman of the London Trades Council, James MacDonald, had refused to speak at the Hyde Park meeting on the pretext that Jewish workers in London had blacklegged a recent tailors' strike. *Ibid.* p252.

⁴⁵ W.Kendall, 'Emigrants', p363.

example, Patrick Curran,⁴⁶ the New Unionist, felt it necessary to change his name to Pete while Jim Connell dropped his 'O' on arriving in London.⁴⁷

c) The International and internationalism

In the years following the inception of the Second International at the Paris Conference in March 1889, the SDF were enthusiastic participants and were crucial to the involvement of the British section in the organisation. However, despite this enthusiasm their role was limited as a result of the personal animosity within the British contingent. This was combined with a realisation among the other European socialists that the SDF (and the other avowedly socialist groups in Britain) had little numerical strength and hence from 1900 the Labour Party became the main conduit of International influence.

The problem of personal as well as ideological divisions is possibly an indication of how the British saw the International: as a way of enhancing their domestic agenda rather than as a valuable political arena in itself. And so at the inaugural Paris conference Hyndman and Burns attended the Possiblist meetings simply because the Socialist League delegates - Morris and the Avelings from the Bloomsbury Socialist Society - were at the Marxist meeting.⁴⁸ The ILP delegates had such a suspicion of continental socialism that in the years before the 1906 general election they treated the conferences as 'point scoring occasions with the SDF'.⁴⁹

Since the SDF was the British group closest in ideology to the main European socialists, they tended to have influence beyond their numerical strength. This was furthered by the role of Hyndman and Bax who could communicate comfortably in French and German whilst the aura of the 'line of succession' given Eleanor Marx after her return to the SDF in 1894 gave them some kudos.

⁴⁶ Pete Curran (1860-1910), labourer/trade union organiser. Active in SDF 1893-7 [one biog. claims he 'joined SDF early on']. Labour Party E.C. from 1900. Labour MP for Jarrow 1907-1910.

⁴⁷ Steven Fielding, *Class and Ethnicity: Irish Catholics in England 1880-1939* (Birmingham 1993), p109, Andrew Boyd, *Jim Connell: Author of The Red Flag* (2001), p13.

⁴⁸ James Joll, *The Second International 1889-1914* (1955) pp33-5.

⁴⁹ C. Wrigley, 'Widening Horizons? British Labour and the Second International', *LHR*, Vol. 58 Part 1. Spring 1993, p10.

However, with the formation of the Labour Party the SDF influence declined. At the 1904 Amsterdam conference, after their link-up with the trade union movement, the ILP delegates felt themselves to be in the ascendant. As Bruce Glasier wrote to his sister, 'Britain has the largest delegation of all countries. The SDF has been subdued by our joint ILP and Trade Union influence, and for the first time the continental movement begins to realise the real position of the Labour socialist movement in this country.'⁵⁰

However, the International was more than just an opportunity for the SDF leaders to act on the European stage. As Karen Hunt indicates, it gave British socialists the chance to make contacts with activists abroad. She cites Dora Montefiore and Eleanor Marx as examples of SDF women with a commitment to internationalism and the 'woman question' in particular. For them the SPD was a role model and Dora Montefiore developed these links through her friendship with fellow socialists like Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollantai.⁵¹

The SDF frequently adopted an orthodox line at the International, usually aligning themselves alongside the Guesdite French and the Kautskyite Germans. For example, with the adult suffrage endorsed by the Stuttgart conference of 1907 the SDF could claim orthodoxy. However, in Paris in 1900 over the Millerand issue the SDF delegation supported the compromise Kautsky resolution which allowed socialists to enter bourgeois governments 'as an exceptional measure of a temporary kind.'⁵² This attitude was less explicable given that unlike the other supporters of the motion – the French and the Germans – the SDF had little chance of having elected members co-opted into government. In a letter to *Justice*, James Connolly wrote that the stand was contrary to all the traditions of the SDF and that it was noteworthy that since Millerand had entered the cabinet, no less than twelve strikes had been broken by the use of the military. 'What good Millerand may have done is claimed for the credit of the bourgeois republican government. What evil that the cabinet has done reflects back on the reputation of the Socialist party.'

⁵⁰ J. Bruce Glasier Papers 1/1/1904/15, cited in C. Wrigley, *op. cit.*, p11.

⁵¹ K. Hunt, 'British Women and the Second International', *LHR*, Vol. 58 Part 1. Spring 1993, p26.

⁵² J. Joll, *op. cit.*, p96.

Heads they win, tails we lose.’⁵³ The SDF position on this issue in particular seemed to alienate the older generation who made up the SDF delegation and the younger members (and ex-members such as Connolly) and contributed to the splits of the SLP in 1903 and the SPGB in 1904.⁵⁴

Although they played nothing more than a bit part in the International, the SDF did contribute to the raising of an international consciousness in Britain. Contacts in the International brought Liebknecht, Bebel and Singer on speaking tours in the 1890s, while the establishment of the May Day in 1890 had a genuine impact. The event itself came out of the Paris Congress of 1889. A commemoration of the Chicago Martyrs of 1886, it became a part of the campaign across Europe for the eight hour working day and as a measure of international solidarity.

The London May Day of Sunday the 4th of May 1890 is a measure of the success of SDF permeation. The two principal organisers of the Hyde Park demonstration were the London Trades Council, which had adopted the Eight Hour measure at Tom Mann’s instigation, and the Legal Eight Hours Demonstration Committee headed by Engels, Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx (the latter pair had begun a rapprochement with the SDF). The two groups agreed to demonstrate together but would frame and present their resolutions separately.⁵⁵ To the surprise of many of those involved, somewhere between 250 and 300 thousand people joined the demonstration. Engels claimed that he had ‘heard again, for the first time since 40 years, the unmistakable voice of the English proletariat’.⁵⁶ It was an event which many had envisaged: the working class marching and demonstrating in large numbers in response to an international call. The success was to be repeated in 1891 and 1892.

⁵³ *Justice*, 25 May 1901.

⁵⁴ See the comments of Yates and Cotton at the 1901 Conference. SDF Annual Conference Report 1901, p16.

⁵⁵ J.White, *op.cit.*, p57. There had been some debate over whether to take the holiday on the 1st of May rather than the first Sunday. Frank Kitz writes that only ‘the Socialist League, the foreign sections [of Socialists], and the Federation of All Trades and Industries led by Jack Williams’ came out on the 1st of May – a Thursday. This demonstration ‘created a very different effect to that held the following Sunday.’ F.Kitz, *op.cit.*, p29.

⁵⁶ Engels to L.Lafargue, cited in Y.Kapp, *Eleanor Marx: Volume II*, p380.

The invented tradition of May Day stressed the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity alongside the rising sun of socialism. This image was especially true of the designs of the SDF artist Walter Crane⁵⁷ that were widely reproduced around Europe. The core idea of humanity overcoming material want and injustice included the desire to seek peaceful solutions to international problems. It was an idea that appealed to the radical Lib-Lab wing of the British labour movement together with the more self-consciously internationalist Marxists in the SDF.⁵⁸

d) Ireland and the Empire

For many Ireland, events in Ireland and the SDF's approach to the situation was a principal reason for joining the Federation.⁵⁹ For some, such as James Connolly, the limitations of the SDF's Ireland policy and their imperial policy generally were sufficiently frustrating to leave the Federation.

From its early delineation in *England for All*, SDF policy towards Ireland was essentially 'advanced Radical' rather than revolutionary socialist. The focus was on land reform and Home Rule rather than anti-imperialism.⁶⁰ However, socialists looked to the Irish Nationalists in Parliament as an irritant. Irish support for the Liberals was seen as impeding the advance of socialism. Moreover, the Liberal espousal of Home Rule was generally seen on the left as a hypocritical manoeuvre intended to obscure more fundamental class issues.⁶¹ However, it was possible for SDFers to be both fervent Irish nationalists and to have a full commitment to socialism. John Scurr was a frequent speaker at United Irish League meetings. Jonathan Schneer recounts Scurr's involvement in a series of meetings around the turn of the century to UIL branches across east and south London on which he addressed the issue of imperialism.⁶²

⁵⁷ Walter Crane (1845-1915), artist/illustrator. Joined SDF, then member of Socialist League (1885) and the Fabians (1889).

⁵⁸ See C.Wrigley, *op.cit.*, pp8-9.

⁵⁹ See the sections on J.E.Williams and J.Macdonald in Anon, *How I Became a Socialist* [nd. 1896?]

⁶⁰ H.M.Hyndman, *England for All* (1881), pp123-130.

⁶¹ S.Fielding, *op.cit.*, p96, R.Blatchford, *Britain for the British* (1902), pp163-5.

⁶² J.Schneer, *London*, pp179-180.

Irish SDF members, the most notable being James Connolly in Edinburgh, began to develop a socialist policy towards Ireland which built alliances with 'bourgeois' nationalists that ran contrary to what Hyndman and his supporters intended for the Empire. Connolly, however, received support from individual branches in London and elsewhere, such as the Finsbury Park SDF.

On the Empire as a whole the SDF was notoriously inconsistent and weak.⁶³ Although they were the first organisation to denounce Imperialism, they failed to make a valuable contribution to one of the key debates of pre-war socialism. The key division is often seen to be between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. Where Luxemburg felt a non-nationalist class-based response to the German Empire would be a more effective socialist tactic than what she described as the 'utopian and fantastic plan for the reconstitution of Poland',⁶⁴ Lenin's strategy was the encouragement of popular nationalist groups as confrere opponents of the Tsarist Empire. A motion from the Battersea SDF to the 1896 congress of the International took a 'Leninist' stance and called for the independence of Poland.⁶⁵ However, this in many ways seems to be a rationalisation of the existing situation, where there is an attempt to put a socialist spin on various anti-state activities or radical movements. A serious question of socialist practice exists here, although the efficacy seems to be determined by the 'objective' situation within the particular state in question. James Joll points out that the Austrian socialists had a series of problems: a substantial number of Czechs within the Austrian party and a fraternal Hungarian socialist party within the Empire. Their solution was the 'mini-international' of autonomous socialist organisations for the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, this fragile unity broke down after the Copenhagen International Conference of 1910 over the issue of separate national trade unions. Hence the nationality problems of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were replicated in the Austro-Hungarian socialist movement.⁶⁶

⁶³ G.Johnson, *Social Democratic Politics*, pp69-103.

⁶⁴ Report of the International Socialist Congress, Paris 1900, cited in C.D.Greaves, *op.cit.*, p128.

⁶⁵ *Agenda for the International Socialist Workers and Trades Union Congress, London 1896* (1896).

⁶⁶ *Justice*, 30 July 1896, J.Joll, *op.cit.*, pp117-121. See also pp115-7 for Luxemburg, Lenin and Poland.

The Socialist League in its founding statement claimed that imperialism was a 'degrading struggle for their share of the spoils of barbarous countries to be used at home for the purpose of increasing the riches of the rich and the poverty of the poor'.⁶⁷ The SDF analysis of the Empire lay on much the same sort of level. Belfort Bax, for example, on his return to the SDF described the empire as the necessary consequence of capitalism. 'In foreign politics', he wrote

'the capitalist is no less king than in domestic. Well nigh every war within the present generation has been the work of a clique of bourse speculators, stock-jobbers, or manufacturers anxious to secure markets. ...all our small English "wars" (so-called), which might more truly be termed cowardly massacres of untrained and ill-armed barbarians. ...The working classes are taxed for the maintenance of this imperial system and have as their reward the somewhat barren honour of belonging to it.'⁶⁸

The push for empire, according to Bax, being driven by capitalists trying to operate in an ever-shrinking home market, in turn creates a demand to increase opportunities for investment abroad. 'Just as the inevitable tendency of Capitalism industrially is for independent smaller capitalists to be absorbed into a few large firms, so it is its tendency politically for small free states to be sucked into great empires', he states.⁶⁹ As a consequence of this analysis, socialists should oppose the further extension of an empire which provided capitalism with the resources for a new lease of life. By 1900, according to Douglas Newton, Belfort Bax's 'theories of imperialism dominated the pages of *Justice*.'⁷⁰

Despite this the majority of the SDF response to the question was to treat the British Empire as the basis of a future British Socialist Federation. The SDF were the only British socialist group to establish branches beyond the British Isles (notably in South Africa).⁷¹ There was also a surprisingly large number of SDFers who had lived and worked in other parts of the Empire: Tom Mann, George

⁶⁷ The Socialist League, *Manifesto* p3.

⁶⁸ E. Belfort Bax, 'Revolution of the 19th Century', in *The Ethics of Socialism* (1889), p41.

⁶⁹ E.B.Bax, 'The Modern Revolution', in *Religion*, p77.

⁷⁰ D.J.Newton, *op.cit.*, p133, p67. See also Schneer, *op.cit.*, p169.

⁷¹ Capetown, Durban and Ladysmith, SDF Annual Conference Reports 1905-1907. The first branch was established in Capetown in 1902. For the commitment of the Capetown SDF to multi-ethnic politics in South Africa see letter from H. McManus, Secretary of Capetown SDF in *Justice*, 24 July 1909. For the establishment of the Gibraltar branch of the SDF see *Social Democrat*, April 1899, pp99-101, Lorenzo Quelch, *An Old Fashioned Socialist: An Autobiography* (Reading 1992). There was also a Social Democratic Party (somewhere) in India *Socialist Annual 1908*, p53. *Justice* had been banned in India,, SDF Quarterly Report, August 1908.

Lansbury, Dora Montefiore, Ben Tillett and, as ever, Hyndman. Believers in a pan-empire workers movement could point to the saving assistance of the Australian movement for the 1889 dockers' strike. It was perhaps therefore easier for them to envisage the empire as a future co-operative commonwealth. The 'white' empire was seen as the core of this commonwealth, while nations such as India should remain within the British sphere of influence. As early as 1881 in a letter to Marx Hyndman had written that 'I need scarcely say that I do not wish to see us give up India... [although] I think we ought to withdraw.'⁷² This view of a transformation of the role of the Empire remained to the left of the Labour Party until at least the 1940s.

Norman Etherington claims that 'programmes designed to combine revolutionary socialism with imperial expansion attracted rank and file SDF members as well as the leaders.'⁷³ Indeed, in *England for All* Hyndman had proposed that the empire be transformed into an Imperial Federation or Customs Union '...in time to come the great English-speaking democracies of England, Australia and North America, may find a common understanding, which will enable them to secure peace and justice throughout the civilised world, by the overwhelming force they could array against any aggressor.'⁷⁴ In 1886 Herbert Burrows put forward a similar proposal for a federation of 'free democratic [Anglo Saxon] peoples who have realised the dignity of true national life as but the means to the great end of international harmony and co-operation.'⁷⁵

However, there is little evidence presented of 'rank and file' participation in imperial activities and twelve years later, according to Etherington, 'for the SDF the Boer War solidified the anti-imperial forces and utterly destroyed the old plan for a "Federation for Democracy"'. It seems 'the Boer war had killed imperialism in the SDF.'⁷⁶ In a 1904 pamphlet in his focus on India Hyndman demanded that 'it is high time we left India to manage her own affairs. Socialism means

⁷² H.M.Hyndman to Karl Marx, 5 January 1881, Marx/Engels Correspondence D2390, IISH.

⁷³ N.Etherington, p89.

⁷⁴ H.M.Hyndman, *England For All* (1881), pp152-3.

⁷⁵ *Justice*, 19 June 1886, cited in Etherington, *op.cit.*, p95. Burrows does not use the word Anglo-Saxon in the original. This is Etherington's addition.

⁷⁶ N.Etherington, *op.cit.*, p96, p98.

emancipation everywhere'⁷⁷ while Quelch put forward SDF policy as 'Legislative and administrative independence for all parts of the Empire.'⁷⁸

The main alternative standpoint was that represented by Belfort Bax. In his essay 'Imperialism v. Socialism' written during the Sudan campaign while he was a member of the Socialist League he states that for 'the Socialist the word frontier does not exist; for him love of country as such, is no nobler sentiment than love of class... The establishment of Socialism, therefore, on any national or race basis is out of the question' and that 'the foreign policy of the great international Socialist party must be to break up these hideous race monopolies called empires beginning in each case at home.'⁷⁹ Later Bax and Quelch could write that socialists were against imperial expansion as it 'means the buttressing of the present system of society and the extension of its lease of life. [Hence] Socialist parties of the world have by instinct thrown the whole force of their opposition against colonial expansion in any form or shape.'⁸⁰ However, the integrity of the Empire and the predominance of the British within it were taken for granted by most SDF commentators.

What is apparent is that the SDF did not have a clear unitary policy on anti-imperialism *or* imperialism but worked within a spectrum between Bax and Hyndman. While Newton and Schneer point out that Bax's views on imperialism dominated the pages of *Justice* after 1900, it could well be (as with his views on feminism) not because he was popular but because he was vociferous. A study of publications at a branch level – minute books, local newspapers and local pamphlets – would suggest that very little effort was put into any anti-imperial work when compared to unemployment or labour representation.⁸¹

⁷⁷ H.M.Hyndman, *Social Democracy: The basis of its principles and the causes of its success* (1904), p27.

⁷⁸ H.Quelch, *The Social Democratic Federation: Its objectives, its principles and its work* (1907), p14. This is also the view expressed in the [Walthamstow] *Socialist Critic*, July 1900.

⁷⁹ E.B.Bax, 'Imperialism v. Socialism', in *Religion*, p126. In the same volume see also 'Universal History from a Socialist Standpoint', p36, in which Bax declares that the 'society of the future will not be limited by consideration of kinship or of frontier,... It will embrace the whole world, irrespective of race,... and become socialised.'

⁸⁰ E.B.Bax and H.Quelch, *op.cit.*, p36.

⁸¹ In Samson Bryher's memoirs of the socialist movement in Bristol the only mention of the empire or imperialism is the recognition of James O'Grady's appointment as Governor General of Tasmania. S.Bryher, *op.cit.*

e) The Boer War

The Boer War of 1899 to 1902 brought a division in the SDF over the meaning of their internationalism, a division that would lead eventually to the split of the old guard from the BSP in 1916.⁸²

Despite the hesitation of Hyndman, the SDF had been opposed to the war from the beginning. As early as the Jameson Raid of 1895, they had opposed the use of aggression in South Africa. However, even in this early response to the situation there is evidence of a division of views and a lack of analysis towards imperialism. In the 18th of January 1896 edition of *Justice*, a manifesto was issued by the Executive Committee on Foreign and Colonial Policy which, although not racist or jingoist, was essentially a radical criticism of Conservative policy. Foreign Policy was a series of 'national dealings' of which the British 'are compelled to bear our share'. The policy was administered not as an adjunct of capitalism or the ruling class but by 'gangs' and 'cliques'. The word 'imperialism' is not used whilst, although military domination 'fostered jingoism at home', the navy 'was not an anti-democratic force.'⁸³ At a national level Hyndman was countered in his chauvinism by the more internationally-minded Bax and within the Federation, the Boer War (or rather the anti-war movement) further isolated him. However, as with many other aspects of the history of the SDF, Hyndman's jingoism and anti-Semitism has coloured the experience of the rest of the membership.

Hyndman's initial response to the war was a full page editorial in *Justice* under the title of 'The Jews War in the Transvaal', which managed to be critical of the war – describing it as 'criminal', 'infamous' and 'unjust', but he ironically singled out the 'true born Britons who are dragging us common Englishmen into the war' as being 'Beit, Baranto and so on'. The ruling class, it seems, was run by 'their masters, the capitalist Jews'. Not unnaturally this brought stout condemnation

⁸² For the 1916 split see W.Kendall, *Revolutionary Movement*, pp84-104.

⁸³ B.Baker, 'The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War', *Our History*, No. 59, (1974), p4.

from both Jewish and non-Jewish SDF members. Hyndman was isolated for much of this time and the anti-Semitism repudiated at the annual conference in 1900.⁸⁴

In July 1899, in the run up to the war, the SDF had called a demonstration in Trafalgar Square to protest against the policy of 'piratical Jingoism'. Six thousand people attended and passed resolutions that maintained that 'peace should be preserved at all hazards'. However, a meeting held two months later fared worse and set the tone for most of the anti-war meetings thereafter. The anti-war demonstrators were completely outnumbered and the platform speakers (who included Hyndman) had abuse and missiles, including knives, thrown at them.⁸⁵

The *War in South Africa* manifesto put out by the Federation in January 1900 shows the SDF to be clearly and uncompromisingly anti-war and, apart from the ambiguous reference to the war being for the interests of 'cosmopolitan millionaires', it avoided a specifically anti-Semitic analysis. Included also was opposition to conscription and a demand for a democratically controlled army. The conclusion was: 'if fight you must, fight here [i.e. in Britain]... take control of your own country into your own hands'. This, in the words of the manifesto, was the way of 'true patriotism'. This approach was sufficient to wield together both the anti-imperialists and what might be termed the social patriots of the Hyndman (and Blatchford) wing. Hyndman's view was that the Boer republics should become part of a South African Federation under British protection similar to that of Australia or Canada.⁸⁶ As Richard Price has pointed out, despite their internal difficulties many SDF branches became the key factor in the Stop-The-War Committee (SWC).⁸⁷

The emphasis on Christian duty was one obvious difference between the Stop-The-War-Committee and the other main anti-war organisation, the South African Conciliation Committee (SACC). Although they sprang from the same radical

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p6. Hyndman was still referring to 'the interests of a cosmopolitan gang of capitalists' at Mile End in February 1900. See *West Ham Citizen*, 17 February 1900. This is not to say that the confluence of anti-Semitic and anti-capitalist rhetoric was unique to Hyndman or British socialists. See section in this chapter on Race and Racism.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp6-7.

⁸⁶ *West Ham Citizen*, 17 February 1900.

⁸⁷ B.Baker, *op.cit.*, p7. R.Price, *Imperial War*, p24.

tradition of protest, they were of differing species. The SACC was eminently rational and reasonable. It realised and faced practical politics. It did not expect to end the war, it hoped rather to influence the settlement. Its object was simply the conciliation of the two opponents through public education. The Stop-The-War-Committee had no programme except to stop the war through public agitation and ensure a restitution of the South African republics and hence, while it represented the more extreme of the pro-Boer movements, it could not be characterised as a socialist formation.

The SACC appealed to the sophisticated middle class Liberal who was inspired by the political principles that s/he believed Gladstone had represented. Its urbane, drawing room character was ill-suited to mobilising any potential anti-war support among the mass of the population. On the other hand, the SWC was completely utopian in what it tried to accomplish and could only appeal to Liberals like Stead, men of uncompromising and limited political vision. However, the Liberals themselves were divided over the war – between the Liberal Imperialists behind Haldane, Asquith and Grey and the Radical pro-Boers of Lloyd-George and Campbell-Bannerman, while at the same time the Fabians indulged in a lengthy internal debate over their position.⁸⁸ Hence, these were the very worst sort of persons to run a mass agitation. Its main support came from Socialists and the extreme Nonconformists; its programme, a radical mixture of evangelicalism and arbitration, ‘had no appeal to a mass audience’.⁸⁹

The SDF and the SWC did have some impact at a local level. In Battersea, the South African Cronwright-Schreiner subsequently described it as ‘the only place in Great Britain where it was possible for me to address without organised rowdiness, an open well-advertised public meeting.’⁹⁰ This was in part due to the strength of the Battersea Stop-The-War-Committee formed in February 1900 around the nucleus of the local SDF branch. The committee was the familiar amalgam of the left in the area. Affiliated to it were: Battersea Labour League,

⁸⁸ See N. and J. MacKenzie (eds.), *The Diary of Beatrice Webb. Volume Two 1892-1905: All the Good Things of Life* (1983), pp211-215 and M. Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw. Volume 2. 1898-1918: The Pursuit of Power* (Harmondsworth 1991), pp36-45.

⁸⁹ R. Price, *op. cit.*, pp23-6.

⁹⁰ J.C. Cronwright Schreiner, *The Land of Free Speech* (1906), p18, cited in R. Price, *op. cit.*, p158.

Battersea Ethical Society, the Liberal and Radical Association, Battersea Spiritualist Society, Clapham Labour League, the local branch of the Municipal Employees Union and the Amalgamated Society of House Painters and Decorators.⁹¹ It would appear that the Socialists were the driving force behind the Committee. As Cronwright-Schreiner stated, 'Most of the work has been done by the Battersea branch of the Social Democratic Federation and the Battersea Labour League.'⁹²

What Battersea had, and what perhaps some other places lacked, was a strong tradition of radicalism, a member of Parliament who was a widely respected opponent of the war and an ex-working man, and a strong dynamic anti-war organisation initiated and sustained by the considerable experience of its socialist members in organisation and agitation.⁹³ W.S.Sanders, not a sympathetic commentator on SDF matters, suggests that the credit for Battersea's dynamism in every respect should go to the influence of the local SDF branch.⁹⁴

From the beginning, however, the anti-war movement had to face tremendous vocal and violent opposition. The Trafalgar Square demonstration on the eve of the war was the only anti-war meeting involving the working men's clubs as institutions. This meeting, which symbolised the unity of the left that was to characterise the anti-war movement, was called at the initiative of F.W.Soutter and the Bermondsey Labour League and was supported by the SDF, the Liberal Forwards and the International Arbitration and Peace Association.⁹⁵ The meeting was a fiasco; there was continuous shouting which prevented all but one of the platform speakers from being heard. All kinds of missiles were hurled at speakers, especially Hyndman, and afterwards there was what Price calls 'the usual suspicion of organised opposition.'⁹⁶

The organised opposition to anti-war meetings (and socialist meetings in general) is highly likely. For example, on the 22nd of October 1899 an anti-war meeting at

⁹¹ Cronwright Schreiner, *op.cit.*, p280, cited in R.Price *op.cit.*, p158.

⁹² Cronwright Schreiner, *op.cit.*, p286, *ibid.*, pp158-9.

⁹³ R.Price, *op.cit.*, pp170-171. See also C.Wrigley, 'Battersea', pp126-58.

⁹⁴ W.S.Sanders, *op.cit.*, pp71-3.

⁹⁵ R.Price, *op.cit.*, pp81.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, pp81-2. See also D.J.Newton, *op.cit.*, pp119-21.

Newington Green was broken up by a mob singing 'Rule Britannia' and 'We Soldiers of the Queen', while the only arrest was the SDF speaker Percy Kebbell. On the 5th of March 1900 at Highbury Corner a meeting was attacked by a mob which had gathered in response to leaflets calling on 'all loyal Englishmen' to turn up and oppose it. On the 11th and 19th of March in the same year there were further socialist meetings at the same venue, and on both occasions they were broken up by the police after there had been serious fighting.⁹⁷

It wasn't only the open-air meeting that met with organised violence. George Lansbury records an SDF meeting at Mile End Vestry Hall with J.E. Williams among the speakers.

'The audience was about equally divided – one set singing the "Red Flag" and the other "Rule Britannia" and "God Save the Queen". How we got started I don't know but start we did and were well on the way to what appeared likely to be a successful meeting when suddenly two stewards appeared shouting "Look out, they are coming." This we learnt later was to inform us that a huge crowd had been gathered together and was marching into the hall. I handed my wife to the care of some comrades and asked Jack Williams to take the chair and with Tom Glossop called for volunteers to defend the stairway. A goodly crowd rallied with me at the top of the stairs where, for an instant we paused. Then, as our enemies came cheering up, we went with a rush at them to sway from side to side, with the result that the railings on each side gave way and we were tumbled pell mell to the bottom. Those who found themselves underneath got a severe bruising: one man suffered a broken arm, others went home with damaged legs and limbs. It seems incredible nobody was killed or so few seriously injured. This escapade saved our meeting, but did not save us from a severe, and in some cases brutal, attacks on the way home.'⁹⁸

However, the result of this rowdyism was frequently for the SDF to respond in kind. The *Socialist Critic* provides an account of an anti-war meeting in Shoreditch where between fifty and sixty 'jingoes' were 'dumped violently into the roadway minus hats and covered in bruises and glory, the former predominating.'⁹⁹

Despite this active and organised opposition, in Battersea and other parts of London it was still possible for the SDF/Stop-The-War-Committee to hold meetings. Price and others have doubted the depth of working class support for British Imperialism and while this does (and did) not always convert itself into critical opposition, it did mean that there were occasions when anti-war meetings

⁹⁷ K.Weller, *op.cit.*, p8.

⁹⁸ G.Lansbury, *op.cit.*, p201.

⁹⁹ [Walthamstow] *Socialist Critic*, 21 April 1900.

escaped the usual disturbances.¹⁰⁰ For example, a meeting held under the auspices of the SDF at Plaistow and chaired by Percy Alden¹⁰¹ vigorously denounced the war but was not the occasion for any rowdyism. Similarly, a Hyndman meeting once more at Mile End Vestry Hall was held successfully in spite of an attempt 'on the part of several hundreds of jingoes brought to the meeting by the means of specially issued posters to prevent it.' The *West Ham Citizen* complained that this meeting had been unfairly reported in the London press as having been broken up whereas in fact the entrance of Hyndman 'brought the greatest part of the audience... to their feet cheering uproariously'. Jack Williams appealed to the audience to 'act as Englishmen and women and give the speaker fair play' but then 'after the first twenty minutes or so the meeting was almost as quiet as a Sunday school except for the marks of appreciation by the audience.' A pro-war amendment received only twenty votes, the main resolution carried by an overwhelming majority.¹⁰²

The SDF were not consistent in their analysis of the ultimate failure of the anti-war agitation. At times they blamed the peace movement's lack of leadership. Rather than call upon the Liberal Party's anti-imperialist Gladstonian heritage, the SDF pointed to the Liberals' failure as stemming from their capitalist outlook and the acknowledgement of the link between capitalism and imperialism, and hence in August 1900 *Justice* stated that 'there can be no anti-imperialist party on the basis of Liberalism.'¹⁰³ At other times they accepted the radical interpretation of working class antagonism, i.e. that they were actively opposed to the anti-war movement. At first the SDF played down the anti-war sections of the working class, but by the spring of 1901 these divisions in the working class had become the main cause of anti-war failure.¹⁰⁴ However, what is significant despite the

¹⁰⁰ The [Walthamstow] *Socialist Critic*, 23 June 1900, records what may have been a spontaneous bout of violence. 'Scene on a Tram. Volunteer showing his friend the beauties of his rifle. Fellow Traveller: "Excuse me but is that the same kind of rifle as was used to shoot the miners in Featherstone who asked for a living wage?" Volunteer (in answer): "You're one of them b_____ pro-Boers, ain't you?"' (Proceeds to assault him, assisted by other passengers).'

¹⁰¹ Percy Alden (1865-1944), settlement worker. Mentioned in Canning Town SDF minute book 1892-3. Liberal MP for Tottenham 1906-1918.

¹⁰² *West Ham Citizen*, 17 February 1900.

¹⁰³ *Justice*, 25 August 1900. This attitude to Liberalism is borne out in the divisions experienced over the war within both the Liberals and the Fabians.

¹⁰⁴ *Justice*, 26 May 1900, 2 March 1901, cited in R.Price, *op.cit.*, p234. See also D.J.Newton, *op.cit.*, p119.

vigour of the anti-war agitation is the lack of the specifically socialist analysis of the war and capitalism. The frame of reference of both the SDF and the ILP newspapers is that the war was both immoral and criminal – common themes of Radicalism and Hyndmanite rhetoric. When the war was termed a ‘capitalist war’, it meant that a few capitalists had ‘conspired’ to bring it about, not that such wars were an integral part of late nineteenth century mature capitalism. On only one occasion did *Justice* take its analysis of the war to any deeper level than that of Liberal-Radicalism.¹⁰⁵ Radical objections to the war therefore provided the only comprehensive anti-war attitude and were not primarily suited to appeal to working people.¹⁰⁶

Despite the criticism of the chauvinism of Hyndman which reasserted itself later in the war, no step forward was made from the Radical analysis. Both Bax and Theodore Rothstein made some attempt during the period at an analysis in the form of articles on Imperialism. Yet both failed, as did the entire SDF, to produce any comprehensive work on the subject which they discussed most and that affected them most closely as for a short time it affected no other socialist party.¹⁰⁷

f) Militarism

What did come out of the war was the SDF’s campaign for a democratising of the armed forces, a Citizen Army free from martial law in times of peace. The idea put forward was known as the National Citizen Army.¹⁰⁸ The scheme would be more democratic than the capitalist standing army. ‘What we advocate’, Quelch wrote, is

‘compulsory and universal military training. ... Conscription or any form of military service means a standing army of men, decivilised... an antagonism to the great body of the people, the citizens. The compulsory military training we advocate carries with it the avoidance of these evils. It means that every citizen shall be trained to act as a soldier at need, but no one shall become merely a soldier or cease to be a citizen.’¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ *Justice*, 2 June 1900.

¹⁰⁶ R.Price, *op.cit.*, pp236-7.

¹⁰⁷ B.Baker, *op.cit.*, pp12-13.

¹⁰⁸ The idea of the ‘people in arms as a democratic citizen militia’ was an established radical aim. See I.Prothero, *op.cit.*, p23.

¹⁰⁹ H.Quelch, *Social Democracy and the Armed Nation* (1900), p6.

This military training would be directed by democratically elected officers and would be disciplined without the force of military law. In contrast to the post-1906 Liberal government's expansion of the Navy, the conscious build-up to the German threat and the 'social patriotism' of those on the left such as Blatchford, Hyndman and many of the Fabians, the SDF membership through the International and through Parliament tried to take a socialist approach to the situation. The SDF objected to what became the 1907 Army Act because it would replace the Volunteers with a Territorial force that would be subject to military discipline and law. This force, it was thought, could be effectively used to break strikes and other forms of suppression.¹¹⁰ 'Are you aware, patriot brothers,' wrote Wil Peake of Erith SDP, 'that you can be called upon to don your uniform, take up arms, and by order of your officer employers, shoot your brothers with whom you are out on strike.'¹¹¹ The 'SDF MP' Will Thorne moved an amendment to Haldane's Bill in favour of universal military training but free from military law. The *New Age* described him as 'the first Labour member to put before Parliament on behalf of Socialism a definite constructive policy on the question of national defence.' They also pointed out that Thorne was able to carry this view because the rest of the Labour party had no agreed policy on the army.¹¹² The following year Thorne, supported by the London Trades Council, introduced the 'Citizen Army Bill'. The Bill failed early on, but some attempt was made within the Federation to counteract the effect of the 'social patriot' onslaught.¹¹³

By 1907 Quelch declared that the SDF 'in common with the Socialist Party in all countries' was against standing armies because they were tools of repression in the hands of the ruling class but as socialists they supported an army for 'the maintenance of national autonomy and for the defence of national territory and popular rights.'¹¹⁴ A similar attempt to portray national defence as 'socialism' is

¹¹⁰ See Robert Edmondson, *An Exposition and Exposure of Haldane's Territorial Forces Act, 1907* (1908).

¹¹¹ *Erith Labour and Socialist Advocate*, September 1909.

¹¹² *New Age*, 6 June 1907, see also the edition of 18 July 1907.

¹¹³ W. Thorne, *My Life's Battles* (1925), H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social Democracy in Britain* (1935), pp194-201 and Appendix iv pp280-2, G. Tate, *op.cit.*, p102. It is ironic that this measure was introduced by Thorne who became one of the most enthusiastic social patriots after 1914.

¹¹⁴ Harry Quelch, *The Social Democratic Federation: Its Objectives, Its Principles and Its Work* (1907), p13. This contrasts with the view that if the nation treats another unjustly then 'the Socialist

the subject of the pamphlet *Work for the Unemployed! A national highway for military and motor traffic* [nd. 1908/9] by A.P.Hazell and W.Cook. This highway would incorporate both motor and light rail traffic and would put the unemployed to work while providing for the defence of the country.

However, the navy was different. In response to Hyndman's *Morning Post* article of July 1910 demanding a £100 million increase in the Navy estimates, a 'flood of protest' came from the London membership. The Central Hackney branch demanded that he 'desist from these utterances' and in what 'began to look like a concerted move', branches at Enfield, Whitechapel, Bethnal Green, St. Georges, Finsbury and Camberwell passed similar motions.¹¹⁵ Hyndman's advocacy of increased naval expenditure served to initiate the formation of an 'Internationalist' opposition to his views on defence, an opposition in which both British and foreign émigré critics were combined.¹¹⁶ Thus at the Conference in the Easter of 1911, Zelda Kahan moved a resolution demanding that 'Executive organ and individual members... combat with the utmost energy, the demands for increased armaments and to demand... the abandonment of all colonial and financial aggression, and the cessation of any provocative and obstructive policy in relations with the powers.' The resolution was a serious attempt to undermine Hyndman's leadership who found himself hard pressed and in danger of losing the vote. By what Kendall describes as a 'prearranged manoeuvre', the closure was called for in the middle of the debate. Although Hyndman and Quelch had together spoken for 50 minutes, neither Kahan nor any member of the opposition was given the right to reply. The vote was tied 28 to 28. Hyndman was saved only by a branch vote which registered 47/33 in his favour.¹¹⁷

naturally wishes for the defeat and punishment of his country.' E.B.Bax and H.Quelch, *A New Catechism of Socialism* (1900, Sixth Edn. 1909), p35.

¹¹⁵ Erith SDP held a special meeting to discuss the Central Hackney resolution. On many issues, such as Socialist Unity and Syndicalism, the branch took a 'left' line. The resolution supported by the Erith meeting concluded that they defended 'comrade Hyndman in his right to express his own individual opinion upon any subject, and we protest against our paper [ie. *Justice*] being used to draw our members' attention away from general propaganda for Socialism.' Erith SDF Branch Minutes, 31 July 1910, 28 August 1910.

¹¹⁶ W.Kendall, *op.cit.*, 'Emigrants' p363. Paul Ward notes that Zelda Kahan and the Hackney Central SDF had been critical of Hyndman's 'Germanophobia' from April 1909. P.Ward, *op.cit.*, pp116-7.

¹¹⁷ *Justice*, 22 April 1911.

Lenin commented in an article written barely a fortnight later, a fact which would seem to point to a close link with at least some of the members of the SDP,¹¹⁸ deploring Quelch's 'miserable sophistry'. He described the Hyndmanite victory as deplorable, expressing the view that 'Zelda Kahan was right.'¹¹⁹

g) Conclusion

In the context of the politics of the period, the SDF took a very advanced position towards racism, nationalism and internationalism. This left them open to the criticism reiterated fifty years later by Halevy that they were out of touch with British workers and uttered an alien creed.¹²⁰ Rather than being a part of a particular 'national' current, these groups were a part of a broader European intellectual and political tradition. (Although as the divergence between the SDF and the Bolsheviks illustrates, they were essentially 'national' expressions of that tradition.) More than any other group in Britain at the time the SDF was locked into this broader current. With its contacts in the United States – not very fraternal ones with DeLeon's Socialist Labour Party – and branches in the Empire, one might call it an international current. This is perhaps best reflected in the evidence of it being the home and point of contact with émigré socialists in London from the 1880s onwards. This internationalism led them to take a critical attitude towards the Empire. While the majority saw the Empire as a potential framework for constructing a world socialist federation built on the industrial strength of Britain, some on the left of the SDF criticised the concept of empire and saw it linked inexorably with capitalism.

Yet despite being Marxism's representatives in the world's largest empire, the SDF seem to have produced no developed critique of imperialism along the lines of Kautsky or Lenin. This led them to adopt an advanced radical position during the Boer War and to ignore the separate position of Irish socialists.

¹¹⁸ V.I.Lenin, *On Britain* (1940) pp113-5. Article written 29 April 1911.

¹¹⁹ W.Kendall, 'Emigration', p364.

¹²⁰ See T.Judt, *op.cit.*, p13 and G.Hoskings, *Russia: People and Empire 1552-1917* (1997), pp345-366 for the foreign-ness of Marxism in France and Russia..

Although they were an international body in composition and inclination, the SDF inherited the prejudices of British contemporaries. The two most visible exponents of this Anglo-centrism were Hyndman and Quelch, although it is likely that there were many more at branch level. This ideology challenged the internationalism of others with its Anglo-specific language, attitudes towards the Irish, Ireland and the nations of the Empire and the overt racism of anti-Semitism. Despite the debate within the SDF which these issues raised, it is this point at which perhaps the SDF (and the other socialist groups of Europe) were too localised and not international enough. They were too embedded in their national culture and not sufficiently secure in their ideology to have an impact on the policy of the British Empire or on the drift towards the European war in 1914.

Chapter 11

Trade Unionism and Industrial Politics

One of the criticisms of the SDF, levelled at it from both the Left and the Right, has been sectarianism. Engels, when despairing of the use made of Marxist theory by Hyndman and the SDF, claimed that they were a 'mere sect' because they could not conceive of Marxism as a 'living theory of action' and of operating through working class organisations such as the trade unions.¹

The basis of this criticism is very real indeed. For some it lies plainly with the SDF's relationship with working class organisations and with the trade union movement in particular. Henry Collins in his survey of SDF theory states that 'if the SDF was not *just* a sect it was partly a sect and the reason for that is linked closely with its disbelief in the possibility of effective industrial action.'² From the 1880s the SDF view was that the trade unions were not working class organisations per se, not fighting organisations, but weak vacillating bodies with an emphasis on friendly society benefits, led by men worthy of Gladstonian praise. This was a view of trade unions similar to that of Marx and Engels towards the end of the First International. Engels described craft unions as forming 'an aristocracy among the working class' but except for this 'privileged minority' workers subsisted in conditions of 'misery and insecurity'.³ However, with the advent of the New Unions from 1888, some in the SDF were stuck with this anti-trade union stance. Many SDF members were also active trade unionists but the SDF as a body did little to win over other trade unionists, whilst managing to alienate many of the more conservative trade union leadership.

¹ Cited in M.Crick, *History*, pp63-4.

² H.Collins, *op.cit.*, p68. See Chapter 10 for the SDF's use of the Iron Law of Wages.

³ Cited in Victor Rabinovich, 'British Marxist Socialism and Trade Unionism: The Attitudes, Experiences and Activities of the Social Democratic Federation 1884-1901.' DPhil Thesis, University of Sussex, 1977, p75.

a) The SDF and Trade Unionism

In the years before the turn of the century when the ILP leadership was cementing the Labour Alliance, the SDF was stung by the criticism that they were mere propagandists and had cut themselves off from the mass labour movement represented by the co-operatives and the trade unions. The response in *Justice* was that 'if one comes to the actual facts I think it will be found that the SDF has as large a proportion of active trade unionists in its ranks as any organisation in the kingdom, and I do not think we should suffer at all in comparison with the ILP in this respect.' At the 1897 Conference members had been urged to join their relevant trade union and yet, despite leading some of the most significant industrial engagements of the generation they were regarded as reluctant trade unionists.⁴

Victor Rabinovich⁵ divides the SDF into three groups in terms of their attitude to the trade unions. The *anti-trade union* group was typified by Hyndman who viewed trade union work as at least time wasting and at best counter productive on the grounds that unions stabilised capitalism, acting as a good buffer between management and worker. The *centrist* or 'orthodox-Marxist' viewpoint included individuals such as Harry Quelch, H.W.Hobart and Herbert Burrows – all active in building the New Unions from the late 1880s who viewed trade unionism as a means of politicising class conflict. The third grouping was the *pro-union* group. They believed that the trade unions, as collectivist organisations, were essentially socialist groups and should therefore be used to forward working class struggle. Jem Macdonald, Margaretta Hicks and Tom Mann took this view.

This brief outline gives some indication why the SDF had a somewhat critical approach to the trade union movement. Quelch as editor of *Justice* had a great deal of influence but Hyndman, whose anti-union stance was very much the minority faction, drew a lot of attention and alienated many of the pro-unionists,

⁴ *Justice*, 23 April 1898, cited in K.Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, p11. SDF Conference Report 1897, pp21-2.

⁵ V.Rabinovich, *op.cit.*, pp143-162.

including Tom Mann. In his *Memoirs* Mann writes that 'at an executive meeting (or it may have been a conference [sometime between 1885 and 1889])' he

'suggested the desirability of avoiding such strong and hostile criticism of the trade union movement as was frequently indulged in, and that care should be taken to show that we attached great importance to the trade and co-operative movements. I urged my colleagues to bestir themselves and get into line to help in solving the social problem.'

Mann goes on to describe the response of the other factions within the Party.

Hyndman criticised Mann

'severely for my championship of the trade union. "What were these precious unions? By whom were they led? By the most stodgy-brained, dull-witted and slow-going time-servers in the country. To place reliance upon these, or to go out of our way to conciliate them, would be entirely wrong and the same applied to the co-operative movement."'

This is not a verbatim report of an internal Party debate as he continues: 'I summarise from memory, but I am sure that I give the gist correctly. Herbert Burrows followed in the same strain as Hyndman though less vehemently. I forget what the vote was, but I know that my proposition received little support and that the meeting endorsed Hyndman's views.'⁶

Hence although in terms of numbers the pro-union and union-neutral positions probably commanded a numerical majority in the SDF, Mann's memory and the received view of the SDF suggests that Hyndman's personal position was large enough to overwhelm others and give substance to the idea that the SDF were anti-union and sectarian. In an early letter to Marx, Hyndman wrote that the 'chief drawback' to the progress of the Democratic Federation was 'the Trade Union fetish' because he felt that 'Broadhurst and his lot [the TUC, were] conspiring against his own class.'⁷

As the leading voice of the SDF and as a political journalist, Hyndman's views were taken as those of the Party and published at home and abroad. For example, while Quelch and others were involved in building New Unionism, Hyndman took

⁶ T.Mann, *op.cit.*, p40. Belfort Bax was also critical of the trade union leadership and devoted a paragraph of his history of the French Revolution to the contemporary sell out by the leadership. Trade union leaders, according to Bax, 'do not exhibit any special desire for a change which, though it would mean the liberation and triumph of the class they represent, would at the same time render trades unions a thing of the past.' E.Belfort Bax, *The French Revolution* (3rd Edn. 1902), p19.

⁷ H.M.Hyndman to Karl Marx, 29 October 1881. IISH D2398.

over the editorship of *Justice* and used the paper to put forward his 'anti-union' views. Hyndman could be supportive of trade unions as such but critical of them as *political* organisations. For example, in his influential debate with Charles Bradlaugh in 1884 he could emphasise that 'the one good thing the working classes have done, they have done as trade unions, by combination, by sinking the individual against the class which is organised against it.'⁸ What he objected to was the tactics adopted by the trade union leadership. In an article (unpublished in Britain) for the Russian journal *Workers' Banner* in 1901 he wrote that the trade unions had

'relied too much upon strikes and isolated trade union action, instead of devoting themselves to capturing the political power..., strikes should never be entered upon, if possible to avoid them. The money and sacrifices involved in them – even when successful – would secure much more important results if applied in other directions.'⁹

One of these directions, no doubt, was away from the Liberals and moving towards the election of SDF MPs for Burnley. Mark Bevir's view is that Hyndman's opposition to trade unionism was 'opportunistic' because he opposed the 'apolitical nature of trade unionism'. For Hyndman they were 'a good thing if they accepted socialism and worked for political reforms that would advance socialism, but they were insignificant if they concerned themselves solely with industrial matters.'¹⁰ Yet this tone, although a minority view, came from the leader of the SDF and at a time when their relations with the trade unions and the LRC had broken down. Hyndman was using his long-held suspicion of the trade unions to justify the SDF's withdrawal from the LRC.

⁸ H.M.Hyndman and C.Bradlaugh, *op.cit.*, p27.

⁹ Cited in A.Rothstein, 'Hyndman, trade unions and socialism.', *BMML* October/December 1966, pp14-20.

¹⁰ Mark Bevir, 'Social Democratic Federation', p229. This view is borne out in Hyndman who writes much later in 1904 that trade unionism 'exists for no purpose but to maintain the wage system... [and that trade unionists are] for the most part engaged in a fight against capitalism without the slightest idea of progress.' H.M.Hyndman, *Social Democracy: The basis of its principles and the causes of its success* (1904), p14. Hyndman was not alone in his objection to using strike action, nor was it merely his bourgeois sensibility that brought on this objection. As late as 1910 Will Peake of Erith SDF could write of strikes that they should 'consign this obsolete weapon to the industrial scrap heap and find some more modern method of settling our trade disputes.' *Erith Labour and Socialist Advocate*, October 1910. For similar comments see also, *Bow and Bromley Socialist*, January 1898. Hyndman did advocate strike action for political purposes. In *The Murdering of British Seamen* (1913), p5, he praises the Belgian general strike as a 'peaceful revolution'.

Neither was Hyndman alone in disparaging industrial action over political action. Even before the formation of the Democratic Federation Robert Banner, a bookbinder and an active trade unionist, had written to Marx asking for a 'work dealing with economics from the standpoint of Socialism' so as they could 'put the night cap on that bastard thing trade unionism.'¹¹ In 1892 in an article entitled 'Social Democrats and Strikes' H.W.Hobart, a compositor and an active SDF trade unionist, could write that 'by "striking" the workers inflict a greater injury on themselves than upon their employers.' His solution, like Hyndman's, was to 'get control of the local boards, the county councils, and the imperial parliament. Use your money to pay representatives of your own class to look after your interests in these assemblies instead of throwing it away in a vain endeavour...'¹²

SDF criticism of trade unionism tends to focus not on trade unions as organisations of the working class but on their role as revolutionary organisations and the less than revolutionary leadership. In the aftermath of New Unionism in the 1890s Quelch wrote that the SDF 'frequently found it necessary to attack – and that bitterly – the reactionary tendencies of some trade unionists.' However, Quelch the trade unionist added that 'personally, I have always held that any Social-Democrat who was in the position of being able to be a member of a trade union and remained outside of it, was failing in his duty to the cause.' Yet, he goes on to cite that trade unionism 'recognises the present system of society, justifies capitalism, and defends wage slavery, and only seeks to soften the tyranny of the one and assuage the evils of the other.' Socialism, on the other hand, aimed at 'destroying the whole system.'¹³

In the *New Catechism of Socialism* the generally pro-union/union-neutral Bax and Quelch stated that

¹¹ R.Banner to K.Marx, 6 December 1880. IISH D132. In a letter to Engels (12 December 1880) Banner, a delegate to the 1880 Congress, declared 'what a sickly thing this TUC is'. IISH L129. Later (14 June 1889) J.L.Mahon (SDF and Socialist League activist) could complain to Engels that in setting up the North of England Socialist Society 'our real immediate foes are the Trade Union leaders.' IISH L3695.

¹² *Justice*, 30 April 1892. A similar line on strikes was taken by the Socialist Group of the London Society of Compositors. '...if Trade Unionists adopted the tactics of Socialists few strikes would take place... Trade Unionists, unfortunately do not appreciate the economic forces at work in society...' Socialist Group of the London Society of Compositors, *Socialism and Trade Unionism* [nd. 1898], p8.

¹³ H.Quelch, *Trade Unionism, Co-operation and Social-Democracy* (1892), p4, p10.

'The English [sic] Trade Union organisation is in a sense a survival of an earlier stage than the present in the class struggle. The tendency is for that struggle to become more and more political, and in so far as the trade unions ally themselves with the political working-class movement, they retain their place as active factors in the conflict. In so far, however, as they allow themselves to be dominated by old ideas and abstain from any participation in political life, they become useless and even reactionary... There is no antagonism between Socialism and Trade Unionism... it is a question in the main of policy and methods, which will be altered as Socialist influence makes its way in the unions.'¹⁴

From the Bax and Quelch viewpoint the older unions of the ASE type were too conservative and apolitical. Their role should have been to support the political labour movement. Yet politicised syndicalist trade unionism was also – for the Bax/Quelch mainstream – a diversion from politics.

The position in London, however, was precarious because there was, to begin with, no large industrial unions such as the cotton unions or the miners to dominate London politics. Secondly, unions that did exist were often small-scale craft unions as the bulk of the London workforce were casual and disorganised in trades such as building, dock work or as gasworkers. The SDF did much to develop trade unionism in these traditionally disorganised sectors but even in 1897 trade unionists made up just 3.5% of the population of the metropolis compared with 8% in Lancashire and 11% in the north-east. Of the 250 London unions listed in 1897, 75 were purely metropolitan, and only 35 had memberships of more than one thousand. In the cabinet-making trade there were more than 23 competing unions. As Ernest Ares concluded at the time: 'metropolitan conditions militate against trade unionism, just as they do against other democratic institutions that depend largely for their vitality on the maintenance of an intimate personal relationship between their members.'¹⁵ An additional London factor is that many trade unionists had to cross municipal boundaries to go to work. A short trip from Walthamstow to Clapton would cross county boundaries. This further inhibited community-based trade unionism.

¹⁴ E. Belfort Bax and H. Quelch, *op. cit.*, p40.

¹⁵ From C. Booth, *Life and Labour of the London Poor. Series 2 Vol. 5.* p175. Cited in G.S. Jones, *Languages*, p212.

b) New Unionism

The pro-unionists in the SDF together with the 'orthodox Marxists' provided a great deal of organisational assistance to the wave of 'New Unionism' that developed in London from the late 1880s. Quelch could claim credit subsequently that the SDF supported every 'struggle on the part of trade unions to improve the position of their members or in resisting the attacks of capitalism... The formation of the new unions of so-called "unskilled labour" - was largely due to the work of members of the SDF.'¹⁶ It would seem to be the logical progression from organising the unemployed in 1885-7 to organising the semi-employed from 1888-1892 but there is no evidence to suggest that the SDF factions were thinking along these lines. What is clear is that the New Unionism developed in London and had a substantial SDF presence from the beginning. The Bryant and May match girls' strike of June 1888 brought Annie Besant and Herbert Burrows as organisers (chiefly it seems of the newspapers). They were followed by Will Thorne's gasworkers in the autumn of 1888 (assisted by Eleanor Marx), with the dockers' strike of August and September 1889 bringing together Burns, Mann, Quelch, Champion and again Eleanor Marx.

Despite the notion that the pro-unionists saw the trade unions as playing a central role in working class struggle, the class element was famously played down in the 1889 dock strike. The tone struck was of a humanitarian plea, aiming for cross-class support. Yet fears from the establishment that the strikers led by the SDF activists and John Burns, 'the man with the red flag' of 1887, might become an organised socialist threat seem quite reasonable. As Gillian Cronje outlines in her survey of the press coverage, 'suspicion of the dockers' leaders... was maintained in some quarters throughout the strike.'¹⁷ The SDF strike leaders, perhaps in order to continue with cross-class support, made a point of denying a socialist intent: 'Mr Burns was heard pointedly to tell a man that he could not then discuss Socialistic topics with him, as the present strike had nothing to do with that.'¹⁸

¹⁶ H. Quelch, *The Social Democratic Federation: Its objectives, its principles and its work* (1907), p5

¹⁷ G. Cronje, 'Middle Class Opinion and the 1889 Dock Strike', *Our History* (Number 61. Winter 1975) p15.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 30 August 1889. Cited in G. Cronje, *op.cit.*, p16.

Ben Tillett¹⁹ put it bluntly in saying 'I wish to entirely deny that this movement has anything to do with Socialism. The Socialists only joined us when the movement was in full swing, in their capacity as trade unionists. Cardinal Manning has been throughout the strike a most cordial sympathiser with us.'²⁰ In *The Times* of the same day Burns 'was reported stressing the classless and apolitical nature of the strike: "The present strike was not one in which religion, politics or class differences would enter (Cheers). When it did, they should leave it... It was not war."'²¹

However, this was not how it was viewed by the leaders of the more established unions. Beatrice Webb describes Burns' appearance at the TUC Congress in Dundee in September 1889 when he 'came on the scene with his intense desire for notoriety and his foreign ideas of the solidarity of labour which he is trying to foist on trade unionists.'²² Burns went on to win a seat on the newly created London County Council standing as an SDF (Central Democratic Committee) candidate.²³ While the socialists involved in the strike may have had more limited goals, it was perceived as class victory as much as a trade one. Despite this the industrial wing of the SDF would have to wait twenty years until Tom Mann and others had a more political approach to trade unionism. By that time, however, Burns was in the cabinet.

A further example of SDF support for New Unionist activity in the capital was the boot and shoe workers' strike of 1890. According to Gary Thorn, 'large numbers' of semi-skilled workers joined the London branches of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives from 1888 because they were 'attracted by new unionist policies.' These policies opposed the control over the interests of the less skilled workers by the 'statemented' or better-paid bootmakers.²⁴ A key organising factor

¹⁹ Ben Tillett (1860-1943), merchant seaman and docker. Born Bristol, joint leader of 1889 dock strike. ILP candidate in 1892, 1895 and 1906. Active with SDF 1909-1911. SDF EC 1910-11. Labour MP Salford (Nth) 1917-24, 1929-31

²⁰ *The Times*, 2 September 1889. Cited in G.Cronje, *op.cit.*,p16.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² N. and J.MacKenzie (eds.), *The Diary of Beatrice Webb. Volume I 1873-1892*, p292. Entry for 1 September 1889.

²³ Martin Crick, "'To make twelve o'clock at eleven.'" *The History of the Social Democratic Federation.* CNAA (Huddersfield) Phd thesis 1988, p99.

²⁴ Gary Thorn, 'London Bootmakers and the New Unionism', *London Journal*, 13.1, (1987-8), p23.

was the National Federation of All Trades and Industries led by Burns and Jack E. Williams which aimed to build a general union beginning in London. William Votier, another SDFer, gave them a voice amongst the bootmakers. Using similar tactics as in the dock strike, such as marches through the City, the union forced a split in the Employers' Association which brought a settlement by the end of March 1890.

The official response to New Unionism reported by the SDF Executive to the International was that the wave of activity had been a missed opportunity. It had 'diverted' workers from 'the active advocacy of Socialism' because some saw it as 'a short cut to the goal of the emancipation of the proletariat.' Although New Unionism was 'to a certain extent imbued with Socialist doctrines [it] has so far failed to advance the cause of militant Social Democracy in Great Britain.'²⁵

This begs the question of why with the leaders' socialist credentials did these SDFers appear to divorce their trade union activities from their politics. It is possible that they believed that they were separate spheres and it was only the experience of a mature Labour Party in Australia which moved Tom Mann towards more overt political/industrial unionism after 1909. Quelch's view was that it had shown the previously unorganised their potential as a 'political force'. His conclusion was that 'they must become more political and revolutionary, not from a party but from a class point of view.' Workers must 'use the power which organisation gives them to get control of the political machinery of the country, and use it for the advancement of the class.'²⁶ However, it may have been seen that the short-term gains of the strike and organising the waterfront were more important than propagandising and attempting a revolutionary situation. Whether these were the 'correct' political tactics at the time remains a matter of debate but it does not seem to resemble the dogmatic sectaries of legend.

²⁵ *SDF Report to the International Socialist Workers Congress, Zurich 1893* (1893), p3. See also Quelch, *Trade Unionism...* (1892), p4 where he writes that some 'who have rushed into it appear to have expected too much from "New Unionism"'. James Leatham, an active SDF printer-trade unionist in Aberdeen, came to a similar conclusion in *A Socialist View of the New Trade Unionism* (1893), p22, pp28-32. See also James Leatham, *The Class War: A Lecture* (7th Edn. 1916), p5.

²⁶ H. Quelch, *Trade Unionism* p7. This view of trade unions, as repositories of individualism and insufficiently class-conscious, lies behind James Leatham's criticism of trade unionism. He says that they were 'individualism multiplied by the number of members in the Union.' Leatham, *op.cit.*, p5.

c) The London Trades Council

In the aftermath of the 1889 strike the SDF did gain politically, despite the non-political profile of the pro-unionist faction and the critical line taken by the anti-unionist who at this time had the advantage of Hyndman as the editor of *Justice*. John Burns and his Battersea supporters gained election to the newly formed London County Council in 1889, which led him to Parliament in 1892, but out of the SDF.²⁷ At the same time in May 1891 the London Trades Council set up the Labour Representation League with the intention of giving 'the workers of the Metropolis the opportunity of being represented by men of their own order in positions of public power and responsibility to improve the conditions of their industrial life.'²⁸ It was to have a central fund for running candidates at local level and for Parliament. In November 1891 the Labour Representation League ran five candidates, four of them SDF members, at the School Board election. None were elected but the vote was substantial (over ten thousand in three of the eleven divisions).

In March 1892 at the LCC election the LRL issued a common manifesto for the Labour candidates – i.e. including SDF members – 'irrespective of creed or sect.'²⁹ Nine Labour candidates were elected, the tenth being narrowly defeated, while the SDFers polled up to 2000 votes. At the Parliamentary election in the same year in which Burns was elected to the House of Commons, H.R. Taylor, a SDF lithographer, stood in North East Bethnal Green as a Social Democratic and Labor (sic) candidate 'at the request of the [note the order] Trade Unionists, Socialists and Radicals of the Division...' proclaiming that 'for ten years' he had 'advocated the Social Democratic principles which had revolutionised the opinions of the workers.' Taylor was on the Executive Committees of both the SDF and the London Trades Council. Together with the Labour Representation

²⁷ Burns is often seen as turning his back on the SDF and socialism by the end of 1889, yet his 1892 general election address begins with the words 'As a Social Democrat, I believe that nothing except the Nationalisation of the Land, Railways, Mines and the means of production, will permanently remove the poverty and inequalities which surround us.' John Burns, *Election Address*, (Battersea 1892).

²⁸ London Trades Council Annual Report. 1891. Cited in G. Tate, *op.cit.*, p79.

²⁹ London Trades Council Minutes. 11 February 1892. Cited in P. Thompson, 'Liberals, radicals and labour', p88.

League he listed eight prominent London trade unionists amongst his supporters, four of whom were SDFers.³⁰

When the SDF put up candidates for elected positions they did so with the support of local trade unionists. For example, when in the autumn of 1894 the SDF put forward a number of candidates, including three women, for the London School Board, they had the backing of trade unionists. In Marylebone, C.A.Gibson³¹, 'whose work among bus and cab drivers is well known', had 'a large and influential committee of Trade Unionists working to secure his return.'

H.W.Hobart, the candidate in Finsbury, secured the support of the local ILP.³²

The London Trades Council is a case in point - an organisation which could be said to have been dominated by SDF members. The position of Secretary of the LTC seems to have been a SDFer's right.³³ It was through the LTC that Quelch as a Printers' Warehouseman went as a representative to the TUC and thence to the LRC after the disaffiliation of the SDF. The position of SDFers on the London Trades Council gave them a good degree of influence with the Labour Party after 1901 and it is perhaps significant that Fred Knee became the first Secretary of the London Labour Party while John Stokes became the first Chairman, both SDFers and both LTC members.

³⁰ H.R.Taylor, *Election Address, North East Bethnal Green* (1892).

³¹ Charles A. Gibson, active in (Kensal Town) SDF c1893-1900.

³² *Justice*, 22 September, 13 October 1894. Edith Lanchester and George Young in Lambeth also had trade union support, *Justice*, 20 October 1894. See also [Walthamstow] *Socialist Critic*, 24 March 1900. SDF candidates in Walthamstow put their trade union initials after their name together with those of the party. For example - 'John Ramsey, SDP and ASC+J.' Social Democratic Party (Walthamstow branch), *UDC Election Address* (1909).

³³ Between 1896 and 1938 all the London Trades Council Secretaries were either SDF members or former SDF members. They were:

James MacDonald, 1896-1913, London Society of Tailors and Tailoresses (SDF Executive member 1894)

Fred Knee, 1913-1914, London Society of Compositors (SDF Executive member 1907-9, 1911)

John Stokes, 1914-1917, London Glassblowers' Society (joined Hackney SDF 1904)

Duncan Carmichael, 1917-1926, National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks. (Battersea SDF from 1903).

Alfred M. Wall, 1926-1938, London Society of Compositors

See G.Tate, *op.cit.*

d) SDF branches and the Trade Unions

Fenner Brockway³⁴, before his long association with the ILP, was for a short period in the mid-1900s a member of the St. Pancras branch of the SDF. He said that he would have resigned early on if it were not for the attitude displayed during a strike. At one of the first meetings he had attended

'news had been brought., just as we were breaking up, that the shop assistants at C.A.Daniels, a large drapers in Kentish Town Road, had decided to strike. Immediately the bickering was forgotten. We volunteered for picket duty, arranging meetings each night, and planned collection-taking. Most evenings I went on picket duty, promenading in front of the shop, handing leaflets to the customers and trying to dissuade them from buying... The excitement of the strike, the keenness of our members, their good fellowship with Labour Party and ILP members on picket duty, renewed my enthusiasm...' ³⁵

What Brockway describes - an almost instinctive, non-sectarian support for trade unionists during an industrial dispute - is not untypical of what is revealed in the minute books of SDF branches in London.

The anti-trade union viewpoint, while it may have been a major current in the national politics of the SDF, does not come across in the recorded minutes of London SDF branches. There are many instances of joint work with the trade unions, such as running joint candidates for local elections, as was the case in Canning Town in the early 1890s and in Erith in the mid-1900s.³⁶ However, there was often no difference between the trade union activists of the districts and the SDF branch activists. The minute books show that SDF delegates to the local Labour representation forum are often interchangeable with delegates from some trade unions. This is particularly the case in Canning Town where the role of the Gasworkers' and General Labourers' Union is paramount.³⁷ In Hackney E.C.Fairchild attended one such meeting as a joint delegate from both the SDF and the Tramway Workers' Union.³⁸ As a result of this melding where the SDF ran candidates it was possible for them to attract the financial backing of some unions.

³⁴ Fenner Brockway (1888-1988), journalist. Active in (St. Pancras) SDF 'for three months only' in 1906. Later Sec ILP, Labour MP for East Leyton 1929-31, Eton and Slough 1950-64. Life Peer from 1964.

³⁵ F.Brockway, *op.cit.*, pp19-20.

³⁶ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 31 August, 24 September 1890. Erith SDF Minutes, 15 February 1906. Stratford SDF Minutes, 28 December 1905.

³⁷ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 19 March 1893.

³⁸ Hackney and Kingsland SDF Minutes, 21 June 1903.

The Glassblowers' Union backed the candidature of Fairchild and John Stokes³⁹ to the sum of £5. John Stokes was at the time the union's president.⁴⁰ This type of practical support was recognised early on in Canning Town when a motion magnanimously stated that 'trade union bodies shall affiliate with SDF for municipal Election + Parliamentary purposes.' A motion allowing only avowedly socialist societies such access was defeated.⁴¹

SDF branch members clearly tried to unite their socialism and their trade unionism. In 1905 a question for the monthly discussion of the Stratford branch was 'Should Socialists be Trade Unionists?' and there is no indication that the answer was anything other than 'Yes' as Stratford soon became the base for a number of noted syndicalists.⁴² In other branches delegates were sent out to unions of the district. Canning Town SDF sent delegates to the Gasworkers, Bricklayers, Navvies and Vestry Employees meetings.⁴³ Some, like Scott in Erith, had to prioritise their trade union work over their SDF duties whilst still remaining a member of the branch.⁴⁴ With this convergence of socialism and trade unionism it is hardly surprising that when faced with the Syndicalist phenomena at the end of the decade, the resolution of the Erith SDFers (a branch which also contained some active supporters of the syndicalist movement) should be that

'this branch, while of the opinion that we must continue our political propaganda, we must give as much of our energy as possible to the organization of the present Trade Unions into a class union, so that we may be able to retain in this industrial field, whatever we may gain in the Political field.'⁴⁵

For SDFers at a branch level, trade unionism and socialist politics were complementary activities.

³⁹ John Stokes (d1942), glassblower. Sec London Glassblowers. Member LTC from 1901-41. Member (Hackney and Kingsland) SDF from 1904.

⁴⁰ Hackney and Kingsland SDF Minutes, 8 April 1904.

⁴¹ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 7 August 1892.

⁴² Stratford SDF Minutes, 30 March 1905.

⁴³ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 14 February, 28 February 1892, 2 April 1893. See also Erith SDF Minutes, 24 November 1905 (Carpenters), 25 January 1906 (Gasworkers).

⁴⁴ Scott resigned as delegate to the local LRA in order to set up a new branch of the Painters' Union. Erith SDF Minutes, 23 October 1910.

⁴⁵ Erith SDF Minutes, 14 August 1910.

e) Syndicalism

In the period after the election of the Liberal government of 1906 and the 'Great Unrest' before the First World War, the SDF conference consistently voted against reaffiliation to the LRC. However, SDF members were also involved in activities such as the Essex Socialist Representation Committee, which energised the Socialist Unity campaign and later led to the formation of the British Socialist Party at the end of 1911. The enthusiasm of the syndicalists and the extra-parliamentary socialists enlivened both movements. In London the SDF had been sending speakers to union branches to promote 'political' trade unionism and in December 1910 they could report that they had circulated speakers lists to 900 union branches and made 150 addresses.⁴⁶ The syndicalist or industrial unionist movement was in some ways a reflection of the working-class militants' disaffection with the 'political' wing of the labour movement.

Many other socialists were involved in British syndicalism (for example the Plebs League and the Socialist Labour Party in Glasgow and elsewhere) but a significant presence came from the SDF to the extent that one could say that there is a continuity of action between the New Unionism of 1888 to the Syndicalism twenty years later. The influence of Morris (and Bax) from the 1880s and 1890s provided some socialists with a view of the medieval guild as a proto-syndicate, as a type of 'collective employer quite definitely dominated by the principle of association.'⁴⁷ As early as 1892 Quelch had declared that 'if Trade Unionism developed into a universal federation of labour and seized the political machinery in order to organise industry and control production and distribution, it should be within measurable distance of that emancipation ... But that would be Social Democracy.'⁴⁸ This way of thinking is a clear foundation for the syndicalists of the following generation. Together with the fact that both movements set off from London, another common factor is the presence of Tom Mann who, on his return to Britain in 1909, felt that the SDF was the place to launch his policy of industrial unionism. He used *Justice* before he set up the *Industrial Syndicalist*.

⁴⁶ *SDP News*, October, December 1910.

⁴⁷ W.Morris and E.B.Bax, *op.cit.*, p242.

⁴⁸ H.Quelch, *Trade Unionism*, p14.

Mann's earliest statements had not ruled out a subordinate role for parliamentary action in the syndicalist strategy, providing it was based upon the predominating strength of an extra-parliamentary industrial movement. Though he actually ignored this form of political action in practice, his stated attitudes seemed to belie this. For example, writing in *Justice* in September 1910, he announced that: 'At the present hour... I favour using all effective agencies or weapons at our disposal, and I include in these industrial organisations, parliamentary action, and voluntary co-operation...'⁴⁹ On his resignation from the SDF in May 1911, however, Mann's growing hostility to parliamentary action was much clearer:

'My experiences have driven me more and more into the non-parliamentary position... I find nearly all the serious-minded young men in the labour and socialist movement have their minds centred upon obtaining some position in public life such as local, municipal or county councilorship... or aspiring to become an MP... So I declare in favour of Direct Industrial Organisation not as a means but as *THE* means whereby workers can ultimately overthrow the capitalist system.'⁵⁰

Common to the several factions that grouped around Mann's *Industrial Syndicalist* was a concern to create some sense of a co-ordinated syndicalist presence and to establish a dialogue between militants in London and the provinces. This dialogue covered local branches of trade unions, the ILP, the *Clarion* movement and, not least, the SDF of which in 1910 Guy Bowman was still a member and which Mann rejoined albeit for a short time on his return to Britain. Mann was attracted to the SDF because of a significant minority in the party who had developed a pro-syndicalist attitude.⁵¹

Syndicalism, according to Holton, proved an attractive alternative to SDF orthodoxy in two senses. Firstly, its emphasis on revolutionary activism and the aggressive elan of direct action was far more acceptable to many militants than the economic determinism which assumed that capitalist collapse was inevitable. Thus instead of the effective separation of the maximum programme of revolution from the minimum programme of reform, syndicalism offered a strategy which invested day-to-day struggles in the workplace with revolutionary significance. Direct action methods built up the sense of aggressive confidence necessary for a

⁴⁹ *Justice*, 10 September 1910. Cited in B. Holton, *op.cit.*, p64.

⁵⁰ *Justice*, 13 May 1911. *ibid.*, p65.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp57-8.

revolutionary seizure of power. A second reason for the appeal of syndicalism was its emphasis on the potential of industrial conflict for revolutionary change. This potential had been consistently neglected by the SDF leadership, which saw wage militancy and strikes as both ineffective and irrelevant to the creation of a socialist society.

However, SDF members in London were attracted to syndicalism even outside of Mann/Bowman's Industrial Syndicalist Education League. In the years before the First World War movements towards industrial unionism through union federation and amalgamation were a particularly important area for syndicalist propaganda.⁵² The foremost of these was the Provisional Committee for the Amalgamation of Existing Unions which was launched late in 1910 by a group of trade unionists in the London area without any connection with the ISEL.⁵³ Indeed, W.F. Watson from the Chiswick branch of the ASE, who led the movement, looked to *Justice* as an important means of publicising the works of the organisation.⁵⁴ The *educational* component of syndicalism – the combination of theory and practice – was also attractive to many SDFers as they could perceive the political goal of industrial struggle. An editorial in the *Link* in 1911 could claim that strikes were not useless 'if every strike shows an advance in confidence and solidarity... The necessity now, as always, is the education of the worker... indeed the recent strikes are a testimony of our past efforts.'

Despite not having an industrial structure that would support mass industrial control (i.e. a community dominated by a single union be it coal, cotton or engineering), London was a centre of syndicalist activity. For Holton it is 'certainly significant that the original move to establish the [amalgamation] committee came from the Walthamstow branch of the [Operative Bricklayers' Society] since Walthamstow was an important centre of syndicalist influence.' His view of the industrial suburbs being an important base for political activity certainly coincides with the evidence of the development of the SDF in London. Walthamstow was not only where Guy Bowman, who published the *Industrial*

⁵² See I. Bullock and L. Barrow, *op. cit.*, pp218-245.

⁵³ *Justice*, 24 December 1910. Cited in B. Holton, *op. cit.*, p66.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp66-7.

Syndicalist and later the *Syndicalist*, was based but it was also the base for three SDF branches as well as the William Morris Socialist Club. The Buck brothers, the printers who were to be prosecuted for producing Mann's 'Don't Shoot!' leaflet, had been SDF stalwarts in Walthamstow since before the turn of the century. Anarcho-syndicalist feeling was also a significant strand of the local building trades with the SDFer George Hicks⁵⁵ of the OBS, who was in touch with the ISEL, while A.G. Tufton, formerly of Stratford SDF, from the carpenters' union was also an ISEL supporter.⁵⁶

Syndicalism brought renewed vigour into political trade unionism and hence attracted the pro-unionists in the SDF but it also brought renewed criticism of SDF theory and policy. Quelch re-emphasised his commitment to trade unionism as 'a means towards the complete emancipation of the proletariat' and to build unions 'with a view to making them a more complete and effective instrument in the class struggle.'⁵⁷ The syndicalists attacked parliamentary democracy as structurally incapable of producing social emancipation. As a result the SDF programme of nationalisation was criticised on the grounds that it would produce control by a state bureaucracy which would only smother working-class initiative and vitality. Instead syndicalists looked to direct action, industrial unionism, the revolutionary general strike and workers' control of industry and society.⁵⁸

This spirit of anti-parliamentary politics certainly fuelled the demand for Socialist Unity after 1910 which led to the formation of the British Socialist Party. Early in the life of the BSP the Provisional Committee could declare itself in favour of syndicalist action. The new party sympathised with and endorsed 'those forms of class struggle that had been displayed in the growing industrial unity of the workers' as this was 'necessary for the realisation of the *Social Revolution*.' However, they clearly saw syndicalism as a complementary tactic to political agitation as 'each form of activity should supplement and aid each other.'⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ernest George Hicks (1879-1954), bricklayer. (Bermondsey) SDF. SPGB c1904-1909 Gen. Sec. Amal. Union Building Trade Workers 1921-41. Labour MP for East Woolwich 1931-50.

⁵⁶ *Industrial Syndicalist*, December 1910, pp3-8.

⁵⁷ Harry Quelch, *Social Democracy and Industrial Organisation* (1911), p1.

⁵⁸ B. Holton, *op.cit.*, p185,

⁵⁹ Provisional Committee of the BSP, *An Appeal by the British Socialist Party* [nd. 1911?], pp3-4.

The SDF and later the BSP leadership did not always view the politics of syndicalism favourably. This view of revolutionary development was clearly too much even for the centrist 'orthodox-Marxist' group and led, almost inevitably, to a split in what was by then (1912-1913) the BSP. In 1910 H.W.Lee had fulminated against those who chose to 'remain inside in order to carry on an irritating campaign of internecine style strife and difference' and warned them that they would become 'a parasitical excrescence of which every serious organisation is bound in its own interests to rid itself as quickly as possible.'⁶⁰ In 1912, as the SDF turned into the BSP, internal conflict between syndicalists and 'political socialists' intensified. A split eventually took place in the autumn of that year when the majority of the 'political' wing of the BSP Executive, led by SDF stalwarts Hyndman and Harry Quelch, began a virulent campaign against the syndicalist minority, starting in *Justice*. Here the aims of the syndicalist movement were entirely distorted as favouring joint control over individual industries by workers and capitalists. The attack then spread to the BSP itself. In what purported to be an official policy statement, syndicalism was attacked as 'the tactics of Levellers and Luddites' and political action declared to be 'the principal function of the party.'⁶¹ Serious consideration was then given to the expulsion of all known syndicalists from the organisation, although this was pre-empted by a combination of rank and file unrest and mass resignation. According to Holton, of those branches which expressed a view on the issue, roughly a quarter voiced full support for syndicalist methods and total opposition to the Executive stand.⁶²

f) Conclusion

The one-quarter mentioned above might give one an indication of the division within the SDF/BSP over the relationship with the trade union movement. What can be said with some certainty is that firstly, a hostile anti-union element did exist which caricatured the trade unions as Gladstonian benefit clubs, but as this element was led by Hyndman it had a disproportionate influence and a high profile and many inside and outside the SDF took the views of this element as party

⁶⁰ *SDF News*, September 1910. See also H.W.Lee's editorial in the August issue.

⁶¹ *Daily Herald*, 31 October 1912. Cited in B.Holton, *op.cit.*, p179.

⁶² B.Holton, *op.cit.*, pp179-180.

policy. Secondly, the centrist grouping around Harry Quelch were critical of conservative trade union leaders and the militants of industrial unionism alike, but were active in their own unions and assisted in the development of the Labour Alliance at London level and at a national level. The pro-unionists, typified by Tom Mann, sought an active political role for trade unionism which, given the circumstances of the 'Great Unrest', led him and others into anarcho-syndicalism and to playing down the role of the revolutionary political party. The various currents within the SDF reflect the difficulties the party had in defining its role; whether it was a reformist or a revolutionary vanguardist party. Without a clear definition of the role of the party it was difficult to work out a clear relationship with other elements of the labour movement. This difficulty is further reflected in the splits that occurred in the SDF in 1885, 1903 and 1904.

The SDF had a broad spectrum of views on the role of the trade unions. Hyndman was critical of both the leadership and the tactics of the trade unions. Many more SDFers were critical of syndicalism and its implications.⁶³ However, anti-trade unionism was hugely outweighed by active involvement in trade unionism. Even a critic of traditional trade unionism such as Quelch gave up his post as editor of *Justice* to lead the South Side Protection League. Active involvement was the norm.

⁶³ See L.Barrow and I.Bullock, *op.cit.*, pp250-5 for socialists criticisms of syndicalism.

Chapter 12

Socialist Unity and the Labour Party

The relationship between the SDF and the trade unions, especially the more established trade union leadership, was often strained. A further strained relationship was between the SDF and the groups that formed the Labour Alliance – the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, the ILP and the Fabians. For many historians the departure of the SDF from the LRC was their ‘big mistake’, for others it is just symptomatic of the SDF’s intransigence and sectarianism. This was compounded by the ‘sceptical’ view of some SDFers towards the trade union movement. This view of the dogmatic, immovable SDF has its roots in the rhetoric of the time. J. Bruce Glasier scotched attempts at Socialist Unity during the 1898 ILP Conference by declaring famously that ‘the ways of the SDF are not our ways... the ways of the SDF are more doctrinaire, more Calvinistic, more aggressively sectarian than the ILP. The SDF had failed to touch the heart of the people.’¹

The SDF’s relationship with the unions inevitably coloured their relationship with the Labour Party in its various stages of growth. The SDF were instrumental in establishing an independent Labour Party in Manchester and Salford in the early 1890s and worked towards similar objectives in West Ham, Poplar, Bow and Bromley, Battersea and other parts of London and Lancashire. Yet at the inaugural conference of the ILP in 1893 the SDF presence consisted of just the six branches from Lancashire. Although Harry Quelch, Tom Mann and James McDonald were involved in the mechanics of establishing a national ILP, the SDF contribution to the inaugural conference seems to have been limited to suggesting a name for the new party (Social Democrat) and a declaration for ‘socialism’ in the party programme. The first item could be seen as a pedantic or dogmatic intervention, although the second could be read equally as a point of principle or

¹ J. Bruce Glasier, cited in D. Howell, *op. cit.*, p316.

of dogma. Given the different line of development of the SDF and the ILP, many individuals held dual membership of both parties but the parties had an uneasy relationship at a national level.

As the Labour Representation Committee was established in 1900, the SDF was also in at the beginning. Indeed Will Thorne was a TUC representative on the committee that drew up the agenda for the founding conference of the LRC. However, the SDF's stay with the LRC lasted but eighteen months. Again the SDF contribution – or rather the recorded contribution – focused on a resolution calling for recognition of the class war and the adoption of a socialist objective. The ILP representatives, seeing this as alien to the spirit of the Labour Alliance and perhaps also as unhelpful and antagonistic, voted against the resolution. The withdrawal from the LRC was (and still is) regarded by some as a withdrawal from the labour movement itself into sterile and 'abstract' propaganda.²

After their departure from the LRC and especially after 1906, when the Labour Party appeared to be the tail of the Liberal government, many in the SDF seemed to relish their divorce. 'Should we mix', asked one member, 'with the slow moving crowd... Or should we rather dash forward, place ourselves in front and explain to the crowd the meaning and the significance of the road, the aim of the journey and in general act as guides... The ILP chose the first, the SDF the second.'³ Thus the sectarianism of one critic becomes the vanguardism of another.

One such critic was John Penny, the Secretary of the ILP, who in 1904 could write a *Clarion* pamphlet which declared that the SDF were 'inclined to resent any progress in the direction of Socialism as the putting off of the great duty of revolution'. Penny noted that while reductions in hours, improvements in conditions, municipalisation and such 'are all supported, [they were] so frequently belittled, that the scorn in general is more in evidence than the approval.' The

² See A. Callinicos, 'Politics or Abstract Propaganda', *International Socialism* Vol.11 (winter 1981). For the SDF's 'big mistake' see also Martin Crick, "'A Call to Arms': the Struggle for Socialist Unity in Britain, 1883-1914', D.James, T.Jowitt and K.Laybourn (eds.), *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (Halifax 1992), Keith Laybourn, 'The Failure of Socialist Unity', *Royal Historical Society Transactions* 1994, p166, G.Tate, *op.cit.*, p91.

³ *Social Democrat*, October 1907, cited in M.Crick, *History*, p202.

SDF had not grown because 'British people do not take kindly to rigid methods. SDF men are apt to take an unpractical view of life, and to frighten off everyday people. If they stood alone they would keep Socialism in the clouds and little progress would be made.'⁴ This allowed future historians to represent the Party along those lines, with A.E.P.Duffy⁵ saying of the SDF that 'its great weakness...lay in its sectarianism,' and Henry Pelling's view of the leadership as 'bitter dogmatic sectaries' and 'the dogmatic sectarian character of their propaganda'.⁶

a) Splits in the SDF

Throughout its history the SDF had a problem retaining membership. The split by William Morris and the majority of the Executive, that led to the formation of the Socialist League at the end of 1884, was over the principle of parliamentarianism and the issue of Hyndman's domination of the machinery of the party (i.e. *Justice*). The split took away the Merton Abbey and Hammersmith branches (both Morris's domains), Woolwich and the Labour Emancipation League groups in East London. The group of members who Crick and Bevir describe as the 'O'Brienite core of the London SDF'⁷ remained with the Hyndman minority Executive and re-endorsed the SDF programme. The Socialist League/SDF split can perhaps be seen as a split between libertarian and scientific socialism, between anarchism and Marxism, hence mirroring the fatal split in the First International.⁸ Perhaps it was a developmental step in British socialism. However it is interpreted, the curious fact is that the majority on the executive turned itself into a minority in the country rather than fighting the issue politically within the SDF. Morris described the situation in a letter to Georgina Burne-Jones: '.... it is not worth fighting for the name of the SDF and the sad remains of *Justice* at the expense of a month or two of wrangling: so as Hyndman considers the SDF his property, let him take it and make what he can of it and try if he can really make up a bogie of it to frighten the Government, ... and we will begin again quite

⁴ J. Penny, *The Political Labour Movement* (nd 1904?) p6, p8.

⁵ A.E.P.Duffy, 'Differing politics and personal rivalries in the origins of the Independent Labour Party', *Victorian Studies* Vol.6 (September 1962), p43.

⁶ H.Pelling, *Origins*, p92.

⁷ M.Crick, *History*, p40.

⁸ That, however, would not explain the departure of the 'Engels' clique'.

clean-handed to try the more humdrum method of quiet propaganda, and to start a new paper of our own...'⁹

Justice lasted longer than *Commonweal*, and the Socialist League crumbled within ten years, by which point Belfort Bax, Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling and others had rejoined the SDF while Morris's Hammersmith Socialist Society was trying to promote unity. The split from the SDF did not preclude joint work in the future. The correspondence of the Socialist League shows arrangements to work together with free speech issues or the celebration of the anniversary of the Commune. For example, J.Green - Assistant Secretary of Croydon SDF - asked the Socialist League for co-operation over open-air meetings 'as our members are few and the middle-class roughs are many,' while the SDF Secretary H.W.Lee wrote to his Socialist League counterpart H.H.Sparling¹⁰ after the arrest of Socialist Leaguers for maintaining speakers pitches, citing the SDF's 'willingness to give you their aid in the defence of free speech and against any infringement of the right by the police.'¹¹

However, the split with the Socialist League further alienated Engels from the SDF. As late as 1894 Engels refused to agree to an interview with *Justice* or co-operate with the SDF because they had 'constantly attacked' him and 'brought all sort of charges' against him. As a consequence, Engels had felt 'compelled to keep entirely aloof from the SDF' and could not see how he could change his attitude 'unless that difficulty is entirely removed.'¹²

The 'Impossibilist Revolt' of the early 1900s was again both political and personal. Many commentators have suggested that the personal antipathy towards Hyndman by some of the Impossibilists was the friction between the young and an older generation.¹³ However, like the Socialist League split, it represents the dilemma

⁹ William Morris to Georgina Burne-Jones, 24 December 1884. Letter 1031. Norman Kelvin (ed.), *William Morris: Collected Letters*. Vol. IIa. (Princeton 1987) pp353-4.

¹⁰ Henry Halliday Sparling (1860-1924), journalist. Married to May Morris. Socialist League 1885-90 and Fabians from 1892. Speaker on SDF platforms from 1894. BSP1914-1920.

¹¹ J.Green to J.L.Mahon, June 1885, K1586, IISH, H.W.Lee to H.H.Sparling, 23 May 1886, K1991/1-2, IISH.

¹² F.Engels to H.W.Lee, 9 April 1894, K972, IISH.

¹³ See for example, C.Tsuzuki, 'The Impossibilist Revolt in Britain', *IRSH* (1) 1956, W.Kendall, *Revolutionary Movement*, pp3-22, 63-76, and T.Bell, *Pioneering Days* (1941)

of the policy of the SDF. If we assume a simple right-left continuum of the Labour Party, ILP, SDF, ultra lefts, then as the SDF satisfied the ultras, so they would, in theory, haemorrhage members to the ILP and the Labour Party. Equally, as the SDF pursued the parliamentary option, the Labour Alliance and Socialist Unity talks, so they would provoke splits to the left.

The 'Impossiblist Revolt' differed from the Socialist League split in that it occurred at branch level rather than on the Executive. The developments that led to the formation of the Socialist Labour Party are interesting in that they show the influence of the international socialist movement on the SDF. The fact that the newspaper of the US Socialist Labor Party (the *People*), the Marxist books published by Kerr and Co. in Chicago and the agitational work of James Connolly (formally of the SDF, subsequently US SLP and then founder of the Irish Republican Socialist Party) were all instrumental as organs and organisers of the split suggests that the SDF was fully within the international socialist current. It was the issue of socialists in bourgeois governments brought up at the Fifth Socialist International Congress in September 1900 that initiated the split. The US SLP and Connolly's IRSP opposed the Kautsky compromise motion. This was the line adopted by George Yates against that of the rest of the SDF delegation.

Yates had already brought about the disaffiliation of the Scottish District of the SDF from the Scottish Workers' Parliamentary Committee and debated the general line of the national SDF towards the LRC and the Labour Alliance. Subsequently at the Annual Conference of 1901, held in Birmingham Town Hall, brought a challenge from Yates (Leith) over the SDF's support of the Kautsky resolution but also over the control of *Justice* and the Twentieth Century Press by individual members of the 'Old Guard' rather than by the party itself.¹⁴

'Impossiblism' became apparent in London soon after this conference and the Finsbury Park branch became its principal centre. The ideas of DeLeonist socialism were spread via the *People*, economics classes and reading circles.¹⁵

¹⁴ SDF Annual Conference Report, 1901, C.Tsuzuki, *op.cit.*, T.Bell, *op.cit.*, R.Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (1977), R.Baltrop, *op.cit.*, C.D.Greaves, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ T.A.Jackson, *op.cit.*

From August 1902 the group published the *Socialist* from Edinburgh and were openly critical of *Justice* and the 'Old Guard' from the start. However, at this stage the Scottish group had not decided to secede from the SDF outright. In criticising the Labour Party and the ILP the paper could state that 'the working class movement is one and indivisible and is represented in this country by the Social Democratic Federation.'¹⁶ By the 1902 conference the Scottish and London Impossibilists had developed some co-ordination as a group to the extent that the Burnbank branch in Glasgow was represented by a London Irishman Jack Fitzgerald and three Impossibilists were elected to the National Executive. Percy Friedberg of Finsbury Park was selected as liaison agent for London to work with the Scottish members. When he wrote to *Justice* protesting against inaccuracies in the published *Conference Report*, he was threatened with expulsion. His branch stood by him and the branch itself was expelled. The London Impossibilists were, according to Tsuzuki, 'reluctant to rise openly against the SDF'¹⁷ because they were less well organised and had more faith in the possibility of changing the SDF from within.

In early 1903 the London group felt that the Scots were forcing the issue and were not involving them in the decision-making. The feeling of distrust led to the collapse of the Scotland/London alliance. The May issue of the *Socialist* announced the formation of the Socialist Labour Party. Only the Bethnal Green branch of the SDF in London adhered to the new party, one of only two branches outside Scotland. However, the leadership of the SDF at the 1904 conference tried to obtain an apology from the Impossibilists for the disruption and hence brought about the expulsion of Fitzgerald and Hawkins (West Ham, Central). This in turn led to the foundation of the Socialist Party of Great Britain on 11 June 1904 with a membership of around one hundred, the majority of whom were London SDF members.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Socialist* [Edinburgh], September 1902.

¹⁷ C. Tsuzuki, *op. cit.*, p391.

¹⁸ 'Portions of the Southwark, Kensal Town and Peckham Branches seceded, but some of the members returned. The Battersea, Central West Ham and Wood Green Branches wholly withdrew from the SDF, the membership of the two latter have come down to 14; but the name of the Battersea Branch was at once taken by the Clapham Junction Branch which had been previously formed by those comrades who could no longer put up with the conduct of the majority.' SDF Conference Report 1905, p15.

Despite the criticism from the ultra-left within the SDF in this period, the organisation moved away from the Labour Alliance and the LRC without adopting dual unionism or revolutionary absolutism. The splits did not damage the party in terms of numbers but it did lose some of its younger (and Irish?) activists in London and central Scotland. When the ILP members became disillusioned with the tactics of their leadership, it was the SDF which gained rather than the SLP or the SPGB.¹⁹ This would suggest that either the grip of the 'Old Guard' was too strong for the DeLeonists to shake it off effectively or that the majority of the branches were satisfied with the policy and the leadership of the party. What it does reveal is an inability on the part of the leadership to deal with criticism from the left except by a purge of the malcontents.

b) Socialist Unity

The movement for a 'united socialist party' or for 'labour representation' (two separate but related initiatives) both involved the SDF and both, it seems, went ahead without them. On these issues the SDF has been repeatedly described as 'sectarian'. ILP and Fabian contemporaries may have been political point scoring but sympathetic historians such as Crick and Barrow and Bullock have described the non-appearance of the SDF in Labour's (broad) church as a mistake.²⁰

Socialist Unity and relations with the LRC are the areas where the reputation for sectarianism seems to stick.

Despite later difficulties between the two parties, the SDF was actively involved in the run up to the formation of the ILP. Of the other socialist groups in the field in 1893 it was the SDF (rather than the Fabians or the expiring Socialist League) whose ideology matched that of independent labour representation, as a class-based political party is compatible with social democracy and Marxism.

¹⁹ One branch of the SPGB was set up in Lancashire in Burnley in c1906. See M.Crick, *History*, pp200-201.

²⁰ M.Crick, *History*, pp296-7, L.Barrow and I.Bullock, *op.cit.* p270.

In Manchester in 1891 the local SDF was involved in establishing the Salford Electoral Association and put forward the SDFer W.K.Hall as an election candidate for the July 1892 General Election. In the May of 1892 the SDF was actively involved in the setting up of the Manchester and Salford Independent Labour Party which is often seen (together with the Bradford Labour Union) as the harbinger of the ILP.²¹ In London, even if we discount the activities of the labour unions in West Ham, Poplar and Battersea for the 1892 General Election, the SDF involvement in the establishment of a national ILP can be seen in Harry Quelch's place on the London Executive of the National ILP. James Macdonald, the Marylebone tailor, was the SDF representative on the Arrangements Committee for the January 1893 inaugural conference of the ILP.²² Hostility to the idea of labour representation does not seem to be the issue. Keir Hardie claimed that 'the bulk of the rank and file of the SDF and the best of the leaders are favourable to the Labour policy for present purposes.'²³

An SDF leaflet of the period declares 'We want an Independent Labour Party!'. If only trade union members devoted funds to representation 'there is scarcely an industrial centre in the country which could not be represented by a Trade Union delegate.' To give control of the wealth of the nation to the people who produce it should be the aim. 'This, the emancipation of the workers of the world, is an object worth living for, worth fighting for, and, if need be, worth dying for, and this is Social Democracy.' What the SDF proclaimed was trade union and working class support for a socialist party – but since the SDF were already there to fulfil that role, there was no need to set up a new organisation.²⁴

Six branches of the SDF (all from Lancashire) attended the January conference but the leadership, in Howell's words, 'kept aloof'.²⁵ SDF delegates tried to put 'Social Democrat' in the title of the new party and socialism in the aims but felt that they could not dissolve the SDF within the new party when it was suggested that existing organisations should federate as a national body. Hence the SDF

²¹ Jeffrey Hill, 'Manchester and Salford Politics and the early development of the ILP', *IRSH* (1981) pp171-201.

²² D.Howell, *op.cit.*, pp288-9.

²³ *Workman's Times*, 8 October 1892, cited in D.Howell, *op.cit.*, p289.

²⁴ Social Democratic Federation, *An Independent Labour Party (Leaflet 9)*, [nd. 1894]

²⁵ D.Howell, *op.cit.*, p292.

(and the Fabians) were there at the birth but stood aside as the infant party took off.²⁶

At the same time as the arrangements were being made from the Bradford conference, Hyndman and others were involved in the Joint Socialist Committee set up by William Morris which brought together the SDF with the Fabians and the Hammersmith Socialist Society. It is possible that Quelch and the other SDF leaders became lukewarm and then hostile to the ILP as firstly, they aimed for a purely socialist party and secondly, they realised that involvement in a national ILP would mean dissolving within a foreign body.²⁷

The Joint Committee produced a joint statement, the *Manifesto of English [sic] Socialists*, on the 1st of May 1893. 'We have thus stated', they claimed,

'the main principles and the broad strategy on which, as we believe all Socialists may combine to act with vigour. The opportunity for deliberate and determined action is now always with us, and local autonomy in all local matters will still leave the fullest outlet for national and international Socialism. We therefore confidently appeal to all Socialists to sink their individual crotchets in a business-like endeavour to realise in our own day that communization of industry for which the economic forms are ready and the minds of the people are almost prepared.'

The talks were more than 'friendly and constructive'; the *Manifesto* certainly seemed to be an historic document to rival the historic ILP conferences. It proclaimed that 'in order to effect the change from capitalism to co-operation, from unconscious revolt to conscious reorganisation, it is necessary that we Socialists should constitute ourselves into a distinct political party with definite aims, marching steadily along our own highway without reference to the convenience of political factions.'²⁸

However, this attempt at building a united socialist party fell apart within five months when the Fabians voted not to renew their delegation to the Joint Socialist

²⁶ The interpretation which I have presented is at odds with Crick's narrative between pages 84 and 86. He quotes Quelch in January 1893 as being openly hostile to a new ILP. Clearly there had been a rapid change of views between August/September 1892 and January 1893. See also M.Crick 'Socialist Unity', p182.

²⁷ Certainly by March 1894 Quelch could say 'I believe I am right in the SDF; ergo, those are wrong who don't work with the SDF. Those who are not with us are against us.' *Justice*, 10 March 1894.

²⁸ Joint Committee of the SDF, Fabian Society and Hammersmith Socialist Society, *Manifesto of English Socialists* (1893), p8, pp7-8.

Committee. The Fabian executive had been 'requested by the membership' to take part in the joint committee but the Fabians at the executive level had been reluctant and unenthusiastic and had decided unity was 'not possible.'²⁹ Hyndman blamed Shaw and Shaw blamed Hyndman. Shaw, according to Hyndman, had 'done as much as anyone to prevent the consolidation of a really powerful and united Socialist Party in Great Britain.' Shaw, it seems, felt much the same about Hyndman.³⁰

However, the fact that negotiations were initiated illustrates that at the grass roots SDFers, ILPers and Fabians had friendly and constructive arrangements. During the 1888 School Board Election in Finsbury, Hubert Bland³¹ had enjoyed the support of SDFers and wrote thanking those 'who gave up so much of their time in helping my candidature.' The ILP in turn supported SDFers Annie Thompson in Limehouse and Rose Jarvis in Hackney at the 1894 School Board elections and the prominent ILPers Richard and Emmeline Pankhurst came to support George Lansbury during Walworth bye-election in 1895.³² Hardie took this view in 1892 while Shaw announced in the same year that the SDF

'rank and file... are for the most part our very good friends as they show by the freedom with which they help us and invite us to help them in any convenient way without the slightest regard to the denunciations of us in which *Justice* periodically indulges. On our side we take no offence and bear no grudges knowing too well how often our success has been made easy by their exertions in breaking the ground for us.'³³

The pressure from below and, for some, the logic of joint action, brought almost continuous calls for unity.³⁴ Socialist Unity was also advocated by Robert Blatchford and the *Clarion* newspaper from the summer of 1894.³⁵ In 1895 SDF branches were canvassed and the conclusion was reached that 'relations between

²⁹ Fabian Society Executive Committee Minutes, 28 October 1892.

³⁰ M.Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw. Volume 1.* p172.

³¹ Hubert Bland (1855-1914) writer. Married to E.Nesbit. Active in (Westminster) SDF 1884-5, Fabian Treasurer from 1884.

³² H.Bland to the editor of *Justice*, 3 December 1888, BLPES 522/2/4, *Labour Leader* 14 July, 13 September 1894, cited in J.Hannam and K.Hunt, *op.cit.*, p54, J.Shepherd, *op.cit.*, p45.

³³ G.B.Shaw, *The Fabian Society: Its early history* (Fabian Tract 41) [nd 1892], pp24-5. Shaw, however, was not always so complementary about the SDF describing them on one occasion as 'Hyndman's congregation of manual-working pseudo-Marxists.' See M.Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw. Volume 1*, p172. See also Shaw's comments on SDF branch meetings in Chapter 3.

³⁴ The aim of Socialist Unity was a regular item in the minutes of the ILP NAC 1893-1904, BLPES M890/1/1-4.

³⁵ L.Barrow and I.Bullock, *op.cit.*, pp83-7.

the SDF and the ILP should be of a friendly and harmonious character' and support for ILP candidates decided on the merits of the individual, but only given to those who clearly stood as socialists, while the NAC agreed to work with SDF branches on a case-by-case basis.³⁶ In April 1897 a joint conference of the ILP, SDF and Fabian representatives was held followed by a second meeting three months later that did not include the Fabians. Later that July an informal meeting of five members of the ILP National Administrative Committee and five from the SDF Executive discussed the feasibility of fusion. They concluded that 'in the opinion of those present expressing their opinions as individuals, it is desirable in the interests of the Socialist movement that the SDF and the ILP be united in one organisation, provided it be found that there is no question of principle to keep them apart.'³⁷ Members of both organisations were balloted on the basis of this formula. Only 6 044 participated but of these only 886 opposed fusion. The SDF regarded the result as binding. The ILP NAC did not. The reason given included the fact that so few members had taken part in the vote and that the proposal for fusion had not been passed by an ILP annual conference.³⁸

In August 1897 in a letter to Bruno Karpeles, an SPD member living in London, Hyndman revealed that he was optimistic but realised there were still obstacles to the negotiations writing that 'the SDF and ILP will come together I think in the course of six months or so. Nevertheless, there is good deal to be done yet before the amalgamation is arrived at.' By October Quelch – who imagined a period of 'federal union' before 'absolute fusion' – could tell the same Karpeles that he was hoping for positive results in the forthcoming School Board elections as wins would 'materially help the negotiations with the ILP.' Even by the following January Quelch could still sound optimistic but believed the NAC was dragging its feet and it was not until the end of 1898 that he could admit to Karpeles that negotiations had stuttered to a halt. In Quelch's view Hardie was 'for the [Socialist] Party but it won't be Keir Hardie's party.'³⁹

³⁶ SDF Conference Report 1895, pp11-12. ILP NAC Minutes, 2 January 1896.

³⁷ ILP Conference Report 1898, p31, cited in D.Howell, *op.cit.*, p315.

³⁸ ILP NAC Minutes, 8 January 1898.

³⁹ H.M.Hyndman to B.Karpeles, 15 August 1897, H.Quelch to B.Karpeles, 18 October 1887, 25 January 1898, 31 December 1898, SPD Kleine Korrespondenz, IISH.

Unity was anticipated in all parts of the party. In Poplar, the Labour Electoral League had been set up in 1892 by SDF, ILP and Labour activists. The *Annual Report* for the year 1898/9 optimistically describes the prospects of united socialist branches in the area: '... the SDF and the ILP are discussing the advisability of joining hands. They have reached the stage of discussing the method of amalgamation, so probably their union will be an actual fact shortly.'⁴⁰

It is during this period, when the NAC of the ILP and especially those such as J.Keir Hardie, J.Bruce Glasier and J.Ramsay MacDonald preferred the idea of the Labour Alliance to Socialist Unity, that the 'sectarian' image of the SDF was constructed for members' consumption prior to the 1898 Conference. As David Howell puts it

'In a "Supplementary Note on Fusion", delegates were presented with a hostile portrait of the SDF with its "rigid, propagandist phrases" cut off from trade unionism, co-operation and "the advanced elements in the humanitarian movements." Dissolution of the ILP would be a loss to the Socialist Cause, immediate fusion would import existing tensions into a supposedly united party...'⁴¹

The question was again put to a ballot of ILP members. 2,397 favoured federation; 1,695 fusion. Given the result, the NAC approached the SDF with the lukewarm federation proposal, which was rejected by the SDF on the grounds that the initial 'fusion' result still stood. The NAC received letters of complaint 'against undemocratic action of the NAC' over the ballot from Droylesden and Stockport ILP branches⁴² but the ILP leadership 'had killed off the topic [of Socialist Unity] for several years.'⁴³

The hostility of MacDonald is understandable given the welcome he received from the SDF branch in Southampton when he stood there without the support of the trades council as the ILP candidate in 1895. In their 'Election Manifesto' they described MacDonald as having a 'chameleon-like career' and while 'in some quarters professing to be a Socialist,' MacDonald in their view had 'so clothed the

⁴⁰ Poplar Labour Electoral League, 7th Annual Report 1899, p4.

⁴¹ D.Howell, *op.cit.*, p315.

⁴² ILP NAC Minutes, 12 April, 1 October 1898, 28 January 1899.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p316. Austen Morgan declares that the 'Hardie leadership scuppered rapprochement' while 'MacDonald took the view that "[ILP] tolerance should not show itself by surrender [to the SDF]."' J.Ramsey MacDonald (Manchester 1987).

principles of Socialism that it almost takes a microscope to find them'. Their response to his candidacy was 'Abstain from voting! Study Socialism and Join the SDF'.⁴⁴

Much of the demand for Socialist Unity had come from the Lancashire area where the SDF was strong but where the ILP also had some influence. In London, the SDF was the stronger of the two but the London Trades Council was a meeting ground for the two socialist bodies. The Trades Council had a great deal of SDF influence and it was via the LTC that a nascent London Labour Party grew. One of the early attempts to put forward Labour candidates in London was for the LCC elections of 1898. The SDF, however, was inflexible on the issue of socialist rather than labour candidatures. The break down of what the LTC's historian describes as a 'move to the left' - with a LTC, ILP and SDF joint campaign for the LCC - was because the SDF would only support socialist candidates while the ILP was willing to support trade union or labour candidates.⁴⁵

c) The SDF and the Labour Alliance

In West Ham in 1898 a coalition of SDF, ILP, trade unionists and Progressives took control of the Borough Council and took their place as the first 'Labour' Council. Hence local compromises were possible. The Canning Town branch of the SDF located in the south of the borough is one of the few branches for which the minute book survives. This book covers the period from January 1890 to October 1893 and therefore encompasses the years before and after Keir Hardie's victory in the general election in 1892 and Will Thorne's first spell on West Ham Town Council from November 1891. By the end of the period the branch recorded themselves as having 110 members.⁴⁶ The minute book shows the SDF working alongside groups such as the Gasworkers' and General Labourers' Union, the Navvies' Union, the ILP, the Fabian Society, the Irish National League, as well as the Reduction of Railway Fares Party and the Mansfield House settlement. It was affiliated to the Legal Eight Hours movement, a Central Unemployed

⁴⁴ SDF (Southampton Branch), *Election Manifesto* (1895). See also ILP NAC Minutes, 22 April 1896.

⁴⁵ London Trades Council Minutes, 2 December 1897, 10 February 1898, cited in G. Tate, *op.cit.*, p83.

⁴⁶ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 3 September 1893.

Committee, the Free Speech Defence Fund and it sent delegates to temperance meetings.⁴⁷ From the early 1890s they were the prime movers in a local Socialist and Labour Electoral Committee.⁴⁸ A measure of the branch's ability to work with other labour activists is shown when the issue of Hardie's candidature came up before the branch in September 1891. They confidently agreed to 'publicly support Keir Hardie in South West Ham', but perhaps significantly an amendment that would have required him to join the branch was easily voted down.⁴⁹

In 1898 SDF councillors led by Will Thorne made up a substantial proportion of the first Labour Council in West Ham. The 'Labour Group' of twenty-seven included eleven SDF members of whom six represented unskilled unions.⁵⁰ The Labour Group manifesto focused on municipal housing, trade union rates for council employees and the creation of a municipal water supply. Therefore, despite the singing of *England Arise* and the *Marseillaise* on election night, it could be argued that the Labour Group was successful simply because they were a reformist party of compromise and hence the ideological influence of the SDF is insignificant in this proto-Labour Party. For example, a pro-Labour newspaper the *West Ham Herald* wrote that they appealed to many across the borough:

'To the Radical and Progressive, because the only party on the West Ham Town Council carrying out a similar policy to the Progressives on the London County Council is the Labour Group; to the Temperance advocate, because healthier homes mean greater sobriety; to the Trade Unionist, because united political action must now largely supersede isolated individual action; to the Socialist, because in municipal progress and development will be found the line of least resistance to the political, social and industrial emancipation of the working masses.'⁵¹

⁴⁷ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 27 and 31 August 1890, 4 January, 16 August, 30 August, 1 November 1891, 28 February, 11 December 1892, 28 May, 28 August 1893.

⁴⁸ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 18 October 1891, 31 January, 14 February, 28 August 1892. From 19 February 1892 the Committee is referred to in the minutes by the title of Socialist and Labour.

⁴⁹ Canning Town SDF Minutes, 20 September 1891. A further entry in the minutes reads 'considering that Keir Hardie has declared in favour of Nationalising of Land + all means of Production through Parliament, this Branch recommends him as a candidate for the House of Commons for S. W. Ham.' (14 February 1892). The candidature was finally agreed upon via the Labour Electoral Committee at a special meeting on 16 June 1892.

⁵⁰ Leon Fink, 'The Forward March of Labour Started? Building a Politicized Class Culture in West Ham, 1898-1900', John Rule and Robert Malcolmson (eds.) *Protest and Survival: Essays for E.P.Thompson* (New York 1993), p295. He also points out that when the Labour Group lost control of the council after 1900, the SDF seats seem to be more secure. In 1906, when the group had eleven seats, ten of them were 'under the grip of the SDF' (p311). Could this be because the policies or the 'cultural identity' of the SDF was sharper than the other ILP/Fabian/Labour candidates?

⁵¹ *West Ham Herald*, 11 September 1898, cited in L.Fink, *op.cit.*, p292.

However, the rhetoric of class-struggle and the assertion of class against labour representation was a motif of the campaign and the subsequent administration. For Leon Fink in his essay on this council,

‘Class identity was occurring as an element not of stasis but of political change in West Ham, and there is ample evidence of a sense of opening, of hopes of social integration and community advance, rather than mere ‘consolation’. The rhetoric of class was no empty shell but a vehicle for repoliticizing the community culture.’

He goes on to state that the bulwark of Labour politics in West Ham was ‘the elemental and robust identification with the working-class that was both cultural and political. Its most determined voice was undoubtedly the Social Democratic Federation.’⁵² While the policies agreed by the Labour Group were not in themselves revolutionary, they were seen - in the words of SDFer Martin Judge⁵³ - as first attempts to ‘shake off this thralldom’.⁵⁴ Whilst they conformed to an electoral strategy, they appealed to a revolutionary future because in their view the revolution could come through a conquest of legislative bodies.

At the TUC, SDF trade unionists were active in moving the resolution for the establishment of the LRC. It is ironic that the steering committee set up from the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC for the inaugural meeting of the LRC was led by an SDF trade unionist: the gasworkers’ and West Ham council leader Will Thorne.⁵⁵

SDF participation in the birth of the Labour Party was in line with the trajectory they had plotted of working with other socialist and labour groups at a local level in London and elsewhere. Yet, while Progressives and socialists compromised about the objectives of the new party, socialists disagreed amongst themselves about the process by which those aims would be brought about. This is part of the

⁵² L.Fink, *op.cit.*, p294, 295. For a view on how the Labour Party used class rhetoric in West Ham in the 1920s and 30s see J.Marriott, *op.cit.*

⁵³ **Martin Judge** (b1870), clerk/publisher – *West Ham Citizen*.. Active (Battersea and West Ham) SDF c1889-1905. SDF EC 1897-9. West Ham Town Councillor 1898-1900. West Ham Guardians 1897-1900.

⁵⁴ Cited in L.Fink, *op.cit.*, p316.

⁵⁵ H.A.Clegg, A.Fox and A.Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889* (Oxford 1964), pp291-304.

explanation around the division between the SDF and the ILP on the 'class struggle' resolution of 1900.

However, at the foundation conference in 1900 there were difficulties in adopting an agreed programme. MacDonald and Hardie were concerned to open the labour movement 'to middle-class sympathisers' and were reluctant to 'commit the party to class conflict.'⁵⁶ In Wald's account of events, a class war version of socialism was rejected by the ILP and others in a bid to extend Labour's electability beyond their 'natural' industrial working class constituency. The loss of the 'class struggle' clause obviously rankled with the SDF and its defeat was put down to another betrayal by the ILP for their 'display of treachery to which we have, unfortunately, by this time become accustomed'.⁵⁷

The decision to withdraw from the LRC is clearly linked to the defeat of the 'class-struggle' clause but, according to Crick, it also has something to do with the internal politics of the Federation. By early 1901 the Scottish District council of the SDF had already withdrawn from the Scottish Workers' Parliamentary Election Committee. The Scottish branches were led by De Leonists who were dismayed by the compromises implied in the LRC. There had also been a leftward shift in the London branches over the handling of the Boer War which saw the election of Theodore Rothstein to the Executive. The issue was brought to a head at the Annual Conference of the SDF in August 1901. Withdrawal from the LRC – which had yet to prove itself as an effective electoral machine – was seen as a way of avoiding a split to the left of the SDF. In Crick's view the 'achievements of the Committee, it was felt, did not justify remaining in membership at the cost of internal rupture within the SDF'.⁵⁸

The correspondence files of the LRC reveal the problems involved in the relationship between the LRC and the SDF at a local level. Letters came to the LRC office in Lincoln's Inn Fields asking for clarification of the relationship on

⁵⁶ Kenneth D. Wald, 'Advance by retreat? The formation of British Labour's electoral strategy', *Journal of British Studies* 27 (1988), pp297-8.

⁵⁷ *Justice*, 3 March 1900. This reaction further alienated the ILP leadership. ILP NAC Minutes, 9-10 April 1901.

⁵⁸ SDF Annual Conference Report 1901, M.Crick, *History*, p101, 'Socialist Unity', p187.

the ground. In return the LRC insisted that SDF/Labour or 'Labour and Socialist' candidates were not allowed to circulate LRC leaflets and literature. MacDonald was keen to distance himself and his Committee from the SDF now that they were out of the frame.⁵⁹

The SDF continued to work at a local level with LRCs and the party maintained a commitment to labour representation despite their disenchantment with the national LRC. The SDF's pockets of strength in certain parts of London made it reluctant to withdraw from the local LRCs entirely and so they remained a significant presence on these committees. In London LRCs were being formed after August 1901 under the leadership of SDF branches - for example, in Westminster the local LRC secretary was Joe Butler who was also the secretary of the SDF branch and of the Royal Army Clothing Union.⁶⁰ This enabled SDF trade unionists such as Will Thorne and A.E.Holmes to become LRC sponsored parliamentary candidates and a number of others stood as Labour candidates at local elections.

From 1902 Will Thorne entered into a lengthy and ultimately fruitless correspondence with MacDonald over the nomenclature of his candidacy. From 1893 the coalition of forces in West Ham had designated themselves as Socialist and Labour and wanted to run their candidate under that title. MacDonald and the LRC insisted on the demi-version of Labour candidate. After two years of discussion Thorne finally agreed to run under the common title of the LRC. In this case the point perhaps is that the compromise in the building of a national Labour party had to come from an organisation that predated the formation of the LRC.⁶¹ However, when it came to local elections the constraints were less severe and it allowed some room for the local Socialist and Labour coalitions to continue.

⁵⁹ On Socialist and Labour candidates in Accrington, Camborne and Northampton see LRC 29/1-2, 29/57-9, 29/343-4.

⁶⁰ Bow and Bromley SDF remained a part of the local LRC after 1901. J. Shepherd, *op.cit.*, p81. J.G.Butler to J.R.MacDonald, 17 January 1903, LRC General Correspondence LRC/6/354. Herbert Morrison was a member of Butler's branch from July 1907 to mid 1908.

⁶¹ The SDF printed the letters as a pamphlet, *Correspondence between J.R.MacDonald and Will Thorne* [nd. 1904]. The same issue was raised by the SDFer E.C.Fairchild. In a letter to MacDonald dated 29 July 1903, he asked if South Hackney selected a Labour and Socialist candidate whether the LRC would provide support. If the LRC can support socialists, he wrote 'it is therefore only logical that a Candidate recognised by your committee can stand as Labour and Socialist.' LRC/10/159.

For example, a letter from the Tottenham, Edmonton and Wood Green Trades and Labour Council as late as February 1905 asks whether they could support SDF candidates in the District Council elections. The reply from the LRC was that 'it remains for the local organisation concerned to use their best judgement in the matter and decide for themselves.'⁶²

However, the relationship between the SDF and Labour leadership was never very smooth.⁶³ In a letter to MacDonald in November 1903 George Barnes wrote of his distaste for the SDF and their tactics. 'The SDF people in Glasgow,' he wrote, 'today sent me a letter asking for my attitude in regard to their political programme. I feel disposed to tell them to go to the devil, but suppose that would be decidedly unparliamentary. They are, however, very irritating. Of course you know their programme and what an impossible conglomeration it is.'⁶⁴

MacDonald's attitude was that the SDF opposition to the LRC was merely a stance and

'it is a combination of nonsense and dishonesty that makes the SDF pose as anti-LRC on the ground that the LRC is not pure enough for it.... You can depend upon it that if the SDF Candidates are returned to the House of Commons they will find that on every Labour and Social question we are just as advanced as they are, probably a little more so, and will do much more effective work in bringing legislation into Socialist lines than ever they will be able to do.'⁶⁵

In 1904 the SDF Annual Conference had agreed that 'branches of the SDF should join these local Labour Representation Committees wherever there are opportunities for influencing such Committees in a Socialist direction.'⁶⁶

Obviously, not everyone saw the contribution of SDF activists as positive. The fact that they worked as a caucus alienated many. G.T.Cox, the secretary of the Lambeth and District Trades and Labour Council, complained of being ousted and that SDF members were 'elected as delegates from their unions who whilst nominally representing Trades Unions really only represent the SDF... whilst

⁶² LRC 21/260-1.

⁶³ See also K.D.Wald, *op.cit.*, p304.

⁶⁴ G.Barnes to J.R.MacDonald, 2 November 1903, LRC/11/181.

⁶⁵ J.R.MacDonald to Andrew McAnulty, Secretary of Blantyre ILP, 13 October 1905, LRC 27/179.

⁶⁶ SDF Conference Report 1904, p8.

nominally representing their unions the SDF predominate over all the council' and elected an SDF secretary in Cox's stead.⁶⁷

At a local level SDFers continued to work on local LRCs even after the formation of the Parliamentary Labour Party following the General Election of 1906. An example from the London/Kent border indicates that it was a difficult relationship but one that the local branch of the SDF worked hard to maintain. From the branch minute books and other available sources it is possible to piece together some of the story at this local level. In 1904 the Erith Trades and Labour Council had run eight candidates for the District Council election, three of whom were known SDF members.⁶⁸ The extant SDF minute books dating from 1905 show a small branch which sends delegates to the formation of the Erith Labour Representation Association, while the position of the SDF in relation to 'parliamentary Labourism' is a subject of debate on a number of occasions.⁶⁹ The Erith LRA included in their aims the 'recognition of the clash of class interests' and hence the SDF branch saw this as a success. When in January 1906 the LRA deleted this from their aims, the SDF branch felt obliged to oppose LRA candidates in the local elections. This, however, was a temporary attitude as two months later they announced negotiations with the local branch of the ILP for 'future propaganda and consolidation of the socialist party in Erith' and reaffiliation to the LRA. They agreed to 'co-operate with [the LRA] for a given object, always providing that no sacrifice of party principles are involved'.⁷⁰ By 1909 the SDF/LRA were able to produce the short-lived *Erith Labour and Socialist Advocate* which ran for twelve months to August 1910. The first issue tried to allay fears that the LRA had been 'captured' by the Social Democratic Party, although a reading of the paper suggests a heavy SDF involvement in the production of the paper at least. In March 1910, with the branch now numbering over ninety members, the LRA put forward seven named candidates, five of whom were SDP trade unionists. In October 1910, when MacDonald held a meeting in the district, the branch declared that they would boycott the meeting in protest

⁶⁷ G.T.Cox to J.R.MacDonald, 28 January 1904 LRC 12/200

⁶⁸ LRC 13/157.

⁶⁹ Erith SDF Minutes, 19 October, 9 November, 24 November 1905.

⁷⁰ Erith SDF Minutes, 18 January 1906, 6 April 1906, 17 June 1906.

against 'the recent action of the labour party and Ramsay MacDonald', although a motion to withdraw from the Erith LRA was defeated.⁷¹

In 1908 the Annual Report for the Bethnal Green ILP could announce that the branch had given 'some assistance to the candidature of Comrade Coleman of the SDP' for the Borough Council and 'help was also given unofficially' to Herbert Burrows in the Haggerston bye-election. As a result a Socialist Political Council for Bethnal Green was set up, followed by the Bethnal Green Labour Party in the summer of 1909 to which the SDP and the ILP sent two delegates with one each from the unions - the London Carmen, the Shop Assistants, Glass Beveillers and the National League of the Blind. The SDP's delegates, Fuhman and Vaughan⁷², attended until the September of the same year before withdrawing over the problem of candidates' nomenclature. The word Socialist appended to Labour was the sticking point once again.⁷³

The debate over the naming of candidates was not the only way to colour the relationship between the SDF and Labour. On the one hand, in Nelson in 1907 the SDF were expelled from the local LRC for advocating socialist policies such as the abolition of the half-time system which were incompatible with the views of the Labour majority.⁷⁴ On the other hand, in Bow and Bromley George Lansbury considered that his electoral success was determined by whether the local SDF backed him or not. In 1909 he wrote to Hardie that if he were to stand, 'it must be as a candidate of the National Labour Party with to say the least a kind of armed neutrality on the part of the SDP.'⁷⁵

Within the national Labour Party SDFers continued to play a part through their respective trade unions and trades councils. For example, at the 1907 conference there was a sufficient SDF clique for them to put forward a 'Socialist objective'

⁷¹ *Erith Labour and Socialist Advocate*, August 1909, March 1910, Erith SDP Minutes, 31 July 1910, 23 October 1910.

⁷² **Joseph James Vaughan** (b1878), electrician. Active in (Bethnal Green) SDF from c1909. Member of Bethnal Green Trades Council 1912-1925. First Labour Mayor of Bethnal Green.

⁷³ Bethnal Green ILP, 2nd Annual Report, January 1909, Bethnal Green Labour Party Minutes, 28 June 1909, 16 September 1909.

⁷⁴ D.Tanner, *op.cit.*, p144.

⁷⁵ G.Lansbury to J.K.Hardie, 5 September 1909, cited in J.Shepherd, *op.cit.*, p90.

motion – proposed by William Atkinson of the Paper Stainers and seconded by Harry Quelch representing the London Trades Council – which lost badly by 98,000 to 835,000. However, Quelch went on to win a resolution on unemployment and an amendment on women's suffrage while Thorne proposed and won a resolution on secular, technical state education. All these motions were in line with SDF policy at the time. SDF members inside the Labour Party carried on activities within the party at a national level and were therefore able to influence and make party policy.⁷⁶

With Will Thorne as an MP in Parliament, the SDF was able to place some of its programme on the national stage. Such was the National Citizen Army scheme which aimed at a form of democratic national service. Democratic control of the forces, it was believed, would reduce the chances of the country being led into a war against its wishes. According to the *New Age*, due to his advocacy of the scheme in Parliament, Thorne 'retains the credit of having been the first Labour member to put before Parliament on behalf of Socialism a definite constructive policy on the question of national defence.' However, the issue also illustrates the ability of the SDF to affect the agenda of the Labour Party long after their formal departure in 1901.⁷⁷ For Graham Johnson

'the SDF's policy towards the Labour Party gave it two distinct advantages. On the one hand, as a national organization it was outside the party, able to distance itself from its actions and criticize [Labour parties] for their compromises and their closeness with the Liberals. On the other hand, it was in and of the Labour Party through trade union activists and membership of local LRCs. This enabled policy and the choice of Labour candidates to be influenced both locally and nationally.'⁷⁸

Hence, instead of seeing the SDF's withdrawal from the LRC as their 'big mistake,' it is possible to see it as a tactic which brought dividends for the SDF as a socialist organisation.

⁷⁶ Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1907, p57, p60, p61, p62. Quelch had proposed a similar adult suffrage amendment the year before. Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1906, pp56-7.

⁷⁷ *New Age*, 6 June 1907. D.J.Newton, *op.cit.*, p165.

⁷⁸ Graham Johnson, 'Social Democracy and Labour Politics in Britain, 1892-1911', *History*, Vol. 85, No. 277 (January 2000), p84.

d) The revival of Socialist Unity and the birth of the BSP

The SDF were members of the LRC for eighteen months. They took a line of critical engagement. There were calls from the 'Impossiblist' left to disaffiliate, while many Lancashire branches, described by Bealey and Pelling as 'the most moderate in their political views',⁷⁹ continued to argue for reaffiliation after 1901. On the other hand, one of the most ardent critics of the Labour Party was Harry Quelch – so there is no clear left/right split on the question.

The presence of both the SDF and the ILP on the LRC seemed an advance for socialist unity but the terms of their participation brought division early on. The SDF resolution on 'class war' and the adoption of a socialist objective (i.e. similar to the Erfurt Programme of the SPD) was defeated by 59 votes to 35 (including the votes of the ILP). When J. Ramsay MacDonald became Secretary of the LRC in front of James MacDonald (SDF and LTC), the division between the SDF and ILP had deepened. These problems, together with a sense that LRC candidates lacked the endorsement of the SDF – a lack of control – coupled with the impending 'Impossiblist' split, brought the perhaps premature decision to secede from the LRC in August 1901.

The breach was widened by the subsequent refusal of the LRC to allow its candidates to describe themselves as 'Labour and Socialist' and, above all, by the placing of the Parliamentary Fund at the disposal of non-socialists and anti-socialists. The Federation, according to A.W.Humphrey, felt that to subscribe to such a fund would be inconsistent. It declared that it would never support someone who was not a Socialist although it recognised that important cases might arise such as the Boer War, in which common cause could be made with those to whom they were generally opposed. However, it preferred a free hand and no alliance, as a federation which would make it support 'men in whose selection we have had no voice, and who may be opposed to the principles we hold most dear.'⁸⁰

⁷⁹ F.Bealey and H.Pelling, *op.cit.*, p167.

⁸⁰ *Justice* 8 October 1904, cited in A.W.Humphrey, *A History of Labour Representation* (1912), pp157-8.

Quelch later described the Labour Party as a compromise and a compromise in which Socialists lost heavily: 'when two men ride together on horseback one must ride behind.' Quelch's view of the Federation's role was quite simple. It was the vanguard party of the working class, 'the head of the lance.' It should lead rather than follow.⁸¹

In London there was no clear left/right division on the Labour Party issue either. Zelda Kahan felt that it was better to bore from within: 'We have to capture rather than oppose it. It is the only material, however resistant at present, which we can hope to shape to our purpose, that of bringing about the Socialist Commonwealth.'⁸² Theodore Rothstein⁸³, however, felt that the ILP would first have to renounce 'Labourism' in order to change the political views of the trade union majority. Hence disaffiliation made sense as the choice was 'whether to share with a large Labour Party confusion and even worse things and to renounce clear-cut Socialist agitation among the masses, or rather to remain a small organisation unhindered towards the Socialist enlightenment of the proletariat.'⁸⁴ Many felt that for the ILP the goal of converting the trade union element of the Labour Alliance to socialism had been put off to a distant future in the interests of electoral expediency.

However, in spite of the withdrawal of the SDF from the national LRC, many local branches remained affiliated to their local Labour parties.⁸⁵ In Hackney, for example, the home of both Kahan and Rothstein, the branch continued working with the Hackney Labour Council. However, it was not a straightforward local/national split – socialist purism at a national level and labourist pragmatism at a local level. In April 1903, for example, a motion was put before the Hackney and Kingsland branch: 'That this branch approach the Hackney Labour Council and suggest to that body its co-operation with this branch to secure the return of a candidate, who shall be a Trade Unionist and a member of an acknowledged

⁸¹ *Justice*, 21 March 1908.

⁸² *Justice*, 16 February 1907.

⁸³ **Theodore Rothstein** (1871-1953), journalist. Active in (Hackney) SDF from 1893. SDF EC 1901-6. 1920 returned to Russia and worked for the Bolsheviks.

⁸⁴ *Social Democrat*, August 1909.

⁸⁵ In 1907 affiliation to local LRCs 'on its merits' became SDF policy. See SDF Conference Report 1907 p9. See also F.Bealey and H.Pelling, *op.cit.*, p237.

Socialist organisation, at the next Parliamentary election in Central Hackney.’ After some discussion, the question was referred to a special meeting three days later. ‘After some considerable discussion’ the question was again adjourned to a further special meeting on the 19th of April. Here, a representative from head office pointed out that the proposed motion was contrary to the rules of the SDF and it was accordingly ruled out of order. A seemingly compromise motion moved by Fairchild and seconded by Cathrall (a mover of the original) ‘that in the opinion of this branch a Socialist candidate should be run at the next Parliamentary election for Central Hackney’ was lost by 4 to 6. It is likely that members felt that while a candidate should declare himself a socialist, there was little chance of success without trade union support.⁸⁶

Local SDF branches were, in places, keen to re-affiliate to the LRC. Demand for unity came from the Lancashire branches of the SDF but also from the London branches of the ILP. At the 1903 ILP conference motions for Socialist Unity came from Woolwich and the London City branches together with SDF/ILPers Jim Connell (Clapham ILP) and Charlie Glyde (Pudsey ILP). However, they were opposed and defeated by W. Wood (Newcastle ILP) who summed up his argument by proclaiming that ‘when the SDF showed sufficient sense to affiliate with the Labour Representation Committee then they could discuss the question whether they could fuse.’⁸⁷ A desire for unity from many in London and Lancashire was met with hostility within both parties.

Equally, there were those in the SDF who could, even before the apparent wave of disillusion after 1906, like the Stratford branch pass an anti-LRC motion denouncing them as ‘not class-conscious representatives of the proletariat.’⁸⁸ Later in the same year (6 April 1905) they reaffirmed their commitment to support only socialist candidates at local and national elections. Their delegate to the national conference (E. McAllen) spoke on the Socialist Unity motion and declared that ‘the Social-Democratic Federation recognised that there was a class war

⁸⁶ Hackney and Kingsland SDF Minutes, 2 April, 5 April 1903. See also 21 June 1903.

⁸⁷ ILP Conference Report 1903, pp22-3. It was the City of London and Clapham ILP branches that put forward the fusion motion to the 1905 conference. ILP Annual Conference Agenda, 1905, pp18-9.

⁸⁸ Stratford SDF Minutes, 16 March 1905. This was reiterated in a letter to the local Trades Council that said that the branch saw ‘no need for the formation of a Labour Party as we believe that the only hope of the workers lies in the formation of a definitely avowed Socialist Party.’ 2 August 1906.

whereas the Independent Labour Party did not.’ This brought a response from Dan Irving (Burnley) who contrasted the ‘spurious ILP-ism in London’ with the less divisive situation in the provinces.⁸⁹ Stratford and their supporters won the debate at the Conference (55 to 11) and put it into practice locally. For example, there was an agreement made on the Leyton LRC only to support socialist candidates.⁹⁰ This allowed the Stratford SDF to take a lead within the labour movement rather than being sidelined.

It is probably because of the federal nature of the organisation that the SDF did manage to involve itself in local labour groups. The qualified success of Harry Quelch’s candidature in the Dewsbury by-election of 1902 was a forerunner for this pan-socialist drive.⁹¹ After 1906 and the positioning of the Labour Party as the tail of the Liberal Party, the SDF and dissidents from the ILP were involved in the formation of Socialist Representation Committees (SRCs) in, for example, metropolitan Essex and Manchester. The time seemed to be right for a unified socialist Party.

It is doubtful whether the British Socialist Party would have come about solely on the basis of an SDF campaign for socialist unity, given that the key events focused on disaffection with the Labour Party from 1906 - the Colne Valley by-election of Victor Grayson (1907), the ‘Green Manifesto’ (1909) and Grayson’s appeal through the *Clarion* (1911) - all came from outside the SDF. The disaffection with the performance of the Labour Party across the socialist movement pre-dates Grayson’s election victory and can be seen in such independent socialist publications as the *New Age*. Cecil Chesterton wrote an article entitled ‘The Need for a Socialist Party’, one of a series on this theme run in this journal. He called upon fellow Fabians

‘not to take their conception of the SDF from those veterans who draw theirs from their recollections of the eighties. The “Impossibilist” movement and the secession of the “Socialist Party of Great Britain” and the “Socialist Labour Party” have purged the Federation of its least reasonable members. Its present leaders are, I believe, quite ready for a policy of conciliation. I

⁸⁹ SDF Conference Report 1905, pp7-14.

⁹⁰ Stratford SDF Minutes, 24 August 1905.

⁹¹ For Dewsbury, see F.Bealey and H.Pelling, *op.cit.*, p165-6, M.Crick, *History*, Chapter X, pp122-152. See Hackney and Kingsland SDF Minutes, 15 January 1904, for their renewed call for a ‘united Socialist Party’.

myself have always received from the members of the SDF the most tolerant and fraternal understanding, though I by no means see eye to eye with them on all matters. They have their faults; but those very faults are largely aggravated by their isolation. Fused in a socialist party, which contained Fabian and ILP ingredients, their energy, their concentration, and their tenacious hold on doctrine would be a very useful corrective to the opposite defects, visible enough in some other sides of the Socialist movement.'⁹²

Despite individuals taking a part in LRC, trade union and SRC activities, the SDF was formally uncommitted to 'joint action'. Resolutions in favour of Socialist Unity were passed in a ritualistic way at SDF Conferences but by 1909 the debate on reaffiliation to the Labour Party was decisive. For example, Duncan Carmichael⁹³ of Clapham SDF said 'it was for [the SDF] to take up a hostile attitude to the Labour Party for he considered it an anti-Socialist body.'⁹⁴ The reaffiliation motion in 1909 was lost 125 to 2.

As late as September 1910 *Justice* could declare that 'Unity can best be achieved by affiliation to a Socialist organisation – the SDF.'⁹⁵ However, the industrial militancy of the period and the objective fact of unity in the Socialist Representation Committees (SRCs) and the amalgamation of SDF and ILP branches (in Oldham, Bury and Ashton) brought to the formation of the BSP a momentum which the 'Old Guard' could not (and did not want to) resist.

The SDF made up less than half of the new Provincial Executive of the BSP and less than half of the organisations represented at the foundation conference of the BSP in September 1911. As with the formation of the ILP in the early 1890s, much of the momentum for the formation of the BSP came from the North West, yet ILP branches in Romford, Balham and Stoke Newington seceded to join the BSP. Hence in London at least the SDF element remained dominant. However, the formation of the BSP illustrates that for individuals such as Quelch and Hyndman, Socialist Unity was not a prize worth the dissolution of the SDF. The SDF became a part of the BSP as a body and remained the same body. Quelch continued to edit *Justice*, while the headquarters of the BSP were transferred to

⁹² *New Age*, 20 June 1907.

⁹³ **Duncan Carmichael** (1870-1926), shop assistant. Active in (Battersea) SDF/BSP from 1903. SDF EC 1909-11. LTC Sec. 1917-26. CPGB from 1921.

⁹⁴ SDF Conference Report 1909, pp21-22. See also the 'Socialist Unity' debate at the 1910 Conference which passed 108 to 43 in favour of unity despite the vigorous criticism of Herbert Burrows. SDF Annual Conference Report 1910, pp8-11.

⁹⁵ *Justice*, 24 September 1910 cited in M.Crick, *History*, p239.

Chandos Hall in London - the headquarters of the SDF - and away from the Lancashire/Yorkshire powerhouse of Grayson and Blatchford. Crick puts the resurgence of the SDF 'Old Guard' down to the 'organisational incapacity' of Grayson and his supporters.⁹⁶ As later splits were to show, the BSP was not the SDF in new clothes. However, it had also not achieved the goal of Socialist Unity desired by so many. This was recognised early on in an editorial in the *Link* in November 1911. It pointed out that 'what the conference has done is collect into one Party the majority of Socialists who disbelieve in the Labour Alliance. We do not deny that to be a good thing, but – it is *not* Socialist Unity.'⁹⁷ The ILP was still in the field and in 1912 outnumbered the BSP 30 000 to 13 000 in fee-paying membership. The BSP was the worst of both worlds – neither Socialist Unity nor Doctrinal Purity.

e) Conclusion

The SDF's reputation for sectarianism is largely a product of the period from 1897-1902 when much of the negative side of the SDF's strategy was played upon by the Federation's opponents to prevent Socialist Unity in order to win trade union support and cash for the Labour Alliance. (Hence the ILP would not commit the LRC to a socialist aim). Socialist Unity was the expressed aim for much of the existence of the SDF. The basis on which this unity could be reached was achieved in 1893 and 1897, yet the possibility of a Parliamentary Labour Alliance and the reality of the Labour Party robbed the British left of unity. As Laybourn suggests, after this period 'there was little prospect of socialist unity' because of the 'diverse and compromising nature of the ILP and the continued intransigence of the SDF'.⁹⁸ While pursuing the advantages of the Labour Alliance the ILP leadership (and in particular the 'Big Four' of Snowden, Hardie, MacDonald and Glasier) were not tempted by fusion with the SDF. As David Howell points out: 'The success of the socialist unity option, whatever the electoral pressures, would have produced a dominant form of British Socialism in which the SDF conceptions would have played a prominent part... The defeat of

⁹⁶ M.Crick, *History*, pp244-5.

⁹⁷ *The Link*, November 1911.

⁹⁸ K.Laybourn, *op.cit.*, p154.

this option helped to strengthen and to propagate widespread beliefs about what socialism should involve, and equally significantly, what it should not.⁹⁹

However, Laybourn, like Crick, describes the SDF's secession from the LRC as 'a mistake' as it 'cut itself off from the most influential independent political organisation of the working classes.'¹⁰⁰ A history of the Labour Party deserves to be written as much in terms of its exclusions as its inclusions. Hence, if there was a 'big mistake' in the SDF's relationship with the Labour Party, it was not the SDF's disaffiliation from the LRC, but the ILP's dismissal of fusion in 1898.

⁹⁹ D.Howell, *op.cit.*, pp395-6.

¹⁰⁰ K.Laybourn, *op.cit.*, p166.

Conclusion

The aim of this work has been the study of a political organisation within its social context. The SDF was singularly unsuccessful in electoral terms and had great difficulty in retaining the membership of the thousands of individuals who passed through its doors. This raises the question of the relevance of a study of a marginal organisation such as the SDF. In other words, is the SDF - like the CPGB - 'interesting but irrelevant'?¹ Even a social or cultural study of the SDF can lead towards narrowness and exclusivity. The study of labour history has aimed to rescue the working class from the 'enormous condescension of posterity', although too often it has been criticised as straying into covering a radical working-class elite rather than the class itself with all its conservative mores. With a key organising concept such as class, which itself has come into question² for some, the study of labour history can be seen as 'a particular form of Marxist and indeed Leninist politics' with its 'fascination with the unionised, the militant and the masculine...'³

However, in response to these criticisms, to begin with, Gramsci could claim that to write the history of a party is like writing the history of a country from a monographic point of view.⁴ This idea of the social context has, I hope, been to the fore in what has been written thus far. A second point about the SDF in particular is the size of the organisation. Many thousands passed through but the party remained sufficiently compact for an adequate description to be attempted. (However, even within a small organisation regional differences will appear). Finally, as Richard Hoggart writes of working-class autodidacts, this "earnest minority"...has had and may continue to have... an influence on their group out of

¹ 'It is tempting to suggest that there will soon be more people researching the CPGB than were ever party members.' Steven Fielding, 'British Communism: Interesting but irrelevant', *LHR*, (Vol. 60.2) Autumn 1995, p122. See also Harriet Jones, 'Is CPGB History Important?', *LHR*, (67.3), December 2002, pp347-353.

² See the exchange between Neville Kirk and Patrick Joyce in *Social History*, Vol. 19 1994, pp221-240, Vol. 20 1995, pp73-91, Vol. 21 1996, pp96-8.

³ Andrew Wells, 'Familiar Cul de Sacs', *History Workshop Journal* 30 (Autumn 1990), p230.

⁴ Cited in D.Sassoon, *op.cit.*, pxxv. Sassoon goes on to say that 'the history of a party is inseparable from the history of the economic and social structures which shape it and against which it strives.'

all proportion to their numbers.’⁵ Hence, the minority of activists who passed through the SDF had considerable influence on the labour movement in Britain in the early part of the twentieth century.

To return to the triad - People, Place and Party - presented in the introductory chapter, a number of points can be made. Firstly, in terms of the individuals, the *People* involved who made up the SDF in London, it is possible to say that the majority were working class and of those most were skilled workers. However, a disproportionate number were employed in occupations such as journalism, teaching or clerical work. Secondly, London - the *Place* in question - can be said to have determined the structure of the SDF in the city. The party grew in the industrial suburbs of north and east London. The suburbs attracted migrants – young, skilled, single males – and these were the recruits to the SDF.

The SDF – the *Party* - adopted the culture of these recruits adapting the working men’s club, and gave a prominence to propaganda by word of mouth and conversion by exposition – socialism as a learnt science. This culture was heavily gendered, critical, even hostile, to some forms of feminism and in some ways adopting the separate spheres philosophy in the structure of Women’s Circles. The culture of the SDF in London took more from working-class secularism than from non-conformism in its reverence for science and empirical forms of understanding. The primacy given to key texts and reading also separates the SDF from kindred organisations such as the ILP. The desire for orthodoxy explains both the attraction of the SDF to immigrants from Germany or Russia but also the desire by the SDF for a position within the International. As a result the politics of the SDF in London can be said to proceed from these bases.

This combination of personal, regional, economic and social factors underlies the SDF’s politics before the First World War. It explains the prominence of street corner agitation and demonstrations which they combined with electoral and industrial politics. A good socialist would always be a trade unionist but it did not always work the other way, and hence even the most active of SDF trade unionists

⁵ R.Hoggart, *op.cit.*, p264.

such as Harry Quelch felt that individual conversion to socialism was more important than working class organisation in trade unions. This ultimately reduced the SDF's collective influence in the labour movement. Individually SDFers would go on to wield substantial power but the priority placed on adherence to socialism made negotiations with the LRC difficult at both a local and a national level.

However, the members of the SDF did have influence, individually and collectively and need to be placed within the political history of the labour movement in Britain. And this study of the organisation based upon its social context, has attempted to explain its role and provides an explanatory tool which increases our understanding of the differences within the labour movement and the diversity of the working classes as a whole.

Appendix A

London branches

The dates in brackets are from Paul Thompson Appendices C and D.

Acton	(1905-14) 1906-9, 1911
Barking	1888, 1896-7, 1903-11
Battersea	(1885-99, 1900-14), 1886, 1889, 1892-4, 1896, 1898-1910
Bermondsey	1888, 1892-4, 1896, 1898 (1901-14), 1901-10
Bethnal Green	(1888-99, 1900-14), 1889, 1894-1901, 1903-4, 1906-10
Bethnal Green and Hackney	1893
Bow and Bromley	(1892-1900), 1893-1909, 1911
Brixton	1894, 1896-1901, 1903, 1910
Bromley [Kent]	1907-8, 1910
Camberwell	(1886-99, 1900-14), 1894, 1905-09, 1911
Camberwell (N)	1893-1903
Canning Town	1886, 1889-94, 1896-1904
Catford	1906-7
Central	1901, 1903-10
Central (West)	1889, 1893
Chelsea	1889, 1891, 1893-4, 1896-7, 1899, 1901
Chelsea and Fulham	1897, 1899-1904
Chiswick	1904, 1911
Clapham	1909
Clapham Junction	1904
Clerkenwell	(1884-99), 1886, 1889, 1893-4, 1896-1909
Croydon	1885, 1896-8, 1904, 1906, 1911
Croydon (W)	1904-9
Custom House	1899
De Beauvoir Town	1896-7
Deptford	1886, 1889, 1893, 1895-8, 1900-1, 1904, 1906-9
East Ham	1905, 1910
East London (Jewish)	1902-7
Edmonton	(1890-99, 1900-14), 1893-7, 1899-1909
Enfield	1905-9, 1911
Enfield Highway	1909
Epsom	1907-9
Erith	1905-12
Finchley (N)	1911
Finsbury	(1900-14), 1911
Finsbury (E)	1909
Finsbury Park	1889, 1893-7, 1899-1901, 1903-4
Forest Gate	1899-1900
Forest Hill and Sydenham	1909
Fulham	(1899-12) 1904-9
Grays (Essex)	1894, 1896, 1899, 1900, 1906-7
Hackney	(1886-99, 1900-14), 1896-7, 1899-1901, 1907
Hackney (C)	1908-10

Hackney (S)	1907-10
Hackney and Kingsland	1903-7
Hackney and Shoreditch	1886
Haggerston	1909-11
Hammersmith	1884-5, 1899, (1907-14), 1908-11
Hampstead	1885-6, (1908-14), 1909
Hanwell	1907-8
Hendon	1909
Hornsey	1906-10
Hoxton	1893-9
Ilford	1897, 1899-1901, 1905-6
Islington	(1887-99, 1900-14) 1889, 1902-3
Islington (C)	1909-10
Islington (E)	1906-8
Islington (N)	1904-11
Islington (S)	1896-7, 1904-8
Islington (W)	1893-4, 1903, 1905-7
Kennington	1886, 1889, 1893-6
Kensal Green	1889
Kensal Rise	1906-7
Kensal Town	1891, 1893-6, 1899-1901, 1903-4
Kensal Town and Paddington	1902-3
Kensington	(1886-99, 1900-08)
Kensington (N)	1892-3, 1910
Kentish Town	1893-4, 1896-1901, 1903-11
Kilburn	1896-8
Kilburn (W)	1907
Kingsland	1894-6, 1900-01, 1903
Kingston on Thames	1906-8
Lambeth	(1888-99, 1900-14), 1896, 1904-1911
Lambeth (N)	1894-6, 1900-3
Lewisham	1907-12
Lewisham (C)	1908
Lewisham (W)	1908
Leyton	1906-7, 1909-10
Leytonstone	1894, 1896
Limehouse	1885-90
Marylebone	1884-6, 1893-4, 1898-1901, 1903-8
Marylebone (E)	1895-8
Marylebone (W)	1895-6, 1909
Marylebone and Paddington	1893-4
Merton Abbey	1884-5
Mile End	(1888-99) 1893-4, 1896-1909
Mitcham	1908
New Southgate	1894
Newington	1889-99
Newington (W)	1895-6, 1898-9, 1901
Paddington	(1908-14), 1884, 1901, 1908-9
Paddington and Bayswater	1885
Peckham	1889, 1894-6, 1901, 1903

Peckham and Dulwich	1893-1904
Penge	1908
Penge and Beckenham	1908
Pentonville	1894
Pimlico	1907
Plaistow	1895-1900, 1903
Plumstead	1896
Plumstead and Woolwich	1895-8
Poplar	(1891-99, 1900-14), 1888, 1899-1901, 1905-11
Romford	1898-9
St Georges	1895-8, 1902-3, 1910
St Georges and Wapping	1895-6, 1909
St Mary's	1894-6
St Pancras	(1890-99, 1900-14) 1889, 1908-9
St Pancras (E)	1893, 1908
St Pancras (S)	1903-4
Shoreditch	(1891-99, 1900-14) 1899-1910
Silvertown	1900
Soho	1907
Soho and St James's	1907
South Norwood	1902-5, 1908
Southwark	(1886-94), 1903-10, (1900-14)
Southwark (W)	1898
Southwark and Lambeth	1889, 1893-4, 1899
Stepney	(1900-14)
Stoke Newington	1896-1903, 1905
Strand	1893, 1896
Stratford	1894-1907
Stepney and Whitechapel	1896
Sydenham	1895, 1908
Sydenham (Lower)	1894
Tooting	1899-1900, 1903, 1905-8
Tottenham	1884-6, 1893-4, 1896-7, 1900-11
Tottenham (S)	1894-5
Upton Park	1900
Uxbridge	1908, 1909
Vauxhall	1894
Walthamstow	(1893-99, 1900-14), 1893-4, 1896, 1898-1911
Walthamstow (Upper)	1909-11
Walworth	1886, 1893-1901, 1910-11
Walworth and West Newington	1902-3
Wandsworth	(1894-99, 1903-13), 1889, 1893-5, 1898
Watford (Herts)	1899, 1903-4, 1906-8, 1910
Wembley	1908
West Ham	(1886-99, 1900-14)
West Ham (C)	1902-4
West Ham (N)	1908-11
West Ham (S)	1904-10
West Kilburn and North Paddington	1907
West London (Jewish)	1907

Westminster	1884-5, 1906-9
Whitechapel	1889, 1894-1901
Whitechapel and Stepney	1906-8
Willesden	(1906-14) 1899, 1902-3, 1907-9
Willesden Green	1899-1900
Wimbledon	1889, 1894-6, 1898, 1900-1
Wood Green	(1887-99, 1900-14), 1889, 1893-6, 1899-1900, 1904
Woolwich	(1895-99, 1900-14), 1896, 1904-7, 1910

Affiliates

<i>Durban (SA)</i>	1906
<i>Cape Town (SA)</i>	1905, 1909
<i>Ladysmith (SA)</i>	1907
<i>Polish Socialist Party (London)</i>	1901-9
<i>Sutton Socialist Society</i>	1908

Appendix B

Figure IVb (Occupations of London SDF members)

<u>Group 1 (Unskilled)</u>	(29)
Labourer	(10)
Docker	(9)
Gasworker	(7)
Costermonger	(1)
Domestic Servant	(1)
 <u>Group 2 (Skilled/Craft)</u>	 (122)
Printer/Compositor	(26)
Engineer	(17)
Tailor	(13)
Carpenter	(7)
Shoemaker	(6)
Cabinet Maker	(5)
Painter	(4)
Bookbinder	(4)
Signwriter	(3)
Bricklayer	(3)
Litho-artist	(3)
Carter	(3)
Builder	(2)
Baker	(2)
Woodcarver	(2)
French Polisher	(2)
Musician	(2)
Architectural modeller	(1)
Plumber	(1)
Umbrella maker	(1)
Ecclesiastical artist	(1)
Glassblower	(1)

Electrician	(1)
Photographic operator	(1)
Hatter	(1)
Blacksmith	(1)
Iron moulder	(1)
Crane driver	(1)
Cigar maker	(1)
Dyer	(1)
Scientific instrument maker	(1)
Hairdresser	(1)
Artist/illustrator	(1)
Cooper	(1)
Watchmaker	(1)

Group 3 White Collar (43)

Teacher	(12)
Shop assistant	(12)
Clerk	(10)
Commercial traveller	(3)
Agitator/lecturer	(3)
Prison warder	(1)
Book keeper	(1)
Publican	(1)

Group 4 (Professional) (42)

Writer/journalist	(23)
Priest/minister	(5)
Lawyer	(4)
Civil servant	(4)
Settlement/charity worker	(2)
Doctor	(2)
Architect	(1)
Broker	(1)

Group 5 (Gentry) (5)

Gentry (5)

Group 6 (Unclassified) (3)

Railwayman (2)

Unemployed (1)

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