

Leeds Anarchist History from its beginning to the 1920s by Shaun Cohen

Introduction

The Ford Maguire Society based in Leeds exists to promote and educate on the radical/socialist and trade union history of Leeds. Whatever our political views are, Anarchism was part of the labour movement and therefore should not be ignored. In fact at times there is a very visible connection between the Leeds Anarchists and members of the Leeds ILP, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

History all too often is seen as belonging to the so called great and good, as Brecht asked “Who built Thebes.” Some are known to us and hopefully more will become known to us and hopefully understand the working of the Leeds Anarchists in the period from the 1880s to the 1920s. Because of the political differences between the Anarchists and other political currents, Anarchism on the whole, has tended to be ignored when it comes to looking at working class history in this country. This essay is an attempt to bring to notice, one of the aspects of labour movement history, namely the history of Anarchism in Leeds from the 1880s to the 1920s.

So it is with that hope and intention, of rescuing the forgotten and largely unknown aspect of Leeds and Anarchist history I have written this account.

The origins

The Leeds branch of the Socialist League was created out of the collapse of the SDF and consisted of former members of the Federation deciding to secede to the new organisation, one of these was Matt Sollitt, who went on until his death in 1915 to be one of the most stalwart of Anarchists in Leeds.

Tom Woodhouse states “The aim of the Socialist League was “the complete conversion, through persistent propaganda and education to the cause. The task was to make socialists. Street propaganda was seen as the main method of spreading the cause and strikes and industrial disputes were opportunities to develop revolutionary class consciousness.” (1)

Within the Leeds Anarchist movement, support for the views of Kropotkin, were the dominant feature of the local movement. On the whole Anarchist thought in Britain envisaged political change through Direct Action not bombs and murder. Different anarchists held different views about violence and what kinds of force would be justified or effective.

The idea of co-operatives as an answer to the ills of poverty and unemployment began to emerge in the 1820s and 1830, and gained widespread support amongst the working class. Despite the failure of the various schemes promoted, the idea of a co-operative commonwealth continued to be part of the basic ideology of the early socialist movement in Britain and certainly in Leeds.

In 1888 in response to the failure of the strike by Jewish tailoring workers a co-operative workshop was established. Particularly active in previously supporting the strike and now the co-operative

were in particular Tom Maguire and Tom Paylor of the Socialist League. Indeed Paylor, in December 1889 chaired a meeting addressed by Prince Kropotkin.

The November 1898 issue of Freedom, in a report written by Billy MacQueen, stated that the Brotherhood Church was established in 1897, in Holbeck, as, "A Communistic Group of Christian Anarchists" The workshop was established about twelve months after after a meeting in Leeds addressed by J.C. Kenworthy. (2) The idea being that victimised iron workers who were out of work, due to the union losing a recent national dispute, could find work. In fact the workers showed no interest in the scheme, which went ahead anyway.

In April 1897, a workshop was established at 6 Victoria Road and according to MacQueen "G. Gibson, who has hitherto been a prosperous cycle manufacturer and electrician decided to throw his works into the movement." (3)

The workshop ran on the following principles "no formal membership, no rules, no formal admission. There is no recognition of fair or equal division of wages. Each man or woman in connection takes from the treasury such as they need." The workshop itself was to survive until 1902 In December 1898 the workshop was described in the New Order "around us are Socialists, anarchists, and members of the Christian Churches watching with curiosity and interest the success or otherwise of the small beginning on the lines of industrial communism at 6 Victoria Street, while in its members is an awakening a social conscience such as will enable them to work effectively and with increasing joy for the common good"(4)

Tom and Lillian Ferris, and Bertie Rowe founders of the Beeston Brotherhood, Tom and Lillian had previously been involved with the Holbeck Brotherhood Church. Also involved with the Beeston Brotherhood was Alf Kitson, who became a central figure in the unemployed agitation of 1908 (see below).

During the First World War Tom, Lillian would receive prison sentences for producing and distributing anti war leaflets. In addition they would also became involved with the No-Conscription Fellowship providing sanctuary for conscientious objectors.

The Socialist League

In 1886 the Leeds branch reiterated its support for the position of opposition to the development of a parliamentary Labour Party "We are convinced that any alliance of radicals or social reformers as such, And Socialists, in order to work from a common basis would be detrimental to the weaker and more advanced section and we cannot understand how a socialist body can enter into such a compromise without compromise of principle"

A report in the Commonweal for September 1886, states that Maguire and Sollitt spoke and fifty copies of Kropotkin's 'Appeal to Youth' were sold. However by May 1887 the Leeds branch voted with the minority parliamentary group at the Socialist League annual conference. By September the branch had decided to stop taking the Commonweal. Despite this decision and the growing differences within the Socialist League leadership, the Leeds branch continued to co-exist with Anarchists and Parliamentarians in its ranks.

Anarchist groups were to emerge in a number of towns across the north of England, attempts to collaborate and co-ordinate activity and publications had started in the late 1880's and continued

until 1912. More information on this aspect of anarchist activity is contained within the Appendix 'Northern Collaboration'

The emergence of the "new unionism" provided not only challenged the existing trade union movement, Leeds Trades Council was created in the early 1860s, but some its members could trace their history back to the early nineteenth century and were imbued with a sense of their own status and position. The new unions also provided an opportunity to break out of the routinism of the weekly open air meetings, the occasional big speaker and the recruitment of individuals to the cause. The involvement with the rising strike movement and growth of trade unionism for the Leeds branch of the Socialist League came about in part by chance. In an interview with James Sweeney in relation to the building labourer's dispute he commented that "Every Sunday there are meetings held belonging to various movements in Vicar's Croft.. and it was there that I, in conjunction with other's first heard some of the labourer's express their dissatisfaction." (5)

H B Samuels a London Anarchist speaking at the Autonomie Club (London) in November 1892 suggested that the Anarchists should take "some active part in the propaganda whether among Trade Union or elsewhere" (6)

Indeed Samuels himself had been in Leeds in 1890 organising tailoring and slipper workers reflecting the involvement of the anarchist movement in the new unionism.(Quail p. 88). In May of that year the Gas Workers Union led locally by members of the Socialist League, organised a May Day demonstration in support of the call for an 8 hour day. Samuels was one of the principle speakers alongside the Gas Workers officials. This demonstration was described by the Yorkshire Factory Times, attended by 10,000 people, as one of the biggest Labour demonstrations in Leeds for some considerable time.

However, the goodwill apparently existing between the anarchists and the parliamentarians soon evaporated in the aftermath of the gas workers strike that started in June 1890. The strike arose as a result of the Leeds Corporation attempt to completely undermine the terms and conditions of staff. Thinking that the demand for gas was less in the summer. The Corporation believed they could overcome the opposition of the workers by the importation of scab labour.

There were in fact several days of disorder, centring on a railway bridge which the scabs had to pass under to get to the Works. They would find themselves under a hail of bricks, bottles lengths of timber and whatever came to hand. Even so the scabs managed to enter the gas works, whilst cavalry with swords drawn attacked those not on the bridge. As Will Thorne described "The soldiers made guard near the gates, but as soon as they were opened and the blacklegs made to enter, the crowd rushed in. I was with them. We charged at the blacklegs, who in their terror made a rush for a wall, over which many of them escaped. The police counter-attacked."

A bystander who went to the gas works to see what was going on reported that;

"I reached the works when the police arrived and stood in the crowd. The policemen commenced to push people back, but the crowd would not move and the police began hitting anyone they could with their staves. They used their weapons freely upon anyone, women and children included. I was struck half a dozen times at least by the police, and my head was split open and my face was covered with blood... I had nothing to do with the disturbance and had not said or done anything."

The previous amity between the socialists and the anarchists in Leeds was completely shattered in the aftermath of the strike. However, it should be noted that as early as 1898 the differences within

the local Socialist League branch between the Parliamentarians and the anti-electoral supporters was already emerging.

H B Samuels commented that the police and troops escorting scabs to the gas works, resulted in a prolonged and sustained attack by strikers and their supporters, especially the women. Samuels wrote "if they had only knowledge (they had the pluck) the whole cursed lot would have been wiped out. As the horses and men picked themselves up, it was seen that many were bruised and bleeding but alas! No corpses to be seen." This comment perhaps is very much in the style of Samuels, making outrageous comments that were very much at odds with most Anarchists.

In a letter Tom Maguire (who along with Paylor and Cockayne) had been instrumental in organising the Gas Workers and General Union wrote;

"there has been such a rumpus raised by a few demented anarchists here – since the gas riots – that it has become impossible for us to work together. Our anarchist friends who were conspicuous by their absence in the gas fights, finally told the people that no policy should be entertained but physical force" (7)

In view of the later arrival in Leeds of Billy MacQueen (see below) and his association with Alf Barton, it is worth noting that in 1892 we find Barton criticising Samuels for his views on the actions of Ravachol in France. Barton wrote protesting there was nothing revolutionary about the murder and robbery of a hermit. (8)

Samuels had it seems arrived in Leeds sometime in 1889 to work work to unionise the Jewish workers within the slipper trade, at the time probably the most exploited group of workers in Leeds. There is no evidence that this attempt to build a trade union was successful and it would appear that Samuels left Leeds sometime in late 1890.

Though we can perhaps see some of the lasting influence of Samuels ideas in the view apparently expressed by an Anarchist in relation to unemployed agitation in February 1894, when it was reported that "they should take anything they could get hold of and that was not stealing" (South Leeds Echo 23 February 1894)

At a meeting of the Trades Council in February 1894, the work of the Unemployed Committee was discussed and the Trades Council Secretary stated that "in spite of resolutions passed by the Committee they would not allow the enunciation of the Anarchist propaganda at their meetings... and he contended that they as a Trades Council had nothing in common with Mr. Murdoch" (9)

During the unemployed agitation of winter 1893/ 1894, a local anarchist John Murdock (aka Tom MacQueen) seemed to have gained some local notoriety. In August 1894, it was reported in Freedom that "our cde. Murdock gave vigorous speeches in the Labour Church every afternoon (this is where the unemployed under the auspices of the Trades Council, Permanent Committee on Unemployed gathered) and in the Town Hall square in the evenings." In May of the same year, it appears he was fined 10 shillings for a breach of the peace in Jack Lane, in opposition to an eviction being carried out.(10)

Leeds Anarchism

Even though the existence of a Leeds Anarchist Group was reported in Freedom for August 1892, this does not mean there was no overtly anarchist activity in Leeds prior to this date. Matt Sollitt could date his active political life to 1884, when along with Tom Maguire he helped to establish what was to become a branch of the Social Democratic Federation, he later became a founder member of the Leeds Socialist League and one of its regular outdoor speakers. After the split in the Socialist League Sollitt was to become one of the stalwarts of the Leeds anarchist movement.

As mentioned above Samuels arrived in Leeds in 1889. The following year, he was involved in organising Jewish workers in the slipper trade and whilst this does not appear to have met with much success. He was also actively in speaking at the open air meetings held at different venues across the city. For example speaking in support of striking clay workers in March 1890.

In April 1890, at Vicars Croft, one of the main open air venues, Samuels found himself cautioned, for selling literature in breach of a by-law, despite literature being sold for months previously with no problem. Samuels on the platform told the crowd what had happened, the police constable then threatened him with being run out of the market. However the crowd prevented this happening. Instead his name and address were taken and he was told he would receive a summons for selling papers on a Sunday.

The following week the comrades, gave away copies of the Commonweal while another comrade followed collecting towards expenses.

In June Samuels was reporting that the position in Leeds was grim, “The sacred flame of Uncompromising Socialism has been allowed to gradually go out. Not a single member made, no more purchases of the Weal and little or no interest shown in the various lectures and meetings.” However by July it was reported that several new members were recruited.

Despite the problems in recruiting English workers, there was a much better reception within the Jewish workers. In 1889 a meeting chaired by Tom Paylor was addressed by Kropotkin and according to Sam Freedman, a later leader of the Jewish tailors union “though he possessed only twopence” it was worth far more to hear the speech. (11) The following year the mainly Jewish International Workings Men’s Club could be found in Templar Street, in 1891 this was now in New York Street and in 1894 to be found in Concord Street.

A report of a meeting held here is worth quoting in some detail, as it gives (even if hostile) a glimpse of what was happening. The meeting was addressed by the anarchist David Nicoll, (who also addressed open air meetings in Vicars Croft) recently released from jail.

“These Anarchists are veritable paradoxes in arguing that things are not what they seem. They profess to be not advocates of disorder but apostles of peace...The room in which the meeting took place was formerly an auction shed and the company present was not only mixed but motley. There were a number of English Socialists, several Irish Irreconcilables, and a few but very few canny Caledonians. The Jewish element predominated very much over the Gentiles. This perhaps may be accounted by the fact that the Secretary of the Leeds International Educational Club is himself a voluble tongued Russian Jew. ... Then “Matt” Sollitt had a turn. There are those in this city who do not know this local celebrity. “Matt” is very fluent – and very foolish; for he talks as much treason in five minutes as would have sent to the gallows a hundred of our forefathers.” (12)

In his memoir Personal recollections of an anarchist past, George Cores, mentions that he spent some time in Leeds and remembers the following Anarchists in Leeds;

John Sketchley, an aged Chartist
Dave Wormald, engineer
Bill Allworthy, engine man in a cotton factory
Billy MacQueen
Jim Sweeney, boot operative

George Cores was definitely in Leeds by October 1890, as the Manchester report in the November issue of Freedom, reports that Cores and Samuels of Leeds addressed the Manchester comrades. Again in June 1891 the Leeds report in Freedom states that good propaganda work is being carried out with cde George Cores. The Who's Who of Radical Leicester tells us that "Cores was a staunch member of the Freedom circle." (13)

The Manningham Mill strike started in December 1890 and became one of the most important labour disputes in the late nineteenth century. By the middle of January the Leeds Socialist League was holding solidarity meetings, typical of these one chaired by Jim Sweeney and was addressed by members of the Weavers Association and George Cores.

In April 1891 a letter appeared in the Yorkshire Post signed by George Cores, James Sweenthey asserted that there was no violence on the part of the crowd and they had, in fact, asked for an alternative location for the meeting to avoid any violence breaking out.

In a letter to the Yorkshire Factory Times, in response to criticism of his role in supporting the Manningham Mills strike Cores stated that "I am not only a member of the Boot Operatives Union, but have been so for eight months past. Formerly I belonged to a labour union and in addition I think I may say that my work in connection with the printers Labourers Union, Socialist League and other working class movements is sufficiently creditable to a young man of 23 years of age." (13)

In April 1892, the Yorkshire Evening Post was asking "Are there any Anarchists in Leeds?" There definitely was at a conference entitled What is Socialism?

In connection with the unemployed agitation in 1892, which was led by the "Leeds Independent Labour Party," Matt Sollitt was to be found at the open air meetings in Victoria Square. At one of these meetings it was reported that he delivered a violent speech during the course of which he described his fellow workers as "fools" and "idiots."

The winter of 1893/1894 saw again agitation around the issue of unemployment. At the February Trades Council meeting, an attempt was made to withdraw Trades Council support from the activities of the Unemployed Committee. One speaker reported that in the room used by the unemployed (this would be at the Holbeck, Labour Church) the view was expressed that they "should take anything they could get hold of and that would not be stealing."

The Secretary in explaining his non-attendance at the Unemployed Committee meetings, explained that even though, they had forbidden allowing anarchist speakers or propaganda, they would not allow the enunciation of the Anarchist propaganda at their meetings... and he contended that they as a Trades Council had nothing in common with Mr. Murdoch"

The Leeds Report in the August 1894 edition of Freedom commented that when the unemployed agitation was at its height, cde. Murdoch was giving speeches every afternoon and evening.

John Murdoch for a short period at least appears to have been the most active Anarchist in Leeds (or the most well known, at any rate). For example in May 1894 it was reported that he was delivering his Gospel of Discontent – better to burgle than to starve. In July he was described, as delivering inflammatory speeches at open air meetings, justifying the assassination of the late French President.

Sometime in 1892 Billy MacQueen came to live in Leeds. He had joined the Anarchist movement in 1892, his sister and brother in law, Alf Barton were already actively involved. In April 1898 the first edition of the Free Commune was produced in Manchester The first issue stating that the “The Free Commune is however bound to no doctrine or party, not even of an anarchist character. It is a free lance in the realm of thought and seeks above all to express the convictions of those who run it, regardless of the approval or disapproval of anyone else.” By issue three dated October 1898, it is stated that it is published by W. MacQueen Markham Avenue, Leeds.

The relationship of the Leeds group to the local ILP can also be seen in a report written by Billy MacQueen in November 1896, where it is stated that MacQueen had been lecturing for the ILP on Anarchism and State Socialism but unfortunately “Badlay an anarchist in theory has fallen prey to the “Necessity for practical action” and has become a municipal candidate (14)

On 26th November 1896, a conference was organised, attended by about thirty people, “the real Anarchists but with others described as “political” anarchists in the ranks of the ILP. The meeting agreed to constitute itself as the Leeds Socialist League, and agreed the following statement of policy;

“object the fullest economic and political liberty realisable in the Communist ownership of the means of production by free Communes freely organised; also the gradual withdrawal from the present exploitative system by means of federal co-operation”

The “political” Anarchists referred to were people probably like David Foster, who had been involved with the Holbeck Brotherhood Church and the Brotherhood workshop prior to joining the ILP, Tom Paylor (15),and John Badlay.

In 1899 The Free Commune: A Quarterly Magazine of Libertarian Thought, was produced by MacQueen (who was the printer for the paper)and Barton, who would be the National Secretary. In October 1900 appeared the Anarchist Newsletter sub titled “A Means of communication between the comrades in England.” This publication coming out of a conference, attended by about 80 participants attempted to create some cohesion between the various Anarchist groups across the country.

MacQueen would continue to produce Anarchist pamphlets in the name of the Free Commune Press until his departure for the USA in 1902. In addition to the venture into printing, he is also organised meetings in Leeds for Emma Goldman in 1895 and 1900, on her tours of England.

In the summer of 1899 the Leeds Anarchists as well holding regular meetings over the last few months, could also take satisfaction in particular making contact with the local trade union movement and having comrades Wormald (who was a member of the A.S.E.) and Louis Ellstein on the Trades Council Executive. Although Ellstein would hold paid positions within various unions

over several years. Trade union activity at this time can be glimpsed with MacQueen participating as a speaker, addressing a meeting of weavers to persuade them to join a union and as one of the Trades Council speakers in support of a Danish dispute.

However, even though there was a noticeable Anarchist involvement in trade union activity in the latter part of the 1890s, hostility between the official local labour movement and Anarchists can be seen at the 1899 May Day demonstration. There was an Anarchist platform, as the official Demonstration Committee did not include any Anarchists.

1900 saw the attempted launch of the Anarchist Newsletter edited by Billy MacQueen, this came about as a result of a Midlands conference held in August, attended by about 80 people representing groups and districts across the Midlands and the North.

The outbreak of the Boer War in 1899, led to the creation of the South Africa Conciliation Committee, a branch being established in Leeds with which the joint socialist committee worked. In February 1900, a meeting in the name of the Conciliation Committee took place, addressed by Walt Woodman of the ILP (again one of those “political” Anarchists) and Billy MacQueen, Anarchist Communist League.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Boer War, in March 1900, a joint socialist committee was created in Leeds, in part because the rowdyism and fighting that had broken out at a recent anarchist open air meeting. The Anarchists were able to work with the ILP as it was agreed to “discard the political basis and are resting purely upon the economical.”

In March 1900, the Corporation had banned a planned anti-war meeting in Vicar’s Croft, the main open air venue, for political meetings. As a result the meeting attendees and speakers headed towards the North Street Recreation Ground, where it happened that a pro-war meeting was already underway. Unfortunately, for the anti-war protestors they were driven away by the jingo crowd, with some violence involved. The bravery and determination of Matt Sollitt can be seen as he went the following week to the same venue to give an anti-war speech, which he was allowed to do so without any major interruption.

In August a delegation of Boers met the local South African Conciliation Committee, including Arnold Lupton and Billy MacQueen, described as Anarchists. Future anti-war protests had Billy MacQueen listed as speaking from the Leeds Socialist Committee rather than as an Anarchist, which suggests the proposed unity effort had some success.

In October the branch could report that activity had centred on anti-war work, with a monster demonstration to conclude the activity but unfortunately, as they described all the scum of the pubs turned out in response to an appeal to give them a “Scarborough welcome” which they proceeded to do.

In September the Yorkshire Evening Post, in an article claimed there were 200 Anarchists in Leeds, 75% of these were foreigners mainly Russians and Poles, with about 50 English Anarchists, but according to one of these their views were so diverse no official resolution concerning the assassination of President McKinley could be agreed.

MacQueen left Leeds in late 1901 and with his departure and the end of the Boer war came a downturn in political activity. In September 1901, the Yorkshire Evening Post could report a local

police official expressing the opinion that there was very little support for Anarchism in Leeds and to his knowledge it was some years since the last avowed Anarchist was in Leeds.

A local newspaper said it was wrong to describe them as Jews, as soon as they become Anarchists they become enemies of their former co-religionists. As an example of the antipathy between the two groups, the Anarchists arranged a meeting at their club room on Meanwood Road, to coincide with Yom Kippur (the most holy day in the Jewish religious calendar). To add insult the speaker was Jacob Caplan, who had previously spent several years in Leeds organising amongst the Jewish tailoring workers.

Caplan had previously led most of the Jewish tailoring workers out of the Gas Workers Union in protest at what was seen as the creation of a bureaucracy within the union that was in was hostile to the membership having control. Caplan was to complain as early as 1891 that the leaders, the agitators, have become peaceful parliamentarians.” The rules were altered to make it more difficult to remove officers, their wages had increased according to Caplan there should be weekly elections for officers as “without leader there would be no misleaders”

Created in 1893 the new union The Leeds Jewish Tailors Pressers and Machinists continued as an independent union until 1915 when it was absorbed into the National Union of Tailoring and Garment Workers. Indeed the name of the union can still be seen on the premises it occupied on Regent Street.

In 1896 they decided to elect officers biannually and to appoint a council of delegates from every workplace to oversee the Executive. In addition Isaac Taylor and Louis Ellstein, both Anarchists were delegates to the Trades Council.

The attitude of the established and burgeoning union bureaucracy can be seen in the following quote even though this dates from 1900

“What kind of union do you think you are? they asked. You are an undisciplined lot. With you the members rule the roost. Whenever they feel like it, they go out on strike. That’s not a union! With us, the official consider every dispute and we usually avoid every occasion which may lead to a strike. We teach the workers that they must see things the same way as the masters. After all, they create the work and the money with which to pay wages.”

In April 1902, the local press were asking where are the Anarchists?, according to the South Leeds Echo, in addition to Matt Sollitt, a certain Mr. J Harrison could be found in Holbeck at a meeting entitled “What is Socialism?” promoting Anarchism.

In 1903 Matt Sollitt was to be found speaking on the ineffectiveness of trade unionism. Whilst other comrades who were members of the Leeds Trades Hall, with a nominal membership of four thousand, had initiated discussions on a Sunday night. Things were so bad for Anarchism in 1904 it was claimed “Of the anticipated revolution in Leeds through the presence of the most important Jewish Anarchists a few years ago, nothing has resulted. Nothing very important is happening here”

Activity took an upturn in 1904, with the return of unemployment agitation. On 3 August, an attempt by the unemployed to enter the Council chamber during a sitting was stopped by the police. One of the four people arrested, was Bertie Rowe, (16) Treasurer of the Unemployed Committee, and a member of the Beeston Brotherhood. As a result of his court appearance he served three days in Armley jail. Also arrested was Walter Woolham also a member of the Beeston Brotherhood.

In September with the TUC in Leeds, Sollitt, Pollock and speakers from the Brotherhood (Christian Communists), could be found speaking in City Square, continuing agitation begun in June.

The specific difficulties of the Anarchists in the Jewish community can be seen from the following extract written by Louis Ellstein in the Arbeiter Freund in 1895, which was a constant feature of the relations within the Jewish community for several years to come.

“This summer we have held many large and successful meetings beneath the open skies. The like of this has never before been presented by Jews, either in number or content. Our meetings were naturally not to the taste of our Jewish upper class. They ran to to the Town Hall and we were under observation by a detective officer and they also complained to the Park Keeper... and attempted to break up our meetings by every filthy trick” (17)

In addition the Jewish working class faced difficulties that were unique to their community, in particular the activities of rapacious landlords, who for several months had been buying up properties and evicting tenants to bring in others who could pay higher rents. In response two of the Jewish Anarchists published the following leaflet, in May 1898, which led to a fracas with several people convicted.

BLOODSUCKERS AND LANDLORDS

They are filling themselves with working men's sweat. To all Jews who are suffering from the 10 plagues of Egypt. The Jewish landlords with their rotten cottages.

Friends. – Our suffering, through the landlords, is impossible to continue by reason of their robberies. Once for all we must have a remedy for the bloodsuckers, we have to see that the anti-Semitism in England should not through landlords, reach the pitch it has in France. We are therefore calling a public meeting in the Labour Hall on Friday evening at 8 o'clock, where good speakers will bring before you what you have to do. Don't be slaves of slaves. Come in crowds and we shall throw off the chains from us.

The problems for Anarchists within the Jewish community continued in response to an attack on a meeting, in September 1904, by what were described as “orthodox Jews and fanatical rowdies” attacking meeting participants with “knives, sticks and beer bottles... The meeting was was thereby broken up those who arranged it hooted and insulted and even struck down by the fanatical Jews, who avowed that no non-religious assemblage will ever take place in Leeds, if organised by Jewish Freethinkers.”

A protest meeting was organised at the North Street Recreation Ground in the heart of the Jewish community, with speakers from the ILP and the Anarchist groups in Leeds and Halifax. In addition it was announced other speakers would address the crowd in Yiddish.

The June 1906 issue of Freedom announced the formation of The International Revolutionary Labour Union. Whose founding principle was to “Advocate Direct Action and the General Strike in all economic questions – as opposed to the political methods.” Meetings of the Union were to be held every Sunday at Liberty Hall. This year (1906) also saw the publication in Leeds of “Poverty: Its Causes and Cure. A Workers Appeal for Direct Political Action by W. Barker and L. Schofield. However nothing appears to have come out of this initiative.

At the end 1907 things again were looking up for the Leeds group, the creation of a Leeds Anarchical Self Education Group was announced and to help, the cdes Dodansky and Newhall of the Jewish Freethinker, handed over their stock and printing facilities.

In part this renewed optimism was a result of the Liverpool conference of December 1907, which launched the International Anarchist Federation of the English Provinces (there was in existence at this time an Anarchist Federation of Yiddish groups, so probably in order to avoid any confusion that name was chosen). The Conference agreed that better co-ordination between Anarchist groups was needed and a new paper The Voice of Labour to be launched.

At the conference Cde. Goldberg from Leeds offered the printing facilities to the new group, and that Leeds had done what Freedom had not, namely to reprint out of date pamphlets. At the follow up conference held in Leeds, the following February the Leeds group secretary called in the name of the Federation for all Anarchists to support its work to make Anarchists.

A report of the Leeds conference in the local press noted that it was agreed that, "Anarchists should take possession of trade unions and drive out the socialists." At the same conference the Leeds group Secretary, urged support for the Federation claiming there were now 8,000 members up from 6,800 at the inception of the Federation.

Again in 1908 unemployment agitation took centre stage, Alf Kitson, took the lead in organising the intervention, a Non-Political Permanent Committee on Unemployment was created with daily meetings taking place in front of the Town Hall. On 17th September a deputation to the Mayor told him that if the hungry people in the Square did not get food in a peaceful manner it would be got by force. Food was found!

The Leeds Corporation had established a Distress Committee chaired by Herbert Brown (whose business was pawn broking) to alleviate the unemployment problem, this Committee came under continual criticism for its lack of initiative in helping the unemployed. On the 8th October, a meeting at Park Lane Council was to be addressed by Cllr Brown, a large number of the unemployed came along to protest at the lack of support from the Corporation. Cllr Brown was unable to address the meeting and at one point as the Yorkshire Evening Post reported "This time the Anarchist as Mr. Kitson styles himself made a speech." Cllr Brown and his party were forced to retreat from the building through a window and down a ladder.

The height of the unemployed agitation took place on 10th October, the Prime Minister of the day Herbert Asquith was due to address a meeting at the Coliseum, at the same as the Suffragettes were protesting, a gathering of the unemployed was as usual taking place outside the Town Hall. It was decided that they should move onto the Coliseum. There is some confusion as to whether the unemployed were invited by the Suffragettes, however the outcome was that Kitson and another comrade were arrested in addition to a small number of Suffragettes, including their organiser, Mrs Baines.

At the subsequent court hearing whilst the Suffragettes went to prison, Kitson agreed to be bound over and avoided a prison sentence. The outcome of the case as reported was not only waste of two days sat in court as a spectator but also wasted opportunity for the Anarchists.

In October the Unemployed Committee circulated a letter appealing for co-operation and co-ordination with similar groups. They stated that they "organise the unemployed on the basis of direct action throughout the British Isles, not to allow any political party to exploit the movement."

Even at this time we can see from debates on the Trades Council, that the unemployed were seen as either deserving or undeserving and that many of those taking part in the open air meetings in Victoria Square were dismissed as “loafers.” A view also expressed in the local press. (18) In November the Committee was re-organised on the basis of the six original members and three each from the organised Labour Associations in the City. This appears to have effectively ended any Anarchist influence within the unemployed agitation in Leeds.

The Leeds Group were also busy distributing leaflets “The Royal Visit Explained” during the Royal visit of July 1908 and the Workers Solidarity Group were protesting at the arrest of fifty three comrades in Warsaw.

By January 1910, members of the Leeds Group were speaking at the Town Hall Square, and in February were holding meetings every Sunday evening in the concert room at the Pointer Inn on North Street.

Not related directly to Anarchism but of interest is the case of Thomas William Stewart, who was convicted of blasphemy in December 1911. He was arrested because of a speech he gave in Victoria Square, in conducting his own defence, he called Matt Sollitt as a witness.

Despite the holding of a national Anarchist conference in Leeds in 1912, (an attempt to solve the same issues discussed previously in 1900 and 1907) chaired by Alf Kitson and the agreement that there should be a federation of branches/individuals in Lancashire and Yorkshire nothing ever appears to have come from this proposal. The Leeds Group appears to have become inactive after the Conference.

The conference report also included reference to a discussion on Sunday-Schools, as the delegates visited one in Leeds run by Comrade Walker from that city. Socialist Sunday Schools, were seen by some as responsible for the wide distribution of Anarchist literature in the form of penny booklets, which was claimed to be highly deplorable. This highlights one of the other aspects of anarchism in Leeds, the apparent close relationship between the principles of the Labour Church, (whose existence was of course the result of J C Kenworthy) and the outlook of the local Anarchists.

During the First World War Tom and Lillian Ferris of the Beeston Brotherhood, would receive prison sentences, of six and three months respectively, for producing and distributing anti war leaflets. In addition they were also became involved with the No-Conscription Fellowship providing sanctuary for conscientious objectors.

Conclusion

In 1901 it was said that the Leeds anarchists “as a body would be more accurately described individualists. They profess to be disciples of Tolstoy”. (YEP 25 September 1901). It is certainly the case that the ideas of Kropotkin would dominate Anarchist politics in Leeds for its entire existence, a meeting in Holbeck on the subject of socialism produced the following reported intervention “Mr J. Harrison remarked that his socialism was Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. He was an Anarchist and did not believe in rule at all. All law and rule was a means of corruption. His society had that every man should act according to his capacity and his means. They did not believe in being being regulated by law but rather working in commune”

The rise of New Unionism did give fresh hope to the Anarchists, that here was an opportunity to raise class consciousness and recruit to the ranks. It was soon obvious that this was not going to happen but this did not stop later attempts to unionise new groups of workers at the turn of the century.

The split within the ranks of the Leeds branch of the Socialist League was not abrupt and sudden as has been previously suggested, indeed we had comrades who had worked together amicably for several years prior to the Leeds Gas workers strike.

Anarchism prior to 1914 was a very broad church, within it could be found different strands of opinion ranging from the direct action, Christian – Pacifists, Anarchist Communists and Individualists.

Within this last category, as they were based in Leeds, I would like to mention the Legitimation League, who wished to abolish the notion of illegitimacy and like the National Secular Society, whilst they were not actually part of the labour movement, their ideas and aims did have an influence

Anarchism in Leeds (as it did nationally) suffered from a lack of direction and unified political thought, in addition to which the Anarchist scare of the 1890s and 1900s, only adding to the difficulties of Anarchists in Britain.

The re-launch of the Leeds Socialist League in 1897, also highlighted one of the fundamental weaknesses of the Leeds group, the belief that there were political anarchists in the ranks of the ILP who could be converted fully to Anarchism. The evidence suggests that the traffic was in fact in the other direction from Anarchism into the ILP.

The attempts in 1900, 1907 and 1912 at some sort of national co-ordination failed and certainly in Leeds by 1914 other than the Beeston Brotherhood, there does not appear to be any sort of Anarchist movement in Leeds. The Leeds Brotherhood became a centre of anti-war activity, with Tom Ferris and Sam Overbury arrested and imprisoned in 1915 for producing anti-war leaflets. The Brotherhood also became a haven for conscientious objectors. The Yorkshire Evening Post was able to tell its readers that foreign Anarchists in Leeds were aware of the plot to kill Plehve the Russian police minister. The members of the Houndsditch gang (those involved in the siege), were known to friends in Leeds, the “genuine Anarchists in Leeds are those who are accustomed to hold secret meetings from time to time in Meanwood Road. The reader is also informed that here two types of undesirables among the foreigners – the extreme Socialist and the Anarchist.” Despite the fact that Leeds is not fertile ground, we are told that, “There is one club in Leeds, a foreign socialist club, where Anarchist literature is extensively and openly disseminated and there are men who are permitted to preach the doctrine of the bomb and revolver.” (YEP 4 Jan 1911)

In response to this a letter was sent from the Committee of the Brunswick and Central Socialist Club, whose location was 41 Crimbles Street, Meanwood Road, They explained they do have Anarchists amongst its membership and they were not connected with the Houndsditch events as Anarchism was opposed to murder. The letter goes on to say that, in fact they are followers of Kropotkin.

George Frost reported that Matt Sollitt died in 1915, probably the most loyal and consistent Anarchist in Leeds, for over forty years and we get a glimpse of his speaking style from this report on a conference of the unemployed in 1895, when it was reported that “A Mr. M. Sollitt followed

with a highly philosophical speech, delivered with considerable vigour.” Again in 1918 we find George Frost reporting the death of Jackie Harrison another long standing comrade.

One of the issues facing the Leeds Anarchists was having people who would not only be stalwarts of the movement but also able to provide local guidance and leadership. The perennial problem is that for those with exceptional abilities, such as Billy MacQueen or Jacob Caplan, they are unlikely ever to remain local. The activity of Alf Kitson in the 1908 unemployed agitation, gave renewed hope for the advancement of anarchism in Leeds, however this proved to be illusory with Kitson’s failure to take advantage of his court appearance in relation to the Asquith visit and his subsequent involvement with the Beeston Brotherhood.

Anarchist involvement in anti-war activity in Leeds appears to have been taken up by the Beeston Brotherhood, and the Quakers. The Workers Socialist League appears to have organised shows of solidarity with imprisoned Conscientious Objectors held in the Leeds Bridewell, prior to transfer.

In April 1925 under the auspices of The British Committee for the Defence of Political Prisoners in Russia, a meeting at the Albert Hall was arranged, with Emma Goldman speaking, tickets could be obtained from the following; John Hey, George Frost, Sam Crook, Mr. Lipmann, B.Goldberg, (who was listed as having available Freedom, from December 1910 onwards, having taking over from a relative) M Goodwin, B. Kauffman. In addition a reception was also organised at the York Cafe on Boar Lane.

Whilst the Leeds Group, were able to organise this meeting, this appears to be the only Anarchist activity organised in Leeds since the 1912 Leeds Conference, other than the Beeston Brotherhood anti-war activity. Between 1924 and 1927 George Frost, it appears without success was stating his willingness to speak at meetings. It appears that George Frost continued to be an active Anarchist into the 1930’s.(19)

Notes

1. Tom Woodhouse, Nourishing the Liberty Tree, p.50
2. It is interesting to note that at the May Day march in Leeds in 1898 J C Kenworthy was on the Socialist platform as an ILP speaker. He had also spoken previously in December 1897 to the Bramley (Leeds) branch of the ILP, shortly after creation of the Brotherhood Workshop.
3. John Quail, The Slow Burning Fuse, p.142
4. W Armytage, Heavens Below: Utopian Experiments in England 1560-19160, pp345-350.
5. Yorkshire Factory Times, 2nd August 1889
6. Freedom, 1 December 1892
7. Tom Woodhouse, Nourishing the Liberty Tree, p.65
8. John Quail, The Slow Burning Fuse, p.140
9. Leeds Mercury, 7 February 1894

10. Commonweal 19th and 29th April 1890. Samuels was fined 5/- for breaking local bye-laws on selling literature on a Sunday in the Leeds City Market
11. Joseph Buckman, Immigrants and the Class Struggle, p.99
12. South Leeds Echo, 26 January 1894.
13. <https://www.nednewitt.com/whoswho/C.html#George%20Cores>
13. Yorkshire Factory Times, 1 May 1891
14. Freedom, January 1897. John Badlay would later become President of the ILP and leader of the Leeds Labour Group on the Council
15. Socialist League member in the late 1880s and one of the leading trade unionists in Leeds and a crucial ally of the Jewish tailoring workers and centrally involved in organising a workers co-operative in the aftermath of the 1888 tailoring strike. In the following year he chaired a meeting organised by Bessie Ford (another well known ILP member) addressed by Prince Kropotkin.
16. Reporting a meeting he addressed it was stated that “three years ago was a well known street corner orator in Leeds” Shipley Times and Express 22 June 1906
17. Joseph Buckman, Immigrants and the Class Struggle, p.164
18. “This morning it was observed groups of obviously respectable unemployed held aloof from the crowd, listening to vehement tirades against the employer and authorities... all the speakers were interloping foreigners who spoke in such broken English that it was extremely difficult to understand what they said” Yorkshire Evening Post, 7 March 1908
19. John Quail, The Slow Burning Fuse, p.306 “my friend George Cummings remembered George Frost speaking on ‘Penniless Hill’, Hunslet, Leeds.” This is probably a play on words as a reference to Penny Hill in Hunslet, which was one of the main working class areas of Leeds

Appendix

Northern Collaboration

By the mid 1890s there were active groups in Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Leicester and Leeds. These groups would at times provide speakers to other cities, however all these groups suffered from a lack of resources, both financial and people.

The lack of resources and insufficient collaboration was an issue facing the Socialist League branches in the late 1880s. In an attempt to overcome these difficulties annual picnics began to be held, the first of these, possibly happening in 1887 and definitely by 1888. The *Commonweal* (paper of the Socialist League) reporting that “Sheffield comrades in conjunction with Chesterfield and Nottingham friends” had a Bank Holiday picnic and informal conference. The 1889 picnic was attended by comrades from Sheffield, Chesterfield, Leeds and Leicester.

It would appear that this practice of holding annual picnics continued, as others were held in 1894, 1896, 1899 and annually from 1898 to 1902.

In 1892 the annual picnic of the Midland Counties Socialist Federation was held, involving groups from Manchester, Salford, Sheffield, Leeds, Birmingham, Walsall and Leicester.(1)

In September 1896 the Midland Anarchist Association Annual Picnic, involved comrades from Manchester, Liverpool, Leicester, Sheffield and the Potteries and “suggestions were made as to a closer co-operation between the various groups and the means of encouraging the propaganda generally” (2)

Noticably absent is Leeds, according to a report on Yorkshire in November it is stated that in reference to Leeds “We have no group, as the comrades are all over the shop; but still one hears of good work being done here and there by comrades...but we find the lack of organisation a serious obstacle.” (3)

Despite the problems in Leeds, an advert in the name of the Midland Anarchist Federation appeared offering lectures to ILP and other Socialist bodies contained contact details for both Alf Barton and Billy MacQueen. Additionally stating that “MacQueen will be in the counties of Lancashire, Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Nottingham and North Staffordshire within the next six months” (4).

In October 1899, it was reported in *Freedom* that George Barber and Alf Barton (Sheffield) that the Northern Anarchists should meet “in conference and endeavour to cement their forces together”. It was agreed the conference be held at Easter 1900. It was also noted that in addition to the groups in Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and Liverpool, there were isolated comrades in Hull, Oldham, Colne, Halifax, Huddersfield, Bradford, Otley and York.

It was agreed there was a need of a federation, with the production of a Newsletter to support common action. Alf Barton was agreed as the Secretary and Billy MacQueen was to produce and distribute the publication. (5) However, This initiative does not appear to have survived for very long.

In August 1909 a conference was held in Liverpool, with attendees from, Leeds and Manchester. It was agreed that a propaganda fund be established to pay for the printing of leaflets and paying speakers expenses. It was also agreed to publish a leaflet for November 11 dealing with the Chicago Martyrs, orders and cash to E. Fox in Leeds.(6)

In 1912 a national conference was held and one of the decisions made was to create three federations one of these to be Lancashire and Yorkshire. In February 1913, there were calls made to the Yorkshire and Lancashire anarchists to to form a small committee to organise a conference to take forward the decisions of the 1912 Leeds conference.

Notes

1. Freedom September 1892
2. Freedom September 1896
3. Freedom November 1896
4. Freedom November 1896
5. Freedom October 1900 This provides a full account of the aims and objectives of the newly created Federation.
6. Freedom October 1909