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The 1912 Anarchist Conference in Leeds as Reported by the Local Jewish Group

The little-known Leeds conference of the English anarchists which took place in late February 1912, was chiefly significant for the weekly journal to which it gave rise (*The Anarchist*).¹ The Jewish movement among the alien immigrants before 1914 had a more continuously active existence, sustained as it was by its own journal, the excellent *Der Arbeiter Freund* (Yiddish), founded in 1885 and running with but occasional breaks until 1932. As the Jewish comrades in every industrial centre worked with, and were from time to time led by, English comrades, so their newspaper kept a watchful eye on the activities of the latter. Thus the revival of activity among the English anarchists in the early 1900s was greeted by *Arbeiter Freund* in the following terms:

The English comrades have, finally, once more taken to their work. In the last few years there has reigned an absolute standstill in the English movement, especially here in London... In the Provinces, too, the propaganda had long since come to a halt. In cities such as Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Leicester, Liverpool etc., where there was once such a strong anarchist movement, it has in recent times been so peaceful and quiet, and only in Scotland—the agitation field of our indefatigable comrade, Blair Smith—was there still a little activity... Under the influence of the mighty anarchist workers' movement which manifests itself so strongly at present on the Continent, especially in Spain, France, Holland, Italy and French Switzerland, the English comrades have once more taken to the work...²

In 1907 and 1908, determined efforts were made through a series of conferences in Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool to establish a provincial federation of Yiddish-speaking anarchists, with the groups from these three cities forming the nucleus. Leading provincial English anarchists such as Pollock of Halifax, Kitson of Leeds, Bessie Ward of Newcastle, and Fairbrother and Kavanagh of Liverpool, were also active in this movement, which spread rapidly to about twelve centres in England as well as to Cardiff, Swansea and Glasgow. Interestingly, it was Kavanagh who remarked at one of these gatherings, when a new and separate Yiddish anarchist journal was being mooted: 'I would be really happy if the English movement had a paper such as *Arbeiter Freund*, and if it did as much as *Arbeiter Freund*, does for the Yiddish-speaking anarchists.'³ Clearly, however, the English anarchist conference of 1912, and its offspring, *The Anarchist* newspaper, were inspired by the rapid growth of Syndicalism in Britain, and much encouraged by the widespread industrial unrest, rising to a crescendo in the strike of one million miners early in 1912. The substance thereby injected into the English movement was ably analysed by the socialist philosopher-poet, Edward Carpenter, on the front page of the first issue of *The Anarchist*:

The rapid growth of the Syndicalist movement is surely an encouraging sign of the times, and a matter of congratulation to Anarchists. We are at last beginning to see a way out of the old jungle of commercialism—a light in the distance through the trees. Socialism has no doubt taken us a long way in the right direction. It has taught us that the industrial life of the nation must in future be carried on collectively for the benefit of the mass-peoples and not for the greedy profit of the few. But we are now beginning to see that its path is in danger of winding through some ugly swamps, of bureaucracy, officialism and over-government... and that it may be difficult to get safely through along that line. So the Syndicalists are branching on to a new route. They are adopting the entirely sensible scheme of getting the workers in each industry to organise that industry and its conditions of production for themselves... Why on earth should they hand over its management to a few employers to exploit for their own gain? The splendid thing about the present movement is the rapidity with which the workers themselves are tumbling to the new idea. The strike of the miners and the way in which the rank and file of them are laying down and deciding their own conditions of labour is full of promise; and similar movements in the other trades, combined with the success and spread of the 'Don't shoot' propaganda among the military, are opening up the way to a new era in our industrial life.⁴

The following report of the 1912 conference, made in Yiddish by Moses Schutz, the secretary of the Leeds Jewish anarchist group,⁵ and printed in full in *Arbeiter Freund* on 1 March 1912, is probably a unique survival both in regard to comprehensiveness and in the working-class viewpoint displayed. It is presented here in the hope that it will be of interest for both of these reasons.

Der Arbeiter Freund, 1 March 1912.

The Conference of the English Anarchists in Leeds.

Leeds, 26 February

The conference of our English comrades took place on the 24th and 25th February. Represented by delegates were London, Bristol, Glasgow, Belfast, Sheffield, Cardiff, Manchester, Liverpool, Halifax, Bradford and Leeds. On Saturday, the 24th the delegates came together, fifty men, in the Clarion Institute, Boar Lane.

Comrade Alf Kitson,¹ the chairman of the conference, declared in his opening speech that this was the first time that such a great number of anarchists had come together from every part of the United Kingdom, and he expressed the hope that the English anarchists would do their best to spread their great ideas of liberation among the masses—ideas which had, until then, been so misunderstood.

On the agenda were the following points:

1. Report from the Leeds delegates on the organisation of the conference.
2. An open-air meeting.
3. The title of the weekly newspaper
4. The anarchistic propaganda in Lancashire and Yorkshire.
5. The general anarchistic propaganda.
6. Unification of all the groups of England.
7. An annual anarchist conference.
8. Report from the Glasgow group on its activity.
9. The weekly newspaper: (a) the financial side of the paper, (b) the editing, (c) the contents and the contributors, (d) distribution, (e) advertisements, (f) the socialist Sunday Schools, (g) open-air meetings for Sundays.

Point 1

A comrade from Leeds stated that throughout the whole city the anarchists had been boycotted and had not been given a hall for a demonstration. After they had been refused by all the theatres, music-halls, saloons and picture-rooms (*sic*) they had finally obtained the 'College of Music' for this purpose. The place was too small, but they had been forced to accept it. The group, relying upon the word of the owner, paid out a large sum of money for advertisements then, one day before the conference, they had received a letter to say that they would not be allowed the hall. Having no other way out, the Leeds comrades had arranged a great open-air meeting in Victoria Square for Saturday evening.

Point 2

The conference decided to organise an open-air demonstration to protest against the base and reactionary treatment by the landlords who refused us their halls. It was decided that our speakers should specially stress that a case of this kind had never occurred in the history of Leeds. All parties, without exception as to ideology or leaning, had until then always been able to obtain the best and largest halls for their meetings. Men such as Victor Grayson and Tom Mann and many others had spoken in the largest and best places in Leeds. The anarchists were the only ones who had been unable to obtain a hall. That was certainly not because we anarchists were really such terrible criminals as the newspapers presented us, but it was simply because they represented the extreme wing of the general socialist movement which denied every right of private ownership and *Herrschaft*.

Point 3

The question of the name of the new paper called forth a heated discussion. Various names were suggested. Some delegates were of the opinion that, as the word 'anarchist' threw a sort of fear into the broad masses, some other name should be used; but the organ itself ought to represent our ideas with the greatest sharpness. The other delegates were of the opinion that no word could express with such clarity and sharpness our ideas than the word 'anarchist', which denies every kind of *Herrschaft*. The first of these views was chiefly represented by the older comrades who, basing themselves on their long and lonely activity, considered that with such a compromise it would still be possible to develop a good movement. The young comrades took the view that the movement depended on their activity and, therefore, they thought that in no case ought they to hide their name, and that they should openly declare who and what they were. The proposal of the second tendency was accepted finally, and the new paper will call itself *The Anarchist Weekly Newspaper*.²

Point 4

The Manchester delegates suggested that, as there was a broad basis for an anarchist movement in Manchester, but that, as there was a lack of speakers, a union should be set up between Lancashire and Yorkshire, i.e., from Leeds, Liverpool, Sheffield, Halifax, Bradford and Manchester so that speakers could be exchanged among the different cities on the account of the place which requests the speaker. That meant that there would be a sort of federation based on the district, which should hold its own conferences from time to time in order to carry on a systematic propaganda in the aforementioned cities. The proposal was unanimously agreed. A secretary was chosen for this purpose. With this, ended the sitting of the first day and all the delegates went away to the meeting.

The Meeting

Whoever was in Victoria Square would have to admit that never before had such an impression been made on such a great number of people as on this Saturday evening. Thousands of people came together and listened attentively to the speakers. Naturally, there was no shortage of police and detectives, as the newspapers themselves admit. Every minute, a capitalist scribbler would come running up to enquire what the anarchists really meant by this conference. Were they really thinking of blowing up the city with dynamite...? 'Stuff' was required for the readers and the *Sunday Chronicle*³ had sent the following telegram to its reporter: 'Send us good stuff. Anarchist conference is being held. See that it's alright.'

And 'stuff' was sent which the world awaited. One paper reported that a Prince Kropotkin was coming to the conference. Another paper discovered that the anarchists were involved in the miners' strike, and still more lies. The meeting showed the audience that the anarchists had not come to Leeds to throw dynamite-bombs [*sic*] only intellectual bombs; and it was the first sign of a new revival of our movement among the English working masses.

Points 5 and 6

At ten in the morning all the delegates assembled to deal with both points concerning the movement in general. A comrade suggested that the same district federations as the comrades from Lancashire and Yorkshire had created, be created in all the remaining parts of the country. It was decided to form three large federated bodies which should unite the groups in the various parts of Great Britain. These three organisations would be united, besides, in a general federation. The secretaries of the individual groups would exchange addresses and carry on a permanent correspondence among the individual groups. The plan for the formation of a general federation would have to wait until the three district federations had begun their work; though all the delegates were in agreement with the founding of a general federation.

Point 7

The point regarding an annual anarchistic conference was left over for the district federations, which were to decide upon the place and time for such a conference.

Point 8

The delegate from Glasgow gave a report on the newspaper and on how his group thought of publishing it. The idea of the Glasgow comrades had been firstly to create a fund of £80 [*sic*] to safeguard the paper. At first they had not wanted to move towards the realisation of the project. Now the necessary sum was available. Apart from this sum, our comrade George Davison, who was present at the conference, declared that he would also contribute £50 towards the paper and, if necessary, he would give £100. The group had also issued penny stamps which could also bring in much money. Until May the comrades can also get many subscribers who can pay their 10s 0d for which they will get the paper for one year, and a second year for 5s 0d. The paper need not cost more than £7 [*sic*] a week and if the comrades tried to sell 2,000 copies a week there could also be a profit.

Point 9

The financial question was as good as settled and the only thing the conference could add was to recommend the Glasgow comrades to carry on with their undertaking. Every group should see to it that it makes as much money as possible in order to safeguard the existence of our weapon. It was suggested that 3,000 copies per week be printed and that 10,000 copies of the first number be given away free to advertise the paper. It should be distributed by comrades, shopkeepers and sub-agents. Everyone who wants to sell the paper may do it through his group and the group should be responsible. The paper will not accept any business advertisements since these are usually bound up with swindlery. The conference suggested that Comrade Barrett, the editor of the new paper, should put himself in communication with good journalists as collaborators. Comrade Barrett declared that he would do this and that he thought that the paper would have the best collaborators, and he was of the opinion that, just as nothing could be done by uneducated workers, a newspaper also could not be published without the help of good literary powers, especially an anarchist journal.

Point 10

The question concerning the socialist Sunday-Schools was specially interesting because the delegates visited the Sunday-School which is under the *aegis* of our Comrade Walker in Leeds. (Editor's note: *From the report of our correspondent we cannot tell whether the matter was discussed.*)

Point 11

It was decided to hold another open-air meeting in Victoria Square on Sunday night.

With that the conference ended and the delegates dispersed, each with new hopes and with the intention to work actively for our ideals. In a word, the conference was a great success and there is not the slightest doubt that, in the present frame of mind of the English working masses, our endeavours meet with a good response. The first attempt has been made; now each one of us should do his duty and help to do away with the rule of Capital and State.

M[oses] S[chutz]

It is of interest to glance at the contrasting reports in the English Press. Few national newspapers reported the event and the main burden fell upon the local journals. Most got the facts right concerning the decision to found an anarchist paper. The *Daily Express* was even at that distant date already disinclined to burden its readers with too much reading:

An Anarchist Congress—closely watched by the police—which met in a dingy second-floor room [sic] in Leeds on Saturday, decided that the condition of Britain would be improved by:

The disbandment of the Army, Navy and Police.

The abolition of legal authority.

The extinction of the Houses of Parliament.

It was also decided to establish a weekly newspaper known as the 'Anarchist', to be published in Glasgow. ⁴

The Liberal *Leeds Mercury* noted that the crowd was no greater than normal for meetings of the socialist demagogues who spoke on the steps of the statue of Queen Victoria, and that the oratory served up was no different from that 'one hears almost every day'. It also observed 'a foreigner of swarthy countenance' among the anarchists, but he assured their reporter that he was not there to throw bombs.⁵ The *Yorkshire Evening News*, in view of its hysteria at the time of the Siege of Sidney Street in the previous year,⁶ carried but a single factual paragraph devoid of comment.⁷ The Tory *Yorkshire Post* is best left to epitomise the style of the capitalist Press against those representing a threat to their class:

... Their presence being something of a novelty with an air of swagger and audacity about it, they soon got an audience together from the fragments which nightly gather in this motley forum. The speeches, however, could hardly come up to expectation for they differed little in substance from the stock phraseology of extreme Socialists—tirades against capitalists, talk of slavery and oppression and so on, which came oddly, by the way, from the lips of Jews [sic] who have found the liberty here which has been denied them elsewhere, and who thus ill-repay the refuge which we have afforded their race. While in sympathy with the objects, if not altogether with the means, adopted by their foreign comrades, the English anarchists take pains to point out that theirs is a purely English movement; they throw 'intellectual' bombs, not real ones. They are yet in the talking age, with the eye of the police on them, all the same... Anarchy, according to them, is a much-misunderstood term in this country, but as no other word precisely denotes their object they perforce must adopt it, for, of course, their aim is the abolition of all Government and the organisation of society as we know it. But there is to be no bomb-throwing here just yet, nothing Continental, in fact...⁸

JOSEPH BUCKMAN

¹ *The Anarchist* ran from 3 May 1912 to 7 January 1913.

² *Der Arbeiter Freund*, 20 March 1903.

³ *ibid.*, 15 November 1907-28 February 1908.

⁴ *The Anarchist*, 3 May 1912.

⁵ Translation by the present writer.

⁶ Kitson, a hero of the Jewish comrades in Leeds, not least for his leadership of the unemployed demonstrations in 1908, lost face with them when, upon his arrest and conviction during the disorders of that year, he opted for a fine instead of imprisonment.

⁷ The older comrades were also, in the event, wiser. In its final issue, *The Anarchist* admitted that its 'bloodthirsty title' had prejudiced agents and buyers against it, and that, next time they would have to change its title. See *The Anarchist*, 7 January 1913.

⁸ In the event, the *Sunday Chronicle* did not report the conference.

⁹ *Daily Express*, 26 February 1912.

¹⁰ *Leeds Mercury*, 26 February 1912.

¹¹ See *Yorkshire Evening News*, 4 January 1911 for the assertion that their reporter was informed by a Leeds Jewish anarchist that he would that day hear of the assassination of Plehve, the Russian Minister of Police, and that the event was correctly foretold.

¹² *ibid.*, 26 February 1912.

¹³ *Yorkshire Post*, 26 February 1912.