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# Robert Banner, William Morris and the Socialist League

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When he died in 1910 Robert Banner was described by his friend Andreas Scheu as ‘perhaps the best of the British comrades’.<sup>1</sup> The two men first met in Edinburgh – where Banner was born in 1855 – in or around 1875 when Scheu arrived in the Scottish capital to work. At this time Banner, whose parents had been Chartists, was an apprentice bookbinder and already secretary of the Edinburgh Republican Club. According to its previous secretary, John Morrison Davidson the well-known radical journalist, the club assembled ‘the choicest spirits in the ranks of labour’.<sup>2</sup> Scheu, an experienced and charismatic Austrian revolutionary, was a significant influence on the young Banner, introducing him to the ideas of Marx and Engels then relatively unknown in Britain.<sup>3</sup> These ideas came to underpin Banner’s political thinking for the rest of life.

An eager twenty-four year old correspondent with Marx and Engels in the autumn of 1880 and already an advocate of nationalising the means of production, Banner was the earliest of the ‘small number of exceptionally gifted working men’, described by E.P. Thompson, to propagate explicitly revolutionary socialist ideas and attempt organisation building.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, thanks to Scheu’s tutoring, Banner was able by 1878 to deliver a coherent conception of socialism, à la Marx and Engels, with expropriation of capitalists and landowners at its core. Hence, while a declared supporter of the Land Nationalisation League during the summer of 1882, along with Ernest Belfort Bax, Adam Weiler, Ambrose G. Barker and others of a similar perspective, Banner insisted that common ownership needed to be extended from land to ‘Mines, Factories and Machinery for the equal distribution of wealth’. He went on, quoting from the *Communist Manifesto*, ‘our goal that was sketched by Marx and Engels, when the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, will be replaced by an association, wherein the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all’.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, when the Democratic Federation

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was considering adopting republicanism as a creed, Banner ‘cautioned the meeting against being led away with the idea that Republicanism was always synonymous with liberty. He instanced various acts of what he considered despotism as great as any to be found under a monarchy’, and argued that ‘the whole question turned upon what sort of republic they wanted to institute in England. In his opinion it should be a social democratic one.’<sup>6</sup>

Given Banner’s early point of entry into revolutionary socialism, it is perhaps surprising that he was overlooked by many of his contemporaries when they came to write their reminiscences, and has been ignored in much of the modern scholarship on the early history of British socialism, meriting often only a walk-on part as a member of the group that left the Social Democratic Federation and went on to form the Socialist League.<sup>7</sup> Part of an explanation for this can be found in Banner’s decision, taken soon after 1886, to cease any meaningful political activity outside of his adopted home of Woolwich, south-east London, where his lasting achievement occurred during the period immediately following the Socialist League years. The foundations of the Labour Party’s independent political identity in Woolwich were put down during the late eighties, leading to the election of a Labour Member of Parliament and a Labour borough council in 1903; Banner’s role in this was second to none. That Banner wrote very little besides letters to the press and left no personal papers is also of significance in explaining his relative obscurity, as is the fact that he was never a self-publicist nor was he politically ambitious, making him a queer fish among the leadership of the early socialist movement, easily ignored and quickly forgotten. Scheu recognised this soon after Banner’s death, taking Harry Quelch, editor of *Justice*, the SDF’s newspaper, to task for failing to publish an obituary or even a notice of death.<sup>8</sup> As if to put the record straight, albeit twenty-five years later, Harry Lee, onetime SDF secretary, wrote in his history of the Federation that of those who split away in 1884, Morris, Belfort Bax, Scheu and Banner were ‘decidedly losses to the SDF’.<sup>9</sup>

This essay, part of a wider study of Banner’s life and work, focuses on his socialist activity during the early and mid-1880s when he encountered all the notable personalities in the movement, including William Morris.<sup>10</sup> Following a brief outline of his early trade union and political work in Edinburgh, attention will turn to Woolwich, south-east London, where Banner arrived during the summer of 1882 with his wife, Helen, and their four children following political setbacks and the loss of life savings when a Scottish building society collapsed. Originally destined for America, Banner was intercepted by Scheu who convinced the young bookbinder that he should join him in his political work in London, having himself moved to the capital during the previous year.



Figure 1: Robert Banner in 1903, from *The Bookbinding Trades Journal*, 1: 1 (1904), p. 6.

Banner completed his apprenticeship in 1877 and immediately took up activity in the Bookbinders' and Machine Rulers' Consolidated Union where he immediately created waves upsetting the traditionally Gladstonian labour aristocrats forming the local committee. From the union branch he was sent as delegate to the Edinburgh Trades Council, where his perspective that trade unions should be fighting organisations engaged in class struggle repeatedly got him into trouble and eventually led to his removal in 1881.<sup>11</sup> Ambitious plans hatched by Banner during the summer of 1881 to establish a Scottish Labour Party committed to nationalisation of the means of production and affiliated to the Socialist International petered out, after which he turned his attention to the fledgling Democratic Federation, gathering together potential Edinburgh members during May 1882, attending the first annual conference later that month and becoming a member of the Executive.<sup>12</sup>

Working with Scheu, Ernest Belfort Bax and James MacDonald he helped persuade the Federation to engage in Sunday open-air meetings in public parks and squares, against the advice of chairman and leading force H.M. Hyndman, who, according to Scheu, 'criticised the Sunday meetings as a "continental idea" which

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the English people would never allow to become established in London'. Scheu believed Hyndman's views on this subject were characteristic of his hostility to foreign influence which he deeply resented. Scheu's account continued with Hyndman remarking: 'Scheu doesn't know any better, but Bax should and could put him wise, if he himself had not spent so much time on the continent and picked up such ideas himself. The English working class will never allow the holiness of their Sunday to be taken away.'<sup>13</sup> Banner later provided a similar account of these discussions, adding a brief description of how he chaired the first socialist meeting held in Regent's Park on a Sunday during February 1883, which proved successful and became a regular pitch for the Democratic Federation.<sup>14</sup>

With typical energy and enthusiasm Banner threw himself into Woolwich civil society, his name appearing in reports of local discussion and debating groups where his strident and class conscious contributions would have jarred against the traditional Tory narrative of the town dominated by military interests.<sup>15</sup> Naturally, Banner targeted the Invicta Working Men's Club in William Street as an assembly to influence, and he was soon ensconced there as a committee member and participating in the Club's discussions on abolition of the monarchy, women's enfranchisement, the imposition of financial strictures on members of the royal family and separation of Church and State.<sup>16</sup> In debating these traditional radical causes, the staple diet of working men's clubs across London, Banner constantly attempted to stretch the argument to demonstrate how only through a commitment to class struggle and replacing capitalism with socialism would the lives of working people improve substantially. For Banner, this was first and foremost a question of understanding the operation of capitalism and appreciating how socialism would be different because it would function with a new set of social relations. He attempted to explain this to a correspondent in a local newspaper in 1886, who had counterposed 'civilization' with socialism. Banner wrote:

[H]e desires me to show him wherein Socialism differs from 'the ordinary laws of civilization'. If he can be a little clearer and inform me what 'the ordinary laws of civilization' are, I shall be most obliged to him, and so, I think, will most lawyers. But perhaps he means what distinguishes civilization from Socialism. Well, this is easily done. Civilization is built upon the wage-slavery of the workers. It is divided into two classes – a possessing and a non-possessing class – one producing, the other non-producing; the non-producing class owning all the land, mines, factories, tools, machinery and means of exchange, the producing class owning nothing but the labour-force in their bodies. Thus civilization involves classes and class antagonisms. Socialism, on the other

hand, involves the abolition of classes, and class antagonisms by the substitution of collective, or co-operative, for class ownership of mines, factories, land etc., owned and organised for the benefit of those who work.<sup>17</sup>

A similar analysis was also conveyed from the platform outside the Royal Arsenal gates every Sunday evening from the spring of 1884, with Banner as the constant chairman and sometimes the only speaker. Hyndman spoke twice, Frank Kitiz, R.P.B. Frost and H.H. Champion also addressed meetings there. Predictably, Scheu became a regular fixture in Woolwich, combining visits to his friend with public meetings, as in May 1884 when a crowd of 400 gathered to hear him on 'Objections to Socialism'. Banner reported that Scheu's address 'made a great impression', and commented more generally that following Hyndman's recent debate on socialism with secularist Charles Bradlaugh, '[t]here is a marked change taking place in sympathies of many freethinkers [...] towards the more advanced sections who have all along stood up for socialism'.<sup>18</sup> By June, when Scheu returned to Woolwich, a branch of the Federation was being set up and had meetings fixed at their club in the Connaught Coffee Tavern in New Road.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Banner continued to have a London-wide profile within the Federation, often being asked to speak at open-air meetings which became his *métier*. Described by his friend, George Samuel, as 'a marvel of learning in economics and sociology', Banner's platform oratory skilfully combined an explanation of complex ideas with engaging, often amusing, references to current political events.<sup>20</sup> A participant in a number of the Federation's meetings at Westminster Palace Chambers during early 1883, it was here that Banner pointed out Morris to Scheu, who later recounted this to J.W. Mackail for his Morris biography: '[t]he business had scarcely started when Banner, who sat behind me, passed a slip of paper, "The third man to your right is William Morris"'.<sup>21</sup> Scheu then gave Mackail a physical description of Morris which he later included almost word for word in his autobiography.<sup>22</sup> Scheu became a good friend of Morris and a regular visitor to Kelmscott House, where on at least one occasion he was accompanied by Banner.<sup>23</sup>

Scheu had taken a dislike of Hyndman when he first encountered him at the Federation's founding conference during June 1881. On this occasion, Scheu was with Morrison Davidson, who later wrote that the pair 'shook the dust from our feet and left the hall' when Hyndman objected to any consideration of the monarchy, 'it being an institution too sacred to be discussed'. For Morrison Davidson, 'though the hand (of the Federation) might be that of the Democratic Esau, the voice sounded uncommonly like that of the Tory Jacob'.<sup>24</sup> Scheu believed Hyndman to be a jingoist, an autocrat and an unprincipled politician; a 'political juggler' was how he described

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him to his friend Bernard Shaw.<sup>25</sup> For Hyndman's part the feeling was mutual, he being resentful of what he believed to be Scheu's patronising attitude to the new socialist movement in Britain.<sup>26</sup> During the period of Scheu's membership of the Federation's executive between 1883 and 1884 a 'bitter feud grew up' between the two men in which Scheu, according to Shaw, distinguished himself as 'the first anti-Hyndmanite'.<sup>27</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Banner was at one with Scheu and although not a member of the Executive during his friend's tenure, we know he attended various 'invitational' and members' meetings in these twelve months, including one at Anderson's Hotel, Fleet Street during January 1884 at which a motion was discussed demanding 'universal suffrage, proportional representation and payment of members as a means of obtaining reduction in hours, socialization of means of production, and the organisation of society'. To this, the reporter to the first issue of *Justice* wrote, 'Banner pressed for general propaganda of socialistic ideas, and had little reliance on mere politics. He trusted more to social agitation. He thought the first thing was the right to live; the right to vote would then be easily obtained. He believed in no half-hearted acceptance of political reform, and looked on all labour as lost which did not bring about the social revolution of the people.'<sup>28</sup>

Following another Federation gathering in July, Banner, according to Morris, came away 'much downcast at the turn things are taking', following a discussion of an issue reflecting division among French socialists and how this impinged on the British socialist movement. Ostensibly concerning the location of an international socialist conference, the discussion was fundamentally about whether the Federation supported the French 'revolutionary Marxists' led by Paul Lafargue and Jules Guesde or the reformist 'Possibilists' of Paul Brousse. We know Hyndman backed the 'Possibilists' and Bax the 'revolutionary Marxists', and it is almost certain that the supporters of each side fell into line, Banner with Bax, Eleanor Marx Aveling and Edward Aveling.<sup>29</sup> Although Morris was at this time becoming increasingly aware of the difficulties of working with Hyndman as Federation chairman, his instinct was to 'patch up the division of the executive and get on with the real work'.<sup>30</sup> Hence his note to Scheu in July, 'I had Bax here last night and begged him to be more politic', and later, 'Banner is to come to me on Saturday. I want to encourage him and also keep him from running a-muck'.<sup>31</sup> Banner, like Scheu, who was remembered by one contemporary as one 'who would never let an opportunity pass of losing his temper', could be confrontational, and doubtless with his friend now away from London, Scheu having moved back to Edinburgh during July 1884, he was ready to take on the mantle and would certainly have been prepared to defend him when snipes were made.<sup>32</sup> In this vein, Morris reported to Scheu during August 1884 that Banner, at his first meeting

back on the executive, 'was ready to jump down anyones throat'.<sup>33</sup>

The annual conference of the Federation at the beginning of August 1884 had seen the adoption of a comprehensive socialist programme and a new name, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). It was also significant because Hyndman's position was weakened with his removal from the office of President and the election of Banner, Joseph Lane, Marx Aveling and Aveling to the executive, meaning he could no longer guarantee a majority for his leadership. Over the next few months, relations on the executive deteriorated with one dispute after another, around which the battle lines were drawn between the pro- and anti-Hyndman factions. Things came to a head during mid-December following Morris's return from a short tour of Scotland, when he reported details of a letter from Hyndman to members in Glasgow that had been made known to him, denouncing Scheu as an anarchist who would destroy their organisation if they allowed him to do so. Up to this moment Morris had believed reconciliation was possible, but no longer. Gathering together those opposing Hyndman on the executive in what he called a 'cabal', Morris sought to win a vote of confidence in Scheu and remove Hyndman from the editorship of *Justice*. We know that Banner was independently in contact with Scheu over these affairs and had advised him to come to London to answer Hyndman's accusations at an executive meeting planned for 23 December. At first Morris did not think this necessary but was persuaded of it at a meeting of the 'cabal' at the Avelings' home on 18 December at which Banner was not present but was reported to be in full agreement.<sup>34</sup> It is almost certain that it was at this meeting that the group decided they would leave the SDF whatever happened at the forthcoming executive meeting.

Scheu attended the meeting on 23 December, mounting, in Morris's words, 'a really noble and skilful defence of his character against Hyndman'.<sup>35</sup> But with business not concluded, the executive reconvened four days later to repeat the arguments, including a contribution from Banner which Morris related to the absent Scheu as follows: 'Banner spoke badly and not much to the point', not the first time he had commented negatively on the bookbinder's interventions in meetings.<sup>36</sup> While Banner was, to use Sidney Webb's words, 'a great Woolwich street orator', he appears on occasion to have been inadequately prepared for important meetings and his contributions could wander, probably mistakenly relying on his skills to extemporise.<sup>37</sup> Not that the power of argument would sway opinion at this point on the executive, voting going as expected, with the Morris faction winning a majority and then astounding Hyndman by resigning en bloc to form the Socialist League.

Banner moved quickly to transform the Federation's Woolwich branch into the Socialist League, drafting in Morris at the end of January 1885 to make the case. Kelvin's interpretation of Morris's attendance at the Woolwich meeting, that it was

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an example of his ‘dislike of conflict among socialists’ illustrated ‘by his readiness to keep an SDF lecture so soon after the weeks of acrimony’, is clearly mistaken, as it was in fact a pre-emptive strike at the Federation heavyweights James Murray and J.E. Williams who visited three days later.<sup>38</sup> Of this meeting Banner reported that Murray and Williams spoke for two hours in a tirade against the majority led by Morris but failed to prevent secession of the branch to the League.<sup>39</sup> However, despite Banner’s untiring efforts, the branch failed to register with the Farringdon Street office and never sent a delegate to the annual conference, probably because there were never more than a dozen or so members who became casualties of the split, with some drifting away. Nevertheless, Banner continued to proselytise for the League in Woolwich, maintaining the Sunday evening Arsenal gate meetings, selling *Commonweal* and pamphlets in the ‘Socialist Platform’ series. A meticulous reader of the Woolwich press, he regularly made his presence known in the correspondence columns, mostly addressing current political and economic matters. When prompted, Banner would not hesitate to display his erudition, as in April 1885 when he treated the editor of the *Woolwich Gazette* to a lecture on the history of the French National Workshops started after the revolution of 1848. Showing them to be ‘the invention, not of the friends, but the enemies of socialism’, Banner quoted heavily from Marx’s article covering the subject from the June 1850 edition of the *Democratic Review*, a publication he knew well, having inherited a complete run from his father.<sup>40</sup>

By the mid-1880s Banner had an established record at the Invicta Working Men’s Club where members elected him into key positions of responsibility. Heavily populated by Scots who had moved to Woolwich and Plumstead to work mostly as engineering craftsmen at the Royal Arsenal, the Club – which was renamed the Woolwich District Radical Club in December 1884 – was receptive to Banner’s influence, who, as a teetotaler, concentrated on the political rather than social aspects of associationism. He was a hard worker and able to draw in speakers with established reputations – Morris gave his ‘How We Live, and How We Might Live’ lecture there during May 1886. Banner clearly deployed his club office and delegacy in ways to extend radicalism towards socialism.

As club delegate at the Fabian conference on ‘Land, Capital and Democratic Policy’ during June 1886 at the South Place Institute, Banner contributed to a number of the debates, adding to the League’s official presence there represented by Morris, Aveling and A.K. Donald. On the land question he differed with Bradlaugh’s proposal to cultivate waste land while it was still in private hands because it would create a ‘system of outdoor relief’ in which the capitalists who owned land would be able to beat down the wages of workers.<sup>41</sup> Responding to the suggestion that compensation should be made to landowners in the event of nationalisation, Banner was ‘loudly

cheered' when he appealed to delegates to reverse the argument and 'ask how the working class would be recompensed because they had all along been compensating the propertied class [...]. Landowners should be told that land does not belong to them and if they did not give it up it would be taken from them. And if they did not like the transaction they could do as many of the working-classes have often done – they could emigrate.'<sup>42</sup>

With apparent incredulity he tackled the individualist Wordsworth Donisthorpe's exposition of Social Darwinism in which the strong prey on the weak, some of whom may 'go to the wall', with the warning that when the socialists got their chance things could be reversed and 'they might show how this could be done'.<sup>43</sup> Finally, contesting G.W. Foote's assertion that socialism would undermine personal freedom, Banner asked: 'what freedom had they now? He must sell his labour to John Jones or he must starve. If he was caught starving wilfully he would be punished for it (laughter). If he was starving and not caught it would be said he was insane. This was the beautiful freedom they had.'<sup>44</sup>

The Radical Club also allowed Banner to express his support for the struggle for Irish independence, a cause he had been connected with since his Edinburgh days when he worked with Scottish members of the Irish Land League. Joining with leading lights of Radical and Liberal Clubs in south-east London during April 1887 at a demonstration against proposed extension of coercion legislation, Banner explained that the new bill had been introduced 'because the people of Ireland had found out they had no room for idle, and useless classes, and the people of England would find out that the men oppressing the Irish people would very quickly frame a bill to oppress English people as well'. He then asked the large crowd 'if any of them had been into the Houses of Parliament? Every time he went there, he came away with a greater contempt for it than he had before. When he sat in the Speaker's Gallery, it always seemed to him that M.P. at the end of the member's name meant something more than Member of Parliament; he thought it also might mean "Midnight Plunderer"'. (Laughter and applause).<sup>45</sup>

Banner's hostility to the Parliamentary process was deep-seated and had been encouraged by Scheu when they were together in Edinburgh.<sup>46</sup> Certainly by 1882 Banner was arguing publicly that '[p]arliamentary government is a mockery, and the cry for the franchise is a sham. What is wanted is not more voting power, but the people to understand how they are being cheated and robbed.'<sup>47</sup> Sadly, we do not have a published report of Banner's lecture 'The Fraud of Politics' delivered at the League's office during May 1886, but we can be fairly certain that it would have developed themes espoused elsewhere and been in accord with Morris's views expressed in the 'Whigs, Democrats and Socialists' lecture read at the Fabian

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conference at which Banner was Woolwich club delegate.

In spite of being often unavailable to attend Council meetings because of overtime working and lack of cash for travel, Banner maintained a high level of commitment to the League in its first eighteen months of existence. Re-elected to the Council at the first annual conference during July 1885, he was in demand as a speaker beyond Woolwich and for a while maintained a regular Sunday afternoon pitch at Deptford before hotfooting it back to Woolwich for the established early evening meeting at the Arsenal gates. He did, however, become increasingly dissatisfied with the League's notoriously poor system of administration, which on one occasion sent him to consecutive speaking engagements, at a personal cost in travel of four shillings, only for there to have been nothing organised. In an angry note to League secretary H.H. Sparling, he stated, '[i]t is not by anarky (sic) but organisation progress will made. If we cannot organise a meeting in the open-air, how are we going to organise to destroy capitalism?'.<sup>48</sup>

Banner's association of poor organisation with anarchy is instructive and chimes with the letter of resignation from the League by Thomas Binning at around the same time. Both Banner and Binning were print craftsmen familiar with strong trade union organisation that they would have contrasted with the shabby practices in the League. Intriguingly, Binning was working at his trade as a compositor in Edinburgh during the 1870s and 1880s, but we cannot be sure he met Banner there. In his letter of resignation Binning wrote:

I earnestly hope the League is not going to degenerate into a mere Quixotic debating society for the discussion of philosophical fads. I care not how angelic may be the theories of Anarchists or Anarchist-Communists. I contend that the real solid basis of the Revolutionary movement is the economic question [...]. If the League means business let it not waste time in metaphysical subtleties such as the precise shade of difference between "Rules" and "Arrangements", etc.<sup>49</sup>

Doubtless, Binning was referring to discussions preceding the annual conference in June on the 'Manifesto' submitted by two Council members, Joseph Lane and Henry Charles, for a reorganisation of the League at the heart of which was the replacement of the Council by weekly meetings of members. Intended to act as a bulwark against centralisation and domination by London members, the proposals sought to anticipate 'the near future society [...] based on free federated communes'. A swift response came from a number of existing and previous Council members – Aveling, Marx Aveling, Banner, Bax, Binning, A.K. Donald, Frederick Lessner, Scheu and Thomas

Wardle – who had come to make up the Social Democratic faction. The rebuttal took Lane and Charles to task for proposals that would compound the problem of London domination by granting to those who were able to attend meetings rights that ‘country’ members could not exercise. For the signatories, it was the ‘imperative duty of all our members to devote their utmost energies to the work of propaganda, and not to waste time on administrative experiments. Methods of procedure, however admirably adapted for carrying on the work of a commune in a socialistic condition of society, are of little value to a revolutionary body who have to conquer the conditions that can make practicable the carrying out of their ideal.’<sup>50</sup>

In the aftermath of the conference, where the Lane and Charles proposals were rejected, Charles accused Banner of circulating rumours ‘calling into question my sincerity as a member of the Socialist League’, and demanded that such allegations be retracted in a clear statement to the new Council of which he, but not Banner, was a member.<sup>51</sup> Banner made no retraction and soon after was out of the League, disappointed at the growing influence of the anarchists as the Council was reduced in size.

Banner’s decision to resign his membership just as the Social Democrats on the Council were becoming organised is a puzzle, particularly as he continued to operate in Woolwich as if still a League member for another two years. He retained an account at the office for multiple copies of *Commonweal* for resale, reported regularly to the secretary on activities, requested speakers for the Sunday meetings and himself attended the 1887 conference as a visitor. While we cannot be sure of Banner’s motives for being at this conference, it is likely he was expressing an interest in the debate tabled on the League’s attitude to electoral contests, including those for Parliamentary seats. After a good deal of behind-the-scenes activity, a motion went forward in the name of Mahon including support for ‘[p]arliamentary, municipal and other local-government bodies [...] to be taken advantage of for spreading the principles of Socialism and organizing the people into a Socialist Labour Party’. E.P. Thompson’s unsurpassed account of these events suggests that Engels may have had a hand in drafting the sophisticated motion, which situated electoral activity within the broad terrain of working-class struggle.<sup>52</sup> Following the defeat of the motion at the conference, a group of its supporters, Mahon, Aveling, Marx Aveling, Bax, Donald, Binning and W.H. Utley came together as a faction to fight for their position within the League.<sup>53</sup> Although not a member of this faction, now out of the League, Banner was certainly in communication with some of its members, Donald, Mahon and Binning, and was probably seen as a key contact.<sup>54</sup> Intriguingly, some of Banner’s contact with members of the faction was mediated through Henry A. Barker, the

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League's secretary, who like Banner had once held strong anti-parliamentary views but by this time favoured engagement in elections and would continue to feature in socialist politics after separating from the League in 1888.<sup>55</sup>

One of Banner's letters to Barker was written in the week following the procession on Trafalgar Square on 'Bloody Sunday', 13 November 1887, where London's radicals and socialists challenged the ban on public meetings in the Square imposed by Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Charles Warren. Banner was with the Woolwich District Radical Club as the south London contingent crossed Westminster Bridge into Bridge Street where they were confronted and attacked by a large police cordon in a brutal and unexpected manner. Banner told Barker that 'it was nearly a header for me, I got my hat knocked into a shape which made me think for sometime I had either lost or found a hat!!!'.<sup>56</sup> Following 'Bloody Sunday' Banner joined in the activities of the Law and Liberty League acting as one of the coordinators of the Woolwich Vigilance Circle formed to monitor police behaviour and mobilise support for the free speech struggle.<sup>57</sup> And he was almost certainly the 'Bookbinder' who gave evidence to the London Liberal and Radical Union's inquiry into the events of 13 November, in which the police attack on the Woolwich marchers was described as 'indiscriminate [...] the police rode in amongst the people hitting left and right'.<sup>58</sup>

Having rethought his attitude to socialists contesting elections sometime between the League's second and third annual conferences, Banner was now in favour and would unite again with a number of the faction's leading protagonists over the next three years in the Labour Union and the Legal Eight Hours International Labour League, both organisations in which Banner was to take his part and which aspired to establish an independent socialist Labour party. This motivation was also instrumental in Banner joining the Fabian Society during November 1890 and not earlier, as stated by Kelvin.<sup>59</sup> Although on friendly terms with Shaw, Sidney Webb, Hubert Bland and Edward Pease, Banner's belief in the centrality of class struggle meant he was not a 'natural' Fabian and his entry to the Society at this stage was part of an organised attempt by a group of socialist working men, including Pete Curran and Fred Hammill, to ditch the policy of permeation in favour of the establishment of independent labour representation and so line up the Fabians with others working towards this goal.<sup>60</sup> Successful in rallying support for this position, Banner and a number of like-minded comrades were elected to the Fabian Society Executive in 1892, and he was able to sign the Society's election manifesto of that year without reservation because its policy had shifted significantly in favour of independent labour representation.

Banner's short period of League membership was obviously of significance to him, and one can speculate about how this was related to the influence of Morris.

Unlike Scheu and a number of other artisans who came to socialism during this period and related craft issues to the challenge of creative labour, there is no evidence to suggest that Banner engaged with these matters, as he remained a trade bookbinder and bindery union organiser all his working life. There are a couple of tantalising lines in letters from Morris in January 1885 suggesting that this might have been different if Banner had found work with T.J. Cobden Sanderson, but nothing came of it.<sup>61</sup> And when in 1904 Banner's trade union imaginatively and courageously launched a new publication with his enthusiastic support, *The Bookbinding Trades Journal*, his name featured on issues of pay and conditions of bookbinders, but not on craft matters which were covered extensively.

Similarly, Banner appears not to have been particularly influenced by ethical considerations of socialism, preferring instead to make the case using economic arguments of which he had a firm grasp. Shaw told an audience in 1889 how he had been advised by Banner to read Marx's *Capital* when in the early eighties he had attempted to contradict Marxism at a Democratic Federation meeting.<sup>62</sup> An unmistakable member of what Morris called 'the intellectual proletariat', Banner, who had been au fait with the *Communist Manifesto* since his teenage years, when he read his father's copy of *Red Republican* in which the first English translation had appeared, was by the early 1890s said to be 'deriding with virile common sense the puny attacks made on Marx by a certain section of economic students'.<sup>63</sup> The driving force behind the Woolwich 'Socialist Society' set up during the autumn of 1887, Banner based its evening educational classes on political economy in order that the workers in attendance could act as effective 'socialist missionaries'.<sup>64</sup> Banner, who had become a social democrat of the European Marxist persuasion by the late 1870s when Scheu arrived in Edinburgh and introduced him to continental developments, was still convinced of these ideas during the 1890s when Harry (later Lord) Snell encountered him in Woolwich. Forty years later Snell remembered Banner as a 'widely read man, a Marxian in economics and in politics an out-and-out social democrat'.<sup>65</sup>

Banner's sustained record of intense trade union activity and leadership of London's bookbinders demonstrated he was undeterred by any of the antipathy, and in some cases hostility, to industrial work evident in sections of the Social Democratic Federation and Socialist League. Having played an important role in securing an eight-hour working day for London letterpress bookbinders during 1890, where his knowledge of economics was invaluable in negotiations with the employers, Banner could accurately cite this industrial struggle as evidence of how workplace and political struggles could be linked. The demand for a statutory eight-hour working day remained central to Banner's political and industrial activity for the next decade,

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making him one of those Marxists whom Pierson identified as having ‘retained a belief in the dialectical interaction between consciousness and political practice [and] especially likely to participate in the immediate struggles of the workers’.<sup>66</sup>

Although in his industrial and political activity Banner was always capable of working with others of differing perspectives, he was not one of Anna Vaninskaya’s ‘socialist hybrids’, even if the organisations to which he belonged exhibited ‘internal variety’ and ‘ideological incompatibilities’.<sup>67</sup> Notwithstanding the uncertainty about what actually constituted the ‘scientific socialism’ of Marx and Engels at this time because so little had been made available in English, Banner was sure in his own mind that the core of these ideas were correct and they remained his lifelong guide.<sup>68</sup> Tellingly, Banner’s first letter to Marx in September 1880, written as a ‘humble admirer’, concerned the possible translation of *Capital* because he believed its availability in English was indispensable for those involved in the class struggle.<sup>69</sup> For Banner, the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels provided the tools to understand capitalist exploitation and the rationale for a socialist society. As with any scientific endeavour, dealing with complex and abstract arguments was challenging and difficult to convey to workers, but Banner believed this to be the fundamental task of socialists. In the debate at the first League annual conference during July 1885 when consideration was being given to the content of *Commonweal* and the possibility of bringing it out in weekly instead of monthly instalments, he made his views clear:

Robert Banner wanted a weekly paper. He wanted a daily, as probably the rest of the members of the League did. In fact, he wanted a Social revolution, but he had to wait for it. But how were they going to get a weekly? First, where was the money to come from? And second, where were the writers to come from? And did they seriously want a Socialist rag, with no literary ability in it? If they did want the superficial light stuff that some of them had been talking about, let them buy other papers. Socialists had been told long enough and often enough that their ideas were unscientific. And now, when this was being shown to be false, actually some of the Socialists themselves objected. If they were going to write for the dregs of the people, they might be sure that they would not understand anything that might be written. But if they wanted to appeal to intelligent people, they must make these see that the whole thing is based upon science. In fact, that is the great difficulty of Socialism, that it is a complex scientific question, and therefore can’t be dealt with superficially. We have to teach this difficult question to the working classes, and the first thing to do is to make them understand our language.<sup>70</sup>

While sometimes temperamentally explosive, Banner did not share what Fiona MacCarthy identifies as Morris's 'waywardness and danger' and susceptibility to anarchist influence, instead positioning himself unequivocally as a disciple of Marx and Engels.<sup>71</sup> The critique of what he regarded as organisational anarchy in the League extended to anarchism as a political philosophy which Banner regarded as organisationally introspective and inherently sectarian. On this and other litmus test issues, Banner established himself as a trusted member of the Engels 'clique' extended by Eleanor Marx Aveling through her involvement in the labour movement during the late 1880s, and he was consulted as attempts were made by the group to establish a socialist Labour party, win support for the Marxist Socialist International Congress and campaign for the legal eight-hour working day. It was no coincidence that, alongside Scheu, Banner's longest political association and friendship was with Eleanor Marx, at whose funeral he spoke and whose death he wanted investigated.<sup>72</sup>

In 1891 Banner told George Samuel that he 'maintain[ed] the warmest personal admiration and respect for Morris', even though he probably agreed with Scheu's verdict that Morris had been too soft on the anarchists in the League.<sup>73</sup> When requested to speak at Hammersmith he would always oblige and, many years later, when chairman of the Library Committee of Woolwich Borough Council, he directed those in charge of requisitions for the new Plumstead Library to ensure that there was a shelf of books by Morris.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that Banner had his old comrade in mind when, shortly before his death, he remarked that although the socialist movement had carried out two of the Chartist principles, 'agitate and organise', they had not succeeded with the third, to 'educate'.<sup>75</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Andreas Scheu Papers, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. (Hereafter AS).
2. 'Our Labour Councillors', *The Bookbinding Trades Journal*, no. 1 (1904), p. 6; Autolycus (Joseph Burgess), 'Workman's Notes and Notions', *Workman's Times* 2 April 1892, p. 5.
3. For Scheu, see Joseph O. Baylen, 'Scheu, Andreas (1844-1927)', *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals*, Vol. 3 1870-1914, ed. by Joseph O. Baylen and Norbert J. Grossman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1988), pp. 723-29. (Afterwards Baylen). For the early availability of writings by Marx and Engels in Britain, see Kirk Willis, 'The Introduction and Critical Reception of Marxist Thought in Britain, 1850-1900', *The Historical Journal*, 20.2 (1977), 417-59. (Afterwards Willis).
4. Robert Banner to Karl Marx, 17 September 1880, 6 December 1880, 3 June 1881, Karl Marx/ Friedrich Engels Papers, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, D 131-133; Robert Banner to Friedrich Engels, 12 December 1880, Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels Papers, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, L 129; E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955), pp. 345-46. (Afterwards Thompson). Thompson lists John Burns, Harry Quelch, John Lincoln Mahon, Tom Maguire, Tom Barclay and Banner.
5. Letter by Banner entitled 'Social Revolution not Political Reform', *The Radical*, 29 April 1882, Issue 17, p. 3; 'Land Nationalisation League', *The Radical*, 8 July 1882, Issue 27, p. 4. (Afterwards Banner, 'Social Revolution not Political Reform').

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6. 'The Democratic Federation', *Daily News*, 1 June 1882, Issue 11272, p. 3; 'The Democratic Federation', *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 4 June 1882, Issue 1660, p. 1.
  7. Among the significant reminiscences that omit any mention of Banner are: Henry Mayers Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life* (London: Macmillan, 1911) and *Further Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan, 1911); Ernest Belfort Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflexions of a Mid and Late Victorian* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1918), Harry Quelch, *Literary Remains*, edited with a biographical introduction by Ernest Belfort Bax (London: Grant Richards, 1914); John E. Williams, *John E. Williams and the Early History of the Social Democratic Federation* (London: The Modern Press, 1886). Banner is absent in the two recent histories of the SDF: Martin Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1994) and Graham Johnson, *Social Democratic Politics in Britain, 1881-1911* (Lampeter: Edward Mellen, 2002).
  8. Andreas Scheu to Harry Quelch, 25 December 1910, AS.
  9. H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social Democracy in Britain: Fifty Years of the Socialist Movement* (London: Social Democratic Federation, 1935), p. 72. (Afterwards Lee and Archbold).
  10. 'Banner, Robert (1855-1910) Socialist', in *Dictionary of Labour Biography Volume 14*, ed. by Keith Gildart and David Howell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), forthcoming. The author wishes to thank the Trustees of the Peter Floud Memorial Prize for their award which has assisted research into Banner's life and work.
  11. Banner's activities can be traced in the Minutes of the Bookbinders' and Machine Rulers' Consolidated Union 1877-1881, Acc. 4395 and the Minutes of the Edinburgh Trades Council 1878-1881, Acc. 11177, both held at the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.
  12. 'Correspondence', *The Labour Standard*, 18 June 1881, p. 7; 'Democrats in Edinburgh', *The Radical*, 13 May 1882, Issue 19, p. 6.
  13. Andreas Scheu, *Umsturzkeime: Erlebnisse eines Kampfers* (Weiner: Volksbunchnhandlung, 1923), Part III, p. 48. (Afterwards Scheu).
  14. Marxian (George Samuel), 'Fabian Notes', *Workman's Times*, 5 December 1891, p. 5. (Afterwards Samuel). See also James MacDonald, 'How I Became a Socialist', *Justice*, 11 July 1896, p. 6.
  15. *The Democrat*, 31 January 1885, p. 3.
  16. *Justice*, 29 November 1884, p. 7; *Woolwich Gazette*, 30 November 1883, p. 2; 14 December 1883, p. 3; 28 March 1884, p. 3; *Reynold's Newspaper*, 24 May 1885, p. 1.
  17. Robert Banner, 'Inconsistent Socialists', *Woolwich Gazette*, 15 October 1886, p. 6.
  18. *Justice*, 24 May 1884, p. 6.
  19. *Justice*, 14 June 1884, p. 7.
  20. Samuel, p. 5.
  21. J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1901), II, p. 96; J.W. Mackail to A. Scheu, 30 June 1897, AS.
  22. Scheu, p. 66.
  23. Minutes of the Hammersmith Socialist League, 26 July 1885, British Library Add. Ms. 4581, 33.
  24. John Morrison Davidson, *The Annals of Toil: Being Labour History Outlines, Roman and British* (London: William Reeves, 1896-1899), Bk. IV, p. 436.
  25. Andreas Scheu to Bernard Shaw, December 6 1885, British Library Add. Ms 50511, 146-147.
  26. Thompson, p. 396.
  27. Thompson, p. 397; from Shaw's lecture to the Fabian Society, 20 December 1889, included in George Bernard Shaw, *The Road to Equality: Ten Unpublished Lectures and Essays, 1884-1914*, ed. by Louis Crompton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 84. (Afterwards Shaw, *The Road to Equality*).
  28. *Justice*, 19 January 1884, p. 7.
  29. Chushichi Tsuzuki, *H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 59.
  30. Thompson, p. 397.
  31. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton: Princeton University

- Press, 1984-1996), II, pp. 294-95. (Afterwards Kelvin).
32. Hubert Bland, 'Memories and Reflections', *Sunday Chronicle*, 2 April 1895, p. 2.
  33. Kelvin, II, p. 314.
  34. *Ibid.*
  35. *Ibid.*, pp. 351-52.
  36. *Ibid.*, p. 353.
  37. *The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Vol. 1, Apprenticeships, 1873-1892*, ed. by Norman Mackenzie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 338. See Morris's comments on Banner's contribution at the executive meeting of 16 December, Kelvin, pp. 348-49.
  38. Kelvin, II, p. 380n.
  39. Robert Banner to J.L. Mahon, 30 January 1885, Archives of the Socialist League, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 742/4. (Hereafter SL).
  40. Robert Banner, 'Labour and Employment', *Woolwich Gazette*, 24 April 1885, p. 6.
  41. 'Land, Capital and Democratic Policy', Fabian Conference, 9-11 June 1886. British Library of Political and Economic Science, Archives, Coll. Misc 0098, p. 42. (Afterwards 'Land, Capital and Democratic Policy'). Annie Besant, 'The Fabian Conference', *To-day: Monthly Magazine of Scientific Socialism*, 6: 31 (July 1886), 8-14 (p. 9).
  42. 'Land, Capital and Democratic Policy', p. 22.
  43. *Ibid.*, p. 225; Morris criticised Donisthopy's paper in 'Misanthropy to the Rescue', *Commonweal*, 2: 33 (28 August 1886), 172.
  44. 'Land, Capital and Democratic Policy', pp. 176-77.
  45. 'Great Anti-Coercion Demonstration on Blackheath', *Woolwich Gazette*, 29 April 1887, p. 3.
  46. For Scheu's early anti-political views, see Baylen, p. 726.
  47. Banner, 'Social Revolution not Political Reform', p. 3.
  48. Robert Banner to H.H. Sparling, 5 April 1886, SL 748/4.
  49. Thompson, p. 490.
  50. The Lane and Charles 'Manifesto' and the response by Banner et al. is included in a file of Joseph Lane's papers in the British Library of Political and Economic Science Archive, Coll. Misc 706/9.
  51. Henry Charles to H.H. Sparling, 15 June 15 1886, SL 1052/1.
  52. Thompson, pp. 534-35.
  53. *Ibid.*, p. 536.
  54. See Banner's correspondence to H.A. Barker, SL 738-741, 746.
  55. Barbara Nield and John Saville, 'Barker, Henry Alfred (1858-1940)', *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. VI*, ed. by Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 18-21.
  56. Robert Banner to Henry Barker, 21 November 1887, SL 740/3.
  57. 'Law and Liberty League', *The Link*, 25 February 1888, Issue 4, p. 8.
  58. 'The Trafalgar Square Outrages', *The Link*, 24 November 1888, Issue 43, p. 4.
  59. Kelvin, II, p. 279n.
  60. Proletarian, 'Fabian Notes', *Workman's Times*, 16 April 1892, p. 7.
  61. Kelvin, II, pp. 380-82.
  62. Shaw, *The Road to Equality*, p. 84.
  63. Thompson, p. 315; Samuel, p. 5.
  64. Robert Banner to Sidney Webb, 26 September 1887, British Library of Political and Economic Science, Wallas/1/6; 'Reports', *Commonweal*, 3: 92 (15 October 1887), 336.
  65. Lord Snell, *Men, Movements and Myself* (London: J.M. Dent, 1936), p. 80.
  66. Stanley Pierson, *Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism: The Struggle for a New Consciousness* (London: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 69.
  67. Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda, 1880-1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 140.

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68. For the early availability of writings by Marx and Engels in Britain, see Willis.
69. Robert Banner to Karl Marx, 17 September 1880, op. cit.
70. 'First General Meeting of the Socialist League', *Commonweal*, 1: 7 (August 1885), 65-67 (p. 67).
71. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 543.
72. Robert Banner, 'Eleanor Marx's Suicide', *Labour Leader*, 30 April 1898, p. 139.
73. Scheu, pp. 82-83.
74. Hammersmith Socialist Record, August 1892, p. 4; February 1893, p. 4; *Catalogue of Books in the Lending Department of the Plumstead Library* (Woolwich: Plumstead Library, 1904), p. 192.
75. Lee and Archbold, p. 80.