The Political Commentary of the *Hammersmith Socialist Record*

David Morgan

The Society's four-page news-sheet which was published from October 1891 to June 1893, although only a modest affair in comparison with *Justice* and *Commonweal*, contains some interesting reportage and commentary on many political events. The articles in the paper constitute a good guide to the outlook of the Hammersmith Socialists, the way they looked at the world, and what they thought important from what was going on around them. They also give some indication of the level of sophistication of their political analysis.

The idea for what is described in the minute books as a “four page monthly leaflet” was first raised at the Society's special general meeting on 30 August 1891 under the subject of propaganda work, and was proposed and seconded by R Steele and Morris respectively. It was referred for consideration to the general purposes committee comprising Bullock, Mordhurst and Tochatti, anarchist editor of *Liberty*. The draft of the first issue was presented to this committee by H B Tarleton on 17 September and appeared in print the following month. The paper, addressed to “friends and colleagues,” was principally designed to keep members informed of Society activities and to give its perspective to a wider public on events in the workers’ struggle.

The launch issue of October 1891 began with a bold declaration of what the Hammersmith Socialist Society stood for: it militantly advocated “International Revolutionary Socialism ... the destruction of the present class society.” Its vision of the future was a system where “useful work” and “unburdensome” labour based on
a system of co-operation would be the norm for all: “the struggle of man with man for bare subsistence would be supplanted by harmonious combination for the production of common wealth and the exchange of mutual services without the waste of labour or material.” This emphasis on unalienated labour in accord with the natural environment is broadly an ecological version of Socialism—far removed from the state Socialisms that dominated much of the twentieth century; Stalinism and “labourism” both shared the aim of maximising production with little regard for the human and environmental costs. The Hammersmith vision could not be further removed from these failed programmes and it is this “green” aspect that gives it its powerful present-day resonance; no wonder Morris's name is often cited as a source of inspiration in the writings of contemporary ecologists.

In other matters the Society’s outlook differed little from standard Socialist and “progressive” beliefs; they adhered to a “stages” view of history as a grand forward advance toward some inevitable Socialist future. This attitude expressed itself most markedly in a doggedly optimistic interpretation of events, especially the belief in the increasing awakening of the masses; it is a conclusion found repeatedly in reports in the Record. It is, of course, a basic Marxian tenet that the workers should become the agency of social change; the Hammersmith Socialists remained faithful to this thesis in statements like the following: “the nature of the work we have taken in hand compels us to depend mainly upon the propertyless worker for the carrying on of the propaganda” (iss.1) or, “The programme of the workers can only be carried out by the workers themselves” (iss.3).

From this it is apparent the Society did not see itself as a “bourgeois” group and was aware of the urgency of the need to recruit workers to the Socialist cause; this is not the same, however, as seeing the workers rising at every turn. In fact, the over-optimistic appraisal of events could act as an obstacle to this object by substituting wishful thinking for practical organisation. Although this is not to imply that the hopes were entirely groundless; there had been a momentous changes in popular feeling during the latter decades of the century. The Record of January 1893 gave a list of factors indicative of this change; the new unionism, the successful London dock strike, the election of Labour candidates. On this the lesson the society draws is not to “build extravagant hopes.” The Society was out to undermine complacency by stressing that these successes did not constitute any shift towards Socialism. The conclusion had to be that their own work of propagandising was essential; otherwise their whole existence would be futile and unnecessary.

The Record was not simply concerned with general abstractions and in fact much the larger part of its copy was concerned with specifics; reportage on actual events, campaigns and incidents of a local, national and occasionally international flavour. Elections and union struggles featured as major interests; the “great coal strike in the North” in 1892, in which Morris took a direct interest, was seen as important because it would “teach the workers by hard necessity” the need for strong organisation, unity of action and clearness of aim (iss.7). Simple factual reporting of such events, apart from its own initiatives like the Joint Socialist Committee, was not the paper’s main object as this could be obtained from established daily newspapers.

The extensive space devoted to elections shows that the Society recognised the importance of the political process, although it remained sceptical of the system and scathing of professional politicians. The invective directed at the impending general
election in December 1891 is characteristic: “the rival political champions have had a few preliminary skirmishes in preparation for the big sham fight. We are pleased to see that up to the present they have been playing to empty houses, the workers taking little interest in the farce.” (iss.3). This article set out to expose the way Liberal and Tory politicians were seeking to woo the workers away from Socialism; proposed reforms were dismissed as “electioneering ground bait.” The society was confident that the labour movement would not be diverted from its programme of “complete emancipation.” Such polemic was good knockabout stuff, but did lead to some erroneous conclusions.

In March 1892 the Record could be found trying to extract comfort from news of the defeat, against the trend, of the two progressive candidates in Hammersmith, Johnson and Parris, “both able and eloquent men.” In contrast the “awakening” in London elsewhere was seen as “very largely due to the Socialistic agitation.” Thus the author, signed “SB” for Sam Bullock, adeptly avoids any analysis of the failure in the local area, that had occurred despite the presence of active propagandistic groups like the Society, and instead opts to celebrate a more general trend. This illustrates the principal aim of the news-sheet as being to give encouragement to readers in order to inspire future action.

In July 1892, “JBG,” J. Bruce Glasier, was moved to produce a lengthy commentary on the general election, setting out a clear Socialist position distinct from “our Anarchist friends;” while acknowledging the traditional scepticism regarding “political” action, he stressed that the most important point was “vision” not the “method.” The “progress of Socialist ideas among the mass of the people” finds different expression depending on the circumstances: “Whether these efforts take the form of parliamentary or municipal electioneering, or the form of Labour revolts, or direct attempts at social insurrection, they spring really from the same impulse – a natural desire to do something ‘practical’” (iss.10). It was the Anarchists who were wrong in drawing too fast a distinction between the ballot box and forms of direct action.

The objective of the Society to act as a unifying force to bridge the divisions over tactics among the various Socialist groups was ultimately to fail: the historic separation of the left into reformist and revolutionary factions was to grow, with the party of labour becoming progressively institutionalised into the parliamentary system and those on its left flank pushed to the outer margins. At this early stage in the evolution of the Socialist movement, full of hopes and expectations, that future could not have been anticipated whatever the analytical tools used. However, the belief in an inevitable Socialist future was surely an impediment: Bruce Glasier speaks of the “inevitable outcome of the growth of Socialist sentiment” and holds to the view that “Socialism is progressing marvellously,” assuming that it can only continue in the same way. Employing language reminiscent of religious revivalism, his is a boundless optimism about the future which seems almost impossible to comprehend today. That he eschews divine revelation does not mitigate the impression that this is someone who holds his ideas as if they were a faith. He chastises the “disheartened” ones with the promise of success tomorrow: “we can only feel disheartened if we begin to measure the duration of [Socialism’s] progress with the narrow span of our lives ....”

His New Year message for 1893 continues in the same vein, but with the proviso
that it is the duty of Socialists to redouble their efforts to shape the future: “We are still far from the promised land, and before any further considerable advance can be made there must be much steady, persistent, enthusiastic advocacy and propaganda of Socialism,” (iss.16). By which he means something distinct from the Fabian policy of joining with “Lady and Gentlemen Landlords and Capitalists” he had criticised some issues earlier. The “hypocritical sympathy” of groups like the Women’s Provident and Protective League only incites the “most undemocratic instincts of the workers, ruins their self-reliance, and represses whatever wholesome spirit of militancy and revolt socialist teaching may have awakened in their breasts.” (iss.12). The need to rouse the workers through agitation and education is a constant refrain running through the Record.

The Queen’s Speech comes under the scrutiny of “WM”, William Morris, in February 1893, when the Irish question is singled out for comment: Morris warned Socialists not to give ground taken “when the Irish party was in the heyday of its hopes.” His conclusion, however, is that “Home Rule in any reasonable form should still have our best wishes,” without making any specific suggestions what this “reasonable form” should look like. He ends with a general warning not to trust to “the performance of any government that could possibly be in office.” The “democratic machinery” remains “a committee of the governing classes charged with the office of defending privilege” (iss.17).

Ireland, a traditional concern of the left until the present day, was not the only topical theme on which Morris expressed an opinion; in April 1893 he selected crime and the law. His arguments on the place of the prison in society have a particularly modern resonance. Morris enunciates the basic liberal case against retributory punishment (“jails are nothing less than nurseries of crime”) and argues for what today would be called rehabilitation; offenders who “have put themselves out of society should have a chance of regaining their place in it.” This might be achieved by prisoners “working hard and usefully in prison” in preparation for “useful labour” on release. Morris sees this as the “only real alternative to the Medieval idea of divine revenge on sin,” which incidentally shows once again that he was not blind to the faults of the Middle Ages.

Morris, as a Socialist, does not finish with this, however; the rehabilitation model of prison system is unworkable under the present system of social inequality because, he says, “the prisoners with hope before them would be in a better position than a vast part of our labouring population not in prison, and with no hope before them.” This is a dilemma modern reformers are still entrapped in and it is the basis for popular criticisms of the mild treatment of offenders. Morris has another insight that strikes at the heart of penal policy: people have no “terror” of prison because their daily lives are so hard. On this the Hammersmith Socialists would have parted company with their fellow Socialists in the Fabian Society who were busy drawing up reform measures for immediate implementation.

Morris contributes one of the most effective pieces of Socialist propaganda to the issue of February 1892; it is effective because written in Morris’s simple, unobtrusive literary style and it is based on direct observation. It is reminiscent of Orwell’s Socialist journalism in its subject matter, but without any hint of Orwell’s contempt for the working classes. It is worth quoting at length because it says a lot about the Society’s outlook and its relationship with the masses:
In a shop window in King Street, Hammersmith, may be seen the notice, ‘For the sons of toil, margarine at 8d per pound.’ We would ask the workers in Hammersmith to consider the meaning of this choice little advertisement. To us it means that the idlers, that is to say, the well-to-do people, who are dependent on the workers for every scrap of food they eat, and every shred of clothing they wear, have eaten all the good butter, and now invite the toilers to satisfy themselves with a cheap and nasty substitute.

Here, quite an effective polemic is made out of such a small incident; one can almost imagine Morris walking down King Street, looking in the shop window and becoming enraged by what he saw.

Another aspect of piecemeal social reform came in for criticism from Bruce Glasier writing on proposals for giving assistance to the poor and unemployed. One charge that could never be levelled at the Society was philistinism; however, despite this reputation Glasier writes dismissively of aesthetic provision for the poor. He criticises those advocating “Socialistic” policies like art galleries, concerts, libraries, and free education because they usually ignore the simpler “bodily needs” of the workers: “If Communism is good for the mind, it is good for the body.” (iss.14)

The final issue of the Record, its twenty-first, appeared in June 1893 and contained a report from “AS,” Andreas Scheu, on the May Day demonstrations across the world. Scheu contrasts the British event unfavourably with what had occurred on the Continent, especially Austria and Germany: “The May Day celebration in these islands is not yet what it ought to be, and what it must become soon, if we are not to fall back behind the fast advancing columns of our Continental comrades.” There was a debate over whether to hold May Day on the first of May or the first Sunday in the month; Scheu comes down in favour of May the first, and “the day all over Europe (at least) as a simultaneous expression of the will of the organised workers.” Resolutions were proposed at the demonstration; the French had proposed “universal peace”, and Scheu wanted to make a typical Hammersmith Socialist proposal: “the establishment of a Socialist Co-operative Commonwealth for art, song and joy to the life of all ...” With this lofty declaration of European unity the Record ceased to appear.