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Socialist antisemitism and its discontents in England, 1884–98

SATNAM VIRDEE

ABSTRACT Virdee's essay explores the relationship between English socialists and migrant Jews amid the new unionism of the late nineteenth century: a cycle of protest characterized by sustained collective action by the unskilled and labouring poor demanding economic and social justice. Reading this labour history against the grain, with a greater attentiveness to questions of race *and* class, helps to make more transparent both the prevalence and structuring force of socialist antisemitism, as well as English and Jewish socialist opposition to it. In particular, the essay suggests that the dominant socialist discourse was intimately bound up with questions of national belonging and this directly contributed to a racialized politics of class that could not imagine migrant Jews as an integral component of the working class. At the same time, such socialist antisemitism was also challenged by a minority current of English Marxists whose conceptions of socialism refused to be limited by the narrow boundaries of the racialized nation-state. And they were joined in this collective action by autonomous Jewish socialist organizations who understood that the liberation of the Jewish worker was indivisible from that of the emancipation of the working class in general. With the help of Eleanor Marx and others, these latter strands entangled socialist politics with questions of combatting antisemitism, and thereby stretched existing conceptions of class to encompass the Jewish worker.

KEYWORDS antisemitism, Ben Tillett, class, Eleanor Marx, England, Jews, race, Social Democratic Federation, socialism, Socialist League

This essay explores the relationship between English socialists and Jews amid the new unionism of the late nineteenth century: a cycle of protest characterized by sustained collective action by the unskilled and labouring poor demanding economic and social justice. The new unionism not only heralded the birth of the modern trade union movement, it also contributed greatly to the political awakening of social forces that eventually went on to establish the Labour Party. What is perhaps less well known is that, temporally, Jewish migration from the Russian Empire coincided with this working-class revolt, and, spatially, the epicentre of this so-called 'revolt of

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the residuum' of late Victorian England—the East End of London—was precisely where the migrant Jews overwhelmingly settled. Between 1881 and 1914, it is estimated that the Jewish population increased from 60,000 to approximately 300,000 with almost a third settling in East London.¹

Despite these intersecting histories of labour revolt and Jewish migration, one would be hard pressed to discover any systematic assessment of the socialist and trade union response towards the Jewish population conducted by the first-wave of labour historians. They were certainly aware of the Jewish presence. E. P. Thompson, for example, mentions in passing how London's East End saw 'deposit after deposit of refugees and immigrant workers',² while Eric Hobsbawm makes reference to 'some localised anti-Jewish feeling' around 1900 but fails significantly to identify any conflict amid the new unionism.³ Instead, what emerges from this and a much broader layer of 'race-blind' socialist-inflected labour historiography is a near unanimity that the working class was re-made in this period.⁴ Such an impression was already emergent in the actual moment of the new unionism when no less a person than Friedrich Engels could speak in glowing terms about how the working class had finally woken from its forty-year slumber: 'The grandchildren of the Chartists stepping into the line of battle.'⁵ More than seventy years later, a latter-day Marxist like Eric Hobsbawm could still confidently characterize this period as one marked by a 'recrudescence of a revolutionary utopianism'.⁶

While there is undoubtedly much of value in this labour history, particularly the emphasis laid on working-class agency, one is struck at the same time by the failure of such historians to acknowledge the ethnic diversity within the working class in England, and to consider the structuring force of antisemitism, and also how such antisemitism was understood and combatted by Jewish socialists as well as by other parts of the English socialist movement. Recent scholarship—more attentive to questions of race *and* class—has demonstrated that the very success of the new unionism lay in the capacity

- 1 Joanna Bourke, *Working Class Cultures in Britain, 1890–1960* (London and New York: Routledge 1994), 195–6.
- 2 E. P. Thompson, 'The peculiarities of the English', *Socialist Register*, vol. 2, 1965, 311–62 (347).
- 3 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The forward march of Labour halted', *Marxism Today*, September 1978, 279–86 (283).
- 4 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Trade union history', *Economic History Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1967, 358–64; Keith Laybourn, 'The failure of socialist unity in Britain c.1893–1914', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 4, 1994, 153–75; Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, 'State and society, 1880–1930', in Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz (eds), *Crises in the British State, 1880–1930* (London: Hutchinson 1985), 7–32.
- 5 Friedrich Engels, 'May 4 in London', *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 23 May 1890, available on the *Marxists Internet Archive* website at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/05/23.htm (viewed 26 April 2017).
- 6 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, quoted approvingly in Hobsbawm, 'Trade union history', 359.

of its socialist leadership to suppress and reject anti-Irish Catholic racism, a modality of racism that had sedimented itself within British society, including parts of the working class, in the mid-Victorian period.⁷ Equally significant was the agency of the Irish Catholic-descended working class who utilized their ethnic ties to strengthen class-based solidarity, a process clearly in evidence amid the unemployed demonstrations of 1886, the matchgirls' strike of 1888 and the dockers' strike in East London in 1889.⁸

Following in the vein of these recent attempts to stretch the concept of class and thereby bring into view both the ethnic diversity of the working class in England and the significance of racism and anti-racism within it, in this essay I explore the extent to which those accounts of the working class offered by Hobsbawm and others are further unsettled when we insert the migrant Jewish worker into the narrative of the new unionism. I do this by bringing the body of work produced by William Fishman,⁹ Joseph Buckman,¹⁰ Steve Cohen,¹¹ John Garrard,¹² and other historians of the Jewish working class into critical dialogue with this wave of 'race-blind' labour history of the new unionism. At the same time, while Fishman and others helped rescue the Jewish working-class presence from the condescension of posterity, they failed to unsettle the dominant reading of this period in large part because of their tendency to dis-embed and thereby detach such accounts from the narrative of ongoing working-class struggles for economic and social justice. As a result, their accounts can sometimes be interpreted as representing a kind of 'add-on' to mainstream labour history, so that, while deserving of mention, they are nevertheless assumed to leave untouched the broad contours and principal coordinates of English working-class development of this period as defined by that earlier generation of historians.

By exploring this period of crisis and working-class insurgency through a focus on the relationship between socialist activists and the migrant Jewish working class, I assess what additional analytic insights are accrued. In particular, I will investigate how pervasive antisemitism was among leading English socialists and their political formations. To what extent did such

7 Satnam Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), 33–47.

8 Louise Raw, *Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and Their Place in History* (London and New York: Continuum 2009); Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*.

9 William J. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals 1875–1914* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications 2004); William J. Fishman, *East End 1888* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications 2005).

10 Joseph Buckman, 'Alien working-class response: the Leeds Jewish tailors, 1880–1914', in Ken Lunn (ed.), *Hosts, Immigrants and Minorities: Historical Responses to Newcomers in British Society, 1870–1914* (Folkestone: Dawson 1980), 222–62.

11 Steve Cohen, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Anti-Semitic* (Leeds: Beyond the Pale Collective 1984).

12 John A. Garrard, 'Test for socialists: English workers and Jewish immigration, 1880–1910', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1970, 18–22.

socialist antisemitism acquire its force from the entanglement of questions of economic and social justice for the working class with those of national belonging? How did Jewish and English socialists challenge antisemitism, and what ideological perspectives animated such responses? And, finally, to what extent does situating the experiences of the Jewish working class within English labour history help to reshape conventional accounts of the making and unmaking of the English working class in this period?

Socialism, antisemitism and working-class schisms amid the new unionism

Between the late Victorian era of the 1880s and 1890s and the end of the First World War, British society underwent a series of crises contributing to a deep rupture and discontinuity in the country's social and political development. These crises, arising initially from the fall-out from the Long Depression and the subsequent emergence of new social forces, such as the suffragette and Irish Home Rule movements, marked the beginning of the end for liberalism: not just of the Liberal Party but of liberalism as a political philosophy underpinned by the idea of 'the sovereign individual in civil society, with his [*sic*] right to property and to his liberties of action and movement'.¹³

It was precisely at this moment of social and political indeterminacy that the organized labour movement was born.¹⁴ Beginning with the large demonstrations against unemployment in 1886 and 1887, followed in quick succession by the 1888 strike by young women at the Bryant and May match factory in Bow, East London, and culminating in the great dock strike of 1889, this period was characterized by an insurgency of the 'lowest of the low' in the hierarchy of labour, the 'unrespectable' and the unskilled. This cycle of protest would help expand the trade union movement beyond its traditional preserve of skilled craft workers. Significantly, it was socialists—women and men like Eleanor Marx, Annie Besant, William Morris, Will Thorne, Ben Tillet, John Burns and Tom Mann among others—organized in the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the Socialist League (SL) and, later, in the Independent Labour Party (ILP)—who would play a formative role in shaping this social movement.¹⁵ Recent scholarship has also helpfully demonstrated that critical to the formation and eventual success of such collective action was the solidarity that was forged between workers of English Protestant and Irish Catholic descent: a notable achievement given the prevalence of anti-Irish Catholic racism in Victorian society.¹⁶ But to what extent was such solidarity extended to the migrant Jews from the Russian Empire who

13 Hall and Schwarz, 'State and society, 1880–1930', 10.

14 Eric Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1984).

15 *Ibid.*

16 Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*.

settled in the epicentre of the new unionism in East London as well as in Manchester and Leeds?

If the migrant Jewish population were hoping they had found a safe haven in which to craft lives free from the threat of antisemitism, they were to be sorely disillusioned. Instead, what they found was not refuge from such persecution but rather a related form of antisemitism tailored specifically to English conditions. From the outset, the reaction of parts of the local East End English population towards them was defined by an explicit animosity such that even the police were forced to concede the 'existence of exclusion zones, which Jews entered at their peril'.¹⁷ Morris Winchevsky, a Lithuanian Jew born in 1856 and editor of *Poilishe Yidl*—the first Yiddish-language socialist journal in Britain—and someone who was remarkably attentive to the corrosive effects of antisemitism, evocatively captures the visceral hatred some English workers felt towards the new arrivals.

Go any Sabbath afternoon to Whitechapel and stand for a few moments in a doorway near where some English workers lounge with their pipes in their mouths, and you will hear, every time a Jew passes by, the loving call 'Bloody Jew!' Is this a token of love?¹⁸

He continues:

... in Brick Lane you will often see dolled-up Jewish women, girls with golden rings on their fingers sitting outside in the street. Look in the eyes of the passing Englishmen and can't you discern the look—which is already half indicative of a pogrom? ... A pogrom in Brick Lane, in the crossroads of Commercial Road can be a more bloody and terrible affair than one in the Baltic.¹⁹

Such everyday hostility combined with language differences and a lack of factory experience forced many of the migrant Jews into sweated trades like tailoring as well as bakeries, cabinet-making and hawking. The small workshops in which such sweated trades undertook their work were 'usually built in the yard or garden behind the dwelling house, sometimes connected with and sometimes detached from the house'.²⁰ 'The overall picture was a cut-throat struggle for existence.'²¹ Their employment in such trades at significantly lower rates of pay helped to further accentuate English working-class hostility,²² particularly among those who worked in comparable trades,

17 David Englander, 'Booth's Jews: the presentation of Jews and Judaism in "Life and Labour of the People in London"', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1989, 551–71 (564).

18 Winchevsky, quoted in Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals*, 90.

19 Winchevsky, quoted in *ibid.*, 90–1.

20 Beatrice Webb, quoted in *ibid.*, 44.

21 *Ibid.*, 45.

22 James Schmiechen, *Sweated Industries and Sweated Labour: The London Clothing Trades, 1860–1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1984).

leading them to complain 'that a major economic problem in this area, that of sweating, was related to the "swarms of foreign Jews" who had "invaded the East End" and turned it into a sweater's paradise'.²³

Rather than challenge such discourses, many of the socialist leaders of the newly established general unions helped shape and give coherence to such antisemitism such that older religiously inflected antisemitic representations of Jews as 'Christ-killers' and 'usurers' were incrementally and unevenly overlain by an emergent set of representations that came to associate the Jewish worker with the economic and social degradation of the English working class. Ben Tillett, a socialist leader who was instrumental in forging a solidarity between English and Irish Catholic dockworkers in the East End of London, could not extend the hand of friendship to the newly arrived East European Jews. Instead, he claimed:

The influx of continental pauperism aggravates and multiplies the number of ills which press so heavily on us ... Foreigners come to London in large numbers, herd together in habitations unfit for beasts, the sweating system allowing the more grasping and shrewd a life of comparative ease in superintending their work.²⁴

Such attempts by prominent socialist activists to associate the migrant Jewish worker with undesirable living conditions and poor terms and conditions of employment helped legitimize demands for controlling such immigration. The Trades Union Congress (TUC)—at this point, still largely the representative of respectable working-class opinion—followed suit, noting in 1888 that 'it was the duty of the trades to keep the matter of Jewish migration under close consideration'.²⁵ And such organized opposition was by no means unique with forty-three unions condemning unrestricted Jewish immigration, and the newly established dockers' union led by Tillett himself at the head of this movement.

In the minds of Tillett and other socialists, the migrant Jews came to be understood, not as an super-exploited stratum of the working class, but as an alien body, antithetical to English working-class interests and responsible for undermining their terms and conditions of living. This ideological positioning of the Jew as an anti-working-class figure was further consolidated when it came to entwine with another emergent set of representations of the Jew as capitalist exploiter *par excellence*. *Justice*—the main newspaper of the Social Democratic Federation—regularly represented the 'Jewish financier' as the archetypal 'international capitalist'.²⁶ And this trope was consistently drawn on by Henry Hyndman—founder and leader of the SDF—who

23 Colin Holmes, *John Bull's Island: Immigration and British Society, 1871–1971* (London and New York: Routledge 1988), 68.

24 Tillett, quoted in Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals*, 77.

25 TUC, quoted in Buckman, 'Alien working-class response', 223.

26 Garrard, 'Test for socialists', 20.

saw the capitalist Jew in almost demonic terms, lying at the centre of ‘a sinister “gold international” destined one day to be locked in mortal conflict with the “red international” of socialism’.²⁷ Hyndman, along with his closest associates, consistently identified Jews with the universal domination of money and savagely caricatured all aspects of Jewish life whether in England or abroad. When antisemitic riots broke out in Vienna in 1885, Hyndman quickly condoned them, denouncing instead the corrupting influence of Jewish finance capital throughout the world. In the dominant socialist imaginary of English society, the Jews were caught in a double-bind that discursively represented them simultaneously as capitalist parasites and sweated labour: both antithetical to working-class interests, and therefore the socialist project of progressive social change in England.

Forging cultures of solidarity: the Socialist League and Jewish universalists

Against the racializing socialist nationalism of much of the Social Democratic Federation leadership, there also emerged an influential current of socialist opinion in the form of the Socialist League (SL) that extended the hand of solidarity to the Jewish worker during the second half of the 1880s. The SL—comprising Marxists and anarchists coexisting in a tense coalition—was deeply committed to an anti-racist politics of socialist internationalism. In large part, this commitment had been forged in opposition to the dominant current of socialist nationalist politics in the SDF. Most of the League’s leadership, including William Morris, Eleanor Marx, Belfort Bax and Edward Aveling, had originally been members of the SDF but had quickly determined to leave due to the production of a ceaseless racializing nationalist discourse by the SDF leader Henry Hyndman and Harry Quelch, editor of the party newspaper *Justice*. Such racism was integral to the politics of the SDF. As early as 1882, when it was still the Democratic Federation, it had passed a resolution advanced by Hyndman that committed it to opposing Chinese immigration to Britain on the grounds that the Chinese ‘always remained a distinct race wherever they went. They could swamp us industrially and crowd us out of almost every occupation.’²⁸

Significantly, Hyndman wasn’t averse to racializing members who sat on the SDF executive council, including Eleanor Marx, youngest daughter of Karl, and a highly accomplished socialist activist in her own right. While conceding that the ‘power of her work was inexhaustible’ amid the new unionism and that ‘she was extremely valuable to the cause’, Hyndman deployed some of the emergent language of scientific racism to characterize Eleanor as having

27 Claire Hirshfield, ‘The British left and the “Jewish conspiracy”’: a case study of modern antisemitism’, *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, 1981, 95–112 (97).

28 Quoted in Michael Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation* (Keele: Ryburn Publishing 1994), 33.

‘inherited in her nose and mouth the Jewish type from Marx himself’.²⁹ Such racist antisemitism could not but antagonize those like William Morris and Belfort Bax along with Eleanor herself for whom ‘socialism and internationalism were synonymous’.³⁰ When matters came to a head between the internationalist and nationalist factions, it was the former who secured a narrow majority. However, as Eleanor ruefully noted: ‘Our majority was too small to make it possible for us to really get rid of the Jingo faction.’³¹ In a letter Eleanor wrote to Wilhelm Liebknecht—one of the founders and leaders of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD, German Social Democratic Party)—in the aftermath of the split in December 1884, she made explicit the grounds for the separation with the SDF and the subsequent formation of the SL: ‘... one of our chief points of conflict with Hyndman is that whereas we wish to make this a really international movement, Mr Hyndman whenever he could do with impunity has endeavoured to set English workmen against foreigners.’³²

Stepped by these earlier battles within the fledgling socialist movement, the SL gave no quarter to antisemitism or racism. Their conception of socialism refused to be limited by the narrow boundaries of the nation-state, seeking instead to transgress those boundaries by extending solidarity to a global working class that included ‘Aborigines, Maoris, American Indians and black people everywhere’.³³ In the pages of their newspaper *Commonweal*, they regularly confronted the racializing nationalist discourse of their fellow socialists in the SDF and accused them of squandering the opportunity to make common cause with Jewish workers: ‘Are we then to allow the issues at stake in the struggle between the robbers and the robbed to be obscured by anti-foreigner agitation?’³⁴ When the SDF called for immigration controls against Jewish migrants on the grounds that they were undermining the living standards of the English working class, *Commonweal* deployed humour to highlight the absurdity of such demands. It joked how, with an Aliens Act in force,

we may safely assume that poverty in the British Isles will soon be a thing of the past! ... How easy and well to do the lives of the East End workmen and work-women would then become all of a sudden ... To Ireland, the poor foreign Jews have, as yet, not penetrated ... hence, the standard of the Irish peasants and workers is an almost ideal one.³⁵

In its manifesto, drafted jointly by Morris and Bax in 1885, the SL boldly set out its position to the working class of England:

29 Hyndman, quoted in Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx: The Crowded Years, 1884–1898* (London: Virago 1979), 58.

30 Hyndman, quoted in *ibid.*, 55.

31 Eleanor Marx, quoted in *ibid.*, 61.

32 Eleanor Marx, quoted in Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation*, 38.

33 Quoted in Cohen, *That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Anti-Semitic*, 22.

34 *Commonweal*, quoted in *ibid.*

35 *Commonweal*, quoted in Garrard, ‘Test for socialists’, 19.

We come before you as a body advocating the principles of Revolutionary International Socialism; that is, we seek a change in the basis of Society—a change which would destroy the distinctions of classes and nationalities. ... The Socialist League therefore aims at the realisation of complete Revolutionary Socialism, and well knows that this can never happen in any one country without the help of the workers of all civilisation. For us neither geographical boundaries, political history, race, nor creed makes rivals or enemies; for us there are no nations, but only varied masses of workers and friends, whose mutual sympathies are checked or perverted by groups of masters and fleecers whose interests it is to stir up rivalries and hatreds between dwellers in different lands.³⁶

Furthermore, the League's *Constitution and Rules* contained the following important statement: "That all societies and individuals adhering to the Socialist League "shall acknowledge Truth, Justice, and Morality as the basis of their conduct towards each other and towards all men, without regard to colour, creed, or nationality".³⁷

While such rhetorical solidarity must have been warmly welcomed by the recently arrived Jewish community, what has been less well noted by those working in the fields of labour and social history is how such a standpoint aligned neatly with the politics of socialist internationalism that had been crafted independently by those of Jewish descent in opposition to the cauldron of hate perpetuated by the tsarist regime in Russia. In 1876, almost a decade prior to the publication of the Socialist League manifesto and its attempt to develop an emancipatory class project that transcended national and racial boundaries, Aron Lieberman—a Jew born in Russia in 1849—had co-founded the first Jewish socialist organization in England, the Agudah Hasozialistim Chaverim (HSU, Hebrew Socialist Union).³⁸ While its immediate aim was to unionize Jewish workers in the Whitechapel area of East London, the HSU's emancipatory vision was informed by a commitment to an anti-capitalist politics that determined that the liberation of Jews was indivisible from the liberation of humanity, and it was therefore beholden on Jews to play an active part in this universalist quest.

While we Jews are a part of humanity, we cannot achieve personal liberation except through that of all men [*sic*]. ... And as the workers of Europe and America have already joined together in various organisations to rouse the dispossessed ... so we Jewish sons bind ourselves to this noble alliance ... This our comrades understand to be true and correct, the supreme arbiter of their relationship with each other and other people, notwithstanding colour, race or creed.³⁹

36 William Morris and Belfort Bax, *The Manifesto of the Socialist League* (London: Socialist League 1885), 1–2.

37 The Socialist League, *Constitution and Rules* (London: Socialist League 1885), 2.

38 Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals*, 103–4.

39 Lieberman's Hebrew Socialist Union statutes, quoted in *ibid.*, 104–5.

Lieberman, in a letter to Jewish youth in 1876, contended:

Everyone is preparing for battle, the proletariat is organising to shake off the yoke of capital and of tyranny ... It is time for our proletarians to join this great endeavor, to win back what the exploiters of our own people have stripped from them ... Human fraternization knows no division into peoples and tribes, it knows only about useful workers and exploiters that spread misery. It is against these that working people must begin to struggle.⁴⁰

Cultures of solidarity were carefully cultivated through the establishment of an infrastructure comprising newspapers and meeting places. The indefatigable Morris Winchevsky, who founded *Poilishe Yidl* in 1884, had gone on to establish *Arbeiter Frint* (Worker's Friend) a year later.⁴¹ The Berners Street club served as a hub for socialists of diverse nationalities, including Russian, Jewish, British, French, Italian and Polish, to debate the most appropriate strategies for the realization of a socialist society.⁴² Harold Kaplansky, a Jewish socialist who attended the fifth anniversary event of the Berners Street club in June 1890, recalled:

William Morris opened the meeting with a brief but informative speech ... He praised the club for its endless dedication and observed that the English comrades could take an example from it. The Jewish immigrants had not come to England for fun, but were driven here by despotism and discrimination, with the tragic experience of leaving their homeland and arriving with the hope of finding a quieter and humane life. Instead, they found the terrible sweating system. New troubles began for them, and they sank in to further depths of despair until the International Working Men's Club brought renewed hope to the hearts of Jewish workers—the holy message of Socialism.⁴³

Such bonds forged between English and Jewish socialists in the early years of the new unionism helped actualize cultures of solidarity in practice. Significantly, the SL leadership of William Morris, Eleanor Marx and others served as a bridgehead between the English working class and its Jewish fraction, and this was reflected in Jewish involvement in demonstrations by the unemployed in 1886 and 1887.⁴⁴ Jewish solidarity action was also important in

40 English translation, quoted in Mario Kessler, 'Engels' position on anti-Semitism in the context of contemporary socialist discussions', *Science and Society*, vol. 62, no. 1, 1998, 127–44 (139).

41 I am not suggesting that this current of socialist internationalism was hegemonic among migrant Jews in this period but rather that it coexisted alongside the more well-known attachment to liberalism; see, for example, David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jew: Social Relations and Political Culture 1840–1914* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press 1994).

42 Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals*, 153–4.

43 Kaplansky, quoted in *ibid.*, 193.

44 *Ibid.*, 164.

the course of the pivotal dispute of the new unionism: the Great Dock Strike of 1889. When the strike committee of the dockers called for industrial action across London, Jewish socialists like Lewis Lyons and Woolf Wess actively campaigned alongside Eleanor Marx, William Morris and others to promote solidarity action among the Jewish tailors.⁴⁵ Posters in Yiddish and English appeared in street stalls and a special edition of the *Arbeiter Fraint* urged its readers to back the call for strike action. William Fishman notes: 'From the first walk out on 2 September to the third week of the strike over 6,000 hands had quit work and 120 workshops were known to lie idle.'⁴⁶

Buoyed by the success of the dockworkers strike in the East End of London, the new unionism began to diffuse rapidly throughout the main urban areas of England. And alongside their support for the self-organized struggles of Jewish tailors and garment workers in Leeds, members of the SL also came to campaign for an industrial unionism that would unify all workers—including Jews—into one big union. In particular, they determined that having the power to call out other groups of workers in solidarity would help strengthen the bargaining power of the Jewish tailors. In 1890 an amalgamation took place between the tailors' and the gasworkers' union in Leeds, whose leaders included important SL activists like Tom Maguire and William Cockayne. Drawing on this new-found strength, they, along with Jewish activists, set about bringing the hours and pay of Jewish workers into line with English workers. In August 1890, when the employers rejected a union circular calling for a uniform working day for all workers, the tailors took strike action. Supported by the gasworkers, the tailors quickly won their demands. 'Within a few days, fifteen masters had conceded a uniform working day', which was quickly 'followed by a further twenty-six during the next week'.⁴⁷

Five strikes in Manchester in the tobacco, tailoring, cabinet, boot- and garment-making industries involving English, Irish and Jewish workers drew attention to the influential role played by Jewish and socialist activists in organizing this collective action.⁴⁸ Bill Williams, summarizing the relationship between organized labour and Jewish workers in Manchester at this time, claims there were

... no signs of hostility to Jewish workers amongst English trade unionists during 1889–90: on the contrary, it was in the interests of the English labour movement to support Jewish workers in a 'levelling-up' of conditions in the workshop trades. This strategy was ... the outcome of the general state of trade union development in England.⁴⁹

45 Ibid., 170.

46 Ibid., 171.

47 Buckman, 'Alien working-class response', 234.

48 Bill Williams, 'The beginnings of Jewish trade unionism in Manchester, 1889–1891', in Lunn (ed.), *Hosts, Immigrants and Minorities*, 263–307.

49 Ibid., 290.

In April 1890, when '[s]ome English workmen ... refused to work in certain shops with Jewish workmen', it was a member of the SL who gave the assurance that 'steps would be taken to stop such ill-natured action' and that as trade unionists 'the Jews have acted most loyally'.⁵⁰ In August 1890, when the growing brutality of Russian antisemitism brought a new wave of refugees to England's shores, it was Eleanor Marx who spoke at meetings welcoming their arrival. And when workers demanded an eight-hour day at the Second May Day on 3 May 1891, she helped draw in 'a large sprinkling of Jewish immigrants'.⁵¹ Another dimension of her work was with Jewish women in the East End of London where she spoke at meetings of the United Ladies Tailors' Association and encouraged the women to 'combine with their menfolk ... [and] appealed for unity between English and Jewish workers in the fight against a single enemy, capitalism'.⁵²

The interventions of socialist activists like Eleanor Marx during these years offered a glimpse into a different way of advancing collective working-class interests that rejected antisemitism and instead re-imagined Jewish workers as an integral component of the English (and global) working class. In doing so, they helped to stretch the language and politics of class in England and helped forge a fragile but nevertheless real multi-ethnic class solidarity. The late 1880s and early 1890s represented the apotheosis of this current of socialist internationalism in the English socialist movement and it was members of the Socialist League, including its various offshoots like the Bloomsbury Socialist Society, and Jewish socialists who played a formative role in uniting English and Jewish workers in a common struggle for social and economic justice.

The internationalist thread unravels: Eleanor Marx and Engels in an age of working-class defeat and rising socialist antisemitism

Tragically, the Socialist League's reach never extended beyond particular occupations in cities like Leeds, Manchester and parts of East London. In part, this was because their anti-racist internationalist standpoint was unable to acquire hegemony in the emergent socialist movement. The majority of socialists remained firmly wedded to a politics of socialist nationalism that sought to locate demands for working-class economic and social justice on the ideological terrain of the nation. While their conceptions of national belonging were undoubtedly broader than those forged by the elites at the time, this expanded imaginary was never sufficiently broad to encompass the Jewish migrant. Indeed, one could argue that this larger understanding of national belonging gained growing legitimacy among all sections of society, but especially the unskilled working class, precisely because it was able to portray elite

50 Quoted in Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, 514.

51 *Ibid.*, 475.

52 *Ibid.*, 519.

conceptions of national belonging as unjust due to their exclusion of those like themselves who were English and therefore deserving of fair and equal treatment. In that sense, the migrant Jewish worker served as a useful foil in making the case both to the elites, and themselves, about who was English and who was not. As a result, throughout the new unionism, socialist nationalist support for Jewish workers remained lukewarm at best, and was shaped fundamentally by a pragmatic, instrumental collectivism that recognized the need to curtail expressions of antisemitism only because it risked fatally undermining the broader class solidarity forged in opposition to the employers over the course of the new unionism. In this sense, their solidarity with the migrant Jew was strategic, not moral or ethical, and was principally born of a rational calculation of the costs and benefits of multi-ethnic solidarity. Typical of such a Machiavellian standpoint was Ben Tillett, the dockers' leader who, when referring to the Jewish workers engaged in collective action declared: 'yes, you are our brothers and we will stand by you. But we wish you had not come.'⁵³

Consequently, an uncomfortable tension over the 'Jewish question' would scar relations between socialist internationalists like William Morris and Eleanor Marx and those socialist nationalists like Ben Tillett and John Burns throughout the course of the new unionism. Even amidst the highpoint of the new unionism strike wave, antisemitism would sometimes resurface, suggesting that the attempts to stretch the concept of class to encompass Jewish workers was always fragile and that it was just as likely to spring back to its more usual racializing form. In May and June 1891, Ben Tillett and Tom Mann sent letters to the *London Evening News* demanding the imposition of immigration controls against Jews. Tillett used this opportunity to formulate a proto-fascist discourse that not only called for the removal of Jewish workers from British soil, but blamed the failure of Britain's ruling class to stand up to the power of the Jewish bankers for the current plight of the British worker: 'Our leading statesmen do not care to offend the great banking houses or money kings ... For heavens' sake, give us back our own countrymen and take from us your motley multitude.'⁵⁴

As far as Tillett was concerned, the Jewish capitalists had manipulated the British government into avoiding the introduction of immigration controls thereby allowing migrant Jewish workers to undercut the wages and conditions of English labour. What we find here is the figure of the Jew caught in an emergent antisemitic double-bind in which the migrant Jew becomes a Trojan horse purposefully deployed by Jewish capitalists with the intention of undermining the living standards of the English worker. In this antisemitic vision, socialism, as imagined by Tillett and other socialist nationalists, becomes an ideology enveloped in antisemitism. And it would lead to some deeply unsavoury alliances between such socialist activists and well-known

53 Tillett, quoted in Monty Meth, *Brothers to All Men?* (London: Runnymede Trust 1972), 5.

54 Tillett, quoted in Cohen, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Anti-Semitic*, 28.

Conservative and imperialist antisemites like Arnold White.⁵⁵ Similarly, in late 1891, in Keir Hardie's newspaper, *Labour Leader*, was printed the astonishing claim that imperialist wars were being planned to suit the interests of Jewish finance: 'Wherever there is trouble in Europe, wherever rumours of war circulate and men's minds are distraught with fear and change and calamity, you may be sure that a hook-nosed Rothschild is at his games somewhere near the region of the disturbances.'⁵⁶

The septuagenarian Friedrich Engels, who at first had been so heartened by the re-emergence of the working class as a collective social force was now outraged at the deployment of such antisemitism by English socialists to effectively cover up their own failure to organize the great mass of the labouring poor in one big union: 'The dockers are on the verge of collapse' and, as part of this retreat, 'they are making one mistake after another', including 'raising an outcry against the immigration of foreign paupers (Russian Jews)'.⁵⁷ Engels' growing sensitivity to the question of socialist antisemitism was both remarkable and recent. Earlier in his life, he himself had been guilty of reproducing elements of what Roman Rosdolsky memorably termed 'the infantile disease of the workers movement'.⁵⁸ In fact, until he witnessed the appearance of socialist antisemitism amid the new unionism, Engels had been incapable of imagining its prevalence among a western European proletariat because of his understanding that it was a residual leftover of pre-capitalist social formations.⁵⁹

There can be little doubt that it was Eleanor Marx that played the decisive role in transforming his understanding of antisemitism in later life. We have already seen how she was instrumental among the English socialists in stretching the language and politics of class to accommodate migrant Jewish workers as an integral component of the working class in England. Over the course of her involvement in the new unionism, she also increasingly frequented the Berners Street socialist club and immersed herself in Jewish cultural life in the East End of London. Indeed, her growing contact with migrant Jewish workers seems to have sparked a greater attentiveness to her own partly Jewish heritage. According to Eduard Bernstein—the German Jewish leader of the SPD—not only did Eleanor Marx begin to learn Yiddish in her thirties she also started to open her speeches to the workers of the East End with the words 'I am a Jewess'.⁶⁰ Further, when Woolf Wess—a leading Jewish

55 David Cesarani, 'An alien concept? The continuity of anti-alienism in British society before 1940', *Immigrants and Minorities*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1992, 24–52.

56 Quoted in Cohen, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Anti-Semitic*, 20.

57 Friedrich Engels, 'Engels to Friedrich Adolph Sorge', 9–11 August 1891, extracts available on the *Marxists Internet Archive* website at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1891/letters/91_08_11.htm (accessed 28 March 2016).

58 Rosdolsky, quoted in Kessler, 'Engels' position on anti-Semitism in the context of contemporary socialist discussions', 130.

59 Kessler, 'Engels' position on anti-Semitism in the context of contemporary socialist discussions', 142.

60 Eleanor Marx, quoted in Silberner, 'Friedrich Engels and the Jews', 340; see also Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, 510.

socialist—invited her to speak at an event in October 1890 called to protest the persecution of Jews in Russia she wrote: ‘Dear Comrade, I shall be very glad to speak at the meeting ... the more glad, that my father was a Jew.’⁶¹ She later confided to the socialist historian Max Beer that she was the only member of her family ‘to be drawn to Jewish people ... My happiest moments are when I am in the East End amidst Jewish workpeople.’⁶²

Eleanor Marx has been described by her biographer Yvonne Kapp as a ‘bred-in-the-bone internationalist’.⁶³ But hers was not an abstract internationalism; rather, Eleanor Marx’s vision of universal emancipation was forged from highly particularist soil that comprised her self-awakening as a Jew combined with her deep commitment to a socialist politics of working-class uplift and an alluring self-belief that life could be so much more beautiful for humankind than it presently was. Out of this set of entangled concrete and Utopian identifications emerged a powerful understanding that the fate of the Jews was bound up with, and dependent on, working-class emancipation because, according to her understanding, it was only united working-class action that could undermine the antisemitism that had infected the English socialist movement, and so move that class collectively towards its goal of a post-capitalist society. It was to lead her to confide to Jewish socialist Abram Cahan: ‘We Jews have a special duty to work for the working class.’⁶⁴ And it was precisely this dialectical understanding of the pathway to universal human liberation that would persuade Engels to reject racist antisemitism. Or, as Edmund Silberner makes clear, Eleanor Marx, by insisting on her own Jewish origins, and ‘by reporting to Engels on her experience with the Jewish labor movement, drew his attention to the Jews, and thus contributed ... to his reorientation in the Jewish question’.⁶⁵ The impact on Engels in his final years was such that he became a vocal opponent of socialist antisemitism, so much so that that he would declare defiantly to anyone that cared to listen that, ‘if given the choice, I’d as gladly be a Jew as a “Herr von”!’⁶⁶ As Silberner would later comment: ‘Once freed from many, if not all, prejudices against them, he fought antisemitism more consistently and courageously than many a socialist, Gentile or Jew.’⁶⁷

Tragically, the direction of events was to turn against Eleanor Marx and Engels’s increasingly sophisticated understanding of emancipatory class politics and human liberation. Concerned at the success of the new unionism in organizing more than 350,000 unskilled workers, and doubling overall union membership from 750,000 in 1888 (6 per cent density) to 1,576,000 (13

61 Eleanor Marx, quoted in Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, 510.

62 Eleanor Marx, quoted in Max Beer, *Fifty Years of International Socialism* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1935), 72.

63 Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, 412.

64 Eleanor Marx, quoted in Silberner, ‘Friedrich Engels and the Jews’, 339.

65 *Ibid.*, 340.

66 Engels, quoted in Kessler, ‘Engels’ position on anti-Semitism in the context of contemporary socialist discussions’, 136.

67 Silberner, ‘Friedrich Engels and the Jews’, 341.

per cent density) in 1892,⁶⁸ the employers along with the repressive apparatuses of the state instigated a coordinated response to undermine trade union organization. Industry-wide employers' federations were established and the legal position of trade unionism, including the right to picket, was undermined.⁶⁹ By 1896 the employers had clawed back many of the gains of the new unionism and reduced unskilled labour unions to around 150,000 members.⁷⁰ By the mid-1890s, the cycle of protest initiated by the unemployed demonstrations and the matchgirls' strike had drawn to a close.⁷¹

Demoralization and despair within the working class followed and the Jews became one of the first casualties of the defeat of the new unionism. Those socialist leaders who had on the whole suppressed their antisemitism during the high-point of the new unionism, now chose to deploy such racism opportunistically to provide English workers with a narrative to make sense of their present distressed condition. Certain alleged deficiencies in the Jewish character or, sometimes, simply their presence in Britain comprised key elements of this resurgent socialist antisemitism. G. D. Kelley, secretary of Manchester and Salford Trades Council who had been 'cheered as the champion of the sweated Jewish workers in the waterproof industry's strike of 1890 ... slip[ped] into anti-Semitic imagery with the failure of the Jewish tailors to maintain their union organisation'.⁷² In 1894 and 1895, the TUC passed motions condemning the landing of pauper aliens and demanding controls.⁷³ Against the objections of James Sexton—the then president of the TUC—a special TUC conference was organized to discuss immigration controls against Jews. In 1896 this was followed by the TUC sending an official delegation to the Home Secretary demanding the introduction of legislation.⁷⁴

Against this backdrop of rising socialist antisemitism, Eleanor Marx found herself increasingly out of step with the times, although she persevered in challenging antisemitism and finding ways to strengthen solidarity between Jewish and English workers. In 1895, immediately after the TUC approved a resolution to control Jewish immigration, she spoke at a meeting arranged by ten London Jewish unions. In the leaflet advertising the meeting, she was billed as 'Mrs. Eleanor Marx—Karl Marx's daughter'. The leaflet itself exhorted:

68 T. J. Hatton, G. R. Boyer and R. E. Bailey, 'The union wage effect in late nineteenth century Britain', *Economica*, vol. 61, no. 244, 1994, 435–56 (Table 1, 436).

69 Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (London: Penguin 1987).

70 Hatton, Boyer and Bailey, 'The union wage effect in late nineteenth century Britain'.

71 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998).

72 Ken Lunn, 'Race relations or industrial relations? Race and labour in Britain, 1880–1950', *Immigrants and Minorities*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1985, 1–29 (5). Other socialists added to such antisemitism by contending that the growing numbers of Jews in the East End had transformed it into a 'foreign country'; see John A. Garrard, 'English reactions to immigrants now and 70 years ago', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1967, 24–32 (24).

73 Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals*, 216.

74 Cohen, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Anti-Semitic*, 21.

Jews! The English anti-Semites have come to the point where the English workers' organisation calls on the government to close England's doors to the poor alien, that is, in the main, to the Jew. You must no longer keep silent. You must come in your thousands to the meeting in the Great Assembly Hall.⁷⁵

There were others too who objected to the growing consolidation of antisemitism among the English socialists as well as the working class more generally, including Jewish members of the East End branches of the SDF. Similarly, Joseph Finn—a Jewish socialist from Leeds—produced a leaflet entitled *A Voice from the Aliens* that denounced in forthright terms the TUC's support for immigration control.⁷⁶ However, the organizational vehicles through which such messages could acquire resonance among a broader working-class public were in decline. The Socialist League, always small, was no longer in a position to challenge the spread of such racist antisemitism within working-class communities. William Morris had resigned from the organization in 1890. Comprising anarchists and socialists, the League had been an unstable formation since its inception. Engels, long frustrated by the inability of the English to establish a mass socialist party with working-class roots, acerbically noted in a letter to Eduard Bernstein that he held out little hope for a party made up of anarchists and socialists, and led by two poets (Morris and Aveling) and a philosopher (Bax): 'three as unpractical men ... as it is possible to find.'⁷⁷ His concerns were to prove well founded as those divisions came to a head during the peak years of the new unionism, causing the organization eventually to split.

As the working class suffered defeat on defeat, socialist internationalists like Morris and Eleanor Marx could do little to arrest the growing despair and despondency that gathered pace within it. With workers no longer confident of taking collective action, they became marginal figures in the socialist movement. Meanwhile, many of the socialist activists including Burns, Thorne, Mann and others decamped to the newly established Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1893. Further, in the space of the three years between 1895 and 1898, some of the most resolute figures of an internationalist emancipatory politics of class in England—Engels, Morris, Aveling and Eleanor Marx—were dead, the latter having committed suicide. Eleanor Marx's death was especially poignant, effectively marking the end of the era of 'making socialists'.

The returns of thinking race and class together

Reading the history of the new unionism against the grain, with a greater attentiveness to questions of race *and* class, helps to make more transparent

75 Quoted in Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, 525.

76 Cohen, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Anti-Semitic*, 24–5.

77 Friedrich Engels, 'Engels to Eduard Bernstein in Zurich', London, 29 December 1884, available on the *Marxists Internet Archive* website at www.marxistsfr.org/archive/marx/works/1884/letters/84_12_29.htm (viewed 8 May 2017).

both the prevalence and structuring force of socialist antisemitism, as well as socialist and Jewish opposition to it. This essay has demonstrated how the dominant socialist discourse was intimately bound up with questions of national belonging that directly contributed to the formation of a racialized politics of class that could not imagine migrant Jews as an integral component of the working class in England. However, we also found how, during the highpoint of the new unionism, such socialist antisemitism was challenged by a minority current of English Marxists whose conceptions of socialism refused to be limited by the narrow boundaries of the racialized nation-state. And they were joined in this collective action by autonomous Jewish socialist organizations who understood that the liberation of the Jewish worker was indivisible from the emancipation of the working class in general. With the help of influential figures like Eleanor Marx and Aron Lieberman, these latter strands helped entangle socialist politics with questions of combatting antisemitism and thereby stretched existing conceptions of class to encompass the Jewish worker.

Tragically, such solidarity was not to last. As the twentieth century dawned, a more pragmatic working-class politics born out of the defeat of the new unionism and the resulting demoralization became more dominant,⁷⁸ and accompanying this was an increasingly pervasive socialist antisemitism. While the current of socialist internationalism was never quite extinguished,⁷⁹ the representational double-bind that imagined the Jew as both super-capitalist and cheap labour, and thereby positioned in opposition both to the nation and the working class, combined with renewed force in the minds of English socialists over the course of the Anglo-Boer War,⁸⁰ the debate over the Aliens Act 1905,⁸¹ and the events leading up to the First World War.⁸²

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78 Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Working-class culture and working-class politics in London, 1870-1900: notes on the remaking of the working class', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1974, 460-508.

79 For the formative role played by Irish Catholic and Jewish socialist internationalists in opposing the First World War and in establishing the Communist Party of Great Britain, see, for example, Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*.

80 Claire Hirshfield, 'The Anglo-Boer war and the issue of Jewish culpability', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1980, 619-31; Hirshfield, 'The British left and the "Jewish conspiracy"'

81 Helena Wray, 'The Aliens Act 1905 and the immigration dilemma', *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2006, 302-23.

82 David Cesarani, *The Left and the Jews, the Jews and the Left* (London: Labour Friends of Israel 2004); Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*, 71-3.