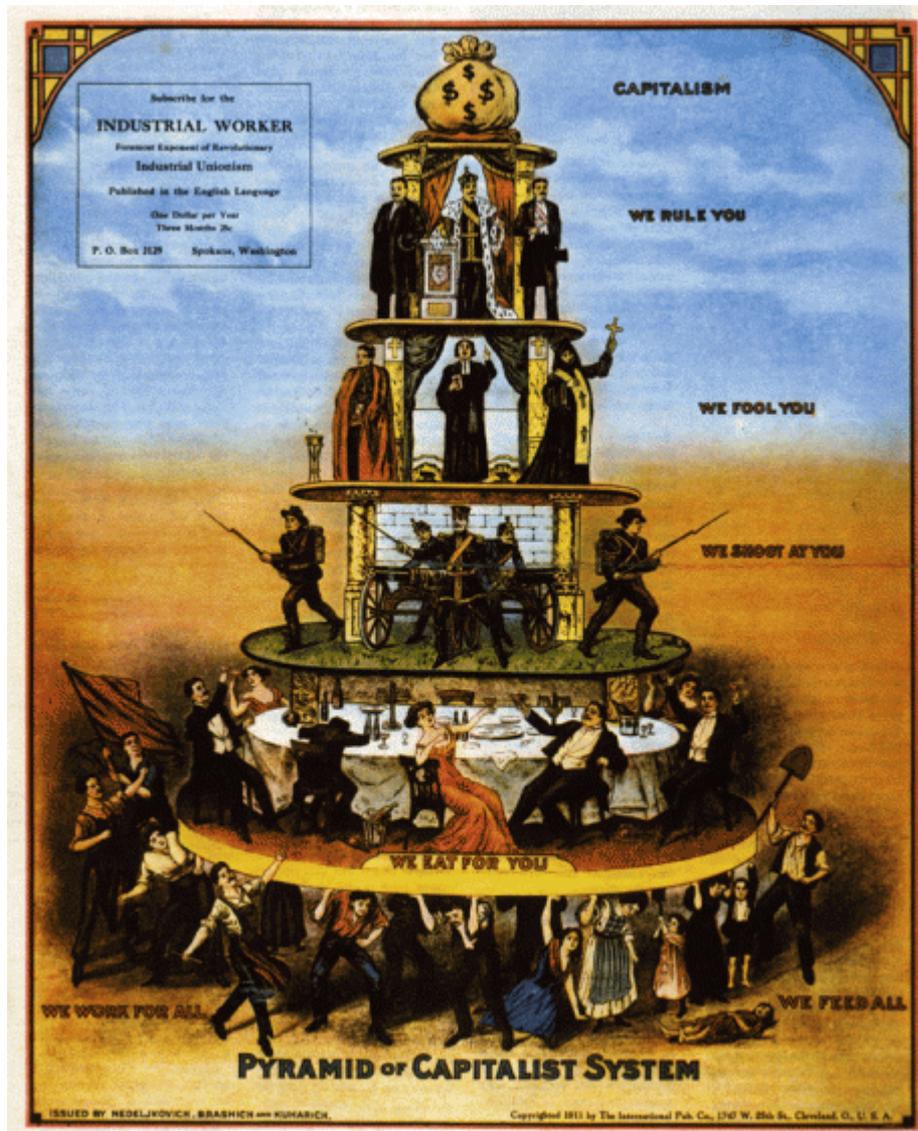


The north London IWW in the 1st World War - Ken Weller



A chapter from Weller's excellent [Don't be a Soldier! - the radical anti-war movement in north London 1914-1918](#). This was the only period in which the Wobblies had any significant presence among the UK radical workers' movement.

Note: the NLHL was the *North London Herald League*, a network of generally libertarian/anti-parliamentarist militants engaged in agitation around industrial and anti-war struggles.

With similar politics, the WSF was the *Workers' Socialist Federation*, which emerged from earlier East London womens' suffrage groups; Sylvia Pankhurst was a prominent member and it published the *Workers' Dreadnought* radical newspaper.

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12. *The Industrial Workers of the World*

The IWW was another part of the complex jigsaw of North London revolutionary politics. Many of the founders of the NLHL had been 'Wobblies' and a close relationship continued throughout the War. Up to about 1916 the North London Local of the IWW had met at the NLHL's premises, but it then moved to its own headquarters in unfurnished rooms in Theobalds Road, Bloomsbury.

With the introduction of conscription several local Wobblies went to prison, while others went on the run. Some of them even managed to leave the country, while at least one member, Frank Ginger (alias Grainger),(1) had joined the army, fought on the Somme, and then deserted and spent the rest of the War avoiding arrest. Nevertheless, some of the 'old guard' remained active; these included Albert Young, A. B. Elsbury and Jack Smith, who were joined by a new wave of members who included Harold Edwards(2) (later secretary-treasurer of the Local), Arthur Titley,(3) Dick Beech and Esther Archer.(4)

The Local had a wide range of activities; for example, several of its members worked at the Hispano Suiza factory in North London where Arthur Titley was a shop steward. The Local was also heavily involved in the Workers' Committee movement; one of its members, Tommy Walsh,(5) a carpenter, was apparently secretary of the London Building Workers' Committee, while Vic Beacham was also active after his release from prison.

The Local maintained a regular speaking pitch at Finsbury Park. To raise cash it even printed its own money, designed and printed by Jack Smith. Members could purchase these notes, which were in 2s 6d, 5s, 10s, and £1 denominations, and could redeem them later if they needed the money. No examples of these notes (which were apparently rather beautiful) seem to have survived.

The Local printed many of its own leaflets and 'sticky-backs' and it seems that one of these leaflets led to a drama which could have ended in tragedy. The authorities, possibly with the aid of an informer, managed to track some of those responsible and in March 1918, five men associated with the Local were arrested. Three of them, including Arthur Titley, were sent to prison for up to six months, while two others (who seem to have been American seamen) were deported. The imprisoned men had a very bad time: Arthur Titley was beaten up on several occasions and lost three stone in weight.

Meanwhile, back in the Local, the hunt for the alleged informer was on. The fear of informers was not simple paranoia. The authorities did have networks of spies, and there was massive interception of letters and (for the first time) systematic telephone tapping. Earlier in the War, infamous *agent provocateur* Alex Gordon(6) had been active in the London area, and he later admitted that his visits to the German Communist Club in Charlotte Street, Tottenham Court Road and the IWW Hall in Whitechapel had been the prelude to police raids on them. Plainclothes police were familiar figures at meetings as they gathered material for prosecutions. The relationships between radicals and the Special Branch men who haunted their meetings were apparently quite complex. Edward Hennem in a letter to me describes them thus:

I knew of no police *provocateurs* in the Herald League. The blokes who came to our meetings were almost close to us — in fact, one was quite influenced by our philosophy and I think he excluded from his notes some of the stupid remarks of the idiots, such as drilling with broomsticks in Epping Forest. Off course there were some of the other type.

The spy fever within the North London Local of the IWW culminated in a 'trial' at which the man in the dock was A. B. Elsbury, who was ably defended by his brother Sam. It is the unanimous opinion of survivors that Elsbury was completely innocent; fortunately he was acquitted - if the verdict had gone the other way it is difficult to estimate what would have happened. The Local contained some tough customers who had cut their teeth in the turbulent

workers' movements of Australia, Latin America and the American West; they had a short way with narks.(7)

There seem to have been a considerable number of firearms floating around the movement after the War, most of them originating with returning servicemen. The going rate for a Lee Enfield rifle was about £2 10s. One of the features of this murky underbelly of the revolutionary movement in the immediate post-War years was a quite considerable gun-running operation to the Irish republicans. Much of this material apparently left the country via Liverpool. There were even rumours of arms stockpiled for potential domestic consumption. Quite a few survivors recall that this trade had considerable North London ramifications, not only in the radical milieu but also among the large local Irish population.

One of the most remarkable members of the Local was Dick Beech. Born about 1893 at Hull, Beech was a huge man some 6ft 3in tall. He had run away to sea with his brother Charlie and they had spent their early lives travelling the world, working in gold and copper mines in Australia, Mexico and Colorado. They presumably joined the IWW in Colorado. At the outbreak of War they were seamen on the Liverpool-USA run, which may have had something to do with the Local's ability to smuggle men from one side of the Atlantic to the other.(8) While serving at sea they were torpedoed twice, on one occasion only surviving by a miracle after spending some time in the water.(9)

In August, 1920, Dick Beech represented the IWW at the 2nd Congress of the Comintern in Russia, and it was during this period that he and his brother fought with the Red Army and apparently did illegal work in Finland behind the white lines.

By 1921 Dick Beech was back in Britain. By this time he was a member of the WSF and he represented it under its temporary name of the Communist Party-British Section of the Third International (CP-BSTI) at the Leeds Convention of the Communist Party of Great Britain in January whence he was elected to the CP's Provisional Executive Committee.

The Beech Brothers were, perhaps significantly, in Ireland for some time in the early 1920s. One consequence of this was that Dick married Moira, the daughter of James Connolly. Dick was also extremely active in the early unemployed movement, where his size made him a favourite target for police batons during demonstrations; on at least one occasion he was badly beaten.

In the 20s, Dick Beech seems to have worked primarily for one of the Soviet trading agencies but he also apparently acted as a courier and maritime specialist for the Comintern. In the late 1920s, he was editor of a journal called the *International Seafarer*. Some time in the early 1930s, Dick Beech left the Communist Party with some bitterness, although the exact reasons are obscure, and joined the ILP. He then became active in the Chemical Workers' Union and was for many years a lay member of its executive and editor of the Union's journal. In 1944-5 he became the union's president.

Dick Beech had many international links, many of them dating from the pre-War syndicalist movement. He knew Trotsky personally and was deeply influenced by his ideas, although he was never a member of a Trotskyist group. In his last years Beech was a member of the Labour Party. He died in Harrow in 1955.(10)

In the latter part of the War the British IWW had a period of substantial growth. It had its own hall in Whitechapel, and was very active in a number of industries in the East End of London. By January 1919 it was substantial enough to be one of the four national convening bodies of the Hands Off Russia Movement (the others were the BSP, ILP and the SLP).(11) Frank Grainger was a prominent speaker, representing the IWW at many Hands Off Russia

meetings. The IWW with its strong international connections always had a contingent of workers from abroad within its ranks, especially a number of American seamen.

The most famous American Wobbly associated with the NLHL was George Swazey, who was the National Organizer of the British IWW. Hennem writes:

He came to England and linked up with the Herald League during the War. He could speak for five hours at a stretch on an open-air platform and could keep an audience convulsed. He was perhaps the most humorous speaker I have ever heard.(12)

With the formation of the Communist Party in 1920, the British IWW decided to dissolve itself and join, but many Wobblies didn't stay members for long. Some departed after the suppression of the Kronstadt Commune in 1921, while others quietly left in the ensuing years. The experience of Charlie Lahr perhaps illustrates this process. Lahr had joined the CP - after a short spell in the WSF - and was a member of its Central London branch, whose catchment area included Bloomsbury and Clerkenwell. While in Berlin in 1921, Lahr managed to obtain, and have translated, the text of the New Economic Policy of the Soviet Government. On returning to London, Lahr and Esther Archer found that two other members of the branch, Eden and Cedar Paul,(13) had quite independently translated the same document. The four of them were so opposed to the new policy that they closed down the branch and left the Party.(14)

Of the 16 members of the North London Local of the IWW about whom I have relevant information, at least 12 joined the CP. The amount of time they remained members varied widely, but only two became lifelong adherents. At first glance it might seem surprising that so many activists from the anarchist and syndicalist traditions joined the CP. However, many of these militants saw the revolutionary overthrow of the Tsar and the Kerensky regime, and the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets', as the embodiment of everything they had stood for, and while many of them soon became deeply disillusioned with Leninism and everything it represented, others stayed with the Communist Party for the rest of their lives.

The confused attitude of the anti-parliamentarian wing of the revolutionary movement at this time towards Bolshevism was startlingly expressed in an article by George H. V. Rose's in *The Communist*, organ of the Communist League,(16) of May 1919.

Therefore we identify ourselves with the Third International, with the communism of Marx, and with that personification of the spirit of revolt, Bakunin,(17) of whom the Third International is but the natural and logical outcome.

Notes

1. Frank Ginger, alias Frank Grainger, went on to be a foundation member of the CP; he later left it and was prominent in the SPGB; still later he was a lecturer for the Economic League.
2. Harold Edwards was born in 1900 at Theobalds Road. He became an anarchist at a very early age. When he became liable for military service in 1918 he went on the run but remained politically active and was a strong supporter of the NLHL. While he was living 'underground' in Soho he came into close contact with the considerable colonies of Spanish and Italian anarchists living in that area; the most notable of these was Errico Malatesta, who once had an electrical engineering shop in Upper Street, Islington. Edwards was also a member of the Communistischer Arbeiter Bildungs Verein, the German Workers' Communist Club in Charlotte Street, founded in 1840, which included among its alumni both Marx and Engels. In 1920 Edwards became secretary of the club for its last six months of existence. Harold Edwards dropped out of political activity in the 1920s and became an antiquarian bookseller. He and David Goodway have produced an unpublished manuscript, *Harold*

Edwards, a Revolutionary Life, on which I have heavily depended for both these notes and the section on the IWW as a whole. I would also like to thank both the authors for the considerable individual help they have given me.

3. Arthur Titley was born near the Angel in Islington. After the War, unable to find work, he became a window cleaner. He was an early member of Islington CP, in which he apparently stayed until his death. This, I am told, was in an air raid in the Second World War.

4. Esther Archer, 1897-1969, born Esther Argeband. Her family lived in White-chapel. During the War she was a well known open-air speaker, noted for her flaming red hair. Her main associations seem to have been with the IWW and the WSF. Esther worked at the Rothman's cigarette factory in the East End, which she organised for the IWW. She first met Charlie Lahr while he was interned; after he was released in 1919 they joined up and lived together for the rest of their lives. They had two daughters.

5. Tommy Walsh was a carpenter; he had been a member of the North London Industrialist League (see note 3, page 23) since at least 1912. He was also an early member of the British IWW. After the War he was for a while secretary of the International Club — the successor of the German Workers' Club. Unable to find work at his trade, he seems afterwards to have made a living as a racing tipster.

6. Alex Gordon was the person responsible in March 1917 for the entrapment of Alice Wheeldon of Derby, and her daughter and son-in-law, who received 10, five, and seven years' imprisonment respectively for a 'plot' to assassinate Lloyd George and Arthur Henderson. Gordon, posing as a man on the run, had been sheltered by Mrs Wheeldon and had repaid her by setting her up and then informing the authorities. Mrs Wheeldon had a hard time in gaol and became seriously ill, after serving two years, she was released; fourteen months later died.

7. Harry Young remembers being in a pub with Dick Beech and Arthur Titley when a fight broke out in another part of the bar; Beech immediately produced a knife while Titley produced a revolver. Incidentally Titley was a very good boxer.

8. The British IWW was pretty strong in Liverpool; it also had substantial Locals in Glasgow and Hull.

9. Dick Beech wrote an account of this experience in *Torpedoed, and other short stories*, Progressive Publishing, Harrow 1943, 62pp. One wonders if the brothers Beech and their comrades ever met Captain Tupper's 'torpedoed' seamen; it would have been an interesting encounter.

10. I would like to thank John Archer, Bob Edwards and Dick Beech (the nephew of Dick Beech senior) for providing me with much information about Dick and Charlie Beech.

11. There were a number of North London trade union branches, as well as the Herald Leagues of Battersea, Croydon, Fulham and Stepney, also represented at the founding meeting of the 'Hands Offs Russia' Movement.

12. Hennem, op cit.; Swazey later returned to the USA.

13. Eden (1865-1967) and Cedar Paul (died 1972) were leading Marxist intellectuals, responsible for translating many of Marx's writings into English, notably the Everyman edition of *Capital*. They also jointly wrote several books on birth control. Both rejoined the Communist Party later in the 20s.

14. Charlie Lahr (1885-1967) was a fascinating man whom I knew quite well. Born in Germany, he came to Britain in 1905. A life-long anarchist, Lahr joined the IWW before the First World War. Interned in both World Wars, Lahr ran bookshops at various sites from the early 20s until well into the 1960s; the most notable of these was at Red Lion Street, Bloomsbury, the shop becoming a centre of radical and advanced literary ideas. Lahr introduced many people, myself included, into the highways and byways of political and social thought. The best single source for Charlie's life is a memoir by David Goodway,

'Charles Lahr; Anarchist, Bookseller, Publisher', in the June–July 1977 issue of *The London Magazine*. I would also like to thank Charlie's daughters Oonagh and Sheila for their unstinting help.

15. G. H. V. Rose was living in Hammersmith at this time. He had left Islington in 1915. He had been active in the local ILP in the first decade of the century. About 1909 he became closely associated with Guy Aldred, a connection which lasted until the early 30s, when he rejoined the ILP. Rose was a hairdresser and played a leading part in the hairdressing section of the shopworkers' union; so did his two sons who were also active in the ILP in the 1930s and the 40s.

The Rose family connections are interesting as they illustrate the familial links which occur again and again in the socialist movement of the period: G. H. V. Rose's father, Frederick Rose, was secretary of the Mildmay Club (see note 3, pages 10 and 11) while his father-in-law was G. W. Patterson (1859-1939), who from the mid-1880s had been an activist in the socialist movement both locally and nationally. Patterson went on to become a prominent propagandist and played an important role in the formation of a number of trade unions. He was friendly with major figures in the movement, such as William Morris, Tom Mann and George Lansbury. Patterson had also been Assistant Organising Secretary of the National Daily Herald League.

16. The Communist League was a short lived organisation which had emerged in March 1919 from a conference called by the London District Council of the SLP; it rapidly attracted to itself a number of recruits from the anti-parliamentarian wing of the socialist movement, strongly laced with anarchists and syndicalists. At its peak the Communist League had well over 20 branches, mostly in London and Scotland but with a few elsewhere, notably in South Wales. The Communist League seems to have lasted about a year, after which it rapidly dissolved into the Communist Party.

17. Bakunin was a major anarchist figure and opponent of Marx in the First International!