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SOVIETS IN BRITAIN: THE LEEDS
CONVENTION OF 1917*

The Labour and Socialist Convention held at Leeds on 3 June 1917 was held expressly “to follow Russia”. It adopted four resolutions, the most celebrated of which called for the establishment of what have been termed “extra-Parliamentary Soviets with sovereign powers”. It was described shortly afterwards as “the most spectacular piece of utter folly for which [the Socialist left] during the whole war-period, was responsible – which is saying not a little”.¹ A contemporary journal held that many of the ILP men had become “avowed Syndicalists or Bolsheviks”;² and the King, in conversation with Will Thorne after the latter’s visit to Russia on behalf of the government, expressed some concern about what had taken place. He “seemed greatly disturbed at the famous Leeds Conference”, Thorne recorded. Thorne’s reply, however, had “seemed to relieve his mind”.³ F. W. Jowett, a member of the group which issued invitations to the Convention, referred to it to the end of his life as the “highest point of revolutionary fervour he had seen in this country”.⁴

Modern studies have tended largely to accept the view that the meeting was called “to inaugurate the British revolution”,⁵ and that the ILP had “appeared to succumb to hysteria”. It has been stated, moreover, that the Convention took place “almost *in vacuo* and [that] nothing more was heard of the Soldiers’ and Workers’ Councils except

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¹ W. A. Orton, *Labour in Transition* (London, 1921), p. 104. The meeting is incorrectly dated 9th June.

² *Nineteenth Century and After*, LXXXVII (1920), p. 590.

³ W. Thorne, *My Life’s Battles* (London, 1931), p. 195.

⁴ A. F. Brockway, *Socialism over Sixty Years* (London, 1946), p. 153.

⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (London, 1965), p. 89.

on the Clyde"¹. The present paper will argue that the Convention is better understood in a pacifist than in a revolutionary perspective. It reflected an opposition to the continuation of the war for a "knock out" victory which was becoming increasingly manifest throughout 1917, and which was by no means confined to Labour and trade union circles. It will be suggested that a closer examination of the speeches delivered and the resolutions adopted at the Convention supports this interpretation. It will also be concerned to document the fate of the district Workmen's and Soldiers' Councils which were set up following the Convention, and which were not, as has been claimed, confined to the Clyde; and it will examine the activity of the Provisional Committee which the meeting established and its attempts to implement the Convention resolutions.

It will, finally, be suggested that the virtual collapse of the Workmen's and Soldiers' Councils owed less to the sabotage of the ILP section (as the BSP section subsequently charged) than to the state of political organization and revolutionary consciousness within the British working class at this time; and more crucially, perhaps, to the basic commitment of the Councils to the achievement of a "people's peace", generally defined as one "without annexations or indemnities". When this slogan was absorbed into the attempt to convene the Stockholm Conference of socialist parties, and became that of the Labour Party as a whole, the Councils lost their *raison d'être*. The Councils movement was not killed, but superseded. Almost unnoticed, it withered away.

The Russian revolution of February 1917 was warmly welcomed, although not always for the same reasons, by virtually all sections of British opinion. The government and majority Labour opinion professed to see it as the overthrow of an unpatriotic Tsar in order to secure the more effective prosecution of the war; while minority Labour opinion hailed the revolution as a "wonderful and beneficent stroke of deliverance for the Russian people", emphasizing that it represented a "supremely important achievement for the cause of democracy and peace in Europe and throughout the world", which might rouse a "flame of hope and deliverance from oppression here at home".² Snowden was concerned that a "permanent peace", a "people's peace" through the "triumph of international democracy", should be

¹ R. K. Middlemas, *The Clydesiders* (London, 1965), p. 75. A modern Soviet study has termed the Convention the "culminating moment in the political struggle of the English workers in 1917" (M. M. Karliner, *Rabochee Dvizhenie v Anglii v 1914-1918 gg.* (Moscow, 1961), p. 271).

² *Socialist Review*, XIV (1917), pp. 97-98.

achieved by the Russian people. In this, he thought, lay the hope of the early termination of the war.¹

The revolution in Russia, a writer in the *Bradford Pioneer* pointed out, was an event which was “distinctly favourable to a reasonable and early termination of the war”. Russia had “adopted a UDC [Union for Democratic Control] Programme”. If they failed to seize this opportunity they might soon find themselves in a “much worse position”. MacDonalD pointed out that the Duma socialists took the “general attitude of our own ILP, if a little more extreme”. The outcome would be, he thought, to “bring the ILP policy more and more into the foreground”. This implied no support, however, of the “leaders of the extreme pacifist Left, like Lanine [sic]”, whose “indiscretions” would, he thought, play into the hands of Milyukov; and he criticized the “impractical groups who would make a separate peace or anything”, the “Lenin Party, which was composed of thoughtless anarchists, who had no definite policy”.² His chief anxiety at this time, it has been noted (and in this, he spoke almost certainly for the majority of the ILP section), was that the leadership should settle in the hands of Kerensky and the central bloc of socialists.³

Labour support was the more readily forthcoming in view of the opposition which Labour had always offered, before the war and on its outbreak, to the British alliance with Tsardom. Many Labour figures were involved in the work of the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom, under the presidency of a respected Liberal, Dr Spence Watson;⁴ and an Anglo-Russian Committee, formed “to watch over the development of Anglo-Russian relations in the interests of the liberties of the Russian people”, included among its members H. N. Brailsford, MacDonalD and J. O’Grady.⁵ An important element in Labour’s opposition to the impending war in 1914 was that it ranged Britain beside Tsarist Russia. As Bruce Glasier pointed out, from the days of Ivan the Terrible until 4 August 1914, Russia had been “universally regarded as the nether-region of autocracy, oppression,

¹ P. Snowden in *Labour Leader*, 29 March and 12 April 1917.

² *Bradford Pioneer*, 11 May 1917; J. R. MacDonalD in *Forward*, 13 March, 14 April, 28 April and 12 May 1917; *Leicester Post*, 7 May 1917.

³ B. Sacks, J. Ramsay MacDonalD in *Thought and Action* (Albuquerque, 1952), pp. 496-97.

⁴ B. Hollingsworth, “The Society of Friends of Russian Freedom: English Liberals and Russian Socialists 1890-1917”, in: *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, New Series, III (1970), pp. 45-64; R. Grant, “The Society of Friends of Russian Freedom (1890-1917): A case study in internationalism”, in: *Journal of the Scottish Labour History Society*, No 3 (November 1970), pp. 3-24.

⁵ H. N. Brailsford, *The Fruits of our Russian Alliance* (London, 1912).

reaction, 'superstition and devouring Empire'.¹ The *New Statesman* noted that since 1907 the Russian alliance had been "steadily and vehemently denounced by a considerable section of Radical opinion". Attacks upon the alliance had ceased since the outbreak of the war; but this represented not a reconciliation so much as an "uneasy acceptance of the practical necessity of the policy".² The February revolution thus removed the misgivings with which the majority section of Labour had entered the war in alliance with Russian Tsardom, and allowed them to claim that the war was now genuinely one in defence of democracy and the rights of small nations.

Minority Labour welcomed the revolution as (in Lansbury's words) the "dawn of a new day". This implied no support of the movement towards the seizure of power by the working class, in Russia or elsewhere. Indeed they "cared not whose revolution it was", wrote Lansbury, "whether Menshevik or Bolshevik: for us it was enough that the Tsardom had fallen".³ This reflected in part the effect of wartime censorship: they knew so little of internal Russian political development, the *Herald* noted, that speculation was idle and suggestion impertinent.⁴ More important, however, it reflected the preoccupation of minority Labour with the achievement of an early and negotiated peace. This concern preceded the February revolution; and what was welcome in that revolution was less the emergence of a soviet system and "dual power" than the support it soon began to provide for a renegotiation of war aims and the achievement of a "people's peace". As the National Council of the ILP and the ILP MPs declared in a telegram congratulating the Russian people on the "magnificent achievements", it was their hope that the Revolution would "hasten the coming of a peace based, not on the dominance of militarists and diplomatists, but on democracy and justice".⁵ In the meetings which subsequently took place in Britain "to follow Russia" these concerns were dominant.

The first of these meetings took place on 31 March in the Albert Hall under the slogan "Russia Free".⁶ It was organized by the Anglo-

¹ *Socialist Review*, October-December 1914, p. 394.

² *New Statesman*, 24 March 1917, p. 578.

³ G. Lansbury, *My Life* (London, 1928), p. 186.

⁴ *Herald*, 31 March 1917, p. 9.

⁵ *Labour Leader*, 5 April 1917.

⁶ Earlier demonstrations were held by the BSP at the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, on 26 March 1917; and at Mile End Road on 24 March 1917 under the auspices of the Committee of Delegates of the Russian Socialist Groups. Lansbury insisted, however, that the "Labour and progressive forces of the capital should rally in even larger numbers" (*Herald*, 31 March 1917, p. 5).

Russian Democratic Alliance, a body which basically comprised the *Herald* editorial staff. Nearly 20,000 sought tickets to attend, a number substantially in excess of the 12,000 capacity of the hall.¹ The ten speakers represented, according to the official report, all that was “most advanced in the Trade Union, Labour Socialist and Radical movements”.²

The report conceded, however, that there was “some difference of opinion” among the members of the audience, and indeed among the platform speakers also. The resolution adopted at the meeting, which was held to embody the “Russian Charter of Freedom”, congratulated the Russian “Democrats” and called upon the governments of Britain and of other countries “to follow the Russian example by establishing Industrial Freedom, Freedom of Speech and the Press, the abolition of Social, Religious and National distinctions, an immediate Amnesty for Political and Religious offences, and Universal Suffrage”. As Lansbury recorded, “not in any of our minds was there ever a thought of violence and bloodshed; one and all, we hoped, longed and prayed for Peace. [...] From the first moment to the last the meeting was one of thankfulness and praise.”³ The *Call*'s observer reported that he had listened in vain for the true lesson of the Revolution: international Labour solidarity and uncompromising hostility to capitalist imperialism and war.⁴ As an anonymous correspondent (“a soldier and a democrat”) wrote to Lansbury, it remained unclear, the admirable speeches notwithstanding, how Labour was going to act. Workers in France and Germany were not limiting their expressions of sympathy to words. There was a need, he urged, for “something stronger than appeals to the Government”.⁵

The meeting had nevertheless released (in the words of Lansbury's biographer) the feeling which the great mass of people were holding unexpressed. From that day there was a “great change of heart and a great change of mind throughout Britain; what had been the unpopular propaganda of a small minority became, in a greater or lesser degree of fervour, the conviction of the greater portion of the thinking working

¹ G. Lansbury, *The Miracle of Fleet Street* (London, 1925), p. 113; F. Meynell, *My Lives* (London, 1971), p. 104.

² *Russia Free! Ten Speeches delivered at the Royal Albert Hall, London, on 31 March 1917. Authorised Report* (Pelican Press, London, 1917). Quotations from the proceedings of the meeting are taken from this source unless otherwise stated.

³ G. Lansbury, *The Miracle of Fleet Street*, pp. 113, 114.

⁴ *Call*, 5 April 1917.

⁵ 8 May 1917, Lansbury Papers, Vol. 7, No 310, British Library of Political and Economic Science.

class of the country, and of many outside the working class".¹ Further meetings were held, and Russian ships on the Clyde and Mersey were contacted. Mayday was celebrated with particular energy.²

It was the United Socialist Council, however, which now took the initiative in summoning the Leeds Convention, rather than the Anglo-Russian Democratic Alliance, which Lansbury allowed to lapse.³ The formation of such a Council had been recommended by a conference which met under the auspices of the International Socialist Bureau in December 1913.⁴ The ILP National Executive, however, which had been a party to the discussions, decided unanimously on 15 October 1914 that "the time was inopportune to proceed with the formation of the proposed United Socialist Council". It was pointed out that the BSP, which had also been represented in the discussions, had not yet affiliated to the Labour Party. At its Easter conference in 1916, however, Hyndman and the pro-war group withdrew from the BSP, and a resolution was adopted, which was then submitted to the ILP National Executive, urging that the USC be established forthwith. The ILP appointed its Chairman and four members of its executive to confer with the BSP accordingly.⁵

A meeting was held on 16 August, at which the ILP and BSP representatives agreed that the USC should be constituted. Since the Fabian Society could not "see its way to join", the USC was composed only of ILP and BSP delegates.⁶ Under its constitution the USC was charged with the "preparation of a common policy upon all matters where that is possible". It should have "power to initiate demonstrations and other forms of propaganda, both national and local, prepare and issue manifestoes, leaflets and other literature, and generally endeavour to co-ordinate the work of affiliated organizations". What the ILP Executive described as "several mutually helpful discussions" had since taken place. A circular had been issued to trades councils

¹ R. Postgate, *The Life of George Lansbury* (London, 1951), p. 165.

² The details as recorded in the Call are printed in Karliner, *op. cit.*, pp. 254-55 and 266. Meetings at Brighton on 18 May, and at Liverpool on 20 May are reported in the *Woman's Dreadnought*, 26 May 1917; and a "Russia Free" meeting in Merthyr Tydfil on 6 May is noted in the *Merthyr Tydfil Pioneer*, 12 May 1917.

³ G. Lansbury, *The Miracle of Fleet Street*, p. 116.

⁴ ILP, Annual Conference Report, 1917, p. 23.

⁵ ILP, NAC minutes, 15-16 October 1914, p. 110, and 6-7 July 1916, p. 201, British Library of Political and Economic Science.

⁶ The Fabian Society decided on 24 November 1916 to seek the right of veto for each society represented on the USC; but this appears to have been unforthcoming (Fabian Society, Executive Committee minutes, 24 November 1917, C/8/B/13, Nuffield College, Oxford).

and affiliated organizations on the subject of industrial conscription, and a letter had been addressed to the conference of the French Socialist Party at the end of 1916.¹ The summoning of the "Great Labour, Socialist and Democratic Convention" at Leeds was, however, the first major initiative which the USC had undertaken.

The circular announcing the Convention appeared on 11 May 1917, under the slogan "Follow Russia". The purpose of the meeting was to "congratulate and encourage our Russian comrades upon the success they have achieved in overthrowing the reactionary forces of that country and establishing real political freedom". It was the duty of the British working class to repudiate the "aims and aspirations – dynastic, territorial, and capitalist – that were supported by the Russian Czarism, and which have materially influenced the collective aims of the Allies". The fifteen signatories, on behalf of the USC, held it to be their "urgent duty to convene a representative conference of Trades Councils, local Labour Parties, Socialist organizations, and women's industrial and political organizations, in order to ascertain and pronounce upon the opinions of the working class of this country regarding the developments which have taken place, and are taking place in Russia. [...] Just as the Russian democracy have taken the most significant steps in favour of an international peace, so must the democratic forces in every country strive to emulate their magnificent example. [...] It is our duty to work for a complete and real international peace based upon working-class solidarity, and, therefore calculated to be honourable and enduring." The arrangements for representation were also specified.²

A further circular issued twelve days later added that the purpose of the Convention was "to hail the Russian Revolution and to organize the British Democracy to Follow Russia". The circular, which was addressed to Trades Councils, trade unions, local Labour Parties, Socialist Parties, women's organizations and Democratic bodies, declared that the Conference was already assured of a great success. It would be historic; and would initiate a new era of democratic power in Great Britain. It would begin, the circular added, to "do for this country what the Russian Revolution has accomplished in Russia": or as Robert Williams put it, to "do for Britain what the

¹ ILP, Annual Conference Report, 1917, pp. 23, 24–25. The formation of the USC is incorrectly dated 1917 in the Labour Year Book 1919 (London, 1919), p. 320; and it is incorrectly termed the United Social Council in A. Bullock, *Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, I (London, 1960), p. 74.

² Labour Leader, 17 May 1917; Bradford Pioneer, 18 May 1917; Forward, 19 May 1917. A form of Application for Delegates and Credentials is in Edinburgh Central ILP, Correspondence, 1917, National Library of Scotland.

Council of Workmen's and Soldiers' Delegates is doing for Russia".¹ Snowden, writing the day before the Convention opened, declared that it would "be the beginning of doing things in this country. [...] This next week-end should see Great Britain painted red."²

The convening of the meeting was not without its difficulties. The texts of the four resolutions to be discussed were distributed together with the circular of 23 May to those bodies which had been invited to attend. The fourth, which called for the formation of Workmen's and Soldiers' Councils, aroused considerable controversy and some opposition, and in some cases delegates were instructed to seek to amend the terms of the resolutions. Glasgow Trades Council, for instance, agreed by a "large majority" to be represented, but instructed its delegates to seek to exclude soldiers from the scope of the Council.³ The London Trades Council agreed "after a [...] long discussion" to send two delegates to the Convention; but they were instructed not to support the second resolution, and to seek to amend the fourth resolution.⁴ In Leeds itself, the local Labour Party agreed to representation by 75 votes to 15;⁵ but the Trades Council agreed to representation by only 37 votes to 30, and instructed its delegates to support only the first three resolutions.⁶

When the delegates arrived, moreover, it was found that the bookings which they had made had been cancelled by the hotel proprietors. The temperance hotels, it was reported, which "benefit so largely out of democratic assemblies of the kind", were the "worst offenders". Alternative accommodation was arranged for all but those who arrived late, who were compelled to spend the night in railway carriages.⁷ Following, it appeared, the visit of a member of the British Empire League to the homes of nearly all members of the local Council, the letting of the Albert Hall, where the meeting was to have been held, was cancelled, and the delegates met instead in the Coliseum. The Council also refused to permit an open-air assembly arranged for Victoria Square. At least one report concluded, however, that the

¹ Circular of 23 May 1917, Edinburgh Central ILP, Correspondence, 1917, loc. cit. (printed in the Labour Leader, 31 May 1917); Labour Leader, 24 May 1917.

² Forward, 2 June 1917.

³ Glasgow Trades Council, minutes, 16 and 30 May 1917, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

⁴ London Trades Council, minutes, 31 May 1917 (microfilm, Warwick University Library, Coventry).

⁵ Yorkshire Factory Times, 7 June 1917.

⁶ Leeds Trades Council, minutes, 30 May 1917, Sheepscar Library, Leeds.

⁷ Leeds Weekly Citizen, 8 June 1917. Tom Quelch, whose letter of thanks for local hospitality is printed in the same issue, offered the consoling thought that the local hoteliers had lost about £1,000 through their action.

vigour of the opposition had “added interest and zest to the gathering”.¹

By noon on the day of the conference, 1150 delegates had arrived, and many more, it was reported, had arrived later. The total audience was put at some 3500.² The proceedings opened with the reading of a telegram from Lansbury, who was unable to be present as a result of ill-health.³ “When they condemn you for wanting peace”, he wrote, “when they charge you with treason for being determined to end the war, tell them that it is treason against God, treason against humanity, not to end it – and at once.” Bob Smillie, who acted as chairman, noted the Convention’s debt to the series of meetings welcoming the Russian revolution which had already taken place, and in particular to the “great Albert Hall meeting”. If it had been right to congratulate the Russian people on securing their freedom, “surely it cannot be a wrong thing for Britain to desire freedom also”. They had come not to talk treason, but reason.

The first resolution, congratulating the Russian people upon the revolution, was moved by MacDonald, who noted that “for years” they had wanted it to happen. The Russian people should put themselves “at the head of the peoples of Europe”. He was anxious, however, that the Russian people should maintain the revolution, and find a cause for unity, stand by their liberties, and “restrain the anarchy in [their] midst”. Snowden proposed the second resolution, which hailed “with the greatest satisfaction the declaration of the foreign policy and war aims of the Russian Provisional Government”, pledged the delegates to work for such a peace, and called upon the government “immediately to announce its agreement with the declared foreign policy and war aims of the democratic Government of Russia”. They had been appealing to the government for three years to be told their peace terms. The time had now come, he said, “for us to tell the Government what *our* peace terms are”. These were based upon the principles of “no annexation and no indemnity, and the right of every

¹ Leeds Weekly Citizen, 8 June 1917; Herald, 9 June 1917. The Times reported that the authorities had “yielded to patriotic pressure” (2 June 1917).

² What Happened at Leeds (London, 1917), p. 1; Labour Leader, 7 June 1917 (the account of the proceedings of the Convention, unless otherwise stated, has been drawn from these sources); Leeds Weekly Citizen, 8 June 1917. The figure quoted in the Woman’s Dreadnought of 11,051 delegates is clearly an over-enthusiastic misprint (Vol. 4, No 11, 9 June 1917, p. 733). A contemporary eye-witness account is provided in the Diary of Alfred Mattison (Brotherton Collection, Leeds University Library). The authorities, he recorded, were “panicstricken”; and “all the young hooligans of the town joined in the looting. However no worse harm befel and all passed off calmly” (Vol. C, pp. 11, 14).

³ W. Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde* (London, 1936), p. 149, wrongly reports Lansbury as present.

nation to dispose of its own destiny". The peace, he declared, would be a people's peace.

The third resolution called upon the government to "place itself in accord with the democracy of Russia by proclaiming its adherence to and determination to carry into immediate effect a charter of liberties establishing complete political rights for all men and women, unrestricted freedom of the Press, freedom of speech, a general amnesty for all political and religious prisoners, full rights of industrial and political associations, and the release of labour from all forms of compulsion and restraint". Many of the best public-spirited men in the country, the proposer pointed out, were in prison; and Labour was "enchained". Nearly a thousand conscientious objectors were in prison, some serving a third or fourth term; and they would be "kept in prison unless we do what Russia has done". Such liberty as they had had before the war, added Mrs Despard, they were now allowing themselves to relinquish.

It was the fourth resolution, however, which was regarded by the press, as Anderson pointed out in moving it, as "the ugly duckling among the resolutions". For this reason he felt it merited the delegates' "special solicitude and support". The resolution called for the establishment in every town, urban and rural district of "Councils of Workmen and Soldiers' Delegates for initiating and co-ordinating working-class activity in support of the policy set out in the foregoing resolution, and to work strenuously for a peace made by the peoples of the various countries, and for the complete political and economic emancipation of international labour". The convenors of the conference were appointed as a Provisional Committee, whose duties were to "assist the formation of the local Workmen's and Soldiers' Councils and generally to give effect to the policy determined by [the] Conference".

If they were to have justice for the soldiers, for the wives and widows of the soldiers, and industrial freedom for the workers, Anderson declared, then workmen and soldiers must join hands. This had been termed revolution. If revolution were the conquest of political power by a hitherto disinherited class, if revolution meant that they would not put up in the future with what they had put up with in the past, then the sooner they had revolution in Britain the better. The organization was not subversive or unconstitutional – "unless", he added, "the authorities care to make it so"; but it would be a "definite challenge to tyranny wherever tyranny [might] show itself". Robert Williams, who seconded the resolution, declared that "if it means anything at all", it meant "that which is contained in the oft used phrase from Socialist platforms: the *dictatorship of the proletariat*" (italics in the original). Parliament, he added, would "do nothing for

you. Parliament has done nothing for you for the whole period of the war. [...] We are competent to speak in the name of our own class, and damn the Constitution. [...] Have as little concern for the British Constitution as the Russians you are praising had for the dynasty of the Romanoffs." It was an "attempt to make a beeline for the Socialist Commonwealth", declared Sylvia Pankhurst. Despite some concern from the floor that the formation of the Councils might be premature or even unnecessary, the resolution was adopted "amid enthusiasm with only two or three dissentients".

Outside Labour journals, press comment on the Convention was disapproving. The *Review of Reviews* assured its readers that the Socialist societies which had called the meeting were "neither very large nor very powerful", and in no way represented the great mass of British labour. The *Leeds Mercury* sourly stated: "the best way to achieve permanent peace would be to pass resolutions urging the troops to pursue unrelenting warfare, and the munitions workers to work ceaselessly to keep the troops supplied". The proceedings had opened with the singing of the *Red Flag*, reported the *Daily Chronicle*, "with its appropriate German tune".¹

Labour comment was naturally more enthusiastic. The meeting had been a success, wrote Snowden, "far beyond the most sanguine expectations of the promoters. It was not only the largest Democratic Congress held in Great Britain since the days of the Chartist agitation", but a "spontaneous expression of the spirit and enthusiasm of the Labour and Democratic movement".² Leeds "meant a change in the social psychology of the British people", according to the Merthyr Tydfil *Pioneer*.³ Lansbury, to whom the meeting had sent a telegram conveying its "best wishes for [a] speedy recovery to full health", received letters from many delegates giving their impressions.⁴ Leeds was splendid, wrote Sylvia Pankhurst. Mrs Despard wrote of "the wonder of Leeds". She had noted a "strong current that is making for peace and open and righteous dealing now"; and at Leeds she had felt it "even more strongly than before". Pethick-Lawrence and his wife "enjoyed the Conference enormously. It was splendid to see such unanimity and enthusiasm." Leeds was "great", wrote A. A. Watts. "There was a fine feeling about the whole show." He added: "I felt on the tingle all day."⁵

¹ *Review of Reviews*, LXI (1917), p. 8; *Leeds Mercury*, 5 June 1917; *Daily Chronicle*, 4 June 1917.

² *Labour Leader*, 7 June 1917.

³ *Merthyr Tydfil Pioneer*, 9 June 1917.

⁴ Telegram of 3 June 1917, *Lansbury Papers*, Vol. 7, No 329, loc. cit.

⁵ Pankhurst to Lansbury, June 1917, No 324; Mrs Despard to Lansbury, 7

What the Convention would mean in terms of a national movement was, however, by no means clear. The meeting had been virtually without debate, and no amendments were accepted for discussion. The delegates, Beatrice Webb noted in her diary, had been "quite incapable of coherent thinking. They were swayed by emotions".¹ Pankhurst and Snowden agreed that the meeting had been composed of a "mass of conglomerate elements, not yet fused, lacking as yet a common policy or plan of action", representing all sections of the Labour and Socialist movement and all shades of Democratic opinion. Nor had the meeting had time for details.²

Noah Ablett, who represented the South Wales miners at the Convention, complained that the delegates had heard ideas which they had heard thousands of times before, and with which they all agreed. What he had not found was "some sort of programme, some sort of practical suggestion of how we are to set up the Councils". The Convention, declared the *Times* on 5 June, had brought together in one hall a thousand or more individuals who were anxious for peace at almost any price. "Curiously diverse in their origin and in their views on other questions, they found themselves united under the banner of pacifism." The meeting had begun no new era and established no new social scheme; its "only tangible product" had been a telegram of some fifty words. Some delegates, at least, were aware of the justice of this criticism. Watts, in his letter to Lansbury after the Convention, noted that "the great thing is for us to get to work. [...] Locally I think we must 'get on with it'."³

The Convention had, nevertheless, adopted four resolutions outlining a policy for the implementation of which the thirteen convenors of the meeting had been declared responsible, as a Provisional Committee. The first three resolutions had aroused practically no opposition, as Smillie told the Convention. The terms of the fourth resolution, however, had called for the establishment of local Councils of Workmen's and Soldiers' Deputies, and had instructed the Provisional Committee to assist in the formation of these Councils. The local Councils were in turn instructed to meet in district conferences to give effect to the policy determined by the conference. Did it follow that

June 1917, No 337; Pethick-Lawrence to Lansbury, 3 June 1917, No 335; A. A. Watts to Lansbury, 15 June 1917, No 348, Lansbury Papers, Vol. 7.

¹ The Diaries of Beatrice Webb, 1912-1924 (London, 1952), p. 88, entry for 7 June 1917.

² Woman's Dreadnought, 9 June 1917, p. 770; Labour Leader, 7 June 1917.

³ Watts to Lansbury, 15 June 1917, No 348, Lansbury Papers, Vol. 7.

the Convention had agreed upon "the extension of the Russian system of Soviets to Britain"?¹

In the first place it should be noted that the functions entrusted to the new Councils were limited and scarcely revolutionary ones. The Councils were required by the terms of the fourth resolution to initiate and co-ordinate working-class activity in support of the previous resolution, to work strenuously for a people's peace, and for the "complete political and economic emancipation of international labour". The Councils were also instructed to "watch diligently for and resist every encroachment upon industrial and civil liberty"; to give "special attention to the position of women employed in industry and generally [to] support the work of the Trade Unions"; to "take active steps to stop the exploitation of food and all other necessaries of life"; to "concern themselves with the questions affecting the pensions of wounded and disabled soldiers and the maintenance grants payable to the dependents of men serving with the Army and Navy"; and to make "adequate provision for the training of disabled soldiers and for suitable and remunerative work for the men on their return to civil life". As Sylvia Pankhurst wrote, this resolution was the "only one which meant action". It foreshadowed (she thought) revolution; yet it concerned itself with "matters of detail which are obviously part and parcel of the present system". It spoke of resisting encroachments upon freedom: while "every worker knows that real freedom we have never had, nor can have under this system". The one specific aim of the councils, added the *New Statesman*, was the laudable but scarcely revolutionary one of looking after the interests of discharged soldiers.²

It was, moreover, in these unpretentious terms that the formation of the Councils had been discussed in the columns of the Labour press in the period preceding the Convention. At Leeds a means must be found, wrote Lansbury, of "setting up committees representative of the people – soldiers and civilians". They must also "imitate Lord Northcliffe and make our voice heard, our wishes known to the Government". This could not be done through a Parliament which had "abdicated its functions". There was no question, he emphasized, of the Leeds Conference "asking anything dishonourable or anything unpatriotic". Workers' and Soldiers' "Committees" should be formed

¹ V. H. Rothwell, *British War Aims and Peace Diplomacy 1914-1918* (Oxford, 1971), p. 97.

² *Woman's Dreadnought*, 9 June 1917, p. 773; *New Statesman*, 9 June 1917, p. 218. Sylvia Pankhurst's journal recommended that the Councils be renamed "Workers', Soldiers' and Housewives' Councils" (*Woman's Dreadnought*, 21 July 1917, p. 807).

in every district, "not for the absurd, ridiculous reasons attributed by the Press, but in order that the working-class may be united".¹ Snowden envisaged the Councils undertaking the task of "combining some of the activities of the various Labour and Democratic bodies". The resolution was a "very harmless" one and "largely unnecessary", he later wrote, since the Councils would duplicate work already being undertaken by the Labour Party and the trade unions.²

The resolution was printed in the Bolsheviks' paper *Pravda*; but the Soviets in Russia were not at this time under their control.³ There is little to indicate, in any case, that the Councils were conceived of as counterparts to the Russian Soviets. The Councils were termed Workmen's and Soldiers' Councils, not Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, which, as Sylvia Pankhurst pointed out, would have been a correct translation of the title of the Russian bodies. Information regarding developments in Russia was in any case hard to obtain. J. T. Murphy, who was present at the Convention, wrote that "no one present had any knowledge whatever of the history of the Russian working-class movement, its party struggles or its leaders". They knew "next to nothing about how Workers' and Soldiers' Councils were constituted and had only the vaguest ideas as to the conditions in which they could and should be formed."⁴

The idea of the establishment of the Councils was, moreover, according to Snowden, that of W. C. Anderson; and it seems unlikely that he envisaged the Councils as British Soviets. It was certainly his expressed opinion shortly after the Convention that the task of the Councils was simply to prepare machinery for the "great rebuilding" which would take place after the war. He disclaimed any intention of "getting the soldiers into trouble"; described as "nonsense" the idea that the movement was pacifist (let alone radical) in character; and indicated that he and his colleagues now felt that it would be best to

¹ Herald, 26 May 1917, p. 8; *ibid.*, 9 June 1917, p. 2.

² Labour Leader, 7 June 1917; P. Snowden, *An Autobiography* (London, 1934), I, p. 456.

³ *Pravda*, 17 May 1917 (old style). Direct support for the Bolsheviks was not envisaged. At a conference in Leicester a delegate called for three cheers for Lenin, which were given "half-heartedly". The chairman pointed out that "they did not want that, as they were neither Leninites nor Kerenskyites, and such incidents would give their opponents an opportunity of misrepresenting them" (*Leicester Pioneer*, 3 August 1917).

⁴ *Woman's Dreadnought*, 9 June 1917, p. 773; J. T. Murphy, *Preparing for Power* (London, 1972), p. 152, and *New Horizons* (London, 1941), p. 63. This view is endorsed in H. Pollitt, *Serving my Time* (London, 1950), p. 91.

obtain the government's consent to the formation of the Councils before proceeding further.¹

Snowden reported to the ILP National Executive at the end of June on recent developments. There was general agreement upon five points: the Workmen's and Soldiers' Council should be constituted as a war emergency organization; it must not interfere with or limit the work of any existing organization; it must not be allowed to dissipate the energies of members of the party; it should be a co-ordinating body locally; and the National Council should be mainly an advisory body.² A week later the Provisional Committee, providing details with regard to the formation of the local Councils, stated that there must be no attempt on their part to "encroach upon or supersede organizations already established. All friction must be avoided [...] and overlapping must be eliminated as far as possible." A further communication in October, representing the views of the National Council regarding the objectives of the movement, declared that the local Council must serve "primarily as a propagandist body, not as a rival to, or to supplant any of, the existing working-class organizations, but to infuse into them a more active sense of liberty". It should attempt to influence public opinion by means of meetings and leaflets, with a view to the ultimate establishment of a Labour government.³ There was no suggestion that the Councils might provide a means of focussing working-class energies with a view to the overthrow of the capitalist order: nor that they should attempt in any way to assume quasi-governmental functions.

It might perhaps be objected that while this was indeed the role which the ILP section intended the Councils to play, the BSP section had rather more radical aims in mind. The BSP certainly claimed subsequently that had other sections displayed the same spirit and enthusiasm, the Workmen's and Soldiers' Councils "would have been well established by now".⁴ Some rivalry does appear to have existed between the two bodies, the presence of which may have limited the effectiveness of the Provisional Committee.⁵ The objection seems nevertheless a misconceived one. In the first place, the ILP was the

¹ P. Snowden, *An Autobiography*, I, p. 455; *Manchester Guardian*, 30 July 1917, p. 6; G. Elton, *Life of James Ramsay MacDonald* (London, 1939), p. 322.

² ILP, NAC minutes, 30 June 1917, p. 222, loc. cit.

³ *Woman's Dreadnought*, 7 July 1917, p. 795; *Herald*, 27 October 1917, p. 10.

⁴ BSP, *Annual Report*, 1918, p. 43, quoted in W. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-1921* (London, 1969), p. 379, note 43.

⁵ The ILP's warning is contained in the *Labour Leader*, 5 July 1917. See also G. Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 188.

dominating element in the movement, and it was to this extent beside the point for the BSP to complain that its proposals had been overruled. At the Convention itself there were more than three times as many representatives from the ILP as from the BSP; and within the Provisional Committee the ILP had a similar preponderance.¹

Quelch suggested in the BSP's journal that as the causes of discontent grew in intensity, and as the revolutionary urge deepened and gathered strength, the local Councils might become more "aggressively Socialist". The following week, however, he suggested no more – were the local Councils to achieve "complete local solidarity" – than that the next Parliamentary election might witness the return to the House of Commons of a majority of working-class representatives.² It seems clear, moreover, that BSP spokesmen differed little in substance from those of the ILP with regard to the issues with which the Convention should concern itself. The BSP's Annual Conference in April adopted a resolution which pledged the party to "act in the spirit of the Russian Revolution". This was interpreted, however, as "endeavouring to arouse the British working class to a sense of the despotism and militarism which are growing up in this country", and attempting to bring about the end of the war on "terms involving no annexations, and no humiliation to any country": or in other words, by achieving a "people's peace". The party's journal saw Leeds as a call to "shake off the bloody nightmare of the war and to stand up for the cause of Peace and Liberty among the nations".³ Mrs Montefiore, who supported the first resolution on the BSP's behalf, declared that their duty was to ensure that the peace was not made by materialists. The working-class movement, which had the power to end the war and establish peace, had also the power to "bring in the Co-operative Commonwealth"; but this, she indicated, was a task to be undertaken only after the war had ended. No BSP speaker suggested that it might be possible to end an imperialist war only through socialist revolution.

For common to the BSP and the ILP was the conviction that, as Snowden put it, the "immediate question" was the "settlement of the war by an honourable peace on the lines set forth by the Russian Democratic Government". It was in this sense that the call had been issued to "follow Russia". The resolution by "organized democratic forces" of industrial and social problems was an important, but

¹ Kendall, *op. cit.*, suggests incorrectly that the Convention elected a nine-man Provisional Committee. The names of the thirteen members and two secretaries are recorded in *What Happened at Leeds*, p. 2.

² Call, 21 and 28 June 1917.

³ Call, 12 April 1917, p. 4, and 31 May 1917.

“postwar” and therefore subsidiary task. The democracy of Britain should bring influence to bear upon the Government as the Russian people had done: this was the only way in which the war could be brought to an end and an enduring peace established. To end the war was, moreover, the most effective way to work against conscription and to defeat the attacks upon industrial and civil liberties.¹

Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that the promoters of the Convention had desired to concentrate the opinions and will of the people upon peace; and “peace was of all words the most popular”.² They wished, Smillie told the gathering, to concentrate the opinion and will of the people upon peace. When peace came, it would be a peace by negotiation, and such a peace could be made only by the common people. (He did not favour, however, the making of a separate peace by the Russians.) The meeting proved, Snowden believed, that the movement for ending the war was becoming more powerful. The reception of the speeches “very clearly indicated”, reported the Glasgow Trades Council delegates, that those present and the “vast majority of those they represented were tired of the war”. Labour, they considered, had “awakened to the horror of it” and was now “demanding a people’s peace without annexation and indemnity”.³

Writers in the labour press were of the same opinion. The Convention, the *Leicester Pioneer* declared in an editorial, had stood for the “vast body of public opinion that is ‘fed up’ with the war, and which resolutely believes that only further national discomfort and disaster can follow any lengthy prolongation of hostilities. [...] There is an intense longing for peace among the people.” A former secretary of the Leicester ILP held in the same issue that the Convention had “focussed public opinion on the question of peace”. It would act, he thought, as the “turning-point on the kind of peace settlement we are to have”. The *Bradford Pioneer* shared these views: “there can be no doubt now of the fact that the British Democracy [is] sick and weary of the war

¹ Forward, 2 June 1917; Herald, 2 June 1917, p. 7; Labour Leader, 31 May 1917; P. Snowden, *Labour in Chains* (London, 1917), p. 16. W. C. Anderson was at this time the President of the National Council of Civil Liberties, Smillie was one of its Vice-Presidents, and Mrs Snowden was the organization’s Honorary Treasurer. The objects of the NCCL coincided closely with the third resolution on civil liberties (M. Farbman, *The Russian Revolution and the War* (London, 1917), p. 47). Of some 1,020 affiliated bodies in August 1917, 20 were national trade unions, 164 were Trades Councils and Labour Parties, and 376 were local trade union branches or other industrial, political and social organizations (NCCL, Circular of August 1917, Edinburgh Central ILP, Correspondence 1917, loc. cit.).

² *Woman’s Dreadnought*, 9 June 1917, p. 770.

³ Labour Leader, 7 June 1917; Glasgow Trades Council, minutes, 6 June 1917, loc. cit.

[and] has lost faith in the capacity or desire of its Government to end it." These sentiments were echoed by a delegate from the Spen Valley Trades Council, who reported that the working class was "sick and tired of the war and thought it was time it was ended".¹

Indeed the "most striking feature" of the proceedings, the *U.D.C.* commented, "was their moderation". There had never been any question of advocating or suggesting a physical force revolution, Lansbury stated. There was, he thought, a "more excellent method of securing Labour's aims". The Councils should for this purpose serve as a "unifying force throughout the land, drawing to themselves all the men and women who wish to work for a better Britain after the war and an early peace".² The Convention gave a "moral impetus" towards this end; and reflected a "growing adherence to the view that there [could] be no moral victory, no knock-out blow".³

The Convention's decision to attempt to organize soldiers as well as civilians aroused some opposition within as well as outside the labour movement. Henderson, for instance, declared that if the Councils were to be formed on the model of those in Russia, with the same possible consequences, there would be no harder fighter against it than himself. He had seen quite enough of the consequences of such a course of action in Russia. What had happened there had shown the "folly of allowing an army, as an army, to take part in political discussions, and this ought to be a warning to us". He would "fight most strongly against any course of action which [would] paralyse our military force as it [had] paralysed the military force of Russia".⁴ Yet no attempt was made, or appears to have been intended, to organize actively among the armed forces or to weaken military discipline in any way. The resolution, Anderson emphasized in moving it, was "not intended to be subversive of military responsibilities". The revolution dealt with no more than the questions of the pensions of wounded and disabled soldiers and the allowances of the dependants of servicemen, and for the training of soldiers for civilian occupations. The linking of the civilian element with the military, the *Times* commented on 4 June, had not yet begun and "not the slightest inkling" had been given of how it was to be accomplished. Indeed the refusal of pacifists to serve in the armed forces, J. T. Murphy noted, kept them more free

¹ Leicester Pioneer, 8 June 1917; Bradford Pioneer, 8 June 1917.

² F. S. Cocks in The *U.D.C.*, 9 July 1917, p. 103; Herald, 8 September 1917, p. 2.

³ Herald, 9 June 1917, p. 8. The editorial comment in the *Times* was predictably hostile. The object of the meeting, it was held, was really to "stop the war". The organizers would then embark upon a "domestic war"; but even the *Times* did not suggest that this would be other than "afterwards" (4 June 1917).

⁴ Industrial Peace, Vol. 1, No 29, October 1917.

of the propaganda of class war than if the government had designed a plan for that purpose. There was "no evidence of the existence at that time of any attempt to permeate the armed forces with revolutionary ideas".¹

The inclusion of soldiers within the work of the Councils reflected, in fact, more than anything else the concern of the ILP to demonstrate that, while opposed to the war itself, it had done everything possible to improve the conditions of the "soldier and the sailor, and for those who were and are dependent upon him". The ILP, it was claimed, had carried on with "tireless energy the campaign to secure a greater measure of justice to the dependants of soldiers in an increased scale of allowances and pensions". ILP MPs had dealt with numerous individual cases privately: Snowden, for example, had handled over seven thousand, and MacDonald three thousand from his own constituency alone.²

A joint conference of Poplar Trades Council and the League of Rights for Soldiers and Sailors was held two months before the Leeds Convention in London.³ It showed, the *Herald* suggested, that the forces at work on behalf of "our broken soldiers and sailors" were gaining in strength. The meeting was presided over by Lansbury, who was elected chairman of a Provisional Committee. Sylvia Pankhurst was elected honorary secretary of the new body. A resolution was unanimously adopted to the effect that a "Central Organization be formed for the purpose of safeguarding the interests of soldiers and sailors and their wives and relatives and discharged soldiers, and that a provisional committee be elected to draft a Constitution for such a body". It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the Council of Workmen's and Soldiers' Delegates became precisely the central organization envisaged in the resolution. It undertook, certainly, the same responsibilities, and was under the same direction.

The Council did undertake propaganda among the soldiers and sailors, and a number of Soldiers' Councils existed for short periods. At Tunbridge Wells an attempt was made among soldiers awaiting demobilization to organize support for a local Soviet, but apparently with no great success.⁴ A unit stationed at Sevenoaks also sought to establish a Soldiers' Council, as a means of "representing the views of the rank and file to the commanding officers". But the movement, it

¹ J. T. Murphy, *Preparing for Power*, pp. 106, 107.

² C. J. Bundock, *The ILP and the Soldier* (London, 1918), pp. 4, 10, 12.

³ *Herald*, 31 March 1917, p. 6 (all references to this meeting are derived from this source unless otherwise stated). The 189 delegates represented Labour bodies in the main, including 89 London trades councils.

⁴ B. Thompson, *Queer People* (London, 1922), p. 283.

was reported, “fell very flat”: the unit was called overseas “where they had other things to think about”.¹ To what extent these developments were attributable to propaganda undertaken by the Council and its local affiliates is in any case unclear: there was considerably greater unrest among the armed forces (as reflected, for instance, in disciplinary offences) than during the first two years of the war; and it had been the purport of the resolution to establish Workmen’s and Soldiers’, not separate Soldiers’ Councils. Propaganda leaflets distributed among the armed forces declared that the Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Council would “take steps to promote a public opinion favourable to freedom of association for soldiers”, and to their right to be properly represented. Pending changes in the Army Regulations, however, it was stated that the Councils would “confine their activities to men discharged from the Army”.²

These developments were a source of understandable concern to the government. On 24 May the Ministry of Labour’s periodic report on the labour situation noted that at meetings in Glasgow and elsewhere the “wildest peace talk appeared to have been received with general acclamation”. The Leeds conference, which had been called “in favour of definite action to secure peace”, had not, it was reported, itself adopted the catchword of “peace without annexations or indemnities”, but the “whole trend of the notice calling a conference proves the organisers to be in sympathy with this cry”.³ The Cabinet was informed the following day by Lloyd George that a “large Labour, Socialistic and Democratic Conference” was to be held at Leeds, with a view, among other things, to “establishing in Great Britain a Council of Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Delegates, on the lines of the one now in existence in Russia”. The meeting was widely known already, and the Cabinet decided that it would accordingly be undesirable to take any steps to suppress further advertisements, or to prohibit the meeting itself, “although it was of such a revolutionary character”. The Secretary of State for War was, however, charged to ensure that no soldiers in uniform attended.⁴

It was too late, Milner wrote to Lloyd George on 1 June, to stop the Leeds meeting; but there might still be time to “instruct the Press [...] not to ‘boom’ the Leeds proceedings too much”. Meanwhile the time was “very near at hand”, he considered, when they would “have to take some strong steps to stop the ‘rot’ in this country, unless we

¹ B. Thomson, “Bolshevism in England”, 23 December 1917, FO 371/3300, paper 212521 of 28 December 1918, Public Record Office, London.

² J. M. Kenworthy, *Soldiers, Sailors and Others* (London, 1936), p. 100.

³ Cabinet Paper GT 832, Cab 24/14, Public Record Office, London.

⁴ WC 147, 25 May 1917, conclusion 11, Cab 23/3.

wish to 'follow Russia' into impotence and dissolution".¹ The Cabinet decided on 5 June, prompted, no doubt, by the Leeds meeting, that the "time had come to undertake an active campaign to counteract the pacifist movement, which at present had the field to itself". A National War Aims Committee was established later in the month.² The Cabinet was informed in July that efforts were being made to "induce soldiers to interest themselves actively in political agitation of a character likely to weaken the discipline of the Army. Cases had already occurred where meetings had been convened and addressed by soldiers." Efforts were being made in various parts of the country to encourage serving soldiers to form committees, which had been successful in a number of cases. Soldiers appeared, also, to have become involved in a meeting held in connection with the Workmen's and Soldiers' Councils. It was agreed that soldiers could not be given permission to join the Councils.³

The government regarded the Councils movement with greater concern than Lloyd George was subsequently prepared to admit.⁴ It was nevertheless true that, apart from a general effort to stiffen morale on the home front, the government need attempt to oppose the Councils movement only to the extent to which it appeared to be prepared to go beyond the limited and pacific proposals of its sponsors. Lansbury, at least, professed a concern to focus the energies of the councils upon domestic social change. At Leeds, he wrote, they had celebrated the triumphant Russian revolution, and pledged themselves to work for the social salvation of the people. He put forward a "New Charter for the workers" as a "translation into plain facts and policies of the enthusiasm of that Convention".⁵ It represented a programme of reforms for which the new Workers' and Soldiers' Council should work, as a "logical interpretation of the resolutions adopted at the Leeds Conference". They meant "*something like this* or nothing at all". Leeds had been a "*Conference, not a Demonstration*"; it had been called to inaugurate action, not to talk; and if it failed to do so it would have

¹ Milner to Lloyd George, 1 June 1917, Lloyd George Papers F/38/2/8, Beaverbrook Library, London.

² WC 154, 5 June 1917, conclusion 22, Cab 23/3.

³ WC 200, 31 July 1917, conclusion 1, Cab 23/3; Cabinet Paper GT 1522, "Formation of Soldiers' and Sailors' Committees", 26 July 1917, Cab 24/21.

⁴ In his War Memoirs, IV (London, 1934), p. 1948, he wrote that he "thought it would be a mistake to treat it too seriously. [...] The leaders were mostly men of the type which think something is actually done when you assert vociferously that it must be done."

⁵ Herald circular, 28 June 1917, Lansbury Papers, Vol. 7, No 359.

failed altogether. "But", he added hopefully, "it will not fail."¹

The Charter was founded upon the principle of ownership by the state and management by the workers. It provided for increases in soldiers' pay, for the right of free speech, the right to strike, and for the freedom of the press. Negotiations were to be instituted at once to end the war upon a basis of no annexations and no indemnities. "Better homes and better pubs" were required; and the conscription of wealth was demanded (in support of which the Eighth Commandment was cited). In general Lansbury expressed concern lest discontent, which was "seething all over the place", should break out in "undirected and sporadic forms". The Council had a "great patriotic task" to perform in saving the nation from the danger of such a disaster by insisting that the causes of unrest be removed.²

Whatever Lansbury's motives for the proposal of a Workers' Charter, however, his initiative remained dependent upon the extent to which the machinery set up by the Convention became effective. The extent to which it did so has generally been understated. It has been suggested, for instance, that the Convention "had no sequel. No British Soviets or Councils of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies were founded and even the Provisional Committee elected by the conference soon broke up." The Convention, it has been stated, "took place almost *in vacuo* and nothing more was heard of the Soldiers' and Workers' [sic] Councils except on the Clyde", and that the Provisional Committee never met.³ District conferences of the Workmen's and Soldiers' Councils did in fact take place in most areas, in order to elect thirteen members to the Provisional Committee. The Provisional Committee also met, and at least one meeting of the full National Council was held. It remained true, however, that the Committee did not sit, as Sylvia Pankhurst had urged, from day to day, as Parliament did (a revolution, she noted, was "not [...] a thing which can be carried on as a spare-time occupation"⁴); and the district meetings met in many cases with considerable opposition. The role of the Councils became increasingly marginal.

The *Herald* announced at the end of June that the Provisional Committee was about to issue a general manifesto. When the thirteen members chosen by the district conferences were added to their number, thus making up the full National Council, they would "doubt-

¹ *Herald*, 23 June 1917, pp. 3 and 7 (editorial).

² *Herald*, 23 June 1917, pp. 8-9, 28 July 1917, p. 7, and 30 June 1917, pp. 8-9.

³ A. Bullock, *Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, I, p. 76 (similarly R. Postgate, *The Life of George Lansbury*, p. 170); R. K. Middlemas, *The Clydesiders*, p. 75; B. Thomson, *The Scene Changes* (London, 1939), p. 283.

⁴ *Woman's Dreadnought*, 9 June 1917, p. 773.

less put forward a more definite programme". A *Manifesto to the District Conferences* was issued a week later. It professed to seek the support of "lovers of freedom" and "men and women of goodwill" in order to "prevent the further loss of liberty, to recover the ground already lost, to attack Governmental and all other forms of tyranny, and to quicken the responsibility and power of democracy". "Close alliance and solidarity" was sought with the Russian democracy, but "not in any narrow or exclusive sense", for "every people must work out their own salvation in their own way". The present hour did not call immediately for the making of programmes; but when the full Council of 26 was assembled, a "full statement of immediate aims and objects" would be forthcoming. Meanwhile "such a volume of clear-thinking public opinion" should be created as would compel the British government to fall in with the Russian war aims.¹ A fortnight later, it was announced that the district conferences had all been arranged (Ireland being omitted for the time being owing to the rise of Sinn Fein), and that they were "calling forth a response from the workers without precedent in the history of the workingclass movement".² Two resolutions were submitted for adoption by each conference. The first hailed the Russian revolution and called for a peace without annexations or indemnities; and the second called for the formation of local Councils, based where possible upon local Trades Councils, to work for the implementation of the Leeds resolutions.³

The response to the call to hold district conferences demonstrated the extent to which the enthusiasm of the Convention had already been dissipated. The delay in holding the district conferences, wrote the Merthyr Tydfil *Pioneer* on 21 July, had been "unfortunately protracted". As a result of this "long debilitating lapse [...] the spirit that Leeds evoked [had] died down". Many local bodies declined to attend the district meetings. The London Trades Council decided not to be represented at the London district conference "until the German Democracy [had] put themselves into line with the Russian Democracy". Bristol ILP members were reassured that there was "no intention of forming a new organization".⁴

Attempts were being made, moreover, Quelch noted, to place

¹ Workers' and Soldiers' Council, *Manifesto to the District Conferences*, National Library of Scotland (printed in the *Herald*, 7 July 1917).

² *Herald*, 21 July 1917, p. 16. A list of the locations and dates of the District Conferences was printed in the *Times*, 25 July 1917.

³ Workers' and Soldiers' Council, Circular of 12 July 1917, National Library of Scotland (printed in the *Woman's Dreadnought*, 14 July 1917, p. 802, and in the *Times*, 25 July 1917).

⁴ London Trades Council, minutes, 12 July 1917; Bristol ILP, minutes, 1 August 1917, British Library of Political and Economic Science.

obstacles in the way of the movement. He promised that the district conferences would nevertheless be held as arranged. Three conferences had been successfully held, he was able to report on 2 August, at Norwich, Bristol and Leicester; but there had been trouble at London, Swansea and Newcastle.¹ In Swansea, a “passion-inflamed mob” disrupted the meeting, wounded some delegates and caused extensive damage. The police were conspicuous by their absence. In Newcastle, the Property Committee of the City Council refused to allow use to be made of the Town Hall, on the ground that “disorder might take place”. The meeting was held on 28 July under the chairmanship of Mr Weir of the Northumberland Miners. Outsiders broke in, however, and stormed the platform. Colonial soldiers and a naval figure attempted to address the meeting, leading to its premature dissolution in what was described as a “wild scene”.²

Arrangements which had been made to book halls in Leeds, Manchester and Southampton were unexpectedly cancelled; and at Birmingham the Lord Mayor and Chief Constable, acting with the authority of the Home Office, issued an order prohibiting a meeting of the Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Council which had been arranged for 11 August.³ “Lively scenes” took place, according to the *Times*’ correspondent, at Southport, where the Conference intended for Manchester was eventually held. A hostile crowd attempted to rush the building where the meeting was taking place, and was forced back “only after a lively struggle”. Several delegates, including women, were subsequently assaulted by the crowd as they left the building.⁴

It was decided to hold an All Scotland Conference in Glasgow on 11 August, rather than two district Conferences as provided for by the circular of 15 June. The Magistrates, however, sought the authority of the Secretary of State for Scotland to issue an Order prohibiting the meeting under the provisions of the Defence of the Realm Act. They quoted “apprehension of grave disorder arising”, and the need to provide 200 police, which they regarded as an “undue demand” upon their resources. Glasgow Trades Council represented that the meeting would not be a public one and that only accredited delegates would be admitted.⁵ The matter was discussed by the Cabinet two days later. The Secretary of State was authorised to prohibit the Glasgow meeting, and it was agreed that an announcement should be

¹ Call, 19 July and 2 August 1917; Labour Leader, 9 August 1917.

² Merthyr Tydfil Pioneer, 4 August 1917; Times, 26 and 30 July 1917.

³ Herald, 11 August 1917; Times, 2, 8 and 16 August 1917.

⁴ Times, 13 August 1917.

⁵ Cabinet Paper GT 1625, “Proposed Prohibition of Meeting at Glasgow, 6 August 1917”, Cab 24/22; Glasgow Trades Council, minutes, 6 August 1917.

made in Parliament, not before the Secretary of State's communication, that the government "regarded the objects of such meetings as illegal, and would not permit them to be held".¹

Glasgow Trades Council had agreed at its meeting on 6 August that should the conference be prohibited, a public protest demonstration would be held on Glasgow Green. A sub-committee was appointed to "deal with any emergencies that may arise". "Quite four thousand", it was subsequently reported, had attended the protest demonstration. MacDonald and E. C. Fairchild addressed the meeting on behalf of the Provisional Committee; and the proceedings had been "very enthusiastic" with "not the slightest semblance of disorder". The organizers held a meeting "in Glasgow somewhere" and agreed that a Local Committee be set up on the lines of the Workmen's and Soldiers' Council, and that the conference should still be held on as early a date as possible. It proved impossible, however, to obtain premises in which to hold the conference, and a postal ballot to elect representatives to the Provisional Committee had eventually to be arranged.² Representation on the Glasgow Council was enlarged, an attempt was to be made to form an Information Bureau, and it was announced that the Council was "making arrangements with a view to making the organization really effective locally". It appears, however, to have undertaken no further activity.³

The most spectacular affray occurred, however, at the district conference in London on 28 July. The meeting was to be private, and the organizers declared that they expected no violence. Arrangements had nevertheless been made to hold the meeting, which had been arranged for the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, in another place should this prove necessary. The owners of the Memorial Hall cancelled the booking, and the meeting was held at the Brotherhood Church, Hackney. The location of the conference was publicized by the *Daily Express*, and leaflets were distributed in pubs in neighbouring areas, where bombs had fallen in the most recent air raid, suggesting that the delegates were in communication with the Germans and had signalled to them where to drop their bombs. Bertrand Russell, who was a delegate, recalled that this "made us somewhat unpopular in the neighbourhood". The result was what Snowden described as the "worst riot seen in London for years".

Shortly before the meeting was due to begin, two or three hundred men, led by overseas soldiers, entered the church singing *Rule Britannia*.

¹ WC 207, 8 August 1917, conclusion 6, Cab 23/3.

² Glasgow Trades Council, minutes, 6 and 15 August, 5 and 11 September 1917.

³ Glasgow Labour Party, minutes, 2 October 1917, and Glasgow ILP Federation, Executive Council minutes, 5 and 19 October 1917, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

A Canadian corporal, the leader of the assault, climbed on top of the organ gallery and urged the audience to remember that they were in the house of God. He then secured the "adoption" of a pro-war resolution, and led the singing of *Rule Britannia* and the *National Anthem*, for which the delegates were compelled to stand. The interior of the church was wrecked, it was reported, as if a bomb had exploded there, and some of the delegates (many of whom, noted the *Times* correspondent, were "bearded men of foreign cast") were injured.¹

Not the least remarkable aspect of the proceedings was the fact the police had "looked on calmly" while damage to person and property was being committed. While pacifist meetings were sometimes attacked, the *New Statesman* observed, one was entitled to expect that when such a meeting, quite legally, was held, the authorities would show a little more interest in the preservation of order. The only arrest which was made at the time was of a NUR member, who had not been a delegate to the conference but had been sent by this union as an observer. He had attempted to defend himself but had nevertheless been badly injured. He was taken to a police station, these circumstances notwithstanding, and charged with "insulting words and behaviour". The magistrate at the North London Police Court told him that "such 'peace meetings' should not be allowed. [He] would have done better had he avoided the meeting."²

These methods, Quelch declared, represented a direct challenge to the Councils. It would be answered: their cause thrived on opposition. The work of the Councils, Lansbury added, would go on.³ It proved, nevertheless, impossible to hold the London Conference elsewhere, and as at Glasgow and as also at Newcastle and Swansea, a postal ballot had to be held to select the two representatives for the Provisional Committee.⁴ Local bodies in the country showed no greater determination. Sheffield Trades and Labour Council agreed in August to call a special meeting of working-class organizations to set up a local Council, since the government had banned the meeting which was due to have taken place at Leeds. The following meeting, however, decided that the decision should be held "in abeyance". The executive

¹ *Times*, 27, 28 and 30 July 1917; *Woman's Dreadnought*, 14 August 1917; B. Russell, *Autobiography*, II (London, 1968), p. 31; P. Snowden, *An Autobiography*, I, p. 456; *Times*, 30 July 1917.

² Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 32; *New Statesman*, 4 August 1917; *Times*, 30 July 1917. Three persons were subsequently arrested and charged with causing £500 worth of damage to the Church. They pleaded guilty. They received no punishment, however, the magistrate observing that "persons who let halls for such meetings ought to expect trouble" (*Times*, 13 and 22 August 1917).

³ Call, 2 and 9 August 1917; *Herald*, 4 August 1917, p. 5.

⁴ Call, 23 August 1917; *Merthyr Tydfil Pioneer*, 8 September 1917.

decided the following month that the time was “not opportune” to call a special conference.¹ Liverpool Trades Council decided on 26 September that “the case was not ripe at the moment for further action”. Following a report of the Stockport meeting a week later, the Liverpool LRC resolved to “take no action to form a Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council at present”.² Leeds Trades Council considered a “lengthy communication” from the district representative of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council on 24 October. It was unanimously resolved that the propaganda work of the Council “can and will be done best by the existing Labour organizations”.³

The central body had no greater success. Tom Quelch had been appointed Secretary with offices at 4 Duke Street, Adelphi, in London. The expenses of propaganda and rent (sixteen shillings weekly) were met, Home Office intelligence reported, from subscriptions raised by the *Herald* and from donations. After a month, however, Quelch received notice to quit and he joined the Army, from which time the Council had no fixed central address. Quelch was eventually arrested as a deserter on 12 September.⁴

It had still not proved possible to bring together the full National Council. A list of delegates so far elected appeared in the *Call* on 4 October, some four months after the Convention, and it was announced that a full meeting of the Council would be held the following week at which the policy of the Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Council would be formulated and a “vigorous campaign instituted”. Following the election of the two Scottish representatives, a meeting of the full National Council was eventually held. It was the National Council’s first, and apparently its last meeting. A seven-point statement of the objects of the Council was adopted, which declared that the Council had been formed “primarily as a propagandist body, not as a rival to, or to supplant any of, the existing working-class organizations; but to infuse into them a more active spirit of liberty”. A “vigorous campaign” was “about to be inaugurated”.⁵

It was nevertheless MacDonald’s conclusion, in his report on the meeting to the ILP’s National Executive, that there “did not appear to be much prospect of activity on the part of the Council”.⁶ Govern-

¹ Sheffield Trades and Labour Council, delegate meeting minutes, 28 August 1917, and executive meeting minutes, 25 September 1917, Sheffield Trades and Labour Council.

² Liverpool Trades Council, minutes, 26 September 1917, and LRC minutes, 3 October 1917, Public Library, Liverpool.

³ Leeds Trades Council, executive committee minutes, 24 October 1917.

⁴ B. Thomson, “Bolshevism in England”, loc. cit.; *Herald*, 11 August 1917, p. 6.

⁵ *Call*, 25 October 1917; *Herald* and *Merthyr Tydfil Pioneer*, 27 October 1917.

⁶ ILP, NAC minutes, 26 October 1917, p. 231.

ment intelligence agreed that workers were losing interest in the Councils. By the middle of October, concluded Basil Thomson, "it was possible to report that the Workmen's and Soldiers' Council movement was moribund".¹ The editor of the *Yorkshire Factory Times* reported in December that he had been "wondering for a considerable time" what had occurred "in connection with the great conference held in Leeds [...]. Somehow or other it does not seem to have gripped the public."²

This was not the last to be heard of Soviets or Councils in Britain. The formation of a Soviet for the West of Scotland was proposed at the end of 1918. Glasgow Trades Council decided, however, to take no part in the conference which was to establish it,³ and the proposal failed to arouse the enthusiasm evident at Leeds. For the Workmen's and Soldiers' Council movement had been the product of special circumstances. It was in its essence an organization formed in order to press for a negotiated settlement of the war rather than for revolutionary social change or "dual power". As such, it could have a role to play only so long as official Labour bodies remained committed to the Coalition government and to a "fight to a finish". Indeed there would have been no immediate need for the Leeds Convention, the *Socialist Review* believed, had not the trade union MPs and the majority of the Labour Party executive "abrogated their functions and scrapped their Labour Party principles".⁴

The Labour Party executive resolved on 18 July that it had "nothing to do with the Leeds Convention", and that in its opinion "no local organization affiliated to the Labour Party ought to convene Conferences which are not in harmony with the general policy of the Party as laid down in its Annual Conferences", which was that of a fight until victory had been achieved.⁵ This underestimated, however, the strength of feeling which now existed, and of which Leeds, almost unexpectedly, gave evidence, in favour of a negotiated peace. Leeds represented, according to the *Socialist Review*, an "unmistakable and warning sign of the spreading feeling of Labour revolt in the country", a revolt which was reflected in widespread industrial unrest and in a

¹ Cabinet Paper GT 1660, Report on the Labour Situation, 9 August 1917, Cab 24/22; Thomson, "Bolshevism in England", loc. cit.

² *Yorkshire Factory Times*, 13 December 1917.

³ Glasgow Trades Council, minutes, 18 December 1918.

⁴ *Socialist Review*, XIV (1917), p. 199.

⁵ Labour Party, NEC minutes, 18 July 1917, Labour Party, London (printed in the *Yorkshire Factory Times*, 26 July 1917). The Scottish TUC Parliamentary Committee refused to participate in the Glasgow District Conference (minutes, 4 August 1917, STUC, Glasgow).

withdrawal of support from official Labour and union leadership.¹

The expulsion of Henderson from the government in August allowed the Labour Party to recapture a measure of political independence and to contain this movement. The pressure for a negotiated peace in labour circles, moreover, now became absorbed into the proposal to summon the Stockholm Conference of Allied, neutral and enemy socialists to elaborate a common socialist policy on the war and other issues. This was a debate which was conducted almost entirely at special Conferences of the Labour Party. Leeds, the ILP executive reported the following year, “undoubtedly gave an impetus to the Movement for summoning the International”.² By the same token, however, it necessarily contributed to its own demise. Leeds was left only as an example of what *Forward* termed the “complicated attempts to exploit the [Russian] Revolution in the interests of Western pacifism”.³

¹ *Socialist Review*, XIV, p. 199.

² ILP, Annual Conference Report, 1918, p. 31.

³ *Forward*, 22 September 1917.