THE FAILURE OF SOCIALIST UNITY IN BRITAIN c. 1893–1914

By Keith Laybourn

READ 25 SEPTEMBER 1993 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

SOCIALIST unity became an issue for the British left within a year of the formation of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1884. The secession of William Morris and his supporters from the SDF and the formation of the Socialist League in reaction to the autocratic leadership of Henry Mayers Hyndman brought about a fundamental division within British socialism. Subsequently the creation of other socialist parties, most particularly the Independent Labour Party (ILP) led to further disunity within the British socialist movement. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the proliferation of British socialist societies with their distinctive socialist credentials, there were several attempts to form a united socialist party between 1893 and 1914. They were normally encouraged, on the one hand, by advocates of the 'religion of socialism' such as William Morris, Robert Blatchford and Victor Grayson, and, on the other, by Hyndman and the SDF. The aim of these efforts was to strengthen socialist organisation in times of both political failure and success, but in every instance they failed due to the intractable problem of bringing together socialists of distinctively different persuasions under the umbrella of one party. These failures have led recent historians to debate two major questions connected with socialist unity. First, they have asked at what point did socialist unity cease to be a viable alternative to the Labour Alliance between the ILP and the trade unions? Stephen Yeo feels that socialist unity became impossible after the mid 1890s, David Howell suggests that this 'suppressed alternative' became unlikely about five to ten years later, as the leaders of the Independent Labour Party opted for the trade union rather than socialist alliance, whilst Martin Crick feels that socialist unity was still a viable alternative to at least 1911, if not 1914, when a determined effort was made to form the British Socialist Party, the one socialist party and forerunner of the Communist Part of Great Britain.[1] Thus

[1] D. Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888–1906* (1984), 389–97; S. Yeo, 'A New Life; The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883–1896', *History Workshops Journal*, IV (Autumn, 1977), 5–56; M. Crick, 'A Call to Arms'; the Struggle for Socialist Unity in Britain, 1883–1914', in *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (eds.) D. James, T. Jowitt and K. Laybourn (1992), 181–204.

the dates of 1895, 1900 to 1906 or 1911 are offered as the alternative years when the prospects of socialist unity in Britain reached a watershed. Historians have been equally divided on the second, and related, question of why was socialist unity not achieved? In particular, they have focused upon two subsidiary questions. First, why did the Independent Labour Party choose the Alliance with trade unions and parliamentary-route way to power rather than socialist unity? Secondly, how important was the intransigence and narrowness of the Social Democratic Federation in thwarting moves towards socialist unity? Some writers have noted the steadfast opposition of the ILP leadership as the main problem whilst others have focused upon the inflexible and domineering nature of Henry Mayers Hyndman and the quasi-Marxist Social Democratic Federation, offering the 'image of the Social Democratic Federation as a narrow and dogmatic sect unsuited to the rigours of British politics'.[2]

This paper will argue that there was little real prospect of socialist unity being achieved in Britain after the mid 1890s and that the reason for the failure of socialist unity campaigns is to be found in the diverse and compromising nature of the ILP and the continued intransigence of the SDF, or Social Democratic Party as it became in 1907. Even if the domineering influence of Hyndman has been blown up out of proportion into a marvellous myth, it is clear that even in 1912 his antipathy towards industrial action, amongst other issues, still prevented the newly-formed British Socialist Party, the 'one united socialist party', from presenting any type of common front for British socialism. If anyone doubts the inflexibility of the leadership of SDF/SDP then they have to explain away the conflicts and tensions evident in the failure of the BSP between 1911 and 1914, particularly with regard to syndicalism, strike action, defence and foreign policy.

As Yeo suggests, by the mid 1890s, with the political failure of the ILP in the general election of 1895 which Beatrice Webb dubbed 'the most expensive funeral since Napoleon'[3], Keir Hardie and other ILP leaders were forced to choose between the business of 'making socialists' and the need to make a political party. Up the 1890s socialism was in the business of 'making socialists' and it did not matter which socialist organisation an individual belonged to. Yeo argues that, after the 1895 general election and the death of William Morris on 1896, the ILP and other socialist groups chose to become entrenched in a trade-union

[2] Howell, *British Workers and the ILP*, 389. This is a view which Martin Crick challenges in his article 'A Call to Arms'.

[3] R. Moore, *The Labour Party 1880–1924* (1978), 53, quoting Beatrice Webb's Diary, 10 July 1895.

alliance that focused upon parliamentary and local political organisation. The need to win elections, and electioneering, replaced the ethical aspects of socialism which had focused upon leading the moral and ethical life of a socialist. The general drift of Yeo's argument does not seem unfair, although some of the fine detail has proved contentious. Indeed, Yeo has emphasised that party connection became much more important to socialists towards the end of the 1890s. David Howell accepts much of what Yeo says although he dates the rise of electioneering and its impact upon the prospects for socialist unity to the early years of the ILP and trade unions alliance: 'The ILP pursuit of trade union influence rendered socialist unity a still viable but less likely option.'[4] This view seems plausible but what is difficult to accept is the argument of Martin Crick, who, looking from the point of view of the SDF, seeks to extend the socialist unity debate to at least 1911, and possibly 1914. His argument is that many socialists were unattached, that the ILP and the SDF worked closely together in Lancashire, and that the socialist revival of the 1904 to 1909 period ensured that there was an alternative to the trade-union alliance on the eve of the First World War and that the SDF was far more flexible and less sectarian than is often supposed. Nevertheless, his argument and supporting evidence could be interpreted in another way. As Jeff Hill has noted, the SDF in Lancashire appeared to be detached from the policies of its parent organisation and its success may have been despite the actions of its national body.[5] It is also possible that the vibrancy of socialism was just as likely to produce sectarian rigidity as it was likely to engender a desire for social unity, as each organisation viewed its own individual successes as confirmation of the correctness of its policies. In the final analysis, the intransigence of both the ILP and the SDF, and the success of the ILP-trade union alliance in 1906 made socialist unity a highly unlikely proposition and confirmed the experience of the previous twenty years that socialism in Britain was to be characterised more by schism than unity. Indeed, there was little prospect of socialist unity being achieved in the 1890s and none after 1906 when the Labour Representation Committee/Labour Party had established its trade union credentials and parliamentary achievements.

In August 1911, Victor Grayson, a controversial figure whose parliamentary by-election victory at Colne Valley in 1907 had been an inspiration to British socialists, wrote that 'The time for the formation

[4] Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party*, 393–7.

[5] J. Hill, 'Social Democracy and the Labour Movement: the Social Democratic Federation in Lancashire', *North West Labour History Society*, Bulletin 8, 1982–83.

of the BRITISH SOCIALIST PARTY had definitely come.'[6] He then called for others to follow his example and to withdraw from the Independent Labour Party, vowing never to join another socialist organisation until the BSP, the 'one socialist party', had been formed. Grayson's appeal worked briefly. There was a period of ecstatic enthusiasm leading up to the Socialist Unity conference in Manchester in September 1911, when a clamour of support emerged. Within a week of his appeal Grayson was writing that 'The British Socialist Party is practically an accomplished fact ... the response has been extraordinary.'[7] After the Unity Conference, Grayson wrote that it 'was the most harmonious and unanimous Conference of the kind that has ever been held'.[8] Throughout the autumn and winter months of 1911, hundreds of members of the ILP wrote to Grayson and the *Clarion* expressed their disgust at the recent policies of the Party and extending a warm welcome to the BSP.'[9] It seemed that the dream of uniting socialists of all persuasions under the umbrella of one organisation was about to become reality. The attempt had been made several times previously but this moment seemed propitious for Britain was experiencing a period of serious industrial unrest and both the ILP and the Labour Party were under attack because of their failure to lead in the fight for socialism. Yet support for the BSP seemed to evaporate almost as quickly as it had emerged. The vast majority of ILP members were not attracted to it and the new party, the BSP, was soon little more than the old Social Democratic Federation, then the Social Democratic Party, in a new form. Yet for a brief moment, carried forward by the impetus of Grayson's enthusiasm and changes within the SDF, the BSP promised to be something more. Some ILP members and their branches went over to the new organisation. Yet, in the end, the BSP left the ILP remarkably unscathed. The British Socialist Party was eventually undermined and destroyed by the bitter disagreements that had blighted earlier moves towards socialist unity and had made earlier efforts untenable.

The idea of forming a united socialist party was, clearly, not new in 1911 and, indeed, it was fitting that Grayson should begin his campaign in the *Clarion* for it was Robert Blatchford, its editor, who had set the precedent by his staunch advocacy of the ideal during the 1890s. In 1894, Robert Blatchford had called for the formation of 'One Socialist Party' maintaining that

[6] *Clarion*, 4 August 1911.
[7] *Ibid.*, 11 August 1911.
[8] *Ibid.*, 6 October 1911.
[9] *Ibid.*, 18 August 1911.

> The only hope of the emancipation of Labour lies in Democratic Socialism
> A true Labour Party should therefore be a Socialist Party.
> A true Socialist Party should consist of Socialists, and of none others but Socialists.
> Now, the Independent Labour Party does not consist wholly of Socialists.
> It has in its ranks very many men who are not Socialists. These men are a source of danger and weakness.
> I am perfectly convinced myself that the only men likely to fight victoriously for Socialism are Socialists, and that the first and greatest work of all true Socialists to undertake is the formation of a united Socialist party ... I desire to see the one party, and I shall continue to advocate the formation of one party, but if it is formed it must be formed by the action of the members of the various existing bodies.[10]

Blatchford's clarion call was loud and clear; it was a demand that the ILP, the SDF and the Clarion Scouts should submerge their differences and unite all genuine socialists into one party. It was an extension to the provinces, and to the whole of the socialist movement, of the concept of unity amongst socialist organisations. Moves in that direction had already occurred in London in 1892 and 1893. William Morris and his Hammersmith Socialist Society, had promoted an agreement on aspects of socialist thought which was carried to the SDF and the Fabians. Yet, this movement aimed at seeking agreement upon points of socialist theory rather than of building unity of action around issues of common importance to all socialists.[11] The result was the rather vague and imprecise, although too revolutionary for the Fabians, *Manifesto of English Socialists* issued on May Day 1893. Apart from the fact that it attempted to present a common ground between the Fabians and the SDF, the main weakness of the document was that it was agreed without reference to the newly-formed national ILP. Blatchford's appeal was something of an attempt to rectify this omission and to obtain unity of action among all socialist parties. Nevertheless, the campaign proved to be mistimed and misplaced, and Blatchford's faith was unfounded.

Blatchford's readers were being urged to form some type of socialist fellowship, without regard to party affiliation, but hopefully with the support of the ILP and the SDF leadership. In other words, he envisaged the possibility of a mass socialist party, or fellowship, coming into existence. Such support was not forthcoming, Hyndman was reluctant,

[10] *Ibid.*, 22 December 1894.
[11] E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic and Revolutionary* (1971), 605–10.

Keir Hardie positively hostile, and even Tom Mann, more favourably inclined than most to Blatchford's suggestions, was cautious.[12] The ILP was particularly concerned to present a clear and unclouded image to the electorate at the coming general election, and the National Administrative Council made it clear that it did not wish to confuse the electorate by changing the name of the party or by 'diverting the attention of the part from the main issues'. It had set its course, and socialist unity was to be no part of its strategy.[13]

Nevertheless, the failures of socialist and ILP candidates in the 1895 general election revived the prospects of socialist unity. The defeat of 29 ILP candidates, including Keir Hardie, stirred doubts about the wisdom of the ILP's policy. When its membership fell from 35,000 to 20,000 between 1895 and 1896, some members began to campaign to unify the ILP with the SDF. At this point, it is essential to understand the respective positions of the ILP and the SDF, the two main socialist organisations in Britain.

There were marked divisions within the ILP both between the leadership and the rank and file, and also within the rank and file based upon geographical differences. The ILP leadership was adamantly opposed to any moves towards unity with the SDF. The 1895 general election defeats had convinced the 'big four'—Keir Hardie, J. Bruce Glasier, Philip Snowden and J. Ramsay MacDonald—of the need to form a progressive alliance with the trade unions in order to win parliamentary seats. To them it thus became more important to win trade-union support than to rush headlong into socialism, and socialism was to be delayed, possibly until 1953 according to Hardie reflecting upon the 1,953 votes he had received in his unsuccessful parliamentary by-election contest at Bradford East in November 1896.[14] In any case, socialism became a long-term rather an immediate objective. As David Howell has suggested, the ILP leaders now became 'subject to conservative influences'.[15] In contrast, some of the rank and file began to advocate a return to the business of 'making socialists' in the way that William Morris, Robert Blatchford and others advocated. This was a move towards the idea being put forward by Robert Blatchford, to whom Hardie was personally opposed.[16]

Nevertheless, faced with electoral defeats and a loss of membership

[12] *Clarion*, 22 December 1894 and subsequent issues indicate the nature of the response.

[13] NAC of the ILP, minute book M.890/1/1, Coll. Misc. 464, meetings for 1894, deposited in the British Library of Political Science.

[14] *Bradford Observer*, 12 November 1896.

[15] Howell, *British Workers and the ILP*, 118.

[16] Their hostility had been nurtured further in 1895 when Hardie supported John Lister, Treasurer of the ILP, against the local criticism of the Halifax ILP which had been nurtured by both Montague and Robert Blatchford.

Keir Hardie agreed to support the idea of a conference of all Socialist organisations, trade unions and co-operative bodies, and the ILP's Easter Conference of 1896 instructed the NAC to organise such a conference, an 'Informal Conference', which was held on 29 July 1897, after some preliminary meetings.

Initially, the SDF leadership was unwilling to respond to these overtures but appears to have changed its mind when a combination of financial difficulties, due to expenditure on the Southampton parliamentary by-election and internal pressure within the party, forced its leaders to think anew.[17] As a result it decided to send five delegates to the 'Informal Conference' where it was agreed that a joint committee would be set up until decisions were made about the nature and name of the new arrangement. An additional committee was formed to deal with arbitration in electoral disputes. Subsequently, H. W. Lee, secretary of the SDF, gave his support to attempts for 'real unity of people anxious and willing to work together for a common object' of socialist unity.[18] There was then a referendum of the joint membership of the ILP and the SDF which voted 5,158 to 886 in favour of fusion. Yet that decision was never implemented.

Keir Hardie immediately intervened to inform the ILP that less than one-third of its paying membership had in fact voted, and a decision on the ballot was postponed until the next annual conference. In the meantime, Hardie campaigned strongly against fusion, expressing his views through the pages of the *Labour Leader* and the *ILP News*. He maintained that 'Rigidity is fatal to growth as I think our SDF friends are finding out', and reflected upon the possible loss of trade-union support for the two organisations if they merged. His attitude was neatly presented in the *ILP News*:

> It may be that there is something in the methods of propaganda, if not in the principle,, of the SDF that not only renders it somewhat antipathetic to our members, but out of touch and harmony with the feelings and ideals of the mass of our people. If, too, it be the case that the SDF, even if not decaying, is not growing in membership, the indication would seem to be that it has not proceeded on the lines of British industrial evolution. It might be, therefore, that the introduction of its spirit and methods of attack would check rather than help forward our movement.[19]

Political expediency was clearly more important than socialist unity as Hardie began to campaign for federation. His leading spokesman of

[17] M. Crick, 'A Call to Arms', 184.
[18] *Justice*, 7 August 1897.
[19] *ILP News*, August 1897.

this strategy was J. Bruce Glasier, whose paper at the ILP Conference in Birmingham, of April 1897, maintained that federation and continued separate existence would be advantageous to the ILP. The crux of his argument was that

> the ways of the SDF are not our ways. If I may say so, the ways of the SDF are more doctrinaire, more Calvinistic, more aggressively sectarian than the ILP. The SDF has failed to touch the hearts of the people. Its strange disregard of the religious, moral and aesthetic sentiments of the people is an overwhelming defect. The ILP position, moreover, is better understood by the public. There is in truth, no party in the land whose aims are more clearly defined in the popular mind than ours. The trades unions have begun to rely upon us, and are depending upon our lead, and were we to abolish ourselves another ILP—perhaps owing to our desertion, a less resolute one—would inevitably take up our ground.[20]

What Glasier was doing was contrasting the ethical and nonconformist basis of much of the ILP support with the more economic-based Marxist tradition and was clearly exaggerating his case. But Glasier's views counted for a lot both in areas like the West Riding of Yorkshire, where the SDF had little support, and also amongst those ILPers who were also members of trade unions and were offended by Hyndman's well known opposition to industrial action. When faced with the decision to form socialist organisations in 1885, the socialists of Bradford and Leeds had opted to form branches of William Morris's Socialist League rather than Hyndman's SDF. The scandal of the SDF's acceptance of Tory money in contesting the 1885 election, the famous 'Tory Gold' issue, had also alienated many socialists from Hyndman and the SDF.

Not surprisingly, the National Administrative Council of the ILP supported Hardie's demand for federation and resolved that the decision between fusion and federation should be resolved by a new ballot of ILP members in which a three-quarter vote of the total membership in favour of fusion would have to be recorded if action were to be taken. The Conference accepted this advice and the vote was held in July 1898 when 2,397 voted for federation and 1,695 for fusion. The ILP leadership had, effectively blocked the prospect of a united socialist party being formed and H. W. Lee, stressed that the SDF was 'in favour of fusion'.[21] The discussions on socialist unity expired.

The belated efforts of Robert Blatchford to revive negotiations also failed. In spite of the *Clarion* decision to conduct a poll of its readers,

[20] *ILP Annual Conference Report*, 1898, 8.
[21] *Justice*, 27 August 1898.

which produced a vote of 4,429 for fusion and 3,994 for federation the ILP leaders were not inclined to be led from their refuge of 'federation'.[22]

The ILP leadership had thwarted the early attempts to form a socialist unity party in their desire to win trade union support. But how much support was there amongst the ILP rank and file for the socialist unity alternative? The available evidence suggests that there were deep divisions, very largely dependent upon geographical regions.

As both Martin Crick and Jeff Hill have suggested, there appears to have been strong support for the alliance idea in Lancashire, an area where both the SDF and the ILP were well entrenched. The idea of socialist unity appears to have emerged strongly in Salford in the early 1890s when the local SDF was active in the process which led to the formation of the local ILP and involved in the attempts to form a branch of the Gasworkers' Union at the Manchester and Salford Gasworks in the summer of 1889.[23] In other words, there was a sense of Labour solidarity evident in Salford, Manchester, Burnley, Blackburn and other centres. And Lancashire, as Watmough has pointed out, was, next to London, the most important centre of SDF activity—occasionally recording more members than the London branches were able to do.[24] Indeed, as Jeff Hill suggests, 'the most marked feature of SDF tactics in Lancashire was their flexibility.'[25] In the socialist unity debates of 1896 to 1898 support for fusion was firm from the Lancashire branches as indicated by the annual conference of 1896 when Fred Brocklehurst of Manchester introduced a motion to change the name the ILP's name to the 'National Socialist Party'. When it became known that the NAC had rejected the SDF's terms for fusion there was a strong and immediate reaction in Lancashire. Many branches felt that the NAC was cheating the party by insisting on an overwhelming vote in favour on the second ballot before the principle of fusion could proceed. The NAC attempted to justify its switch of policy with the SDF by asserting that 'In Blackburn, Nelson, Rochdale, Ashton and several other places the local branches of the ILP and SDF already work cordially side by side and for elections and many propaganda purposes are already virtually federated together'.[26] Many of the Lancashire ILP branches begged to differ and saw co-operation as the basis for fusion. Littleborough ILP called for 'one militant socialist party' whilst the branches at Droylsdon and Preston refused to enter the ILPs second ballot because they had already voted decisively for fusion.

[22] *Clarion*, 3 December 1898.

[23] Hill, 'Social-Democracy', 47, and *Justice*, 14 September 1889.

[24] P.A. Watmough, 'The Membership of the Social Democratic Foundation 1885–1902', *Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin*, (Spring 1977), 35–40.

[25] Hill, 'Social Democracy', 51.

[26] *ILP Conference Report*, 1899.

Bolton West, Everton and Blackburn opposed the NAC, and Stockport announced its intention 'to withdraw from the party' as a protest against the undemocratic action of the NAC.'[27] Charles Higham, of the Blackburn ILP, emphasised the point at the 1899 national ILP conference when he claimed that the socialist co-operation in his own town illustrated the ridiculous position of the NAC and the ILP leadership.[28]

At the other extreme there was far less support for socialist unity in the textile region of the West Riding of Yorkshire, one of the major centres of ILP support. The West Riding was still one of the most active of the ILP areas even when ILP membership declined in the late 1890s. In 1897 the *ILP News* stated that 'Halifax has 730 paying members and these, being well organised, are probably the strongest socialist body in the country'.[29] At the same time the Bradford's branches recorded between 800 and 900 fee-paying members. The Keighley ILP had 120 members, the four main Huddersfield clubs had 235 members, and the Leeds, Hunslet and Holbeck branches had 237 members. Most other Yorkshire towns had small but viable branches. In fact, an examination of the 11,000 to 12,000 fee-paying members of the National ILP indicates that between 2,700 and 3,000 came from the West Riding.[30] The National ILP was strongly influenced by West-Riding opinion, which in turn was shaped by the attitudes of the powerful branches in Bradford and Halifax.

In Bradford the rejection of socialist unity was all too evident. In September and October 1897, there was almost total rejection of the idea. This is hardly surprising when one considers that the Bradford Labour Movement had built up a thriving club organisation of about twenty-seven or twenty-eight clubs and 2,000 members in the early 1890s, with considerable trade-union support. Even though their membership declined in the late 1890s they still provided social, educational and recreational activities for their members and their families and were a powerful political force within the working-class community.

There was no way in which the SDF could challenge the overwhelming dominance of the ILP. By the summer of 1895 it had only three modestly-sized branches in Leeds and smaller ones in Hull, Bingley and Low Bentham.[31] There was also a branch in Dewsbury

[27] Reports in the NAC Minute book, 16 June, 16 June–15 July and throughout August–September and November to December 1898. Also quoted in J. Hill, 'The ILP in Lancashire', in *The Centennial History of the ILP*, 50.

[28] Hill, 'The ILP in Lancashire', 50 and *ILP Conference Report*, 1899.

[29] *ILP News*, June 1897.

[30] *Ibid.*, September and October 1898 and March 1899.

[31] M. Crick, 'A Collection of Oddities': The Bradford Branch of the Social-Democratic Federation', *The Bradford Antiquary*, Third Series, number 5, 27.

which challenged and then took over the ILP and a small branch in Halifax. In August 1895, a Bradford branch was formed but it started with six members, never had more than 28, averaged about fifteen, and expired in 1897, and as Martin Crick states:

> Elsewhere in Yorkshire the outlook was similarly bleak. Of the three Leeds branches only Armley maintained an active existence. Low Bentham, Skipton and Sheffield branches clung tenuously to life until mid-1898 and they too collapsed. Those who were sympathetic to the SDF undoubtedly followed the example of W. P. Redfearn of Huddersfield who reported he had joined the ILP for want of a viable alternative and that he hoped eventually for the unity of the two parties. The only exception to this gloomy scenario was in Dewsbury, where an ILP branch had always supported socialist unity and had been sceptical as to the value of trade unions was 'organised out of existence' by a capable SDFer from Burnley.[32]

The fact is that the SDF presented no threat to the dominance of the ILP in the West Riding of Yorkshire and that the ILP branches, and particularly those in Halifax and Bradford, had established close links with the trade unions and were already pursuing the type of policies that Hardie was advocating. Thus, in 1896, the *Bradford Labour Echo* argued that 'The time has not come for the thorough fusion of forces which the creation of such a party would demand ... The formation of such a party before the time was ripe would bring nothing but mischief.'[33] Indeed, this was the dominant view, even though Keighley ILP voted in favour of fusion and the Morley branch seceded and the Dewsbury SDF and ILP branches fused.

Throughout 1898, when the Bradford ILP clubs were examining the possibility of reorganising the party into one centralised branch, rather than three constituency branches and numerous clubs, attempts to create a united socialist organisation failed. It is obvious that during the discussions various socialist societies had misinterpreted the intentions of the Bradford ILP when its general council had decided to meet a committee of 15 'outsiders'. This attempt to widen support was misunderstood. As the *Bradford Labour Echo* reflected:

> They the outsiders endeavoured to ignore the fact that the meeting was an ILP branch meeting, and proceeded to treat the gathering as one specially called to bring into being an entirely new Socialist party. Some of the outsiders who proposed to serve on the committee

[32] *Ibid.*, 28–9 and *Clarion*, 20 December 1901.
[33] *Bradford Labour Echo*, 11 April 1896.

withdrew their names, when the meeting passed the following resolution: 'That the fifteen members elected from the meeting should declare themselves Socialists who were willing to become members of the ILP under the reconstituted constitution.' Carried by an overwhelming majority...

The *Bradford Observer* report, reprinted in the same issue of the *Echo*, was even more direct: 'One fact made quite clear was that no fusion of Socialist Sections is intended. The representatives of various smaller Socialist bodies attended, and did their best to turn the discussion into this groove, but entirely without avail.'

There was little support for the idea of fusion within the Bradford ILP and equally little support for the idea in Halifax. The July 1898 issue of the *Record*, organ of the Halifax ILP, did refer to the 'One Socialist Party' campaign going on in Bradford but played down its importance, doubting its 'practical superiority' to the existing situation. The report argued that the term fusion suggested a hardening of social policies which did not fit the more general approach favoured by the members of the Halifax ILP. Also most ILP members spent a working week protected by trade-union surveillance, and weekends attending Labour Church activities, glee club meetings and rambles. Satisfied with their achievements they were not inclined to join forces with a society which had little presence in Halifax and which appeared to play down the value of trade unionism. On the whole one is left with the impression that socialist unity barely merited serious consideration in the ILP strongholds of Bradford and Halifax. Also, the Yorkshire Divisional Council of the ILP had rejected the idea, by 32 voters to sixteen, as early as October 1894.[34] In Bradford, Halifax and more generally throughout the West Riding of Yorkshire there was little or no inclination to join with an organisation that carried no political weight or support. Martin Crick has suggested, the socialist unity movement was probably a movement from the bottom up, but even this is partial and barely evident in some areas, most notably the West Riding of Yorkshire.

It would appear that there was little prospect that socialist unit would be achieved in the late 1890s. There were four main reasons for this. In the first place the ILP leaders and many of their supporters had attached their flags to the trade union mast. Secondly, there were intense rivalries within the broader socialist movement between Hardie and Blatchford on the one hand, and between Hardie and Hyndman on the other. Thirdly, if the ILP was driven by political expediency so was the SDF, whose leadership showed no inclination towards socialist

[34] *Labour Leader*, 6 October 1894.

unity until it began to lose members in the late 1890s and once the Southampton parliamentary by-election faced it with financial embarrassment. Fourthly, whilst just under half the rank and file members of the ILP favoured fusion the other half, possibly the majority, favoured federation and it was this second body, firmly based in Yorkshire, which carried most political clout with the ILP leaders. Given these facts it is not surprising that the attempts at socialist unity in the 1890s ended in failure, and that future efforts would be blighted by similar problems.

It is true, as Martin Crick suggests, that there was nothing unusual in socialists having dual membership with the ILP and the SDF. Quite clearly it didn't matter to many socialists which organisation they joined for to them a socialist Britain was imminent. But after the 1895 general election defeats it was more difficult to sustain hope for the immediate success of socialism and electioneering and leadership considerations got in the way of sustaining any hopes of socialist success. Indeed, the experience of Lancashire should not be emphasised too much for, as Jeff Hill suggests, there were two factors that needed to be taken into consideration. One is that the Lancashire SDF branches acted more flexibly than their parent organisation did, and some branches still remained in the Labour Representation Committee even after their parent organisation had left. Secondly, they paid a price for their flexibility for, as Jeff Hill suggests, 'Though on the one hand local autonomy was a source of strength in that it allowed social-democrats to adapt to their immediate environment, on the other hand, it produced a movement notoriously prone to internal divisions over strategy and one which ultimately was unable to preserve its identity as a united socialist force.'[35]

Even if socialist unity had been achieved it seems unlikely that it would have survived. Most probably, the ILP would have split, with Hardie leading his West Yorkshire contingent and other supporters into an alternative ILP-like organisation. In effect the SDF would probably have been left with its own supporters and a few other socialists, much as occurred when the British Socialist Party was formed in 1911.

There was a second phase in the development of socialist unity at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Labour Representation Committee [LRC] was formed as a result of a conference held in February 1900 and, at first sight, appeared to have met the needs of both alternative strategies for the progress of the Labour movement. On the one hand, it was an alliance between the trade unions and the

[35] Hill, 'Social Democracy', 53.

socialist parties and, on the other, it brought the socialist parties, including the SDF and the ILP, into one organisation. Although the LRC was not a socialist organisation, as such, five of the twelve members of the Executive Committee were Socialists and there was a prospect that this alliance could be the basis of a closer co-operation between the SDF and the ILP. Yet within eighteen months of the founding conference the SDF voted to secede. This decision was taken because 'We were being committed to the support of men and measures with which we did not agree'.[36] Indeed, the ILP and SDF had clashed from the outset when the ILP failed to support the SDF resolution committing the LRC to socialist objectives.

The SDF's secession from the LRC was a mistake for it now cut itself off from the most influential independent political organisation of the working classes, although its action is explicable in terms of the internal difficulties within the party which led to the secession of two groups who formed the Socialist Party of Great Britain and the Socialist Labour Party, usually known as the 'Impossibilists'.

At this point the SDF appears to have revived its interest in socialist unity. Whether that was ever a realistic option seemed doubtful and David Howell has concluded that socialist unity had effectively been ruled out by the formation of the LRC: 'The logic of national events ... combined with local developments ... to erode the United Socialist alternatives, even in an environment where it had developed a significant presence.'[37]

Only Martin Crick seems to doubt this judgement. He bases his assessment upon a number of factors but, most importantly, the situation that existed in Lancashire, which has already been referred to. Quite clearly, there was a demand for socialist unity in Lancashire but this did not represent the dominant feeling of the ILP members many of who were drawn to the prospect of working through the LRC alliance at both the local and national levels. In any case, the Lancashire SDF branches, who had pushed the SDF towards affiliating with the LRC were dismayed by the withdrawal of their parent organisation and this appears to have caused something of a slump in the SDF activities in the county.

Crick's second line of argument is to stress that the Dewsbury parliamentary by-election of 1902 provided an insight of what could be achieved by socialist unity at a period when ILP and LRC parliamentary victories were still thin on the ground. His argument is that the SDF

[36] H. W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social Democracy in Britain*, 159 quoted in Crick 'A Call to Arms', 187.

[37] D. Howell, 'Was the Labour Party Inevitable?', *The Bulletin of the North-West Labour History Society*, (1984), 17.

put forward Harry Quelch, the editor of *Justice*, as the SDF candidate because it feared that the local Trades Council and the ILP would impose a compromise Lib-Lab candidate, Sam Woods of the Wigan Miners, who might be accepted by the local Liberals. The Trades Council and ILP reaction of putting forward Edward Robertshaw Hartley, a butcher who was soon to become a member of both the SDF and the ILP, rebounded because he refused the candidature and gave his support to Quelch. He later added that 'The great work of the official section of the ILP at present seems not so much to push Socialism as to try and intrigue some half-a-dozen persons into Parliament.[38] And yet, despite the opposition of the Trades Council and the ILP, the electorate of Dewsbury gave 1,597 votes to Quelch, 517 votes more than Hartley had secured in the 1895 general election. Here was, as A. M. Thompson of the *Clarion*, wrote

> a crushing blow to the conflicting 'Leaders' and a triumphant vindication of Socialist Unity ... The rank and file of Dewsbury have shown the way. Socialists of all denominations have shut their eyes to the scowlings and nudgings of rival party officials and stood shoulder to shoulder for Socialism.[39]

The actions of the ILP were further criticised by a plethora of letters and articles in *Justice*, which, amongst other things, attacked the doctrines of the ILP as 'a heterogeneous conglomeration of absurdities and self contradictions. Their principles, as exemplified and illustrated by their tactics, are no principles but only political expediency.'[40]

Crick's viewpoint is highly biased in favour of the SDF and thus open to the criticism that it lacks balances. If, for instance, the Dewsbury parliamentary by-election of February 1902 caused a 'damaging split in the Labour movement' as Crick suggests, why should this necessarily revive the spirit of Socialist Unity?[41] There was, indeed, some criticism within ILP ranks about the effectiveness of the LRC but equally there was strong commitment to the view that trade unionists should be drawn into the independent political labour movement.

The ILP also retorted to the SDF's actions with a fusillade of abuse against the charge that the SDF had cheated by calling a joint meeting of all the Labour organisations to elect a candidate and then had pre-empted the meeting by announcing Harry Quelch to be their candidate.

[38] *Clarion*, 7 December 1901.

[39] *Ibid.*, 7 February 1902.

[40] *Justice*, 4 January 1902.

[41] M. Crick, 'Labour Alliance or Socialist Unity? The Independent Labour Party in the Heavy Woollen Areas of West Yorkshire, c. 1893–1902', in *'The Rising Sun of Socialism': The Independent Labour Part in the Textile District of the West Riding of Yorkshire between 1890 and 1914*, (eds.) K. Laybourn and D. James (1991), 38.

The *ILP News* reflected that

> The SDF has taken up the attitude of having its own isolated and impossibilist way, and setting up at defiance the ILP and the Trades Council. It is unity no doubt—the unity of itself. [...] We are disputing the pretence under which he has been placed in the field as 'the Socialist and Trade Union candidate', and we are disputing the suggestion that his candidature is anything but an unnecessary and humiliating reproach upon the reputation of Socialism. [...] An isolated SDF candidate would prove a very lamentable and futile political escapade, and would provide a very bad advertisement for Socialism in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Without the cardinal co-operation of the Trades Unions, no third, not to speak of a fourth candidate, would receive an effective vote in the division.[42]

And 1,597 votes was not that good when one considers that Hartley had contested the seat in 1895 when socialist fortunes were in decline. With more voters and a well-organised trade union movement the vote should have been much larger. Compared to the Conservative vote of 4,512 and the Liberal vote of 5,660, Quelch's vote was small, being about 14 per cent of the votes that were cast.[43]

The second phase of Socialist Unity, if it can be regarded as such, did not lead very far but Crick is quite correct to suggest that there were strong moves towards its further advocacy between 1904 and 1911, although that is not to suggest that it was a viable proposition. The SDF certainly changed its attitude towards Socialist Unity and fully embraced the Amsterdam Conference resolution of 1904 which instructed Socialist parties in all countries to amalgamate. It made approached to renew negotiations with the ILP in 1907, 1909 and 1910 but the ILP laid down the precondition that the SDF should re-affiliate with the SDF. It would also appear that the SDF became internally divided over the issues of industrial conflict and international relations as new figures in the party, such as Zelda Kahan, began to challenge Hyndman, Quelch and the other established leaders of the SDF/SDP. Undoubtedly the rising emphasis which the SDF placed upon Socialist Unity was a distraction from these internal conflicts but it was hardly going to offer a solution to the conflicts within the SDF/SDP nor a solution to the problem of policy as it emerged in the British Socialist

[42] *ILP News*, October 1901.

[43] K. Laybourn and J. Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour 1890–1918* (1984), 153. Ben Turner obtained 21.3 per cent of the vote in the 1906 general election and 20.2 per cent in the parliamentary by-election of April 1908.

Party. The SDF/SDP may have become less narrowly economically deterministic in its attitudes but the dominating influence of Hyndman's view was still present in the vital years when the BSP was being formed.

There were quite clearly other factors which encouraged the idea of reviving Socialist Unity apart from the convenience it offered to the SDF/SDP. The membership of all socialist organisations rose substantially between 1906 and 1909. In addition, the return of 29 LRC MPs to Parliament brought an optimism about social change that was not going to be realised, even by a Labour Party working upon a reforming Liberal government. The contrast between Labour Party inaction and rising socialist ambitions certainly increased tensions between some members of the ILP and the Labour Party.

Victor Grayson echoed this disillusionment on Parliament following his success in the Colne Valley parliamentary by-election in 1907. His views were outlined in a book entitled *The Problem of Parliament—A Criticism and a Remedy*, published in 1909 and dedicated to 'H. M. Hyndman, R. Blatchford and J. Keir Hardie, who can give this country a Socialist party tomorrow if they care to lead the way.'[44] At much the same time E. R. Hartley was arguing in a debate at Manchester that the ILP was 'swamped' within the Labour Party.[45] Indeed, between 1909 and 1911, 46 branches of the ILP collapsed. The moment seemed propitious for a renewal of the Socialist Unity debate.

Indeed, the criticism of the ILP intensified. Towards the end of 1910 four of the fourteen members of the NAC of the ILP signed the pamphlet *Let Us Reform the Labour Party*, better known as the 'Green Manifesto'. Written by J. McLachlan, a Manchester councillor, introduced by Leonard Hall, and contributed to by C. T. Douthwaite and the Rev. J. H. Belcher, it attacked the ILP and Labour Party tendency to sacrifice socialist principles in order not to embarrass the Liberal government. Subsequently, Fred Jowett criticised these men for their lack of loyalty and all lost their seats on the NAC at the annual conference in 1911.

Also, it should not be overlooked that in Birmingham, Manchester and many other towns, social representation committees were emerging to unite socialists of all persuasions. Many socialists were not attached to the two main socialist parties and a United Socialist Propaganda League was formed to combine them together and to spread the message to the rural areas.[46] Indeed, there was sufficient evidence to encourage Grayson, now free of his parliamentary duties and political

[44] Quoted in W. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain* (1971), 37.

[45] J. M. McLachlan and E. Hartley, *Should Socialists Join the Labour Party—A verbatim report of the debate* (1909).

[46] *Clarion*, 7 July 1911.

editor of the *Clarion*, that a call for socialist unity would be well received. As it was, within two months, it proclaimed that 'if the BSP has not up to the present absorbed at least thirty per cent of the Independent Labour Party our forms are liars and ought to be torn up.'[47] The *Labour Leader* countered with the suggestion that only about five per cent of ILPers had left for the BSP. However, there certainly seemed to be considerable support as Grayson toured the West Riding of Yorkshire and south Lancashire addressing 'a magnificent meeting at Colne Valley' and speaking to large audiences at St George's Hall, Bradford.[48]

But how many ILP members were won over to the BSP? There is no denying the divisive impact of Grayson's appeal upon the Yorkshire ILP branches. Apart from the Colne Valley Socialist League, the Wakefield ILP branch withdrew from the ILP and a new BSP branch of 70 members was formed.[49] A large number of individual members of the ILP also joined the BSP. Grayson's estimate of thirty per cent, however, may have been excessive. An estimate of twenty per cent would appear to be nearer the mark,[50] and Crick has suggest about twenty five per cent for Lancashire.[51] Within a couple of years the figures were to diminish significantly as individuals and branches drifted out of the BSP. J. Bruce Glasier's comment in October 1911 ultimately proved correct: 'The new party is merely the SDP under a new name.'[52]

In the meantime the SDF/SDP was conducting its own moves towards socialist unity and suggesting to its members that they should not complete the *Clarion* forms but await the Unity Conference at Manchester. Grayson's response to this was to suggest, in advance of Glasier's comment, that their plan will amount to 'little more than an enlargement of the SDF.'[53] Blatchford gave his support and suggested that beyond the basic principles of socialism the BSP would be a wide, all-embracing party, committed to both industrial and political action.[54] The potential was there for conflict but matters went smoothly on the weekend of 30 September to 1 October when the Socialist Unity Conference was held at Manchester, at which delegates claiming to represent 35,000 members, including 41 ILP branches, 32 Clarion clubs and fellowships, 85 SDF/SDP branches, 50 local Socialist Societies and

[47] *Ibid.*, 13 October 1911.

[48] *Ibid.*, 11 August and 22 September 1911.

[49] *Clarion*, 8 December 1911.

[50] Laybourn, 'A Story of Buried Talents and Wasted Opportunities', 22.

[51] M. Crick presented this percentage in a lecture at the Conference on the Centennial History of the ILP held at the University of Bradford, 30 January 1993 but some hint of this level is also indicated in D. Morris, 'The Origins of the British Socialist Party', *North West Labour History Society, Bulletin 8*, 1982–83, 34–5.

[52] L. Thompson, *The Enthusiasts: A Biography of John and Katherine Bruce Glasier* (1971), 169.

[53] *Clarion*, 11 August 1911.

[54] *Ibid.*

12 branches of the new BSP, plus other organisations, attended.

Yet the tensions soon surfaced for the Conference set up a Provisional Committee to prepare the constitution and Grayson, a member of that committee, soon realised that the SDP/SDF would not cease to exist as a separate organisation until the first annual conference in 1912. However, his main objection was that the Provisional Committee, of which he was a member, had not been given the authority to set up the BSP and he felt that the 'new Party must make a fresh start or it is doomed to failure.'[55] Nevertheless, the BSP was formed by the SDP and Grayson withdrew his support, many of his followers lost interest in the BSP and the Colne Valley Socialist League whilst still sending delegates to BSP conferences never paid its fees. The membership claimed by the BSP on the eve of the first annual conference were thus exaggerated. The 1,000 members claimed by the West Yorkshire District Council included several hundred members from Colne Valley who were not paying membership fees to the BSP and the 400 members claimed for Bradford seems something of an exaggeration.[56]

There is, perhaps, only a fine distinction to be drawn between the loss of support resulting from Grayson's departure and that which resulted from the internal difficulties within the movement, for both sprang from the dominance of the old inflexible SDF/SDP leadership which, as in the past, continued to undermine any possibility of achieving socialist unity. There may have been moments when the old SDF leadership proved less than dominant but not in the years 1911 and 1914. Hyndman's opening address to the first annual conference of the BSP in April 1912 also betrayed the contradictions within the Party. Whilst emphasising the success of the new body he admitted that there had been difficulties. Most revealing was his reference to the syndicalists, a group of industrial activists led by Tom Mann who hoped to capture the existing trade-union structure for the rank and file and to bring unity and militancy to trade unionism.[57] Although the BSP had declared itself for both industrial and political action, Hyndman returned to his old criticism of industrial action stating that 'of the futility of resuscitated syndicalism it is needless to speak. There is nothing real and nothing ideal in the floundering and hysterical propaganda of segregated grab.'[58]

Such a statement from the chair made the 'old guard' position clear. They would concede that 'The political and industrial organisations of the working class must be complementary to each other', but their

[55] *Ibid.*, 5 January 1912, in an article written jointly by Tom Groom and Victor Grayson.
[56] *Justice*, 2 March 1912, and 9 December 1911.
[57] *Conference BSP, 1912*, 8.
[58] *Ibid.*, 8.

view that the main function of the Socialist Party was the organisation of an independent political party of the working class' remained unchanged. Campaigning along this line appeared in the pages of *Justice* and the *British Socialist* before the first annual BSP conference in May 1912 and this thwarted the efforts by E. C. Fairchild, and other old SDF stalwarts, to synthesise political and industrial action.[59] Thus when, Leonard Hall, a syndicalist, moved an amendment at the first annual conference to reduce 'the organisation of an independent political party of the working class' to the one main function of the Party he met with vehement opposition. 'The Trades Union Congress was the expression of their industrial action', said Quelch, and it 'would be gross impertinence on their part to say the main functions of a Socialist Party was to organise and conduct industrial operations.' Hall's amendment was defeated but it had gained the support of about a third of the delegates with forty-six for and 100 against.

The syndicalist debate continued for several months with Hyndman and Harry Quelch attempting to counter the syndicalist articles and speeches of Gaylord Wilshire, Leonard Hall and Russell Smart. The eventual brake came in October 1912, when the BSP *Manifesto* was issued, emphasising the primacy of political over industrial action. Hall and Smart rejected the *Manifesto* and were supported by the Rev Conrad Noel, also a member of the Executive Council, who considered it to be 'disastrously one-sided' and felt that it did not express 'the feelings of the members of the British Socialist Party'.[60]

This division of opinion cut right across the BSP and halted its progress in its tracks. Fred Knee reflected this block to growth in his annual report in *The Socialist Annual* of 1913, commenting that

> I finished my last year's article on a note of exultant hope. This time I have to strike a lower key. Despite the unity achieved at Manchester in the autumn of 1911, and the subsequent formation of the British Socialist Party, the movement has not done well, the new body has spoken with too many tongues, and till now it has lacked anything like unity of purpose or of doctrine.[61]

Many BSP branches were clearly divided on the issue. The Huddersfield BSP, led by Arthur Gardiner, was a strong advocate of industrial action partly owing to the local popularity of H. Russell Smart, who had once contested Huddersfield in a parliamentary election, and also owing to the pioneer propaganda work on E. J. B. Allen, who lived locally.[62] It

[59] *Clarion*, 26 April 1912.
[60] *Justice*, 10 November 1912.
[61] *The Socialist Annual*, 1913, annual report of Fred Knee.
[62] Laybourn, 'A Story of Buried Talents and Wasted Opportunities', 25.

passed a resolution committing itself to socialist representation and 'to assist in the building up of a powerful union movement'.[63] In other areas there was serious division within the local BSP branch. This was most evident in the case of Birmingham where H. B. Williams, the Secretary of the local branch, found himself in conflict with Leonard Hall, Thomas R. Wintringham and others over industrial unionism, the 'Graysonian clot' on the party and other related issues.[64] Industrial unionism was to prove a stumbling block to the BSP as industrial action had proved to be to the SDF in earlier years.

This split was, however, just one of the tensions that divided the BSP. International affairs and defence matters continued as source of internal conflict for in December 1912 Zelda Kahan succeeded, by the narrowest of margins, in getting the BSP to oppose increased government naval expenditure in opposition to Hyndman.[65] As a consequence the old guard of the SDP/SDF rounded upon her and her supporters through articles in *Justice* to reverse the decision. As a result she resigned, citing the dangerously imperialistic attitudes of 'our Fuhrer' as being a cause of danger to the BSP but noting that the Executive has reversed the decision on armaments in the absence of four important opponents of the idea and with only five Executive Committee members present.[66]

Internal conflict, very much engendered by the intransigence of Hyndman and his supporters, led to the rapid decline of the BSP. Support had faded away, particularly in Yorkshire where only the slimmed down Bradford branches, and the Leeds branches directed by Bert Killip, appear to have carried any significant weight. Even then, the Leeds BSP decided in April 1913, by a large majority, to affiliate to the local Labour Party.[67] The BSP faced further problems as Twentieth Century Press, which produced *Justice* and other socialist journals, fell into the hands of the receivers as the new company failed to raise an eighth of the share finance it required.[68] The 'enrol a Million Socialists' campaign, begun in August 1912, also failed to get anywhere near the 100,000 it wished to win in less than a year, never mind the million it hoped for in five years.[69] In fact BSP membership fell from a claimed

[63] A. Gardiner Scrap Book. The source of the newspapers quotation is not indicated.

[64] BSP Papers 1910–1914 (Birmingham), in the British Library or Political and Economic Science, Coll. Misc. 155, M228, collected by H. B. Williams. Note particularly item 48/49/5-, and item 46, the letter from Wintringham to Williams.

[65] Look at Zelda Kahan's article 'Peace and its Perils' in *British Socialists*, I, 1912, 56–68 and *Justice* from December 1912 to March 1913.

[66] *Justice*, 15 March 1913.

[67] *Bradford Pioneer*, 11 April 1913.

[68] *Justice*, 8 February 1913.

[69] The *Clarion*, 21 June 1912 referred to the BSP decision to go for five million members during the next five years but in the same issue a report on the first annual conference of the BSP refers to H. Russell Smart stating the objective of raising 500,000 Socialists

40,000 in 1912 to a mere 15,313 by the time of the 1913 Blackpool Conference.[70] By 1913, the BSP was little more than the old SDP/SDF rump.

In such a climate of failure the BSP reversed overnight its policy of viciously attacking the Labour Party and the ILP and once again attempted to woo the ILP and the Labour Party. In the summer of 1913 the BSP leaders met with ILP and Fabian representatives to discuss the formation of a 'United Socialist Council', and membership of the Labour Party. Presiding over this love feast was the International Socialist Bureau. The suddenness of this transformation was remarkable for an organisation which had unstintingly criticised the Labour Party for its lack of class struggle and had complained that it was 'nothing more or less than the tail of the capitalist Liberal Party'.[71]

Nevertheless, many of the old guard came out in support of the new line, including H. M. Hyndman, Zelda Kahan, J. Hunter Watts, Fred Gorle, and Dan Irving and George Moore Bell, who summed up the new spirit when he wrote that

> The English people won't have a Socialist Party. They like compromise, and the Labour Party is a compromise. Up to date a very poor one; but it is *there* and we are *here*. It lacks spirit and courage, and knowledge. Are we going to help it get these things? Shall we take the field, or shall we leave it to the Liberals?[72]

These views were opposed by Harry Quelch, who was ill and died in September 1913, Thomas Kennedy and H. Russell Smart who felt that Socialism would be 'thrust into the background in favour of weak and ineffective reformist policy'[73]

Finally, the December 1913 Conference of the BSP decided to hold meetings with the ILP and the Fabians in order to organise four socialist demonstrations in 1914—at Cardiff on 1 March, Newcastle on 8 March, Glasgow on 15 March and at Leeds on 22 March, and others to be held later. The Third BSP Conference held in London 1914 went further and, having debated Socialist Unity decided upon holding a referendum of its members on Socialist Unity and affiliation to the Labour Party.[74] The result was a marginal victory in favour of affiliation to the Labour Party by 3,263 votes to 2,410.[75] As a result the BSP

---

and £10,000. Also look at the 'Enrol a Million Socialist Campaign' report in *Justice*, 31 August 1913.

[70] *Justice*, 31 August and 7 September 1912; Kendall, *Revolutionary Movement*, 312.

[71] *Justice*, 9 November 1912.

[72] *Ibid.*, 9 August 1913.

[73] *Ibid.*, 6 September 1913.

[74] *Ibid.*, 16 April 1914.

[75] *Ibid.*, 28 May 1914.

applied to join the Labour Party on 23 June 1914 and affiliated in 1916. In October 1916 a not very effective United Socialist Council was also formed.[76]

Stephen Yeo has written that the formative socialist period of the 1880s and 1890s was 'too exciting to last' and added that 'Socialism in that period had not yet become the prisoner of a particular elaborate party machine—a machine which would come to associate its own well-being with the prospects for Socialism.'[77] He was right for by the mid and late 1890s party electioneering was rapidly taking the place of the task of 'making socialists'. By that time, also, the ILP and the SDF had become almost sectarian in their approach which meant that there was little prospect of creating a Socialist Unity party. If it was the ILP leaders who were intransigent opponents of Socialist Unity in the 1890s, as they sought the support of the trade unions, it was equally the case that the SDF/SDP leaders of the 1911 to 1914 period were also intransigent for there was little evidence that Hyndman was going to change his mind on the issue of industrial action and defence. Martin Crick might be right that Hyndman's domination of the SDP/SDF was not total but it was still sufficient, until he was effectively ejected in 1916, to thwart attempts to united and keep socialists on one mass party.

In the final analysis, Socialist Unity was effectively a non-starter after the formation of the LRC in 1900, if not before, killed by the rigidity of both ILP and SDF leaders. Hardie, Hyndman and their close supporters had ensured that this would be the case. The fact that there were close relations between the ILP and the SDF branches, and dual membership, in some areas like Lancashire is of little significance because, as Jeff Hill noted, the sheer flexibility of the Lancashire SDF branches made them prone to internal strife and compromise. In any case areas like the West Riding of Yorkshire were dominated by the powerful Bradford and Halifax ILP organisations who would have no truck with Socialist Unity and were already operating a trade union alliance. By 1909 Victor Grayson's appeal to Hyndman, Blatchford and Keir Hardie 'who can give this country a Socialist party tomorrow if they care to lead the way' was already too late. As the Communist Party of Great Britain, the successor of the BSP, was to find, mass party socialism within a united socialist party in Britain has proved to be an appealing illusion.

[76] D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (1977), 200, 208–9.
[77] Yeo, 'Religion of Socialism', 31.