

William (Woolf) Wess Obituary

Death of Anarchist Veteran; Echo of Bryant and May Strike

George Cores

August 1946

Death has taken from us, in his eighty-fourth year, our comrade William Wess, on may 23rd of this year. His body was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium.

We have lost a true comrade; the world a real noble man. his life was an epitome of the mind and activity of a genuine anarchist in present-day society.

He was born in Lithuania in 1861. As a lad he worked in Dvinsk, and in 1881 followed the great emigration of the Jews after the terrible pogroms which occurred in Russia at that period. He came to London, and after learning the English, German and Russian languages, became one of the founders of the International Working Men's Educational Club in Berners Street, Commercial Road, E. and later its secretary (the title of the club deserved to be "Germinal", so much has been its outcome). Here was started the "Workers' Friend" (a journal in the Yiddish language) which lasted for many years. In 1895 William Wess became editor for some months.

During Wess' secretaryship the Berners Street club became famous as a centre of enlightenment and propaganda. Among well-known people who lectured or addressed meetings there were William Morris, Annie Besant, John Burns, Peter Kropotkin, Stepniak, John [Johann] Most, Elisée Reclus and Errico Malatesta. Active British comrades of the time, such as Charles Mowbray, Frank Kitz, David Nicol [Nicoll], Ted Legget [Leggatt], John Turner and George Cores also addressed meetings from its platform. It was the headquarters of the famous strike of the match-box girls of Bryant and May, in which Annie Besant and Herbert Burrows figured prominently. But the club, true to its practical Anarchist character, did not merely gather the poor girls and women together to listen to speeches, and to parade them in strike processions, but fed them, to the best of its ability, with bread and butter, cake, tea, etc., to maintain their stamina. There were no strike funds to draw upon and street collections had to be made to sustain the poor workers who were in revolt against making match-boxes in their own homes for twopence-farthing a gross.

Wess was Secretary of the club when it organised a mass-meeting in the Great Assembly Hall, Mile End, E., on November 1st 1890, to protest against the foul persecution of the Jews in Russia.

The exploitation of the immigrant Jewish workers was very severe, especially in the East End of London, and Comrade Wess, in co-operation with others, was most active in trying to bring about an amelioration of their conditions.

William Wess played an important part in the Jewish trade-union movement in Britain. He helped to establish almost all of the Jewish unions in the 1880's and 1890's.

He was proud of the part he took in the great East London Tailors' strike in 1889. The strike lasted from August 27th until October 2nd, and its aim was to reduce the working-day to 10 ½ hours. Wess was the secretary of the strike committee and worked hard day and night for it. Funds had to be raised to provide the necessaries of life for the strikers and their families. Wess obtained a donation of £75 from Lord Rothschild and Samuel Montague (afterwards Lord Swaythling) gave the sum of £30 10s. 0d.! The strike was won – at least for a time. It is pleasant to add that the dockers contributed £100 to the strike funds, while other English trade-unions, including the Tailors, also gave smaller sums of money.

In 1890 Wess founded and became Secretary of the East London Workers' Unions. In the 1890s he was secretary of the International Tailors, Machinists and Pressers' Trade Union, and later of the United Ladies' Tailors and Mantle Makers' Association.

And yet his activity in the Jewish Workers' movement is by no means the whole story. He was a member of the (original) Socialist league in the '80's – when the present writer first met him – and when "Freedom" was published by Mrs Wilson, Peter Kropotkin and the other comrades he joined with them in their English propaganda of Anarchism, and was associated with the Freedom Group until 1914 (Both "Freedom" and the Freedom Group" have long passed out of existence, and are not to be confused with any present paper using the same name. – [DA] eds) He learned type-setting and at one period, when the offices of the journal were in St. Augustine's Road, Camden Town, N.W., set up the type there.

As a man his nature and conduct were of the kindest and most tolerant character. He sought to win others by persuasion to sympathy with the principles and ideals of our movement.

As can be seen by his work in the Jewish trade unions he was in favour of direct action methods, although the phrase was not in general use in those days.

As a man in his private life he was a good husband and father. He won the respect and esteem of numerous people, and many, both in this country and the U.S.A. will deeply regret the fact that he is no longer with us.

Of course, he was not a believer in any theological superstition, Almost to the last he was, in spite of his age, actively associated with the movement. This year, 1946, he was present and made an encouraging speech at a social meeting at the Workers Circle House in Alie Street, Aldgate, E. which was held to celebrate the 55th anniversary of the publication of the "Freie Arbeiter Stimme" ("Free Workers Voice") of New York, the well-known Jewish Anarchist journal.

William Wess' life was that of a man wholly devoted to the service of humanity; and especially to the betterment of the conditions of the workers, and to their emancipation from the slavery and misery of modern times.

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