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Leeds Anarchist Group (1935)

Herbert Foster

July 1935

To the editors of Terre Libre

COMRADES

In setting out this report on our group's activities, I have discovered that it would be impossible to set it out logically and in an interesting way without offering a brief glance at the circumstances that have shaped the mentality of Leeds workers in their attitude to our propaganda. I think we will all admit that, depending on how a man lives, works and sleeps, his mind reacts – broadly speaking – along certain lines to the problems with which the existing social order confronts him.

That said, allow me briefly to put myself in the shoes of any random stranger fetching up in our city and coming into first contact with the vision of devastation that meets his eyes. He arrives around midday. His gaze is carried to the dense curtain of smoke darkening the slum areas of West Street, Kirkstall Road, York Street, York Road, Hunslet, etc... And inevitably his first thought at this spectacle will be that as a matter of urgency our City Council should erect in a prominent place in the landscape a huge hoarding bearing Dante's dictum: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!" In the industrial hell of Leeds there is nothing so striking as the stark contrasts between extreme

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wealth on the one hand and the extreme poverty on the other. Such is the essence of Civilization.

Such conditions, destructive of human integrity, have, naturally, an impact upon the day to day lives of the workers and indeed upon their leisure. In order to soothe the exhausted nerves of those who were happy enough to have found work, we have here the consolations of drink, cinema and then again the football match. That list would fall short were it not to mention those two, twin, indissoluble and complementary scourges: the Prostitute with her hand-bag and the Minister of God with his little prayer book. The cynicism of the one works hand in glove with the hypocrisy of the other. The entire social life of the Leeds worker is trapped between the two. Such are the hurdles we have undertaken to overcome, whatever the cost.

Our city has a population of 400,000 inhabitants, the vast majority of whom rely upon their brawn as their only support. Some are steelworkers, others textile workers, garment-workers and others still working in transport and the various building trades. Add to these also the brush factories, the shoe factories, the printshops, the woodworkers, the cement workers, the paviours, etc ... But the main industries are the ones named above. Like other centres of industry, Leeds suffers from the effects of capital rationalization and accumulation, which insists upon ever greater revenue extracted from ever fewer employees. This can be seen in the figures published by the Labour Office. Some twenty-six per cent of workers tramp the streets. In addition to which another eight thousand are reduced to reliance on Public Assistance, being in no position to feed themselves and their families.

In the past the organizing of these mass ranks of unemployed was undertaken from several quarters, for the purpose of exploiting the worker's misfortunes and cares for political purposes. Once upon a time there was the NUWM (National Unemployed Workers' Movement). Today the local trades council has taken its place, unsuccessfully. Over its existence,

which currently stands in excess of two years, it has occurred to me to ask why the solidarity fund has only 700 regular dues-payers when its affiliated organizations have 32,000 unionized members. Also, how the entitlements they have built up are automatically stripped from the malcontents who have left or been thrown out. Likewise, I reckon I am within my rights to argue that, despite the presence in its ranks of such respectable folk as City Councillors, Aldermen and Members of Parliament and other bigwigs, that organization does not deserve the trust of the unemployed workers. In my opinion, it comes as small surprise if these bigwigs are in fact as brutal and cynical a line-up as any gang that ever oversaw slave-driving or galley-slaves. That might appear a bit harsh. But I have, let it be said, had it up to here with their hypocrisy. I see men sent to rot on street corners; nothing to do, forgotten yesterday and today hideous: and tomorrow, a nightmare. They are alive, their hearts beat, their lungs work and yet they are sent away to rot as if they were already in their coffins. Such is the price of capitalist civilization.

That being the situation, our activity has been hampered by several things: mainly by the joblessness that affects 75 per cent of our members, and the resultant dearth of cash. All things considered, I reckon we have not done too badly. We have held an average of two meetings a week and whilst the results have not been as brilliant as expected, we have at the least hopes of doing better in the near future.

We had our friend Guy Aldred here on a ten-day propaganda tour. Three new members and lots of sympathizers were won on that occasion. Pamphlet sales were good and we hope that they will bear fruit. We all believe that once we have set up in our new premises, we will make progress towards the social revolution at a pace that will astonish all the comrades.

Yours in the fight for freedom

Herbert FOSTER