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Review: The London Years by Rudolf Rocker

Anarcho

May 28, 2012

While much attention will be directed towards London for the expensive farce which is the Olympics, 2012 should be marked for far more important events – the 100th anniversary of the two great strikes by tailors and dock workers. At the centre of the epic struggle of the tailors was Rudolf Rocker whose excellent autobiography *The London Years* covers these events and much more.

To say that Rocker had an eventful life is a bit of an understatement and it is impossible to do it justice in a review. His autobiography covers the period that made his name in the anarchist movement, when he, a non-Jew, became a leading member of the Jewish anarchist and labour movement in the East End of London (and from there, nationally and internationally). He did so by accident during a visit to Liverpool and a chance meeting on the street. He learnt Yiddish in order to edit a newspaper (*Dos Fraye Vort*) there before being asked to take over the editorship of *Der Arbeter Fraind* in 1898.

This book recounts this movement at its height. These were exciting times, with the labour movement “making

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great progress everywhere” and the “old ideas of the First International were in the air again.” The “crippling influence” of German Social Democracy was being replaced with a new movement “which was aimed not only against the economic monopoly of a privileged minority, but also against the danger of a state-bureaucracy arising in the future.” (83–4) Rocker and his colleagues applied their libertarian ideas in Jewish communities across Britain (including London, Glasgow, Leeds and Liverpool). In London there were so successful that they opened the Arbeter Frait Club and Institute in Jubilee Street, a hall that could hold 800 people (they had to hire 5,000 capacity theatres for bigger meetings).

He recounts various episodes of these struggles, for example during a bakers’ strike the demand was raised for “a trade union label on the bread, so that the public could see if it came from a bakery that observed trade union conditions.” (92) The resulting consumer boycott on non-union bread helped win the strike. However, the peak of the movement came in April 1912 when a strike started among West End tailors. The next month saw thousands of immigrant Jewish tailors in the East End come out in solidarity with them and to challenge the whole sweatshop system. They won a resounding victory.

While the tailors were striking, dockers in London were also on strike for better conditions. As Rocker recounts, the “common struggle brought Jewish and non-Jewish workers together. Joint strike meetings were held, and the same speakers spoke at huge joint demonstrations.” With the “death-blow to the sweatshop system” produced by victory in the tailors’ strike, the British workers “looked at the Jewish workers with quite different eyes after this victory.” Yet the London dock strike continued and many dockers’ families were suffering. The successful Jewish strikers started a campaign “to take some of the dockers’ children into their homes.” This practical support “did a great deal to strengthen the friendship between Jewish and non-Jewish workers.” (129–31) This solidarity was repaid in

dividualist anarchism but also on the preconditions for liberty (such as federalism). His massive *Nationalism and Culture* is a searching analysis of human culture through the ages, with an analysis of both political thinkers and power politics (the manuscript of which was only thing he took when he fled the Nazis in the 1930s).

Combine all these with numerous articles for the anarchist press (in multiple languages), you are left to wonder why there has been no comprehensive anthology of Rocker’s works yet in English. Suffice to say, *The London Years* will show its reader that Rocker’s ideas and life should be of pressing interest to modern revolutionaries. It is best to leave the last word to Rocker himself:

“People may ... call us dreamers ... They fail to see that dreams are also a part of the reality of life, that life without dreams would be unbearable. No change in our way of life would be possible without dreams and dreamers. The only people who are never disappointed are those who never hope and never try to realise their hope.” (95)

The London Years
Rudolf Rocker
Five Leaves Press/AK Press
2005
£14.99

to close off a previously open part of the ship they were interned on and charge access to it. As Rocker notes, “these were the people who were always proclaiming their German patriotism. Every German was supposed to be their comrade. Now they told the English that they regarded the great mass of their fellow-Germans on the boat with such contempt that they would pay for the privilege of not having to mix with them.” (158) This, in a microcosm, shows the poverty of nationalism – it ignores class differences and ends up by getting the many to kill and be killed for the few who own the homeland.

Rocker was refused permission to be expelled to Russia after the February revolution in 1917. Interned for four years, he was finally sent to Germany as part of a prisoner exchange – trying to escape in Holland before he could taste the Kaiser’s hospitality. Ironically, once he had arrived in Germany he was refused entry because he had been stripped of his nationality due to his anarchist activism. He gained his freedom by being expelled to Holland, and the book ends with him visiting his old anarchist comrade Domela Nieuwenhuis.

As the epilogue by his comrade Sam Dreen notes, it is a shame he did not produce another volume chronicling his activities in the German Revolution as a leading member of the syndicalist Free Workers Union as well as his work for the syndicalist International Workers Association formed in 1921. An introduction by the late Colin Ward summarises Rocker’s life and influence well.

The book leaves you wanting to know more. As befitting a leading syndicalist, Rocker also produced the definite introduction to *Anarcho-syndicalism: Theory and Practice* in 1937 (and an abridged version, *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*). He analysed the Russian Revolution in articles like *Anarchism and Sovietism* and defended the Spanish anarchists against the Stalinists in *The Tragedy of Spain*. *Pioneers of American Freedom*, his account of liberal and libertarian thinkers in North America, is still relevant both in terms of an excellent introduction to in-

October 1936, when the dockers were at the forefront in stopping Mosley’s fascist blackshirts marching through Jewish areas (the famous battle of Cable street).

Rocker stresses the importance of such partial struggles in a memorable passage:

“Like many others I have believed in my youth that as social conditions became worse, those who suffered so much would come to realise the deeper causes of their poverty and suffering. I have since been convinced that such a belief is a dangerous illusion ... There is a pitch of material and spiritual degradation from which a man can no longer rise. Those who have been born into misery and never knew a better state are rarely able to resist and revolt ... Certainly the old slogan, ‘The worse the better’, was based on an erroneous assumption. Like that other slogan, ‘All or nothing’, which made many radical oppose any improvement in the lot of the workers, even when the workers demanded it, on the ground that it would distract the mind of the proletariat, and turn it away from the road which leads to social emancipation. It is contrary to all the experience of history and of psychology; people who are not prepared to fight for the betterment of their living conditions are not likely to fight for social emancipation. Slogans of this kind are like a cancer in the revolutionary movement.” (25–6)

Sad to say, most people (including, sadly, leftists) will be more aware of the siege of Sidney Street in 1910 (even thought it involved Lettish Social Democrats) than this anarchist union organising and struggle. Rocker recounts this event plus how many revolutionaries from the Russian Empire could not ad-

just to conditions elsewhere and were even against open activity as not sufficiently revolutionary. Rocker also takes time to mention the activities of Tsarist police agents within the revolutionary movement.

As well as discussing his work within the Jewish unions, Rocker recounts his relationships with such famous libertarians as Louise Michel, Errico Malatesta and Peter Kropotkin as well as his speaking tours of America and attending the 1896 Congress of the Second International. The latter, he explains, was considered important to anarchists to attend. Had these “not concealed their true nature” as Social Democratic congresses then “the anarchists would have been the last to want to be represented” but as they proclaimed themselves socialist ones anarchists, being “after all socialists” and working class in “the great majority”, considered it “wrong to deny them admission.” (28)

There he saw at first hand the intolerance of the Marxists against the anarchists. As Rocker dryly comments: “I often asked myself during this London Congress what would happen if people so intolerant and despotic as these German social democrats ever came to power in a country. I began to fear that socialism without liberty must lead to an even worse tyranny than the conditions against which we were fighting. What has since happened in Russia has proven my fears to have been more than justified.” (32) Rocker noted that this repeated the events of previous congresses of 1891 and 1893 (of the former, Engels gleefully wrote in a letter that, “best of all, the anarchists have been shown the door, just as they were at the Hague Congress. The new, incomparably larger and avowedly Marxist International is beginning again at the precise spot where its predecessor left off”).

For anarchists, Rocker stressed, socialism is “not a simple question of a full belly, but a question of culture that would have to enlist the sense of personality and the free initiative of the individual; without freedom it would lead only to a dismal

state capitalism which would sacrifice all individual thought and feeling to a fictitious collective interest.” (1) How true!

A significant portion of the book relates to the First World War and his time in various British internment camps. He recounts the shock which most anarchists felt when Kropotkin announced his support for the Allies. Kropotkin’s ideas had influenced his “whole development” and he was bound “by ties of close personal friendship and affection” but “this was a matter of conscience” and Rocker had “to take a firm stand.” As Rocker notes, Kropotkin found few anarchists agreeing with his position and he summarises Malatesta presenting the anarchist position which was that “this war was like every other war was being fought for the interests of the ruling classes, not for the nations” and “whichever side the workers fought on they were only cannon-fodder.” (146–7)

So he took up his pen and, like Malatesta, Berkman and other leading anarchists, critiqued Kropotkin from, ironically, the anarchist position that Kropotkin himself had elegantly defended in the pages of *Freedom* the previous year. Rocker did so in spite of his fear that his anti-war activities would bring the police after him – a fear which was confirmed when he was arrested by special order of the War Office. He was interned along with numerous other Germans, from patriots, to the apolitical to anti-war internationalists. Rocker, it should be noted, argues that it was the repression associated with the war that undermined the Jewish anarchist movement.

Rocker paints the fears and isolation, the petty officialdom, the injustice of internment vividly. Needless to say, this was not how it was reported and he mentions how papers “like the *Daily Mail* and *John Bull*” started “a campaign that the ‘enemy aliens’ were living in luxury.” (165) This, like the ignorance and hatred directed towards the Jewish immigrants, will be sadly all too familiar to readers today.

One episode recounted by Rocker is particularly worthy of note. Some wealthy Germans convinced the British officers