DICTIONARY *of* LABOUR BIOGRAPHY

VOLUME XIV

Edited by

Keith Gildart & David Howell

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Contents

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The *Dictionary of Labour Biography* depends on the scholarship of our contributors. They enable an appreciation of the infinite variety that has been characteristic of the British labour movement. We thank them for their entries and for their tolerant and good-humoured responses to our queries and comments.

The research for this volume, as with its predecessors, rests on the library and archival resources of many institutions. As always we have depended on the rich collections and supportive staff of the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, the Labour History Study and Archive Centre at the People's History Museum, Manchester and the Working Class Movement Library, Salford. Previous volumes have acknowledged the invaluable contribution of the British Newspaper Library, Colindale. Its closure and the consequential transfer of its holdings mean that we can now consult them in the less spartan and less urban new home at Boston Spa in Yorkshire.

The construction of individual entries has depended on the resources of local depositories. We are grateful to Burnley Public Library, Cambridgeshire Record Office, Durham Record Office, Flintshire Record Office Hawarden, Hampshire Record Office, Portsmouth Archives, Hull History Centre, Kent Record Office, Maidstone Archives, Sheffield City Archives, Tyne and Wear Archives Service, Newcastle Archives, and Walsall History Centre. Our thanks are all the greater because these vital resources for the historical memory of communities are suffering from the severity of government-imposed austerity.

We remain committed to the exploration of labour movements in the context of diverse and contested national identities, a priority underlined by recent political upheavals. Our debts to the National Archives Kew, the British Library, the Trades Union Congress Library, the National Library of Scotland, the Scottish Record Office, and the National Library of Wales are underpinned by this commitment. Our entries also depend heavily on material held in British academic institutions: Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics and Political Science, London Metropolitan University Archives, Sydney Jones Library University of Liverpool, Swansea University Library, University of Durham Library, University of Huddersfield Library, University of Newcastle Library, University of Stirling Library, University of Sussex Library.

Diverse collections illuminate the richness of our material: Arthur Findlay College Stansted, British Postal Museum London, College of Psychic Studies London, National Co-operative Archives Manchester, National Portrait Gallery London, National Tramway Museum Archives Derbyshire, Union of Democratic Mineworkers Mansfield, Women's Library London. More widely we must emphasise our continuing thanks to the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam complemented for this volume by the Archive Office of Tasmania, Hobart and the Kenya National Archive, Nairobi.

Once again we have experienced the excitement and frustrations of tracing family details on Ancestry.com, the genealogist.com.uk and scotlandspeople@scotlandonline.co.uk. We are glad to note our informal link with the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the practical help and enthusiasm of Mark Curthoys.

This volume has been prepared in a period of exceptional political turmoil. Much has been unexpected and emphasises the complexity and contingency of what we study as historians. More substantively the crude populism that increasingly degrades our politics makes even more urgent the need to recover our past in all its diversity.

Notes to Readers

1. Place names are usually quoted according to contemporary usage in the period covered in each entry.
2. Where the amount of a will, estate or effects is quoted it is normally that given in *The Times*, in the records at Somerset House in London, the Probate Office in Manchester or at the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh. For dates before 1860 the source is usually the Public Record Office. Additional information has been provided by www.ancestry.co.uk and www.gov.uk.
3. Under the heading **Sources**, personal information relates to details obtained from relatives, friends or colleagues of the individual in question; biographical information refers to other sources.
4. The place of publication in the bibliographical sources is London unless otherwise stated.
5. The *See also* sections that follow some biographical entries include names marked with a dagger—these refer to biographies published in Volumes I–XIII of the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*; those with no marking are included in the present volume.
6. A consolidated list of entries in Volumes I–XIV can be found at the end of this volume, before the general index.

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K. Gildart and D. Howell (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography,*
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ANCRUM, James (1898–1946)
COMMUNIST AND NATIONAL UNEMPLOYED WORKES' MOVEMENT LEADER

James 'Jim' Ancrum was born on 15 August 1898 in Felling-on-Tyne, now part of the metropolitan borough of Gateshead. His parents were James, a road labourer, and Martha née Mills. The family included many staunch Methodists. He started work underground at a local colliery as a boy and at the age of sixteen, in 1915, he volunteered for the Royal Navy and served for the rest of the war. During the miners' lockout of 1926, Ancrum joined the Communist Party, a decision that caused a permanent rift with some of his respectable, Methodist relatives. The 1926 lockout featured a rapid expansion in Communist Party membership in the Durham coalfield, more than in any other, but then an equally rapid decline. He was part of a small cadre who remained in the party and played a significant role in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) in the region during the inter-war years.

Ancrum gained both a national and an international reputation for his organising role with Workers' International Relief during the lock-out at Dawdon Colliery, County Durham, in 1929. This was a particularly significant dispute for the Communist Party because it was an opportunity to implement the 'class against class' strategy which had recently been adopted by the Communist International. At Dawdon the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) Executive was amenable to accepting the inferior wages and conditions offered by the management whilst the local lodge was not; for the Communist Party this was an opportunity to promote its revolutionary leadership in opposition to the official union structure.

Workers' International Relief (WIR) was a Comintern initiative that was intended to prevent workers who were on strike from being starved back to work. Ancrum described how the national committee of the WIR had made a £30 donation to start a feeding centre for the miners and their families. A local committee, initially opposed by lodge and DMA officials as a communist front, organised the centre with the help of the local Co-operative Society. Funds were then raised by collections and concerts that involved the local community as well as appeals to trade union branches around the country. Over fifteen weeks, until the Dawdon miners returned after a partial victory, 14,880 meals were served and 1200 food parcels were distributed to workers and their families. According to Ancrum this showed that 'the workers cannot rely on the trade union machine to prevent them from starving during a strike. They must have their own commissariat, the W.I.R…' [Ancrum (1929)]. This of course was entirely in line with the 'class against class' position, but at the same time the feeding centre has been recognised as being instrumental in allowing the dispute to continue.

Ancrum was appointed by the 11th Congress of the Communist Party to its Central Committee in December 1929. He served until 1932, whilst also spending time from some point in 1931 until 1932 at the International Lenin School in Moscow. The 11th Congress was the second held by the party in 1929, the Comintern believing that the members of the Central Committee agreed at the 10th, at the beginning of the year, were insufficiently committed to the 'class against class' policy. Ancrum proved loyal to this policy for as long as it was required of him. He repeated his WIR role in organising soup kitchens and feeding centres during the textile disputes in Lancashire in 1930. In that year he was a leader of the Tyneside contingent of a Hunger March to London. This march, held only a year after an earlier National Hunger March and organised despite the reservations of the NUWM leadership, attracted less than half of the target number of marchers and Tyneside was no exception.

In the early 1930s Ancrum was also secretary of the Durham Miners' Minority Movement, speaking at pit-head meetings and trying with little success to build a membership in the coalfield. The Executive of the DMA had been in a bitter feud with the Communist Party since the 1926 lock-out, and the Minority Movement pushing the 'class against class' critique of the union leadership exacerbated the situation. In 1931, Ancrum was temporarily expelled from the union for Minority Movement activity, although the specific offence was 'dealing with Lodge

business in Felling Square' [DMA Executive Committee Minutes, 14 July 1931]. Although the available evidence points to his loyalty to the Communist Party leadership, the Minutes of the Central Committee of 15 March 1931 record a contribution which also outlined his approach to locality working:

> Before I joined the Party I used to back gee-gees, fill in the football coupon and go to the pub. But when I joined the Party I thought I had to stop doing this and only associate with Communists. But we must associate with people who back gee-gees, fill in the football coupon and go to the pub. Find out what's troubling them and raise it as an election issue… we must not only deal with national issues but get definitely on to the big issues affecting the workers in the localities [Communist Party, Minutes of Central Committee Meeting, 15 March 1931].

There are echoes here of Methodism in this account of his life-style conversion on joining the Communist Party. There is also a clear sign of what was to make him a force in the Felling area: the focus on what local people defined as major issues and the need to engage with them.

Ancrum was elected as a Communist councillor to Felling Urban District Council at a by-election in 1935. This local authority was solidly Labour and it was his third attempt at a seat in his own West Ward; he consolidated his position two years later. Ancrum's electoral progress in Felling over a six-year period indicates his increasing presence in the area, as can be seen from the election reports in his local newspaper *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, and the *Newcastle Journal*. In 1931, in a field of six candidates for three seats, he secured 12% of the votes cast. Three years later, with five candidates for the seats, he secured 16%. At the by-election in 1935 he was elected with 66% of the vote against one Labour rival. In 1937, in a field of five candidates, he was re-elected with 23% of the vote, again defeating a Labour rival. Although he was never successful in the Durham County Council elections, he nevertheless achieved a noticeable increase in his share of the vote over the same period. In 1934 in a field of three candidates for one seat he won 18% of the vote and 29% three years later.

West Ward was one of the poorest in the authority and had the highest rate of over-crowded housing. Ancrum's increasing success was the result not just of persistent electoral campaigning in the same ward but of meticulous local advice and advocacy work. He was a leading figure in the Felling branch of the NUWM and a speaker at regular outdoor meetings, where he described his extensive casework on benefits advice and appeals over rents, repairs, and preventing evictions. Ancrum organised the funding and equipment for the Felling contingent on a Means Test protest march to Durham in 1932 and led the Felling and Gateshead campaigns against the new benefit scales introduced by the 1934 Unemployment Assistance Act. This campaign involved 1000-strong indoor rallies in a local cinema, and a march estimated at 15,000 strong to the Unemployment Assistance Board Area Office. Ancrum secured a commitment from the manager not to reduce benefit scales where children were receiving free school meals, a review of cases where 'unfair advantage' was being taken of the Act, and agreement that central government would be notified about the protest. This was part of the national movement that forced the government to temporarily withdraw benefits cuts. However, his local paper noted after his first election success that 'This contest appears to have been fought on an individual and not a political basis … Councillor Ancrum is well-known throughout the district and this no doubt accounts for his remarkable victory' [*Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 18 October 1935]. In other words it was not his communist politics that attracted the voters, but his local efforts on their behalf over benefits, housing issues, and council policies.

Ancrum's council work was largely an extension of his NUWM work. As well as taking opportunities to campaign against the Means Test and benefits levels, he took up local dissatisfaction about council housing and job schemes, and campaigned for more transparency in council business and for a points system in council house allocation. At one point the district Communist Party officials had to warn him against making accusations of corruption and

favouritism in council affairs unless he had firm evidence. At the same time he had a national presence in the NUWM, speaking and helping to create branches around the country, and with his name and position as 'National Organiser' on the organisation's headquarters letterhead. Nevertheless the NUWM in the North East of England, as in many other areas of the country, was isolated from the mainstream labour movement for much of the 1930s. Ancrum was involved in organising the Tyneside contingent for the 1934 Hunger March, but the effort was later criticised by NUWM leaders for having to make up the numbers with 'unreliable, bad types' rather than the trade unionists who were the target participants. Although trade union participation had improved considerably two years later, and Ancrum had been instrumental in raising funds for the marchers in the Felling area, he failed to persuade Felling Urban District Council to support the 1936 Hunger March. His Labour colleagues fell into line with their party's official opposition to such communist initiatives.

Local elections were suspended for the duration of the war and Ancrum served on Felling UDC from 1935 until his death in 1946. His was one of only five local authority seats to be taken by Communist candidates in the north-east of England during the inter-war period; like Ancrum, the other councillors were all well-known local activists in the NUWM. This appears to have been the case in other parts of Britain too. The fact that the small numbers of communists elected to local authorities in Britain were almost invariably local NUWM figures is a testament to the effectiveness of their advice and advocacy work. The Communist Party recognised at the time that such local electoral success was the result of campaigning work by individuals, but that this was not being translated into wider support for the party: 'the workers see too much done by councillors as individuals and not enough by them as Party members' [Communist Party, Report of the Fifteenth Party Congress 1938]. Ancrum's local paper had already made a similar observation. During the Second World War Ancrum served as an Air Raid Precautions warden in Felling, a role which communists developed as a means to monitor and take up local issues and grievances. He formally withdrew from the NUWM in 1940, with a suddenness that is known to have confused such leadership of the organisation as still remained; it is not clear what the reasons were, although by that stage the political circumstances that had produced the NUWM had changed completely.

Ancrum had acquired a command of Russian during his year at the Lenin School and that was the first of several visits to the Soviet Union. It is possible (although this must be conjecture) that his knowledge of the language gave him a greater opportunity to appreciate what was really taking place there during the 1930s. If so there is no public evidence that he expressed any disquiet about it. It is known that the NUWM leaders Wal Hannington and Harry MacShane had several major disagreements with the Comintern loyalists in the Communist Party leadership over the direction of the unemployed movement. What role, if any, Ancrum played is not known and neither is his position during the policy disputes. His career as an activist lasted twenty years and witnessed the major Comintern-imposed policy shifts of the CPGB, all of which he seems to have accommodated.

Ancrum had married Frances J. Gibbon in June 1920, a Felling Communist Party activist, and they had no children. He died in 1946 of complications following an operation and after a communist funeral was buried at St Mary's Church, Heworth. After his death the Labour Party re-captured his West Ward seat and the Communists were never represented again on Felling Urban District Council. In many respects Ancrum represents a good example of the 'local tribunes' produced by the Communist Party between the wars. He would have been to a large extent an ideal role model of the time: rooted in his own community and sharing its privations, selflessly active, an effective negotiator and open-air speaker, a natural leader whose abilities were honed through party training and education. His achievements as an NUWM leader—and in winning local elections—were substantial in a region where the CP membership was consistently the smallest of any district in Britain. Nevertheless 'local tribunes' operated within the context of the top–down organisation that was the Communist International. Jim Ancrum was

one of those who had to balance the needs of the people among whom he worked with the demands of a political leadership whose priorities were determined elsewhere.

Writings: 'The W.I.R. in the Dawdon Lock-Out', *Labour Monthly*, vol. 11, no. 9 (September 1929); 'Felling's Part in the Great Protest', *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 15 February 1935.

Sources: (**1**) **MSS**: Durham County Record Office (Minutes of the Durham Miners' Association Executive 1931–1939); Tyne and Wear Archives Service (Minutes of Felling on Tyne Urban District Council 1934–1946); Labour History Archives and Study Centre, Manchester (Minutes of the Central Committee of the CPGB 1930–1939; Wal Hannington Papers); Marx Memorial Library (Hannington and Brown Papers; NUWM Bulletins and Circulars). (**2**) **Newspapers**: *Daily Worker* March–April 1930; *Heslop's Local Advertiser* 1931–1946; *Newcastle Journal* 1934–1937. (**3**) **Books and Articles**: George Hardy, *Those Stormy Years* (1956); Richard Croucher, *We Refuse to Starve in Silence: A History of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement 1920–1946* (1987); Stuart Howard, 'Dawdon in the "Third Period": The Dawdon dispute of 1929 and the Communist Party', *North East Labour History Society Bulletin*, 21 (1987), 3–17; Andrew Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1920–1945', *Historical Journal*, vol. 3, no. 43 (2000), 777–800; Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920–1991* (2007); Alan Campbell and John McIlroy: 'The National Unemployed Workers' Movement and the Communist Party of Great Britain Revisited', *Labour History Review*, vol. 73, no. 1 (April 2008), 61–89; Don Watson, *No Justice Without A Struggle: The National Unemployed Workers' Movement in the North East of England 1920–1940* (2014). (**4**) **Oral Testimony**: Mrs. Joan Douglas (nee Ancrum).

DON WATSON

See also: Henry BOLTON; †Sir William LAWTHER

BANNER, Robert (1855–1910)
TRADE UNIONIST AND SOCIALIST

Robert Banner was born on 27 November 1855 in a tenement building in East Arthur Place, on the eastern south side of central Edinburgh. His father, James Banner (1816–1887), an Edinburgh shoemaker had married Margaret née Dickinson (1825–1882) in 1843 and together they were active in the Chartist movement. Robert (he was 'Bob' from an early age), the eighth of seventeen children, later recounted that his father had known Ernest Jones and his mother had set up a secret hand-grenade factory during a critical period in the Chartist movement. Banner's reading material at home included works by Robert Owen and files of the Chartist newspapers *Northern Star*, *Red Republican*—including the first English translation of *The Communist Manifesto*—and *Friend of the People* [*Workman's Times*, 5 December 1891]. Throughout his life Banner remained a student of Chartism, once promising the Socialist League Council a pamphlet on the subject for the Socialist Platform series. Sadly, Banner failed to deliver the manuscript and he published nothing other than letters to the press in his lifetime.

Already a recent participant in the Edinburgh demonstration for household suffrage in 1866 and other radical gatherings, Banner became involved in the affairs of the Edinburgh Republican Club when it was established in 1871, where he met the radical journalist John Morrison Davidson. Although only nineteen years old and still an apprentice in the bookbinding trade, Banner took over the secretary's role in 1874 and according to one account it was here that he first met the Austrian Marxist Andreas Scheu, who arrived in the city in the following year [Lee and Archbold (1935) 80]. Scheu's autobiographical portrait written nearly fifty years

later, locates their first encounter in the Unitarian church of Pastor Robert Drummond after the Austrian had spoken to the congregation [Scheu (1923) 109]. Whatever the exact truth, at some point in or around 1875, the experienced Austrian revolutionary took Banner under his wing and introduced him to social democratic ideas which the young bookbinder later acknowledged formed the core of his political thinking.

On completion of his apprenticeship in March 1877, Banner was admitted to the Edinburgh branch of the Bookbinders' and Machine Rulers' Consolidated Union where his enthusiasm was at first encouraged by the respectable and largely Liberal artisans forming the local committee. Sent as delegate to the influential Edinburgh Trades Council in April 1879, Banner made an immediate impact when he challenged the right of the secretary to absent himself from a conference to discuss a Federation of Trades because he did not agree with the purpose of the gathering. Acting for the first time with David Reid, a young compositor representing the Scottish Typographical Association, Banner argued for the Trades Council to implement the decision of the 1878 Trades Union Congress (TUC) to work for federation of unions principally to defend the nine hour day. Indignant at the challenge, the Trades Council secretary threatened to resign and then put his case at the following Congress, coincidentally held at Edinburgh, opposing what he believed were over-ambitious moves towards federation. In the period of consultation that followed, Banner brought the matter to the attention of the Bookbinders branch where, following a contested vote, it was agreed to instruct the Trades Council to organise a federation conference. However, with all local impetus lost in delay the matter dropped from the agenda.

Undeterred, Banner and Reid continued to make waves at the Trades Council. In August 1879 they unsuccessfully opposed any financial contribution to the Royal Infirmary Hospital because 'it should be the capitalists …to keep up such an institution' [Minutes of Edinburgh Trades Council, 19 August 1880]. Their proposal in January 1880 to encourage the Trades Council to discuss 'all questions of national importance, political and social', was checked by a majority who believed it unconstitutional and divisive [Minutes of Edinburgh Trades Council, 6 January 1880]. The pair were in a minority of two when attempting to reject endorsement of two Liberal parliamentary candidates on the basis of Banner's words that, 'so far as the working classes are concerned, none of them had any more interest in the working classes than the man in the moon' [*Edinburgh Evening News*, 31 March 1880]. They were again going against the grain in June 1880 when, in secular mode, they objected to the depiction of Sunday labour as 'demoralising', providing another rest day was provided. This landed Banner in trouble with the Bookbinders branch who warned him to be more careful in the future. For Banner, matters came to a head in the following August when the Trades Council was agonising over the allocation of seats for the royal review of volunteers and he castigated delegates for their deference saying: 'he did not understand why the Trades Council should be anxious to procure tickets for the grand stand. Besides it was a most depraving thing to see men throwing away their time, which could be devoted to useful production. They would be throwing their time away before an old lady of whom Benjamin Disraeli said she was mentally incapable of performing her duties. They will have 100,000 fools looking at another 40,000 fools, each handling a musket for the defence of a country that did not possess an inch of …' [*Edinburgh Evening News*, 17 August 1881]. At this point the Trades Council president ruled Banner out of order and he was forced to stop. These remarks proved too much for the Bookbinders union branch who replaced Banner as delegate.

Away from what was for Banner the stultifying environment of the Trades Council, his activity was more expansive and explicitly political. Again with Reid at the Edinburgh Workman's Industrial Institute set up in 1880 by leading trade unionists to stage 'discussions, essays and

lectures', Banner promoted a political aspect to the work, inviting Scheu to speak and running a Social Science Congress [Minutes of Edinburgh Trades Council, 27 April 1880; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 8 October 1880]. Despite its strong links with the Trades Council, the arms-length nature of the relationship gave Banner space to criticise the established craft unions, as he did in November 1880 when reviewing the recent TUC he described them as 'a collection of old women and windbags who just wished themselves reported' [*Edinburgh Evening* News, 1 December 1880].

In a similar vein, Banner's correspondence with Friedrich Engels in the winter of 1880 focussed on the limitations of British trade unionism—'what a sickly thing the TUC is'—and expressed hope that as more of Marx and Engels's work were translated into English 'you will hear the low murmurings that lay stifled in the breasts of the people burst into a raging storm that will bring down priest, king and bourgeoisie. Once let the toilers taste the good we have to give them, and the odious individualism will perish as feudalism perished' [Marx/Engels Papers L-129]. Banner studied assiduously Engels's articles published in the *Labour Standard* between May and August 1881, remembering nearly twenty years later receiving a copy of the first in the series, 'A fair day's wages for a fair day's work', from Engels himself [*Woolwich and District Labour Notes*, July 1899].

Banner was also in correspondence with Karl Marx by the autumn of 1880, declaring himself to be a 'humble admirer', expressing the wish to read *Capital* that extended into a proposal for translation into English. Marx asked Banner to keep him informed of developments in the Scottish working-class movement and reports were sent, including one announcing a 'Conference of Social Democrats' meeting in Hamilton on 11 June 1881 [Marx/Engels Papers D 131–133]. Banner was clearly the driving force behind this initiative and it is possible that by this time he had established relations with James Keir Hardie, who had since 1879 led struggles among Hamilton miners, making it a suitable venue for a conference that intended to establish a 'Scottish Labour Party' that would affiliate to the Socialist International and send a delegate to the upcoming conference in Zurich. Although nominally one of three joint secretaries, it was Banner who took the leading part and drafted the programme for discussion. This included the traditional radical causes of adult suffrage, equal electoral districts, payment of members, triennial parliaments and independence for Ireland; less common was the demand for Scottish independence which was also there. Land nationalisation also featured and had a particular resonance at this time because of ongoing tenants' struggles in Scotland against landlordism. But what was most significant about the Hamilton conference, and which marked out its distinctively socialist character, was the call for 'nationalisation of the means of industrial production; national co-operation for the rational production and distribution of wealth' [*Labour Standard*, 18 June 1881]. On this issue the meeting was in advance of the founding Democratic Federation conference held three days earlier in London—welcomed by the Hamilton delegates—where nationalisation was not discussed because its leading force, H.M. Hyndman, 'was still in large part satisfied with the Radical programme adopted' [Wilkins (1959) 205]. The influence of Scheu can be detected in an additional resolution at Hamilton condemning the 'persecution of Herr Most' (Johann Most) the editor of *Freiheit*, the German language anarchist newspaper produced in London to which Scheu regularly contributed. In March *Freiheit* had supported the assassination of Tsar Alexander II and suggested other monarchs should be treated to the same justice, leading to Most's arrest, and at the time of the Hamilton meeting, detention. Most was subsequently found guilty and sentenced to sixteen months hard labour.

Banner needed no encouragement to condemn the British state for its use of repression. He reacted vociferously against the Liberal Government's Coercion Bill of 1881 claiming it 'is got up by a conspiracy of Whigs and Tories in the interest of the landowning class, in the interest of

that class who have at all times resisted the ever growing demands of the people for freedom, so that they may be better able to collect their blackmail in the form of rack rents' [*The Radical*, 26 February 1881]. For Banner, the removal of constitutional means of protest justified direct action, and he was in contact with Edinburgh-based members of the Irish Land League. He made sure that the suppression of the newspaper *Irish World* from circulation was condemned by the Hamilton delegates and in early 1881 he was attempting to attract well known speakers on the Irish question to Edinburgh [*The Radical*, 5 March 1881]. In an interview given to his friend George Samuel in 1891, Banner claimed he had been one of the few who had defended the Phoenix Park assassinations in May 1882, which he said led to government interfering with his correspondence. Banner must also have alluded to his involvement in events 'connected with Ireland, Russia and elsewhere', because Samuel wrote that these he 'must not mention in print' [*Workman's Times*, 5 December 1891]. It is possible, of course, that these were fanciful and boastful notions expressed by Banner, but it is also conceivable that they were true and perhaps connected to the 'rumour current throughout the nineties—always angrily denied—that a member of the H.M. Hyndman's Democratic Federation had some hand' in the Phoenix Park events [Thompson (1971) 33].

By the spring of 1882 Banner had certainly linked up with the Democratic Federation—the proposed Scottish Labour Party having come to nothing—his attention turned to setting-up a branch of the Federation in Edinburgh [*The Radical*, 13 May 1882]. At the end of April 1882 Hyndman wrote asking for a report on progress and in May Banner made the trip to London to attend the Federation's first annual conference where he was elected to the executive and contributed to the debate on republicanism, telling delegates that, 'the whole question turned upon what sort of republic they wished to create … In his opinion it should be a social democratic one', which presupposed common ownership of all means of production and not just land [BLPES Coll Misc 492C; *Daily News*, 1 June 1882]. Therefore, while Banner was in June 1882 prepared to join other social democrats in endorsing the programme of the Land Nationalisation League, he would add that common ownership also needed to extend to 'Mines, Factories and Machinery for the equal distribution of wealth'. In that way Banner believed, quoting from the *Communist Manifesto*, 'our goal that was sketched by Marx and Engels, where the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, will be replaced by an association, wherein the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' [*The Radical*, 1 July 1882; 29 April 1882].

By this time Banner was a married man with four children. He married Helen née Maclucas, a fellow native of Edinburgh and a lithographer's assistant, in January 1875. The service was conducted by Pastor Drummond whom Scheu remembered as preaching 'quite radical ideas, and with whom I had various interesting discussions' [Scheu (1923) 109]. The Banners settled in Arthur Street near to where Robert had been born and with the young bookbinder in regular work earning a weekly wage of 30 shillings the family would have been better off than most. Robert, although prone to spend money on books, had built up savings only for them to be lost when the Scottish Savings and Investment Building Society wound up after 1880. Scheu later recounted his conversation with Banner at this time:

> I well remember the day when he came to me in Edinburgh and told me, with a troubled expression, that the workers' building society that he belonged to had failed. 'But you weren't heavily involved,' I said. 'Well, with my life savings about fifty pounds.' 'I thought you had invested it all in books.' 'Some of it, not all. I wish I had been true to my first love and stuck with the books. But now – perhaps it is a just punishment for wanting to have my own home that I could leave to my children, from which nobody could ever evict them. Why would a

> fighting socialist need such a thing?' He had no words of anger or bitterness against his comrades whose lack of knowledge of business (let us assume!) had led to the collapse of the building society. But it finished Edinburgh for him [Scheu (1923) 111].

Banner and his family did indeed leave the city in the late summer of 1882 with the original intention of following other Edinburgh bookbinders to America, but en route he met up with Scheu in London (Scheu had moved there in 1881) and was persuaded to set up home in the capital. Banner found work as a bookbinder in Woolwich, took rooms for the family in Milward Street in a residential district near Woolwich Common, and was quickly involved in the Invicta Working Men's Club where he found many fellow Scots, working mostly as engineering craftsmen at the Royal Arsenal. Activity at the Invicta Club gave Banner entrée to cohorts of secularists, republicans, home-rulers, anti-imperialists and radicals, amongst whom he argued for a socialism based unequivocally on the struggle between classes, an approach to politics that almost certainly had never been aired in the previously Tory Woolwich.

Banner worked with James Macdonald and Scheu to persuade the Federation to hold Sunday open-air meetings in Regents Park in February 1883, an activity he then took to Woolwich [*Justice*, 11 July 1896]. The site outside the Arsenal gates in Beresford Square became his regular haunt with, on occasions, himself the only speaker, a fact belying the suggestion that it was only following later contact with Will Crooks that the socialist tradition of open-air meetings took hold in Woolwich [Tyler (2013) 106]. Banner was soon able to persuade leading members of the Federation to speak at Woolwich, including the chairman, Hyndman, who had previously been opposed to Sunday gatherings believing them to be, according to Scheu's account, 'a continental idea, which the English people would never allow to be established in London' [Scheu (1923) 48]. Always an engaging and amusing speaker, who could perform impromptu, Banner became a familiar figure on the soap box where his Edinburgh tones accorded with some of his audience who had also left the Scottish capital to work in Woolwich. When mistaken for an Irishman Banner, tongue in cheek, wrote, 'Don't slander me. I am a Scot, and, as a Scot, a Communist' [*Workman's Times*, 14 November 1891].

In June 1884, following such a meeting at the Arsenal gates with Scheu as the main speaker, Banner announced that a Woolwich branch of the Federation was being established. Although not at this point a member of the executive, having come off in June 1883, Banner was playing a role in the simmering discord that emerged between Hyndman and Scheu over the chairman's autocratic style of leadership and 'submerged jingosim' [Thompson (1955) 396]. William Morris, who had joined the Federation in January 1883 and was at this point playing a conciliatory role, reported to Scheu who had returned to Edinburgh, that Banner was 'much down cast at the turn things are taking,' but would caution him from 'running a-muck' [Kelvin (1987) 294–295]. While Morris appears to have respected Banner's political integrity, he sometimes seems to have doubted his temperament which could be fiery and confrontational, once describing how 'Banner was ready to jump down anyone's throat' at an executive meeting [Kelvin (1987) 314]. No doubt experienced and successful in making extemporised contributions, Banner's lack of preparation could sometimes be exposed, as Morris observed at a decisive meeting where he 'spoke badly and not much to the point' [Kelvin (1987) 360].

Banner had been re-elected to the executive at the annual conference of the Federation in August when delegates adopted the title of Social Democratic Federation (SDF) along with a full socialist programme. At this conference the composition of the executive changed weakening Hyndman's position and increasingly he resorted to intrigue against Scheu and his other critics, further polarising views and forcing Morris to lead the opposition camp. In a series of confrontations during December the battle lines were drawn, culminating at the 27 December

executive meeting where Morris and his supporters, despite being in a majority, resigned from the SDF and went away to form a new organisation, the Socialist League (SL).

Banner was announced as a member of the SL provisional council and signatory of the League's *Manifesto* when it was published on 30 December 1884. Moving quickly to transfer the small Woolwich branch from the Federation to the SL, Banner invited Morris to speak in the final week of January 1885 aware that members of the SDF were due to visit in an effort to avoid secession. Morris's visit to Woolwich on 25 January was not, therefore, as Kelvin suggests, an example of his 'dislike of conflict among socialists … (illustrated) …. by his readiness to keep an SDF lecture engagement so soon after the weeks of acrimony', but more a pre-emptive strike against the Federation [Kelvin (1987) 379]. Three days later, Jack Williams and James Murray were sent down by the SDF executive and in speeches lasting two hours attacked 'various members of the majority' for their actions. Banner reported to the League secretary that after much debate members voted by five to three to become a branch of the League. Banner's addendum to his note that a number of members who would have voted to join the League were not present because of overtime work at the Arsenal, could not disguise the fact that little more than a handful were involved, and not surprisingly, despite his best efforts a League branch was never established at Woolwich [SL Archive 742/4]. The regular and well-attended Sunday evening meetings continued, still featuring League heavyweights, copies of *Commonweal* and other SL literature were sold, but no branch was registered at the Farringdon Road office nor delegate sent to the annual conference.

Not discouraged, Banner's early enthusiasm for the League meant he was a regular outdoor speaker at many of London's principal venues and occasionally he was asked to deliver a conventional lecture on one of his chosen topics including 'The Social Revolution' and 'The History of Chartism'. Banner's third offering, 'The Fraud of Politics', allowed expression of his view held since at least the early 1880s that 'Parliamentary government is a mockery, and the cry for the franchise is a sham. What is wanted is not mere voting power, but the people to understand how they are being cheated and robbed' [*The Radical*, 29 April 1882]. During the free speech fight at Dod Street in September 1885, he expected the League to send a 'force of true men who can be relied upon to resist the police should they again commit outrages', offering himself to 'come armed' [SL Archive 747/1]. He propounded League policy on the Soudan War at a protest meeting of the Woolwich (formerly Invicta) Radical Club in April 1885, successfully moving a resolution that the war was undertaken 'in the interests of the market-hunters and bond holders against a people struggling for the freedom of her native land' [*Cambridge Independent Press*, 5 April 1885]. As delegate of the Woolwich Radical Club at a Fabian Society conference in June 1886, Banner acted as a surrogate League representative, stating that 'socialists did not believe that socialism would be carried out in one country only. Socialists believe that in order to establish socialism it must be universal … and international' [Coll Misc. 0098, 1886, 175]. Described by Hyndman as a 'workman economist' because of his knowledge of Marx, Banner advised George Bernard Shaw to read *Capital* and established classes in economics for workers in Woolwich because he believed the study would unlock understanding of exploitation [Lee and Archbold (1935) 80; Shaw (1971) 84; BLPES Wallas/1/6; Commonweal, 15 October 1887]. When a Woolwich newspaper attempted to ridicule Morris for being a manufacturer and a socialist, Banner explained that socialists were concerned with the capitalist system as a whole and not the actions of individuals [*Woolwich Gazette*, 17 April 1885].

Banner's working hours and the necessity to take on overtime when it was available in busy periods often meant he was unable to attend SL council meetings and his record of attendance in the first six months of 1885 was far from exemplary. Absence meant Banner could be surprised by reported discussions of meetings, such as the occasion in May 1885 when his name had

been put forward as a possible successor to Mahon for the League's post of secretary without prior consultation. Such events reinforced doubts Banner harboured about the League's governance, organisation and administration. He complained bitterly to the secretary in April 1886 about being sent to meetings in Stratford and Battersea, at a personal cost of 4s, only to find nothing organised. Banner wrote: 'Now, as I am neither a millionaire nor a spendthrift, I don't intend going to any meeting put up by the League until those who are responsible for this organisation have been taught a little common sense. It is not by anarky (sic) but organisation progress will be made. If we can't organise a meeting in the open-air, how are we going to organise to destroy capitalism' [SL Archive 748/4].

Re-elected to the Council in April 1886, Banner, along with others, detected a growing anarchist influence in the League which he believed to be organisationally introspective at a time when energy needed to be directed towards education and agitation. With Scheu, Eleanor Marx Aveling, Edward Aveling, Alexander K. Donald and others associated with the Bloomsbury branch of the SL, Banner signed a statement criticising a circular issued by Joseph Lane and Henry Charles of the League's anarchist wing proposing major organisational change at the 1886 conference. Their scheme to establish 'communes' as a counterweight to centralisation and domination by London members, was criticised by Banner and the others as disruptive, divisive and likely to compound existing problems [BLPES Coll Misc. 0706/9]. Although the Lane and Charles proposals were rejected by the conference, the anarchist tendency grew proportionately stronger on the League council as it reduced in size, which undoubtedly contributed to Banner's decision to resign his membership in 1886.

In spite of this, he remained in regular contact with the League, took copies of *Commonweal* for sale, and attended the 1887 annual conference as a visitor. Present with League comrades at the demonstration on 13 November 1887 seeking access to Trafalgar Square following its closure by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Banner reported to the SL secretary that 'it was nearly a header for me. I got my hat knocked into a shape which made me think for some time I had either lost or found a hat' [SL 740/3]. The Woolwich contingent was attacked by the police just after crossing Westminster Bridge and Banner described how, 'The police rode in amongst the people hitting right and left indiscriminately' [*The Link*, November 24, 1888]. Following the demonstration he acted as one of the two Woolwich contacts for the Law and Liberty League as it attempted to defend those prosecuted and maintain pressure for the banning proclamation on Trafalgar Square to be lifted. Banner's association with the League was also influenced by his admiration for Morris and he continued to respond positively to requests to speak at Hammersmith into the nineties when he would combine a Sunday midday open-air meeting with an evening lecture at Kelmscott House.

Banner's links with leading members of the Bloomsbury branch of the SL was also of significance in that it revealed a further stage in the evolution of his own political thinking, bringing him closer to those who believed it was necessary for socialists to engage in the class struggle on all fronts, including parliamentary and municipal politics, where standing candidates was a necessity. He explained his view of the tensions in the relationship between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activity in a letter to the local Woolwich press in 1890.

> Parliament never moves faster than the people who make and unmake parliaments …And is parliament their sphere of action? At present, certainly not. It is in rousing the great inert mass of working men who are at present outside of labour organisations and instructing them on the great economic questions. The **best** men among the workers don't desire to go to Parliament, but to the street corners, the factory gates, and just as our work is done effectively, then so Parliament will act in our interests. If those workmen who have an eye on Parliament

> would just keep their attention fixed on educational work …and just remember …that it is not Parliament, but the people outside it who are first to be captured, the work of us all would be more lasting and sounder …Let those who are for education and organisation stick to our guns; Parliament will move as our shots are effective. But at the same time let us see that we vote for no candidate who is against our labour programme, and that we rouse the workers to a knowledge of their own interest [*Woolwich* Gazette, 5 September 1890].

This was to be the issue the Bloomsbury branch would contest with Morris in the SL until their expulsion in 1888, by which time Banner was in regular contact with leading protagonists A.K. Donald and John L. Mahon as they hatched plans for a new organisation. By June 1888, Banner was advertising meetings in Woolwich under the title of the Labour Union and two months later a new body of that name was canvassing support, with Mahon as joint secretary and Banner a member of the organising committee, for an 'independent working class party'. Recognising that such a party could not be established immediately, the Labour Union accepted it must 'throw what weight it has on the side of the party that brings forward the most progressive measures' [Barker Archive BAR 3/1; George Bernard Shaw Papers 465].

Banner attempted to apply this strategy in the selection of a parliamentary candidate to ensure that the Conservative incumbent Colonel Edwin Hughes was challenged at the next election. Pushing forward William Martin Edmunds, a radical Liberal and supporter of home rule, Banner claimed he had received assurances from Edmunds of his support for key labour policies and other progressive demands and told a local Liberal and Radical club that 'they would force this man on the Liberal Party, and tell them that unless they supported him they would hold aloof from the election contest, or run a man of their own and split the vote' [*Woolwich Gazette*, 24 May 1889]. The choice of Edmunds created controversy in Woolwich with some local Liberals resentful of the emerging labour interest and Banner's assertive intervention. Others, including Fred Hammill who had recently arrived in the town from Yorkshire to work at the Arsenal, believed him to be a poor choice, citing the authority of the recently established Woolwich branch of the National Labour Electoral Association with its two hundred members who 'under no circumstances would… support any candidate, save one who stood on the Labour Platform, independent of any party, and was prepared to champion the claims of labour apart from the pressures of party' [*Woolwich Gazette*, 8 November 1889]. Hammill and Banner did not see eye to eye on this and there appeared to be some animosity between the two men which surfaced again in July 1891 when Banner attempted to block Hammill's candidacy for the forthcoming London County Council (LCC) election. Preparation for the LCC election gave rise to a new labour umbrella body the Woolwich Labour Representative League, which drew support from trade unions, radical clubs and tenants' organisations and it quickly became the authoritative forum for the selection of labour and trade union candidates. Tom Chambers, a retired engineer, was selected to fight the LCC election and after a good deal of jockeying for position following Edmunds' withdrawal, Ben Jones, a London co-operator with the backing of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society, was selected ahead of Pete Curran, Banner's preferred candidate, to contest the Parliamentary seat.

When it became clear during the autumn of 1889 that the Labour Union would not take hold, Banner turned his attention to setting up an independent labour party with the support of Hammill and Pete Curran, who was also a recent arrival in Woolwich. Meetings continued at the Arsenal gates but were now described as organised by the 'Labour party' and were soon linked to the call for a legal eight-hour working day, the central demand of the International Socialist Labour Congress held in Paris in July 1889 about which Eleanor Marx Aveling had consulted Banner and other leading socialists in an effort to win British support [Meier (1984) 216]. The congress decision gave rise to the successful labour demonstration on 4 May 1890 where Banner

spoke on the platform with friends Curran and George Bernard Shaw, a Woolwich regular at the bookbinder's request. Following the demonstration the organisers established the Legal Eight Hours and International Labour League, where as a member of the executive representing the Woolwich Radical Club (he was now Club secretary) Banner again worked alongside Marx and Aveling and became a stalwart of subsequent May Day demonstrations. In tune with Banner's aspirations the League sought to achieve its objectives, 'educating, agitating, and organising for an eight-hours Bill…and the foundation of an independent Labour Party' [Kapp (1976) 390–391].

Banner was able to engage in discussions about the eight hour working day with some experience having been a member of the joint union committee that had achieved this for London letterpress bookbinders. Representing the London branch committee of the Bookbinders' and Machine Rulers' Consolidated Union, Banner played a prominent role in negotiations with employers that commenced in October 1890 and concluded twelve months later with an agreement to implement the eight-hour day from January 1892. Despite the agreement not being universally adopted by employers in the capital, and a vellum binders' strike seeking enforcement ending in defeat, the deal was acknowledged as a breakthrough and received wide publicity. Awareness in Woolwich of Banner's role in the negotiations led to him being drafted in by trade unions at the Royal Arsenal to advise on their campaign and accompany delegations to meet government ministers as they made their case for an eight-hour day. Similarly, Banner was also on hand to assist the Woolwich branch of the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers as they mounted their campaign for improvements in the summer of 1889.

During the Arsenal workers' campaign Banner was in contact with Keir Hardie, supplying detailed information on pay and conditions to help the MP put their case at Westminster. It is highly likely that the two men had been on good terms and in regular contact since the early 1880s and so when Hardie's campaign in South West Ham during the 1892 general election needed a push he called for Banner to act as his agent. Hardie reported to 'Proletarian' of the *Workman's Times* (almost certainly Robert Blatchford), that during the final two weeks of the contest Banner worked tirelessly 'never away from his post from 6 in the morning till 11 at night, save to catch a meal next door. Bob, on polling day, had his head shaved to keep himself cool' [*Workman's Times*, 16 July 1892]. When the result was declared late into the night, some 50,000 people had gathered outside the Town Hall in Stratford to greet Hardie whose arrival on the balcony was cheered when Banner struck a light so the crowd could see his face.

Banner knew east London well having been a regular SL speaker at Canning Town and since his admission to the Fabian Society in November 1890 he frequently made the trip across the river—aided by the opening of the Woolwich free ferry in 1889—to meet the group of east London Fabians based in Hackney. Including Samuel and Harry Lowerison, the group was involved in efforts to tighten up the Fabians' Eight Hours Bill (published as Fabian Tract 9) and replace the Society's policy of permeation with thoroughgoing commitment to an independent labour party. As part of this movement Banner was elected to the Fabian executive in 1892 where he was pleased to sign the Society's election manifesto of that year because it represented a move towards support for a party of independent labour. However, work commitments and the refusal of the executive to adjust their early evening start time forced his resignation after only six meetings. Banner kept up his support for the Woolwich Fabian group established in 1891 and, particularly valuing the intellectual stimulation it offered, he remained a member of the society all his life.

Meanwhile, Banner and the group associated with the Woolwich Labour Party seized the opportunity to connect with others working nationally to found an Independent Labour Party (ILP) in the Spring of 1892 and were early 'adherents' to the appeal by Joseph Burgess in the pages of *Workman's Times*. Although very much in contact with the principal figures of the new movement in the capital, Banner did not join the leadership of the London ILP, as might have

been expected, preferring instead to confine his activity to Woolwich. Similarly, when the Woolwich branch of the ILP was finally constituted as part of the national body in October 1894, Banner, although elected to the executive committee, did not become one of the leading officers or attend national conference, presumably because he no longer had to, there having been many new recruits to the cause in the years following the new unionist upsurge that made the Woolwich branch among the strongest in London. He reflected on this change in his speech to a large meeting in the Woolwich Drill Hall in October 1894 where, supporting Hardie, he contrasted the new optimism with the time 'not so very long ago to advance collectivism at one of the clubs in the town, called forth hisses' [*Woolwich Gazette*, 12 October 1894].

Further evidence of this was provided only two months later when Banner and four other Labour men were elected to the local authority, the Woolwich Local Board of Health. Previously dominated by Conservatives and penny-pinching small businessmen, the Board had recently been given a shock by the public exposure of its failure to deal with poor and insanitary housing and the highest death rate in London, by Rev. J.W. Horsley, the social reforming vicar of the Holy Trinity Church. These revelations severely embarrassed Board members, prompting some improvements in public health measures which the Labour members wanted strengthened and extended. Banner, in particular, argued for the adoption of the most recent public health legislation to force recalcitrant landlords to accept their responsibilities to provide sanitary habitations. The long-running campaign, led by the labour movement, for the Board to open public libraries, in which Banner had played a prominent part since the late eighties, eventually succeeded at the end of 1895: after much delay and opposition, the Free Libraries Acts were adopted and plans made for a new library in the town. Re-election for Banner in 1896 and improved labour representation encouraged further progressive changes, including acceptance of trade union-approved conditions for contract labour, expanded public work to absorb local unemployment, and stricter enforcement of laws obliging landlords not to neglect their premises. Banner was especially vocal in these years, rebutting the argument often made by government ministers that improvements in pay of Arsenal workers could not be justified as they were immediately swallowed up by landlords increasing rents. For Banner, this view made the argument for public housing watertight and he urged the Board to explore the scope for action provided by the Housing of the Working Classes legislation pointing out how the government could release unused ground on the Arsenal site for housing. However, nothing was done in this area and Banner lost his seat in 1899. In the late nineties the Board was winding down as it anticipated the reorganisation of London local government which would in 1900 create a new Metropolitan Borough of Woolwich, absorbing the previously independent Plumstead and Eltham.

Banner's membership of the Woolwich Local Board had from January 1895 given him a seat on the governing body of Woolwich Polytechnic, which he had supported since its foundation in 1891. A regular contributor at its public events he was quick to join the campaign to save the Polytechnic when it ran into financial trouble and was forced to close in June 1894. Pivotal to the effort to mobilise the Woolwich labour movement behind plans to reopen, Banner advised a public meeting on tactics and then led a Trades and Labour Council delegation to the local Board in July 1894, a few months before his election to that body, in support of a proposal to accept funding from the LCC Technical Education Board, then under the chairmanship of Sidney Webb. When this was agreed the Polytechnic reopened, and by the turn of the century it was back on its feet offering technical programmes connected to the town's industrial workforce and a range of liberal education courses. When Banner lost his seat on the local board, Webb lost no time in efforts to retain his commitment to the Polytechnic at governing body level by proposing his nomination as a representative of the Technical Education Board, a position Banner occupied until his death.

At Parliamentary constituency level the Woolwich ILP maintained its support for Ben Jones, who had been unsuccessful at the 1892 general election and lost again in 1895. When the result

was declared Jones gave special thanks to Banner, but some in the London ILP were unhappy with the support offered by the Woolwich branch to the candidate whom they believed to be tainted by Liberal associations. The Deptford ILP was particularly strong on the matter and in October 1895 won support at the party's General Council for a resolution declaring 'the Woolwich branch be advised to take such steps as shall in the end bring about the expulsion of Bob Banner from the ILP, he being the ringleader in the matter' [ILP/9/58]. This was subsequently rescinded, allowing Banner to continue his activity in the Woolwich party as executive member, public speaker and contributor to its *Woolwich and District Labour Notes*, issued from November 1898. This splendidly unsectarian publication urged its readers to also support *Justice* (and the *Clarion*) reflecting the good relations existing locally between the ILP and the SDF where there were often joint gatherings and a summer fete, including one in 1896 at which Herbert Burrows of the SDF 'declared that a united socialist party was bound to come' [*Labour Leader*, 8 February 1896].

Although never expressing an interest himself in rejoining the SDF, some of Banner's comrades did, including Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx Aveling, whose tragic suicide at her Sydenham home at the end of March 1898 deeply affected him. He spoke at Eleanor's funeral on 5 April, but sadly his contribution was not reported. Two letters to the correspondence column of *Labour Leader* then followed. The first on April 23 written 'in haste', objected to remarks in the previous issue by 'Lily Bell', believed to be the pseudonym of Isabella Bream Price, about destructive aspects of Eleanor's materialism, which Banner correctly pointed out were 'very stupid' because they confused her philosophical and theoretical materialist outlook with her general view of life which he believed was one of idealism: 'Her theoretical materialism I know, and believe in; her ideal materialism was her failure. She placed love and hope where there was none, and died a martyr's death' [*Labour Leader*, 16 April 1898; Crawford (1999) 715; *Labour Leader*, 23 April 1898]. Readers familiar with Eleanor's story would have understood Banner's remarks about 'love and hope' to be a clear reference to Aveling's duplicitous behaviour and failure to commit to their relationship. Banner went further in his second letter a week later prefaced with the words 'as one who knew her, perhaps longer that any living British socialist', a claim which if true, would date their first encounter to a time before Eleanor's acknowledged membership of the Democratic Federation in 1883 [*Labour Leader*, 30 April 1898]. With access to 'facts and letters put at my disposal', Banner quoted a letter written by Eleanor dated 20 February 1898 including her words 'I can get on anyway', in respect of her care for Aveling who had been released from hospital following an operation and would go to Margate for convalescence. Banner linked Eleanor's remark to her financial situation which, following Engels not inconsiderable bequest in 1895 had since worsened because 'by far the greater part of it had been spent'. Here Banner, without mentioning his name was clearly impugning the 'waste of her property' to Aveling, and again his words would have been unmistakable for those who knew the couple. Banner then went on to detail—'I assert positively'—a host of apparent inconsistencies and omissions in the evidence presented at the inquest into Eleanor's death, all questioning Aveling's role in the events, which he clearly wanted investigated by the public prosecutor, a call made seven days later by Keir Hardie in his *Labour Leader* column [*Labour Leader*, 7 May 1898]. When this did not happen, Banner was most likely involved in the request to Alexander K. Donald, a former SL comrade and recently qualified barrister, that he give an opinion on the case for a prosecution against Aveling; Donald cautioned against.

The inclusion in Banner's second letter written little more than three weeks after Eleanor's death of her words 'I can get on anyway,' can only mean that he read the original correspondence from Eleanor to Freddy Demuth, son of Helen Demuth, housekeeper and lifelong friend (and possibly more) to Marx and his family. This letter and eight others, which it can be assumed Banner also read as he cites 'facts and letters', written by Eleanor between August 1897 and March 1898, reveal her state of mind as the extent of Aveling's betrayal became clear. Banner

sent the letters (or copies) to the German Social Democratic Party from which Karl Kautsky added a footnote to an article of reminiscence by Eduard Bernstein published in the April issue of *Die Neue Zeit* hinting at suspicious circumstances of Eleanor's death [*Labour Leader*, 21 May 1898; *Die Neue Zeit* XVI Jg. II Band, Nr. 30]. Bernstein, who was known to Banner, published the letters translated into German in his second article in *Die Neue Zeit* in mid-July and then in *Justice* on 30 July [*Die Neue Zeit* XVI Jg. II Band, Nr. 42, 481–491; *Justice*, 30 July 1898]. Banner must also have given Keir Hardie access to the letters because he, too, published on the subject, also including Eleanor's letters in full [*Labour Leader*, 30 July 1898].

Freddy Demuth, an engineer by trade and a member of the ILP, lived in Hackney, where Banner had established acquaintances including George Samuel and Harry Lowerison [Kapp (1976) 437]. Although we cannot be certain, it is credible to assert that Banner had come to know Demuth and, if so, would have recounted stories of his long friendship and comradeship with Eleanor. For Demuth, keen to secure posthumous justice for the wronged Eleanor, making the letters available to Banner for certain publication in Hardie's *Labour Leader* was conceivably the best way to bring the matter to the attention of the authorities.

Away from Woolwich politics, Banner maintained his trade union activity in the Bookbinders' Consolidated Union where he was a long-serving member of the London branch committee; when annual national general council meetings were instituted in 1900 he became a regular delegate. A frequent contributor to debates, he found his stance broadly in tune with the union's leadership when the base of the organisation moved to Manchester in 1900 and James Kelly, a supporter of independent labour representation, was elected as chief secretary. Vocal in support of members taking action against what he believed were increasing employer incursions into established craft practices, Banner advocated solidarity action with strikers in Liverpool (1902) and then Glasgow (1903) where he accompanied Kelly to assist in negotiations. A prominent role was also accorded to Banner in the union's attempt in 1908 to reach agreement with the National Association of Master Printers and Allied Trades over demarcation issues. Fearing the continued introduction of new machinery into binderies which allowed employers to take on workers without a craft apprenticeship, the union sought an accord with the Master Printers Association which had expressed anxiety over competitor firms undercutting their businesses by dilution of skilled labour. However, despite much common ground between the two sides, the talks failed because the Master Printers' Association felt unable to enforce any agreement on the trade, causing Banner to remark, 'I am afraid that moral suasion with firms who are already cutting your throats will not amount to very much' [*Bookbinders' Trade Circular*, March 1908].

Banner's national profile encouraged him to stand for election to the new full-time union post of assistant secretary in 1908; he came top of the poll after the first round of member voting. However, as the lowest-placed candidates were eliminated in successive rounds and members voted tactically he lost ground, eventually finishing runner-up. At the general council he opposed attempts to extend the union pension scheme for members, telling delegates at the 1905 Manchester conference that, 'There is not an economist who has written against trade unions who had not pointed out the work done for the employing class by the trade unions in providing superannuation allowances which were often the object for which the selfish men joined the societies' [*Bookbinders' Trade Circular*, August 1905]. Banner also feared the superannuation payments would be a millstone around the neck of the union, and so it proved, as the number claiming the benefit increased by 50% between 1905 and 1909. In contrast, he was an enthusiastic supporter of educational initiatives such as the launching of a new journal for the trade in 1904, the *Bookbinding Trades Journal*, edited by fellow bookbinding craftsman, ILP member and Morris admirer, William Mellor from Manchester. Believing the new publication would become an important forum for views and discussion, Banner stressed the capacity of union members themselves to fill the journal rather than paying professional writers.

The first issue of the *Bookbinding Trades Journal* proudly announced to its readers the names of two union members who had recently achieved election to municipal authorities, one being Banner, who was elected to Woolwich Borough Council in November 1903 as Labour took control for the first time with a large majority. Elected top of the poll in the St George's ward, regarded as the most difficult for Labour to win, Banner joined twenty-four other Labour councillors swept in on a wave of enthusiasm carried forward from the election in March of Will Crooks for the Woolwich parliamentary seat. Despite there being unanimous support for Crooks' candidature during the nomination process, involving the Trades and Labour Council, the ILP, and other affiliates, the Woolwich ILP took exception to the omission of their party's name from the election address, and to Labour's willingness to be accommodating towards local Liberal organisation, ignoring repeated advice by Banner and others that it was almost non-existent. Banner was acutely aware of this, having since 1899 been secretary to the Progressive Association which brought together Labour and Liberal supporters at local election time, but which by 1903 had ceased to operate as such because Labour's influence had become overwhelming. He made this plain to Hardie before and after the poll, and Hardie in turn took up the ILP's case with the Labour election secretary, William Barefoot, who was fast emerging as the central figure in the development of the local electoral machine. These anxieties were symptomatic of a growing bias 'strongly towards the trade union side of the alliance' weakening the ILP's position, a tendency that would be exacerbated by the introduction of individual membership after the setting-up of the Woolwich Labour Representation Association in 1904 [ILP/4/1903/21; Howell (1983) 264].

Nevertheless, eleven of the twenty-five Labour councillors were from the ILP, including the Mayor, Lewis Jenkins Jones, and a number of the council committee chairmen. Appropriately, Banner, well known as a bibliophile, was given chairmanship of the Library Committee where he proposed an ambitious programme including the building of a new library at Plumstead. By the time the new library was opened in December 1904, the committee chairmanship had passed to Angus Tynemouth, an elementary school teacher, who gave a vote of thanks to Liberal MP John Morley, for his keynote address. Banner did speak but the content was not reported, save a comment that it was 'an amusing speech', and one wonders if he was able to resist reference to Morley's notorious opposition to the legal eight-hour day which the bookbinder had adhered to in the previous two decades [*Borough of Woolwich Gazette*, 23 December 1904]. Banner left his mark on the new library, instructing those purchasing the stock to ensure that there was an excellent range of books about socialism and a shelf of works by William Morris.

Naturally, Banner was a supporter of the Labour Council's minimum wage policy, its provision of temporary work for the growing number of unemployed discharged from the Arsenal, plans for extended municipal services such as milk supply and electricity, and vigorous enforcement of public health regulations to improve sanitation. Housing, for Banner, remained a critical area for municipal action telling a meeting in 1906 that, 'He professed to give the landlords no peace' until there was justice for working-class tenants and 'if he did not live to see the day, he would instil the idea into children, and so to his children's children' [*Pioneer and Labour Journal*, 26 October 1906]. Angry when council plans to build municipal homes at Bostall Hill were rejected by the Local Government Board in 1905, Banner demanded a challenge and commitment to extend housing provision.

Banner was initially against standing for re-election in 1906 but was persuaded to put his name forward again, with his son William, a schoolteacher, as election agent. This time, in common with a number of other Labour men, he lost the seat as control passed to the Conservatives who stood as Municipal Reform candidates. Shocked after their defeat in 1903, municipal reformers revamped their local organisation and conducted a press campaign against the Labour council for its 'municipal extravagance', which culminated in the 1906 election campaign described by the local Labour secretary as one of 'relentless bitterness… supported by

a mendacious press which appealed only to the basest instincts of the electorate' [*Pioneer and Labour Journal*, 28 June 1907].

Disappointment at the defeat did not sap Banner's commitment. He remained involved in the work of the Labour Representation Association, serving on its general and executive committees for some time and taking on his share of public engagements. He was still sometimes asked to speak about William Morris and he would probably have taken great pleasure in chairing a meeting from the Clarion Van known as 'William Morris', parked in Woolwich in the Spring of 1908. The once-strong link with Bernard Shaw was renewed momentarily in 1906 when the playwright lectured at Plumstead and acknowledged Banner's presence in the audience. One of Banner's last public speaking engagements was at the 1909 May Day demonstration, organised jointly by the Trades Council and the ILP, where he registered his view that in Woolwich as 'in every civilised country in the world the workers assembled and declared their solidarity with the workers in all lands. The object of the meeting that night was to impress upon the workers gathered together the need for their standing together in one solid army' [*Kentish Independent*, 7 May 1909].

While Banner would have wished the spirit of working-class unity to be the one driving force behind moves to merge the four trade unions in London bookbinding, he was realistic enough to know that the depressed state of trade and the rapid introduction of binding machinery were making amalgamation essential for survival. Relations between the London unions had been good since the eight-hour campaign in the early nineties, and it was from the capital that the impetus to merger came. An active participant in the London conference of May 1907, from where he was elected to serve on the joint union committee to plan the merger, Banner was then an important agent in the process to secure positive member ballots of the constituent unions achieved by the spring of 1909. Sadly, by vesting day of the new organisation, the National Union of Bookbinding and Machine Rulers, 1 January 1910, Banner was dead.

Admitted to Plumstead Infirmary the first week of September 1910 with what was reported as a 'mental breakdown', Banner was visited by Scheu after he had learned of his old friend's condition from Linton Hartland, the former deputy clerk at Woolwich council, who was in touch with the Banner family. Scheu recorded the visit in his diary:

> He recognised me, and we were both deeply moved. He shouted 'Hey, I knew you would come.' Then he turned to a warder. 'This is my oldest friend. An artist – a poet – he and William Morris – what would Morris say, hey?' Then he lay back exhausted on his pillow, holding my hand tightly in his…Poor Robert! I comforted him as best I could, and promised to go to his wife. He embraced me strongly once more with tears in his eyes. Good-bye, Bob – Good-bye. Outside, the doctor said that Bob would be transferred the following day. To an asylum for the mentally ill – where he died. Perhaps the best of the British comrades [Scheu Archive].

Banner was transferred to the LCC Horton Asylum, Epsom on 7 September, where he died on 7 November 1910; his death certificate recording 'General Paralysis' as the principal cause of death. At this time 'general paralysis' was often used as a euphemism for syphilis, and indeed the Asylum's medical register lists that condition for Banner, although a question mark was added, suggesting a degree of uncertainty, implying perhaps a tumour on the brain [Horton Hospital H22/HT/B/03/009]. The funeral took place at Woolwich Cemetery on 11 November in what appears to have been a low-key event with few of Woolwich's labour notables present, other than Charles Grinling and William Calderwood, who were both there on behalf of the Woolwich Polytechnic governors.

Fittingly, the Bookbinders' union publications carried sympathetic notices of Banner's death. One by Sam Stubbings, secretary of the Society of Day Working Bookbinders of London and Westminster, was particularly poignant in that it came from one who had worked closely with

Banner on the merger, who shared his political perspective and was also an admirer of Morris, himself being a member of the socialist Kelmscott Club. In contrast, no substantial obituary notices appeared in the Woolwich local press and the only national newspaper to mark Banner's death was *Labour Leader*, where his pioneering socialist work was highlighted [*Labour Leader*, 25 November 1910]. Scheu was very upset that *Justice* had failed to mention Banner's death and he made his feelings clear to editor Harry Quelch when he wrote that the omission in respect of a 'good and brave comrade is most deplorable' [Scheu Archive]. As if to set the record straight, Harry Lee the lifelong SDF stalwart and historian of the federation later wrote kind words about Banner including an acknowledgement that of those who split in 1884, Morris, Belfort Bax, Scheu and Banner were 'decidedly losses to the SDF' [Lee and Archbold (1935) 72]. From Lee we also have the insight that late in life Banner was reported to have commented that 'although we had carried out two of the Chartist principles, "agitate and organise", we had not succeeded with the third, "educate"' [Lee and Archbold (1935) 80].

Following Banner's death, his wife Helen (sometimes 'Ellen') sold her husband's library to John Burns, who had known Banner since the SDF days, but was now President of the Local Government Board and a member of the Liberal Cabinet. Scheu, who probably had a hand in this, noted sarcastically, 'John could use it! And he has the money' [Scheu Archive]. Helen Banner remained at 16 Milward Street, to where the family had upgraded in 1890, close to a number of her six children who stayed in Woolwich, until she died at St Matthews Hospital, Shoreditch on 21 May 1939.

Sources: (**1**) **MSS**: Socialist League Archive, Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels Papers, Andreas Scheu Papers, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam; Fabian Society Archive, Independent Labour Party Archive, Wallas Archive; Coll Misc., British Library of Political and Economic Science; H.A. Barker Archive; Labour History Archive, People's History Museum, Manchester; George Bernard Shaw Papers; Hammersmith Socialist Society Papers, British Library; Edinburgh Trades Council, Bookbinders' and Machine Rulers' Consolidated Union, Edinburgh Branch, National Library of Scotland; Bookbinders' and Machine Rulers' Consolidated Union Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick; Woolwich Labour Party Archives, Minutes of the Woolwich Board of Health, Minutes of Woolwich Borough Council, Greenwich Heritage Centre, Horton Hospital; London Metropolitan Archives. (**2**) **Newspapers and Periodicals**: *Bookbinder* 1888–1889; *Bookbinders' Trade Circular* 1877–1910; *Bookbinding Trades Journal* 1904–1910; *Borough of Woolwich Gazette* 1903–1910; *Borough of Woolwich Labour Journal* 1901–1904; *Borough of Woolwich Pioneer* 1904; *Borough of Woolwich Pioneer and Labour Journal* 1904–1906; *British Bookmaker* 1890–1894; *Commonweal* 1885–1888; *Die Neue Zeit* 1898; *Edinburgh Evening News* 1873–1882; *Fabian News* 1891–1910; *ILP News* 1897–1903; *Justice* 1884–1910; *Kentish Mercury* 1882–1910; *Labour Elector* 1888–1890; *Labour Leader* 1894–1910; *Labour Standard* 1881–1885; *The Link* 1888; *People's Press* 1890–1891; *Pioneer and Labour Journal* 1904–1910; *The Radical* 1880–1882; *The Republican* 1879–1886; *The Republican Chronicle* 1875–1878; *Woolwich Gazette* 1882–1902; *Woolwich and District Labour Notes* 1898–1899; *Woolwich District Labour Journal* 1899; *Workman's Times* 1890–1894. (**3**) **Books and Articles**: *John E. Williams and the Early History of the Social Democratic Federation* (1886); *Preliminary*, *Interim and Final Reports of the Amalgamated Committee of the Bookbinding Trades of the Metropolis on the Eight Hours Movement* (1890–1892); *A Short Biography of Fred Hammill* (1891); *Benjamin Jones*, *The Next Parliamentary Election: A Labour Representative for Woolwich* (1892); J.M. Davidson, *Politics for the People* (1892); J.W. Horsley, *I Remember: Memoirs of a 'Sky Pilot' in the Prison and the Slum* (1911); H.M. Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life* (1911), *Further Reminiscences* (1912); E. Belfort Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflexions of a Mid and Late Victorian* (1918); C.H. Grinling, *Fifty Years of Pioneer Work in Woolwich* (1920); A. Scheu, *Umsturzkeime: Erlebnisse Eines Kampfers* (1923); W. Stephen Sanders, *Early Socialist Days* (1927); W. Barefoot, *Twenty Five Years of the Woolwich*