

# **100 YEARS BEFORE BREXIT**

**1919**

## **Britain on the brink of revolution**

**by**

**Chanie Rosenberg**

Published in 1987 the inside page of this book bears the signature of Eric Heffer, Labour MP for Liverpool Walton. It came to me via the second hand book dealer who acquired many of his books when he died (there were a lot). I mention Heffer, born 1922, because his personal political history illustrates many of the uncertainties and misunderstandings that have beset socialism in Britain. For example, like so many others, Heffer placed Militant Tendency on the left. Having worked for a council controlled by them I saw Militant as extremely absolutist, the definition of a right wing government derived from the French Revolution in 1789. Discussion excluded all but a small controlling group. Dissent was not permitted. They reminded me of Calvin causing the death of Servetus because he was not the right kind of Protestant. What kind of socialist are you? Might you have a touch of syndicalism about you? Are anarchists goodies or baddies? Is the phrase 'commanding heights of the economy' a cop out? Religion is the regulation of faith. Socialism can feel just like that.

Rosenberg's book stimulates these sorts of questions but its 93 pages, including references and index, focus upon what happened in that crucial year, why it happened in the way that it did and who were the major players.

The politicians of 1919 were trying to bring order to a world that had been disordered by the kings, emperors and prime ministers of 1914. It did not take long for HG Wells to realise the futility of his own phrase, usually represented as The War To End All Wars. Wavell (later Field Marshall) characterised the Peace Conference as The Peace To End All Peace. Gladstonian ideals, particularly in the mind of Woodrow Wilson, prompted the creation of small, often unstable, nations while Lenin was cranking the dialectic wheel faster than Marx ever imagined it could go.

Churchill, meanwhile, as Secretary of State for War, not only did not wish to de-mobilise our troops but also agitated for them to be sent to Russia to suppress Bolshevism and at home for them to put down an increasing number of strikes. Mutinies and strikes were plentiful. In Liverpool, as Rosenberg reminds us, a battleship and two destroyers were sent to help deal with a massive strike by (guess who) the police

who so often felt themselves to be in sympathy with the strikers. She does not say so but I believe that had Churchill been prime minister instead of the far cleverer Lloyd George there would have been a revolution. Why was there not?

Lloyd George was one reason. He had a great sense of timing. He knew all about divide and rule. And, possibly his cleverest move, he frankly told the unions that they had all the power: that they could bring down the state if they used that power.

For Chanie Rosenberg this was crucial. The officials of the unions, even those considered to be on the left, had no wish to bring down the state. She points out that union officials, many of whom were members of parliament in 1919, spend more time negotiating to achieve a compromise and find common ground with bosses than they do sharing the experience of their members.

There could have been a revolution. There was, however, no political party willing to have one. Unions made much noise about combining their forces but they did not. Who hates unofficial strikes the most? The officials! I have often felt the propensity of both the Labour Party and the trade union movement to devise lists of procedural rules has been a restraint on action. Values are more important. The more inclusive the discussion of and consensual arrival at public values the better. When the procedures become a liturgy known only by the priests the congregation becomes a group of worshipers rather than celebrants. In 1919 the rules, regulations and procedures of the unions did not enable the kind of change that could produce a more equal and fair society. They actually enabled the powerful to keep hold on power.

I loved reading this so well written book. I ought to have read it before. Not everyone might respond to it as I have. I do, however, recommend reading it. 2019 is not far away. Brexit has already given us dysfunctional government. We live in interesting times.

Cliff Jones 24<sup>th</sup>. November, 2018