"PEACE THROUGH SPORT?": SPORT, INTERNATIONALISM AND THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS IN THE INTER-WAR YEARS
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"Do you think the people outside of politics, did they care what was going on abroad?"
"No, not generally speaking I don’t think, no."

(Nottingham man, reflecting in 1984 on the international situation of the 1930s)¹

Jonathan F. Wagner’s recent analysis of the Prague Socialist Olympics of 1934² reminds us of the significance of sport in the European labour and socialist movement of the inter-war period. Sport, it was assumed, not only prepared workers mentally and physically for the class struggle; it also acted as an agency through which proletarian solidarity of truly international proportions could be fostered. Such was the purpose of festivals of the kind described by Wagner. They had a mission that reached far beyond simply athletic competition. The ability of European socialist parties to mobilise large numbers of their members in such gatherings underscores a point made by the editors of a recent discussion of European working class movements:

Only relatively recently have historians turned their attention from workers’ economic organisations and political parties to the broader study of a whole range of features of workers’ lives which might elucidate those forces shaping workers’ political values and behaviour.³

Sport and recreation, as Wagner demonstrates, was clearly one of those forces. But sport features largely by its absence in the contribution on the United Kingdom to the survey just cited.⁴ The omission is, perhaps, not surprising. The extent to which Britain conformed to the patterns of socialist development established in continental Europe from the end of the nineteenth century has long been an issue of debate among historians. Many have been inclined to follow Engels and see Britain’s development as exceptional.⁵ Is this fair? The present essay seeks to examine, in a British context, Wagner’s theme of sport, socialism and internationalism, and especially to consider the impact of this in the everyday life of working people.

The ‘revival’ of socialism in Britain in the 1880s has long been a point of focus for historians interested in the origins of the Labour Party. Less
frequently commented upon, however, is the contribution made by the socialist revival to the spirit of internationalism which had developed in the British radical and labour movement during the course of the nineteenth century. The fact is that compared to the spirit of internationalism evinced by continental socialists, especially the Germans, the voice of the British labour movement was small, and not particularly socialist. For the most part theories of class struggle and the world division of labour passed British socialists by. Men like James Ramsay MacDonald and James Keir Hardie, both members of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and among a small band of people in the labour movement who expressed interest in foreign affairs, inclined towards ethical notions of pacifism and the achievement of international cooperation through the pursuit of enlightened self interest. MacDonald, along with most members of the ILP (though not those of the Labour party itself) opposed the War in 1914. He kept up a rather ambiguous anti-war position throughout and would have attended the Stockholm Conference in 1917 had not the Government refused an exit visa. After the War his remedies for peace rested chiefly on the principle of democratic control over foreign affairs coupled with collective security and disarmament through the League of Nations. These ideas were drawn less from the socialist canon than from the inventory of radical internationalism built up since the late eighteenth century and articulated in wartime Britain through the Union of Democratic Control.

Ideologically, then, the advent of Labour brought little that was new to international thinking. As in economics the British labour movement took much from Liberalism. But what Labour had achieved by the 1930s was an impressive structural network of international ties. Many of these had been created through the trades union movement, and were exemplified in the ideas and work of Walter Citrine, secretary of the Trades Union Congress from 1926 until 1948, and in the inter-war period secretary also of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). This kind of international cooperation—essentially bureaucratic and not designed to mobilise the masses in international solidarity—was complemented by a strand of thought and action that had been developing among some sections of the labour movement since the 1890s. This was the culture of socialist fellowship, at its strongest in certain areas of the North of England, and closely associated with Robert Blatchford and his popular socialist newspaper the Clarion. From this basis cultural links with overseas socialists were established before the War, and consolidated afterwards through the Socialist Workers' Sports International (SWSI). For such groups sport was to be one channel alongside many others through which an international workers' solidarity was sought, as a basis for a conflict-free world. 'Peace through Sport'—the motto of the Clarion Cycling Club in the interwar years—encapsulated this honourable objective. However, its attainment was rendered difficult. For one thing, the splits between social democratic and communist factions that developed after the War produced competing strategies; for another, the whole