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“ENGLAND FOR ALL”: THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION’S SUCCESSSES THROUGH FAILURE

John Kemp

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The 1880s saw a resurgence of Socialist politics in the United Kingdom after almost three decades without any substantial working class social or political movements. This renewal of Socialism was spurred on by the creation of the Social Democratic Federation in 1881, the first Marxist political organization in Britain’s history. Founded by the wealthy Henry Hyndman, the Social Democratic Federation survived for nearly 30 years before being absorbed into a different Socialist party. The Social Democratic Federation’s impact on the British political landscape is substantial, both directly through its politics and strategies and indirectly from its failures, as the later Labour party was consciously able to avoid the pitfalls the Social Democratic Federation fell into. Historians have long considered the Social Democratic Federation as a peripheral group in the history of British Socialism, one that played little role in the working-class movement that would culminate in the creation of the most influential and enduring British political groups, the Labour party. Given the Social Democratic Federation’s lack of success in parliamentary elections and their inability to grow effectively through most of the country and to keep a strong, consistent membership, their historical label as a failure is not surprising or strictly undeserved. However, this does not mean that their historical role in and influence on the working-class movement and the subsequent Labour party should be disregarded. Studying the official newspapers, writings, and letters of both members of the Social democratic Federation and from rival groups, supplemented by local newspapers that detailed the everyday events of the federation, a different picture emerges. It is clear from looking at the actions of the Federation holistically that both the successes and failures of the Social Democratic Federation contributed vitally to the establishment and success of labor politics in the United Kingdom.