

# Holborn and St. Pancras: A long association with the revolutionary workers movement

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The Socialist Equality Party is standing candidates in the May 7 general election in the constituencies of Holborn and St. Pancras, in the London borough of Camden, as well as Glasgow Central.

David O’Sullivan is the candidate for Holborn and St. Pancras, which has a long association with the revolutionary workers movement, going back to the early decades of the nineteenth century. Much of this history is recounted in the SEP 2015 election manifesto .

In 1836, the London Working Men’s Association was first proposed at a meeting held at 14 Tavistock Street, Covent Garden. It was led by cabinetmaker William Lovett, who in 1838, along with Francis Place, formulated the revolutionary demands of the People’s Charter. Chartism was the first mass revolutionary political movement of the working class. It became the focus of over a decade of mass and at times insurrectionary struggle.

However, the early political organisations of the working class remained dominated by Owenite utopian socialist conceptions. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels worked closely with the Chartist movement in the late 1840s to shift the axis of the struggle onto scientific socialist foundations.

The London borough of Camden also became home to émigré socialists in the aftermath of the defeated European revolutions of 1848, including Karl Marx.

On August 26, 1849, driven from the continent by the forces of counter-revolution who had drowned the 1848 revolutions in blood, Marx, a leader of the Communist League, fled with his family to London, where he lived in and around Camden until his death in 1883. His place of burial in Highgate Cemetery remains a beacon of attraction for socialists around the world. In 1870, after selling his business, Engels settled in a house 10

minutes’ walk from the home of Marx, his wife Jenny and their children, and lived there until his death in 1895.

Marx first lived in a number of addresses in the southern part of the constituency, suffering near destitution and at the mercy of ruthless landlords. It was during this period that Marx wrote *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*, developed close ties with the leaders of the Chartists and contributed to their publications.

From December 1850 to September 1856, the Marx family gained a certain stability, living at 28 Dean Street, Soho, but they were still plagued by dire poverty. Three adults and three children lived in two rooms. The front room served as a living room and study, the back as a kitchen, bathroom and sleeping quarters for all. Three of Karl and Jenny’s children died in these first years of exile in London in the most tragic of circumstances.

On February 27, 1855, Marx was invited to speak at a large meeting in Covent Garden’s St Martin’s Hall to commemorate the anniversary of the French Revolution of 1848, alongside Louis Blanc and Victor Hugo, among others.

From October 1856 to March 1864, the Marx family lived at 1 Grafton Terrace, Maitland Park, Haverstock Hill, Camden. Marx would take the omnibus to the British Museum, where he would spend hours in the reading room, researching and writing his great life’s work, *Das Kapital (Capital)*. From March 1864 to March 1875, the Marx family lived at 1 Maitland Park Road (now a block of flats called “The Grange,” built c.1900). It was here that Marx completed his first volume of *Capital*, which was finally ready for publication in 1867 after 16 years of work.

Marx explained, “In this work I have to examine the

capitalist mode of production and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode...it is the ultimate aim of this work to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society.”

In 1875, Marx moved to another house at 41 Maitland Park Road, where he lived until his death.

The First International (the International Working Men’s Association) was founded in the constituency at St. Martin’s Hall in September 1864. In his inaugural address, Marx wrote a remarkably prescient speech in which he pointed to the vast wealth accumulated at one pole of society and the tremendous degradation at the other and sought to draw out the experiences of the working class since the defeat of the 1848 revolutions:

“Past experience has shown how disregard of that bond of brotherhood which ought to exist between the workmen of different countries, and incite them to stand firmly by each other in all their struggles for emancipation, will be chastised by the common discomfiture of their incoherent efforts.”

Marx concluded, “If the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people’s blood and treasure?”

Workers, he insisted, must “master themselves the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments; to counteract them, if necessary, by all means in their power.... The fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes. Proletarians of all countries, unite!”

In response to the Paris Commune in 1871 and its bloody repression, the General Council of the First International adopted Marx’s *The Civil War in France*. Engels recorded its impact in London: “No publication in the history of London has caused such a stir.... The entire press had to confess unanimously that the International is a great power in Europe to be reckoned with, which cannot be eliminated by refusing to talk about it.”

In 1870, Engels had moved to 122 Regent’s Park Road, where he lived until 1894. From there he played a leading role in developing the programme, perspective and work of the First International. He edited volumes two and three of *Capital*, as well as his

own profound works, *Anti-Duhring*, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, alongside a vast body of other writings.

Later, in the opening decade of the twentieth century, Russian émigrés also gathered for a time in and around Camden fleeing persecution at the hands of the despotic regime of Tsar Nicolas II. Vladimir Lenin, the future leader, with Leon Trotsky, of the 1917 Russian Revolution, made the district his home on a number of occasions between 1902 and 1911.

It was in 1902 that Trotsky first met Lenin in London, where Lenin was editing *Iskra* ( *Spark* ). Trotsky noted in his autobiography, *My Life*, “He [Lenin] spent a great deal of time in the library of the British Museum, where he carried on his theoretical studies, and where he usually wrote his newspaper articles. With his assistance, I obtained admission to that sanctuary too. I was insatiable, and simply gorged myself on the super abundance of books there. Soon, however, I had to leave for the continent.”

Lenin used to take fellow émigrés on long walks through the streets of Camden and Clerkenwell. His partner, Nadezhda Krupskaya, recalled that while “observing these howling contrasts of richness and poverty, Ilyich would mutter through clenched teeth and in English ‘Two Nations’,” words that still ring true today.

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