

# INTERNATIONAL PARTY

Within the space of two months I was privileged to attend Bund centenary celebrations in New York, Paris, Brussels and London. All combined celebrations which, in New York and Paris, took the form of banquets, and seminars which looked at the ideas of the Bund and their relevance to today. *The Shvue* (Oath), the hymn of the Bund was sung in a various arrangements. At all the events I was struck by the warmth and commitment shown by Bundists of all generations.

Each event had its own character. The New York celebrations were mainly in Yiddish; those in Paris and Brussels were in French; in London they were in English. The Brussels and London events stressed the relevance of the ideas of the Bund to other minorities. However in all the speeches and contributions to the debate there were some common themes.

Firstly, adherence to the socialist or social-democratic movement and to the key ideas and traditions of that movement. The Bund's history includes a revolutionary past and a present affiliation to the Socialist International. As French sociologist Michel Wieviorka said, it combines a revolutionary past with a reformist present. But it does not seek to deny or minimise its history. Motl Zelmanowicz in New York talked with pride of the Bund's celebrations of May Day in Poland in the 1920s and 1930s, with red flags flying. He saw this as an indication that the Bund was an organic part of the international workers' movement. Benjamin Nadel, the General Secretary of the Bund, said that the Bund was originally a classic Marxist party which now sees itself as democratic socialist. Richard Marienstras, who spoke in Paris and in Brussels, pointed out that many people have tried to deny the significance of class politics in the world today. In France, though, where in the previous week the employers' organisation had broken off dialogue with the government over the proposed introduction of a shorter working week, they had been proved wrong.

Secondly there was the notion of *doyleit* (or 'hereness'), a key Bundist principle. In its classical formulation this related both to the Bund's non-Zionism and to its belief in the principle of national cultural autonomy for different minorities within states composed of a multitude of minorities. Yves Plasseraud in Brussels showed how today this principle is gaining currency in Eastern Europe as a way of recognising the needs and interests of national minorities



Bundist banquet in New York

within a non-territorial framework. For example it has been adopted as policy in Hungary (and incidentally has even found its way into the programme of the rebels in the Chiapas region of Mexico).

Michel Wieviorka, who chaired a session at the Paris seminar, argued that the Bundist conception of *doyleit* occupied a midway position between the individual within a nation state, who is equal to and subject to the same laws as other individuals, and a destructive, competitive communitarianism. He characterised two positions within this: a toleration of minority customs as long as they are within the confines of their own communities, on the one hand; and movements which organise around universal ideas within minorities, on the other. The Bund was a representative of this latter position. Marienstras characterised this as a minority group using culture to place itself in a relationship with its history.

Thirdly, *veltkehkeit*. This can be translated as secularism but, as speakers at the New York seminar made clear, it was a secularism which represented a modern alternative to the traditional, religious obscurantism of communities in the Russian Empire and Poland. It sees religion as a private matter for individuals, but is not anti-religious. As Henri Minczeles emphasised, many Bundist leaders came from religious

backgrounds and used religious ideas and religious practice to fight for new ideas. At a time when fundamentalist and anti-modernist ideas continue to make their presence felt, for example in Israel and in other Jewish communities in the world today, the Bund's notion of *veltkehkeit* has a continuing relevance.

The fact that two of these key themes are encapsulated in Yiddish words points to the importance of Yiddish in the history and in the current practice of the Bund. The two Bundist journals published regularly, *Undzer Tzayt* in

New York and *Lebnsfragn* in Israel are both in Yiddish. The New York conference was held almost exclusively in Yiddish, though the European events were in French and English. Although the New York event was able to connect with Bundist tradition in a more direct way due to its use of Yiddish (and the participation, for the most

part, of Bundists who speak Yiddish in their daily lives) it was less accessible to younger people who may be enthusiastic about the ideas of the Bund but do not speak Yiddish perfectly or even at all.

The ideas of the Bund have a relevance and an attraction today. The challenge is to convey them in the languages in which Jews normally communicate, for example English, French or Hebrew as well as Yiddish, and in a way that shows their continuing relevance to the problems that continue to be faced by Jews and other minorities.

Michael Heiser

**The challenge is to convey the ideas of the Bund in the languages Jews speak today**