

MARXIST IDEAS IN BRITAIN (*Socialist Standard* January 1972)

The first article in our series on the early history and ideas of the British Communist Party. We recall this history not only for its own interest, but because today others are making the same mistakes.

The Russian Revolution had a great impact on the thinking of radically-minded workers everywhere. Very few of those who had opposed the War were not enthusiastically swept off their feet by events in Russia. To them it appeared that in one part of the world capitalist rule had been overthrown in favour of a government committed to introducing Socialism. The Bolsheviks themselves were caught up in this enthusiasm as reflected in the speeches of Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev (who was in charge of the Communist International). They also encouraged it, calling their regime a "Socialist Republic". Many outside of Russia took this further than the Bolsheviks intended and devoted their energies to spreading the good news that Socialism had actually been established in Russia.

What sort of people supported the Bolsheviks and heeded Lenin's call to split the Labour movement and form separate communist parties? Naturally they varied from country to country but nearly all their leaders had been associated either with the Social Democratic or, in a few cases, with the anarcho-sindicalist movements. In Britain they came from the small political parties that claimed to be in the Marxist tradition and from the militant trade unionists who had built up a following as a result of the official unions' war-time "truce" with the government and employers.

Marxism never caught on in Britain in the way it did on the Continent, and to the extent that it did it was recognisably different. Everywhere the Labour movement grew out of the radical wing of the parties supported by the industrialists and petty capitalists. So it is not surprising that its theory and language tended to reflect its background. On the Continent the radicals were anti-clerical and even insurrectionary, so Marxism with its materialist philosophy was not too radical a departure especially when linked with the rising consciousness amongst industrial workers that they ought not to remain the tail-end of their employers' political party. But in Britain the Liberals (and the Radicals) were Nonconformist Christians and believers in peaceful political change, features which were inherited by the Labour movement here. In Britain atheism was not popular amongst the workers; nor were appeals to class interest. The Labour leaders preferred to see Socialism as a question of "morality" and as a "faith", with the result that what passed for theory were the vaguest, sentimental repetitions of the Sermon on the Mount. But even in Britain, and especially London, atheism had a following amongst some Radicals. And where Secularism had been strong there Marxism found a following.

In 1883 a number of working-class Radical clubs in London came together as the Democratic Federation. Later, under the influence of a rich former Tory, H. M. Hyndman, this became the Social Democratic Federation, which proclaimed Socialism as its aim and professed adherence to Marxism. At that time, few of Marx's works had been translated into English and were only available in French or German. As a result those who couldn't read these languages had to rely on those who could for a knowledge of Marx's ideas. Men like Hyndman and the writer and designer William Morris did grasp more or less what Marx was getting at but put it over in a crude form. Hyndman made both Marx's Labour Theory of Value and his Materialist Conception of History much more rigid than in fact they were. In particular he made Socialism appear as the inevitable outcome of a mechanical operation about which human beings could do very little: sooner or later the capitalist economic machine would break down

so Socialists must be prepared to take over when it did. This was Morris' view too, though in his writings he also touched on problems like that of Reform and Revolution which Marx did not really have to face.

The SDF took over traditional working-class Radical demands and justified them as "stepping stones" to Socialism. Of course they were nothing of the sort and would not have been out of place in the programme of a radical, non-socialist party. Concern about this was one of the reasons why Morris left the SDF and helped to form the Socialist League. The Socialist League did refuse to advocate reforms though this was often obscured by its general anti-parliamentarism.

At the time of the Chartists a group of London artisans had emphasised the importance of mass understanding and support for change. Secularism, too, with its street-corner propaganda meetings exerted an influence in the same direction of educational rather than reform activity. This was to be an issue which was to split English Social Democracy.

So Marxism in Britain tended to play down the workers' class struggle as the way to Socialism in favour of the mechanical breakdown of capitalism or the equally mechanical build-up of abstract "knowledge".

When towards the end of the century Marxist writings, of a sophisticated kind, became available in English (mainly from America) this contributed towards the dissatisfaction with the SDF's whole policy and structure amongst some of its younger members. The critics were dubbed "impossibilists" by the SDF leaders, a word which conveyed two meanings. One, that they were raising "impossible" demands and, two, that they held it was "impossible" to reform capitalism so as to benefit the workers.

The outcome of what has been called the Impossibilist Revolt was the founding in 1903 of the Socialist Labour Party and in 1904 of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, both of which -though the SLP a little vaguely -opposed the suggestion that a socialist party should have a programme of immediate demands to be achieved within capitalism. Nevertheless, the SDF did continue to attract those who considered themselves Marxists but wanted reforms.

The SLP, destined to supply some of the leading lights of the Communist Party of Great Britain, was based on the ideas of the American party of the same name led by Daniel De Leon. De Leon had been one of the first Social Democrats to come out against a reform programme declaring that a socialist party should concentrate exclusively on achieving Socialism. But he is more well known for his advocacy of "socialist industrial unionism", a hybrid of Social Democracy and syndicalism. He was in favour of setting up separate socialist unions opposed to the "pure and simple" trade unions. In the absence of mass support for Socialist ideas these unions were a failure and De Leon eventually turned to the Industrial Workers of the World. In Britain the SLP did have its own industrial union but this never got off the ground so SLP members, though banned by Party rule from holding union office, worked inside the existing unions. The effect, therefore, of De Leonism was to turn their attention to union work, an alteration that was to bear fruit during the war -but at the expense of their original "impossibilism".

The SPGB was the only party not to be carried away by the Russian revolution, refusing to concede that Socialism was possible in backward Russia or that the Bolsheviks had found a short-cut to Socialism. The SPGB differed from the SLP in not lauding De Leon and in not preaching "socialist industrial unionism". Members of the SPGB were active trade unionists but had no illusions about it. Because our support, small though it was, was built up as support for Socialism alone we were to emerge from the War (which of course we opposed)

and the Russian revolution still basically "impossiblist". The SPGB is important here in that we have been in continuous and active existence, particularly in London, since 1904. We were thus a thorn in the side of the Communist Party's attempts to palm off Bolshevism as Marxism and state capitalist Russia as Socialism. The SPGB's mere existence meant that the Communist Party had to meet the arguments of traditional Marxism.

Meanwhile those workers for whom Marxism had no attraction but who still favoured independent Labour politics had been organising with support many times larger than that of the SDF, SLP, and SPGB combined. In 1893 had been founded in Bradford the Independent Labour Party committed to the vague ethical "socialism" discussed earlier. The ILP was weak where the SDF was strong in London. But under Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald they skilfully used trade union disquiet over certain Court decisions to win support for the idea of a "Labour Party". Their efforts were successful when in 1900 the Labour Representation Committee was set up, a body which, when it had enough MPs, became in 1906 the Labour Party. This was not, and did not claim to be a socialist party. It was basically a trade union parliamentary pressure group. Along with many trade unions the ILP was affiliated to the Labour Party and worked for the election of Labour candidates. The SDF had attended the inaugural conference of the LRC but had later with- drawn. It was not affiliated to the Labour Party but at the same time was not completely opposed to it like the SLP and the SPGB.

The Labour Party presented socialists and Marxists in Britain with a problem: should they oppose or should they work within the Labour Party? As we shall see, this was an issue on which the British Communist Party zigged and zagged. Those who weren't outright against the Labour Party were put in a more difficult position when in 1918 its new constitution committed it to "socialism", albeit of the Fabian variety (and there- fore really only state capitalism).

The SDF became the Social Democratic Party in 1908 and in 1911, together with a number of dissident ILP branches and others, became the British Socialist Party, the party which was to supply the bulk of the members of the Communist Party when it was formed. Despite opposition from some of the old SDP members, the BSP soon began to move towards affiliation to the Labour Party. A party referendum in 1913 favoured this and in 1914 the party joined with Labour, leaving only the "impossiblists" and some "industrial unionists" and "syndicalists" opposed.

The poor record of the Labour Party as the mere tail-end of the Liberal majority in the House of Commons (it had to be since most of its MP's had been elected by Liberal votes) helped encourage anti-political and anti-parliamentary ideas in the period of industrial unrest immediately before the war. The subtle difference between the syndicalists and the industrial unionists does not concern us here for on one point they were agreed: that the workers could get more by "direct action" and relying on their own "economic power" than through sending representatives to parliament. It was an argument really not about how to get Socialism but how to get social reforms, though there were those who accepted the full anarcho-syndicalist argument that the way to overthrow capitalism was through a General Strike. Most didn't go this far and thought that Labour MP's could play a subsidiary role in getting reforms.

At this time, with the growth of trade unionism, there was a demand for workers' education to train people to fill the administrative posts in the unions. Ruskin College, Oxford, was originally set up with government support for this purpose but a row soon blew up when the principal wished to teach Marxian economics and sociology alongside the more orthodox versions. He was dismissed and eventually a rival "Labour College" financed mainly by the South Wales miners and the railwaymen was set up. Here a kind of Marxism (in addition to

journalism, book-keeping, etc) was taught, but a Marxism tailored to trade unionism. The journal Plebs became the organ of the Labour College movement and its "Marxism".

The way in which this was different from traditional Marxism was in its emphasis on "economic power". Traditional Marxism had pointed out the necessity of winning political power, arguing that when a particular social class had become parasitic it was able to hang on to and preserve its privileges through its control of political power. Thus in effect that class had economic power because it was the ruling class (that is, the class that controlled the State). Labour College Marx-ism reversed this, arguing on the contrary that the capitalist class was the ruling class because it had economic power (of course they genuinely thought this was Marx's view). This was economic determination rather than historical materialism. But it implied that the struggle at the "point of production" was more significant than the political struggle, a doctrine that was attractive for militant trade unionists and in keeping with their anti-parliamentary mood at that time.

This view that the capitalist class rule because they own rather than own because they rule came to be accepted as "Marxism" by the Communist Party, which is not surprising since anti-parliamentarians like the South Wales (formerly Rhondda) Socialist Society were amongst the founding groups of the British Communist Party. The SWSS also had links with Sylvia Pankhurst's Socialist Workers' Federation, another anti-parliamentary body. In addition, this version of Marxism was attractive to the SLP who were able to use the loose organization of the Labour College movement to get in some of their members as lecturers and to get some of their views published under its auspices.

The SLP arguing for "socialist industrial unions" as the main weapon to overthrow capitalism naturally tended to the view that economic power was more important than political power.

Soon after the war began the trade unions concluded an industrial truce with the employers. However, the war with full employment and speed-up put pressure on the workers and at the same time put them in a strong position to resist it. It was inevitable that the workers would find a way of fighting back, if not through the official unions, then outside them. This is what happened. Unofficial bodies like the Clyde Workers' Committee in which members of the SLP and BSP were prominent took up the struggle. By the end of the war there was a fully-fledged and fairly influential Shop Stewards and Workers Committee Movement. The end of the war and industrial truce, together with growing unemployment, meant that this movement rapidly declined in influence but, before and while it did, its leaders transferred their allegiance to the Communist Party of Great Britain.

Those who supported Lenin in Britain were thus drawn from two groups. First, left wing Social Democrats, mainly from the BSP but with some from the ILP (the pro-war section of the BSP under Hyndman had split off at the beginning of the war) and, second, militant trade unionists and their supporters who regarded the economic struggle as paramount.

The bulk of the members of the CPGB set up in 1920 were from the first group, ex-members of the BSP. The Communist Party thus did not evolve out of the intransigent Marxist trend in English Social Democracy but rather from its pro-reform trend. And the SLP members who went over had already abandoned their Impossibilism, the prisoners of the non-socialist support they had won as prominent labour agitators. But the SPGB was opposed to the CPGB from the start knowing from past experience the reformism of the BSP and its members.

The manoeuvring which eventually led to unity amongst the pro-Bolshevik groups in Britain has been described elsewhere and we need not repeat it here. Suffice it to set out what were the conditions for unity: support for

1. the soviets, or workers' councils, as the way to power and then to control society;
2. the "dictatorship of the proletariat" to crush all opposition to the introduction of Socialism;
3. the Third (Communist) International. This left unsettled two important issues on which the pro-Bolsheviks were divided -the attitude of the new party towards the Labour Party and towards parliament. The BSP had been affiliated to the Labour Party and had always been committed to using parliament to get reforms. The ex-SLP members were opposed to the Labour Party but not to parliamentary action, while the others from the Workers Committees, the SWSS and the SWF were opposed to both the Labour Party and parliament,

As most of the members had come from the BSP a party referendum would have gone in favour of both. But another factor helped secure this result. Lenin favoured it. He argued that the Labour Party was not so much a Social Democratic party as a federation of workers' political and industrial organisations, which the Communist Party ought to join while retaining full freedom of thought and action.

The pro-Labour decision meant (though this is hardly what Lenin intended) that the Communist Party was destined to be the tail-end of the Labour Party, its extreme left wing rather than a Leninist party in its own right. The reformists who had come from the BSP did not appreciate Lenin's subtle pro-Labour arguments. For them this was not just a "tactic"; they remained reformists who really believed that a Labour government was the way to Socialism and would help solve the workers' problems. This reformist trend in the CPGB was strengthened in 1921 when the Communist International adopted the "united front" tactic.

The question of parliamentary action was easily settled: the workers could only win power through the workers 'councils so that the role of parliament could only be subsidiary, a sounding board for revolutionary propaganda.

When the Communist Party applied for affiliation in 1920 the Labour Party turned them down. However, undismayed, the Communists joined local Labour parties and as such were delegates to the Labour conferences, Labour candidates, councillors and even MP's.

As we shall see, except for a few years between 1929 and 1933, it has been Communist policy to work for or within the Labour Party (as far as that party has allowed them). For most of its existence it has thus been a left wing ginger group encouraging, and sharing, illusions about some form of Labour government as the way to Socialism.

A.L.B

STALIN TURNS LEFT (from *Socialist Standard* February 1972)

The second in our series on the early history and ideas of the British Communist Party.

IN 1930 The Communist Party of Great Britain had just entered the period of "independent leadership" in accordance with the tactical turn made by the Communist International. The new tactics involved the end of working within the Labour Party and the trade unions in favour of outright opposition to them. When the change of tactics was being discussed in 1928 and 1929 a majority in the leadership of the British Party was opposed to them, arguing that the time had not yet come to give up work in the Labour Party and the unions.

In 1920 Lenin had argued that the CPGB should try to affiliate to the Labour Party since this was not an orthodox Social Democratic party but rather a federation of workers' political and industrial organisations; as one such organisation the Communist Party had every right to be in the Labour Party without any compromise of principle. In 1922, in accordance with a Comintern decision of the previous December in favour of "united front" tactics, the CPGB raised the slogan of a 'Labour Government' and began to work, as best it could, through the Labour party and the unions to achieve this.

Seeing that they were only a small party this tactic can be said to have been fairly successful. Through the Minority Movement, set up in 1924, they were able to rally any Leftwing trade unionists behind their slogans. In 1925 the British TUC even agreed to establish with the Russian unions an Anglo/Russian Trade Union Committee. The leaders of the Labour Party, however, hit back. The 1924 and 1925 Party Conferences carried a number of anti-Communist motions barring members of the Communist Party from being candidates or even individual members of the Labour Party. Affiliated unions were urged not to include Communists in their delegations to the Labour Party Conference. Some local Labour parties, already under Communist influence, refused to accept these decisions and were disaffiliated. These local parties, together with others still in the Labour Party, were organised by the Communist Party into the National Leftwing Movement.

The Anglo/Russian Trade Union Committee broke up in mutual recriminations after the raid in 1927 on the London offices of the Russian trading firm Arcos. But, through the Minority Movement and the Leftwing Movement the Party was having some success with its tactic of boring from within the reformist organisations.

However, the end of the General Strike and then the Mond-Turner talks on "industrial peace", together with the anti-Communist rulings of the Labour Party, made co-operating with the Labour and TUC leaders unpopular with a section of the CPGB membership. They found a spokesman in R. Palme Dutt, who had been the founder and editor of *Labour Monthly*, and was one of the CPGB's leading theoreticians. He, with Harry Pollitt, had played a key role in the committee which had recommended major changes in the organisation of the Communist Party, leading in 1922 to the replacing of the old federal structure by one (involving 'cells' and the like) more suited to the CP tactic of boring-from-within and controlling other bodies by secret caucuses. Trotsky, too, who had fallen out of favour in Russia, was criticising the Stalin leadership for relying too much on alliance with people like the Left in the British TUC and not enough on working class militancy. There is evidence that Dutt sympathised with some of Trotsky's criticisms. In any event his *Where is Britain Going?* was favourably reviewed.

Dutt became the spokesman of those in the Communist Party dissatisfied with the boring-from-within tactic which, in their view, meant that the Party acted merely as a leftwing ginger

group for Labour. These critics, mainly among the younger members, were calling for what in Bolshevik terminology was a "left" turn. They wanted the Communist Party to come out in open opposition to the Labour Party.

The Communist Party leaders, and probably a majority of the members, were quite content with the old tactic. Indeed, some of them obviously thought that being a ginger group for Labour was their party's role. Thus, again in Bolshevik terminology, 'opportunist' trends were strong in the British party.

It so happened that the Stalin group was also planning a "Left" turn in 1928, both in its domestic and in its foreign (and so Comintern) policies. In Russia forced collectivisation began. The Comintern changed its tactics. However, as we saw, tactical changes should only take place in Bolshevik theory when the situation changes. Thus the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in 1928 proclaimed the end of the period of partial capitalist stabilisation which had existed almost continuously from 1921 and the beginning of another "crisis of capitalism". This meant that the old pre-1921 slogans, suited to "revolutionary situations", were brought out again.

Once again the Social Democratic parties were seen as openly counter-revolutionary outfits pledged to help maintain capitalism by confusing workers and diverting their discontent into peaceful reform rather than into civil war and revolution. For this the notorious phrase "social fascists" was coined. But the turn went further than this. Not only were the Social Democrats "social fascists" but the "main blows" ought to be directed against them since they had more influence over the workers than the ordinary fascists. The most dangerous kind of Social Democrat, said the Comintern, were the "Lefts" who mouthed revolutionary phrases to cover up their treacherous role of diverters of the workers' discontent into reformist channels. The ILP in Britain fell into this category and among the first to receive the main blows were Cook and Maxton for their 1928 Manifesto.

Naturally, such a sharp turn caused misgivings amongst those who had joined the Communist Party thinking it was just a part of the Labour Movement. The leadership of the Party tried to resist the change but, once the Comintern had decided, they had to abide by it. Then they tried to interpret it in a not so anti-Labour manner: Did it really mean that Communists in the unions should no longer pay the political levy to the Labour Party? Yes, it did, replied the Comintern. Gradually the leaders of the British party were driven further and further to the left till they had to publicly proclaim before the 1929 election that Labour was "the third capitalist party" and to put up their own candidates in opposition to Labour. This clearly went against the grain for some and the Comintern knew it. They resolved that a new, more reliable leadership was required to carry out the new policy faithfully.

In the British Communist Party there were those who had criticised the old line and were enthusiastically in favour of the changed tactics. It was from their ranks that the new leadership would be drawn. The Tenth Party Congress in January 1929 was the last more or less democratic Communist conference. It elected the same old names to the Central Committee. After pressure from both the Comintern and the Left in the party another Conference was held in Leeds in December of the same year. This time the delegates were given a recommended list to vote for, a list which omitted several of the old leaders. Not all of them were dropped since it was recognised that they had the political experience that would be a valuable aid to the inexperienced new men who were being brought in. The post of Secretary was up-graded so that the man who filled it would be the recognised "Leader" of the Party.

The man chosen by the Comintern was Harry Pollitt. He had all the qualifications: an industrial worker (Pollitt was a boilermaker by trade), with a record of militancy (the Jolly

George incident in 1919), reasonably well-known at Labour and TUC Conferences, an experienced party official of many years standing, tough-minded and, finally, thoroughly reliable. Till 1929 the CPGB had had what amounted to a collective leadership. After the Eleventh Congress of December 1929 Pollitt was the recognised Leader with Dutt as his deputy in charge of theory.

The names of Dutt and Pollitt had in fact already been linked in the title of a document calling for and justifying a change to open opposition to Labour. This was the Dutt/Pollitt Thesis, though it was obviously mainly the work of Dutt.

There were two reasons why the Communists had been pro-Labour: (1) Lenin's view on the federal nature of the British Labour Party. (2) A dose of Labour government would rid workers of their reformist illusions.

Dutt, therefore, had to refute both of these. Naturally, he was not going to challenge them head on (though of course he could have said they were mistaken all along). He merely argued that conditions had changed.

First, the Labour Party had changed from a federation of workers' organisations into a disciplined party of the Social Democratic type. Dutt brought forward as evidence the anti-Communist rulings and the consequent expulsions and disaffiliations. Thus he was saying here that it was no longer possible for Communists to bore-from-within the Labour Party, at least not very effectively.

Second, the failure of the 1924 Labour government had disillusioned the workers who were now looking for revolutionary leadership. This was a more dubious proposition, but Dutt justified it by reference to the General Strike and, oddly, to falling Labour votes at national and local elections. The Labour Party, the thesis was saying, was finished and on the way out.

We need not say much on the first point except that when after 1935 the Communists returned to the pro-Labour tactic they were quite successful in getting into the Labour Party, the "bans and proscriptions" notwithstanding.

But the second point was patently wrong and could have been seen to be so at the time. Labour was by no means finished (and, if it was, why wait till 1928 to change tactics, why not 1925 or 1926?). Indeed they emerged from the 1929 election as the largest Party (despite Communist opposition) and once again took over the administration of capitalism. This miscalculation meant that, from the viewpoint of Bolshevik tactics, the CPGB zigged while the masses zagged. The "revolutionary vanguard" was moving in the opposite direction to the workers and as a result became "isolated" from them, a terrible fate to befall a Bolshevik party.

Of course, it is not quite correct to say that this was a "miscalculation" for what was happening in Britain was not the only relevant factor for the Communists. What was happening in Russia was just as important and the Stalin government had its reasons for turning to the left-collectivisation, fear of growing hostility towards Russia by other States.

A.L.B

REFORM BECOMES REVOLUTION (from *Socialist Standard* March 1972)

The third in our series on the early history and ideas of the British Communist Party.

European Social Democracy never satisfactorily settled the problem of Reform and Revolution, of whether or not a party aiming at Socialism ought also to campaign for reform of capitalism. They tried to combine the two, having a maximum programme of Socialism and a minimum programme of reforms. This minimum programme was called variously "immediate demands", "partial demands" and "reforms". The question the Social Democrats did not face was: did campaigning for reforms hinder the struggle for Socialism? All the evidence seemed to show that it did; that the support for the Social Democratic parties was built up for reforms, not Socialism, so that these parties in effect became the prisoners of their non-socialist supporters and to retain that support were forced to compromise their socialist objective. Socialism became merely a pious "ultimate" aim which meant, to all intents and purposes, no aim at all. Some observant members of the German Social Democratic Party around the turn of the century saw this and suggested that the party recognise that it was only out for reforms and so should drop its paper commitment to social revolution. This the party refused to do but in August 1914 the weakness of the basis on which it had built its support was exposed to all. It was not a Socialist party but a patriotic democratic reform party.

Once they had got over the initial enthusiasm of a Bolshevik government in Russia, the Communists were going to be faced with the same problem, but their theory left them even worse equipped to deal with it. The Social Democrats at least were committed to majority understanding as a pre-condition of Socialism. The Bolsheviks were not, holding that a skilful leadership using the right slogans could get the workers to rise against capitalist rule. They saw the Reform or Revolution issue as Parliament or Armed Insurrection. But in logic this was not so. Parliament could be used for the one revolutionary purpose of ending capitalism, while mass action and violence could be used to get reforms. An outside observer would not have seen much difference between the "slogans" of the Bolsheviks and the "minimum demands" of the Social Democrats, except perhaps that the Bolsheviks were demanding a lot more. There was a reason for this. The Social Democrats put forward their demands as something practical to be achieved to improve the immediate position of the workers. The Bolsheviks were more concerned with the psychological effect of their slogans. They knowingly put forward extravagant demands in order to teach the workers how little capitalism could offer. They were thus in a basically dishonest position: they told the workers lies in order to get them to struggle for reforms and so learn from their failures that only Socialism was the solution.

The Communists, no matter whether they considered the period revolutionary or not, always demanded reforms. In a revolutionary period the reforms were more extravagant still, but this was because they were "transitional", i.e., were supposed to lead on directly to the workers' overthrow of capitalism. The 1929 Programme of the *Communist International* explains:

When a revolutionary situation is developing, the Party advances certain transitional slogans and partial demands corresponding to the concrete situation; but these demands and slogans must be bent to the revolutionary aim of capturing power and of overthrowing bourgeois capitalist society. The Party must neither stand aloof from the daily needs of the working class nor confine its activities exclusively to them. The task of the Party is to utilise these minor everyday needs as a starting point from which to lead the working class to the revolutionary struggle for power.

This is quite frank and clear. It might have been thought that in a revolutionary period the Communists would only demand the maximum, i.e., power for Socialism. But this view, which was argued by a group of Italian Communists who had just been excluded, was specifically repudiated:

Repudiation of partial demands and transitional slogans 'on principle', however, is incompatible with the tactical principles of Communism, for in effect, such repudiation condemns the Party to inaction and isolates it from the masses.

This is unfair in that Bordiga and his supporters were not advocating inaction but a different type of action. This may well have led to a drop in support for the Communists but that would "merely show that the workers still had reformist illusions. The Comintern's line amounted to opportunism: if we do not demand reforms we shall lose and not gain the support of the workers.

Thus the Comintern required a cynical attitude of mind of its supporters. While knowing that a reform could not be achieved under capitalism, they had to pretend that it could in order to get workers to fight for it. In fact most Communists were not as cynical as this so that it was a difficult tactic to apply. Either they themselves really believed the reform could be achieved or they did not really try to pretend that it could. No wonder "right opportunism" and "left sectarianism" were frequent Comintern criticisms of its affiliates.

The British Party until 1929 provides a good example of the first deviation. We have seen how many even of the leaders had accepted that the role of the Communist Party was to be a ginger group within the Labour Party, trying to change it into a revolutionary, socialist organisation. When they called for a Labour government, they really meant it and tended to share the illusions of other Labour supporters. This was why they found the 1928 left turn so difficult to accept. Right opportunism was more of a problem than left sectarianism in the British Party because the bulk of its members had come originally from the pro-reform wing of the English Social Democracy (the BSP). Those who opposed Socialists advocating reforms (the SPGB) never joined the Communist Party.

In America it was the other way round: the Party there did not always put its heart into the struggle for partial demands. Listen to Gusev's complaints at the 12th Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) in September 1932:

Comrade Bedacht states that in a number of cases he found, that when our comrades spoke in the election campaign, they apologised for the fact that the Party put forward partial demands. They stated, that, of course, they knew that the solution of all problems is revolution, but that the workers do not know this, and therefore we put forward partial demands, although they have absolutely no meaning (laughter). At one meeting where Comrade Bedacht spoke on the question of social insurance, the workers in the hall told him that other Party speakers had informed them that our campaign for social insurance was not serious, that we did not expect to get anything out of it, and we were not worrying much about it, because any concessions would objectively patch up the capitalist system, the workers would be satisfied, and would not want a revolution.

Of these two deviations that to the left was the more dangerous from the Bolshevik standpoint of trying to lead the masses. It meant less masses to lead or, as they put it, "isolation from the masses". The Comintern was not unaware of the dangers of right opportunism, particularly that a party might get so engrossed in reform struggles that it might slip out of Comintern control. But since mass influence was their aim this was obviously the direction they would

move in, as they did when the tactic of "class against class" was gradually abandoned. Without mass influence parties were less effective as instruments of Russian foreign policy.

So when the Comintern launched the tactic of "independent leadership" this did not mean independent leadership in a direct struggle for Socialism, but independent leadership of the reform struggles that were supposed to lead on to the struggle for Socialism. Their theory of transitional demands involved tricking workers into believing that reforms could be achieved. To do this the Communists had not only to pretend that reforms could be got but also to denounce these who said they could not, those who in fact told the workers what the Communists agreed was the truth. In Britain the ILP served as the whipping boy. The ILP was itself a reformist party and certainly did not repudiate immediate demands but it did include a number of confused, but sincere, people who saw no harm in saying that capitalism could not be reformed and that only Socialism was the answer.

The ILP, or rather some of its leading members, put forward three particular arguments which upset the Communists -the automatic collapse of capitalism, that trade union action could not stop things getting worse and the call for "Socialism in Our Time". Listen to the way the Communists answered these points.

Pollitt is debating Fenner Brockway in April 1932:

In the ILP literature today it is possible to find references to the automatic collapse of capitalism. No automatic collapse of capitalism is possible. There will never be a breakdown of capitalism in the sense that every- thing will come right for the workers simply to take the reins of power without mass struggle. Capitalism will find a way out of the crisis unless the workers can fight back and know how to fight back. ..Any talk about the automatic collapse of capitalism, any talk about capitalism having no way out of the crisis, leads to fatalism and disorganising the workers' fight.

Pollitt must have hoped that his audience did not remember that this is precisely how the Communists themselves had talked only a few months previously.

In the same debate Pollitt had this to say about a passage in an ILP paper that the striking Lancashire cotton workers should realise "the price of the continuance of capitalism is worsening conditions for the working class. We must go all out for Socialism:

Such a lead takes the heart out of the textile struggle. For the fight to defend existing conditions is the fight for Socialism. Because it is only in that fight that the workers learn solidarity, increase their political consciousness and discipline and develop a powerful weapon that can hold back the capitalist offensive. ..The ILP tells the textile workers of Lancashire that they will support them through thick and thin, but that the situation is of such a character that it is useless to do anything because Socialism alone is the alternative.

Actually, the ILP did not say that the trade union struggle was "useless", but note how Pollitt is forced to repudiate the idea that "Socialism alone is the alternative".

R. P. A (ndrews) had to do the same in a 1932 introduction to a reprint of *The Communist International Answers the ILP* (1920) when he asked:

In the fight for a revolutionary way out of the crisis, why does the ILP leap straight into "socialism in our time" and hide from the workers the necessity of a grim and bitter struggle against the capitalist state?

These anti-ILP arguments all have the same content. They accuse the ILP, by its talk of "capitalism cannot be reformed" and "socialism is the only way out", of discouraging the struggle for reforms and the struggle on the economic front, thus undermining the discontent the Communists were trying to exploit. Up till 1932 they maintained that this was a deliberate manoeuvre on the part of the ILP to sabotage the workers' struggle. For the Comintern had decreed that not only should the "main blows" be aimed against the Social Democrats but that of these the "lefts" were the most dangerous. As Pollitt told Brockway "the chief support of world capitalism today is that of Social Democracy, and the most dangerous part of that is the ILP because of its left wing phrases". Nevertheless, the Communist criticisms of, for instance, the ILP advice to the Lancashire cotton workers did have a logic in terms of Bolshevik theory. Those who told the truth by pointing out the limitations of trade union action were a nuisance.

L. J. Macfarlane, in his study of the British Communist Party up to 1929, comments on this aspect of Communist theory and practice:

The workers had to learn through their own experiences that capitalism could not provide them with a tolerable standard of living. Communists needed to campaign around the day-to-day issues and demands of the workers and, through their leadership and example, gain the workers' confidence. The Communist Party refused to see any contradiction in urging the workers to press for concessions which could not, according to their analysis, ever be granted. This was a parallel contradiction to that involved in calling on them to vote for a Labour government which would betray them. In practice, of course, it was impossible to call on workers to come out on strike in order to learn through defeat the folly of purely industrial action. *The Communist Party, therefore, formulated demands based on the expectations of those involved and insisted that those demands could be realized if only they campaigned hard enough for them.*

Failure to achieve the aims set in any particular industrial dispute was usually ascribed to the treachery of the official union leaders, the ruthless cunning of the employers or the intervention of the capitalist government, rather than to the underlying economic condition of the industry concerned. The result was that the leading Communists working in the trade unions were supported primarily as militant trade unionists instead of as Communists. (*The Communist Party. Its Origins and Development until 1929*, 1966, emphasis added).

In other words, the Communists were supported because they told lies, because they pandered to the illusions of their followers. Macfarlane also hits the nail on the head when he says that even after the expected failure to get a reform or win a strike, the Communists still cannot tell the truth but, in order to retain their support, must think up some other excuse like "betrayal". The Communists thus played a confusing role but this was a reflection of their own confusion.

Their 1929 programme *Class Against Class* is a prime example of this. After declaring that "there is no way of escape for the working class of this country from the degradation and oppression now imposed upon it other than by the fundamental revolutionary measures which only a Revolutionary Workers Government can put into life" they go on to outline "the programme of the Revolutionary Workers' Government" (4 pages) and then "our immediate programme of action" (12 pages). But, apart from the nationalisation without compensation of industry, land and the banks by the Revolutionary Workers' Government, the two programmes are almost word for word the same -repudiation of the national debt, rent limited to 10 per cent of wages, free medical service, non-contributory health insurance giving equivalent of wages when sick, 7-hour day and 40-hour week, raising the school leaving age to 16, independence for the Empire, publication of secret treaties, etc., etc. One difference is that the Revolutionary Workers' Government will introduce the 6-hour day for miners, while the

capitalist government is only expected to go down to 7 hours, but to provide pension at 55, a promise not made for after the revolution !

But if these are "fundamental revolutionary measures which only a Revolutionary Government can put into life" is it not futile to campaign for some capitalist government to implement them? Is it not absurd to list a number of measures which you say can only be carried out after the overthrow of capitalist rule and then to campaign for their implementation by a capitalist government before it is overthrown? There is an explanation of this, that these immediate demands were really "transitional" designed only to raise revolutionary consciousness. This, in essence, is what the Communists try to say:

Preparation for the coming of the Revolutionary Workers' Government is the present work of the Communist Party. It enters this General Election with the object of strengthening the workers to that ultimate end. It puts before the workers the following proposals for an immediate militant working-class policy -not an alternative to the programme which has just been outlined, but a statement of things which the working class demands at once.

Labour reformists claim that the Communist Party is concentrating all attention on distant revolution, whilst they, as practical people, are concentrating on getting something now. This, of course, is nonsense. The struggle for reforms in the present period leads to revolution. The following programme of immediate demands is, therefore, not an alternative to the programme of the Revolutionary Workers' Government, but the application of its principles to the immediate situation as preparatory measures expressing the needs of the workers, the struggle for which weakens the forces of the capitalist class and strengthens the power of the working class, and prepares it for its greater task of conquering power.

But this will not do. If their demands are transitional then their Labour critics are right: the Communists are not concerned with getting something now (since transitional demands are not supposed to be able to put into practice under capitalism). On the other hand, if these are not transitional demands then they are an alternative to the "ultimate end". The basic confusion arises because the Communists probably felt that some of these reforms could be achieved under capitalism (as indeed some could and have been) but had to justify campaigning for them in revolutionary terms. They were ordinary reforms but had to be labelled "transitional" because there was supposed to be a revolutionary period. Note the old Social Democratic dichotomy between "ultimate end" and "immediate demands".

Speaking "r-r-revolutionary" but acting as a reform party is about all the Comintern's left turn amounted to. The Communists were guilty of the charge they levelled at the ILP (and other "left Social Democrats"): they were revolutionary phrase-mongers side-tracking the direct struggle for Socialism into reform struggles.

Their phrase-mongering drew not only on Socialist but also on old Radical sources. When in 1931 the National government abandoned free trade and went over to protection, the Communists raised the slogan of "No Taxes on the People's Food", a slogan which nearly a hundred years previously Cobden and Bright had used to trick workers into backing the capitalists' demand for Repeal of the Corn Laws so as to pay lower wages and which the demagogue Lloyd George had used to win support for the Liberals against Tory plans for tariff reform twenty-five years before. The Communists, too, were playing the demagogue and it is a measure of their lack of revolutionary intent that they revived this hoary old anti-working class slogan in a bid to gain a mass following.

Brian Pearce has pointed out how when in 1926 the CPGB brought out its own edition of Trotsky's *Where is Britain Going?* they omitted the word "revolutionary" :

It omitted the preface specially written by Trotsky for the American edition in May 1925, which included these words: 'The inference to which I am led by my study is that Britain is heading rapidly towards an era of great revolutionary upheavals'; and, though giving the bulk of the introduction written in May 1926 for the second German edition, it omitted the word 'revolutionary' from the phrase 'the revolutionary prediction for the immediate future of British Imperialism made in this book' and also an entire paragraph which included these words: 'The most important task for the truly revolutionary participants in the General Strike will be to fight relentlessly against every sign or act of treachery, and ruthlessly to expose reformist illusions'. (*Early History of the Communist Party of Great Britain*. p.59).

This was in line with the Comintern's then assessment of the situation as non-revolutionary. After 1928, on the other hand, the word "revolutionary" was back in favour. Instead of an ordinary Labour government there was to be a *revolutionary* workers' government. The Communists began to refer to themselves as the *revolutionary* Communist Party. Ordinary reform and trade union activity became "*revolutionary* mass work". There was a revolutionary trade union opposition to the bureaucrats.

So, when is there a revolutionary situation? Answer: When we say there is. And what do you do in such a situation? Answer: we call our reform and trade union activity revolutionary.

This is no exaggeration for the Communists always held that "the struggle for reforms in the present period leads to revolution", however they assessed the period. They argued this before 1928 and they argued it ten years later, when they wanted a Popular Front government. The fact is that they were essentially reformers justifying their reform work in terms of Bolshevik metaphysics. If, in accordance with the Marxist method, we judge the Communists by what they do rather than by what they say, they stand exposed as hypocritical reformers mouthing revolutionary phrases.

A.L.B

THE PENDULUM SWINGS BACK (from *Socialist Standard* April 1972)

The fourth in our series on the early history and ideas of the British Communist Party

The Communist International, or Comintern, was a valuable political asset to the rulers of state capitalist Russia. It was also a financial investment since they spent considerable sums subsidising Communist parties abroad. The Comintern was useful to them because it could be used as an adjunct to Russian foreign policy. But to do this it had to have some following in the countries Russia wanted to influence. So, although there were very real political reasons for the policy of "independent leadership", its disastrous effect on the membership and influence of Communist Parties throughout the world was bound to lead sooner or later to a re-assessment of the whole policy.

This is what did happen though gradually and it was not until the end of 1934 that the pre-1928 position was again reached. Though this time it did not stop there but kept on going to the right till by 1939 the CPGB was a chauvinist body calling for an alliance of all anti-fascist elements including those in the Tory party.

Using the word in its Bolshevik sense the CPGB was at its most "sectarian" in the years 1930 and 1931 following the Leeds Conference in December 1929. This was during the depth of the slump with a helpless Labour government in power. The Communists' denunciations of the Labour Party and the trade unions as anti-working class found a ready hearing amongst some of the unemployed, who provided the bulk of the members and supporters of the party in this period.

During this period the Communists were, literally, violently opposed to the Labour Party. The *Daily Worker*, which was launched in January 1930, carried that very same month a call from Harry Pollitt to physically break-up Labour meetings:

There should not be a Labour meeting held anywhere, but what the revolutionary workers in that district attend such meetings and fight against the speakers, whoever they are, so-called 'left', 'right' or 'centre'. They should never be allowed to address the workers. This will bring us into conflict with the authorities, but this must be done. The fight can no longer be conducted in a passive manner (29 January).

This kind of talk and action earned the Communists the reputation of being anti-trade union also. This was a valid criticism, not in the sense that the Communists were opposed to workers putting up a fight on the industrial field but in that of urging workers to conduct this fight outside the unions and under the leadership of rival bodies set up and led by the Communists. For the policy of "independent leadership" was to apply on the industrial as well as on the political field.

The Comintern's policy involved withdrawing not only from the Labour Party but also from the reformist trade unions whose bureaucracy was said to be actively aiding the capitalists to crush the workers. Instead the Communists were supposed to set up rival "red unions". This policy may have made some sense in Europe where the workers had a tradition of being organised on political or religious lines but in Britain it was madness. For one lesson the workers of Britain had learned was trade union unity, a lesson embodied in the slogans "Unity is Strength" and "United We Stand, Divided We Fall". Trade and occupation, rather than politics or religion, were recognised as the proper bases for organisation on the industrial field.

But faced with the Comintern instructions the CPGB had to make a show. They did manage to set up two "red" unions -the United Mineworkers of Scotland and the United Clothing Workers Union. The Scottish coalfield had a tradition of splits and breakaways which the Communists were able to draw on. The clothing workers' union was a breakaway of the London members of the Garment Workers Union under the popular Sam Elsbury who were dissatisfied with the timid attitude of the union's national leaders.

For the rest the policy of "independent leadership" relied on what was left of the Minority Movement and on so-called Workers' Committees the Communists set up in the factories and mines and during strikes as would-be rivals to the established unions.

The MM, which had been the vehicle of Communist pressure on the TUC in the mid-twenties, issued its own membership cards and so could be regarded as a kind of union, though it was never involved in negotiations with employers or in calling strikes. In any event, this was how the Communists chose to regard it. For instance, the Seamen's Minority Movement was an attempt to organise a rival to the National Union of Seamen. When in the summer of 1930 the CPGB decided to launch a "Workers' Charter" in a bid to gain a mass following the MM was used. The Charter, with obvious historical significance, had six points such as higher unemployment pay, against speed-up, against increased national insurance contributions, repeal of the Trades Disputes Act - ordinary reforms. Actually the Party's own programme went further for *Class Against Class* called for a national minimum wage of £4 a week while the Charter only demanded £3. But then consistency was not something the Communist Party could ever be accused of.

The other expedient, workers' councils or committees, were set up especially during strikes. So, for instance, when the textile workers of Lancashire and Yorkshire or the South Wales miners went on strike there were two strike committees - the official union one and its Communist rival. Needless to say, the Communists represented no-one but themselves. The result was the dread "isolation from the masses" and an unenviable reputation for wrecking tactics.

As we saw, it was not as wreckers that Communist trade unionists had built up their following, but as militant union members. They were thus in a difficult position, torn between loyalty to the Party's wrecking line and loyalty to their fellow workers in the unions. The fates of Arthur Horner and Sam Elsbury illustrate this dilemma.

Horner was a prominent and very active member of the South Wales Miners Federation. Up until 1929 he was on the Central Committee of the CPGB, being one of those excluded for refusing to wholeheartedly endorse the "left" turn. It was clear that after the line was changed Homer was going to be singled out as an example of how a Communist should not behave. In 1929 he opposed continuing unofficially a strike which the SWMF had decided to call off because it had no chance of success. For this he was accused of capitulating to the union bureaucrats, a heresy that was labelled "Hornerism". Homer, however, was not the sort of man to take this lying down. He appealed to the Political Bureau and then to the Central Committee and finally, as the dispute dragged on into 1930, to the Communist International. Anxious not to lose so popular an industrial leader, the Comintern ruled that Horner was wrong but that the CPGB was also wrong to inflate this into "Hornerism". Horner was satisfied, or at least he stayed in the Party. But the policy of "independent leadership" was again to try his patience in March 1931. During a strike of Welsh miners the Communists had applied their policy of setting up their own strike committees. Horner wrote to Moscow denouncing this saying it resulted "only in our isolation". The Communist Party, he went on, was "effectively bankrupt from every angle" (*Daily Worker*, 10 March, 1931). Strong words! Hornerism was rearing its head again. By now the Comintern had had time to see the

disastrous effects of their 1928 policy and Homer's letter must have played a part in bringing about the relaxation of "independent leadership" that was allowed at the end of 1931. There was speculation at the time that Homer would set up a rival Communist Party less given to wrecking tactics but in the end he again stayed a member.

The policy of "independent leadership" succeeded in wrecking one of the two "red" unions - the United Clothing Workers Union under Sam Elsbury. Elsbury, who had been London organiser of the old union, was the secretary of the new union but had to take his orders from the CPGB. Those orders involved calling strikes whenever the slightest excuse arose with little or no regard for the chances of success or for the finances of the union. This led to one of the more sordid episodes in the history of the British Communist Party. In order to get Elsbury to call a strike on one occasion in 1930 the Party promised £400 for union funds which otherwise could not have borne the burden. Promised such financial support the men went on strike, but the money was not forthcoming and they had to return to work defeated with their union organisation at the factory in ruins. This was too much for Elsbury. He resigned from the Communist Party denouncing its methods. This the Party was not prepared to accept - nobody resigned from a Bolshevik party! - and expelled him instead, using the childish trick of backdating his expulsion to the day before he wrote his letter of resignation. Elsbury was viciously denounced and, needless to say, was driven out of his union job also. While Horner remained a lifelong Communist and went on to become General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, Elsbury later became a Labour councillor in the east end of London. He was able to get his own back on the CPGB for its shabby treatment of him when in 1937 he won a libel action that caused the withdrawal of an official history of the Party written by Tom Bell.

The 11th Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) that met at the end of 1931 decided to call a halt to this disastrous policy. "Sectarianism" and the "isolation" it caused were denounced. The sort of reputation the CPGB had got can be gathered from comments made at the 12th Plenum in September 1932 when the beneficial results, influence-wise, of the new turn were discussed. 'Our party', declared Comintern-man Gusev, "was not popular amongst the organised workers because it had obtained a firm reputation for being against the trade unions". Pollitt admitted:

Wrong formulations on this question of the trade union movement have given the impression that we are out to smash and disrupt the trade union movement.

The British Party began the process of picking up the pieces with its 1932 "January Resolution" which echoed the new Comintern line. As described by Bell (Communist historians are not reliable except as a guide to what at the time of writing the Party wanted people to think, but on this he happened to be right):

This Resolution demanded a complete transformation in the direction of revolutionary mass work in the trade unions; a fight against 'Left' sectarianism, which interpreted independent leadership as the abandonment of all work in the reformist trade unions; at the same time it demanded a struggle against trade union legalism, for persistent recruiting to the party, for improving the content and increasing the sales of the Daily Worker, and, finally insisted on the need for tirelessly explaining to the workers the revolutionary way out of the crisis. (*The British Communist Party, A Short History*, 1937, p. 150).

The reference to a "way out" of the crisis reflected another chance in the line. Up till 1932 the CPGB held that capitalism was collapsing. Palme Dutt, as the Party theorist, was the main spokesman for this viewpoint.

In *Capitalism or Socialism in Britain?* (March 1931), he declared:

Capitalism or Socialism in Britain - capitalist collapse or Workers' Revolution - this is no longer a debating issue of the future, it is a life and death issue, a fight for life that draws close

and, in *The Workers' Answer to the Crisis* (August 1931):

The final issue is: Workers' Revolution or final collapse and mass starvation.

So Dutt, and the Communist Party, were committed in these pamphlets to the view that capitalism was collapsing and that, without a socialist revolution, the workers would starve. In effect the reason the communists were giving the workers for rising up was to avoid mass starvation. It wasn't a very encouraging message but it did provide a sort of justification for the desperate wrecking tactics the Communists had been engaging in: the situation was urgent; the Labour and trade union bureaucrats were blocking the way; to avoid mass starvation they must be smashed.

After January 1932 this was not the attitude of mind the Communists wanted the workers to have. They wanted them to fight for reforms so that the Communists by leading them in such struggles could regain some of their lost influence. They had thus to pander to reformist illusions. This was done in two ways: the harsh doctrine of "Revolt or Starve" was abandoned and the "united front" tactic was revived to a small extent.

"Revolt or Starve" was a doctrine that might have stirred the Communists to do desperate things they wouldn't normally do, but it was also by implication a declaration that it was futile to struggle for reforms. As the Communists now wanted to lead such struggles with some chance of winning a following this doctrine had to go. It was done in an ingenious way. The Communists now said that Socialism or Starvation were not the only two alternatives but that there was a "capitalist way out of the crisis" involving attacks from various sides on the workers' standard of living. This served a dual purpose for the Communists could now claim that the "revolutionary way out" of the crisis could be found in struggling against the capitalist way out. They had done it again: Reform could be justified in terms of Revolution without offending too much the illusions of pro-Labour workers.

Dutt recanted at the earliest possible moment. In the February 1932 issue of *Labour Monthly* he wrote:

Until the proletarian revolution overthrows capitalism, it is inevitable that capitalism, whatever the extremity of its chaos and breakdown, will drag on, will of necessity find its own 'way out', from form to form from stage to stage, with increasing misery and renewed contradictions-until the proletariat acts.

Earlier in the same article Dutt had written that until there was the necessary "action, organisation and victory of the working class . . . capitalism will still drag on from crisis to crisis." This in fact was the classic Marxist position - that capitalism would go on from crisis to crisis until the workers consciously organised to end it. A few months later in April, as we saw, Pollitt was brazenly denouncing the ILP for being defeatist in preaching the collapse of capitalism, though, it is true, the ILP went further than the CPGB ever did. Maxton once gave capitalism only six weeks!

The second concession was the revival of "united front" tactics, "but only from below". This proviso nullified the effect since it ruled out united action between Communist and Labour and Social Democrat organisations. Which was what the united front was supposed to be. So it would be inaccurate to say that after 1931 the Communists were again wooing the Social Democrats. Far from it, they were still "social fascists" preparing the way for fascism proper. The new formula did, however, represent a significant departure from the previous line. In calling for Labour and Communist workers to undertake joint activity it was a concession to the pro-Labour sentiments of the workers. It was a slight move from the previous rigid anti-Labour position. And was recognised as such by some members. For as Pollitt told the 12th Plenum in September 1932:

the tactic of the united front with the workers who belonged to the Labour Party was looked on, by a large portion of the Party members, as a step back from the tactic of 'class against class'.

A.L.B

RETURN TO LABOUR (from *Socialist Standard* May 1972)

The concluding article in our series on the early history and ideas of the British Communist Party

One of the main political events of 1932 in Britain was the breakaway of the ILP from the Labour Party. Until July of that year the ILP had been a constituent part of, and indeed had played a key role in establishing and maintaining the Labour Party. Its secession reflected the feeling of disillusion with the failure of the Labour Party's reformism which had been demonstrated by the collapse the previous year of the Labour government amid a record number of unemployed and with their leader going over to the Tories.

The ILP breakaway had no effect on the attitude of the CPGB to the ILP and its members. Which is not surprising since no authorisation for any change had come from Moscow. But at the 12th Plenum in September Gusev denounced the British party's attitude to the ILP as "right opportunist lagging behind the mass movement". The Party, in other words, had failed to realise that the breakaway of the ILP represented a leftward trend amongst working class militant and so had failed to take advantage of this.

"Right opportunism", as we saw, is in Bolshevik jargon the opposite of 'Left sectarianism' and since in this period the Comintern was abandoning the old "sectarian" line it was on the face of it odd that a Party should be accused of "right opportunism". But an incident in 1932 well illustrates what "right opportunism" was. The victim was ex-SLP man, J. T. Murphy, a local Communist leader with a trade union following in the factories of eastern Sheffield. At this time the CPGB was pursuing an anti-militarist policy and had raised the slogan "Stop the Transport of Munitions". Murphy was against this and suggested as an alternative "Credits for the Soviet Union". In fairness Murphy really was guilty of opportunism because the factories of eastern Sheffield where his followers worked were munitions factories -an interesting example of how Communist trade union leaders had built up their following for industrial rather than political reasons.

The Comintern order to co-operate with and try to win over the members of the ILP was conveyed to the 12th Congress of the Party in November 1932. "The basic task", said Pollitt, "is a definite turn in our united front work, to drawing in ILP workers in every phase of united front activity". The ILP leaders, however, continued to be denounced as "the most dangerous reformists in this country" who were trying "to build a barrier between the leftward workers and the CP" (*The Road to Victory*, Pollitt's Speech to the 12th Party Congress).

Four months later, however, in February 1933 the CPGB, following another lead given by the Comintern, called for united action with Labour, the TUC, the Co-operative Movement and the ILP. The "United front", the Comintern had decreed, was to be extended from co-operation with workers who were members of other workers parties to co-operation with those parties themselves. What had caused this change of line was Hitler's appointment as German Chancellor at the end of January 1933. This represented a failure of the policies pursued by both the Social Democrats and the Communists to stop the rise of fascism. The Labour Party, needless to say, turned down this appeal with contempt but the ILP had agreed and in May a kind of non-aggression pact between the ILP and CPGB was concluded. This alliance was to prove highly embarrassing to the CPGB since they were moving rightwards while the ILP continued moving leftwards. The ILP, said Bell, "subsequently tried to break up the united front by making anti-Soviet Trotskyist attacks upon the USSR and the Communist

International" (p.152). Actually, what was happening was that both the Trotskyists and the Communists were trying to take over the ILP by the dishonest policy of boring from within.

The Communist Party, we said, was continuing rightwards. A curious feature of this was that each step in this direction was justified by saying that the final revolutionary crisis was getting nearer. Bolshevik ideology, we saw earlier, demanded that any change in "tactics" had to be justified by a change in the "objective" situation. Since the VIth World Congress of the Communist International in 1928 authorised the "left" turn its EC had met four times. Each time it authorised a move away from "sectarianism" and each time this was justified by saying that the final crisis was getting nearer. Thus the 10th Plenum of the ECCI held from July to September 1929 predicted the imminence of a world economic crisis. The 11th Plenum held at the end of 1931 declared that the crisis was deepening (and authorised a revival of the united front tactic, but "only from below"). The 12th Plenum in September 1932 spoke of a transition from the economic to a revolutionary crisis (and again extended the united front). The 13th Plenum in December 1933 declared that times were even nearer to a revolutionary crisis; at any moment the revolutionary crisis could come; the capitalists were abandoning democracy for fascism; the slogan "Soviet Power" should be raised by all Communist parties. In response the British party republished in March 1934 the thesis of the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920, the previous occasion the Bolshevik leaders had hysterically predicted an immediate world revolution.

This demand of the 13th Plenum to step up "united front" tactics amounted to a demand to intensify the struggle for immediate demands under the leadership of the CPGB. From the beginning of 1934, however, as the Russian government re-thought its foreign policy, there were so many changes in the Comintern's line that the British Party was unable to keep up with them.

In February 1934 it was urging workers to vote against both the Tories and the Labour Party in the London County Council elections and in March put up a candidate against the Labour nominee in a parliamentary by-election in Hammersmith. "A third Labour government", it was said, "means only betrayals" (*One Million London Workers to Welcome Hunger Marchers!*, February 1934). Harry Pollitt declared that there was "no contradiction between being associated with the other parties in united front activity against capitalist attack, and opposing the same parties in elections" (*Daily Worker*, 19 March, 1934). As late as 9 August the *Daily Worker* was still arguing that for the Communist Party to extend the united front to electoral activities would be "renouncing its revolutionary policy and programme . . . This it cannot do and remain the workers' party. Therefore it opposes Labour Party and ILP candidates whenever possible". Less than two weeks later, on 21 August, the *Daily Worker* was reporting that the French Communist Party had concluded just such a deal with the Social Democrats there! The significance of this was not lost on the leaders of the British party and by the time the February 1935 local elections came round their policy had again shifted. Now they were prepared to back any Labour candidate who supported the united front. Harry Pollitt had the unenviable task of explaining this shift to the delegates at the Party's 13th Congress in February. The already bewildered delegates were treated to the now familiar excuse:

The question has been raised: 'Do our new tactics in the elections imply that the previous line of the Party was wrong?' This question principally arises from our inability to understand that the application of the tactical line and policy of the Communist party is always adapted to the immediate concrete situation and needs to be changed as the situation changes, with its subsequent changes in the working class movement (**A Call To All Workers**, 13th CPGB Congress, February, 1935).

Pollitt went on to speak of this leading to the conditions for "sweeping away the National Government, returning of CP MP's and a Labour Government".

This was in fact way to the right of the new programme For Soviet Britain adopted at the Congress. This had been drafted before Pollitt was ordered to do his about-turn and still reflected the policy of the 13th Plenum as far back as December 1933! After the Congress the old slogan of "Down With the National Government" was replaced by a call for a "Third Labour Government", though unqualified support for all Labour Party candidates had yet to come. In June the CPGB offered to form a United Communist Party with the ILP, but this was just a way of withdrawing its members who had been boring from within the ILP since by now the ILP was regarding the CPGB as a little moderate for them.

By the middle of 1935 the Russian government had decided on its new foreign policy: to seek the support of "democratic" France and Britain against "fascist" Germany. A full Congress -the 7th -of the Communist International was summoned in order to let the various Communist parties know what the new line was. "In the mobilisation of the toiling masses for the struggle against fascism", Georgi Dimitrov, hero of the Reichstag fire, told them, "the formation of a broad people's anti-fascist front on the basis of the proletarian united front is a particularly important task". Unity of action against fascism, he went on, must lead to political unity, to one working class political party in each country.

Their instructions clear, the leaders of the British party returned from Moscow and called a special Party Congress. The old programme For Soviet Britain adopted earlier that year was quietly forgotten and a call for a Labour government substituted. From then on the Communist Party gave unqualified support to the Labour Party; it backed all the Labour candidates, not just leftwingers, in the November General Election and soon applied for affiliation -only to be rejected of course, with some pointed reminders about their previous policy and the lack of democracy in Russia. In accordance with Dimitrov's instructions the Party went patriotic, dropped its anti-militarist line and cut out the subheading of the *Daily Worker* which read "Organ of the Communist Party of Great Britain (Section of the Communist International)".

The end of 1935 is a good place to stop in our early history of the Communist Party of Great Britain since this party's present policy is substantially the same as it had then become: support for the Labour Party and a Labour government. There is one difference, however, the Communist Party now puts up candidates against the Labour Party. How long it will take them to drop this inconsistency remains to be seen.

A.L.B