

# **THE KICK INSIDE**

**Revolutionary opposition in the  
CPGB, 1945–1991**

**Lawrence Parker**

**For Brian Lewis Jones —  
you were so beautiful, you  
were so very special.**

**Published by November Publications Ltd  
BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX**

**© November Publications**

**ISBN 978-1-291-19609-2**

**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data: A catalogue  
record of this book is available from the British Library.**

**Typeset by November Publications Ltd**

**Printed by Lulu, [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)**

**Second edition 2012**

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**“One didn’t like the language  
One thought the time was wrong  
One said ‘stay under cover’  
Lest John Mahon say ‘so long’  
I’m still a party member  
I said I wouldn’t sign  
But I’ll back our committee  
Along the Lenin line”**

**‘To Cross, Pinckheard & others’  
*Vanguard* Volume 1 Number 1,  
February 1964**

**The cover image, from the Action Centre for Marxist-Leninist  
Unity’s journal, *Hammer or Anvil*, has been reproduced with the  
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# Preface

It is a pleasure to recommend the second, expanded edition of *The kick inside* to readers. I don't agree with all of the author's political conclusions or the emphasis he puts on particular trends or developments. These are quibbles, however. In the two editions of this book, Lawrence Parker has provided a service to the workers' movement. He has raised to the surface something of the real history of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), illustrating its life, colour and vitality in a way that the dull official histories do not.<sup>1</sup> He has thrown light on the factional battles that started to disaggregate the party, particularly from the 1950s onwards, and also — crucially — shown why they still matter and what lessons activists in the movement today can glean from them.

However, given the subject matter of this book, I should really come clean from the outset. From the late 1970s/early 1980s, I was an active and fiercely partisan soldier in these factional battles that tore apart the CPGB and the youth organisation, the Young Communist League (YCL). I became the national organiser of *The Leninist* faction sometime in my early twenties. (Around 1984, so my wobbly, 50-year-old memory prompts me, probably unreliably.) This is a position I have held, with some brief interruptions and evolutionary leaps in the name of the organisation, ever since.

So readers should be clear that there is nothing politically neutral or objective about this preface. I was intensely loyal to a particular trend in these struggles. More than that, as far as I am concerned, the opportunist currents on the left of the contemporary workers' movement often replicate many of the political features of the degenerate factions I struggled against as a young man in the CPGB of the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> *Plus ça change*, sadly.

It follows from this, and as the reader might expect, that I have a pretty firm set of opinions on the subject matter. For instance, in one of my very first articles for *The Leninist*, I concluded a survey of the dismal state of the YCL with a passage of which, nigh on 30 years later, I am still rather proud, in a slightly embarrassed, parental sort of way.

"Previous left-oppositional forces within the YCL have been flawed by their inability to challenge the descent into liquidation on a political rather than an organisational level," I thundered. Then, more *sotto voce*, with resolve — and possibly with an 007-style raised eyebrow as I typed the words — I promised: "This time, it will be very different."<sup>3</sup>

Well, actually, yes and no. Of course, history records that the rather intense, confident young things grouped in *The Leninist* faction actually failed to stop "the descent into liquidation" — the party was officially consigned to the

history books in 1991. To be frank, we did not even come close. Parker is correct to write that we remained “a tiny group... confined to London and its immediate surrounds”.<sup>4</sup> However, unlike those previous left-opposition groups in the CPGB (such as the forerunners of the New Communist Party and those around *Straight Left*), who tried to defeat “today’s reformist revisionism with yesterday’s reformist revisionism”,<sup>5</sup> *The Leninist* comrades traced the degeneration far further back. The author of this book is spot on to describe us as a dialectical break and a continuation with the left party oppositions of the past: “... *The Leninist* was the inheritor of previous revolutionary oppositions in that it distilled positives and negatives of those groups and individuals into a strategy that avoided the sectarian wilderness inhabited by the ‘Marxist-Leninist’ sects while not allowing its struggle to... [to be] cooped up in the tiny space the CPGB allowed its dissidents.”<sup>6</sup>

This is an important point and underlines the fact that the comrade’s methodological approach to this aspect of the party’s history is the correct one. His declared aim is to explain “why [the CPGB] continually threw up revolutionary militants and ideas in a period in which it had formally ditched a revolutionary programme”. Comrade Parker treats these groups and individuals as “an organic product of the ‘official’ communist movement”<sup>7</sup>, a point I have made about the nature of *The Leninist* faction on a number of occasions.

### STERILE PARADIGM

The tragedy was that almost all these oppositional trends worked within the sterile paradigm of Stalinism. In this they were, ironically, the mirror image of the revolutionary sects and grouplets that worked outside the party, hampered by a rigidity of thought moulded by adherence to particular versions of ‘official’ Trotskyism.

Quite apart from the broader programmatic problems associated with the Trotskyist alternative, it was also posed with a tricky political conundrum when *The Leninist* emerged: how to characterise it? I recall a founding member of Workers Power (a comrade now sadly no longer with us) telling a youthful Mark Fischer on a late-night Northern Line train in the capital, that he had never before encountered, in this country or internationally, an oppositional “Stalinist trend” such as *The Leninist* that had traced the political origins of the decay of ‘official’ communism as far back as we had. I recall burbling something in reply that certainly did not convince him; hell, it did not sound all that plausible to me. In fact, if I could re-live that moment again I would tell the comrade that this was not something that I found particularly challenging; but it was a development that should perhaps prompt him to thoroughly re-interrogate the notion of Stalinism that was offered to him by his version of Trotskyism. Again, as Parker in part refers to, here were ‘Stalinists’ that:

- Rejected the ‘theory’ of ‘socialism in one country’.<sup>8</sup>
- Critiqued the related opportunisms of both the Third Period and the Popular Front.<sup>9</sup>

- Advocated a version of democratic centralism that was qualitatively more ‘permissive’ than our Trotskyist comrades thought appropriate for their own organisations.
- Came — towards the end of the Soviet Union’s life — to call for a political revolution to establish genuine socialist democracy.<sup>10</sup>

Over the 10 years of its factional struggle, *The Leninist* was able to show incontrovertibly that the CPGB had been politically liquidated as a revolutionary vanguard long before the final *coup de grâce* was dealt by a special congress convened by the Eurocommunist-dominated leadership — “death by a thousand opportunist cuts”, as *The Leninist* dubbed it. This is something that the majority of the factions and groups that Parker discusses would have been unable to admit, despite their subjective will to revolutionary politics.

This is one reason why I characterise *The kick inside* as a general service to the whole workers’ movement: whatever its other intentions, it addresses a specific aspect of the contemporary left’s general philistinism — its ignorance of the genuine history and political dynamics of the most important working class organisation we have so far created in the UK. The CPGB was always small in comparison to the mass parties in Europe. It was, however, a genuine party of the class, with a real influence in the workers’ movement and wider society. A haughty refusal to properly engage with its history implies a frivolous, light-minded and stupidly sectarian attitude to the actual history of our class in the 20th century.

For example, the revolutionary left outside the party took an extremely passive, intensely insular and — initially — factually inaccurate view when large-scale factional war in the CPGB broke out openly in the 1980s. If I were feeling charitable, I might say that this was at least partially explained by the troglodyte existence that oppositional trends of the time had led in the party — with the exception of the small group around *The Leninist*, of course. However, I think the real reason was the crude caricature of the CPGB and the political dynamics of its internal life that most had lumbered themselves with. (The smarter soon got themselves up to speed courtesy of *The Leninist* and, with unseemly haste in some cases, dropped their view of the battle line being ‘tankies versus Euros’).<sup>11</sup>

As comrade Parker shows, the reality was much more complex and multi-layered. Essentially, the 1980s saw a split in the right opportunists (associated with the party apparatus) as its stability as a party trend “became increasingly tenuous to the point where... it is disintegrating as it becomes polarised between centrism [the pro-Soviet left of the party — MF] and Eurocommunism over the *Morning Star* crisis”.<sup>12</sup> The revolutionary section of the workers’ movement needs to be better informed about the genuine history of the CPGB, even if in hindsight. More than that, it should have had an active, engaged interest in its internal battles at the time, not the cynical membership-poaching exercises that most engaged in.

The crisis created fluidity and opened up possibilities for intervention and change. *The Leninist* faction issued 'A call to all communists', an editorial that explained the thinking behind the slogan that was to subsequently appear on the journal's cover — 'The place for all genuine communists is in the Communist Party of Great Britain'. (True, some of the specific revolutionary groups that 'A call...' targeted were a tad obscure — for instance, does anyone know not simply what happened to the John MacLean Collective, but what on earth it was in the first place?)

The intention was clear, however. It was a message to the left that the crisis in the CPGB was not simply the proprietorial concern of its contemporary membership, but of the whole advanced part of the class. It called for the extra-CPGB revolutionary left to "[break] from their sectarianism" through "comradely discussion and debate" with the comrades of *The Leninist* and actually join the party as conscious fighters for revolutionary politics: "The revolutionary sectarian groups emphasise the importance of 'ideological purity' and point to the opportunism in our party today... Merely pointing to a sin does not cure it, and in only doing this they commit the greatest sin for a revolutionary, that is standing aloof from the workers' movement."<sup>13</sup>

That seems to me one of the core lessons to take from Lawrence Parker's excellent book, especially for comrades who may find themselves in today's revolutionary left, members of groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) or the Socialist Party (SP). The demise of the CPGB was greeted positively by many of the revolutionary sects as they held that with the party out of the way, the time had come for their little group. In the 1990s generally, a similarly sanguine view was common: the death of the 'official' world communist movement that the CPGB belonged to equated with the demise of Stalinoid politics — who can forget Peter Taaffe and his truly stupid labelling of the coming decade as the "red '90s". (A gaffe that, in recent years, the comrade has, in good, old-fashioned Stalinist style, taken to airbrushing out of history.)<sup>14</sup>

### **STALINISM REINVENTED**

All profoundly misplaced. Stalinism reinvents itself. Having once performed a limited historical service in dark political times by at least maintaining formal links to the earlier, healthy traditions of Bolshevism, we now see sections of the revolutionary left promoting versions of the degenerate politics they once (quite rightly) blasted the CPGB for. From most, the response to the global economic crisis has been essentially Keynesian, nation-centred 'solutions', in effect a recapitulation of the CPGB's Alternative Economic Strategy. We have had the SWP take Popular Frontism a step beyond Stalinism when it actually formed a pop-front party with the Muslim Association of Britain! And, if anything, most groups have internal regimes more restrictive, more opaque and bureaucratically suffocating than the CPGB of yesteryear.

Time to recycle the front-page headline from the first issue of *The Leninist* as a



newspaper in April 1984; we told the CPGB membership of the time: ‘Comrades rebel!’ We say the same thing today to comrades in the left sects that generally claim some sort of lineage from the Trotskyist tradition. We really could do with a few more rebels these days to shake up our profoundly conservative and passive left. Instead, a degenerate cultural norm has evolved that sees individuals or groups that develop differences with their comrades in a revolutionary organisation — be they serious or relatively trivial — simply leave and, if they do set up another organisational fragment of the left, generally attempt to present themselves as the product of some political immaculate conception, without history, antecedents or ‘baggage’.

At best, this is a frivolous attitude to the workers’ movement. To my mind, it is more like political vandalism. Our call for CPGB members to rebel in 1984 was prompted by a loyal attitude to that important organisation in the movement. Today, when we criticise the politics of the left; when we call on comrades in the SWP, in Workers Power or the SP to overthrow their organisations’ regimes of bureaucratic centralism or we polemicise against this or that light-minded split, it flows from the same, partisan method.

We want the contradictions inherent in the contemporary revolutionary groups to be resolved positively: just as we did in the CPGB of yesteryear. And that means — when it is at all possible — staying in alongside your comrades and fighting to win. As comrade Parker puts it as he surveys the admittedly peripheral, politically flawed, left-oppositional groups in the CPGB, his book “does not treat their struggles as inevitably doomed”.<sup>15</sup>

And quite right too, comrade.

**Mark Fischer, November 2012**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See for example James Klugmann *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain — Volume I: Formation and early years, 1919–1924* London, 1969; *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain — Volume II: The General Strike 1925–1926* London 1969; and Noreen Branson *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927–1941* London, 1985. See also pp12–14 of this book for a review of more recent CPGB histories.

<sup>2</sup> The majority of the left sects that litter the political landscape in today’s Britain claim some sort of lineage from Trotsky, the arch-enemy of Stalinism. Yet, almost without exception, they have internal regimes that are worse. They have more restrictions on members’ rights than the Stalinist CPGB. In recent years, we have seen the Socialist Workers Party create a Legoland-scale popular front in the form of Respect; we have also had the unedifying spectacle of the Socialist Party in England and Wales effectively adapting to national chauvinism via No2EU. In my opinion, we have even had a re-run of the Eurocommunists in the Counterfire split from the SWP. After tragedy and farce, what comes next?

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Wright 'YCL congress' *The Leninist* Number 4, April 1983

<sup>4</sup>See p99 of this book.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid* p90

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid* p98

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid* p11

<sup>8</sup>See Jack Conrad *From October to August* London 1992 pp20, 53–54.

<sup>9</sup>'Open the fight against liquidationism on all fronts' *The Leninist* Number 5, August 1983 — available online, along with all issues of *TL*, at [www.cpgb.org.uk/assets/files/leninistpdf/The%20Leninist%20\(5\).pdf](http://www.cpgb.org.uk/assets/files/leninistpdf/The%20Leninist%20(5).pdf)

<sup>10</sup>Parker quotes Jack Conrad on p101, below: "In our writings up to 1989 on the USSR, there was a lot of similarity between the orthodox Trotskyists and us."

<sup>11</sup>See *Ibid* pp13–14 for a more contemporary view of this misreading.

<sup>12</sup>'Open the fight against liquidationism on all fronts' *op cit*

<sup>13</sup>'A call to all communists' *The Leninist* Number 3, September 1982

<sup>14</sup>See Mark Fischer 'Soviet "planning" and bolt-on democracy' *Weekly Worker*, November 12 2009.

<sup>15</sup>See p11 of this book.

# Introduction

This is a study of the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB's) post-war revolutionary oppositions, from the inner-party rebellion of 1945, the various pro-Chinese factions of the 1960s, the factional struggles of the 1970s, through to *The Leninist* group of the 1980s.

This is the second iteration of an earlier, self-produced, monograph, *The kick inside — revolutionary opposition in the CPGB, 1960–1991* (2007). This is an expanded edition with new chapters on the rebellion inside the CPGB immediately after the Second World War; the run-up to the launch of the *British Road to Socialism* (BRS — originally produced in 1951); and the inner-party opposition of the 1960s and 1970s. In terms of the other chapters, I have added a fuller treatment of the Action Centre for Marxist-Leninist Unity group after coming across a bundle of its *Hammer or Anvil* (which also provided me with a striking cover image). I have made updates and revisions to the separate chapters dealing with Reg Birch and *The Leninist* based on further research. Some of the material presented in 'The trouble with Browder' and 'How Lenin would have squirmed' chapters previously appeared as articles in the *Weekly Worker*, paper of the Communist Party of Great Britain (PCC).<sup>1</sup>

I particularly stress a sense of belonging to the CPGB in that these groups and individuals were an organic product of the 'official' communist movement (the one inspired by the Soviet Union) in Britain. By 'revolutionary' I mean those who opposed the reformist, Labourite and nationalist politics of the BRS. I stress this idea of context because I do not mean 'revolutionary' as some type of metaphysical absolute or as a reading of a set of contemporary principles. Although it will be immediately apparent where the author's sympathies lie, I have severe criticisms of this opposition, some of which are reflected in the text. However, my main criticism of these revolutionaries is simply that they failed.

As well as tracing the historical lineage and context of the CPGB's revolutionary trends, this study sets out a hypothesis as to why the party continually threw up revolutionary militants and ideas in a period in which it had formally ditched a revolutionary programme, and also conveys a reading of why these various trends ultimately failed. In short, while not pretending that the post-war period was in any way comfortable for small groups of revolutionaries inside the ranks of the CPGB, it does not treat their struggles as inevitably doomed or subject them to a bizarre rumour mill.

When I was originally researching this project, most people seemed intrigued but I could also see the 'why?' flitting across their foreheads. Simply put, it is the gaps and omissions in the history of the CPGB that need to be addressed if the subject is to advance beyond its current, largely sentimentalist, *modus operandi*.

Tiny and sometimes ineffective as the oppositions might have been, they are a means to understand the CPGB, precisely through the act of being a living, although flawed, opposite of an opportunist leadership. Even on an empirical level, the treatment of CPGB minorities cannot be laid aside if one wishes to analyse the party's extreme lack of democracy. Worse, by burying the revolutionary opposition, the historian ultimately lines up politically with an undemocratic, opportunist leadership or what were pseudo-oppositions around Sid French, *Straight Left* and the *Morning Star*.

#### SIDE-SWIPES AND SECTARIANISM

I first came across the notion that the CPGB had revolutionary oppositions after the Second World War when I read Willie Thompson's book, *The good old cause*, in the mid-1990s. True, Thompson cannot resist having little side-swipes at various individuals and groupings<sup>2</sup> (a political trait he shares with others of a Eurocommunist bent who are notoriously touchy about criticism of this baleful faction's 'achievements' inside the CPGB)<sup>3</sup> but he does have the residual honesty to remark that the party's deficiencies, as judged by its revolutionary oppositionists, "were to prove a recurrent theme advanced from a variety of angles in subsequent decades".<sup>4</sup> Of course, it cannot be considered that Thompson offers a serious analysis of any of the CPGB's numerous inner-party oppositions but, nevertheless, this was the first place in which I discovered names such as Michael McCreery, Reg Birch and Sid French, enticing locations such as Bexley and exotic-sounding journals such as *Vanguard*, *The Leninist* and even the *Marxist-Leninist Quarterly*.

John Callaghan offers another prejudiced reading, albeit one more clearly signposted by a confused analysis. He argues: "Parliamentary reformism irritated some party members because it exposed the organisation's political weaknesses in ways which the industrial struggle served to conceal. But the critics did not propose a revolutionary alternative. Everyone knew that this was a non-starter in the post-war period."<sup>5</sup> This is sloppy. As we shall see, plenty of oppositionists proposed a supposed 'non-starter' of revolutionary politics, this being a consistent trend inside the post-war CPGB. Worse, Callaghan himself makes some sparse references to these forces.<sup>6</sup> The author appears to have taken a half-truth, namely that factions in the 1960s around Sid French and Fergus Nicholson did not develop a consistent brand of revolutionary politics (i.e. in relation to opposing the *BRS*) and twisted it to suit his own political preconceptions.

In many ways, James Eaden and David Renton are two writers on the CPGB that I have a fair amount of political sympathy with on certain issues of the party's development. However, their work becomes balefully one-eyed when dealing with various revolutionary oppositions.

For example, when picking up on Edward Upward's novel *The rotten elements*, which deals with inner-party oppositionists in the late 1940s, they pick up on a passage from the book, which Edward and Hilda Upward used to "justify their

opposition" to a CPGB that they "only wanted to restore... to its earlier vigour".<sup>7</sup> This section reads: "During the years when they had led the struggle against unemployment and against fascism they had been leaders whom their rank and file could love and be inspired by. Alan [Sebrill — a fictionalised version of Upward], in attacking them as they now were was defending them as they had formerly been, was being loyal to what had been best in them and to what might even yet, as a result perhaps of his and Elsie's and Les Gatten's present efforts, be brought to life in them once more."<sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting that Sebrill, in the passage quoted above, wanted the leaders of the CPGB to return to being leaders of mass struggle, not return to being ponderous bureaucrats. That the Upwards might have had illusions in party leaders' pasts is not a big surprise. If every political movement is ruled out of court on the basis of having illusions in certain leaders, then this can only reinforce a sectarian outlook.

That the Upwards could not immediately elaborate a standpoint in line with the historians' particular world view is not an excuse for a relative dismissal. Nor should it obscure the fact that the Upwards, as the novel and various factional documents of the era make clear, justified themselves not just on the basis of a return to the militancy of the 1930s, but also on the argument that there was no reformist path to socialism through the then Labour government and that Lenin's views on the smashing of the capitalist state still held good. In the context of the CPGB as it was during this period, this cannot be assessed as anything other than militant, revolutionary politics, however much one finds some of the rhetoric and attitudes of those years (which clearly illustrate such factions' origins in the world of 'official' communism) politically distasteful.

This is no accident on the part of Eaden and Renton. When it comes to assessing the impact of the Sino-Soviet split on the CPGB, they make the following remarks: "How closely rank-and-file communists followed the argument is debatable, however the doctrinaire and orthodox defence of essentially Stalinist positions being put forward in statements from Peking did attract a small following in the party."<sup>9</sup> That only a small minority of CPGB members was attracted to a pro-Chinese line is not up for debate, neither is the point that this opposition had some views that could be classed as 'Stalinist' (not least its anti-Trotskyism). However, this opposition also had a strong anti-Stalinist bent in that it developed politics that were opposed to 'Stalinism' (or, to give it a more scientific term considering that this brand of politics outlived Stalin, 'official' communism) as it came to be represented in Britain by the Labour-loyal parliamentary reformism of the *BRS*.

Eaden and Renton are forced to portray revolutionary oppositionists in this manner because they have their own schema for assessing divisions in the CPGB: "One large group remained ultra-loyal to the Soviet Union, the first socialist state. Another group saw a contradiction between the reformism of

the Popular Front era and loyalty to Moscow. These latter communists stressed their loyalty to British traditions and to the broad class alliances of 1935–39.”<sup>10</sup> So, essentially, we are left with a common misreading of the struggle inside the CPGB: ‘tankies versus Euros’. Lurking behind this, of course, is a factional sleight of hand. For Eaden and Renton, the ‘revolutionary party’ is the Socialist Workers Party and its International Socialist forerunners in the post-war era. Ergo, there cannot have been revolutionaries inside the CPGB and the inner-party struggle has to be reduced to an abstract schema. The alternative would have been to join the IS/SWP.

A major object of this present work is to positively overcome these various misconceptions by offering a fuller narrative and critique of the CPGB’s revolutionary oppositions.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See ‘Their finest hour?’ *Weekly Worker* December 9 2010; ‘The trouble with Browder’ *Weekly Worker* December 16 2010

<sup>2</sup> See Willie Thompson *The good old cause: British communism 1920–1991* London 1992. For example, the breakaway of Michael McCreery’s faction “was of small concern to the CP” (p131), while the faction around *The Leninist* in the 1980s is denounced as “a group of political Don Quixotes” (p182).

<sup>3</sup> See Francis Beckett *Enemy within: the rise and fall of the British Communist Party* London 1995 p230

<sup>4</sup> Thompson *op cit* p131

<sup>5</sup> John Callaghan *Cold War, crisis and conflict: the CPGB 1951–68* London 2003 p188

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* pp19–20, pp305–306n

<sup>7</sup> James Eaden and David Renton *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920* Basingstoke 2002 pp109–110

<sup>8</sup> Edward Upward *The rotten elements* London 1979 p118

<sup>9</sup> Eaden and Renton *op cit* p135

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* p100

# The trouble with Browder

The post-war revolutionary opposition inside the CPGB has often been thought of as a fragmented affair until the appearance of various pro-Chinese factions in the early 1960s. *The Encyclopaedia of Anti-Revisionism Online* has erroneously suggested that “the initial, post-World War II anti-revisionist opposition within the Communist Party was muted and individual in character”.<sup>1</sup> In November 1963, one of the leading participants in one of these factions, Michael McCreery, looked back at the struggle of his then comrade Arthur Evans inside the CPGB between 1947 and 1953 with the salutation: “We salute Arthur Evans for his moral courage in battling on during years when he found little response within the working class movement.”<sup>2</sup> The isolation experienced by CPGB oppositionists in the late 1940s and early 1950s that McCreery alludes to was also borne out by CPGB activists such as Edward Upward and Eric Heffer but, critically, this represents a fragmentation and loss of momentum among oppositionists at the end of the 1940s after the defeat of a broad-based opposition immediately after the Second World War. In 1945, a large section of the CPGB’s rank and file was in revolt.

It is often assumed that the Second World War and its aftermath was a high point for the CPGB in terms of membership and influence, despite the lack of a concerted political breakthrough (for example, the CPGB could only muster two MPs in the 1945 general election). However, as became clear at its congress of November 1945, for a section of its membership, ‘swimming with the tide’ in concert with British imperialism during the latter part of the war had been a thoroughly *traumatic* experience, both as activists and as observers of a leadership that had raced to the right. This anger was only compounded as the leadership sought to project the cross-class politics of ‘winning the war’ into ‘winning the peace’.

The politics of the CPGB during the Second World War were subject to a set of bewildering twists and turns, particularly during the early years of the conflict. When war was declared in September 1939, the party initially supported the war in line with the ‘anti-fascist’ politics of the Popular Front, calling for the replacement of the Chamberlain government. However, the Comintern then intervened to enforce a change, in concert with the freshly signed Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, declaring the war to be imperialist and thus unsupportable. The CPGB shifted around to support this policy with a minority of its leadership, general secretary Pollitt, MP William Gallacher and *Daily Worker* editor JR Campbell in opposition. Pollitt and Campbell were removed from their posts.<sup>3</sup> Despite this shift to opposing the war, the CPGB still continued to couch its politics in the cross-class rhetoric of Popular Frontism, campaigning for a ‘people’s peace’ and initiating the (undoubtedly successful) People’s Convention. The invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany in June 1941



saw the party swing behind the war effort once more. Pollitt was restored to the post of general secretary and the CPGB began to campaign for a second front in Europe. The party also instructed its many trade union militants to adhere to and proselytise for a rigid 'no strikes' policy on the shop floor, which, as we shall see, became ever more problematic for the CPGB as the war continued.

Judging by what has been written by the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain (CPB), the largest remnant of the CPGB's factional struggles of the 1980s, the period after June 1941 was a high point in the 'official' party's history: "The Communist Party's impressive campaigning in the factories, localities and labour movement, inspired masses of workers with the conviction that the war could be won, the reactionaries decisively weakened and a Labour government elected to bring about great changes after the war. The party's membership more than doubled during the war; from 20,000 in September 1939 to 45,435 in March 1945. Its clear-sighted leadership and heroic struggles had been a major factor in building the labour movement's strength and advance to the crest of the wave in 1945."<sup>4</sup>

#### REBELS TAKE CENTRE STAGE

So the CPGB was apparently at the very crest of this glorious patriotic wave. We will deal with some of the omissions and misleading statements in this 'analysis' below, but it would no doubt have been seriously bizarre news to a section of the party's membership who, before and during the congress of November 1945, were in angry rebellion against the leadership and, testimony to the pressure being felt by the likes of Pollitt, were accorded a considerable platform in the open publications of the party to make their case. Many branches also submitted resolutions that were critical of the leadership.<sup>5</sup> As Pollitt put it to the congress: "We deliberately kept out of [CPGB weekly] *World News and Views* for six weeks any contributions by Executive Committee members, because we did not want to give any appearance of attempting to damp down the discussion, or, to use that much abused word in our party circles, 'give comrades a bashing'."<sup>6</sup> To those comrades who had argued bitterly against Pollitt and company, the CPB idea of "clear-sighted leadership" would have been absolutely laughable.

It is true, as the CPB argues, that the CPGB's membership more than doubled during wartime. But this masks a deeper problem. In 1939 the organisation had 17,756 members; by December 1941 it had 22,738; at the end of 1942 it claimed 56,000; but by March 1945 this had fallen to 45,435.<sup>7</sup> So, the overall growth masks a slump of 10,000 or so. But there was also a broader cultural issue at stake. Thompson argues the CPGB had a "problem in that its swift growth had outrun its organisational ability to absorb its new members and integrate them into the party's culture and practices".<sup>8</sup> Croucher records a lack of activity in CPGB factory groups, generally characterised by a rapid turnover and only a small minority of party members being active.<sup>9</sup> Harry McShane argues of Glasgow during the Second World War: "A lot of new members were



recruited, but they had no education in Marxism and the whole character of the party changed. For the first time we had a predominantly paper membership. Hundreds of people filled in membership forms during the huge second front meetings... but only about a third of them ever turned up to branch meetings.”<sup>10</sup>

These retrospective judgements are borne out in more forceful language by activists in the run-up to the 1945 congress. James Wilson, also a CPGB member in Glasgow, argued: “In the past we in our party have tended to take into our ranks every Tom, Dick and Harry, Mary, Jane and Flo, who had been coaxed, cajoled or forced into signing a membership form. The result has been that our most militant and active comrades have been forced into a position of working inwards on party work, trying to get members to pay dues, come to meetings... that they have almost forgotten how to work outwards and get real contact with the masses...”<sup>11</sup> RB Burrows stated that in many branches “activity depends on a handful of comrades”.<sup>12</sup>

There was a clear understanding that recruiting in such a low-level fashion had not just shifted the character of the party and created a huge paper membership that acted as a dead weight upon party militants, but was something that had impacted directly on the political deterioration of the CPGB. A member listed as ‘Sgt Brown, RAF’ noted the “apparently low degree of political understanding of so many of our members”, adding “I have read letters from comrades at home and have been horrified at their political backwardness”.<sup>13</sup> A number of correspondents noted lapses in party education during this period. JAS Robinson of Bury branch said: “Experience inside local branches shows [a] need for instruction in Marxist-Leninist theory to be our most urgent need. Tailism, too, is a danger that can arise as the result of a membership that is not able to critically analyse day-to-day events and the lines given by party leaders.”<sup>14</sup> A number of branch resolutions for the 1945 congress took up the issue of education, sometimes directly linking it to the issue of political decay and bureaucratic tendencies. Wimbledon branch called “for a big drive to increase the knowledge and understanding of Marxism among party members and the labour movement more generally”.<sup>15</sup> A Westminster City Aggregate (London) recognised “the new problems created by the growth of a mass Communist Party”, a “considerable gap” between the training given to new members and leading members, and called for “more schools and classes for developing cadres”.<sup>16</sup> West Bromwich branch proposed: “This congress feels that more intensive education is required to combat certain confusion amongst certain sections of the party.”<sup>17</sup> Aston (Birmingham) branch pointed to a tendency “for the rank-and-file membership automatically to accept the directives given from a leadership which, however capable, is nevertheless not infallible”. The branch called for the building of a membership that was “capable of independent reasoning”.<sup>18</sup>

Bob McIlhone, Glasgow secretary and a member of the CPGB’s Scottish Committee, linked this problem of dilution directly to the opportunism

engulfing all levels of the organisation. He argued for the party “to become more compact, more united as an active campaigning force and this can only be done to the degree that we develop our fight for the principles of Marx and Lenin and take the extra-ordinary measures that are called for to raise the *political level of the whole party*”.<sup>19</sup> This isn’t directly spelt out by McIlhone, but this dead weight of unsophisticated paper members was a contributing factor in the leadership’s gallop to the right during the Second World War.

Harry Pollitt, replying to discussion at the congress, dismissed these criticisms outright, and, in doing so, implied the leadership’s practical reliance on the dilution of its militant old guard to support its rightist political objectives. “The party wants to be a narrow party, it wants to be a party of exclusive Marxists. It resents hundreds and thousands of new members coming into the party. Yes, I apply this test to all of you. It is not how many members the other fellow makes for the party: it is how many members you personally are making, all of us here. It is the welcome we extend to the comrades when they are in our ranks.”<sup>20</sup>

#### CENTRAL POINTS

Of course, the impact of this dead weight could only but exacerbate the CPGB’s bureaucratic centralism. Bessie Leith of Marylebone (London) branch wrote: “The branch [feels] that we still have not overcome the tendency to bureaucracy which [it] attempted to bring out at the last London district congress, which expresses itself in instructions to branches (thus stifling the political life of the branches) instead of giving leadership and inspiration.”<sup>21</sup> W Zak, also from London, wrote: “Of democratic centralism practically everything has been liquidated, to leave us with the stifling and stultifying so-called democracy of social-democracy, in which the leadership is practically immutable and the membership expected to do as they are told.”<sup>22</sup> A Lambeth Borough Aggregate resolution proposed: “That this national congress recognises that there has taken place in recent years a certain decay of inner-party democracy. This has been caused: (1) By the fact that rapid changes in the situation have required action by the centre without there being time for consultation of the rank and file. (2) By the fact that many of our old and tried comrades have been lost into the army. This has meant, firstly, that there have been fewer people in the groups capable of criticising the party line as decided upon by the centre or district and, secondly, that positions of leadership have been filled with comrades less experienced in leadership and therefore more prone to bureaucracy.” The resolution saw this decay as a “trend” and not “permanent” but argued that the “complete recovery of party democracy will not, however, be automatic”.<sup>23</sup>

Pollitt replied to these critics at the congress thus: “Something has been said here, both in the contributions and the amendments, about more democratic methods of procedure. Due note will be taken of that fact; but this congress is being publicly reported, and I state the claim right now that the Communist Party is the most democratically run political organisation in the world.”<sup>24</sup> This, of course, must have been tremendously comforting for all concerned.

As noted above, the CPGB shifted around to supporting the war in June 1941, arguing that the best means of defending the Soviet Union was a vigorous prosecution of the war. This did not make the party's policies completely supine (it distrusted the anti-fascist credentials of Britain's industrialists and pushed for the democratic integration of the workers into the production processes through Joint Production Committees) but nevertheless posed particular problems for CPGB militants: "The new industrial policy had implications which could put communists and fellow-travellers in novel and occasionally difficult positions. Arguing in favour of intensified work, enlisting the help of the foreman in the production drive, working against strikes and so on was not always popular on the shop floor when local grievances had accumulated to the point where workers contemplated a stoppage. Stakhanovism did not export well to the British shop floor. Nor, indeed, was the communist accustomed to playing such a role."<sup>25</sup>

Croucher records a number of episodes in the engineering sector where CPGB union activists, well embedded in the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), were given a tough time over their attitude to stoppages, despite the fact that the notion of the Second World War as an 'anti-fascist' war dovetailed with the ideas of most advanced workers. For example, during the dispute at the Vickers shipyard in Barrow, autumn 1943, the party had two of its members expelled from the strike committee for trying to make the strike a political issue (of course, in hindsight, it could be argued that the CPGB was perfectly principled in introducing 'political' argument into a dispute, the problem was the toxic nature of those politics). George Crane, CPGB national organiser for the AEU, claimed he was only given three minutes to speak to the strike committee in September 1943, and that participants threatened to throw him down the stairs.<sup>26</sup> After the dispute, the Barrow shop stewards produced a leaflet entitled 'Facts v filth' that ended: "Fellow members — where *are* we going?... if we allow the present lack-a-daisical methods of our EC to continue, of *whom* is our EC the servants? *Ours* if we fight and deserve it, the Communist's Party [sic] if we do not."<sup>27</sup>

In an earlier conflict, the Total Time strike on Tyneside in October 1942, the CPGB had also faced difficulties, which were compounded by the party's leadership not being content with its members merely arguing against the strike. The *Daily Worker* denounced the strike and party shop stewards who had scabbed on it had lost their cards.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the CPGB leadership had some internal issues with its activists and Pollitt was despatched to stiffen their resolve. Malcolm MacEwen, then local organiser on Tyneside, records the impact of the party's intervention: "Our members spoke and voted against the strikes... but we would have advised them to come out with the strikers if they lost the vote had Harry Pollitt not come up and instructed them to go to work. I did not quarrel with his decision but it was an emotional not a political one. The party shop stewards who worked through the strike were isolated and instantly deprived of their positions, yet the workers would have been willing to listen to

them had they not blacklegged... Few of the party stewards were reinstated after the strike and the party never regained the influence it had previously exercised on the Tyne.”<sup>29</sup> Pollitt, on the other hand, applauded those who had scabbed, claiming it required a “sacred spirit of real class consciousness” from those CPGB members who had carried on with their job.<sup>30</sup>

For a party that set so much store by organising at the point of production and had recruited thousands of militants throughout the 1930s on that basis, often to the exclusion of more ‘political’ CPGB work, this was obviously a traumatic time and it seems that many CPGB militants turned a deaf ear to King Street’s extreme anti-strike rhetoric. In relation to the party’s engineers, Croucher writes: “... the CP shop stewards do not always appear to have put political priorities before industrial grievances. The prolonged go-slow conducted by a north-western aircraft factory after a ‘production week’, the threatened district-wide stoppages in Coventry and Manchester in 1943, the collections held through the Clyde factories in support of both the women and apprentice strikers of 1943–4 — all these instances prompt us to ask whether the CP shop stewards disassociated themselves from these actions. Given the communist pre-eminence in the areas concerned, such instances seem to point inevitably to only one possible answer. Many CP stewards, it would appear, preferred not to lose their steward’s cards as some of their comrades had done and, faced with the uncomfortable choice between their political and industrial loyalties, adopted positions of varying degrees of ambiguity.”<sup>31</sup>

Presumably, such activists had reacted with relief when the Second World War ended. They might have swallowed ditching strikes in the cause of saving the socialist motherland but now, surely, was the time for ‘business as usual’? As it turned out, the CPGB leadership had roughly the same attitude to Clement Attlee’s government as it had had to Winston Churchill’s, replete with the same ‘produce or perish’ attitude to peace on the industrial front (this tailing of the new Labour government was criticised by many in the CPGB — see below). Clearly, the experience of ‘swimming with the tide’ had been an intoxicating one (in the negative sense) for the CPGB’s leadership. As Pollitt put it to the November 1945 congress: “Are we never going to learn? I have been in too many campaigns which had as their main motive *against*, and not sufficient with the main motive *for*, and comrades, especially the younger comrades, in this congress would be well advised to assimilate that experience too.”<sup>32</sup>

The leadership faced a number of critical resolutions on the subject of strikes at the congress. A Woolwich Borough Aggregate urged “a positive policy relating our leadership to strikes”<sup>33</sup> while Aylesbury branch proposed: “That this congress is of the opinion that it may be necessary to support strike action in existing circumstances, and that the whole question of our attitude to strikes should be reviewed through the party.”<sup>34</sup> In relation to the 1945 dock workers’ strike, which the CPGB had condemned in line with its support for the Labour government, Banstead branch proposed: “That this congress supports the fight

of the dock workers to improve their wages and conditions. It deplores the lack of action taken by the party and the lack of support given by the *Daily Worker* to this fight.”<sup>35</sup> Epsom branch was critical of “the recent failure of the party to give a clear lead in the dock dispute...”<sup>36</sup>

### DOCKSIDE DIFFICULTIES

This issue had clearly been debated from the floor of congress and Pollitt had attempted to face down these critics. He criticised those “who so light-heartedly talk about strikes” as presenting a threat to the idea of “winning the peace”. On the issue of the dock workers’ strike, Pollitt made it crystal clear that the CPGB was continuing the industrial practices it had elaborated after June 1941 and that the militants caught in the crossfire between the party line and their fellow workers had to carry on taking the flak. “On the dock strike, I took the view that if our party had been compelled to stick its head out in difficult situations in the war and compel our comrades to be stigmatised as strike-breakers, we are not called upon to repeat that in the days of peace, but we would examine every dispute on its merits. The *Daily Worker* reported the facts. It is true we gave no lead for 10 days, but that is no crime, because we considered that strike ill-advised... If some of our comrades were in difficulties on the docksides, well communists are always in difficulties and we have to be prepared to face them and to stand up against them.”<sup>37</sup>

Another controversial step taken by the CPGB’s leadership (and one that it came to deeply regret) was the dissolution of its factory branches and their replacement with factory committees, while industrial members were redistributed among residential branches, partly as a means of coping with mass redundancies at the end of the Second World War.<sup>38</sup>

The loss of these assets caused some dissent among party members. In the run-up to the November 1945 Congress, Bessie Leith of Marylebone (London) wrote on behalf of her branch: “The present form of organisation on a residential basis has not provided the party with the closest possible links with the people. The abandoning of factory groups has not strengthened the party amongst the industrial workers. The social composition of the party is unsatisfactory when a large proportion of the members are non-trade unionists.”<sup>39</sup> W Zak wrote of the decision on factory branches that “the communist basis of organisation had... been liquidated and replaced by the social-democratic basis of area electoral branch organisation”.<sup>40</sup>

These criticisms need to be handled with some care. First, while it was quite correct for the CPGB to build and maintain factory branches up to 1945, and mistaken to dissolve them, the workplace is not the special repository of communist consciousness that the comrades above appear to be suggesting. In fact, the increasing tendency throughout the 1930s and beyond was for CPGB trade union militants to practically and ideologically become the carriers of bourgeois trade unionism i.e. defending and extending organisations whose

primary aim was the regulation of labour power under capitalism.<sup>41</sup> The CPGB leadership's action in dissolving factory branches certainly heightened this developmental train. Ultimately, the party's trade unionists, in general, became another source of its growing opportunism in the post-war period and it was generally among residential branches that healthier oppositional elements were found (in admittedly tiny numbers).<sup>42</sup> Also, the theory behind factory branches was always somewhat brighter than the reality. Croucher considers evidence during the Second World War that the CPGB's engineering factory groups were often semi-active and suffered rapid turnovers in membership, with the majority of work falling on the shoulders of a few individuals.<sup>43</sup>

#### WAITING ON A FRIEND

One issue aired above was that of 'tailism'. Contributions to the congress debate placed this error in the light of the CPGB's passive attitude to the 1945 Labour government and its reactionary foreign policy.<sup>44</sup> FM (Frank) Roy of Welwyn Garden City wrote: "Regarding the attitude of the party towards the Labour government, I feel we have been failing to give real leadership... How is it that [Ernest] Bevin [Labour foreign secretary] is getting away with a policy that is 100 per cent reactionary?"<sup>45</sup> Bob Liddell of Leith branch said of the CPGB "that after the thing happens, we start roaring and trying to do something, once again trailing behind instead of leading". He added: "This 'watch-dog' attitude is not one that befits a Marxist party, and not one that will arouse and inspire our members to build a mass party so essential in the bringing about of a socialist Britain."<sup>46</sup> Bob McIlhone wrote: "... both general support for a Labour government and the fight for unity must be conducted in a revolutionary manner not an opportunist manner." He added: "It is necessary to raise this most sharply, because this failure to criticise Bevin in an objective fashion is also reflected in the most dangerous tendency to minimise the real differences which exist between social democracy and the position of the Communist Party."<sup>47</sup>

There was a whole slew of branch resolutions to the 1945 congress that were critical of the CPGB's attitude to the Labour government, alongside, in some, a generally supportive tone in regard to progressive measures being undertaken by that administration. A Paddington Borough Aggregate was "of the opinion that the Communist Party should take a vigorous lead in exposing the weaknesses of the Labour government. At the same time we should in no way slacken in our support of the Labour government and should make every effort to assist the government in carrying through progressive legislation".<sup>48</sup> Cheltenham branch was "concerned at the lack of clarity as to the role of the party in the period ahead, particularly in relation to the Labour government... we feel there is a tendency to tail behind the workers and the Labour government, a tendency to await developments".<sup>49</sup> Salisbury branch said: "The party will neither further the unity of the working class, strengthen the Labour government, nor further the cause of socialism, by allowing the name, prestige, members and policy of the party to become subservient to the immediate tactical interests of any one sect or section of the Labour movement."<sup>50</sup>



The CPGB's inability to tackle the imperialist foreign policy of the Labour government was also addressed in a number of resolutions. Wimbledon branch proposed: "Congress declares the need for the party to adopt a more constructively critical position on the foreign policy of the Labour government, so as to strengthen democratic forces all over the world."<sup>51</sup> Chippenham branch proposed: "This congress condemns the foreign policy of the Labour government, and is of the opinion that the Communist Party should take a strong line in its indictment and agitate for a policy to break up reactionary designs for a Western Bloc and the suppression of democracy in Europe and the East."<sup>52</sup> There were many other resolutions confronting the need to condemn and fight against the Labour government's foreign policy.<sup>53</sup>

The thrust of general secretary Harry Pollitt's reply to the many critics was that the CPGB was simply not big enough to force any of these issues: "Nobody would be happier than I if I thought the influence of this party was as great as McIlhone makes it out to be. But I refuse to deduce wrong policies as a result of a wrong estimation of the forces going to carry the policies through."<sup>54</sup> Pollitt, blithely ignoring the issue of 'tailism', commented that the British working class was not disillusioned with the Labour government, thus implying the CPGB's supine attitude was correct. "Look at the by-elections taking place. Are they revealing a disillusionment with the Labour government on home and foreign policy? Of course they are not. The political instinct of the masses is too sound."<sup>55</sup> And, in a judgement that history has unfortunately stamped on in relation to the 1945 Labour government, Pollitt said: "Everything is not black in the realm of foreign affairs, despite what Bevin is attempting to do, because there are bigger things in England and other countries than Ernest Bevin."<sup>56</sup>

Of course, there is a certain irony around the likes of Pollitt becoming such loyal sergeants of the Labour Party. The *Morning Star's* CPB writes: "The Communist Party's impressive campaigning in the factories, localities and labour movement, inspired masses of workers with the conviction that the war could be won, the reactionaries decisively weakened and a Labour government elected to bring about great changes after the war."<sup>57</sup> In fact, the Executive Committee had, to the consternation of many of the CPGB's rank and file, in March 1945 called for a continuation of the wartime coalition into peacetime, not for a Labour government. In the middle of a huge upswing of support for Labour, one critic, G Clark, talked of the "energy that was spent persuading many sceptical branches of the need for a post-election national coalition" and that when "it was realised that this was incorrect, one had an odd sensation of being led to the left by the Labour Party".<sup>58</sup> Opposition was also heard in branch resolutions. Portsmouth proposed: "That this congress considers that the results of the [1945] general election showed that our party under-estimated the deep political change among the people."<sup>59</sup> Hyde Park branch (London) proposed: "That this congress views with grave concern the mistake in policy of the EC on the question of including Conservatives in a Labour government. It asks that in future greater care be given to the consideration of such important questions

of policy. It also strongly disapproves of the undemocratic manner in which branches were stampeded into hasty acceptance of this policy.”<sup>60</sup> Cambridge branch said that the “party has not cleared up its attitude to the question of national unity after the war and the role of the so-called progressive Tories”.<sup>61</sup>

Given that Pollitt was now posing as someone very much ‘for’ the Labour government, it is perhaps unsurprising that this error on the CPGB’s part was conceded, being related to “the point legitimately made about ears being closer to the ground”. He added: “I believe we failed to grasp this fact: that in the course of this war... the working class, the professional and middle classes... were thinking, in our lifetime capitalism has only brought us poverty and unemployment, and now it has brought us this war. And on the other hand, they were thinking also of the miracles being performed by a socialist country through its Red Army... That was what caused a basic political mental change in the outlook of millions and led them to take that historical initiative of which we had not taken due cognisance.”<sup>62</sup>

Some of the members who were opposing the leadership’s initial take on continuing the wartime coalition broadened out their criticisms to take on the theoretical reasons why this had happened. Merlyn Morgan of Abertillery wrote that the CPGB’s errors over the ‘national unity’ issue i.e. the reliance on progressive Tories and the under-estimation of the contradictions of capitalism, “were not accidental, nor merely tactical; they sprang from what I can only describe as opportunism”.<sup>63</sup> Others were quick to locate the root of this opportunism in the diplomatic shifts of the Second World War. The Yalta conference (sometimes referred to as the Crimea conference) of the Allied side of February 1945 produced a communiqué that Pollitt, speaking to the CPGB’s EC, hailed in the following terms: “Here you have got a categorical statement... a formulation hitherto only found in Marxist literature... in which the greatest perspective ever given to world humanity stands before you — the abolition of the causes of the war.”<sup>64</sup>

It was this idealistic drivel that the CPGB warmed over for its proposal that the war-time coalition should be continued into peacetime and that the labour movement could rely on the ‘progressive’ wing of the capitalist class. The Soviet Union was at this stage looking to maintain its cordial relations with Britain and the US as long as possible after the end of the Second World War so as to maximise its national and strategic advantages. The CPGB’s ‘error’ over ‘national unity’ was cut from the same cloth (however, none of the leadership’s critics openly pinned their critique on the Soviet Union). Bessie Leith, writing for Marylebone branch (London), said: “There has been a tendency to over-simplification in analysing the social forces both in Britain and internationally, which led to too much reliance on the progressive role of the ‘far-sighted elements of the capitalist class’.”<sup>65</sup> Bob McIlhone said: “... Crimea did not mean, as was plainly stated in communist literature, a historic reconciliation between the capitalist world and the socialist world.”<sup>66</sup> In an earlier contribution,



criticising a CPGB educational document that suggested collaboration with the capitalist class provided excellent conditions for an advance to socialism, McIlhone argued: "This is not a new 'theory' of the working class advance to socialism. It is the old reformist idea dressed up in some new words. What has become of the working class, the only consistently revolutionary class, the only class capable of rallying round itself all the progressive democratic forces against the imperialists, against monopoly capitalism, which has no wish to co-operate with socialism, but only to destroy socialism and its distributing influences in the capitalist countries?"<sup>67</sup>

### 'NOTORIOUS REVISION OF MARXISM'

The CPGB's leadership encountered particularly bitter resistance from oppositionists about its perceived lackadaisical attitude to general secretary Earl Browder's liquidation of the Communist Party USA in 1944 in favour of the looser Communist Political Association, a move based on Browder's expectation (thoroughly in line with that of Pollitt) that the wartime coalition with 'progressive' capitalists would usher in an extended period of social peace and prosperity. Despite the roots of such naive politics in Popular Frontism, this was jumping the gun somewhat. The leadership of the 'official' communist movement, while it might have been prepared to liquidate the empty shell of the Comintern in 1943, was not yet prepared to cash in its bargaining chips in the form of various national communist organisations, some of whom were millions strong (an astute move with the Cold War in the offing). Thus, Jacques Duclos of the French Communist Party was entrusted with the literary task of stamping on this trend before it had a chance to fully gestate in April 1945. Duclos argued: "Despite declarations regarding recognition of the principles of Marxism, one is witnessing a notorious revision of Marxism on the part of Browder and his supporters, a revision which is expressed in the concept of a long-term class peace in the United States, of the possibility of the suppression of the class struggle in the post-war period and of establishment of harmony between labour and capital."<sup>68</sup> This was clearly emboldening for critics of such politics inside the CPGB.

S Beechey (London) claimed that there had originally been an "acceptance without question of the rightness of Browder's policy in the USA. Nowhere, except from isolated comrades of the rank and file, was there any doubt expressed..."<sup>69</sup> J Sutherland said: "When Browder was leading the American [sic] Party astray, what was our attitude? We were for some time left without a lead (even without a report) until finally the *Daily Worker* printed an article defending and explaining Browder's line as being correct — at least in American [sic] conditions. In view of this, it is not perhaps so surprising that tendencies of liquidationism also found some expression in the [CPGB]."<sup>70</sup> And this is where the opposition sought to push home its advantage: by pointing to similarities in political outlook. Bob McIlhone argued: "Both Pollitt and Browder produced variations on the same theme: the progressive character of the capitalists who signed or supported Tehran and Crimea both at that time and in the period

ahead.”<sup>71</sup> He added: “It can no longer be denied that Browder’s dissolution of the American Communist Party [sic] has been reflected in Britain by these serious retreats from the basic positions of a Leninist party. Thus the tendencies for the party to lose its separate identity, to become little more than a ginger group in the labour movement.”<sup>72</sup>

A number of branch resolutions took up what they saw as the CPGB leadership’s tardiness in dealing with the Browder issue. Wimbledon branch proposed: “This congress regrets the failure of the Executive Committee to give clear and correct political leadership to the party on the serious political errors that led temporarily to the liquidation of the American Communist Party [sic]... ”<sup>73</sup> Cambridge branch proposed: “This national congress cannot accept the Executive Committee’s explanation of its attitude to Browderism... when it first appeared... If [the CPGB] saw the nature of the Browder tendency from the beginning (we do not recall any hints that we did see this) by failing to draw the attention of our American [sic] comrades to our views, our party must now bear some of the responsibilities for this mistake.”<sup>74</sup>

Pollitt was not convincing in his reply to critics at the congress. He boldly asserted, despite the facts to the contrary, that the US “comrades were in profound disagreement with the policy of our party”, claiming that a book by Browder had been refused publication in Britain by the CPGB. In dealing with the tardiness of the CPGB’s response, Pollitt implied that his party did not have enough authority in the ‘official’ communist movement: “... it may well be that the party with a million members [i.e. the French Communist Party] will have its views listened to with more respect than a party of 50,000.” Unfortunately, Pollitt did rather let the cat out of the bag with his final riposte on this issue: “And finally, to those of you who are so worried about this problem, I must draw your attention to the fact that I have not yet seen any criticism of the Browder policy in any of the theoretical organs of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union — not an unimportant party of the world!”<sup>75</sup> This would imply that Browder’s policy, and by implication that of Pollitt, who had unquestionably drank from the same poisoned well, were still acceptable, despite the Duclos article, which the CPGB had formally accepted.

### CONTROLLED DEFEAT

None of the opposition resolutions were successful at the congress. A document issued by the CPGB’s propaganda department was able to boast: “A number of composite amendments, expressing [oppositional] views were put to the vote and decisively defeated.”<sup>76</sup> This is hardly surprising, given that the congress (and thus those who attended it) was a controlled affair. This time, however, the leadership thought it prudent to allow a frank debate to act as a safety valve (the chimera of ‘winning the congress’ was largely touted by later half-hearted oppositionists from the 1960s onwards). Judging by the fact that the opposition of autumn 1945 appeared to dissipate over the next couple of years, this tactic appears to have paid off.

Looking back on the arguments voiced against the CPGB leadership in 1945, no one had been directly critical of cross-class popular frontism, the international politics of the Soviet Union and the wartime alliance with British imperialism. All of the *consequences* of these factors were thoroughly debunked but the root source of the CPGB's opportunist errors in this period went unchallenged and apparently *unnoticed*. It is crystal clear that Browderism and its British version under Pollitt was essentially the politics of the Popular Front as practised in alliance with British and US imperialism during the Second World War, elaborated into a berserk opportunist strategy for 'winning the peace' (albeit a strategy that a more savvy Soviet leadership wasn't prepared to fully commit to).

However, there were strong factors militating against this line of reasoning. Most oppositional figures of this period mistakenly believed in the revolutionary credentials of Stalin and the Soviet Union as against the practice of the CPGB. Eric Heffer said: "Looking back on our challenge to the CP, we were completely blind to the realities of Stalin and the Soviet Union. We thought that if only Stalin knew what was going on in the British CP he would be on our side. It was seriously suggested at one point that we should send someone over to tell him about our situation."<sup>77</sup> This naive standpoint, that the opportunism of the CPGB was somehow out of step with the leadership of the Communist Party Soviet Union (CPSU), hobbled pro-Soviet oppositionists down the years, particularly when, in 1964, John Gollan, Pollitt's successor as general secretary, unveiled Stalin's role in the drafting of the original *BRS*.<sup>78</sup>

Nevertheless, even as presented in this crippled political fashion, this opposition was clearly grappling with the imposition of 'socialism in one country', albeit around 20 years too late and without coming remotely close to assessing the role of the Soviet Union.<sup>79</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising given that the 'collaborationist' experience of the CPGB during the Second World War represents an extreme form of the distorted politics that would be expected of a diplomatic bargaining chip. As we shall see, this sense of an 'opposition in slow motion' was one that would infect the CPGB's oppositionists at a number of levels.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.postww2/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Michael McCreery 'Introduction' in AH Evans *Truth will out — against modern revisionism* <http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.postww2/truthwillout/introduction.htm>

<sup>3</sup> The CPGB's leadership subsequently found this phase to be highly embarrassing. A resolution from Cambridge branch to the November 1945 congress proposed: "... we feel that there is need for some discussion and analysis of the party's attitude to the war in the period between the fall of France and the entry of the Soviet Union into the war. Statements are constantly appearing in party publications which seem to imply that the party supported the war

against Germany during that period. The latest example of this has been in the letter on the 25<sup>th</sup> birthday of the party. We believe that this is a form of political dishonesty which will only confuse our members and ultimately harm the party. If our attitude in this period was wrong the party must face the issue squarely even at this late hour." Branch resolutions, CPGB archive CP/CENT/CONG/05/01

<sup>4</sup> [http://communist-party.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=263:1936-qthey-shall-not-passq&catid=13:short-history-of-the-communist-party-&Itemid=26](http://communist-party.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=263:1936-qthey-shall-not-passq&catid=13:short-history-of-the-communist-party-&Itemid=26). This statement has been used, not because it is particularly exemplary or well argued, but rather because it is a thoroughly standard 'official' communist summary of the CPGB and the Second World War.

<sup>5</sup> If not referred to in the body text, I have made a note of these resolutions in the footnotes.

<sup>6</sup> 'Reply to discussion by Harry Pollitt' CP/CENT/CONG/05/02

<sup>7</sup> Thompson *op cit* p218 and Richard Croucher *Engineers at war 1939–1945* London 1982 p320

<sup>8</sup> Thompson *op cit* p73

<sup>9</sup> Croucher *op cit* pp320–322

<sup>10</sup> Harry McShane *No mean fighter* London 1978 p235

<sup>11</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 44, November 10 1945

<sup>12</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 38, September 29 1945

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 45, November 17 1945

<sup>15</sup> Branch resolutions *op cit*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>19</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 44, November 10 1945 — original emphasis unless stated. Harry McShane offers a somewhat jaundiced view of McIlhone, stating that: "He was a bureaucrat, but completely devoted to the Communist Party." On another occasion, McShane says: "I respected McIlhone because he had always made great personal sacrifices for the party, but he was also very bitter against anyone else who didn't hold the same views as he did." McShane *op cit* p237 and p248

<sup>20</sup> 'Reply to discussion by Harry Pollitt' *op cit*

<sup>21</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 41, October 20 1945

<sup>22</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 45, November 17 1945. Grumbles about the lack of democracy inside the CPGB were not restricted to the rank and file. For the complaint of Idris Cox, CPGB EC member from South Wales, see Kevin Morgan *Harry Pollitt* Manchester 1993 p144.

<sup>23</sup> Branch resolutions *op cit*

<sup>24</sup> 'Reply to discussion by Harry Pollitt' *op cit*

<sup>25</sup> Croucher *op cit* p143

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* p221

<sup>27</sup> Cited in *ibid* p226

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* p186

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Morgan *op cit* p137

<sup>30</sup> Cited in *ibid* p136

<sup>31</sup> Croucher *op cit* p372

<sup>32</sup> 'Reply to discussion by Harry Pollitt' *op cit*

<sup>33</sup> Branch resolutions *op cit*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*. It should also be noted that there were resolutions from Carshalton branch stating that the CPGB should "exercise great caution regarding strikes", while Ardwick branch called for the government to "speed up" negotiating machinery to reduce strikes and strengthen the trade unions.

<sup>37</sup> 'Reply to discussion by Harry Pollitt' *op cit*

<sup>38</sup> Pollitt told a meeting of the CPGB EC in 1953: "We have paid a heavy price for the tendencies towards liquidation of factory organisation which we tolerated after the end of the war." Cited in Croucher *op cit* pp360–361n.

<sup>39</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 41, October 20 1945

<sup>40</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 45, November 17 1945

<sup>41</sup> See my review of Nina Fishman's *Arthur Horner: a political biography* (2010) — 'Coal and Clausewitz' *Weekly Worker* August 5 2010

<sup>42</sup> What was left of the CPGB's trade union wing produced the reformist and nationalist 'opposition' around the *Morning Star* in the 1980s, a fraction of which formed today's Communist Party of Britain.

<sup>43</sup> Croucher *op cit* pp320–322

<sup>44</sup> In October 1944 Labour had supported intervention against the Greek communist resistance and the new government was committed to the retention of Britain's imperial power, which meant that it encountered resistance from sections of the parliamentary Labour Party and the trade unions.

<sup>45</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 45, November 17 1945

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>47</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 44, November 10 1945

<sup>48</sup> Branch resolutions *op cit*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*. These included resolutions were from the following branches: Aston, Banstead, Billingham, Blackburn, Bristol Central, Carlisle, Lincoln, Roydon and Uxbridge. Bill Rust, *Daily Worker* editor, sided with these critics at the congress, calling for Bevin's removal from office, possibly because of his rivalry with Pollitt. See Morgan *op cit* pp148–151.

<sup>54</sup> 'Reply to discussion by Harry Pollitt' *op cit*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>57</sup> [http://communist-party.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=263:1936-qthey-shall-not-passq&catid=13:short-history-of-the](http://communist-party.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=263:1936-qthey-shall-not-passq&catid=13:short-history-of-the)

communist-party-&Itemid=26

<sup>58</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 42, October 27 1945

<sup>59</sup> Branch resolutions *op cit*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>62</sup> ‘Reply to discussion by Harry Pollitt’ *op cit*

<sup>63</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 44, November 10 1945

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Morgan *op cit* p140

<sup>65</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 41, October 20 1945

<sup>66</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 44, November 10 1945

<sup>67</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 43, November 3 1945

<sup>68</sup> Jacques Duclos *On the dissolution of the Communist Party of the United States* <http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/cpusa/1945/04/0400-duclos-on-dissolution.pdf>. The Communist Party USA was re-established in 1945 under the leadership of William Z Foster.

<sup>69</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 43, November 3 1945

<sup>70</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 25 Number 44, November 10 1945

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>73</sup> Branch resolutions *op cit*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>75</sup> ‘Reply to discussion by Harry Pollitt’ *op cit*

<sup>76</sup> CPGB propaganda department *The 18<sup>th</sup> national congress: guide for reporting back* CP/CENT/CONG/05/02

<sup>77</sup> Eric Heffer *Never a yes man: the life and politics of an adopted Liverpudlian* London 1991 p38. See Upward *op cit* p183 for similar illusions in Stalin.

<sup>78</sup> See the correspondence and minutes of meetings between Stalin and Harry Pollitt presented in *Revolutionary Democracy* Volume 13 Number 2, September 2007 pp174–198. Stalin’s involvement had also been remarked upon by John Gollan: “... the CPSU showed considerable interest in what we were thinking when we were drafting the *BRS*. The main ideas advanced in the programme, particularly that of the possibility of peaceful transition in Britain, were discussed in detail in conversation Harry Pollitt had with Stalin at the time, who approved fully of our approach... Following the adoption of the programme by our Executive Committee in January 1951, it was published in full in *Pravda*, again with Stalin’s approval” — John Gollan *Which road?* (1964) cited in ‘Some thoughts on the *British Road to Socialism*’ *The Leninist* Number 4, April 1983 p20

<sup>79</sup> There are a couple of half-glimpses of inner-CPGB opposition on such matters in the 1930s. Palme Dutt told a CPGB Central Committee meeting in 1939: “The [opening of the Second World War] has shown dangerous tendencies in the party... We know anti-international tendencies, contemptuous attitudes to the International, anti-Soviet tendencies... from the time of the [Moscow] Trials, talk of collapse of the International, talk of the Soviet Union following its interests and the like...” — cited in Andrew Murray *The Communist Party of Great Britain: a historical analysis to 1941* Liverpool 1995

p93. In a similar vein, Edward Upward sketches a CPGB branch meeting where an oppositionist member, Mike Bainton, is expelled from the party for proselytising the idea that the Soviet leaders were in the process of abandoning international revolutionary communism — see Edward Upward *In the thirties* London 1978 pp165–184.



# ‘How Lenin would have squirmed’

I remarked in the previous chapter that the inner-party rebellion of 1945 ebbed in subsequent years. This can be seen clearly in the debate that took place around the CPGB’s February 1947 congress.

A number of contributions to the pre-congress debate echoed the critical themes that were raised at the November 1945 congress. For example, R Page (India Command) portrayed some of the continuing negative consequences of building a ‘mass party’ composed of large amounts of ‘paper’ members: “... it is inevitably the more active members who take on the job of being dues collectors; they become involved in masses of detailed work giving a very small return; the misuse of valuable cadres in this way is serious for the party, and the development of comrades is retarded.”<sup>1</sup> Factory and workplace organisation was still a controversial issue for some activists. Hugh Savage of Bridgeton noted a “tendency to pay lip service to the importance of factory committees”<sup>2</sup> while J Painter (Aspley, Nottingham) asked why district political committees, branch committees and leading party industrial activists had “failed lamentably” in relation to factory organisation.<sup>3</sup> Eric Kerridge (London Student branch) and B Kerridge (Sudbury branch) asserted: “Organisationally, the essence of Browderism in the US was the abandonment of factory organisation.”<sup>4</sup> This contribution added: “Without full democratic discussions of our errors, without frank self-criticism, without assessing the blame, we shall not be able to re-establish Marxist clarity and organisation in our party.”<sup>5</sup> A contribution from Bill Whittaker drew attention to a defeated oppositional resolution at a Lancashire and Cheshire congress that had been critical of the party’s inability to expose “social democracy as a bulwark of imperialism” and had argued for a strong party that would “fight for a share of the political levy”, contest all by-elections and sponsor “increasing use of the strike weapon”.<sup>6</sup>

## MUDDYING THE ARGUMENT

Despite being cut from the same political cloth, these contributions did not numerically equal the avalanche of 1945 and, unlike in the previous encounter, the EC felt confident enough to lash certain oppositionists in print. The main oppositional grouping at the 1947 congress was based in the CPGB’s South-East Midlands area around its branches in Hertford and Welwyn Garden City. In a contribution to the debate, Eric Heffer (Hertford) and Dave Jenkins, Bill Owen, Hal Marshall (all Welwyn Garden City) argued: “By the EC forgetting the dictatorship of the proletariat, and informing that now a peaceful transition to socialism is possible, it means they have virtually abandoned Marxism, or only make use of those parts and quotations, etc, which are acceptable to the petty bourgeoisie.”<sup>7</sup> Emile Burns replied for the EC in the same issue of *World News and Views*, pointing out that the views of the grouping had been defeated at the last CPGB South-East Midlands congress and that the above



contribution from Heffer and company represented “the unfortunate effect of reading Lenin like a cookery book, to find recipes for making pies”.<sup>8</sup>

The Hertford and Welwyn Garden City branches took their opposition onto the floor of the congress, each submitting an amendment/resolution (both heavily defeated). Welwyn Garden City looked for significant deletions and substitutions to the main political resolution. It argued: “Britain’s coming crisis can be resolved only by a proletarian revolution and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”<sup>9</sup> Taking up concerns that the CPGB was still tailing the Labour government, the amendment added: “Revolutionary tactics demand that the main blow should now be struck at the influence of the Labour leaders over the working class, in order that the workers may be won over to communism. The Labour leaders must be exposed both in theory and practice as the agents of capitalism inside the labour movement.”<sup>10</sup> The Welwyn Garden City resolution called for the scrapping of the ‘Aims’ listed in the CPGB’s rules and “a new programme shall be drafted in which the essential Marxist-Leninist principles of the party are stated clearly, especially: the doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat; the role of opportunism in the working-class movement; revolutionary strategy and tactics; the right of nations to self-determination; and the party as the revolutionary vanguard”.<sup>11</sup>

Testament to the fact that the CPGB leadership now felt much more confident in giving oppositionists a ‘bashing’, Pollitt offered a more belligerent response than a couple of years previously. He accused the majorities in the Hertford and Welwyn Garden City branches of doing “nothing but destroy two of the most promising branches in one of the most difficult agricultural areas of the country” and threatening that the “new Executive Committee will have as one of its first duties the task of ensuring that these branches are reorganised in order that we have the guarantee that the line of this congress is going to be carried out by people who believe in it”.<sup>12</sup> Frank Roy and others from Welwyn Garden City and Hertford were indeed expelled after the congress (Eric Heffer was also expelled from the party, although this was deferred until his relocation to Liverpool shortly afterwards). Pollitt, presumably without irony, added: “Let us stop learning by rote, let us stop reciting quotations which we don’t understand and have no relation to the present events. How Lenin would have squirmed if he had been here this morning.”<sup>13</sup>

A factor that, in all probability, put the brakes on the opposition was the opening of the Cold War and the foundation of the Cominform in September 1947. As Britain was in alliance with the US, this meant that the CPGB leadership was reluctantly yanked to the left, away from its ‘comradely’ subservience to the Labour government and its ‘no strike’ policy. Much of the reactionary ‘winning the peace by working with the progressive capitalists’ and nationalist ‘produce or perish’ nonsense disappeared although, ironically, nothing much changed strategically. As we shall see below, by 1951 the CPGB was to have its new *BRS* programme that, under the tutelage of no less than Stalin,

committed the CPGB to a parliamentary road to socialism as the junior partner of a future left Labour government. The errors that had been highlighted by the 1945 opposition, namely tailism and reducing the organisation to the status of a 'ginger group' (i.e. British Browderism), were to become enshrined programmatically.

#### FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

In this changed international situation, Pollitt had issued the obligatory 'self-criticism' in order to align himself and the CPGB with these changed circumstances. This was picked up by the Australian Communist Party, which had been critical (initially behind closed doors) of the CPGB's opportunism when its fraternal delegate, Jack Henry, had attended the 1947 congress.<sup>14</sup> The Australian party had written its critique in March 1948 and this was published, alongside the CPGB's reply, in *World News and Views* in August 1948.

For anyone familiar with the arguments of CPGB oppositionists since the end of the Second World War, the Australian letter (compiled by Lance Sharkey and Richard Dixon<sup>15</sup>) essentially amplified and codified those concerns in a particularly hard-hitting and uncompromising manner. Sharkey and Dixon pointed to the CPGB's "exaggerated hopes and praise of the role to be played by the Labour government, thereby reinforcing the social-democratic illusions among the masses". They argued that this "reached its climax in the [CPGB] central committee's pronouncement that Britain was 'in transition to socialism'. The non-Marxist character of this estimation is quite clear when it is remembered that here we are dealing with the second-strongest imperialist power in the world, where monopoly capitalism is in complete control and the bourgeois state has not been undermined and the government is led by social democrats whose role is so well known to all students of Marxism-Leninism as that of the saviours of capitalism, more particularly in the moments of its gravest crisis".<sup>16</sup> Sharkey and Dixon estimated that the CPGB's productionist and class-collaborationist slogan of 'produce or perish' "has placed the party in direct opposition to the struggle of the British working class. The central committee has consistently opposed the strikes of the workers. Their own documents relate that, in the big [1945] dock strike, in which they came out in opposition to the striking workers, party speakers were in danger of being lynched by the workers, and that the strike ended in the hands of Trotskyists and other rotten elements".<sup>17</sup> Sharkey and Dixon also picked out that the CPGB's shift to a more critical position in relation to the then Labour government only meant that the likes of Pollitt were now breeding illusions in future 'left' Labour governments opening up the road to socialism. In other words, the CPGB was merely engaged in a tactical shift and not a strategic one.

What impact did the Australian letter have on CPGB oppositionists? Edward and Hilda Upward, party members in Camberwell, south London, who were engaged in their own struggle against opportunism, remembered being "electrified" by it, as it criticised the British party's reformism in much the

same terms as their own.<sup>18</sup> However, the picture painted in Edward Upward's semi-fictionalised account of this struggle, *The rotten elements*, is very much of a localised rebellion, easily dealt with by the party leadership. For example, the Upwards had no contact with the grouping in Hertford. Eric Heffer recalled reading *The rotten elements* some years later: "It mirrored our experience exactly [in Welwyn Garden City and Hertford] and I realised that we had not been as isolated as we had thought we were."<sup>19</sup> In these fragmented circumstances, when the tide of inner-party opposition was ebbing from its 1945 peak and the CPGB's leadership was reluctantly trimming off the worst of its post-war opportunist excesses, it becomes clear that the only tangible effect the Australian letter had was to reinforce the opinions of existing oppositionists.<sup>20</sup> It was not the cause of an expansionist ideological offensive against the party leadership that the Upwards and others like them may have hoped for.

### THE KING STREET/MOSCOW AXIS

Viewing the party press from 1948 onwards, the critical voices largely disappear, although the debates around factory organisation and building a 'mass party' still surfaced from time to time.<sup>21</sup> It seems as if the CPGB's leadership felt confident enough to freeze out what remained of its left opposition.<sup>22</sup> Thus, in the lead-up to the adoption of the *BRS* in 1951, which, as argued above, codified the CPGB's post-war opportunism by committing the CPGB to a parliamentary road to socialism as the junior partner of a future left Labour government, real debate around the programme's terms of reference was virtually absent. In any case, the *BRS* was very much the product of a King Street/Moscow axis and, as Palme Dutt admitted later, there was no consultation of the membership, no full discussion and certainly no special congress to debate its contents.<sup>23</sup> Fred Westacott's claim that there "was a great deal of discussion within the party prior to the adoption of the *BRS*" is not backed up by any other source.<sup>24</sup>

What the rank and file did get was the opportunity to 'rubber stamp' the *BRS* in the congress of April 1952. Prior to this was a perfunctory debate in *World News and Views*, in which J Hubbard of Hampstead, London, was seemingly an isolated voice in wanting to discuss fundamentals, albeit in a half-hearted, almost innocent manner: "In the [*BRS*]... it is stated that 'Britain will reach socialism by her own road', and this road is put as people's democracy and parliament. In view of the criticisms of parliament which we have made in the past, it seems to me that more explanation should be given on this point."<sup>25</sup>

The congress itself was a damp squib, as was practically admitted by Pollitt in his published reply to the congress 'discussion': "In the discussion today [April 12 1952] 32 speakers have taken part... and there has been no fundamental difference with the political line of the report as a whole. This is in itself a splendid thing, which augurs well for the carrying out of that line."<sup>26</sup> In private, Pollitt was seemingly less jolly about the congress. He remarked to his fellow EC members in a meeting on May 10 1952 that although he thought the congress had been "one of the best", there had not been enough political

discussion, there had been an absence of criticism and self-criticism and the discussion around the *BRS* “had been disappointing in the extreme”.<sup>27</sup> One only shudders to think what the ‘worst’ congresses must have been like.

Nina Fishman argued that the *BRS* “was not popular amongst party union activists” as their “strategies for British socialism revolved around encroaching on managerial prerogative and ensuring left-wing victories in elections for the shop stewards’ committee and union branch”.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the culture of most CPGB trade unionists and their practical and ideological reliance on bourgeois institutions that regulated and controlled labour power (trade unions) was complimentary to the reliance of the *BRS* on the bourgeois crutch of the Labour Party and the bourgeois institution of parliament, albeit at the cost of distancing many of these members from the formal political structures of the CPGB.<sup>29</sup> As evidence for this opposition, Fishman produced a passage from John Mahon’s biography of Pollitt, where it was noted that Pollitt “had to record that many members seriously underestimated the significance” of the *BRS*.<sup>30</sup> But this speaks more of the undemocratic beginnings of the *BRS* and the fact that the CPGB’s left opposition of the immediate post-war years had suffered a series of reversals, rather than of any serious — and unrecorded — rebellion on the part of union militants. There is some evidence to suggest that despite the lack of an open revolt, there was a strong feeling of doubt as to the plausibility of the strategy of working with and through the Labour Party, and it was this subterranean opinion that would be more openly expressed in the inner-party rebellion of 1977 (see below).<sup>31</sup>

As we have seen in the last chapter, oppositionists had erected a rigid division in their heads between the ‘revisionism’ of the CPGB and the supposedly revolutionary credentials of the CPSU and Stalin. While the precise details of Stalin’s involvement in the *BRS* would remain obscure until John Gollan’s previously mentioned admission in 1964, no less a journal than *Pravda* had welcomed the programme’s launch and there were other examples in the British party press that offered details of the Soviet welcome. For example, *World News and Views* reproduced an article from the Soviet journal *New Times* that hailed the *BRS* as exposing “the slanderous misrepresentation of the policy of the British Communist Party, which is accused of aiming to introduce soviet power into Britain and abolish parliament” and that “corresponds to the needs and heartfelt desires of the great majority of British people”.<sup>32</sup> However, illusions in the revolutionary élan of the CPSU would persist for many long years.

### REVOLUTIONARY BACKDROP

Why did the CPGB continue to produce revolutionaries? Why would this rightward-shifting environment continually throw up small groups who wished to oppose reformism inside the party?

Harry Ratner, a Trotskyist opponent, divided CPGB members into ‘hards’ and ‘softs’. He saw those that had joined the party prior to the turn to the Popular

Front period of 1935–39 as the ‘hards’. “They had joined the party when it was still preaching class struggle and revolution... they had been taught that there was an irreconcilable clash of interests between the capitalist and working classes, that parliamentary democracy was a sham and that the ruling class could only be overthrown by revolutionary means. For them the turn to Popular Front politics... was purely a temporary and tactical manoeuvre...”<sup>33</sup> Ratner saw those who had joined in the Popular Front period and between 1941–45 as the ‘softs’. He argued that such members “remained basically no more than starry-eyed progressives with a minimal education in Marxism”.<sup>34</sup>

Ratner’s impressions were backed up by Harry McShane, who was himself to become a critic of the CPGB’s rightward drift through the Second World War and after: “Our attitude to the war made the Communist Party extremely popular. Russia was looked upon as that brave country fighting on alone, and Stalin became a national hero. A lot of new members were recruited, but they had no education in Marxism and the whole character of the party changed.”<sup>35</sup> McShane drew further contrasts between “older party members” who “didn’t take supporting the war to its extremes” and newer members who were content to fly Union Jacks.<sup>36</sup>

There was then a strand of activists in the CPGB who had been schooled in a version of revolutionary politics and this influence percolated through the party in the post-war period. Of course, one would not want to draw such a contrast too crudely. Plenty of those who joined before 1935, not least in the ranks of the leadership, were prepared to stomach and espouse reformist politics, and, as time wore on, the revolutionary wing was to be replenished by members who had joined since 1945.

Ideologically, across different strands of membership and various districts, the CPGB was something of a hybrid of revolution and reform. Its origins were in the Russian Revolution of 1917 so, arguably, if the party cut its links to this revolution (or even the monstrosity that developed from its ashes — the Soviet Union) it ceased to meaningfully exist. However, the issue is somewhat more complex and contradictory.

Viewing the party between 1951–68, Callaghan states that “the old doctrines, though sometimes disposed of on Soviet authority — as in the case of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’... — were never subjected to a formal critique, even when they were clearly redundant, as in the case of soviet democracy. Most of the old doctrinal [i.e. revolutionary] baggage continued to coexist with the party’s declared commitment to a parliamentary reformism which could even envisage party pluralism ‘under socialism’”.<sup>37</sup> He goes on to consider how this constellation worked itself across the CPGB. “The party’s fudging of doctrinal issues enabled a serious reformist dynamic to develop alongside Leninist and Stalinist politics so that it was neither one thing or the other. Vanguardism, democratic centralism, and the conspiratorial, sectarian and authoritarian

attitudes and behaviour associated with them survived alongside a genuine, sometimes creative, commitment to issues such as women's equality, educational reform, legislative action against racism...<sup>38</sup>

It is worthwhile fleshing out this argument. Take, for example, the CPGB's post-war guidelines for an introductory course on 'The state and democracy' (June 1948). Suggested reading is *State and revolution*, where Lenin stresses: "Marx's idea is that the working class must break up, smash the 'ready-made state machinery', and not confine itself merely to laying hold of it."<sup>39</sup> The CPGB's interpretation, while striking a succession of orthodox Leninist poses (not least in its suggested reading), is a careful reformist interpretation of Lenin's position.<sup>40</sup> Despite the obvious reformist drift, however, it is still *State and revolution* that is being offered as the ideological cement to hold this 'creative Marxism' together. Which is where 'Alan' and 'Elsie Sebrill', in Edward Upward's semi-autobiographical *The rotten elements*, begin in 1947–48 when they begin to question the CPGB's post-war line. Alan and Elsie go to meet 'Digby Kelsall', a member of the party's EC, to discuss their doubts. When asked about her hesitations in regard to the CPGB's reformist drift, Elsie says: "I mean I'm not altogether clear about [the party's line]. Apparently it's different in some ways from the line that Lenin laid down in *State and revolution*."<sup>41</sup> Kelsall, illustrating perhaps how the party's leaders were making Leninist rods for their reformist backs, replies: "What grounds have you for supposing that the party has departed from Lenin at all?"<sup>42</sup> He goes on to frostily encourage the Sebrills to read some of Lenin's articles from 1905. Similarly, this is how Eric Heffer characterises his group's fight: "We in Hertford and Welwyn challenged the leadership on the question of the character of the capitalist state, and the way socialism would be achieved. We had drunk long and deep at the Leninist well."<sup>43</sup> It would appear that Eddie Jackson of the Appeal Group (see below) was correct in 1971 when he talked about the ideological practice of CPGB general secretary John Gollan: "By mentioning Lenin's name, and quoting from him, Gollan hoped to give credence to his claim that he and his parliamentarianism were truly Marxist-Leninist."<sup>44</sup> As if to prove that this was an arena of diminishing returns for the leadership, Jackson employs his own quotes from a 'revolutionary' Lenin in order to bolster his own case against the CPGB's reformism.

Similar points can be made as to the party's 'vanguard' role in the post-war period. Programmatically, the CPGB was strategically reduced to the status of a 'ginger group' in relation to a Labour Party that needed the comradely help of the CPGB in order to begin the march to socialism. This idea of being a 'ginger group' was often deplored by the leadership. The party's education again put an essentially orthodox Leninist spin on a reformist drift.<sup>45</sup>

With these glaring ideological contradictions it becomes less difficult to understand why the CPGB continued to produce revolutionaries in the post-war period.



There were difficulties in organising effective and lasting opposition inside the CPGB. Factional activity, or combining “with other members in other party organisations who think like them”, was banned.<sup>46</sup> The vertical organisation of the CPGB did not countenance discussions between branches or allow unauthorised publications. Party publications were controlled by a self-perpetuating leadership, so debate was conducted on its terms and generally pinched into periods immediately prior to a congress. Even branch meetings were not usually concerned with dealing with differences over the party line.<sup>47</sup> “There was... a predisposition to keep mental reservations to oneself. To air differences in public was to put the party’s good name in question; even to admit them to oneself was undermining.”<sup>48</sup> It thus took guts to raise serious political differences in the CPGB, not least because of the reception that might be encountered: “But let a comrade attempt to express doubts, however sincerely felt or genuinely well-founded... and the chances are that either he is hammered into silence and made to feel an awkward customer, or he will find himself treated as a disruptor who may require expulsion.”<sup>49</sup> Oppositionists thus had an extremely difficult choice, particularly in the immediate post-war years when the CPGB’s activism and sense of unity was strong: battle on in an environment in which it could be extremely difficult to get your voice heard; or leave the party.

#### **BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO**

However, leaving the CPGB was not an easy option and one that vexed those oppositionists who came near to leaving or chose to take this final step. Harry McShane left the CPGB in the early 1950s after a long party service in Glasgow. His opposition had developed around a number of points relating to the CPGB’s move toward a ‘British’ reformist perspective: the diplomacy being pushed by the Soviet Union for a ‘peace pact’; the downgrading of factory branches in favour of residential branches in order to facilitate electoral work; the worship of Stalin; and McShane’s scepticism over potential successors to general secretary Harry Pollitt.<sup>50</sup>

McShane relays what seems to be a rather disappointing outcome to his departure: “Only a handful left the Communist Party when I did... We were expecting more to join us. A whole number of people used to come to the office and tell me their grievances, but they all stayed in.”<sup>51</sup> He goes on to compare his case with that of Eric Heffer: “I was better known and had a better base in Glasgow, but I am doubtful if we could have got a real fight.”<sup>52</sup> McShane goes on to recount a journey through something of a sectarian wilderness: a brief contact with Gerry Healy and Trotskyism; joining up with Eric Heffer in a small federation of Marxist groups; and then into a small group of Marxist-humanists. There is no hiding that this was a thoroughly shrunken political world. As McShane states: “After years of working in the Communist Party it was very hard to join a small group and find myself isolated from the mass of workers.”<sup>53</sup>



This contradiction will be a recurring theme in our account of CPGB oppositionists. It is easy to see why activists such as McShane and the Upwards left. But it is also not hard to see why other activists stayed. Presuming that you might not fancy burying yourself in the Labour Party (itself not unaffected by a more ideologically cohesive CPGB), leaving the party could be a step into the wilderness. The CPGB, despite its uneven geographical and labour movement spread, was part of the working class movement in a way that small sects outside it were not.

Thompson argues that the expectations of activists in the CPGB (as opposed to ‘paper members’) “might well be regarded as likely to numb the imagination and induce a state of demoralised helplessness”.<sup>54</sup> Peggy Pinckheard, who was expelled from the CPGB in 1963 and a member of the Committee to Defeat Revisionism for Communist Unity (CDRFCU), backed up Thompson’s remarks. She talked of the “zeal of the cadres” being blunted by “endless tasks of raising money”. Pinckheard added: “The making of jam, pickles and book ends by militant workers hardly develops the ability to arouse and lead workers...”.<sup>55</sup> These remarks are obviously reflective of the difficulties being encountered in persuading activists to develop a critique of the CPGB’s strategy and its methods in the face of a ‘heads down’ culture of party work.

It seems that more difficulties were thrown up by the total immersion of some party members in trade union work. The CPGB’s leadership was itself concerned at points that it was unable to drag the gaze of its trade union activists away from the workshop and onto broader ‘political’ issues (see below), never mind those minorities in the party pushing members to take up an explicitly revolutionary stand. One CDRFCU writer talked of most CPGB districts having “two distinct types”: the “small group of members whose understanding of Marxist theory is relatively highly developed”; and those working in “big enterprises and in the major trade union organisations”. The former group is thought to be “cut off” from the latter, which is presumably a reflection on the limitations of the struggle recently undertaken inside the CPGB by CDRFCU personnel.<sup>56</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 27 Number 1, January 4 1947. See comments also from ME Paul (Oxford) and Jim Harris (Woodford), Volume 27, Number 4, January 25 1947.

<sup>2</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 27 Number 4, January 25 1947

<sup>3</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 27 Number 3, January 18 1947

<sup>4</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 27 Number 1, January 4 1947

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 27 Number 4, January 25 1947. For more on the rebellion of the Hertford and Welwyn Garden City branches, see Eric Heffer *op cit* pp33–38.

<sup>8</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 27 Number 4, January 25 1947

<sup>9</sup> CP/CENT/CONG/05/06

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> 'Reply to discussion by H Pollitt' *World News and Views*, March 8 1947

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> 'Introductory note; exchange of letters between the Australian and the British communist parties' *World News and Views* Volume 28 Number 31, August 7 1948

<sup>15</sup> By the time the CPGB published the Australian critique, Lance Sharkey was general secretary of the Australian Communist Party and Roger Dixon was general president.

<sup>16</sup> 'Letter of the Australian Communist Party; exchange of letters between the Australian and the British communist parties' *World News and Views* Volume 28 Number 31, August 7 1948

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> Raphael Samuel 'The lost world of British communism: two texts' *New Left Review* January–February 1986 pp119–124. See also Upward *op cit* pp98–125.

<sup>19</sup> Heffer *op cit* p33

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, AH Evans 'Contribution to congress discussion' *op cit*

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the contribution of George Crane in *World News and Views* Volume 29 Number 45, November 5 1949: "Right through the party from top to bottom there is still a passive resistance to the building of factory groups or branches."

<sup>22</sup> The Upwards submitted a letter as a contribution to *World News and Views* in the 1948 pre-congress discussion that they claimed was not published — see Samuel 'The lost world of British communism: two texts' *op cit* p121.

<sup>23</sup> See Morgan *op cit* p170

<sup>24</sup> Fred Westacott *Shaking the chains* Chesterfield 2002 p271. Westacott was district organiser of the East Midlands CPGB at the time and claims to have "attended many packed branch meetings called to discuss the draft — and what lively meetings they were".

<sup>25</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 32 Number 13, March 29 1952

<sup>26</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 32 Number 15, April 19 1952

<sup>27</sup> CP/CENT/EC/02/08, notes on discussion by George Matthews and James Klugmann

<sup>28</sup> Nina Fishman 'No home but the trade union movement: communist activists and "reformist" leaders 1926–56' in Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman and Kevin Morgan *Opening the books: essays on the social and cultural history of the British Communist Party* London 1995 p120

<sup>29</sup> For more on this see Lawrence Parker 'Coal and Clausewitz' *op cit*.

<sup>30</sup> John Mahon *Harry Pollitt* London 1976 p353

<sup>31</sup> In 1950, Welsh district organiser Idris Cox reported on a succession of 'sectarian tendencies' in his area to the CPGB's EC — see Lyndon White 'The CPGB and the national question in post-war Wales: the case of Idris Cox' *Communist History Network Newsletter* Spring 2002.

<sup>32</sup> *World News and Views* Volume 31 Number 8, February 24 1951

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Harry Ratner 'Remembering 1956' *Revolutionary History* Volume 9 Number 3 p210

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> McShane *op cit* p235

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid* pp235–236. He himself had joined the party in 1922. Brian Pearce was another member who was recruited towards the end of the ultra-left Third Period in 1934 and who used his experience of this era to become critical of what he saw as the CPGB's insufficient leftward shift after the Second World War. Pearce subsequently joined the Trotskyist movement after being expelled from the CPGB in 1957 — see John McIlroy 'A communist historian in 1956: Brian Pearce and the crisis of British Stalinism' *Revolutionary History op cit* p88.

<sup>37</sup> Callaghan *op cit* p29

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>39</sup> VI Lenin *State and revolution* <http://www.marxists.org.uk/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch03.htm#s2>

<sup>40</sup> CPGB *Marxism: an introductory course in five parts. Course III — The state and democracy* June 1948: "The fight for fundamental changes therefore requires in the first place the fight for a new Labour government based on the left, carrying out a policy in the interests of the working class at home and abroad. Such a government would represent a great further step towards working-class democracy, and with the overwhelming majority of the people behind it, it would have to undertake changes in the state which would make the class composition of the state correspond with the majority in the House of Commons really representing and closely in touch with the working class. The essential feature of these changes would be the removal of reactionaries from key positions in all departments of state, and their replacement by socialists; together with drawing the workers into every aspect of running the country. The fight along these lines is the fight for a people's democracy in Britain, which will be able to carry through the change to socialism against whatever resistance and sabotage the capitalist class may put up." <http://www.marxists.org.uk/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/pamphlets/1946/ch03.htm>

<sup>41</sup> Upward *The rotten elements op cit* p32

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid* p33

<sup>43</sup> Heffer *op cit* p35

<sup>44</sup> Eddie Jackson *Congress: an appeal to delegates* October 1971

<sup>45</sup> CPGB *The role of the Communist Party* June 1965 <http://www.marxists.org.uk/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/partied/1965/rolecom65.htm>: "The working class needs the Communist Party: (i) To give the Labour movement a socialist consciousness, a scientific socialist theory, a perspective of advance to socialism. (ii) To lead the workers and their allies in all the struggles which confront them — from the immediate struggles under capitalism right up to the struggles for political power and the building of socialism. (iii) To provide the organisation for the vanguard of the working class and working people capable of carrying out these two tasks."

<sup>46</sup> Raphael Samuel *The lost world of British communism* London 2006 p83

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid* pp80–81

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid* p83

<sup>49</sup> Forum group *What's wrong with our Communist Party?* June 1965 pp8–9

<sup>50</sup> McShane *op cit* pp242–249

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid* pp250–251

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid* p251

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid* p254

<sup>54</sup> Thompson *op cit* p151

<sup>55</sup> 'Why we left the CPGB' *Vanguard* Volume 1 Number 1, February 1964.

Daphne Liddle recalls her immense disappointment on joining Bromley CPGB branch in the late 1960s. The branch members seemed to her to be mostly concerned with *Morning Star* bazaars and similar types of activity, and less concerned with discussing politics — author's interview with Daphne Liddle.

<sup>56</sup> 'On learning to talk with the people' *Vanguard* Volume 1 Number 2, March 1964

# Less than a hundred flowers bloom

A common tactic used to silence oppositionists in the post-war CPGB was to invoke the symbolic power of a higher party authority: “Comrade, you are attacking Comrade Stalin.”<sup>1</sup> Or, as Samuel puts it, “the principle of unity” was “indissolubly linked to that of authority”.<sup>2</sup> The dubious uses to which this authority was put in an undemocratic party regime was yet another fetter on the development of opposition. Even when an oppositionist was convinced they were correct politically, internalised deference could still be a restraining hand. Despite being unable to square off the *BRS* with a theoretical education in Marxism-Leninism, Bill Bland, a CPGB activist from Ilford, still had his doubts: “I took the view that all these people [party leaders] are influential, highly esteemed Marxist-Leninists, and I’m just an ordinary bloke, and I must be wrong.”<sup>3</sup>

However, the splintering of this authority at the lofty levels of the international communist movement in the 1960s offered a window of opportunity to those opposing the CPGB’s reformism.

The Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s saw the Communist Party of China (CPC) denounce the CPSU (and thus parties such as the CPGB that followed a Soviet lead) from what seemed like an explicitly revolutionary standpoint. Soviet notions such as ‘peaceful co-existence’ with the capitalist West were forcibly attacked with revolutionary rhetoric and the CPSU itself was denounced as ‘revisionist’. Unsurprisingly, many communists across the globe found explanatory threads (whatever the CPC’s motives may have been) for the reformism that had infected their own ‘national’ organisations. And this was from a potent source, given that the ‘official’ communist movement worldwide had generally shared in the achievements of the Chinese communists. By 1963, the CPGB had, for all intents and purposes, lined up on the Soviet side.<sup>4</sup>

As part of its break with the CPSU, the CPC had begun to fish around in the international movement for sympathisers. The CPC never sought to establish a functioning Maoist international, but rather worked through a set of bilateral links. The CPC would bring sympathetic groups to China to meet leading figures; give them publicity; and provide such groups with political material for use in their own publications.<sup>5</sup> There is also a possibility that some of the CPC’s international contacts received financial support or some kind of subsidies. By April 1963, key polemical Chinese texts were publicly on sale in Britain.<sup>6</sup>

The CPGB EC received a selection of protest letters from individuals and branches (mostly in London and its surrounds) sympathetic to the Chinese stance. For example, Bill Bland took up cudgels for China’s ally in the world communist movement, the Albanian Party of Labour, in January 1962,

complaining about the CPGB's denunciation of the Albanians for supposedly having departed from the decisions of the meeting of Marxist-Leninist parties in Moscow in November 1960.<sup>7</sup> Bland's branch (Loxford, Ilford) followed this in December 1962 with a statement in relation to the Sino-Indian border dispute that stated that "members were deeply disturbed at the continued reports that the Soviet government was prepared in present circumstances to supply military planes to the government of India".<sup>8</sup> Other branches offered a more coded form of opposition through requesting more information. In January 1963, Brixton (London) branch called for "publication of the most important political statements by the Chinese, Soviet, Albanian, Yugoslav, Italian communist parties" while, in December 1962, the Smiths MA 1&2 workplace branch (London) requested that any material "received by [the] EC from the Chinese party... should be made available to branches".<sup>9</sup> The Cambridge City branch (December 1962) supported calls from the Chinese for more meetings of the world communist parties<sup>10</sup> while, in July 1963, Wimbledon branch (Surrey) called for "adequate coverage" of the "Chinese viewpoint" in the *Daily Worker*.<sup>11</sup> In August 1963, Wembley Park (London) branch stated that the EC should "repudiate the evil propaganda that China is working for war".<sup>12</sup>

#### INTERNAL AFFAIRS

A group of CPGB members, the majority based in London, led by Michael McCreery, secretary of Tufnell branch (Islington, London) and a member of the CPGB's economic subcommittee,<sup>13</sup> began to use the CPC's attack on the CPSU as a means to explain the reformism of its own party. Eventually, part of this group left the CPGB to form the Committee to Defeat Revisionism For Communist Unity (CDRFCU). The group emerged in 1961–62 and initial activities appear to have been based around interventions in internal CPGB meetings and schools, composing articles for the party press and visiting contacts around the country.<sup>14</sup>

McCreery himself had critical pieces published in *Marxism Today* and *Comment* between 1961 and 1963.<sup>15</sup> In these articles, McCreery began to develop the core ideas of the CDRFCU, without presenting them as obviously pro-Chinese in inspiration. He dismissed the idea that the state could be neutral or above class, and bluntly stated that there could be no secure democratic reforms without the smashing of the capitalist state. McCreery also saw the *BRS* and notions of a reformist, legal path to socialism as the fundamental reason why the CPGB had been unable to implement numerous plans to build more factory branches; residential branches could deliver parliamentary votes and so were, in reality, being prioritised. Judging from subsequent events, this activity allowed the group to develop some political coherence and pick up limited CPGB contacts across the country.

McCreery subsequently talked of articles of his being "repeatedly rejected" for publication by *Marxism Today*.<sup>16</sup> However, any suggestions of a 'gagging

order' were energetically dismissed by a CPGB spokesman talking to the BBC after the CDRFCU had gone public in November 1963: "As an individual [McCreery] has had more space in the party press to put his views than most members."<sup>17</sup> McCreery himself admits in a letter from 1963 there had not been an absolute ban: "... one or two of my pieces were allowed, basically because I believe they still hoped to win me," adding that "as a result I have emerged as a known opponent to the revisionist line".<sup>18</sup> He also explains this as the CPGB leadership wishing to create the illusion of a real debate and showing the opposition as weak by letting only a couple of hostile pieces under its radar. He also draws attention, presumably from bitter experience, to the limitations of short verbal contributions in branch meetings. McCreery, at this point arguing the rationale of an 'exit' strategy for his faction, sums up the position in late 1963 as: "The press is now completely denied to us. Branch meetings are completely denied to us."<sup>19</sup>

The CDRFCU was formed after a meeting in November 1963 at the Lucas Arms, Grays Inn Road, London. This gathering adopted a manifesto — 'An appeal to all communists from members of the Communist Party of Great Britain' — which was a call to overthrow the "revisionist" leaders of the CPGB for their support of Khrushchev and his "outright betrayal" of the working class.<sup>20</sup> This appeal was signed by 14 comrades — rank-and-file members, and some minor officials from local branches — eight from London, three from Manchester and three from Scarborough, Yorkshire.<sup>21</sup> Michael Baker, a signatory of the appeal from Scarborough, told a *Times* reporter "the aim of the group was to win support from both inside the existing party and from outside" to gather a nucleus to fight revisionism.<sup>22</sup> Noone presents the outcome rather differently, talking of subsequent opposition to "agreed" decisions of the Lucas Arms meeting from comrades who "argued that the anti-revisionist movement should function as an opposition *within* the CPGB working towards taking control of the CPGB".<sup>23</sup> These differing slants on the meeting represent divisions and splits within the group from the outset (although Michael Baker stayed with the CDRFCU until 1965).

Such divisions soon became apparent to observers sent to CDRFCU public meetings by the CPGB leadership. A report from a November 1963 meeting said that an unknown comrade spoke as a member of the CPGB and stated that he agreed with the platform's line, but argued CDRFCU personnel should have stayed within the main party.<sup>24</sup> Another CPGB reporter on a meeting on Cuba in December 1963 noted the absence of various individuals such as Muriel and Peter Seltman and the "Ashes" (a reference to Bill Ash and his wife)<sup>25</sup>. The reporter said: "The absences were significant — since it was a meeting on Cuba — it is evident that there are differences even within the little group that has split off [the CDRFCU], i.e. the Seltmans and McCreery, etc. — (or else a deliberate division of labour)."<sup>26</sup> Noone identifies a "Seltman" as the leader of the *Forum* trend (see below), which wanted the anti-revisionist movement to function as an inner-CPGB opposition.<sup>27</sup>



The CPGB London District Committee moved quickly against the London signatories of the 'Appeal' after it had appeared in *Tribune* (November 15). It met on November 17 and unanimously decided to expel all eight signatories in turn for, among other things, publicly organising opposition to the democratically decided policy of the CPGB.<sup>28</sup> The committee noted its invitation to the eight London signatories to attend the meeting. None bothered to attend, which would suggest that McCreery and company were not interested in fighting their expulsion in line with the idea of a clear organisational break with the CPGB.<sup>29</sup> Any remaining or future CDRFCU supporters in the CPGB were seemingly encouraged to resign from the CPGB.<sup>30</sup> The Seltmans were also expelled at the November 17 meeting, despite their shift away from McCreery and their willingness to remain inside the ranks of the CPGB. It also appears as if they tried to put up some significant opposition to their expulsion.<sup>31</sup>

### 'DREAM OF THE IMPOSSIBLE'

Those who wanted a clear break from the CPGB (almost certainly including McCreery, the group's leading theoretician) very quickly got their way inside what was left of the CDRFCU after this initial split. This can be evidenced by the CDRFCU significantly choosing to print two letters from McCreery to comrades who had not followed him out of the CPGB in a pamphlet produced in the same month as the 'Appeal'.<sup>32</sup> In these letters, the author expresses his frustration at any further attempt at working inside the CPGB: "The argument... that we must work to win a *majority* of the party to our way of thinking, by working away within the permitted framework laid down by the opportunist leadership, is not a correct one because the means whereby party opinion can crystallise around a correct subjective understanding of the objective world *do not exist*."<sup>33</sup> McCreery reaches a blunt conclusion: "In practice you *cannot separate* the party from the leadership... To talk of winning a majority against them within the rules they operate is to dream of the impossible."<sup>34</sup>

This discord in the broader anti-revisionist faction between McCreery's group and those wishing to work inside the CPGB was probably not helped by the inflexibility shown to potential CDRFCU recruits. Bill Bland, who had been a dissident since the introduction of the *BRS*, thought that the CDRFCU was set up on a "sectarian", "all or nothing" basis.<sup>35</sup> He recalled being contacted by McCreery: "I was very pleased to be contacted and said I would like to work with him, but he insisted, or as good as insisted, that everyone had to immediately resign from the Communist Party. And I said there is no other organisation, even though I am only a rank-and-file member of that party now, at least one can work among people with a similar outlook. I [didn't] think that the time [had] come yet when everyone should withdraw..."<sup>36</sup>

In pushing the CDRFCU to an unambiguous organisational split with the CPGB, McCreery's group was in all probability reflecting the stance of the CPC: "Both internationally and in individual countries, wherever opportunism

and revisionism are rampant, a split becomes inevitable in the proletarian ranks.<sup>37</sup> The CPC taught its adherents in the international communist movement that it was the revisionist leaders of parties such as the CPGB departing from Marxism-Leninism and the “proletarian revolutionary party” who were the real splitters, “even when for a time they are in the majority or hold the leading posts”. Furthermore, the revisionists were denounced as “agents of the bourgeoisie”.<sup>38</sup> Messages such as these were unlikely to endear activists to a continued existence as a faction inside the CPGB, particularly when frustrations borne from the constrained nature of such struggles were brought into the mix.

A number of authors have commented that the CDRFCU was relatively well supported financially, which was reflected in the high production values of its newspaper, *Vanguard*, launched in February 1964.<sup>39</sup> There is also a consensus from different sources that it was McCreery’s personal wealth that kept the organisation afloat.<sup>40</sup> This became the subject of negative comment from McCreery’s political opponents.<sup>41</sup> Alexander finds no indication that the CDRFCU had any direct contacts with the Chinese party.<sup>42</sup> In retrospect this seems unlikely, although the first issue of *Vanguard* reprinted an earlier letter sent to the *Sunday Telegraph*, rebutting a report that the authors of the ‘Appeal to all communists’ might be tempted to take Chinese money to fund a breakaway from the CPGB: “... those communists who issued this Appeal have never taken, and will never take, money from overseas.”<sup>43</sup> Contacts certainly existed with the Albanian Party of Labour and an early issue of *Vanguard* shows McCreery and Arthur Major pictured with Enver Hoxha and other Albanian communists for May Day celebrations in Tirana in 1964.<sup>44</sup> However, as will be seen below, the CDRFCU was more than a British cadaver for the CPC or its Albanian ally. Alongside the attacks on Khrushchev and the various totems of Soviet revisionism, there was a clear effort being made in *Vanguard* to develop an indigenous appeal to the British labour movement and CPGB members through, for example, its industrial coverage and lively cultural pages, which went beyond merely dealing with the faults of the CPGB.

As stated above, the CDRFCU used the CPC’s critique of the Soviet-led communist movement as a tool to explain the degeneration of the CPGB into reformism. This process seems to have been traced back to 1943 and the dissolution of the Comintern, which, McCreery argued, had acted as a constraining hand on the CPGB.<sup>45</sup> In a document written by McCreery while he was still in the CPGB, he debunked the idea of a peaceful, parliamentary road to socialism, using — unsurprisingly — Lenin’s *State and revolution*.<sup>46</sup> McCreery argued (as against CPGB theoretician James Klugmann) that Lenin’s ideas retained their contemporary relevance because a weakening capitalist class was more likely to attack the democratic rights of the working class — hence the need for a violent revolution and to smash the bureaucratic military machine. He concludes: “The *British road* [to socialism] is like one of those medieval paintings, produced before the laws of perspective had been fully

grasped. The foreground, our decaying capitalist society, is seen in all its ugliness. In the background a socialist Britain stands out in full glory. But the middle distance, the intervening ground which links the two, and should give coherence to the whole picture, is somehow blurred.”<sup>47</sup>

In another major CDRFCU document, which had originated as a talk for CPGB members, McCreery linked the party’s pursuance of a “constitutional road” with its inability to consistently organise factory branches or communists at their place of work. It is this workplace organisation that is seen as vital for the coming struggle for power, which, as the author strongly implies, is likely to be anything but peaceful or constitutional.<sup>48</sup> However, the CDRFCU was not uncritical of the CPGB’s trade unionists and was perceptive about the individualistic limitations of their work.<sup>49</sup>

The CDRFCU did manage to establish a skeletal national organisation with groups in London, the Thames Valley, Scotland, West Yorkshire, Manchester and Cardiff and a well-produced monthly paper. However, McCreery was clear to supporters about what was needed to make such a preparatory group into an effective Marxist-Leninist organisation: “Not until we have active self-reliant groups in all main industrial centres can a *party* be established.”<sup>50</sup> Outside the CPGB, the CDRFCU soon began to splinter. In August 1964 Arthur Evans, editor of *Vanguard*, and Ron Jones, the paper’s features editor, broke away,<sup>51</sup> apparently in a conflict over an article by Evans that was not published.<sup>52</sup> Seemingly related to this was an ugly dispute in the London branch of the CDRFCU in September, where McCreery was in a minority opposing decisions of a national meeting of August and was subsequently removed as London secretary for “factionalism”.<sup>53</sup> As the group began to fracture, it began to adopt some of the baroque ornamentation of the Marxist ‘party’/sect, presumably to reinforce the control of the group around McCreery. October 1964’s *Vanguard* thus announced the formation of a “Central Committee”, from which a four-man secretariat was appointed to be responsible for leading the CDRFCU’s work.<sup>54</sup>

McCreery died at the age of 36 on April 10 1965 after a battle with cancer. Losing its main theoretician and animator was clearly a blow to this small group. Noone says that after McCreery’s death, the CDRFCU “degenerated into an ineffective group without direction”.<sup>55</sup> Bland, who had declined membership to stay in the CPGB, argues that McCreery’s “money was always important” to the group and its paper, and “the whole thing fell to pieces” after he died.<sup>56</sup> A *Vanguard* article from August/September 1965 rather ruefully notes: “Initially [in 1963] certain comrades expected overnight fireworks and a dramatic build-up of Marxist-Leninist forces — such over-optimism led to impatience and disillusion when progress was gradual.”<sup>57</sup>

The CDRFCU ultimately fragmented into a number of political tendencies. The Action Centre for Marxist-Leninist Unity (ACMLU) was one such

group, formed in September 1965 around Michael Baker who had been a member of the CDRFCU's Central Committee and took away a section that was mostly based in northern England.<sup>58</sup> Bland contrasts the approach of the ACMLU to CPGB members with that of McCreery: "Baker was the next one to approach me and my position was the same, and he made the point that he agreed with me that it shouldn't be necessary at the moment for everybody to withdraw from the CPGB." Instead Bland says that they looked at "potential recruits" among "confused and honest" CPGB members.<sup>59</sup> The decision to leave the CPGB had obviously been a sobering experience for some militants in McCreery's group and Baker had chosen to revert to the 'some inside/some outside' position he outlined to the media on the CDRFCU's formation. This would suggest that Baker and others felt the CDRFCU's moves for a clear-cut organisational break from the CPGB had been premature. They were probably correct. As we shall see, there was still a visible Maoist current inside the CPGB and, more worryingly for the leadership, it had Reg Birch, one of the party's leading trade unionists, as one of the helmsmen. By 1967, as the 'second wind' of international Maoism began to blow with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, journals such as *Red Guard*, a journal of the Chelsea branch of the Young Communist League (YCL), were still appearing.<sup>60</sup> YCL branches in London such as St Pancras also had significant Maoist rebellions in the same period.<sup>61</sup> These were good opportunities for groups that could show some organisational flexibility in respect to factional work inside the CPGB.

### FALSE START

Thompson claims that the CDRFCU was a "false start" for Maoism in Britain.<sup>62</sup> It was also something of a cul-de-sac for the development of an effective revolutionary critique and organisation within the CPGB. What strikes one about McCreery's group in retrospect was how it was unable to positively overcome any of its structural limitations or political dilemmas, despite the relative profundity of McCreery's critique of the CPGB's reformist strategy. The group was tiny, geographically limited and unduly dependent on McCreery himself. Despite being given some initial space in the CPGB to put his view, McCreery clearly felt squeezed by the leadership. The group was then unable to elaborate any flexible solution to the issue of either staying in or leaving the CPGB, with the decision to leave leading to a sectarian attitude being shown to those remaining in the CPGB, which cost the CDRFCU members from the outset. It was then a matter of maintaining a tiny group on the fringes of the labour movement, albeit one with a good publication and writers/theorists of some stature (McCreery, AH Evans). Without an obvious opponent (as opposed to a literary one) to practically cohere, such groups all too easily begin to fragment. Even if McCreery had lived, the future of the committee would in all likelihood have been maintaining an ideologically pure sect and further fragmentation (both tend to go hand in hand).

The ACMLU sought to achieve "broad and principled unity amongst the Marxist-Leninist forces, their groups and organisations"<sup>63</sup> and consequently

**Partners against reformism:** Mike Baker (standing, far right) and Bill Bland (seated immediately next to Baker), pictured at the founding conference of the Marxist-Leninist Organisation of Britain in September 1967



looked “to fight for a policy of integrating the work of Marxist-Leninists in *all* spheres, in the CPGB, in the mass organisations of the working class, in the progressive movements and in the Marxist-Leninist movement itself”.<sup>64</sup> The goal of this activity was to be the elaboration of a “broad programme of struggle against the modern revisionist betrayal of the fundamental interests of the working class and the advance towards socialism”.<sup>65</sup> The ACMLU solicited reports from “anti-revisionist CPGB members” so that “comrades in other branches will know that they are not alone” and also called for the building of “active groups”<sup>66</sup> in CPGB branches.

The ACMLU had a very clear perspective of what had gone wrong around the time of the London conference in November 1963, which had given rise to what Maureen Scott referred to as a “spontaneous division”<sup>67</sup> between the CDRFCU and *Forum* groupings. She described the Lucas Arms gathering as “inadequately prepared for, with practically no preliminary consultations between the participating groups”.<sup>68</sup> Scott argued that “the line of advance should have been the establishing of an open leading centre representative of the best forces then available which would have published a journal proclaiming itself to be the organ of Marxist-Leninists *within* the CPGB”.<sup>69</sup> Instead, as Scott effectively illustrated, two groupings had arisen that were marooned around one pole or the other of this dual strategy. The *Forum* grouping and other clandestine centres were erroneously “based on the assumption that the revisionist party could perhaps be transformed into a Marxist-Leninist party from within” and “failed in practice to develop struggle against the revisionist clique” due to anti-revisionist struggle being “confined within the bureaucratic framework of the party by a clandestine form of organisation which did not challenge the revisionist leadership”.<sup>70</sup> The CDRFCU, on the other hand, “neglected that part of the work of an open centre to carry its line through to the revisionist party, and were thus prevented from drawing the maximum forces from the party by engaging the revisionists from within”.<sup>71</sup>



However, Scott, writing in the April/May 1966 edition of *Hammer or Anvil*, was already confining this practice to the status of a historical lesson, given that the anti-revisionist movement was seen as being at the “beginning of a new stage”, namely “the entirely positive, revolutionary work of building a Marxist-Leninist party” following the “dissolution” of the CPGB at its 1965 congress.<sup>72</sup> The ACMLU had come to a hysterical and garbled position that if the EC’s draft resolution for the congress was passed: “The Communist Party will have ceased to exist in Britain.”<sup>73</sup> In fact, when Mike Baker got down to analysing the draft resolution, it was not clear what had qualitatively changed from the *BRS* in terms of the draft resolution’s appreciation of the Labour Party’s left and right wing, the role of the capitalist state and so on. Similarly, the draft resolution’s call to build a “united left movement” was surely based on the 1951 *BRS*’s assertion that: “Only by united action between all sections of the labour movement can the working class rally all its forces and all its allies for decisive action to win a parliamentary majority and form a people’s government.”<sup>74</sup> To be fair to Baker, he did assert: “It is the duty of every honest party member, of every true socialist, to struggle at every level, both inside the CPGB and outside it, to defeat this line and the revisionist programme, the *British road to socialism*, from which it stems.”<sup>75</sup> However, this correct formulation only muddled the ACMLU’s assertion that the CPGB’s leadership was proposing anything fundamentally new at the 1965 congress.

### EXISTENTIAL ISSUES

One suspects that this jumble can be partly explained by the impatience of some sections of the ACMLU to get on with the more “positive” work of building their own organisation. Therefore, the editorial of the January/February 1966 issue of *Hammer or Anvil* boldly, but emptily, proclaimed: “The Communist Party no longer exists in Britain!”<sup>76</sup> The editorial picked out the following sentences from a CPGB policy statement as being of particular significance: “It is impossible for our Communist Party to influence British politics in any decisive way unless it influences the trade unions and the Labour Party. We must advance along with the forces of the left.”<sup>77</sup> Given the history of the CPGB since the Second World War, it was not entirely clear what had changed since October 1965. Elsewhere, the editorial talked of the perspective of the *BRS* being “completed by the new embryo programme [*Turn left for progress*, the policy statement issued by the congress]”<sup>78</sup>, which did rather suggest the original *BRS* had something going for it. This impatient and incoherent analysis pushed the ACMLU toward the establishment of a Preparatory Committee for a Conference of Marxist-Leninist Unity in April 1967, which went on to found the Marxist-Leninist Organisation of Britain (MLOB). The MLOB itself was founded on some polemical acrimony with those in the “reactionary and disruptive... capitalist clique”<sup>79</sup> around *The Marxist* journal (see the following chapter) and those in the *Forum* group and other groups such as the London Workers’ Committee, the Communist Workers’ Organisation and the Scottish Workers’ Party. Ultimately, the ACMLU displayed all the sectarian impatience traditionally associated with the CDRFCU.

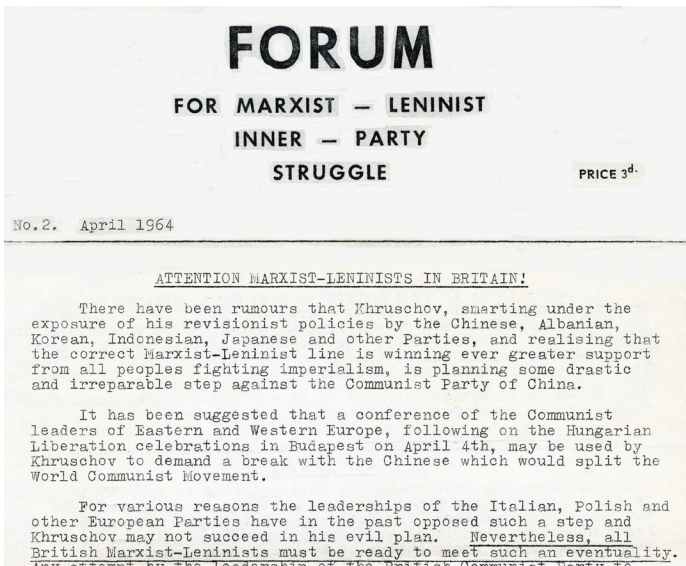
Some of the pro-Chinese activists unhappy at the thought of leaving the CPGB with McCreery in November 1963 subsequently grouped themselves around the 'London Political Organisation' and the *Forum* journal (originally subtitled *For Marxist-Leninist Inner-Party Struggle*).<sup>80</sup> There was a reasonable amount of polemical bad blood between the CDRFCU and the *Forum* group: "For the past nine months or so the anti-revisionist struggle in this country has been fragmented. A large part of the responsibility for this rests with McCreery, whose insistence on setting himself up as the 'leader' of the anti-revisionist struggle last November [1963] created divisions, suspicion and mistrust among comrades who otherwise, might have moved much more rapidly towards a united, if small, movement in Britain."<sup>81</sup>

*Forum* was thus a discussion journal that was aimed (mostly although not solely) at those wanting to follow the lead of the CPC but who wished to retain their membership of the CPGB. To that end, contributors were anonymous in order to protect their identities from the CPGB leadership. Its founders were also concerned (in another side-swipe at McCreery) "that neither a 'line' nor a party can be set up by any self-appointed group in Britain at the present time".<sup>82</sup>

Its writers (particularly of its more authoritative lead articles) were generally flexible on strategy towards the CPGB. One such lead writer formulated clearly that it was impossible to change either the leadership or to transform the CPGB using the existing machinery of the party. Rather, a "genuine Marxist-Leninist"<sup>83</sup> party was proposed. In response to the dilemma the author poses as to whether militants in the CPGB should be abandoned in favour of a completely fresh organisation, or that the struggle should be restricted to the 'old' party (the classical dilemma of CPGB oppositionists), like the ACMLU, a flexible approach was posed. Leaving the party was thought to be "wrong in principle as well as tactically", as the CPGB was still part of the international communist movement and leaving would merely "consolidate many comrades behind the revisionists" by being seen as 'anti-party'.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand: "Equally, comrades fighting inside the [CPGB] will be forced, sooner or later, to confront the leadership openly on fundamental questions. By striving to remain inside the [CPGB] *at all costs* and to transform it from within, they will, inevitably, be forced to compromise on principle."<sup>85</sup> Clearly, some hard lessons were being learned from the experience of the CDRFCU.

There was also an appreciation by contributors of some the limitations of the CPGB's anti-revisionist groups: "Not only are the Marxist-Leninists few but, distinct from other parties, they are drawn entirely from the rank and file of the [CPGB]. In the last 12 months [up to early 1964] some of these Marxist-Leninists have become increasingly active. There is no doubt that secret, 'illegal' groups exist inside the party. Publications and statements have begun to circulate anonymously. But while this activity has been on the increase, it has been exclusively concerned with the international communist movement; with distributing Chinese publications and statements and attacking the leadership





*Party piece:  
Early issues of  
Forum were  
squarely aimed  
at developing the  
struggle inside  
the CPGB*

for suppression and distortion of information.”<sup>86</sup> It was noted in another article that the anti-revisionist struggle was limited to small numbers and had been “unco-ordinated and diffuse”, this being due to the “long history of revisionism” in Britain.<sup>87</sup>

As the 1965 CPGB congress neared, the *Forum* group attempted to influence the debate in the run-up by issuing a series of publications.<sup>88</sup> These publications put *Forum*’s contributors firmly in the tradition of the anti-revisionist critique that had developed since the Second World War: “The truth is that the Communist Party behaves in practice as a left-wing section of Labour, not as a Marxist party... This means that it serves in the final analysis the interests of the bourgeoisie, not the workers.”<sup>89</sup> Similarly, with the *BRS* (1957 version): “The whole document depicts the passage from capitalism to socialism as a rose-strewn path — so easy and gradual; with everybody law-abiding and obedient to the Labour and Communist majority in Parliament. We are here presented with the prospect of a painless transformation — a socialist majority in Parliament and — hey presto! — we awake to find that socialism has arrived.”<sup>90</sup> The document goes on to illustrate that the ‘democracy’ the CPGB was relying upon was a class democracy of the ruling class and that there was no alternative to workers challenging and smashing the bourgeois state. This was the theoretical background to an acknowledgement of a crisis of organisation in the CPGB: falling electoral support; trade union scandals (in the Electrical Trades Union); stagnant branch life; a neglect of theory; falling levels of activity; and an ageing and apathetic membership.<sup>91</sup>

The Sino-Soviet split and its attendant issue of ‘revisionism’ in the ‘official’ communist movement was thus still rearing its head at the CPGB’s 1965

congress.<sup>92</sup> It was here also that Reg Birch, a member of the Amalgamated Engineering Union's (AEU's) executive and by this time the apparent leader of the CPGB's pro-Chinese faction, was removed from the EC.<sup>93</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> McShane *op cit* p245

<sup>2</sup> Samuel *The lost world of British communism op cit* p81

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Bill Bland by JP, July 1994

<http://website.lineone.net/~comleague/intercom/blandint.html>

<sup>4</sup> Thompson argues that although the CPGB lined up on the Soviet side of the dispute, "it never accepted unreservedly the Soviet position" — Thompson *op cit* p131.

<sup>5</sup> Robert J Alexander *International Maoism in the developing world* Westport 1999 p20

<sup>6</sup> RFE/RL background report 'Chinese pamphlets on sale in Britain' April 8 1963. This report details an advertisement for the pamphlets in the *New Statesman*, which were on sale in Collett's bookshop, London. A *Sunday Telegraph* report of September 23 1963 said that such literature was readily available through the Chinese *charge d'affaires* and that the Chinese "are known to have built up a substantial mailing list of sympathetic British communists" — cited in RFE/RL background report 'British communist rebellion', 13 November 1963.

<sup>7</sup> CP/CENT/EC/08/07. Some oppositionists were also circulating material promoting the Albanian party's material inside the CPGB and being expelled for their trouble; see the case of J Wilson, Blaydon branch, North East, October 6 1962 in CP/CENT/EC/08/12.

<sup>8</sup> CP/CENT/EC/09/01

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> CP/CENT/EC/09/06

<sup>12</sup> CP/CENT/EC/09/07

<sup>13</sup> Michael McCreery was the son of General Sir Richard McCreery, who commanded the British Eighth Army in northern Italy during 1944–45. Michael was educated at Eton and Christ Church Oxford, going on to serve with British Military Intelligence — see 'Michael McCreery' *Workers Broadsheet* Volume 1 Number 5, no date but circa mid-1969. McCreery had joined the CPGB in 1956 after a previous membership of the Labour Party. One writer offered this picturesque vignette: "McCreery spends all his time on committee activities in a dingy top-floor flat on Anson Street in North London. It is the location from which their newspaper, *Vanguard*, is published. With him live a few other bachelors among the squalor of unwashed milk bottles, piles of dirty clothes, unattended dishes in the sink and rumpled beds. McCreery's office in the flat contains a library of perhaps 2,000 books and pamphlets which line the face of one wall. Piles of loose literature are scattered over the floor. In the centre of his room is his desk on which he answers all his correspondence by hand in a neat, almost classic, script" — George Thayer *The British political*

*fringe: a profile* London 1965 pp123–124.

<sup>14</sup> See report by Jack Cohen on the activities of comrades Muriel and Peter Seltman, McCreery and others at the Holiday School, Lyme Hall, August 10–17 1963 (typed up by author September 9 1963) in CP/CENT/ORG/20/07. The Seltmans (of Barnet branch, London; Muriel was branch secretary), McCreery and another comrade were deemed to have worked as an “organised group” throughout the duration of the school. They were reported to have been active during lectures and informally at mealtimes, and at the bar. They pretended not to know each other. They were “open protagonists of the line of the CPC”. A letter from ‘Harry B’ (probably Harry Bourne, Midlands district secretary) to Betty Reid (then secretary of the CPGB’s Central Organisation Department) dated August 21 1963 in CP/CENT/ORG/20/07 reports on a discussion in Coventry after the Soviet Union had signed the Partial Test Ban Treaty. He says that Dick and Margery Jones had both come prepared with a statement opposing the ban, condemning Khrushchev on identical lines to a Chinese statement. He further reports that a London communist by the Christian name of Michael stayed with Dick and Margery Jones over a weekend. McCreery obviously attempted to enlist the support of his branch (Tufnell) at an early stage. In a letter from McCreery to ‘Kay’ (probably Kay Beauchamp) dated November 27 1962 in CP/CENT/ORG/20/07, its author defended a letter he wrote to the CPC expressing fraternal support. McCreery said he did so at the request of the Tufnell branch although ‘Bryn’ and ‘Kay’ said they never asked him to do so. McCreery was “perturbed” at the turn of events.

<sup>15</sup> These pieces included ‘On capitalism’s economic prospects’ *Marxism Today* Volume 5 Number 10, October 1961 pp315–317; ‘The fight against the monopolies’ *Marxism Today* Volume 6 Number 12, December 1962 pp381–384 (see also the reply by JR Campbell in *Marxism Today* Volume 7 Number 1, January 1963 pp29–30); and a contribution on factory branches for the ‘28<sup>th</sup> Congress Communist Party of Great Britain discussion’ supplement *Comment* February 6 1963.

<sup>16</sup> Michael McCreery *Destroy the old to build the new! A comment on the state, revolution, and the CPGB* November 1963 p8

<sup>17</sup> RFE/RL background report ‘CP daily breaks silence on rebellion’ November 13 1963.

<sup>18</sup> McCreery *Destroy the old...* *op cit* p13

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>20</sup> ‘British communist rebellion’ *op cit*. See also ‘14 put forward policy defeated at Easter’ *Daily Worker* November 11 1963 — this report did not mention the group’s pro-Chinese inspiration, presenting it as small, isolated circle putting forward views that had already been “overwhelmingly” defeated at the 1963 congress.

<sup>21</sup> The full listing (followed by CPGB branch and any responsibility held) was: Joan Baker (Scarborough); Mike Baker (Scarborough), branch secretary; Alf Cross (*Daily Mirror*, London), branch treasurer; Joe Dix (Gorton, Manchester); Tony Hall (Stoke Newington, London); Malcolm Jervis (Stoke Newington, London); Ron Jones (Tufnell, Islington, London), branch chairman; Arthur

Major (Moss Side West, Manchester); Michael McCreery (Tufnell, Islington, London), branch secretary and member of CPGB economic subcommittee; Alec Moss (Scarborough), member of branch committee; Peggy Pinckheard (Maitland, St Pancras, London), branch education organiser; Hassan Sheriff (Shoreditch, London), branch committee member; Silvia Sheriff (Shoreditch, London) branch committee member; and Wendy Smith (Moss Side West, Manchester), branch committee member — CP/CENT/ORG/20/08.

<sup>22</sup> 'British communist rebellion' *op cit*

<sup>23</sup> Paul Noone 'Michael McCreery, the WPPE and the break with reformist communism' in Michael McCreery *The way forward: a Marxist-Leninist analysis of the British state, the CPGB and the tasks for revolutionaries* no date p5. Noone had been a member of the CDRFCU. The 'WPPE' was the Working People's Party of England (see note 58, below).

<sup>24</sup> Report from 'B' on Conway Hall meeting, London, November 28 1963 — CP/CENT/ORG/20/07

<sup>25</sup> The writer Bill Ash records an association with McCreery's group alongside Evan Gibbon in *A red square* London 1978 p191. However, despite his opposition to the BRS and the fact that he never hid his hostility to the party's reformism, Ash applied to join the CPGB in 1964. His application was rejected as "unacceptable" after a meeting with the London District Committee in June 1964. Ash's remark that "I explained my application on the grounds that in spite of my criticisms there was nothing else that could pass for a communist party" could be read as an indictment of the tiny CDRFCU — see *ibid* pp202–203. Ash's writing was still appearing in CPGB journals such as *Marxism Today* as late as October 1965.

<sup>26</sup> Report from Mollie Mandell on CDRFCU meeting on Cuba held at Conway Hall, December 12 1963 — CP/CENT/ORG/20/07.

<sup>27</sup> Noone *op cit*

<sup>28</sup> Minutes of London District Committee, November 17 1963 — CP/CENT/ORG/20/08. See also 'Communists expel eight' *Daily Worker* November 20 1963.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes of London District Committee *op cit*

<sup>30</sup> See letter from 'BM' to a London District Committee subcommittee, December 11 1963 where it is recorded that at a branch meeting in Edgware, London, on December 10, Issy Siefert resigned from the CPGB, stating that he supported McCreery and was in organised association with him — CP/CENT/ORG/20/08.

<sup>31</sup> See correspondence between London District Committee and Muriel Seltman and Peter Seltman, August–November 1963 — CP/CENT/ORG/20/08. In a letter to John Mahon, London district secretary, dated November 16 1963, the two stated that, although their proposed expulsion was legally acceptable, it was "an attack in the most violent form" on comrades carrying out their communist duty of defending the CPGB and the international movement. They saw their proposed expulsion as "obviously and clearly disruptive".

<sup>32</sup> McCreery *Destroy the old...* *op cit* pp9–13

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid* p9

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* p10

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Bill Bland *op cit*. Bland makes a mistake in this interview of referring to McCreery's organisation as the "ACMLU" and the first organisation that he was in association with Mike Baker as the "MLOB" (see note 58, below, for the lineage of these various splinters).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*. Despite this approach the CDRFCU was still managing to pick up small knots of CPGB members through 1964 — see, for example, 'Statement from Yorkshire' (members of Dewsbury CPGB) in *Vanguard* Volume 1 Number 8, September 1964.

<sup>37</sup> Editorial Departments of *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*) and *Hongqi* (*Red Flag*) 'The leaders of the CPSU are the greatest splitters of our times — comment on the open letter of the Central Committee of the CPSU (VII)', February 4 1964, <http://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/polemic/splitters.htm>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>39</sup> Robert J Alexander, *Maoism in the developed world* Westport 2001 p90

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Bill Bland *op cit*; Thompson *op cit* p236n

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Noone *op cit* pp5–6; and a later comment by the Joint Committee of Communists 'The Marxist-Leninist movement in Britain: origins and perspectives' *The Marxist* Number 12, Autumn 1969 p7: "By utilising his own financial resources McCreery was able to prop up an organisation and a journal which were in reality a sham."

<sup>42</sup> Alexander *Maoism in the developed world op cit* p92

<sup>43</sup> 'Chinese gold' *Vanguard* Volume 1 Number 1, February 1964

<sup>44</sup> *Vanguard* Volume 1 Number 5, June 1964. See also Arthur Major's report, 'An Albanian diary' in *Vanguard* Volume 1 Number 8, September 1964.

<sup>45</sup> McCreery 'The way forward' *The way forward... op cit* p28: "So long as the Third International endured, that is until 1943, the CPGB supported, in the main, the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism..."

<sup>46</sup> McCreery *Destroy the old... op cit*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, pp7–8. The CDRFCU offered *For Soviet Britain* as "the revolutionary programme which [the BRS] replaced" — 'Before the "British Road"' *Vanguard* Volume 1 Number 9, October 1964.

<sup>48</sup> McCreery 'Organise at the place of work' *The way forward... op cit* pp24–27

<sup>49</sup> "But unless there is a party branch, no matter how small, meeting to plan communist argument and communist agitation, these regular contacts will be so many politically wasted opportunities. It is not as a rule sufficient to leave this to individual initiative, to each individual conscience..." — *ibid* pp24–25.

<sup>50</sup> Noone *op cit* p6

<sup>51</sup> Alexander *Maoism in the developed world op cit* p92; *Vanguard* Volume 1 Number 8, September 1964. Evans, who had left the CPGB in 1953, had been an opponent of the CPGB leadership since the second half of the 1940s — see AH Evans *Truth will out: against modern revisionism op cit*; and a 1946 paper criticising Harry Pollitt's *Looking ahead*, CP/IND/MISC/22/08. An Irish group around Brendan Clifford also split away from the orbit of the CDRFCU in



May 1964 to form the Irish Communist Group (later to become the Irish Communist Organisation — after a split with a Trotskyist faction — and then the British and Irish Communist Organisation) — see ‘The revolutionary movement in Ireland in the last 10 years; part one: the anti-revisionist miscarriage’ *Red Patriot: newsweekly of the Communist Party of Ireland (Marxist-Leninist)* Volume 5 Number 42–43, December 1 and 14 1976.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Stalin and the national question’ *Red Front: organ of the Marxist-Leninist Organisation of Britain* March/April 1968

<sup>53</sup> Minutes of London CDRFCU, September 3 1964 in CP/CENT/ORG/20/07. Ivor Kenna’s motion to declare the decisions and recommendations of the national meeting of August 29 and 30 was carried. The votes were six in favour, three against (McCreery, J Siefert and A Cross) and one abstention (Peggy Pinckheard who was chairman). Pinckheard then left the meeting and it was proposed to elect a *pro tem* chairman to continue. McCreery (secretary) said he would not participate in a rump meeting and ordered all present to leave his flat. After “foul language and threatened violence” it was decided to continue the meeting on September 6 (where McCreery was removed as secretary).

<sup>54</sup> *Vanguard* Volume 1 Number 9, October 1964. Members of the secretariat listed are McCreery, Johnny James, D Volpe and J Seifert. The report also stated that regional associations would be established to co-ordinate the group’s work.

<sup>55</sup> Noone *op cit* p7

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Bill Bland *op cit*. *Vanguard* went bi-monthly around the period of McCreery’s death in 1965, which suggests Bland’s point about the importance of this personal finance is correct.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Tasks ahead’ *Vanguard* Volume 2 Number 5, August–September 1965. This article also notes a “certain degree of turnover” in the CDRFCU’s personnel. The argument that CDRFCU members “must be vigilant against overestimating our individual importance” is perhaps an acknowledgement of some of the criticisms aimed at McCreery’s role as ‘leader’.

<sup>58</sup> The ACMLU had a publication called *Hammer or Anvil*, edited by Baker, who was also secretary of the group. He had been expelled from the CDRFCU by a Central Committee meeting of June 13 1965 — ‘No longer associated’ *Vanguard* Volume 2 Number 4, June–July 1965. Baker was later joined by other refugees from the crumbling CDRFCU such as Dave Volpe. According to one source, Baker had been expelled from the CDRFCU after he had moved to London from Manchester to become political organiser, with an intention to strengthen the Central Committee as against the four-man secretariat — see Revolutionary Communist League *Notes towards a history: as it was at the beginning* November 1990 — <http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.firstwave/notestoward.htm>. Other ‘heirs’ to the CDRFCU were the Workers’ Party of Scotland (around Tom Murray and Ken Houlison) and the London Workers’ Committee (around Johnny James and Paul Noone — previously the Islington Workers’ Committee), which eventually became the Working People’s Party of England. The London and Scottish groups had friendly relations, although the ACMLU interpreted them as “a very dangerous development” — letter from Mike Baker

to Communist Party of Belgium (Marxist-Leninist), February 2 1967 in CP/CENT/ORG/20/04.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Bill Bland *op cit.* Bland and Baker, after working together in the ACMLU, were key figures in the founding of the Marxist-Leninist Organisation of Britain (MLOB) in 1967. In January 1968 the MLOB had withdrawn its support for Mao Zedong's faction, now deemed to be "a disguised counter-revolutionary headquarters" — *Red Front* Special Edition 'Report of the Central Committee of the MLOB on the situation in the People's Republic of China' January 1968.

<sup>60</sup> The second issue of this journal suggests that this grouping was on a rapid exit route out of the YCL with a number of the branch having been suspended. An 'Editorial note' says the "reformist nature" of the YCL "cannot be changed from within" and that "comrades still upholding Marxism-Leninism inside the ranks of the YCL must *leave and form a new youth movement*" — see *Red Guard*, Volume 1 Number 2, December 1967. Both the MLOB and the journal initially founded around Reg Birch in 1966, *The Marxist*, apparently had links with such groupings. There is an advert for *Red Guard* in *The Marxist* Volume 1 Number 5, Winter 1967–68. In March–April 1968 the MLOB's *Red Front* reproduced a statement from a group of London members of the YCL, which said that the YCL and CPGB could not be transformed into a Bolshevik party and that a new revolutionary party needed to be constructed — see 'We accuse...! Young communists denounce leadership' *Red Front* Volume 2 Number 1, March–April 1968.

<sup>61</sup> See the letter from Geoff Lee of the Camden Communist Youth Movement, formerly members of St Pancras branch of the YCL, *The Marxist* Volume 1 Number 2, January–February 1967.

<sup>62</sup> Thompson *op cit* p147

<sup>63</sup> *Hammer or Anvil* Volume 1 Number 1, November 1965

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>67</sup> Maureen Scott 'On the development of a programme and the task of building the Marxist-Leninist party' *Hammer or Anvil* Volume 2 Number 2, April–May 1966

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>73</sup> Mike Baker 'Twenty-ninth national congress: Marxism-Leninism or revisionism?' *Hammer or Anvil* Volume 1 Number 1, November 1965

<sup>74</sup> CPGB *The British Road to Socialism*, January 1951 <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/brs/1951/51.htm#5>

<sup>75</sup> Mike Baker *op cit*

<sup>76</sup> 'The Communist Party no longer exists in Britain!' *Hammer or Anvil* Volume 2 Number 1, January–February 1966



<sup>77</sup> Cited in *ibid*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>79</sup> 'Editorial' *Hammer or Anvil* Volume 3 Number 1, July–August 1967

<sup>80</sup> By October 1964 this had changed to the rather more ambiguous *For Marxist-Leninist Struggle*.

<sup>81</sup> 'Towards a new party' *Forum* Number 8, October 1964

<sup>82</sup> 'Editorial' *Forum* (no date but presumably first issue circa February–March 1964). Although, as we have seen above, one of the Seltmans was identified with the journal, it would seem that Evan Gibbon (mentioned by Bill Ash as being previously associated with McCreery — see note 25, above) was also identified by the CPGB leadership as one of *Forum*'s leading figures. See typewritten notes on letter from Mike Baker (ACMLU) to Communist Party of Belgium (Marxist-Leninist), February 2 1967 in CP/CENT/ORG/20/04. Another CPGB document asserted that *Forum* was distributed from Evan Gibbon's address in South London — see CPGB Central Organisation Department *The attack upon the party from the so-called 'extreme left'* March 1964 <http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.firstwave/cpgbattack.htm>. Another anonymous organisation that chose to stay in the CPGB after the split of the CDRFCU was the Committee for the Defence of Marxism-Leninism. According to the document cited immediately above, the group sent out a set of duplicated statements supporting the line of the CCP. The China Policy Study Group was associated with Prof George Thomson who was apparently the only member of the 1951 CPGB EC to vote against the *BRS*. While this grouping does not appear to have functioned as an inner-party pro-China oppositional faction in the same fashion as the group around *Forum*, its members and writers did come under attack from the CPGB's leadership. Colin Penn, a CPGB member in its Belsize, London, branch and also the honorary secretary of the China Policy Study Group, was expelled in July 1966 because of an article in the January 1966 issue of *The Broadsheet* (the monthly journal of the above-named group) "suggesting that the US and the USSR have a similar attitude on some international questions" — see "The tide of anti-revisionist struggle in the CPGB reaches new heights!" *Hammer or Anvil* Volume 2 Number 3, November–December 1966.

<sup>83</sup> 'On the formation of a Marxist-Leninist party' *op cit*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>86</sup> 'Editorial' *Forum* (no date but presumably first issue circa February–March 1964)

<sup>87</sup> 'On the formation of a Marxist-Leninist party' *Forum* Number 5, July 1964

<sup>88</sup> *What's wrong with our Communist Party?*, June 1965; and *The British Road... to where?* July 1965

<sup>89</sup> *What's wrong... op cit* p7

<sup>90</sup> *The British Road... to where?* *op cit* p3

<sup>91</sup> See various sections of *What's wrong... op cit*

<sup>92</sup> RFE/RL background report 'The British communist congress', December 1 1965. The Wembley branch was reported as suggesting that the CPGB might

need to re-examine the *BRS* “to see whether a more revolutionary approach might be necessary”.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*

# Birch branches off

In Reg Birch, the pro-Chinese opposition had, for the first time, a CPGB figure of some importance and standing on its side. A writer in *Forum* had worried that the “anti-revisionist struggle will tend to become the property of a handful of ‘fringe egg-heads’” if the departmentalisation of the CPGB into ‘trade union specialists’, ‘intellectuals’ and so on did not cease.<sup>1</sup> The involvement of Birch was potentially a blow against this division of labour and thus dangerous to the party leadership.

However, there are two ‘tales’ of Birch written by different ‘authors’. In one, Reg Birch is the principled Marxist, disgusted by the counter-revolutionary betrayals of the CPGB in the shape of the *BRS* and thus his departure in 1967 to found the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist) (CPB[M-L]) is the culmination of his political struggle.<sup>2</sup> In the other tale, Reg Birch is a fairly typical CPGB trade unionist, with a sprinkling of Maoist politics picked up after China broke with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s. Thus, if you agree with this story, Birch’s departure from the CPGB can be explained by his disgruntlement at the decision of the party to withdraw support for him in the 1967 AEU presidential election in favour of Hugh Scanlon; his Maoist politics become little more than an exotic sub-plot. Much of Birch’s history in the CPGB is wreathed in shadow. However, as we shall see, there are some pointers as to what might have happened. Before discussing this, it would be pertinent to highlight some general issues about the CPGB’s trade unionists in the post-war period.

## THE REAL ‘ROTTEN ELEMENTS’

Trade unionism was the *raison d’être* for the party in the eyes of many of its militants. Such ideas became even more compelling with the collapse of the CPGB as an electoral force in the post-war period. Such a prioritisation was intensely problematic for the party. The CPGB used to talk about its ‘rotten elements’, those poor souls unwise enough to counter or doubt ‘the line’. But the real rot was trade union economism. Embedded in the party’s development were the ideas that trade union work was good in itself and that a primary loyalty to your trade union (a bourgeois institution, albeit one with a working class base) was a prerequisite for communists (a trail blazed by Harry Pollitt in the 1930s, as he dodged the practical implementation of Third Period politics).

The CPGB, to all practical intents and purposes, thus became blind to the limitations of trade unionism, which is essentially a bargain over the terms of slavery (as an aside, no one is suggesting that work in the trade union movement was not necessary for revolutionary groups, or that the CPGB was incorrect in according it a high priority during this period).

Party members were “builders of unions, assiduous agents on behalf of unions — collecting the subs, distributing information, holding meetings, recruiting members, opposing apathy, cynicism and splitters”.<sup>3</sup> In this particular context, such work tended to merely structure a reformist culture. This was given a further boost by the adoption of the *BRS* in 1951. So it was that the seeming permanence of bourgeois institutions and the need to utilise external crutches (the Labour Party, trade unions) loomed ever larger in the CPGB mindset.

The manner in which the party approached trade unions actually meant the dissipation of its influence *as a party*. In this vein, Callaghan talks of the leadership’s “uphill struggle” to maintain factory branches in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>4</sup> He later states: “It was a convenient simplification to depict communist trade unionists as politically motivated robots under the central direction of King Street. The party itself worried that some of its industrial militants were interested in nothing other than trade unionism... .”<sup>5</sup>

This notion of CPGB trade unionists is a familiar one: “Griff Jones, the lodge chairman and uncrowned king of a big colliery up the valley, was an old party member and lived in Porthneinion, but though he was always friendly enough and would ask you in for a cup of tea, you could never get him either to come to a meeting or to sign up any more of his mates in the lodge. Richard soon realised that the real influence of the party lay elsewhere, that it was widely looked to to give a lead in the union, and for that a handful like Griff felt themselves to be enough.”<sup>6</sup>

This fictional account rings true when the likes of JR Campbell remarked in the mid-1960s that of the CPGB’s 25,000 trade union activists, perhaps only one in 10 attended an industrial party meeting each year.<sup>7</sup> Another member (echoing the line of the CDRFCU militant quoted above) stated “there are two Communist Parties — members of one work in ward branches and members of the other work in industry”.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the party’s industrial department did have responsibility for overseeing the work of the industrial advisories that brought together CPGB members to coordinate their union work. Callaghan says that they “acted as transmission belts for the formulation and dissemination of party policy”.<sup>9</sup> This sounds fine in theory but what actual control did it give the party as a whole over its union militants? From Campbell’s above remark, it would seem that a number of union activists would not bother to attend such gatherings. In the context of a reformist culture that venerated trade unionism, one does suspect that the transmission belt fed from the union to the political centre and only rarely the other way.

The idolisation of trade unions as *trade unions* and the perceived future reliance on a ‘special’ type of Labour government to enact socialism screamed ‘ginger group’, despite the protestations of the CPGB leadership to the contrary. In

those circumstances, there simply is not much utility in shouting about your politics (if you have any left that can be distinguished from Labourism). Communism thus becomes an individual point of identity that is fairly meaningless in practice. Probably one of the only things marking out a CPGB member on the shop floor in the 1950s and 1960s would have been tireless activism and a rather peculiar set of ideas about the Soviet Union (or, in some cases, China).

### THE WORKPLACE ENIGMA

So when oppositionists such as McCreery and McShane (see previous chapters) made what they thought was a revolutionary criticism of the CPGB in relation to its inability to build factory and workplace branches (a theme common to many CPGB oppositionists down the years<sup>10</sup>) they were barking up the wrong tree. Even if by some miracle the CPGB had consistently managed to build up such branches in the post-war period, they would have only very likely have given a more organised structure to the reformist activity of its trade unionists (given that the party as a whole was infected with reformism) in that it was the culture and political ideas of the CPGB that were critical, not the particular manner in which they were organised (or, in this case, often unorganised).<sup>11</sup> Of course, workplace branches that encompassed all of the CPGB's trade unionists in a disciplined structure might have meant trade unionists being exposed to more revolutionary arguments on occasion. But in the overall scheme of things this would have been unlikely to bear much fruit. Simply put, the workplace is not some kind of special repository for communist politics — the mastery of the *whole of society* by the working class — just by virtue of being a workplace. Thus, McCreery's idea that "it is at the point of production that we can most effectively wage the class struggle"<sup>12</sup> effectively concedes ground to reformism. The reverse is also true: there was nothing essentially anti-revolutionary about residential branches, as Birch and others argued. Indeed, it was these (often London-based) branches that were by and large producing CPGB oppositionists, albeit in tiny numbers.

Reg Birch was an exception to this trend. By the beginning of the 1960s his influence in the AEU was growing from his base on the London North District Committee. Already an AEU National Committee member for 17 years, in 1960 Birch was elected as divisional organiser of London North and in 1966 he was elected as Executive Council member for London and Southeast England. Birch had stood for the presidency of the AEU in 1956 and 1964, being defeated by Bill Carron on both occasions. Thus when he marked himself out to the CPGB leadership in the mid-1960s as pro-Chinese, he could not be shrugged off as easily as a Heffer or a McCreery.

Birch joined the CPGB around 1939, at about the same time he was first elected as a shop steward. Podmore says: "Reg joined the CPGB around this time almost, he later said, to return a favour to a CPGB comrade who showed exceptional care to Reg and his first wife Kit when she was dying, tragically

young, of stomach cancer. Later Reg said that he should never have joined the CPGB, it was always a mistake and that he never really wanted to be in.”<sup>13</sup> If Birch had left the CPGB after a couple of years then Podmore’s line would ring truer but in the context of 28 years’ membership it seems to be a case of projecting the CPB(M-L)’s later anti-CPGB line backwards. More plausible is Podmore’s statement that: “Like many others, [Birch] stayed so long in the CPGB from a mistaken sense of Leninist discipline, from a belief that you did not run away but persevered with the struggle within.”<sup>14</sup>

Further problems arise when we consider other CPB(M-L)-inspired musings on Birch’s early career as a CPGB oppositionist. Les Elliott, a founder member of the CPB(M-L) alongside Birch and later AEU London organiser, said of the Second World War period: “I gathered that not all was well even then between Reg and the [CPGB]. Reg was too much of a worker, whereas some of those others were people who could quote word for word what Karl Marx or Frederick Engels had said and used to do so quite frequently, praising Harry Pollitt as a populariser, to make believe they were something they weren’t.”<sup>15</sup> Podmore asserts: “From 1950, Reg opposed the proposed [BRS] programme for its blatant revisions of Marxism.”<sup>16</sup>

If this is true, why was Birch enlisted by the leadership onto the CPGB’s EC at the 1957 congress, at a time when it was still trying to face down the events of 1956? It seems unlikely that someone who, according to Podmore, was questioning the fundamentals of the CPGB’s strategy would have been welcome on one of its leading bodies when the leadership was trying to deal with the consequences of Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin and the suppression of a popular anti-Stalinist revolt in Hungary.

In fact, Birch’s name was strongly identified with the ‘revisionist’ pro-Labour, class-collaborationist politics practised by the CPGB on the shopfloor. Writing in 1946 when he was a member of the CPGB’s London District Committee, he argued: “Employers are not going to be allowed to do things just as they think fit. The nation’s needs must come before the personal ambitions of the old employing class. Because of the urgent needs of the day, there is every reason why joint production committees should be in existence, more so today than in the most perilous war days. The people have elected a Labour government — the first of its kind in the history of this country. There are powerful interests already at work sabotaging the efforts of this government.”<sup>17</sup> This does not square with his later suggestion that he was aware from the Second World War of “the acme of the revisionism around the world via the international”.<sup>18</sup> In all probability, Reg Birch’s oppositional career was confined to after the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s.

By 1965 the CPGB leadership had begun to tighten the screws on Birch. In John Gollan’s papers in the CPGB archive, there is a file that details an EC subcommittee investigation into Birch’s activities in 1965 that effectively

*Taking a stand:  
Reg Birch (at  
the microphone,  
centre) speaking  
at a demonstra-  
tion beneath  
a CPB (M-L)  
banner in 1973*



amounts to Birch being spied on and his name and character being dragged through the mud (some of this slipped out into the mainstream media).<sup>19</sup> Judging from these papers, this was an unpleasant, personalised affair that bred even more paranoia and suspicion on both sides. One can see from these events why Birch (and his CPB[M-L]) had so much subsequent disdain for the CPGB. The upshot of these events was that Birch was censured by the EC for writing a letter “the EC considered he should not have written”.<sup>20</sup>

However, as the November 1965 congress loomed it became clear that, whatever dubious methods the leadership was using against Birch, it was broader political questions that were at stake. On October 30 1965 the London District Committee discussed nominations, including that of Birch, for the EC (Birch was of course a sitting member). A discussion of his position took place and the 37 members present unanimously decided to oppose him. The committee felt that Birch had been in “consistent and growing opposition” to CPGB policy on the question of the international communist movement (the Sino-Soviet split).<sup>21</sup> His views were recorded as being common knowledge in engineering and other active party circles in London. The committee noted discussion at meetings of north London engineering activists and a number of informal conversations. It was felt that Birch had not fulfilled his responsibility of fighting for the party’s policy. In conclusion: “The essence of our opposition to the election of RB is that he is opposed to party policy on a vital issue and that his opposition is not limited to reservation of opinion but is active opposition.”<sup>22</sup> Birch’s career on the EC was at an end.

However, strange as it might seem, this was not quite the end of Birch’s hopes for the CPGB and the AEU. He told Dennis Goodwin in December 1965:



"We should not allow the differences in the international movement to be reflected in our trade union work."<sup>23</sup> It would also appear that Birch knew of the possibility of the CPGB backing Scanlon in the forthcoming AEU presidential election by early 1966: "I am told the real purpose [of a Manchester social] is to canvass putting forward Scanlon for the presidency. Of course he has a perfect right to put himself forward but it is not right that this gathering should be pressed ahead with no discussion or consultation with other party members."<sup>24</sup> In the first quote, Birch shows he has picked up the reformist idea of 'trade union specialisation' from his time in the CPGB: 'politics' is deemed to be separate from the 'union'. And, of course, up until this point Birch's rise in the CPGB was paralleled by his rise in the AEU. Maybe he did see an immersion in his union as a way to circumvent his political fall. However, bearing in mind the nature of his treatment by the CPGB leadership in 1965, it seems difficult to see how these relationships could be repaired.

### WRITING WITH THE ENEMY

There are other pieces of evidence that also suggest this opposition between 'politics' and 'union' existed in Birch's mind. In 1966, while still a CPGB member, he penned the introduction to a book by Tony Cliff and Colin Barker — *Incomes policy, legislation and shop stewards* — of the International Socialists, an organisation of Trotskyist descent.<sup>25</sup> This is interesting, in that the CPGB's Maoist groups and individuals had an extremely hostile attitude to Trotskyists. The ACMLU characterised Birch's act as building "a united front with the Trotskyists, the most dangerous enemies of the working class" and Tony Cliff as a "notorious Trotskyist and vicious enemy of people's China".<sup>26</sup> But here is Reg Birch, identified as the CPGB's leading Maoist, stating of (unorthodox) Trotskyists: "We should thank [Cliff and Barker] for their contributions whether or not we accept *in toto* the political conclusions."<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, Birch thought that the authors had useful things to say to the trade union movement and the division that he saw between 'unions' and 'politics' saved that contribution from the hellfire that most 'Marxist-Leninists' would have damned it. This division spread deeper into some of the specific points that were made in the introduction: "It is in the second part that the book is not so well informed. I do not accept that the extension of shop stewards' organisations, their increase in number, will automatically lead to the development of a socialist movement. There needs to be politics — working class politics. This is not a question of being militant on economic demands within the factory or place of work alone, or of taking one's politics from the policies or utterances of the 'politicians', whether of right or left, but of the development of political aims by the working class, and of insisting that it is not a case of our supporting or adopting the policies of political parties but of their supporting the aims and aspirations of the working class."<sup>28</sup> On one level, this is a perfectly acceptable critique of the short-sighted economism that the likes of the International Socialists were peddling. But Birch wants to have his cake and eat it. He criticises economism (where revolutionary politics emerge

spontaneously from the trade union struggle) but nullifies it by abstracting 'politicians' and political parties from their class. By retaining a division between 'politics at large' and the 'working class struggle', Birch and others in the CPGB were helping to make sure that trade unionists/shop stewards stayed just that.

Birch was not supported by the CPGB in the 1967 AEU presidential election; ex-CPGB member Hugh Scanlon being backed as the 'broad left' candidate, in line with *BRS*-type notions of a united left. The party's national engineering advisory committee voted 24–16 in favour of Scanlon.<sup>29</sup> Birch chose to contest the election without formal CPGB support and was easily defeated.<sup>30</sup> In January 1967 he was suspended from party membership for three months, ostensibly on the grounds of his support for China in its dispute with the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup>

Towards the end of 1966, Birch became a member of the editorial board of *The Marxist*, a new discussion journal, originally intended to be bi-monthly. Contributors included other AEU/CPGB members such as Jim Kean, Ted Roycraft and shop stewards' convenor Tom Hill, comrades recently expelled from the CPGB such as Colin Penn and Mike Faulkner (ex-YCL), and unaffiliated Maoists such as Bill Ash.<sup>32</sup> Birch wrote the keynote article in the first issue — 'The Wilson screw on the workers' — in which he proclaimed: "The overthrow of capitalism should... be the purpose behind every action."<sup>33</sup>

In line with previous opposition groups, the CPGB's "preoccupation with the Khrushchevian version of 'peaceful coexistence' — that is the renunciation of real struggle against imperialism headed by the United States" was linked to its blurring of the "fundamental conflict between social democracy and Marxism" and the avoidance of revolutionary struggle in the *BRS*.<sup>34</sup> In its second issue, the journal featured an article from Colin Penn defending China's Cultural Revolution.<sup>35</sup>

The finance behind *The Marxist* (which was initially extremely professional in its design and production) appears to have come from businessman Jack Perry (a director of various companies and a council member of the British Council for the Promotion of International Trade also involved with the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding), who had severed his links with the CPGB around the time of the Sino-Soviet split and set about building business and political links with the CPC.<sup>36</sup>

The London District Committee (LDC) of the CPGB denounced *The Marxist* in late 1966 on the basis of its pro-Chinese politics; its disavowal of 'peaceful coexistence'; its opposition to the CPGB's version of 'left unity'; and its supposed rejection of a peaceful transition to socialism without civil war.<sup>37</sup> An LDC statement said: "Like all sectarian groups, they want the movement to go back to square one and start anew under their leadership... This negative approach can only lead to inactivity and demobilisation of the left."<sup>38</sup> But at this

point (February/March 1967) the writers of *The Marxist* were not apparently ready to declare themselves as any kind of 'new party' solution: "Unfortunately, mainly owing to the policies of the CPGB, it is necessary to re-learn Marxism and, in this sense, 'to go back to square one', but in this sense only... New leaders — and no one yet knows who they will be — need not make again the mistakes that the CPGB has made."<sup>39</sup>

### SPLIT PERSONALITIES

However, it seems that as 1967 advanced, Reg Birch had decided who those leaders might be. In the Winter 1967–68 issue of *The Marxist*, a new editorial committee apologised for its inability to keep to its original bi-monthly production schedule.<sup>40</sup> The names of Reg Birch, Sam Nelson and Ted Roycraft (all on the original committee) were missing, although the other five members of the old committee (including Jim Kean and Tom Hill of the AEU) were still listed alongside new members.<sup>41</sup> Clearly there had been a split as Birch moved to found his new organisation in September 1967. The new editorial committee chose to hide this split in its ranks, although confusingly the new committee did appear to have reached the idea (like Birch) that there were no more gains to be made inside the CPGB: "It is now no more than a left adjunct of social-democracy which, like the social-democratic parties actually assist the capitalist class in maintaining its power."<sup>42</sup> The committee then upbraided itself for previously avoiding the problems involved in creating a new party.<sup>43</sup> It looked to a variety of (unspecified) Marxist-Leninist groups and individuals as being the raw material from which a future new party could be formed. The implicit message behind this was that there had been a split with Birch and his followers, and that leading figures in *The Marxist* felt that what was to become the CPB(M-L) was too narrow in organisational scope.<sup>44</sup>

In September 1967 Birch convened a meeting in Conway Hall, London, which set up a Provisional Committee that worked towards the official inauguration of the CPB(M-L) in Easter 1968. Joining Birch and his wife Dorothy were a number of his AEU comrades, including Les Elliott, Glyn Jones, Les Doust and Ted Roycraft, plus the writer Bill Ash.<sup>45</sup> Ash commented later that it was Birch's intention to "pick up whatever good elements there were among the floating anti-revisionists".<sup>46</sup> However, Birch was unable to win hegemony over an extremely fragmented extra-CPGB Maoist left, the new organisation being set up itself on the basis of a split with his former comrades in *The Marxist*. Even a loyal supporter such as Ash said of the CPB(M-L)'s formation period that "there was considerable ferment and a lot of loose, free-wheeling political fragments hurtling about, like elements shooting off every which way when a nuclear entity is bombarded in a cloud chamber".<sup>47</sup>

Reg Birch's career as a revolutionary oppositionist in the CPGB is confirmation, if any more were needed, of the difficulties faced by such elements. The leadership appears to have moved with a measure of caution against him and it is almost certainly the case that a less important member would have been

expelled (or suspended) much earlier than Birch. However, my feeling is that Birch was not a run-of-the-mill oppositionist. It is very hard to maintain the idea of him as some kind of consistent, principled opponent of the leadership. Too many facts refuse to fit this tale. When he did become a pro-Chinese oppositionist in the 1960s, it is clear that he was working away at various levels of the party and union to convince people of his views. The nature of the personal attacks on Birch during the leadership's 1965 investigation of him would have meant that it would have been extremely difficult to repair a fractured relationship. His propensity to separate out 'union' and 'political' issues was either an opportunistic tactic or, as seems more likely, an honest reflection of his training in the economistic school of CPGB trade unionism. It is this 'separation' that pushes one towards the conclusion that it was events in the AEU that hastened the formation of the CPB(M-L), with Maoism playing a supporting role. Thus, Birch ultimately proved to be no solution to the problem that 'fringe' revolutionary oppositionists had in finding an audience with CPGB trade unionists.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'Editorial' *Forum* (no date but presumably first issue circa February–March 1964)

<sup>2</sup> This appears to be the ideological *modus operandi* of Will Podmore *Reg Birch: engineer, trade unionist, communist* London 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Callaghan *op cit* p35

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* pp32–33

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* p232

<sup>6</sup> Margot Heinemann *The adventurers* London 1962 p206

<sup>7</sup> Callaghan *op cit* p251

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* p249

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* p39

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *What's wrong... op cit* p4; Birch himself said: "The pushing really for the beginning of the [CPB(M-L)] was the acme of the revisionism around the world via the international and pioneered in Britain by Pollitt. And what happened is they collected among them a number of people, and at the end of the war promulgated the idea of a municipal band of communists, not party factory. The reason for not party factory was that in the great progress through the war, thanks to the Red Army, many lofty proletarians emerged, who towered way above the party moguls and would have outdistanced them in a day. That's why we began." Cited in Podmore *op cit* p44.

<sup>11</sup> Some of the evidence collected by the CPGB leadership in preparation for a factory branch conference on June 11–12 1966 shows that even where militants did sustain functioning workplace branches this did not lead to a qualitative difference politically. A discussion with George Anthony of the Ship Repair Branch (covering London and Surrey docks) recorded that "the workers do not yet see the party branch as an all-round political force but rather as a ginger group for the [trade union] organisation". Apparently, the last material issued in the name of the branch had been a folder for the 1964 General Election. A

similar discussion with Les Burt and Peter Whatford of Thrupp and Maberley branch (car factory in north London) noted that: “Many of the workers including some of our own members see the factory [trade union] organisation as the important thing and do not see the need for all-round political work” — see CP/CENT/IND/1/2.

<sup>12</sup> Proposed speech to London District Congress, 1962 in CP/CENT/ORG/20/06

<sup>13</sup> Podmore *op cit* p7

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* p44

<sup>15</sup> ‘Les Elliott remembers a comrade and a friend’ *The Worker*, July 1994

<sup>16</sup> Podmore *op cit* p44

<sup>17</sup> Reg Birch *A wage based on human needs: for all workers in the metal, engineering, ship-building and allied trades* London 1946

<sup>18</sup> See note 10, above

<sup>19</sup> See CP/IND/GOLL/04/06. The investigation seems to have been prompted in May 1965 by letters that Birch wrote to fellow AEU and CPGB member Tom Hill that were wrongly interpreted as being written to EF (Ted) Hill, an oppositionist in the Australian CP (the address on one letter was that of Tom Hill and the name written, incorrectly it seems, was ‘Ted Hill’). In these letters, Birch makes some references to his factional work on the CPGB EC. (In an undated letter he finds the situation “very encouraging” and thinks it is positive that people on the EC are now beginning to argue and express themselves. It is a “fundamental change which needs to be encouraged”. He also claims that “nobody would own any political reasons to support K[hrushchev]”.) These letters were intercepted by a secretary (herself a longstanding CPGB member) in Birch’s AEU office in London after being alerted to the words ‘bloc’ and ‘November’ in one of them, which she guessed were references to the 1965 congress. These letters were then passed on to the CPGB. It is clear from a number of these documents that Birch was disgusted at the turn of events although serious allegations were made from both sides. The file also has some correspondence from party members after a leak had led to the *Daily Mail* reporting on May 25 that the CPGB was set to expel Birch for his pro-Chinese views. It is clear from EC records from the period that Birch had voiced his pro-Chinese views in inner-party debates and opposed the expulsion of pro-Chinese members such as Muriel and Peter Seltman. See the minutes and notes for the EC meeting of March 14–15 1964 in CP/CENT/EC/09/11.

<sup>20</sup> Notes on subcommittee meeting, July 1965 in CP/IND/GOLL/04/06

<sup>21</sup> Notes on London District Committee, October 30 1965 in CP/IND/GOLL/04/06

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*. Birch replied to these points at the meeting: “We are not selecting a group but discussing who is to lead the working class... Anyone aspiring to such leadership has one outstanding responsibility — to fully expose his mind... I cannot subscribe to the idea that if you shut your mouth that is loyal... The executive must be a forum for discussion and that means there must be disagreement... My time on the EC has been very disappointing to me. I have not found what I hoped for.” Birch also tells the committee: “You are the most

unfriendly lot I have ever met.”

<sup>23</sup> Points raised by Reg Birch in conversation with Dennis Goodwin, December 15 1965 in CP/IND/GOLL/04/06. Goodwin was a full-time worker in the CPGB's Industrial Department.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* January 15 (1966)

<sup>25</sup> Reg Birch 'Introduction' Tony Cliff and Colin Barker *Incomes policy, legislation and shop stewards* London 1966

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1966/incomespol/0-intro.htm>

<sup>26</sup> 'The role of *The Marxist*' *Hammer or Anvil* Volume 3 Number 1, July–August 1967 p13. *Forum* had an editorial policy of excluding Trotskyists: "No Trotskyist point of view will be published. The Trotskyists are working overtime at the present moment to infiltrate into as many Marxist-Leninist groups as possible. Their influence now, as in the past, is pernicious." See 'Editorial' in *Forum* (no date but presumably first issue circa February–March 1964).

<sup>27</sup> Birch 'Introduction' *op cit*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>29</sup> Podmore *op cit* p65

<sup>30</sup> Scanlon got around 55,000 votes and Birch "less than 20,000" — *ibid* p67.

<sup>31</sup> Callaghan *op cit* p239

<sup>32</sup> Faulkner was part of a Maoist faction in St Pancras YCL circa 1966 and became a manager of the new journal, being entrusted with the task of keeping in contact with readers around the country. The editorial committee of *The Marxist* was initially composed of Reg Birch, Mike Faulkner, Jim Kean, Tom Hill, Ewan MacColl, Sam Nelson, Colin Penn and Ted Roycraft.

<sup>33</sup> Reg Birch 'The Wilson screw on the workers' *The Marxist* Volume 1 Number 1, November–December 1966 p8

<sup>34</sup> 'Our purpose' *The Marxist* Volume 1 Number 1, November–December 1966 pp2–3

<sup>35</sup> Colin Penn 'China's Cultural Revolution' *The Marxist* Volume 1 Number 2, January–February 1967 pp9–19

<sup>36</sup> See 'The role of *The Marxist*' *op cit* for the ACMLU's exhaustive investigation of Perry's various holdings and business associations. See also David Widgery *The left in Britain 1956–68* Harmondsworth 1976 p492.

<sup>37</sup> 'Back to square one?' *The Marxist* Volume 1 Number 3, March–April 1967 pp26–28

<sup>38</sup> Cited in *ibid* p28

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>40</sup> *The Marxist* Volume 1 Number 5, Winter 1967–68 p2

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid* p6

<sup>42</sup> 'Statement by the editorial committee' *The Marxist* Volume 1 Number 5, Winter 1967–68 p2

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid* pp3–6

<sup>44</sup> A later statement in *The Marxist* by the Joint Committee of Communists (JCC) argued that the CPB(M-L) shared "striking political and organisational similarities" of a negative kind with McCreery's CDRFCU — 'The Marxist-Leninist movement in Britain: origins and perspectives' *The Marxist* Number

12, Autumn 1969, p8. The JCC was a federation of local autonomous groupings that had left or been expelled from the YCL. It was formed in April 1967 and had refused to enter the CPB(M-L). A group of North London AEU members also declined to follow Birch and eventually formed the Brent Marxist Industrial Group, contributing to *The Marxist*.

<sup>45</sup> Podmore *op cit* p73

<sup>46</sup> Ash *op cit* p208. Ash subsequently became editor of the CPB(M-L)'s paper *The Worker*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid* p209. For a more detailed exploration of this inability of Birch's CPB(M-L) to positively integrate the existing groups and tendencies in the 'anti-revisionist' movement on much more than a 'take-it-or-leave-it' basis, see the account of a participant in this process in TM 'Revisionism and the British anti-revisionist movement' *Marxist-Leninist Quarterly* Number 3, Winter 1972–73.



# 1977 and all that

At the CPGB's 1965 congress, leaders of what was a growing pro-Soviet opposition trend — Sid French, Surrey district secretary, and Les Howey, Hants and Dorset district secretary — were critical of the leadership's handling of the Sino-Soviet conflict in relation to a March 1965 19-party meeting in Moscow. However, this tendency had no Maoist leanings whatsoever. It was more concerned that the British party had been seemingly reluctant to attend the aforementioned meeting and that the British and Italian parties had opposed a subsequent communiqué calling for the convening of an 81-party international conference.<sup>1</sup> What lay behind these rumblings was concern over the CPGB leadership's attempt to steer something of a neutral course in the Sino-Soviet split (in the midst of a broadly pro-Soviet line) and the party thus appearing to be out of step with Moscow.

Up until 1977 this opposition was centred on Surrey district with its full-time secretary Sid French, often with the assistance of Hants and Dorset, another of its strong areas.<sup>2</sup> There were also networks of comrades — often led by a local operator who kept his or her own group in contact with more senior factional leaders — who did not have the luxury of controlling their own districts.<sup>3</sup> After French and the majority of the activists in the Surrey district had departed to form the New Communist Party (NCP) in 1977, ex-student organiser Fergus Nicholson and lecturer John Foster emerged as key spokesmen of this shadow 'party within a party'. For the most part, this opposition worked in what was subsequently classed as a "disciplined manner",<sup>4</sup> which in practice meant a mixture of subterranean plotting, utilising the limited democratic forums that the leadership offered (such as contributing to pinched pre-congress discussions in the CPGB weekly of this period, *Comment*, pressurising the leadership with various communications and winning congress votes). The battle was thus largely conducted on the leadership's own terrain.

As stated above, the leaders of this trend were hostile to others inside the CPGB that were influenced by the Chinese in the mid-1960s. Worse, there is some evidence that areas such as Surrey actively 'fingered' oppositionists in this period. For example, in April 1965, the Surrey District Committee passed a resolution that stated: "This DPC believes it is contrary to the democracy and discipline of the party for members particularly of elected higher committees to assist in the launching of organisations part of whose object is clearly to fight against the policy of our party. In the absence of a disclaimer from Comrade Reg Birch re: SACU [Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding] it calls on the EC to take action to ensure that no party members have more rights than any others in relation to the principle that party policy is binding on us all."<sup>5</sup> It was thus clear that this trend, right from the outset, did not have any particular empathy with the critique of the CPGB's reformism that had been advanced

over the previous few years by its 'Maoist' factions. Rather, it had a much more circumscribed critique, occasionally bolstered by revolutionary rhetoric, which did develop into more of a 'full-blown' critique among some individuals and groups in its orbit.<sup>6</sup>

The broad outlines of this faction's politics emerged over the next decade with the Surrey district and Sid French taking a clear leadership role (unsurprisingly, since the energy and resources of a CPGB district were a useful bridgehead in the context of a vertically organised party). Key battles were over the name change of the *Daily Worker* (which became the *Morning Star* in April 1966), where the opposition challenged the appeasement of the bourgeois inclinations of non-manual workers (many of whom, ironically, were having their roles steadily proletarianised) and the undemocratic manner in which this was decided (i.e. without reference to a party congress).<sup>7</sup> The events of 1968 were also important for the pro-Soviet wing. The opposition of the majority of CPGB members to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in that year was a confirmation that sections of the party were moving away from the auto-Sovietism insisted upon by French and company. Despite being relatively easily defeated on the issue at the 1969 congress, two of 18 district committees — Surrey, and Hants and Dorset — had voted against an EC resolution that was critical of the Soviet action, while three of 18 district congresses — Surrey, Hants and Dorset, and the North East — had also rejected it.<sup>8</sup> The actions of the Soviet Union and its allies were defined by this trend as "working-class internationalism". "Anti-Sovietism" (and hence, in this rhetoric, "anti-communism") was deemed to be a weapon of the capitalist class through its Trotskyist and anarchist agents: "The newspapers, television and radio back up these ultra-leftist attacks on the Soviet Union and real socialism, using their lies to combat the growing influence of socialist ideas among young people, especially the working-class youth."<sup>9</sup>

However, underlying this opposition's more well-known actions and ideological predilections was a clear (and correct) recognition that the CPGB was in the throes of a very deep decline and was moving into crisis. For example, in April 1966, the Surrey District Committee prepared a document for an EC discussion on electoral work, calling for a "fundamental re-examination of our electoral work and perspectives". It argued: "As we have concentrated more and more on elections the party has been able to give less and less attention to the planning and leadership of mass struggle." The document, somewhat rhetorically, added: "Has our electoral work really helped advance our congress line of unity [of the labour movement]? In fact many see the way we contest as a contradiction of our unity policy in the context of large Labour votes side by side with small and declining communist votes."<sup>10</sup> In May 1967, French wrote to John Gollan, CPGB general secretary, to request some space in the party press to discuss the organisation's specific problems. He felt the wider party should be made aware of the negative features in the organisation, for example, declining sales for the *Morning Star* and *Comment*, and shrinking votes. French also wondered why on

May Day in London a “splinter group’... had 85 per cent as many on the march as did the party”.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the relative discretion shown by this trend in terms of the CPGB’s rules, its leaders, in particular, had had their ‘cards marked’ by the national leadership of the party. For example, in March 1971, Tony McNally, a member of the YCL’s National Committee, reported to the CPGB PC that Sid French and Les Howey had referred to the YCL leadership as a ‘mafia’ in a private conversation outside an EC meeting. Such complaints would, of course, be utterly laughable, if the PC had not then asked French for a written statement giving his views of the exchange.<sup>12</sup>

### ALL PART OF THE APPEAL

Despite the fact that it had a staunchly pro-Soviet line on international issues, what was to become the Appeal Group defined its domestic stance against that of the mainstream pro-Soviet opposition led by the Surrey district.<sup>13</sup> Although this small group of CPGB members came to relative prominence in 1971, its opposition, centred on Bexley branch (in the Kent district of the CPGB) and Eddie Jackson (an engineer who had been a shop steward and fitter at the Royal Arsenal) had been around since the early 1950s. Jackson had opposed the introduction of the *BRS* and its notion of a peaceful, electoral road to socialism.

In line with the *BRS*, Rule 2(b) of the CPGB tied the party to “a united struggle... expressed in a parliamentary majority of socialists and communists pledged to a genuine socialist programme”.<sup>14</sup> Bexley’s strategy down the years was to propose amendments to this rule that would free the CPGB from this injunction and open up a debate around the issue of the reformist versus the revolutionary road to socialism, so that the party could rid itself of the *BRS*. Bexley’s amendment to Rule 2(b) for the 1971 congress would have committed the CPGB to: “Work to maintain, defend and extend democracy within the present system; to develop mass struggles on the issues that concern the people; to constantly spread the revolutionary theory and practice of Marxism-Leninism; to achieve higher organisation and greater unity of the working class and its allies to effect the overthrow of the capitalist state and establish the rule of the working class and begin to build socialism.”<sup>15</sup> Jackson thought that the advantage of such an amendment was that it left “all roads to socialism open”, including the “parliamentary road”.<sup>16</sup>

However, by 1971 this long-term strategy was looking to be a failure and Bexley branch was isolated from the broader pro-Soviet wing of the CPGB, who were not supporting its amendments (see below).<sup>17</sup> Jackson alleged that down the years Bexley branch had been a victim of some sharp practice on behalf of the party bureaucracy in Kent and nationally.<sup>18</sup> During the 1969 congress he said he had been given just three minutes to move Bexley’s amendment and oppose an EC amendment.<sup>19</sup> These roadblocks continued at district level in the run-up to the 1971 congress, with another alleged attempt to derail Bexley’s

amendment and the suspension of Jackson from the branch committee by the Kent leadership.<sup>20</sup>

Despite this, the Bexley amendment was taken by the 1971 congress (where it won 25 votes).<sup>21</sup> However, negotiating a bureaucratic minefield had obviously made its mark on Jackson and his followers as they planned their strategy for the 1971 congress. The group came to the conclusion that working in the framework of the CPGB's rules to get an opposition message heard (the strategy of Sid French and the 'mainstream' pro-Soviet opposition) was a dead-end.<sup>22</sup> Alongside the amendment, Jackson and other Bexley comrades decided to hand out a polemical document to congress delegates as they entered Camden Town Hall. Jackson authored *Congress: an appeal to delegates* and Bill Horton, Mick Laws, David Daniels and Daphne Liddle were listed as subscribing to the views expressed in the document.<sup>23</sup> This was the core of what came to be known as the Appeal Group.

The document itself shows that despite the Bexley amendment theoretically leaving a door open to the peaceful, parliamentary road to socialism favoured by the CPGB majority, Jackson and company were firmly in the anti-BRS camp, in that parliament was not seen as a route towards socialism, rather it was a tool of class domination: "Capitalism works better and is not so obviously a class system if it is a parliamentary democracy."<sup>24</sup> The appeal was also scornful of the illusion of, and the illusions sown in, the parliamentary 'left' of the Labour Party. Jackson, in polemical remarks aimed against general secretary John Gollan, drew attention to the CPGB's revolutionary past, when its aim was to "disperse parliament and institute the Soviet system. That was long ago. Comrade Gollan has no doubt forgotten it".<sup>25</sup>

The group was expelled from the CPGB after the congress. However, the comrades chose to try and fight their expulsions in the hope of having the chance to address a future congress on their reasons for issuing the appeal. Also, they did not encourage any of their contacts to resign positions in the CPGB, the line being that "we're the real communists, not the leadership".<sup>26</sup> The tactic of winning further appeals did not work, however, what then became the Appeal Group did not go down the sectarian dead-end previously adopted by McCreery's CDRFCU. It had members inside and outside the CPGB, using pseudonyms in minutes to protect 'insider' members' identities and worked with other party contacts to help them construct and argue Appeal Group politics within the CPGB.<sup>27</sup> It aimed to recruit supporters both inside and outside the CPGB to fight for its anti-revisionist platform, with the help of an independent "organising-cum-agitative paper".<sup>28</sup> Initially the group grew a little in its first few years of existence, although it never numbered more than 30.<sup>29</sup>

There were some ambiguities in the Appeal Group's position on retaining membership of the CPGB. Branch members appending their names to *Congress: an appeal to delegates* made them easy targets for expulsion and in

retrospect seems like a rash move for a group that wished to retain CPGB membership. John Chamberlain attended some Appeal Group meetings as a potential recruit: “The problem I had with the Appeal Group was that at the first meeting I attended of theirs they were toying with the idea of declaring themselves *the* party, which is mad, and quite frankly, to walk out of the CPGB on the basis that you were disaffected was, I thought, stupid. If they were an opposition I would have been interested in pursuing my relationship with them, but they were on their way out, I thought into the wilderness.”<sup>30</sup> Chamberlain gives no date to this encounter and it would seem to contradict the more sensible strategy outlined above. However, Chamberlain’s memory that the Appeal Group were “toying” with the idea of a ‘grander’ status is also present in the appeal to the 1971 congress: “We must break with the revisionists now and build a truly Marxist-Leninist pro-Soviet party.”<sup>31</sup> This may have been Jackson’s intention as the document was authored, but presumably the limited echo of the appeal among delegates and even CPGB oppositional elements in general must have dented this idea.

The ‘some inside/some outside’ strategy had durability. As late as August 1974 when the Appeal Group was under polemical attack by the Korba Collective (Birmingham), a Maoist grouping, for advising comrades to stay inside the CPGB, Wat Tyler<sup>32</sup> replies: “The Korba line of ‘fighting’ revisionism in the CPGB *from the outside only* is no less foolish than the Surrey [CPGB district’s] line of fighting CPGB opportunism *from the inside only*. Korba throws away a platform, a media, the chance to argue a case where it would count and could be put to a vote. Surrey throws away the chance to organise the opposition and its platform, its line.”<sup>33</sup>

### FROST AMONG THE FIEFDOMS

This brings us to the Appeal Group’s relationship with the ‘mainstream’ pro-Soviet opposition. On international issues, both shared a common approach. Eddie Jackson had supported the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Indeed, when comparing the CPGB’s espousal of multi-partyism and Dubcek’s reforms, Jackson trenchantly argued: “... revisionism in a socialist country is counter-revolution” and claimed that parties in the ‘official’ international communist movement who had stood by the Warsaw Pact in 1968 had been able to increase their votes in elections.<sup>34</sup> However, by 1971 relations between Bexley and Surrey were frosty, if not downright hostile.<sup>35</sup> Some of this could be put down to the tension and paranoia that existed between the semi-autonomous fiefdoms of the opposition in the face of a leadership that wanted to curtail its activities. But there were deeper issues at stake.

Jackson and company knew that Sid French, who they eventually called “the leader of the shame-faced”, had refused to support Bexley’s amendment to Rule 2(b) at the 1969 congress “and carried the majority of his supporters with him”.<sup>36</sup> By 1971 they had clearly despaired of getting support from French and his followers. In *Congress: an appeal to delegates* there is a short satirical

narrative featuring three CPGB members: 'Bert', 'Bill' and 'Sid'. 'Bert' and 'Bill' get arrested after a fascist coup. 'Sid' gives this response: "He said Bert and Bill deserved all they got; they'd stuck their necks out and then he said he knew the party wasn't really revolutionary when he joined it 10 years ago... 'If you want to change the world and play at revolutions you'll have to do so without me, I'm not sticking my neck out that far.'" <sup>37</sup> The pattern was repeated at the 1971 congress: "The shame-faced [Surrey district] claimed 66 supporters, 25 voted for the Bexley amendment to Rule 2(b)." <sup>38</sup> As alluded to in the quote from 'Sid' above, the division between the two tendencies was political: one was stridently anti-*BRS*; the other was prepared to at least tolerate the CPGB's reformist programme. Or, as the Appeal Group put it: "... shame-faced revisionism was seeking only to preserve a non-revolutionary revisionist party." <sup>39</sup>

The Appeal Group essentially developed into an educational experience for its members before it disappeared around 1975–76. Meetings were dominated by deep theoretical discussions and a slow exegesis of Lenin's political pamphlets. <sup>40</sup> Among other things, the group developed an analysis of the growth of fascism. <sup>41</sup> The end for the Appeal Group came partly from Jackson's increasing paranoia about infiltration and a subsequent distrust of newcomers. <sup>42</sup> But the real political death knell appears to have been the group's strident pro-Sovietism. Members began to find positive references towards the CPGB's reformist strategy in Soviet *Novosti* pamphlets, which apparently shook Jackson and other members. <sup>43</sup> This issue, that revisionism was a problem for the whole international 'official' communist movement, including the CPSU, and not just parties such as the CPGB, was being pointed out to the Appeal Group by its Maoist critics: "The *general* line of the CPGB *is* the general line of the international movement." <sup>44</sup> Despite the flexibility of its strategy towards the CPGB and its clear political line in relation to the *BRS*, the Appeal Group's pro-Sovietism left a dangerous flapping door and one that was to contribute to its early demise. The real tragedy for the Appeal Group was that it was imploding just as the rebellion inside the CPGB was hotting up.

## DEAR JOHN

In the January 1976 issue of *Marxism Today*, John Gollan, who in the previous year had retired from the position of general secretary, produced an article in association with the twentieth anniversary of Khrushchev's secret speech, 'Socialist democracy — some problems: the 20<sup>th</sup> congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in retrospect'. The rather mild criticisms of the Soviet Union that Gollan raised, unsurprisingly, provoked a strong reaction from inner-party oppositionists after the pages of the journal had been subsequently opened to other contributors, and at meetings addressed by Gollan up and down the country.

Some of the contributors to *Marxism Today* clearly wished to defend the Soviet Union and its past, alleging that Gollan was importing bourgeois standpoints into his narrative. Kenneth Brinson, a CPGB member from Surrey, argued



that “ostentatious refutation of ‘Stalinism’ has become a mark of political acceptability in the West”<sup>45</sup>, while Dorothy Friedmann suggested that the Gollan piece was part of “a tendency to apply ideas deriving from the pluralist concept put forward by Western communist parties... as if they represented eternal truths”.<sup>46</sup> Ron Press argued that the article dealt “mainly with the problems of the intellectual [in the Soviet Union] and little is said about the real freedom from unemployment, exploitation, rising prices and insecurity, etc”.<sup>47</sup> John Tarver was more hyperbolic in stating that the piece “must be judged to be the most dangerous expression of revisionism yet to hit scientific socialism in Britain in the post-war years”.<sup>48</sup>

However, as the debate wore on, oppositionist contributors began to return to the issue of the CPGB’s failings. Ron Press put Gollan’s critical remarks on democracy in the Soviet Union in the light of the British leadership’s own practices: “How much discussion, even in the party, took place when Chris Myant became assistant editor of the *Morning Star* or the new national organiser Dave Cook was appointed?”<sup>49</sup> He also detected a ‘softening-up’ process, whereby cross-class reformist ideas were being introduced: “What worries me is that in our headlong rush to show how ‘democratic’ we will be, we will make the dictatorship of the British proletariat so attractive to the capitalists that it won’t appeal to the proletariat.”<sup>50</sup> Sid French agreed with the thrust of these contributions, stating that the discussion “like that we are promised on the *British road*” was “designed to ‘bury’ any lingering concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat”.<sup>51</sup>

French (and his close ally Les Howey, who made a similar contribution)<sup>52</sup> stated that the discussion was a diversionary tactic: “The circulation of our paper is less than half pre-war. Since the disastrous decision to change the name of our paper under the illusion that getting rid of the title *Daily Worker* would lead to the biggest advance in its history, the weekend extras have dropped by over half and are now just 6,000. The YCL has lost nearly three-quarters of its members in recent years and reached a position where an average of about only one YCL member paid dues in each parliamentary constituency. The considerable and rapid fall in our votes is very serious and the recent 28 gained in a ward in Clydebanks is no comfort.”<sup>53</sup> He added: “Small wonder the executive prefers to launch discussion on the weaknesses of the CPSU rather than include our own problems.”<sup>54</sup>

### DRAFT DODGERS

Following this preliminary skirmish, the year 1977, like 1945, was another year of rebellion for a significant section of the CPGB’s rank and file. In that year, a new draft of the *BRS* was presented to the CPGB membership as a continuation of the organisation’s programmatic development since the end of the Second World War. Indeed, an article was written by James Klugmann to emphasise this point.<sup>55</sup> Alongside this piece, Chris Myant introduced the 1977 draft to the party. He placed it in the context of “class confrontations involving



important sections of the ‘traditional’ labour movement” occurring alongside “the appearance of new forces outside of the movement’s historic boundaries”. Myant summarised the main points in the draft’s introduction: “... to achieve socialism the working class and its allies must take political power out of the hands of the ruling class; for Britain, socialist revolution can be carried through in conditions without world war, without civil war, through the combination of mass struggles outside parliament and the election of a parliamentary majority and government determined to implement a socialist programme; the necessary forces to do the job exist in Britain, what is required is unity and a broad democratic alliance; winning of this new political power will come not through a single insurrectionary act but rather by a process of struggle, the next significant stage of which is the winning of a Labour government committed to carrying out a left programme; central to the achievement of socialism in Britain is the fullest development of democracy...”<sup>56</sup>

Even a Eurocommunist-influenced historian such as Thompson (who presumably would be keen to hail any radical shift) is forced to concede that the changes from the 1968 edition of the *BRS* “were more of style and terminology than of real substance”.<sup>57</sup> Geoff Andrews, another Eurocommunist sympathiser, said compromise pervaded the content of the draft, which reflected the fact that it had been drawn up by a group split by Eurocommunist and more traditionalist influences (the actual writing fell to Martin Jacques and George Matthews).<sup>58</sup> Even the much-trumpeted shift to so-called ‘new social forces’ (such as the women’s movement) in the shape of the ‘broad democratic alliance’ merely meant a perceived broader constituency to either adapt to and/or impregnate with the CPGB’s post-war reformist strategy. Unfortunately, as we shall see, the healthy instinct of many members to rebel against the draft foundered on the illusion that the 1977 draft was substantively new, thus investing it with a historical importance that it really did not deserve.

#### ‘SERIOUS REVISIONIST ERROR’

The most far-ranging critique of the 1977 draft from the left of the CPGB came from Charlie Doyle<sup>59</sup>, who independently published his own pamphlet: *A critique of the draft British Road to Socialism: revolutionary path — or diversion?* For this action, Doyle ended up being censured by the CPGB EC (see below). Doyle contended that the “concept of the *British Road* is a serious revisionist error” and that he did “not think that this [draft] document can be amended, either to improve it or transform it into a viable Marxist-Leninist programme”.<sup>60</sup>

Doyle criticised the draft’s vague use of the term ‘democracy’. He argued that “all forms of democracy have class content, and it is only the class content of democratic institutions that can determine whose interest they serve. The [draft] document consistently uses the non-class term ‘democracy’”.<sup>61</sup> Doyle added: “It is one thing to drop the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. It is quite another to lose its essence, its content, and fail, as the draft does, not only to recognise

the class nature of the bourgeois state, but the need to break and replace it.”<sup>62</sup> In fact, despite noting the disaster in Chile where the Chilean Army was deemed to be neutral by the Popular Unity government, Doyle did exercise a more fluid sense of this ‘break-up’ of the bourgeois state. He said: “... a radical change in the method of exercising power will have to take place. Some existing institutions will have to be changed, others abolished, new ones created. There can be no socialist revolution within the structures of bourgeois democratic institutions.” But while Doyle grappled with the undoubted illusions around the neutrality of bourgeois institutions, there is a certain conflation of ‘bourgeois’ and ‘democratic’ familiar to this brand of ‘Marxist-Leninist’ critique, allied to an emphasis on “making a better effort” to defend the “existence and strength” of the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> In relationship to the Labour Party, Doyle reiterated a familiar critique, outlined by oppositionists since 1945, of ‘tailism’ or, in his own words, putting “the Communist Party as a tail to the Labour Party kite”.<sup>64</sup>

Doyle was somewhat ambiguous on the relationship of the 1977 draft to its *BRS* predecessors. He said of the 1951 version: “Then the party was united and immersed in working-class struggle and it was felt a creative contribution was being made... Whatever validity it may have had in 1951 has long since vanished.”<sup>65</sup> However, alongside such notions, which suggested the earlier *BRS* was defensible in a particular context, other passages suggest the whole basis of the *BRS* ‘project’ was fundamentally flawed. Doyle argued: “To attempt, as we do, in this and previous editions of the *British road* to predetermine and predict the course of objective change to suit subjective wishes is to make a mockery of revolutionary theory and transform it into a lifeless pedantic exercise, or at best a pessimism which leads us to embrace bourgeois democratic forms as the only instruments for change and parliament as the executive institution for shaping the new socialist society.”<sup>66</sup>

The ambiguity over previous versions of the *BRS* and the draft’s relationship to it was a common feature of the left’s critique that year. Brian Davies, a Welsh Committee member from Swansea,<sup>67</sup> did try and isolate what was different in the 1977 draft that made it the decisive turning point toward ‘reformism’. Davies argued unconvincingly that: “A parallel reading of the draft and the previous editions of the *British road* shows that what we are now presented with is in many respects a new programme.”<sup>68</sup> He thought that the main shift was embedded in the premise that the “government of the revolutionary transition is to be led by the Labour Party. Only in ‘subsequent left governments’ would the Communist Party acquire ‘a more significant presence’.” Davies added: “So the ‘major development’ in the new *British road*... turns out to be the relegation of the Communist Party to the second division of working class politics. There have always been differences in the party over the *British road*. But these are now at a qualitatively different level.”<sup>69</sup> A similar point was made by the Surrey District Committee: “If the draft is endorsed by congress the party remains communist in name only. In actuality it becomes a left social-democratic party with a left social-democratic programme.”<sup>70</sup> The irony behind this critique is

that it was precisely this ‘relegation’ that had been a common argument from the CPGB’s left oppositions since 1945. The *BRS* itself was, in part, a product of the party’s tailist practice toward the post-war Labour government. This is what lies behind the 1951 programme’s assertion that: “... the united action of all sections of the working-class movement — Labour, trade union, co-operative and communist — is the vital need. Only by united action between all sections of the labour movement can the working class rally all its forces and all its allies for decisive action to win a parliamentary majority and form a people’s government.”<sup>71</sup> If the left had forgotten the historical genesis of the *BRS* it had plenty of other more recent examples of this supine attitude to social democracy. At the CPGB’s 1975 congress, general secretary Gordon McLennan told the organisation that left unity (i.e. unity with the Labour left and the trade unions) was “a matter of principle, not a tactical convenience”<sup>72</sup>, while the main resolution from that year — ‘The crisis, left unity and the Communist Party’ — was squarely focused on challenging the right-wing domination in the Parliamentary Labour Party through left advances at the TUC and Labour Party conferences, a development seen as “essential for any realistic strategy of socialist advance in Britain”.<sup>73</sup>

Therefore, supporters of the 1977 draft, such as Victor Adereth, were correct when they argued “it is not just the 1977 draft these people object to, but the essence of the strategy for revolution which the party has been elaborating since 1951”.<sup>74</sup> He added: “Though the 1951 programme was approved by comrade Stalin, what’s good enough for the CPSU is clearly not good enough for Sid French. That’s his problem.” One suspects that Adereth was rather perceptive in isolating a major reason behind some of the CPGB left’s inability to comprehensively dismiss the precursors of the draft. Essentially, the debate around the 1977 draft was in fact a confused proxy war for a debate that should have been conducted in the early 1950s as the phenomenon of ‘opposition in slow motion’ reared its head once more.

However, other contributors were more forthright in dismissing the 1951 *BRS*, albeit with more ambiguities. Gwyn Reed of Rawmarsh, South Yorkshire, said: “We must admit that it was a mistake to adopt the *British road* in 1951 as a ‘programme’ and allow it to substitute for a comprehensive analysis of changes and developments in this turbulent and complex world.”<sup>75</sup> However, he then called for “the preparation of a deep-probing investigation into how it came to be possible for the present leadership to completely emasculate the working-class integrity of the party of Dutt, Pollitt and Gallacher”.<sup>76</sup> It would have been unkind to note that Dutt, Pollitt and Gallacher were the very people overseeing this “mistake” in the first place. Wallington CPGB branch was on firmer ground when it talked of the draft marking “the culmination of the long process of the transformation of the [CPGB] from a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist working-class vanguard party into a reformist petty-bourgeois tailist party, distinguishable from the Labour Party more by its small size and feeble organisation than by any ideological differences”.<sup>77</sup> BA French from Sussex

perceptively argued: "I would suggest the *British Road to Socialism* never came into existence as the result of Marxist analysis at all. It has been compounded of three elements: a pragmatic reaction to the events in the Soviet Union; an entirely erroneous assessment of the needs of communist trade unionists; and a misguided attempt to curry favour with the left in the Labour Party."<sup>78</sup>

Many other left contributors to the debate were critical of the CPGB being projected to "follow the backside" of the Labour Party, as Peter Hall of Swansea put it.<sup>79</sup> Another contributor, Harry Bradfield of Leeds, argued: "Are we really going to accept an ideology that one day the people are going to be so impressed by the success of the Labour left that they are going to turn to the party in great numbers?"<sup>80</sup> Others emphasised the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as against a more diffuse (and presumably 'bourgeois') sense of democracy, although Brian Topping, North Shields, put an interesting slant on the question: "For Marxist-Leninists it is not a question of democracy or dictatorship, for without qualification the words are meaningless. From a class position there is no distinction between the two words. The dictatorship of the proletariat is the exercise of democracy by the majority, for the majority, by means of force as opposed to violence."<sup>81</sup>

Other opponents of the 1977 draft argued against the conception of the 'broad democratic alliance'. Tony Swash, London, said that "various social forces are presented [in the draft] as being outside of, and separate from the various class divisions. In fact, class divisions run across these movements and without an adequate analysis it is impossible for communists to understand their role in the class struggle *within* these movements".<sup>82</sup> Harry Perry from Oxford argued: "The labelling of the alliance as a 'democratic' one also detracts from the recognition of its essential aspect — the rooting of its dynamic in the class struggle generated by the production relations of state monopoly capitalism."<sup>83</sup>

Fergus Nicholson, who would become one of the leading lights of the left opposition following the departure of the Sid French, made a somewhat less-than-trenchant contribution. He wondered what would happen if congress decided to "refer back" the draft to a new EC and suggested that "very few people seem to like the draft". In what seemed to be an allusion to previous *BRS* documents, he added: "Of course, 25,000 words can't all be wrong, and there are many separate statements in the draft which we have made before and which no one will quarrel with. But the thread which runs through this draft is the positive affirmation that we can, indeed will, have a gradual evolution from monopoly capitalism to socialism. A programme based on that proposition would disarm our party and disarm the working class."<sup>84</sup>

#### CONDUCT OF THE DEBATE

There were many complaints from the left and other sections of the party around the leadership's conduct of the debate. For example, Manchester and Salford Universities Staffs Branch, in a letter to the EC, said: "We feel that the

major theoretical and practical issues raised in the draft cannot be adequately discussed in 900 words [in letters to the *Morning Star* and *Comment*], and that the numbers of comrades contributing to the discussion will be limited by this restriction.”<sup>85</sup> Others, such as Mike Prior, London, complained about the leadership’s actions: “The leaders, who week by week tell us the line on each and every subject, remain locked in the convention of ‘cabinet responsibility’ and prefer to ride the storm out... we are also pompously informed that the publication of material outside *Comment* or the *Morning Star* is not allowed in the interests of ‘fairness’.”<sup>86</sup> Prior also characterised CPGB congresses as “five-minute hysteria” followed by “five-minute demagogy”.<sup>87</sup> Of course, this situation was bound to be perceived as unequal as both the draft and its proposers (such as Myant and Klugmann) would be allowed a more generous word count/time allocation. Jerry Spring, also from London, complained that the party leadership was foisting a *fait accompli* on the CPGB: “Even before the ordinary members of the Communist Party have been able to read it, we have George Matthews challenging Shirley Williams to ‘read the new draft’.”<sup>88</sup>

A document produced by the CPGB PC expresses the leadership’s own concern around the debate, namely that the ‘wrong’ debate was being held and the ‘wrong’ conclusions were being reached: “From the commencement of the discussion on the new draft some members and party organisations have by their contributions and the titles given to meetings shown clearly they were more interested in challenging the basic principles of the party’s programme than in discussing the new draft.”<sup>89</sup> While it can’t be denied that the leadership was convening an open discussion, albeit in a restricted form, it is apparent that its instincts for control-freakery had been pricked, which becomes particularly clear from the heavy-handed manner in which Charlie Doyle’s pamphlet was dealt with.

On May 15 1977 *Comment* reported the results of a PC decision, namely that publication and distribution of the Doyle pamphlet “is contrary to the decision of the Executive Committee that pre-congress discussion in printed form of the *British road to socialism* should take place in *Comment* and the *Morning Star* and not in any other form”.<sup>90</sup> Behind the scenes, Reuben Falber, assistant secretary, had made suggestions that Doyle found “absurd”, namely that Doyle should ask comrades to send previously sold pamphlets back to his home and that he should go into the pages of *Comment* to make this request. Doyle stuck it out and was eventually censured in July.<sup>91</sup> This net spread further to activists deemed to be guilty of handling and distributing the pamphlet. Ron and Beryl Huffinley, ASLEF and CPGB activists from Leeds, were initially suspended from party membership for three months (although their appeal was upheld in September 1977) on the grounds that the two distributed the pamphlet after being informed of the EC’s rules surrounding the discussion of the draft. Presumably, the leadership decided to back off after weighing up the advisability of being so heavy handed with longstanding members who had held numerous positions in their union and the local labour movement, although the Huffinleys

were also censured for their actions.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Nick Wright, a CPGB activist from South London who had been involved in the production of the Doyle pamphlet, was also on the receiving end of censure and restriction towards his activities.<sup>93</sup>

Sections of the CPGB queried the use of such measures. The East Midlands District Committee queried why Doyle had been censured when feminist journals such as *Red Rag*, produced by CPGB members outside the authority of the EC, had escaped disciplinary measures. Reuben Falber replied: "With regard to *Red Rag*, the actual decision of the EC was to request the comrades concerned to cease associating with this journal and help in the publication of [party women's journal] *Link*. It is correct that some comrades did not comply with this request, but since it was not an instruction and the party had no attitude towards *Red Rag* as such we did not consider this a breach of party discipline."<sup>94</sup> In other words, if the EC felt comfortable with, or at least 'neutral' towards, the politics of unofficial publications, then those publications would be tolerated. If it felt uncomfortable with the politics of such publications, then it would pursue disciplinary measures. This was not a level playing field. Even some supporters of the draft could not understand why leading committees of the CPGB should "fear mindless diatribe" and that their actions "will win the [Doyle] pamphlet a lot of friends among people in the party, who, had they been given the opportunity to read it, would have become the pamphlet's implacable enemies".<sup>95</sup>

### TAKING FRENCH LEAVE

According to a document drawn up by the CPGB's PC, the decision to form the breakaway New Communist Party (NCP) was taken at a meeting of the participants on 16 July 1977. On the following day, Surrey's District Committee voted by 21 votes to five to join the breakaway, while a similar decision was taken by the Sussex District Committee by nine votes to two (with two abstentions) and three members of the Hants and Dorset District Committee were expelled from the CPGB following their announcement of an intention to resign from the committee.<sup>96</sup> Around 700 members eventually left the CPGB to form the NCP. It had strong concentrations in Surrey and Sussex, as well as significant components in Hants and Dorset, Yorkshire and Lancashire. Sonia Jacks, a member of the CPGB's reconstituted provisional Surrey District Committee, estimated that the NCP had about 130 members in Surrey, the CPGB having retained "in excess of 300" (although Jacks made no distinction between 'active' and 'paper' members);<sup>97</sup> while the leadership estimated that 90 per cent of the Sussex membership had remained loyal.<sup>98</sup> Sid French became the first general secretary of the NCP (and effectively its leader).

The decision to split was probably immediately precipitated by the actions of the CPGB's EC. The 'Developments in the party' draft noted: "The last meeting of the EC instructed the PC to interview Sid French, Eric Trevett and Ken Brinson and confront them with the evidence of factional activities directed



towards forming a breakaway organisation.”<sup>99</sup> Clearly, French and company would have realised that the game was up if (as was likely) they had got wind of this instruction.

It is clear that the spilt was also precipitated more generally by the suffocating and frustrated nature of observing the disciplines of remaining as a subterranean inner-party faction inside the CPGB. Bottled-up frustration at the anti-Soviet direction of the party, unable to find true, open expression inside the CPGB, was a motivating factor for some people joining the new organisation. John Chamberlain, an early recruit of the NCP, said: “To me what the advantage of Surrey was, or the NCP, was that they were doing it... I expect I was suffering from youthful impatience and the fact that Fergus Nicholson [see above] didn’t have a strategy... How are we going to win? One congress after another, after another and that’s all they’re offering us, it didn’t strike me as being likely as a winning strategy, whereas the NCP was at least going to issue a paper, for example, at least that gives you a chance. Selling the *Morning Star* and waiting for congress, which was effectively all we were doing, struck me as being [a wrong strategy].”<sup>100</sup> Founding NCP member Maisie Carter says: “Once the decision to form the NCP had been taken there was the most overwhelming feeling of relief — liberation even. After all those years of what I can only describe as ‘creeping revisionism’ the formation of the NCP brought an end to the frustration — it was like being set free.”<sup>101</sup> The NCP did not appear to do any factional work inside the CPGB once this ‘liberation’ had occurred and there was no attempt to retain CPGB positions or force expulsions as comrades merely resigned.<sup>102</sup>

The breakaway’s leaders had communicated to the CPGB leadership that the forthcoming congress would be “rigged”<sup>103</sup> against them — which is absolutely true, although, as Thompson notes, the departures did give the proponents of the draft *BRS* an easier congress victory.<sup>104</sup> The leadership could not quite conceal its partial relief at the NCP’s formation. “While we regret any breakaway [amendment added by hand] the departure of members who for several years have attacked the party’s policy and persistently sought to undermine confidence in the party and its leadership has in many of the party organisations concerned created a healthier atmosphere, opened the way to public work around our policy and helped to change sectarian methods of work.”<sup>105</sup> Indeed, the issue of whether members of the party’s leading committees had welcomed the split had become a bone of contention in the pages of *Comment* in autumn 1977. Some members were pleased at the breakaway, while others, such as Geoff Gay from Loughborough, somewhat hysterically, tried to pin the CPGB’s decline on the “continuing influence within the party of this basically Stalinist section”.<sup>106</sup> Others were more sceptical as to the leadership’s motives, particularly as it had got around the organisation that the Surrey area was due to be reorganised, thus sweeping aside Sid French’s base and necessitating his departure. Geoff Ferres, Birmingham, argued: “I feel suspicious of the PC’s condemnation of the breakaway... especially after hearing



**Dear leaders:** *Eric Trevett (left) with Kim Il-sung in the 1980s. Trevett was the New Communist Party's first national organiser in 1977, and became its general secretary after the death of Sid French in 1979*



EC member and *BRS* drafter Peter Carter ‘welcome’ the split at a Birmingham public meeting on July 25. He complained there were ‘still a lot of sectarians left in the party’. He seemed sorry so few comrades have left... I believe the EC, by attempting to isolate rather than *politically overcome* ‘sectarianism’ has prepared the ground for the split. This isolation has been attempted by: the dissolution of the South Midlands district [and] this year’s scheme for the dissolution of Surrey... ”<sup>107</sup>

However, it seems that sections of the traditional leadership worked hard to contain the more sectarian views of its Eurocommunist wing. In August 1977, the YCL Political Committee enquired as to omission of the following sentence from a YCL statement in the *Morning Star*: “... so we do not regret the departure of those who have held their fundamental differences above the unity in action of the League.”<sup>108</sup> Reuben Falber explained the action in omitting the half-sentence thus: “The situation in Surrey and Sussex at that particular moment was extremely sensitive. We were in many cases relying upon comrades who had sharp differences with the party to hold together our organisation and maintain our activity. It was important for us to maintain the best possible relations with these comrades otherwise the already difficult situation would have been aggravated.”<sup>109</sup> Ingrained caution was therefore reconciling some of the leadership to the reality of a deeply divided party.

Unsurprisingly, the NCP proved unable to develop any kind of rounded revolutionary critique of the *BRS*. Indeed, as CPGB critics such as Victor Adereth quickly noted, while his organisation was still discussing the 1977 draft, the NCP seemed somewhat reticent to discuss issues of strategy: “The manufacturers of the ‘New Communist Party’ are not only opposed to the 1977 draft and the essence of the strategy we’ve been developing since 1951; they are opposed to having a strategy at all. If the draft is a load of rubbish, there must be a viable alternative. Why have they not been spelling it out at the meetings they have addressed?”<sup>110</sup> A pamphlet issued by the NCP after it had split from

the CPGB in 1977 talked of the crisis in the CPGB being “a result of growing opportunism in the party and a move towards reformism in its policies”.<sup>111</sup> The NCP leaders characterised the rewriting of the *BRS* by the CPGB’s right-opportunist leadership in the run-up to the 1977 congress as completing “the destruction of the CPGB as the revolutionary party of the working class of Britain”.<sup>112</sup> Beneath the leftist rhetoric, the implication of this analysis is that the *BRS* — the programmatic source of the CPGB’s reformist ills — is not a problem *per se*, rather it is rewriting it that shifts the ‘official’ party into non-revolutionary terrain; in other words, defeat today’s reformist revisionism with yesterday’s reformist revisionism.<sup>113</sup> A later publication expanded this analysis. According to the NCP: “The *BRS* was first revised in 1957 — the start of a process culminating in 1977 which deprived it of all revolutionary content...”.<sup>114</sup> Therefore it is necessary to treat with profound scepticism subsequent comments from the NCP that it had “opposed the revisionist line of the CPGB as expressed in its programme, the *British road to socialism*”.<sup>115</sup>

The tolerance being shown towards the *BRS* was not limited to the NCP. Leading members of the rump opposition who remained in the CPGB after the 1977 defection subsequently founded the journal *Straight Left* (launched in 1979).<sup>116</sup> However, the reigning *modus operandi* of this publication — Brezhnevite ‘internationalism’ under a ‘broad labour movement’ cloak — was nothing but a ‘traditionalist’ distillation of the CPGB’s post-war reformist drift.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> RFE/RL background report ‘The British communist congress’ December 1 1965. See also pre-congress discussion contributions from the Surrey District Committee, *Comment* October 2 1965; and Sid French, *Comment* November 13 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Tasked, as assistant secretary of the party, with attending a Surrey congress during the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1968, Reuben Falber subsequently claimed that French had national leadership ambitions and that he been in conflict with the leadership since becoming a full-time party worker in London after the Second World War (apparently over the CPGB’s lack of revolutionary zeal and Leninism). Falber ‘explained’ Surrey’s oppositional stance by making reference to the area’s lack of large workplaces and the ‘stockbroker belt’ nature of some of the district, which made it poor soil for CPGB politics and thus led French and his district supporters to blame the “reformist” policies of the leadership — Reuben Falber *The 1968 Czechoslovakia crisis: inside the British Communist Party* <http://www.socialisthistorysociety.co.uk/FALBER.HTM>. However, Thompson claims that the Surrey membership was “drawn from south London rather than the stockbroker belt” — Thompson *op cit* p238n. Stevenson discusses the tensions around the work of Surrey, and Hants and Dorset, at the YCL’s 1971 congress — Graham Stevenson *The YCL 1966–1980 — anatomy of decline* [http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=692&Itemid=53](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=692&Itemid=53).

<sup>3</sup> John Chamberlain played such a facilitating role in Hemel Hempstead in the

1970s, circulating oppositional documents through his contacts and organising meetings with key speakers — author's interview with John Chamberlain. This mode of operation was summarised by The Appeal Group thus: "It finds out where all the critics are... the full list is only known to the leader. These are either contacted on the telephone or leg-men sent to them" — 'Camouflaged revisionism' *The Appeal Communist Monthly* Number 2, no date. There could occasionally be tensions over Surrey's leading role in the opposition due to its control of district structures — author's interviews with Jim Moody and John Chamberlain. Jim Moody suggests that Hants and Dorset was seen as being "more maverick" by Sid French, and that Surrey comrades could exhibit a degree of paranoia on occasions ("which was hardly surprising, given how centre behaved") — author's correspondence with Jim Moody, June 2007.

<sup>4</sup> New Communist Party *The case for the New Communist Party* London, no date but circa 1977, p8

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Surrey District Committee to Reuben Falber, April 26 1965. The outcome of this affair was that Birch was told by the EC that he should have consulted it before involvement with the SACU — CP/CENT/EC/10/10.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Moody remembers that "revolutionary élan" was one of Les Howey's favourite phrases, particularly in relation to the CPGB leadership's lack of it — author's interview with Jim Moody.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, a letter from Bexley Branch to the CPGB EC, January 12 1966 in CP/CENT/EC/11/01

<sup>8</sup> The leadership was surprised to lose the North East — Falber *op cit*.

<sup>9</sup> Surrey Young Communist League *Unemployment and the crisis of capitalism* 1976 pp14–15. French was criticised by Tony Chater at the CPGB's 1975 congress for claiming that the CPGB was fostering this anti-Sovietism — see 'The crisis, left unity and the Communist Party: Tony Chater's reply to the discussion' *Comment* November 29–December 13 1975.

<sup>10</sup> 'Statement of Surrey DPC for the Executive Committee discussion on 23.4.66 on our electoral perspectives' CP/CENT/EC/12/01

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Sid French to John Gollan, May 11 1967 in CP/CENT/EC/12/01

<sup>12</sup> See documents in CP/CENT/PC/12/04

<sup>13</sup> I am particularly grateful to Daphne Liddle for her help with this section.

<sup>14</sup> Eddie Jackson *Congress: an appeal to delegates* October 1971. Jackson was in his 60s when he wrote this document.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Jackson did however point to a similar amendment from Stockport branch appearing at the 1971 congress — see *ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson refers to a variety of bureaucratic 'mishaps' down the years: "the secretary of the branch didn't send it in"; "we've never discovered what happened to it"; and "we believe the delegate, who was not a Bexley branch member, withdrew it at congress" — see *ibid*. Daphne Liddle, by 1971 a member of Bexley branch, says that the Kent leadership did not argue with Bexley about political issues, rather it tried to isolate the branch through "administrative

gagging” — author’s interview with Daphne Liddle.

<sup>19</sup> This was apparently “scheduled on a Saturday just after the lunch break when the hall was almost deserted as delegates lingered in the pub” — Daphne Liddle’s notes. Jackson said that no vote had been taken on Bexley’s amendment at the 1969 congress — Jackson *op cit*.

<sup>20</sup> “Shortly after Bexley branch passed and submitted its amendment... [Bill] Horton, the [branch] chairman and Jackson, the secretary, were suspended from office (the branch committee) by the [Kent District Political Committee]. In September Bexley branch members were circulated to attend a meeting on [September 21] to deal with congress materials. There was no mention that we would be discussing, reviewing or rescinding a previous branch decision. When we arrived we were informed that the agenda included a recommendation by the branch committee (the new one), that Bexley’s amendment to Rule should be withdrawn. After a challenge, on constitutional grounds, the chairman, Norwood, said that the district secretary had assured them they were quite in order” — see *ibid*. Previous to these events there was a dispute in late 1970 and early 1971 between Bexley branch and the Kent District Committee (the correspondence can be found in CP/CENT/EC/13/11) relating to what Bexley branch perceived as a poorly arranged Kent district congress in November 1970 where Eddie Jackson’s name had not been added to a ballot paper (the Kent leadership rejected any claims of sharp practice). A letter from the CPGB EC to the Kent District Committee dated March 16 1971 suggests that the Kent leadership wanted to remove oppositionists from their branch offices. The EC also wanted to “ascertain clearly who was responsible for the writing, production and distribution of the document ‘Why Labour lost’, which we [the EC] understand was not in accord with the [EC’s] estimate of the 1970 General Election and stated there was no Marxist-Leninist party in Britain”.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Camouflaged revisionism’ *op cit*

<sup>22</sup> Author’s interview with Daphne Liddle

<sup>23</sup> Daphne Liddle joined after Mick Laws and a group of comrades knocked on her door and asked her to type up the document.

<sup>24</sup> Jackson *op cit*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>26</sup> Author’s interview with Daphne Liddle

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*. The Appeal Group also leafleted CPGB events such as its November 1973 national congress — see ‘Statement by the under-signed appellants: leadership double-talk’ November 1973 (signed by A Cottrell, Daphne Liddle, Eddie Jackson, WE [Bill] Horton and Mick Laws) in CP/CENT/CONG/19/05. This leaflet highlighted programmatic issues arising from the coup against Allende in Chile: “Less than three months ago, the [CPGB] leadership boasted that its programme was the same as that of the Allende government. *Yes; and it would have the same tragic result.*” It added: “Our appeal against expulsion: constitutionally we have no case. Politically, the party leaders are guilty men.”

<sup>28</sup> ‘Camouflaged revisionism’ *op cit*. This is of course the paper referred to in the quote.

<sup>29</sup> Daphne Liddle's notes. The group met in her flat, overlooking Charlton Athletic football ground, in southeast London.

<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with John Chamberlain

<sup>31</sup> Jackson *op cit*

<sup>32</sup> Wat Tyler was Eddie Jackson's pseudonym.

<sup>33</sup> Wat Tyler *Behind the revolutionary mask: a critique of neo-Maoism and how it helps fascism*, Bexleyheath, Kent, August 1974 p9

<sup>34</sup> Jackson *op cit*

<sup>35</sup> Daphne Liddle thinks that Eddie Jackson was not that in touch with the mainstream pro-Soviet opposition around Sid French and Surrey district — author's interview with Daphne Liddle.

<sup>36</sup> 'Camouflaged revisionism' *op cit*. A list of Surrey district's heresies against Bexley were eventually collected into an Appeal Group pamphlet entitled *Shameful*.

<sup>37</sup> Jackson *op cit*

<sup>38</sup> 'Camouflaged revisionism' *op cit*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>40</sup> Daphne Liddle's notes

<sup>41</sup> See Wat Tyler *Fascism: it can't... it is* Bexleyheath, Kent, September 1973 and *The anti-fascist manifesto* Bexleyheath, Kent, August 1974

<sup>42</sup> Daphne Liddle's notes. Some of the roots of this paranoia can be seen in the 1971 appeal: "Needless to say every care must be exercised. The enemy, through the CIA and other agencies, is full of sophisticated tricks..." — Jackson *op cit*.

<sup>43</sup> Author's interview with Daphne Liddle

<sup>44</sup> Korba Collective 'Why do we need a new communist party?' in Wat Tyler *Behind the revolutionary mask... op cit* p46(vii)

<sup>45</sup> *Marxism Today* Volume 20 Number 4, April 1976

<sup>46</sup> *Marxism Today* Volume 20 Number 3, March 1976

<sup>47</sup> *Marxism Today* Volume 20 Number 9, September 1976

<sup>48</sup> *Marxism Today* Volume 20 Number 7, July 1976

<sup>49</sup> *Marxism Today* Volume 20 Number 9, September 1976

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>51</sup> *Marxism Today* Volume 20 Number 12, December 1976

<sup>52</sup> See *Marxism Today* Volume 20 Number 10, October 1976

<sup>53</sup> *Marxism Today* Volume 20 Number 12, December 1976

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>55</sup> James Klugmann 'A brief history since 1945' *Comment* February 5 1977

<sup>56</sup> Chris Myant 'Up for discussion' *Comment* February 5 1977

<sup>57</sup> Thompson *op cit* p171

<sup>58</sup> Geoff Andrews *Endgames and New Times: the final years of British communism 1964-1991* London 2004 p165

<sup>59</sup> Charlie Doyle was a retired power worker who formerly worked at Battersea Power Station and had been active in the Electrical Trades Union. He was expelled from the union after leading unofficial strikes in the winter of 1962-63. Doyle, born in Scotland, had been a member of the CPUSA and was deported back to Britain in 1953 in the era of McCarthyism. He had opposed the

leadership line on Czechoslovakia. His wife, Mikki Doyle, was editor of the *Morning Star* women's page. Charlie Doyle had contributed to an earlier debate around Bert Pearce's article, 'The strategy of socialist revolution in Britain' *Marxism Today* January 1971. Doyle's reply, in the December 1972 issue, was critical of the CPGB leadership's fixation on the possibility of a peaceful parliamentary transition to socialism while disregarding the possibility of non-peaceful, violent upheaval.

<sup>60</sup> Charlie Doyle *A critique of the draft British Road to Socialism: revolutionary path — or diversion?* London 1977 pp2–3

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid* p3

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid* p6

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid* p14

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid* p8

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid* pp12–13. My emphasis.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid* p16

<sup>67</sup> Brian Davies was on the Welsh Committee of the CPGB from 1974–77, leaving the party to join the New Communist Party in 1977, an experience that Davies subsequently referred to as "out of the frying pan into the fire" — author's interview with Brian Davies, 1996. Davies was a founder member of the Niclas Society, a Welsh Marxist group.

<sup>68</sup> *Comment* March 5 1977

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>70</sup> *Comment* April 30 1977

<sup>71</sup> CPGB *The British Road to Socialism op cit*

<sup>72</sup> 'The crisis, left unity and the Communist Party: Gordon McLennan's speech introducing the resolution' *Comment* November 29–December 13 1975

<sup>73</sup> 'Resolution: The crisis, left unity and the Communist Party' in *ibid*

<sup>74</sup> *Comment* September 3 1977

<sup>75</sup> *Comment* July 9 1977. Gwyn Reed later joined the New Communist Party. His son, Garvin Reed, also joined the NCP, later joining the Labour Party and becoming deputy leader of Rotherham council.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>77</sup> *Comment* June 11 1977

<sup>78</sup> *Comment* October 15 1977

<sup>79</sup> *Comment* March 5 1977. Hall was deemed to be an ally of Sid French and Surrey by his CPGB comrades in Swansea — email from Mark Lewis.

<sup>80</sup> *Comment* July 9 1977

<sup>81</sup> *Comment* June 25 1977

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>83</sup> *Comment* August 20 1977

<sup>84</sup> *Comment* October 1 1977

<sup>85</sup> CP/CENT/EC/15/16. The letter is dated June 1 1977.

<sup>86</sup> *Comment* July 9 1977

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>88</sup> *Comment* February 19 1977

<sup>89</sup> 'Developments in the party' (draft) September 8 1977, CP/CENT/EC/15/17



<sup>90</sup> *Comment* May 15 1977

<sup>91</sup> See correspondence in CP/CENT/EC/15/16

<sup>92</sup> See correspondence in CP/CENT/EC/15/16 and CP/CENT/EC/15/17

<sup>93</sup> See correspondence in CP/CENT/EC/15/16

<sup>94</sup> See correspondence in *ibid*

<sup>95</sup> Letter from Rob Howarth, London, *Comment* June 25 1977

<sup>96</sup> ‘Developments in the party’ *op cit*

<sup>97</sup> *Comment* October 1 1977

<sup>98</sup> ‘Developments in the party’ *op cit*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>100</sup> Author’s interview with John Chamberlain. In a similar vein, Jim Moody remembers thinking “this is great” when learning of the formation of the NCP, putting this in the context of a difficult struggle inside the CPGB that didn’t seem to be going anywhere — author’s interview with Jim Moody.

<sup>101</sup> Maisie Carter, interviewed by Ann Rogers. <http://www.newworker.org/maisie.html>

<sup>102</sup> This was the experience of Jim Moody in Yorkshire area NCP — author’s interview with Jim Moody.

<sup>103</sup> ‘Developments in the party’ *op cit*

<sup>104</sup> Thompson *op cit* p173

<sup>105</sup> ‘Developments in the party’ *op cit*

<sup>106</sup> *Comment* September 17 1977

<sup>107</sup> *Comment* October 1 1977

<sup>108</sup> See correspondence in CP/CENT/EC/15/17

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>110</sup> *Comment* September 3 1977

<sup>111</sup> *The case for the New Communist Party op cit* p7

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid* p9

<sup>113</sup> In all probability the NCP leadership was attempting to keep its right and left wings together. According to Jim Moody, there were elements around the founding of the NCP that were looking back to the CPGB’s *For Soviet Britain* (1935) as a possible programmatic foundation — author’s interview with Jim Moody.

<sup>114</sup> New Communist Party *The revolutionary party* London 1982 p27

<sup>115</sup> See <http://newworkerfeatures.blogspot.com/2007/07/30-fighting-years-of-new-communist.html>

<sup>116</sup> Fergus Nicholson is the name most commonly associated with the journal, writing under the by-line of ‘Harry Steel’.



# How late it was...

We left those who departed the CPGB in 1977 to form the NCP in a 'demob happy' state of founding their new organisation. Almost immediately there was something of a time bomb ticking away inside the NCP in the shape of a group of younger comrades who were wondering what they had joined but found themselves quickly elevated to positions of leadership. For example, Jim Moody found himself in the role of Yorkshire district secretary while John Chamberlain went on the NCP's Central Committee (CC) and became national organiser (NO) in 1979 after the death of Sid French.<sup>1</sup> On attending his first CC meeting Chamberlain was "completely shocked" by the low level of discussion (similar to an "amateurish CPGB branch"), an absence of political discussion and what he perceived as a lack of purpose now that the NCP no longer had a CPGB leadership line to organise against.<sup>2</sup> A report from Jim Moody similarly noted the "appalling level" of discussion at CC and Political Committee (PC) meetings after being elected to both bodies in 1979.<sup>3</sup>

The NCP leadership had relations with the circle around Rıza Yürükoğlu (Veli Dursun) of the Communist Party of Turkey (CPT), based in London and producing the *İşçinin Sesi* (*Workers' Voice*) newspaper.<sup>4</sup> By 1979 it was engaged in a factional struggle as a revolutionary, Leninist wing of the CPT. At this point, tensions had begun to surface inside the NCP. At a CC meeting of December 1979 John Chamberlain was not re-elected to the position of NO.<sup>5</sup> However, as NO, Chamberlain had begun to gather a small group around himself (including Robin Jackson and Jim Moody) and it was this group that came under the influence of the circle around *İşçinin Sesi*. Chamberlain had been struck by Yürükoğlu's writing in books such as *Turkey — weak link of imperialism* (1979), seeing it as one of the first things he had read from the 'official' communist movement that was using Leninism in a dynamic, exploratory manner, rather than just reciting and regurgitating.<sup>6</sup>

Chamberlain's group had decided that the NCP's politics (and by that token its own) were a dead-end and that it needed a period of study to plan its next move.<sup>7</sup> Under the influence of the Turks, it was decided to provoke a short factional struggle, partly as a means of giving some steel to a set of young and relatively inexperienced comrades.<sup>8</sup> By September 1980, Chamberlain was still editor of the *Young Worker*, the paper of the NCP's youth section. Issue 2 of that month was headlined: "If you want peace... fight the bosses!" As the Turkish comrades advising Chamberlain had predicted, this was far too 'leftist' for the tastes of the majority NCP leadership.<sup>9</sup> The PC ordered all copies of the issue to be impounded and suspended Chamberlain from NCP membership; he was finally expelled in November 1980, along with allies such as Sara Wells and Jim Moody.<sup>10</sup> As the year came to an end, five other people were refused membership cards for 1981, with a couple more expulsions.<sup>11</sup>

Six NCP expellees then joined the Leninist wing of the CPT. Initially the idea was to learn revolutionary politics at a qualitatively higher level. However, the September 1980 military coup in Turkey meant the CPT's British members were quickly embroiled in practical solidarity work through the likes of the Committee for the Defence of Democratic Rights in Turkey.<sup>12</sup> What was to become *The Leninist* group met in parallel to its activity in the CPT, quickly coming to the conclusion that leaving the CPGB had been a mistake and that the 'official' party should be a site of struggle for the new faction.<sup>13</sup> Before *The Leninist* magazine was launched in late 1981, the British members of the CPT had come under pressure from their Turkish comrades to continue in the orbit of Turkish solidarity work.<sup>14</sup>

### ALTERNATIVE ROAD TO CHAUVINISM

It was immediately clear from its new publication that the group had absorbed lessons from past CPGB oppositions. It shared a similar rejection of the *BRS* (and what had become the 'Alternative Economic Strategy') in all its guises down the years. Sam Aaronovitch's *The road from Thatcherism* (1981) was dissected as a particular example of the degeneration of the national project of the *BRS* into straightforward national chauvinism.<sup>15</sup> James Marshall, with a stress on "genuine" mass democracy in the form of soviets, poured scorn on the idea of using parliament as a road to socialism: "Using universal suffrage the bourgeoisie portray their rule as democratic, attempt to draw the masses into seeing the 'national interest' as their interest. Revolutionaries must use parliament and elections as a platform, and to gauge the political level of the masses, but that's all. So it is not enough to advocate reforms such as abolishing the House of Lords, establishing Scottish and Welsh parliaments, and creating new committees, the holy icon parliament must be destroyed lock stock and barrel."<sup>16</sup>

*The Leninist's* founding statement suggested that the CPGB's opportunism had matured to the stage that it now threatened the very existence of the organisation. Its "seething mass of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois tendencies — feminism, pacifism, economism, liberalism, anti-Sovietism, nationalism", espoused by all sections of the party but most clearly by the Eurocommunist wing around *Marxism Today*, backed by the 'right opportunists' around the party machine, was seen to have effectively dissolved the party ideologically, so it was the next 'logical' step to destroy it organisationally, although *The Leninist* argued in the statement that this liquidation was then taking the form of demanding that the party be submerged into 'broad' movements.<sup>17</sup> The solution to this crisis was an open, ideological struggle to regain the revolutionary specificity of the CPGB's foundation — in other words, give it a specifically Leninist reason and foundation for existence, rather than adopting the ideological garb of trade unionists or CND, which was of course a reason for the CPGB not to exist. This struggle was contrasted to 'pub room conspiracy' (i.e. plotting) to win votes or 'winning a majority' at various congresses: "The results of this organisational fetishism is the suborganisation to the organisational tasks of everything else,

including principle.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, you could conceivably (although this was highly unlikely) win a congress but the ideology of opportunism, buttressed by the living reality of capitalism, would remain, ready to undermine the CPGB in the future.

But why then, faced with such unpromising circumstances, should this tendency have sought to re-enter the CPGB? This was explained thus: “The Communist Party of Great Britain is part of the world communist movement; it is not a sect which declares itself a party when its membership exceeds the dizzy height of one hundred. As a party it has an organic relationship with the working class and thus organises a significant section of the vanguard of the class... It rests on a living tradition as a militant party of class struggle with a history that stretches back to the early [1920s]... ”<sup>19</sup> Supporters of *The Leninist* were thus urged inside the CPGB to become the “best party members, taking the lead in all work”, while conducting an open, ideological struggle.<sup>20</sup>

*The Leninist* group did not think that it was possible to ‘reform’ the CPGB or its (mis)leaders. “We did not say reform the CPGB. We said reforge. What we were calling for was a revolution in the CPGB. We were not engaged in a polite debate with the likes of Gordon McLennan and Nina Temple. We were not out to modify their opportunism. Open revolt and sweeping away the old regime — organisationally and politically — was our slogan.”<sup>21</sup> To that end, *The Leninist* sought to recover a positive interpretation of a ruthless party purge of opportunist politics.<sup>22</sup>

From the above it will be clear that *The Leninist* was the inheritor of previous revolutionary oppositions in that it distilled positives and negatives of those groups and individuals into a strategy that avoided the sectarian wilderness inhabited by the ‘Marxist-Leninist’ sects<sup>23</sup> while not allowing its struggle to become cloaked in subterfuge or cooped up in the tiny space the CPGB allowed its dissidents. But *The Leninist* did not merely regurgitate the politics of The Appeal Group (who it was perhaps closest to in terms of its oppositionist predecessors). Instead, it deepened its critique of ‘official’ communism.

From a very early stage *The Leninist* was not solely reliant on the human material that it found among existing CPGB members: “... Leninists will draw around them not only the best elements in the party, but also win large numbers of revolutionaries to join the ranks of [the CPGB].”<sup>24</sup> Drawing on the inspiration of the British Socialist Party’s *The call for a Communist Party* (1920), *The Leninist* issued its own call to all genuine communists to join (or, in some cases, rejoin) the CPGB, in particular those in the NCP, the Workers Party, the Revolutionary Communist Group, *Proletarian* and the John MacLean Collective.<sup>25</sup> These groups were not being offered some non-aggression pact if only they would join, but *The Leninist* was working from a template where reforging the CPGB was not just going to be the work of one faction or sect but the advanced part of the class, expressed in various tendencies and shades

FOR  
A REFORGED  
COMMUNIST PARTY

# THE LEFTIST

FOR  
PROLETARIAN  
INTERNATIONALISM

No 7 30p

Monthly paper of the Leninists of the Communist Party of Great Britain

April 1984

## Comrades Rebel!

Roger Freeman

At the March meeting of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party comrade Gordon McLennan, the General Secretary, won a majority to his strategy of beating the growing opposition threat.

It is this strategy which underlies the promise that the next EC meeting in May will see the beginning of a far reaching purge of "those involved in the production of *Congress Truth*", while no such threats will

centralism' he is in an unassailable position. In 1983 the Euros! slate only managed to gain a measly 457 average vote against this Chatter's second a 739 average, and now, with the rallying of the Straight Leftists to his cause, he can rely on their vote as well which averaged a respectable 263 last year. So it is clear that the Euros will have to pull out all the stops to vote down Chatter.

Given the difficulties caused by this year of attrition why doesn't McLennan go all out for a quick victory by an immediate expulsion, or at least the threat of expulsion, against Chatter and his supporters?

sentinal principle which goes to make a genuine Communist Party, they have sought to destroy every trace of Marxism-Leninism, and yet they dare now stand as paragons of Party virtue, the true defenders of the Party. We say: A EURO MORNING STAR WILL BE AS USELESS AS FIGHTING THE GLASS WAR AS A STARTING OF WATER IS AT BUCKING A FIRE.

What about the Chatter group? Well, their rebellion against Eurocommunism, as well as their "pro-Sovietism", is not only rather late in the day, but is totally lacking in principle. For while

opposition: this has sent even those centrists further to the left scurrying to the right. Dropping their old leftism they now self justifiably sit at the table of Chatterism, sing canned paeons of praise to the "positive developments in the *Morning Star*" and drink from the poisonous revisionist cup of the "positive interpretation of the RES". But the bloc around Chatter is rotten, unstable, and destined to disintegrate if it maintains its present course. Faced with the Euro proposal to expel the four Straight Leftists in January, Chatter's supporters on the EC

Whatever the logic of this position, it was also lodged in pragmatism. As long ago as the early 1970s, The Appeal Group had noted that the “advanced state of decomposition of the CPGB” made nonsense of the idea of changing the party only from within.<sup>26</sup> By the time *The Leninist* had appeared in the early 1980s its activists found an even more advanced state of decomposition; it was extremely difficult to make new revolutionaries from an organisation largely composed of elderly members infected with opportunist ideas that had been central to the CPGB since the 1930s (never mind those of a Eurocommunist persuasion whose ideas often only had a passing acquaintance with Marxism). There was simply very little human material for a group such as *The Leninist* to work with.<sup>27</sup> The faction did recruit important members from traditional activist/familial CPGB backgrounds but as the 1980s wore on, recruits were increasingly from non-CPGB, sometimes Trotskyist, backgrounds.<sup>28</sup> This situation must have reinforced the search for an external dynamic to arrest the dire situation for revolutionaries inside the CPGB.

*The Leninist* was a tiny group that in terms of members (as opposed to supporters and sympathisers) was always under 30 in number and confined to London and its immediate surrounds.<sup>29</sup> Sometimes the group struggled to get its supporters into CPGB congresses as observers, never mind as delegates.<sup>30</sup> In literary terms it was more of a success: *The Leninist's* exposé of the CPGB's factions and reportage from closed meetings of various leadership bodies<sup>31</sup> made it a 'must read' for many activists across the party.<sup>32</sup> The leadership quickly moved to ban *The Leninist* (unlike the Labourite *Straight Left*, which

it tolerated).<sup>33</sup> A statement adopted by the EC stated: “The declared objective of *The Leninist* is to conduct a factional battle within the Communist Party to reverse congress policy and to oppose the elected leadership. The EC decided that party members should not contribute to or sell *The Leninist* and that party journals should not advertise it nor party bookshops stock it.”<sup>34</sup> Activists were also kept under surveillance by the leadership and its supporters.<sup>35</sup>

Supporters of *The Leninist* such as Mark Lewis have argued that the group appeared at the last possible moment (albeit from an NCP detour) inside the ranks of the CPGB and that there was nothing objective that would have stopped it appearing 10 years previously. Lewis sees this late birth as one of the main reasons why *The Leninist* group numbered tens rather than hundreds and was largely composed of “kids” (relative to its middle-aged and elderly opponents).<sup>36</sup> Looking at the organisation’s slim material and human base one suspects that this is true. In any case, it helps to highlight a major contradiction: *The Leninist* distilled the experience of previous revolutionary oppositions into a situation where it was unable to have much material impact. Thus the group effectively became a ‘school of thought’ inside the CPGB rather than a major player in the factional battles of the 1980s.

‘Official’ communist opponents of *The Leninist* sometimes dubbed it as ‘Trotskyite’, a charge that members of the group denied.<sup>37</sup> Trotskyism was formally dismissed as “leftism” by Frank Grafton, who said it “must be castigated, not for the sectarian politics of ‘social fascism’, but for their [the Trotskyists] desertion of the world communist movement and passage into the petty bourgeois wilderness. They have subsequently remained as insignificant as when they first emerged, despite the opportunity during the critical vicissitudes of the Second World War to prove their hollow claim to be the true heirs of the Comintern”.<sup>38</sup> Despite the fact that *The Leninist* group remained critical of Trotsky’s legacy, the reality is that on leaving the NCP John Chamberlain had invested in a significant number of Trotsky’s works<sup>39</sup> and it is obvious from reading *The Leninist* that its founders had made a serious study. For example, previous revolutionary oppositions had been generally ambiguous on the CPGB’s Popular Frontism of the 1930s, but *The Leninist* had seemingly taken on chunks of Trotsky’s critique of this period: “In retrospect, it is possible to state that the new orientation towards ‘popular fronts’ adopted at the Seventh Congress [of the Comintern], constituted the decisive turning point for the rightward drift into opportunism...”.<sup>40</sup> Revolutionary salvation was not sought in earlier CPGB programmes such as *For Soviet Britain*, seen by Jack Conrad as “revolution in word, reformist in deed” due to its inability to integrate an “army of facts” into any sort of strategic impulse.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the surface revolutionary phrases of the *Class against class* election manifesto of 1929 were debunked as uncritical adaptation to the “centrist drift” in the CPSU.<sup>42</sup>

Looking back, Jack Conrad said: “We did not look over our shoulders at the Trotskyist tradition and see a movement with all the answers. Far from it. We



were not and are not anti-Trotskyist, of course. In our writings up to 1989 on the USSR, there was a lot of similarity between the orthodox Trotskyists and us.”<sup>43</sup> There was a clear awareness that maintaining some kind of ‘revolutionary myth’ of Stalin and the Soviet Union (as opposed to an opportunist CPGB) was only storing up theoretical trouble for the future.<sup>44</sup> Contemporary groups such as those around the *Proletarian* journal (see below) and past organisations such as the Vanguard Group and The Appeal Group were classed as “left-centrist, pulled to revolutionary politics but at the same time unable to make the break from a tailist, completely unscientific approach to the policies of the Soviet party and state”.<sup>45</sup> When groups such as the South Wales Communist Campaign Group<sup>46</sup> tried to maintain a division between the revisionism of Harry Pollitt and the international communist movement in the late 1930s, Jack Conrad argued: “If Pollitt suffered from revisionism, so did the majority of our world communist movement. Check the facts comrades. Pollitt was no exception, he was the rule... If you criticise Pollitt you must go on and criticise Stalin, the CPSU and the leaders of the world communist movement.”<sup>47</sup>

*The Leninist* was pro-Soviet in the sense of defending the USSR from imperialism and designating it as the “world’s revolutionary centre”, however: “It does not mean that the comrades in the Kremlin were ‘directing’ the world revolution as some Trotskyists foolishly believe us to mean. Nor did it mean that everything the [CPSU] does is automatically correct as most centrists [i.e. the likes of *Straight Left* and *Proletarian*] consider it does. No, for us the world revolutionary centre is an objective fact indicating the country where the class struggle has reached its highest expression.”<sup>48</sup> This licence to criticise the Soviet Union and other countries in the world socialist bloc (which was stressed as being the most healthy form of proletarian internationalism) was always ready to unpick the ‘official’ communist tropes that *The Leninist* used on occasion.<sup>49</sup>

When discussing the internal political causes of the Polish crisis of the early 1980s, despite using ‘left’ quotes by “comrade” Brezhnev (on the need for democracy under socialism) and the CPSU (on the need for revolutionary leadership) to buttress his argument, James Marshall essentially mobilises a Trotskyist analysis, describing a Polish United Workers Party (PUWP — the ruling communist party, although at that point effectively sidelined by martial law) that had become thoroughly bureaucratised and alienated from Polish workers.<sup>50</sup> Among other features the article analysed the undemocratic nature of ‘planning’ in Poland and the growth of inequality. The proposed remedy for the growth of reaction (in the form of the ‘yellow’ trade union Solidarity) was the democratic involvement of the masses and the opening up of the PUWP to the working class. Poland was still classed as a socialist country to be defended against counter-revolution, with the rider that “our main contribution to advancing socialism in Poland is to fight for the *revolution in Britain* itself”.<sup>51</sup>

In retrospect, 1984–85 was the key period in the development of *The Leninist* faction. In April 1984 *The Leninist* became a monthly newspaper. What was

then still a miniscule organisation threw itself wholeheartedly into the miners' strike. Members travelled around the country visiting picket lines and others worked in various miners' support committees in the London area.<sup>52</sup> *The Leninist* did not abstract the class war from a decaying 'official' CPGB, rather it stressed the interconnections: "The miners' strike is undoubtedly political as well as economic, and as such it concerns the working class as a whole. We must have no truck with the rotten theory and practice of dividing working class struggles into watertight economic and political compartments. It is the role of a Communist Party to mobilise the greatest possible concentration of forces to strike with the miners, to deepen and extend the struggle to show with every turn of events that it is political, that total victory can only be won if this is recognised, and that the struggle is given a consciously anti-capitalist direction."<sup>53</sup>

#### ABDICATED VANGUARDS

The 'official' CPGB proved to be utterly incapable of such a role. While *The Leninist* argued that the miners' strike showed that "the Communist Party remains at the heart of the working class movement" and that "everywhere in the NUM you will find Communist Party members" it was quick to point out the wretched role played by the CPGB leadership in the strike.<sup>54</sup> The decisions of the CPGB EC of July 1984 in relation to George Bolton's report were classed as "at best tailist", and "at worst" having the ability to "actually hamper the healthy growing politicisation and refreshing willingness of workers to use violence to advance their cause".<sup>55</sup> The CPGB leadership (as well as its *Morning Star* and *Straight Left* factions) was seen to have completely abdicated its vanguard role in the strike.

In contrast, *The Leninist* attempted to pose solutions for deepening and winning the miners' strike: building a militant minority in the NUM and other unions to win a general strike (with or without a venal TUC);<sup>56</sup> workers' defence corps to protect pickets from police brutality;<sup>57</sup> and transforming miners' support committees from merely collecting food and clothing into councils of working class action.<sup>58</sup> What partly informed this political line was a study of the early years of the CPGB, up to and including its role in the 1926 General Strike.<sup>59</sup> In this vein, a supplement from May 1985 stated that "whatever limitations there were with the Communist Party in 1926, it was able to give the struggle a common strategic direction" and was "a genuine vanguard of the class".<sup>60</sup>

What impact did the miners' strike have on *The Leninist's* development? The aftermath of the defeat of the miners was a split around the time of the organisation's third conference in June 1985.<sup>61</sup> The two comrades who left around this period were deemed to have "stood against our style of work and political perspectives [and] our organic involvement in the miners' strike" in favour of weakening the level of personal and financial commitment supporters of *The Leninist* were expected to make.<sup>62</sup> This specific issue (partly explained by other members as a reaction to the defeat of the miners<sup>63</sup>) is probably less



interesting than the light shone on *The Leninist* organisation. Despite the fact the group had won an audience among militant miners, particularly towards the end of the strike,<sup>64</sup> participants such as 'RT' noted that "despite progress we have had very few recruits, and although *The Leninist* is a good paper and has respect from militant workers, this is not enough".<sup>65</sup> 'RT' was on his way out of the group so his statement may be a partial reflection of his political direction. However, a resolution on the 'Party crisis' said: "Today and for the immediate future *The Leninist* will remain small in numbers, relatively isolated from the working class, and indeed relatively peripheral in inner-party [CPGB] debates."<sup>66</sup>

Thus despite its positive engagement with the miners' strike, *The Leninist* group had not gained any significant leverage in the struggle inside the CPGB. Clearly, recruiting 'outsider' revolutionary militants to do battle inside what was fast becoming a CPGB corpse was not easy, particularly in the face of the leadership's opportunist role in the strike and doubts around whether the *Marxism Today* wing of the party had even supported the strike.<sup>67</sup>

*The Leninist* classified the *Straight Left* opposition as liquidationist in view of its position of pushing for CPGB affiliation to the Labour Party in order for Labour to become the 'federal party of the working class'. This dissolution into the folds of Labour was seen to be the "most dangerous form of liquidationism", made worse by *Straight Left's* "debilitating effect on the very wing of the [CPGB] from which pro-partyism can be expected to emerge".<sup>68</sup>

What of the opposition of Mick Costello (CPGB industrial organiser until 1983) and Tony Chater (editor) around the *Morning Star*? On face value it would seem that the emergence of this anti-Eurocommunist trend would offer *The Leninist* fertile ground to intensify its struggle. To go along with such a thesis, one would need to subscribe to the myth that grey figures such as Chater, raised on the thin revisionist gruel of the CPGB's right-opportunist bureaucracy, represented some kind of left, class struggle trend in the party.<sup>69</sup> In fact, as *The Leninist* was quick to comprehend, the *Morning Star* opposition, like *Straight Left*, was in fact a product of the CPGB's ideological and organisational decay.

Writing in *The Leninist*, Frank Grafton traced the emergence of Chater and Costello as oppositionists to the late 1970s and the aftermath of Eric Hobsbawm's 1978 Marx Memorial Lecture 'The forward march of Labour halted' and interpretations of the 1978 *BRS* that were downplaying the leading role of the working class (essentially equated with the existing reformist labour movement). Costello was seen to be voicing the alarm of CPGB trade union activists and officials at their declining influence inside and outside the party: "The party was beginning to break up into several opportunist cliques, all promoting 'sectional' interests, and in this sense, comrade Costello was promoting trade unionism, not as an integral component of communist



**On the march:**

Members of  
*The Leninist*  
group take part  
in a May Day  
demonstration  
in London,  
1990

work, but as a 'sectional' interest."<sup>70</sup> This narrow sectionalism was seen to be infecting the response of many CPGB trade unionists choosing to respond to the debate around a controversial article by Tony Lane in *Marxism Today* in September 1982.<sup>71</sup>

Chater's move in describing the CPGB EC as "a body outside the PPPS" in June 1983 was thus seen as a sign of "a very dangerous liquidationist orientation that, which in some senses surpasses that of the Eurocommunists in its speed of development",<sup>72</sup> as was the editor's position of seeking financial support from the trade union movement.<sup>73</sup> Thus, *The Leninist* developed 'a plague on both your houses' approach that looked askance on both Chater's anti-party orientation and the Eurocommunists' perceived desire to turn the *Morning Star* into a daily/weekly version of *Marxism Today*.

In 1985 this approach underwent some modification after *The Leninist* group's third conference. The conference had originally agreed an abstentionist position for the June elections for the People's Press Printing Society (PPPS — the body that formally owned and managed the *Morning Star*) Management Committee in line with the above approach.<sup>74</sup> A *National Bulletin* was even put out on June 5 that only recommended a vote in favour of Malcolm Bride, a member of *The Leninist* group.<sup>75</sup> This strategy then underwent a dramatic shift before the PPPS AGM, where *The Leninist* finally recommended a vote for the candidates of the CPGB EC as Chater's increasing reliance on non-CPGB support (the NCP, Arthur Scargill, Tony Benn and the trade unions) was seen to pose the greater short-term liquidationist threat: "Because Chater has been treating the *Morning Star* as a piece of personal property, because the EC were standing for the idea of the [CPGB], and because the Chater camp had taken a qualitative step

forward in its liquidationism we had to fight for all CPGB members to vote for the candidates of the EC.”<sup>76</sup>

This change of line had occurred under the influence of Yürükoğlu and the CPT who were still meeting with *The Leninist* group for regular political discussions.<sup>77</sup> The CPT had already expressed the view at the third conference that Chater’s rebellion was “one of the most important agents in the disintegration of the CPGB today”.<sup>78</sup> Mark Lewis was the last comrade to be convinced of the change of line at what he describes as a “long, fraught and difficult meeting” at which CPT members were present. He describes the decision as “one of the worst mistakes we ever made” and one that “cut us off from a whole audience” among *Morning Star* followers. Lewis says that the decision to back the EC candidates “absolutely made [the group] pariahs among our target audience and isolated us for a whole period”.<sup>79</sup> Although he accepted that the leading group around Chater was liquidationist and without principle, he thought that its CPGB followers were generally honest communists. An editorial in *The Leninist* hoped that “literally thousands of good communists who voted for the Management Committee slate can be won back to the party”.<sup>80</sup> Looking at it from the point of view of these voters, *The Leninist* had just backed a Eurocommunist-led EC that was busily expelling huge swathes of their group (particularly after events at the London District Congress in November 1984) in the biggest purge in the party’s history.

One could overemphasise the impact of this decision to back the EC candidates. John Chamberlain thinks that it made little difference to the overall evolution of the group, seeing it as the product of a young and relatively inexperienced organisation.<sup>81</sup> *The Leninist* group had already worked out that there was very little left in terms of raw material for revolutionary politics in the CPGB. A group infected with sectional trade unionist reformism was always going to be difficult territory for a revolutionary group that in its coverage of the miners’ strike had been keen to undercut such sectionalism with a more rounded view of what communist politics entailed.

#### COULD HAVE BEEN A CONTENDER?

However, the events of 1985 did confirm that *The Leninist* group, despite having a widely read and relatively influential publication, was not going to be a big player in the CPGB’s ‘endgame’ and, despite occasional delusions to the contrary,<sup>82</sup> neither was it going to have much positive leverage over the breakaway Communist Campaign Group (CCG — what was to become the Communist Party of Britain [CPB] in 1988) that emerged from the *Morning Star* opposition, despite being targeted as a “focus of attack” by *The Leninist* in late 1987.<sup>83</sup> Ian Mahoney complained of CCG members in 1987 that: “They defend the *BRS* and refuse to debate with those in the Communist Party who have not sold their soul in order to get a sniff of what was imagined to be the ‘big time’. Even those with most left pretensions, as in South Wales [a reference to the group around Robert Griffiths], fight shy of debating with us.”<sup>84</sup>

However, *The Leninist's* contention that the *Morning Star*/CCG rebellion was a low-level split and thus a dereliction of party duty, was one that was widely held by CPGB veterans who were opposed to the Eurocommunists but distrusted Chater's group and its motives. For example, veteran Frank Watters, although generally supportive of Chater in his initial rebellion against the CPGB, put his views about the CPB split in relation to a disciplinary he was on the receiving end of in 1985: "... they [the Yorkshire District Committee] thought people [such as] Ken Gill, Ken Brett, Arthur Utting, Terry Marsland, Frank Watters and others would join the Labour Party or fling their weight behind the Communist Campaign Group, a front set up to prepare for another breakaway, the Communist Party of Britain. None of these, to my knowledge, did so as they had sufficient labour movement experience to understand that such splits in the communist movements in other countries were disastrous and played into the hands of the Euros."<sup>85</sup> Similarly, the CPGB's former industrial organiser, Bert Ramelson, another opponent of the Euros (but who was also critical of the *Morning Star* camp), argued that "the worse thing at the moment is to allow ourselves to be provoked into a split".<sup>86</sup> This hostility meant that the CPB proved to be a somewhat anaemic split from the CPGB and *The Leninist* played its own ideological role in the breakaway's negative reception.

When the Eurocommunists attempted to wind up the CPGB in November 1991, *The Leninist* group refused to acquiesce and became the CPGB Provisional Central Committee (PCC), effectively capturing the 'CPGB' name.<sup>87</sup> However, the CPGB PCC was little more than *The Leninist* faction, which was recognised in the idea of it being a provisional body. Since that period the group has been engaged in a winding process of rapprochement with other trends and factions, partly through work in organisations/alliances such as the Socialist Labour Party, the Socialist Alliance and Respect. In general, its evolution has been similar to that of *The Leninist* group: its paper — the *Weekly Worker* — has been a political success that gives it some leverage over the left, but it is still a tiny circle that is effectively a 'school of thought' among a decomposing revolutionary left rather than a thriving organisation with any real roots in the labour movement.

### BUNCH OF PROLES

*Proletarian* was also formed by a group of ex-NCP members around Keith Nilsen, which then chose to orient its journal towards the CPGB. The circle was expelled from the NCP's Wandsworth (London) and Southampton branches after a battle at the organisation's third congress in 1981.<sup>88</sup> This flared up after a resolution from Southampton branch that suggested the NCP's *New Worker* should be aimed at raising the level of politically advanced workers. According to *Proletarian*, Eric Trevett, general secretary of the NCP, had denounced such views as elitist, seemingly reflecting a more general trend in the leadership that was uncomfortable with dividing the working class into strata and who thought that the *New Worker* should be palatable to workers who were generally drawn to populist bourgeois newspapers. Thus, "[the NCP leadership] repeat almost

word for word the arguments on these questions put forward by the economists against Lenin's paper *Iskra*...".<sup>89</sup> *Proletarian* linked the NCP's rejection of Lenin's ideas with its economist political practice. The group was expelled from the NCP in the first six months of 1982.<sup>90</sup>

Post NCP, *Proletarian* came to similar political conclusions to *The Leninist* regarding the strategic importance of the CPGB for revolutionaries: "The CPGB is corrupted by opportunism, yet it remains the mass party of the politically conscious sections of the British working class."<sup>91</sup> However, the "struggle to rid the proletarian vanguard" of "petit bourgeois elements" was not to be confined to the CPGB; *Proletarian* looked to other forces (the Workers Party, the Revolutionary Communist Group and even the CPB[M-L]).<sup>92</sup> It was also, again like *The Leninist*, "aware that the pro-Soviet alternative remaining in the CPGB [after the NCP split in 1977] suffered from the same kind of economist approach in that [it] restricted the inner-party struggle to, [as *The Leninist*] crudely define it, pub-room conspiracies" that were lacking in any theoretical, ideological scope.<sup>93</sup> Although the group was active in the politics of the *Morning Star* and the PPPS it generally did not do factional work inside the CPGB itself. Despite the fact that *The Leninist* had chosen to simply ignore CPGB rules to publish as an inner-party faction, in reply to the question, "Is organisational unity with elements under the influence of opportunism correct?", *Proletarian* appeared to be using the formality of CPGB rules as a barrier to organisational unity: "*The Leninist* conveniently overlooks the fact that the CPGB is organised on *democratic centralist* lines — the principles of which today prevent the formation of publications not under Central Committee control."<sup>94</sup>

The focus of the group strongly reflected the nature of its factional struggle in the NCP in that the "task confronting the British communist movement [in 1983] is... to build a paper to raise the level of politically advanced workers".<sup>95</sup> Unfortunately, the *Proletarian* journal did not get beyond a second issue in 1984 (the group ceased to exist around 1988), so on the level of what it saw as its key task it must be judged a failure.<sup>96</sup> In April 1985 Keith Nilsen had to admit "that there have been problems in developing *Proletarian*",<sup>97</sup> and the organisation began to haemorrhage members, some of who claimed its leadership was suffering from political and organisational sclerosis.<sup>98</sup>

As indicated above, *Proletarian* was similar to The Appeal Group in seeing the CPSU as a special repository of revolutionary élan. The group argued "the only correct, genuinely proletarian attitude towards the CPSU is to recognise it as a principled Marxist-Leninist party standing at the vanguard of the world revolutionary process".<sup>99</sup> Such a position was enough to finish off The Appeal Group in the mid-1970s; maintaining it in the 1980s, particularly after the accession to power of Gorbachev in 1985, was even more untenable, handing a polemical gift to *Proletarian*'s opponents: "Because *Proletarian* cuts its cloth to suit the leadership of the CPSU, we can only wonder where present moves in



the Soviet Union will take it; i.e., offers by Gorbachev to stitch up deals with Reagan on 'international hot spots', or the CPSU's rapprochement with the virulently pro-imperialist Communist Party of Italy."<sup>100</sup> *The Leninist* wondered aloud whether the uncertainty of this pro-Soviet position was behind the stasis of *Proletarian* (the first sign of its implosion), which, in retrospect, seems a plausible hypothesis.

Relations with *The Leninist* were relatively hostile. Initially, *The Leninist* group welcomed the publication of *Proletarian* and thought its polemical demolition of the NCP in the first issue was "doing a great service".<sup>101</sup> However, this dialogue foundered over *The Leninist*'s unwillingness to tone down its critique of the socialist bloc, seeing *Proletarian*'s version of 'proletarian internationalism' as having a similar venal nature to that of the NCP.<sup>102</sup> For its part, *Proletarian* thought *The Leninist* was moving "away from the positions of Marxism-Leninism towards Trotskyism".<sup>103</sup> It explained the evolution of *The Leninist* thus: "... this group of individuals thus exchanged their own superficially pro-Soviet views for the equally superficial, but also thoroughly reactionary, anti-Soviet views of Yürükoğlu and his trend."<sup>104</sup>

*Proletarian* suffered further bitter splits around 1988 (with branches such as Bristol resigning *en masse*) and quickly faded out of existence. Much of this dispute was centred on Keith Nilsen's personal conduct and his lack of political accountability as the group's leading figure.<sup>105</sup> Even if it had managed to make it to the 1990s, there were arguably much bigger ideological falls to come for this pro-Soviet trend and it largely repeated the mistakes of The Appeal Group. There was simply no political purchase to be had from hitching revolutionary politics to a CPSU bandwagon. Its inability to produce a regular publication (its apparent *raison d'être*) severely limited any impact the group might have had.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eric Trevett took over French's position as general secretary, vacating the post of national organiser.

<sup>2</sup> Author's interview with John Chamberlain

<sup>3</sup> Jim Moody, draft report on NCP expulsions, no date but late 1980

<sup>4</sup> John Chamberlain argues that Yürükoğlu told Sid French not to leave the CPGB in 1977 — author's interview with John Chamberlain.

<sup>5</sup> Draft report on NCP expulsions *op cit*

<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with John Chamberlain

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Draft report on NCP expulsions *op cit*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*. Another leftist group, the Vanguard Group, had split from the NCP in 1979.

<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with John Chamberlain

<sup>13</sup> Chamberlain subsequently called leaving the CPGB "the biggest political



mistake I ever made” — ‘Open letter to Bill Dunn from John Chamberlain’ *The Leninist* Number 4, April 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Author’s interview with Jim Moody. Moody chose to carry on with this solidarity work and was not a formal member of *The Leninist* group when the first magazine was launched. Mark Lewis says that Yürükoğlu could be extremely difficult to work with on occasion — author’s interview with Mark Lewis. Jack Conrad’s obituary of Yürükoğlu notes: “There can be no doubt that the comrade had a domineering personality” — ‘Influence in Britain’ *Weekly Worker* December 20 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Grafton ‘The road from Thatcherism, or the road from Marxism’ *The Leninist* Number 1, Winter 1981–82 pp10–27

<sup>16</sup> James Marshall ‘Some thoughts on the *British Road to Socialism*’ *The Leninist* Number 4, April 1983 p16

<sup>17</sup> ‘Founding statement of *The Leninist*: The Communist Party, the crisis and its crisis’ *The Leninist* Number 1, Winter 1981–82 p3

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* p5

<sup>19</sup> ‘A call to all communists’ *The Leninist* Number 3, September 1982. See also Jack Conrad and Mark Fischer as participants in ‘Mapping our tradition’ *Weekly Worker* August 24 2000: JC: “In almost every industry CP activists pursued a very wrong political strategy, a pro-bureaucracy line almost invariably. But throughout industry, in every trade union, trades council, etc, the collectively thinking part of the working class was organised in one party — the CPGB.” MF: “The CPGB in 1920 was the highest political achievement of our class thus far. It united the advanced part of the class under a revolutionary programme, situated in the living experience of Bolshevism. Its decline and disintegration was death by a thousand opportunist cuts — some deeper than others. Throughout the period we are talking about, the CPGB organised the best militant fighters in our class. It degenerated, yes. But turning your back on the CPGB meant turning your back on the advanced part of the class itself.”

<sup>20</sup> ‘How Leninists should work in the party’ *The Leninist* Number 4, April 1983 p39. All supporters of *The Leninist* were expected to take out a CPGB party card except those, such as John Chamberlain, who were refused one. For a perspective on how difficult it was for certain ‘marked’ members of the faction to regain CPGB membership, see the correspondence of Robin Jackson with Roger Trask, London district organiser, in CP/CENT/EC/20/01.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Fischer in ‘Mapping our tradition’ *op cit*

<sup>22</sup> ‘Founding statement of *The Leninist*...’ *op cit* p7

<sup>23</sup> Reg Birch’s CPB(M-L) and McCreery’s CDRFCU (incorrectly introduced as “McCreery’s MLOB”) were classed as examples of “left liquidationism” — ‘Open the fight against liquidationism on all fronts’ *The Leninist* Number 5, August 1983 p4.

<sup>24</sup> ‘How Leninists should work in the party’ *op cit* p39

<sup>25</sup> ‘A call to all communists’ *op cit* pp1–5. These particular groups were referred to as “revolutionary sectarian”.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Camouflaged revisionism’ *op cit*

<sup>27</sup> Author’s interview with Mark Lewis

<sup>28</sup> Members such as Mark Lewis, Stan Keable and Peter Manson all had significant family or activist backgrounds in the CPGB, as well as activists such as John Chamberlain and Jim Moody — author's interviews with this group.

<sup>29</sup> The *Leninist*'s opponents seemingly sussed out its London confinement in membership terms fairly quickly — 'The party crisis and the *Morning Star* crunch' *The Leninist* Number 4, April 1983 p1.

<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with John Chamberlain

<sup>31</sup> These were leaks from a source on the EC — see *National Bulletin: Newsletter of the Leninists of the CPGB* January 17 1985. The *National Bulletin* had even more detailed accounts of inner-party meetings than those in *The Leninist*.

<sup>32</sup> Author's interview with Peter Manson. He had been largely unaware of the CPGB's various factions until given a free copy of *The Leninist* on a demonstration.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson *op cit* pp181–182

<sup>34</sup> See CP/CENT/EC/21/01

<sup>35</sup> For example, at the CPGB EC meeting of 12–13 January 1985 it was noted that Doug Chalmers had reported that he had seen Mark Lewis selling *The Leninist* at a Scottish miners' rally in Glasgow — CP/CENT/EC/21/09.

<sup>36</sup> Author's interview with Mark Lewis

<sup>37</sup> See for example the letter from Tom Durkin in *The Leninist* December 19 1986. Durkin was involved in the *Morning Star*-led CCG breakaway — see note 46 below. The CCG's successor continues to push this 'Trotskyite' line: "There is also a tiny sect of no more than 30 members, of Trotskyite origin and orientation, which has recently hijacked the name of the 'Communist Party of Great Britain'" — *Solidarity! International Bulletin of the Communist Party of Britain* Summer 2005. I have yet to find evidence of a 'Trotskyite' faction in the NCP.

<sup>38</sup> Frank Grafton 'The roots of liquidationism' *The Leninist* Number 8, May 1984

<sup>39</sup> Author's interview with John Chamberlain

<sup>40</sup> 'Open the fight against liquidationism on all fronts' *op cit* p2. See also the analysis here of 'socialism in one country' and the "hopelessly sectarian" use of 'Third Period' tactics in Germany in 1933, which all seems similarly influenced by Trotsky's writings.

<sup>41</sup> Jack Conrad 'Which road? A critique of the *British Road to Socialism* (part 5)' *The Leninist* Number 84, November 23 1989

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>43</sup> Jack Conrad in 'Mapping our tradition' *op cit*

<sup>44</sup> Such developments have not stopped some historians painting *The Leninist* as hard-line Stalinist in inspiration: "A coup in August 1990 removed Gorbachev from power and on his release the decline of the Soviet Union began to accelerate. In a bizarre mini replica of this episode the offices of the British Communist Party were also occupied in August of the same year, by a group called 'The Leninist', who accused the party leadership of selling off the party's archives and thus its historical legacy..." — Geoff Andrews *op cit* p220.

<sup>45</sup> 'A call to all communists' *op cit* p1

<sup>46</sup> The Communist Campaign Group (CCG) was set up by supporters of the

*Morning Star* after it split from the CPGB. Its members then set up the breakaway Communist Party of Britain (CPB) in 1988. Robert Griffiths was the main animator of the South Wales CCG although he subsequently renounced the anti-*BRS* views he held circa 1986 (some of which were published by the South Wales CCG as *Discussion papers* and republished in *The Leninist* article here), becoming general secretary of the CPB — which had chosen to retain a version of the *BRS* — in 1998.

<sup>47</sup> Jack Conrad 'Crisis in the CCG' *The Leninist* Number 47–48, March 20 1987

<sup>48</sup> 'CJ' in 'The third conference of the Leninists of the CPGB: Debates, resolutions and subsequent decisions' *The Leninist* Number 22, July 1985

<sup>49</sup> "We can also never forget the Red Army's victory over the forces of German imperialism and how this directly opened up the possibility of spreading socialism into Eastern Europe" — Resolution on the Soviet Union in *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> James Marshall 'The Polish crisis: the role of imperialism and the fight for proletarian internationalism' *The Leninist* Number 2, Spring 1982 pp4–17

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid* p15. Marshall's analysis bears more than a passing resemblance to that of Leon Trotsky in *The revolution betrayed* (1936). For more of this strain on the Soviet Union and Gorbachev see Jack Conrad 'For a real political revolution' *The Leninist* Number 56, November 23 1987.

<sup>52</sup> Author's interviews with John Chamberlain, Mark Lewis and Jim Moody

<sup>53</sup> James Marshall 'Strike back with the miners' *The Leninist* Number 9, June 1984

<sup>54</sup> David Sherriff 'While the miners strike...' *The Leninist* Number 13, October 1984

<sup>55</sup> Roger Freeman 'Myopic liquidationism' *The Leninist* Number 11, August 1984

<sup>56</sup> Jack Conrad 'Hit back with the miners' *The Leninist* Number 13, October 1984

<sup>57</sup> Richard Hardy 'We need workers' defence corps' *The Leninist* Number 11, August 1984

<sup>58</sup> Bill Kernan 'Miners' Support Committees: into action' *The Leninist* Number 12, September 1984

<sup>59</sup> Author's interview with John Chamberlain

<sup>60</sup> 'A defeat: but not a strategic one' *The Leninist* May 1985. With hindsight, the idea that the defeat of the miners' strike was not a strategic one was completely wrong.

<sup>61</sup> See 'The third conference of the Leninists of the CPGB' *op cit* and *National Bulletin: Monthly Newsletter of the Leninists of the CPGB* November 12 1985

<sup>62</sup> *National Bulletin: Monthly Newsletter of the Leninists of the CPGB* November 12 1985

<sup>63</sup> Author's interview with John Chamberlain

<sup>64</sup> Author's interviews with John Chamberlain and Mark Lewis

<sup>65</sup> 'The third conference of the Leninists of the CPGB' *op cit*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>67</sup> Thompson *op cit* p192

<sup>68</sup> 'Open the fight against liquidationism on all fronts' *op cit* p7

<sup>69</sup> It is this myth that 'informs' books such as Francis Beckett *Enemy within: the*

*rise and fall of the British Communist Party* London 1998 pp190–211

<sup>70</sup> Frank Grafton 'The crisis of the *Morning Star* and the Communist Party' *The Leninist* Number 5, August 1983 p35. Samuel comes to broadly similar conclusions about the direction of the Chaterites towards the "centre-left" of the trade union movement — see *The lost world of British communism op cit* p27.

<sup>71</sup> 'The crisis of the *Morning Star*...' *op cit* p36. Lane's article made reference to petty corruption among lower-level trade union officials — see Tony Lane 'The unions: caught on the ebb tide' *Marxism Today* September 1982.

<sup>72</sup> 'The crisis of the *Morning Star*...' *op cit* p37

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid* p38

<sup>74</sup> 'The third conference of the Leninists of the CPGB' *op cit*

<sup>75</sup> *National Bulletin: Newsletter of the Leninists of the CPGB* June 5 1985

<sup>76</sup> 'The third conference of the Leninists of the CPGB' *op cit* — Chater's candidates still won very comfortably at the 1985 PPPS AGM.

<sup>77</sup> Author's interviews with John Chamberlain and Mark Lewis. Chamberlain argues that Yürükoğlu, who he deems to have had a 'national' perspective in terms of the CPT, had done some sort of deal with the CPGB EC to deliver *The Leninist's* support of the EC candidates in return for some kind of logistical support.

<sup>78</sup> 'The third conference of the Leninists of the CPGB' *op cit*

<sup>79</sup> Author's interview with Mark Lewis. See *The Leninist* Number 23, August 1985 for a selection of critical letters over the PPPS issue. One year on, the group was still receiving disapproving letters over its decision to back the EC candidates — see letter from Janet Cordon, *The Leninist* June 14 1986.

<sup>80</sup> 'The PPPS AGM' *The Leninist* Number 22, July 1985. See also the letter from Zoe Ellwin querying the advice to vote for EC candidates at the PPPS AGM. A reply from Ian Mahoney suggests that this advice was not a break with the "essence" of the group's original 'plague on both your houses' approach.

<sup>81</sup> Author's interview with John Chamberlain

<sup>82</sup> For example, in the run-up to the CPB split in late 1987, one writer argued: "*The Leninist* is being seen as *the* opposition by the leadership of the CCG" — *The Leninist notes of the week*, December 27 1987.

<sup>83</sup> *The Leninist notes of the week*, November 8 1987

<sup>84</sup> Ian Mahoney 'PPPS AGM: The gerbil and the buzz-saw' *The Leninist* Number 52, July 17 1987. *The Leninist* group saw the CPB split organisation, eventually founded in 1988 and soon to adopt a version of the reformist *BRS*, as an "NCP Mark II" — see 'No short cuts' *The Leninist* Number 64, May 23 1988. Activists from the leftist South Wales CCG had apparently refused to talk to supporters of *The Leninist* at a *Morning Star* meeting in Cardiff in October 1987 — see *The Leninist notes of the week*, October 25 1987.

<sup>85</sup> Frank Watters *Being Frank: the memoirs of Frank Watters* Doncaster 1992 p162

<sup>86</sup> Roger Seifert and Tom Sibley *Revolutionary communist at work: a political biography of Bert Ramelson* London 2012 p296

<sup>87</sup> See 'CPGB lives!' *The Leninist* Number 113, December 4 1991

<sup>88</sup> These events are covered in 'Economism, tailism and the New Communist Party' *Proletarian* Number 1 1983

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*. The group had members/branches in London, Brighton, Dorset and Bristol.

<sup>91</sup> 'The present stage of the world revolutionary process and the tasks of communists in Britain' *Proletarian* Number 2, 1984 p2

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid* p13

<sup>93</sup> 'Answering the call: *Proletarian*' *The Leninist* Number 4, April 1983 p38

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid* p39 and author's correspondence with Simon Cormack. Cormack was a *Proletarian* member in Bristol.

<sup>95</sup> 'Answering the call: *Proletarian*' *op cit* p39

<sup>96</sup> The group produced *Selected articles and correspondence* (1987), seemingly as a stopgap for the never-to-be-finished third issue of *Proletarian*.

<sup>97</sup> 'Reply to *Proletarian*' April 1985 [http://website.lineone.net/~partisan\\_britain/foundation/prolrep.html](http://website.lineone.net/~partisan_britain/foundation/prolrep.html)

<sup>98</sup> Some of these elements formed the Partisan group, which claimed that Nilsen and the *Proletarian* leadership suffered from insecurity, began to fear the advanced workers it was meant to be addressing and thus had an aversion to serious cadre development — see 'Lenin and the advanced worker: founding statement' [http://website.lineone.net/~partisan\\_britain/journal.html](http://website.lineone.net/~partisan_britain/journal.html)

<sup>99</sup> 'The present stage of the world revolutionary process...' *op cit* p7. The article added (p11): "... regarding our understanding of the present role and character of the CPSU, we may say that within the question of *absolute* and unconditional support for the Soviet Union there is also the *relative* question of the objective and subjective limitations of the CPSU as a party in development and change operating principally on the basis of its own national experience... Thus, in relative terms, it is very possible that viewed from the perspective of our own national experience, communists in Britain will have certain differences with the CPSU and thus may doubt the wisdom of this or that policy or approach, whilst recognising overall that the [CPSU] is unquestionably the most developed and formidable opponent of imperialism and whose policies as a whole confirm that fact." This passage appears to signify that *Proletarian* was aware that the CPSU's actions simply could not be classed as 'revolutionary' on all occasions but then smothers that acknowledgement by concluding that despite this, the CPSU was still principled "overall" — a circular argument.

<sup>100</sup> Sean Quinn 'Against centrist hypocrisy, for communism' *The Leninist* Number 56, November 23 1987

<sup>101</sup> Letter in *Proletarian* Number 2, 1984 p83

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>103</sup> 'The present stage of the world revolutionary process...' *op cit* p19

<sup>104</sup> 'Answering the call: *Proletarian*' *op cit* p39

<sup>105</sup> Author's correspondence with Simon Cormack: "I left at the time the majority did so (spring–summer 1988). At the time this was because Keith [Nilsen] was not abiding by political committee decisions. In summary, Keith's leading role in *Proletarian* made him indispensable to the organisation but his personal conduct was not consistent with his responsibilities. Coupling enormous strengths with enormous weakness (kindly put) in the leading figure

of a political organisation is not a recipe for success. Simply put, I left along with the rest of Bristol branch because Keith's personal and political conduct was incompatible with our reasons for being members in the first place." Also, see the '8' column in *The Leninist* Number 65, June 20 1988 and July 31 1988 for some comment on these splits.



# We can't work it out

The main lines of this study of the CPGB's revolutionary opposition will now be apparent. This opposition visibly matured down the years; each wave had its own particular gains. The early post-war oppositionists and McCreery's CDRFCU had the clarity of their Leninist line on the CPGB's reformism. Sections of the CPGB's pro-Chinese oppositions were able to overcome (at least for a time) the urge to march off into a sectarian wilderness. The Appeal Group had at least an idea of a viable strategy for working inside the CPGB while retaining a polemical voice beyond the 'host' party's oppressive rules and structures. *The Leninist* deepened its critique of 'official' communism so that its revolutionary politics were not premised on a romanticised myth of the Soviet Union. *Proletarian* stands out by contrast because it had obviously absorbed very few of these lessons.

The bitter irony is that by the time the opposition had matured in the shape of *The Leninist*, there was not much inside a decayed CPGB for it to relate to (and winning 'outsiders' was hardly easier). The phenomenon of 'opposition in slow motion' had played its last card. A consistently stunted growth of revolutionary ideas and factions after the Second World War meant that activists were constantly having to relate to a host body that was fast decaying, and their slow growth was not enough to offset the decline.

The revolutionary opposition was always a fringe attraction of the CPGB. *Straight Left* and the group around the *Morning Star* were much bigger and more mainstream, but these were essentially products of opportunist decay. Even in the workplaces and trade unions, where earlier oppositions might have expected to make an impact on CPGB members at what was seen as the sharp end of the class struggle, union sectionalism and reformism (and what eventually matured into an anti-party trend in the shape of Chater's grouping in the 1980s) effectively held sway. Reg Birch's role in the pro-Chinese opposition in the 1960s had been no solution to this division.

However, readers should not come away with the impression that just because these groupings were tiny and sometimes isolated from their CPGB comrades, never mind the broader 'labour movement', they were somehow irrelevant. The organisation and activity of even tiny groups of Marxists is not irrelevant to the working class as a whole. To say that they are irrelevant merely reproduces the logic — in reduced circumstances — of the *BRS* itself, which made the CPGB effectively irrelevant by ceding leading roles to bourgeois institutions (albeit ones with a working class base) such as the Labour Party and the trade unions.

The history of the 'anti-revisionist' wing of the CPGB should not be reduced to a simple good/bad dichotomy of revolutionaries and reformists. I have

attempted to set out some of the objective and subjective circumstances (for example, the organisational state of the party, the Soviet Union, the trade unions, the actions and ideology of oppositionists, and so on) that layered other sets of decentred contradictions on the inner-party struggle. Also, as will be clear from the latter sections on *The Leninist* group and *Proletarian*, there was no magic resolution to the contradictions that impacted on the CPGB revolutionaries.

These groups were only an embryo of a solution, partly because of their lack of social weight (even in inner-party terms) and London-centric nature but also, more importantly, because the various collectives never worked out a coherent and consistent revolutionary strategy based on mass working class participatory democracy. Rather, they tended to defend elements of a healthy revolutionary approach by rejecting the legalism, opportunism and reformism of the CPGB's post-war strategy. This 'defect' is hardly surprising. The CPGB as a whole was an undemocratic organisation and its leading sections acted as an organised conspiracy against the party membership, never mind the working class. The right-opportunist and Eurocommunist leadership alliance of the CPGB's final years made the most noises in the direction of openness and democracy. However, their abuse of the party apparatus against opponents in the 1980s means that they were treated with contempt when they talked of inclusiveness and democratic rights. (And the historical record should show this contempt: Gordon McLennan, Martin Jacques, Nina Temple *et al* cannot, in any sense, be thought of as CPGB 'reformers' or 'working class democrats'.) The party also lived in the shadow of the Soviet Union and its satellites — the very negation of working class democracy. There was nothing in the CPGB's culture that helped its revolutionaries formulate a consistent democratic approach, although, as we have seen, the ideological formation that the party rested on did allow for the rescue of militant ideas on the capitalist state and revolutionary violence.

In the sense of similarly being a bureaucratic dictatorship *over* the working class, China and Albania proved to be no alternative to the Soviet Union. On occasion, pro-Chinese CPGB members evidenced a fear of mass popular movements, in accord with their ideological attachment to a bureaucratised regime. This can be the only explanation for an article in *Forum* that called 'Beatlemania' "a practical preparation of the young people for fascism".<sup>1</sup> An extreme example this might be, but even if we consider more measured critiques of CPGB strategy by the likes of McCreery, issues of working class democracy are largely absent and the important relationship between party and class tends to be assumed as a unity rather than explored as a key contradiction. The nub of the matter for theoreticians such as McCreery seems to be the use of revolutionary violence.<sup>2</sup> Thus, potential organs of the dictatorship of the proletariat (trade councils, shop stewards' committees, councils of action and so on) are boiled down to forms of authority and force without any particular democratic content.<sup>3</sup> Democratic issues are actually begged from such critiques. McCreery is correct to mock the CPGB for wishing to use parliament to

institute socialism, but there are many democratic issues lurking here that cannot be swept aside by simply constituting yourself as a crude, militant opposite to an opportunist CPGB leadership. Similar problems appear in a *Forum* critique of the *BRS* that is lumbered with the idea that: “Bourgeois democracy and socialist democracy are opposite poles.”<sup>4</sup> This obscures the fact that existing civil liberties and democratic rights in capitalist society are not ‘bourgeois’ in inspiration, but usually the result of the mass struggle of the popular classes. The *Forum* critique says communists should merely “preserve” such rights rather than deepening and extending them to win the battle for socialism.<sup>5</sup> It adds: “The value of these rights is that they can provide opportunity for educating and organising the working class to struggle for socialism.”<sup>6</sup> This is correct, but such rights are reduced to a technical advantage rather than using a struggle for such rights as a constituent part of the communist struggle. The reader is left with the impression that this “bourgeois democracy” and its attendant civil liberties could well disappear under the opposite pole of socialism. One can only hope that this socialism does not turn out to be the opposite pole of democracy itself.

As we have seen, *The Leninist* group was by far the most advanced critic of ‘living socialism’ among the CPGB’s revolutionary factions and one that had explored ideas of mass participatory politics in, for example, the miners’ strike. It was still hampered by the notion that the advance of the Red Army into Eastern Europe developed ‘socialism’ without the activity of the majority of the working class — although it did recognise the bureaucratised nature of this process.<sup>7</sup> These contradictions came to a head when one considers *The Leninist*’s analysis of the Soviet Union’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Despite stating that the “Soviet Union acted with great national chauvinistic arrogance”, the editorial concludes: “What was posed in 1968 was defending existing bureaucratic socialism or the Dubcek capitalist road. For genuine communists the interests of the world revolution demanded the former and we must have the courage to say that, faced with such a choice, Czech and Slovak national rights had to take second place.”<sup>8</sup> In hindsight, this was a deformed critique whereby embryonic revolutionary ideas could be threatened by residues of a more traditional ‘official’ communism.

It is unsurprising that the revolutionary opposition was unable to work out a consistent democratic approach to working class politics. In many senses the CPGB was extremely infertile ground for the development of a revolutionary critique and this difficult birth marked all of its oppositional factions, without exception. Indeed, when working on this research round about midnight, the author has sometimes marvelled that anything positive or principled ever came out of a CPGB suffering death by a thousand opportunist cuts.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> ‘Pop go The Beatles: the groups and classes they serve’ *Forum* (no date but presumably first issue circa February/March 1964)

<sup>2</sup> See for example McCreery *Destroy the old...* *op cit*

<sup>3</sup> “But in essence, whatever their form, they will be centres of working class power (Soviets); the means whereby the working class exerts superior force against the capitalist state in order to win power” — *ibid* p3.

<sup>4</sup> *Forum* group *The British Road...* *op cit* p6

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> James Marshall ‘The Polish crisis...’ *op cit* p5: “Thus the conditions for the building of socialism in Poland relied more on the strength of the Soviet Army than on the native revolutionary movement itself.”

<sup>8</sup> *The Leninist* July 31 1988. After the ‘official’ party had liquidated itself, an overwhelming majority of the CPGB PCC group ditched the idea that the Soviet Union was any kind of progressive ‘socialist’ society, dating this development to around 1928.