Anti-Parliamentarism and Communism in Britain, 1917–1921

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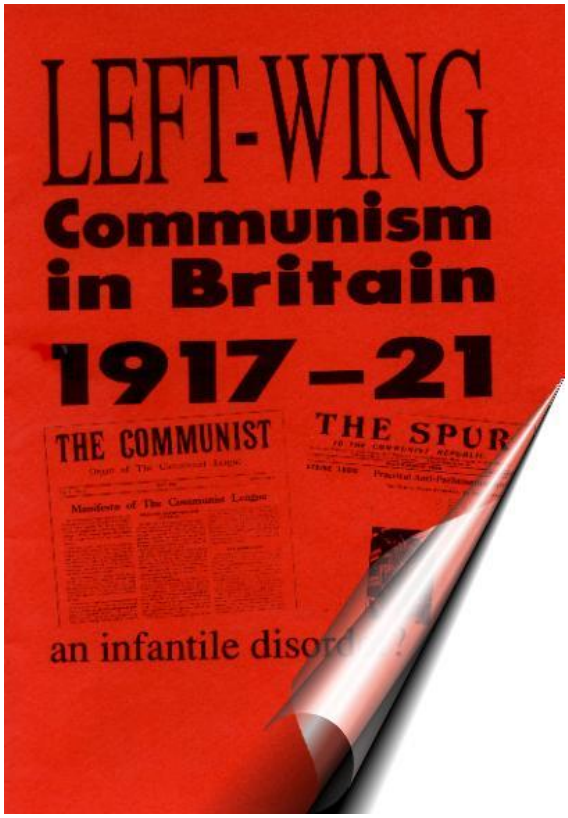

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Authors Introduction — October 1991

This short work was written in 1984 as an article for the journal 'Black Star'. 'Black Star' expired before the article appeared and it eventually appeared in print in 1989 in the Grand Rapids based 'Discussion Bulletin' and later in a slightly revised form in 'The Raven' (No. 11, 1990).

The pamphlet attempts to show how an evolving British Communist movement was taken over by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and turned into something quite alien. At the moment when the Communist Parties, and the authoritarian communism they represent are collapsing everywhere it is perhaps appropriate that this work should reappear. While commentators are glibly enthusing over the end of "communism" and "socialism" it is important to remember that there was an earlier and very different communist tradition in Britain. Understanding the process by which it ws marginalised and in a large part obliterated may help us to understand what went wrong. It might also help to undermine the assumption that 'libertarian' and 'communist' or 'socialist' are mutually contradictory terms.

Anti-Parliamentarism and Communism in Britain, 1917–1921

In this article I shall discuss the growing British anti-parliamentarist movement in the period immediately preceding the formation in 1921 of the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (APCF). In particular, I want to consider the attempts to unite the various anti-parliamentary groups into one Communist Party. These attempts were, I shall argue, a natural development of the revolutionary movement in Britain. They were cut short by the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), an unnatural development for Britain which was based on the conditions set by the Communist International in Russia. The subsequent formation of the APCF was, as a result, a pale reflection of what could have been.

At the outset it is necessary to try to clarify what is meant by 'anti-parliamentarism'. It is important to realise that, for British comrades in 1921, anti-parliamentarism was not merely a negative delineation of tactics — a rejection of the policy of socialists standing for and sitting in Parliament — though this was obviously a key element of the movement. Anti-parliamentarism has, at this time, to be viewed in the context of a burgeoning communist movement. Indeed, until the formation of the CPGB, which took upon itself the definition of all things 'communist', it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the anti-parliamentary and communist movements were synonymous. To be a communist before 1920, even 1921, was to be an anti-parliamentarian. Only after 1921 was the prefix 'anti-parliamentary' needed.

This was true of both Marxists and anarchists. Each shared a common set of ideas, including the centrality of the class struggle for social analysis and action; the conception of workers' committees and councils seizing the means of production and distribution; the ensuing creation of a Soviet Republic which initially would act as a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'; and, as a necessary corollary of these, the importance of direct action and anti-parliamentary agitation. While there was not unanimity on all of these points, there was a broad measure of agreement emerging.

One revealing example of this convergence of views was the interpretation which was made by most sections of the revolutionary movement in Britain of the Russian Revolution in sovietist and councillist terms rather than in terms of the determining role of a centralised and disciplined political party. This interpretation remained almost universal until 1920, when doubts about the exact nature and direction of the Russian Revolution began to surface in Britain. It is also significant that these doubts emerged not over the political practice of the Bolsheviks in Russia — which were rationalised away into existing theoretical formulas (though this was not true of the anarchists centred on the London Freedom Group) — but over the advice Lenin was giving to German and Italian communists to participate in parliamentary elections.

Completely absent was any notion of the centralised, disciplined party as the controlling agent of the revolution. This, however, was a key element in the Comintern's 'Twenty-One Conditions for Admission to the Communist International', which all Communist Parties had to accept before affiliation. Thus Point 12 declares that the party must be built 'upon the principle of democratic centralisation', and speaks of control by 'iron discipline'; and of a party central body with 'the most far-reaching faculties'.

The acceptance of the 'Twenty-One Conditions' by the CPGB therefore represented a marked break with past British experience. What was the significance of this? For some historians, such as James Hinton in The First Shop Stewards' Movement (1973), the unity negotiations resulting in the formation of the CPGB represented a 'theoretical clarification'. Hinton charts a development of revolutionary theory from syndicalism and industrial unionism by way of the experience of the shop stewards' and workers' committee movement to the ultimate flowering of 'the soviet idea of revolution' in the CPGB. There is much that is wrong with this interpretation. Here it is necessary only to note the simple points that the CPGB did not embody any 'theoretical clarification', and had very little to do with 'the soviet idea of revolution'. The whole point of the unity negotiations was to set up Lenin's 'party of a new type' — that is, a centralised party loyally following the orders of the Comintern. Any theoretical or other discoveries made by the British participants were subsumed within this task. The end result was that the existing revolutionary movement and any theoretical advances it had made were largely destroyed.

Let me examine this a little more closely. The first point to make about the 1920 unity negotiations is that they did not involve discussions about the theoretical significance of soviet power or the meaning of the dictatorship of the proletariat. There was already a fair measure of agreement on these issues. The main, almost the exclusive, topic of discussion was parliamentarism, in the form of parliamentary action and of affiliation to the Labour Party. As I shall show later, almost the whole of the revolutionary movement was anti-parliamentary and was uniting around an anti-parliamentary platform. For the moment, however, let me assume this point, and examine how the incipient 'party of a new type' handled the question. In doing so we shall see how M path was laid for the destruction of the revolutionary movement in Britain.

What was the attitude of communists to the Labour Party? For anyone thinking in terms of communism (outside certain sections of the British Socialist Party and the Independent Labour Party), it was simply inconceivable to regard the Labour Party as having anything at all to contribute to the developing movement. Then, as now, the Labour Party, so far as any move towards

socialism was concerned — and never mind about any move towards communism — was seen as a bad joke. D. Manion noted at the Communist Unity Convention of 31 July — 1 August 1920:

> At the present time in Sheffield no matter how good a Socialist a man might be he was mobbed if at any Socialist or trade union meeting he said he was in favour of such [i.e. Labour Party] affiliation.

And Mrs Bamber from Liverpool added:

> The industrial workers were sick to death of the position of the Labour Party at the present time, and she hoped that we, the Communist Party, showing the way not to reform but to the emancipation of the workers, would keep outside the Party that had done so much to delay the progress of the working class during the last few years.

If this was so obvious to so many people, why was Labour Party affiliation ever considered as a serious policy? One factor was that the BSP, the largest socialist body involved in the unity negotiations, was already affiliated to the Labour Party, and continued to argue for affiliation. But a growing number of BSPers, including Comrades Manion and Bamber, were starting to reject the policy. There were clearly other factors at work. The most important of these was the Comintern directive instructing the British Communist Party to affiliate, backed up by Lenin's rationalisation of the position in Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder. While the directive was crucial, perhaps more important was the kind of argument used to support it — a strange kind of argument, new to the British movement and indicative of the kind of reasoning that was to undermine the communist movement in Britain.

It could be argued that up to this time the main aim of British socialists and communists had been a simple one of trying to make socialists and increase the class consciousness of the working class. Questions about the mechanics of seizing power were not widely discussed, most people being content to rely on the ability of the working class to create As own organs of self-government in any revolutionary situation. Further, the Labour Party was to play no part in this process, simply because it was not socialist and because its actions had positively hampered the development towards socialism.

But such common-sense and seemingly obvious points were to come under attack from a new breed of 'realists' and 'hard-headed strategists', who were to play an important part in the unity negotiations. The common-sense view of the Labour Party now came to be seen as 'naive' and 'emotional'; one needed a longer-term tactical view.

The ultimate source of such a view was the Comintern and Lenin himself. Left-Wing Communism appeared just before the Unity Convention, and ably summarised the lectures and advice Lenin had been giving British Communists during the preceding months. In this work Lenin argued that 'revolution is impossible without a change in the views of the majority of the working class, and this change is brought about by the political experience of the masses, and never by propaganda alone'. Fair enough; but Lenin went on to insist that in consequence 'British Communists should participate in parliamentary action, that they should from within Parliament help the masses of workers to see the results of a Henderson and Snowden government in practice'. In this way it was hoped that the masses would very soon become disappointed with the Labour Party and would begin to support the Communists.

Unfortunately this sort of argument leads directly into the nightmarish world of the mechanistic and manipulative party politician. In Lenin's words again:

> The strictest loyalty to the ideas of Communism must be combined with the My to Me A M necessary practical compromises, to manoeuvre, to make agreements, zigzags, retreats and so on, so as to accelerate the coming to power and subsequent loss of political power of the Hendersons … to accelerate their inevitable bankruptcy in practice, which will enlighten the masses in the spirit of our ideas, in the direction of Communism…

Or, in his oft-quoted phrase, Communists would support the Labour Party 'in the same way as the rope supports a hanged man'.

A good example of these intellectual contortions at work in Britain comes from R. Page Arnot's intervention at the Unity Convention on the Labour Party affiliation issue. He readily agreed that 'we were all sick of the Labour Party', but he added that this didn't necessarily mean that leaving the Labour Party was 'the best tactic for the revolution'. Arnot, as befitted the new revolutionary tacticians, was thinking ten steps ahead, in terms of Communists in the Labour Party 'splitting off' and taking 'a very large number of the organised working class with us'. The essence of the new outlook was to look at matters 'as tactics in a military sense' — that is, to 'think the thing out coldly and clearly and get rid of emotion'. Those who did not have these requisite military skills and who simply pointed out that the Labour Party was hopelessly reactionary and would tar the Communist Party with the same brush were said to be using 'emotional arguments'.

In this manner, Communist policy ceased to be a matter of debate and discussion by the rank and file, based on the observable experience of the working class and its institutions. Instead, policy was now determined by long-term tactical perspectives from above — an ever-changing series of intellectual permutations and combinations known as the 'Party Line'. This, when coupled with a centralised party demanding absolute loyalty, ensured the speedy elimination of any ideas and practice developed from the class struggle by the pre-existing communist movement in Britain. If its members didn't conform to the tactical line, they were simply disregarded as 'naive' or 'emotional'. Edgar T. Whitehead noted the process at work at an early period of its operation:

> I do like this word 'naive'. It clinches the argument. All logic falls flat before it. Anti-parliamentarians are so naive, in face of the mephistophelian astucity [sic] of these revolutionary parliamentarians.
>
> (The Spur, November 1920)

There could be no direct answer to such charges of 'naivety', because the Communist Party had developed its own particular logic, impervious to any questioning from outside.

Anti-parliamentary communists became increasingly puzzled by the attitude of the 'Maiden Lane Communists' (the CPGB, with its office in Maiden Lane, London) to the parliamentary question. Whitehead voiced a question which was baffling many: 'Why do the Maiden Lane Communists want participation in Parliament so much that they would rather split the movement than forgo it?' Given that the propaganda value of electoral activity was not a serious difference with the anti-parliamentarians, and given the repudiation of Parliament by the organised

Workshop Movement, what possible reason could there be for wanting to pursue participation in Parliament at all costs? Whitehead concluded: 'It is almost inconceivable that Maiden Lane should have been so blind and mad as to cease to take into account these realities, and instead, sheep-like, to blunderingly follow a tactic dictated from Moscow…'

But this is almost certainly what did happen. The increasing invective and abuse from Maiden Lane was part of what Lenin called the 'liquidation of "left" doctrinairism'- a necessary stage which the class-conscious vanguard (the Communist Party) had to pass through to establish its supremacy. There is no space to document this process further, though it may be seen in its most dramatic and pathetic form in the amazing intellectual somersaults of people like William Gallacher and J. T. Murphy, who were very effectively 'liquidated'. The unity negotiations were in fact a crucial phase in the 'liquidation of "left" doctrinairism' in Britain. Rather than attempting to unite the existing revolutionary groups in Britain — indeed the negotiations created more division than unity — the main aim was to create Lenin's party 'of a new type', a party strictly conforming to the Comintern's conditions and with little regard for the British situation. This, and its consequences, were clearly foreseen by the anti-parliamentarians at the very foundation of the CPGB. Thus Whitehead noted:

> Maiden Lane must understand … it is Britain we are dealing with, and British industrialists and Proletarians, British historical conditions, and British realities. Until Maiden Lane faces these facts, gains some backbone and grey matter of its own, and ceases to be merely a gramophone for the Moscow Records, we can do no other than build our own party, propagate our Soviet and Communist principles in accord with realities.

Unfortunately Maiden Lane was incapable of facing these facts and continued to play Moscow Records. The tragedy of this is that in the process a real possibility of unity was lost and indeed destroyed.

What was this possibility? Put simply, it was the chance to bring about a unity of a number of anarchist and Marxist groups who had in common their support of the Russian Revolution and who were moving towards a common communist philosophy. If carried forward, there was a possibility of uniting once again the differing conceptions of Marx and Bakunin in a communist movement of great potential significance.

At the outset, it must be realised that long before the Russian Revolution there was a communist movement in Britain, and that after 1917 it was a rapidly developing and largely non-sectarian movement. A good example of its nature on the eve of the Russian Revolution is given by Jim Griffiths in his description of the activities of the Communist Club at Ammanford in South Wales. Griffiths reports on a series of meetings held there in the early days of 1917:

> The aim of these meetings has not been to propagate any particular brand of Socialism or Communism. They have aimed rather at providing a common platform — a workers' Forum — where all who are interested in social problems can meet, and freely and frankly exchange opinions on vital social questions, the members of the club being convinced that the providing of opportunities for such meetings is the

> greatest service they can render to the working class movement at the present time. If the movement is to survive the hard times ahead, it must cease wasting its energies in fruitless wrangles over this, that or the other policy. It must return to first principles… We must aim at securing an intelligent class-conscious rank and file.
>
> (The Spur, April 1917)

In this non-sectarian atmosphere socialists were beginning to forget their 'fruitless wrangles' and move towards a common conception. Thus within the anarchist movement there was a growing section of what Guy Aldred called 'Marxian anarchists' who were distinguished from other anarchists (especially 'Kropotkin anarchists') by their acceptance of the Marxist analysis of the state and their recognition of the importance of the class struggle. These anarchists were becoming increasingly impatient with those who, in the words of Freda Cohen of the Glasgow Anarchist Group, were merely content with 'fine phrases or poetical visioning'. What was needed, she continued, was 'knowledge … for the class struggle, by giving a scientific basis in place of a sentimental belief' (The Spur, January/February 1918). She concluded that 'knowledge of economics, history and sociology are of primary importance', and that due recognition should be given to the fact that 'industrial unionism, IWGBism [the Industrial Workers of Great Britain], the Shop Steward movement, etc., are questions that concern the daily life of the worker … [and] are coming more and more to the fore. We must discuss them thoroughly and define our attitude towards them.'

These were also the concerns of many members of the Socialist Labour Party and left-wing members of the British Socialist Party and the Independent Labour Party. Workers in these socialist groups were beginning to share a common literature and to exchange views and debate the key issues raised by the political and industrial struggles of the moment. For example, James Morton of the London Industrial Workers' Committee took part in a debate with the SLP in 1917 on direct action, and ordered six dozen copies of J. Blair Smith's anarchist pamphlet Direct Action versus Legislation for distribution at this and other meetings.

Rank-and-file members of socialist bodies were starting to question the established political shibboleths of their particular groups. SLPers, for instance, started to query the DeLeonist attitude to parliamentary action — some, like Joseph Linden, leaving the SLP to join the anarchists. Within the anarchists, too, there was dissent. Robert Selkirk, an anarchist from Cowdenbeath, questioned Aldred's rejection of the workshop struggle: 'It is as well to speed the day when "the Socialist organisations will cease to be glorified debating clubs and become fighting units". And this can be done in the despised "workshop struggle… (quoted by Aldred, The Spur, June 1919). A number of anti-parliamentarians and anarchists (such as Whitehead and R. M. Fox) accepted the importance of the 'workshop struggle' at this time, and thus came close to the position of dissident SLPers and socialist militants in the Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee movement.

The important point is that these questions were a matter for debate and discussion within a developing anti-parliamentary movement. Thus, on the 'workshop struggle', for example, Aldred was to make a speedy and effective reply to such palliative fights for 'petty ends', as he viewed them, in his debate with T. L. Smith of the Workers International Industrial Union (WIIU) (The Spur, August 1919). There were other fierce arguments between collectivists and communists, between those who were for or against action in the workshop, and between others on the precise nature of the anti- parliamentary attitude to the ballot-box. Such arguments, however, were 'becoming less real', as Aldred had noted, with a 'growing tendency of socialists to accept a common

theory and to meet on a common democratic footing' (The Spur, March-April 1919). Moreover, this tendency was 'a natural growth, capable, truly, of extensive and intensive cultivation; but still a vital development from within a movement'. But Aldred was well aware of 'a hypocritical parade of unity' by those whose 'desire is not for unity, but for capture'. Such a 'mechanical inspiration from without', as he described it, would destroy the natural growth within the movement towards unity — and this is precisely what happened at the Unity Convention.

But what happened in the intervening years? A number of important initiatives were made in the period from 1918 to 1920 to articulate the approaching unity in organisational terms. I shall briefly examine two of hew initiatives -he formation of the Communist League, and the formation of the Labour Abstentionist Party, both in 1919.

The more important of the two, the Communist League, was an attempt to unite dissident branches of the SLP with London anarchists centred on the Spur and Freedom papers. From it came the first paper in Britain to be called The Communist, and also — and more significantly — a real attempt to unite Marxists and anarchists in one organisation. The first step towards the new group came from the London District Council of the SLP, which in February 1919 issued a proposal to convene a conference for rank and file members of the British socialist movement to discover a basis for communist unity. The proposal was accompanied by a lengthy manifesto which included a draft constitution for a new Communist League. Key elements in the constitution were: a call for local workers' committees and councils to aim at seizing the means of production and creating a proletarian dictatorship; the ultimate aim of a republic of federated communes; and a declaration that the parliamentary vote is obsolete and that direct industrial action should be adopted as an alternative.

The unity conference was held on 16 March 1919, and the Communist League was established on an explicitly anti-parliamentary programme. George Rose well expressed the spirit behind the new movement in the first issue of its paper The Communist:

> We know that there must develop the great working-class anti-Statist movement showing the way to Communist society. The Communist League is the standard bearer of the movement; and all the hosts of Communists in the various other Socialist organisations will in good time see that Parliamentary action will lead them, not to Communism but to that bureaucratic Statism correctly named by Hilaire Belloc the 'Servile State'... Therefore, we identify ourselves with the Third International, with the Communism of Marx, and with that personification of the spirit of revolt, Bakunin, of whom the Third International is but the natural and logical outcome. (May 1919)

The essence of the new movement was thus an attempted fusion of Bakuninism and Marxism in an anti-parliamentary movement working for the creation of revolutionary workers' councils and factory committees.

Over the next few months the League developed and expanded. An attempt was also made to unite with the Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF), but the WSF had its own plans. While most branches of the League were to be found in Scotland and London, William Mainwaring

announced the formation of a Treherbert branch in South Wales in May. Mainwaring, however, did reject the League's constitution on a couple of details, including the interesting point that it was nonsense to speak of the parliamentary vote as 'obsolete' because 'to say it is obsolete will lead many to suppose that it once was useful. To this we do not agree! (The Communist, June/July 1919.)

Reports in Freedom cast light on developments in London and the influence of the League on anarchists there. A generally favourable report on the initial unity conference, while noting that the League was not an anarchist organisation, recognised that 'the repudiation of Parliament is a long step in our direction' (April 1919). But subsequent issues carried an acrimonious exchange between William Hopkins of the Stockport Workers' Anarchist Group and David Bloom of the Stepney Branch of the Communist League, concerning seemingly irreconcilable differences over a communist dictatorship and economic determinism, among other matters (June, July, October 1919).

The prominence given to this ill-tempered debate should not obscure the progress being made towards unity in London. Among a section of London anarchists there was a desire for action to prepare the way for an expected revolution and an impatience with the primarily literary propaganda of the Freedom Group, as exemplified in 1919 by the appearance of a new Anarchist Propaganda Group. To these anarchists the best chance of the desired kind of action seemed to lie in co-operation with the Communist League. Thus at a Conference of London Anarchists in April 1919 it was argued by some comrades that 'the time had arrived for action' (May 1919):

The anti-parliamentary attitude of many Socialists and Communists was greatly due to our propaganda in the past, and good results would undoubtedly follow if we worked with them. Steps, therefore, are to be taken towards holding a Conference with the Communist League to consider a joint plan of campaign.

The resulting conference, held in June 1919, was not without points of dispute, including the vexed question of the nature of any proletarian dictatorship. But, significantly, the discussion was 'very friendly in tone, the desire on both sides being to find points of agreement rather than points of controversy' (July 1919). Finally, it was hoped that the points at issue could be resolved at a future National Conference to which anarchist groups would be invited.

Possibly in response to anarchist criticisms, a novel feature of the League was its attempt to create a decentralised ruling body called the Local Delegates' Committee. This embodied the principle of an elected delegate committee (each branch electing delegates in proportion to its membership), with mandated delegates subject to immediate reporting back and instant recall if they failed to follow their mandates. The aim here was to sweep out 'boss domination and cliqueism' (The Communist, August 1919): 'It must be a movement of the rank and file, expressing itself to the rank and file.' A real test of this new ruling body in practice was to be the first national conference of the movement. It is not clear, however, whether the conference ever took place, for the Communist League seems to have disappeared without a trace at the end of 1919 or the beginning of 1920.

This, though, was not the end of attempts to find a basis for unity between anarchists and Marxists. Aldred in particular continued to pursue closer relations with SLP, BSP and ILP comrades. In an important article Aldred again spoke of the revolutionary movement 'drawing closer and closer together on a platform of practical revolutionary effort' ('Bricks and mortar', The Spur, October 1919). There was now common agreement that the Soviet Republic could not be estab-

lished by parliamentary action, but there was still considerable division over the question of the precise usefulness of parliamentary action.

To overcome this division, and particularly addressing SLPers, Aldred proposed he 'Sinn Fein' tactic — communist antiparliamentary candidates adopting the Irish Nationalists' use of the ballot-box for agitational purposes, with a pledge not to take the oath and not to sit in Parliament if elected. While preferring the straight anti-parliamentary position of boycotting elections, Aldred put forward the 'Sinn Fein' alternative as 'a tactical compromise ... for effecting a wider unity'.

The tactic was put to the test in the Paisley by-election of 1919–1920, when Aldred offered to support the SLP candidate if he stood as a communist anti-parliamentarian. The offer no doubt had some effect on the local SLP branch, for when William Paul declined to stand as their candidate, they decided to forget all compromise and conducted a 'Boycott the Ballot Box' campaign aimed particularly at the Labour Party candidate, Biggar. Their leaflet concluded: 'Every vote withheld is a vote for socialism... Abstain from voting. Work for the social revolution.' (Quoted by D. M. Chewter. The History of the Socialist Labour Party of Great Britain. B Litt thesis, Oxford 1965.)

Such action was perhaps indicative of a growing unease in the ranks of the SLP with the parliamentary policy of the party. Although quite a lot is known about the activities of SLP dissidents like Paul and Tom Bell, who were to form the Communist Unity Group of the SLP, very little is known about the developing anti-parliamentarism in the party as exemplified by the Paisley action. There is evidence that other SLP branches were accepting the anti-parliamentary position. For example, we know that Aldred was running a mission in 1919–1920 under the auspices of the Shettleston SLP which, in the words of its secretary J. Bowman, was to 'thump home that anti-parliamentary truth' (The Spur, March 1920). Realising that 'this is not the SLP position', Bowman insisted however that 'there must be no parliamentary sidestepping'. This attitude to Parliament also surfaced at the Carlisle conference of the SLP in April 1920, which spent an unusual amount of time discussing the case for and against parliamentary action.

Similar developments were taking place in branches of the BSP — for example in Scotland at the Tradeston and Anderston branches — and in ILP branches too. The rank and file of these parties were getting impatient with the traditional party arguments for parliamentary inaction, and were beginning to cooperate with individuals across party lines in practical propaganda. Individuals and branches were moving towards communist unity on their own initiative, independently of party leaders. Thus in May 1920 a Communist Group was formed in Paisley of ex-BSP members, while in June 1920 J. E. Scott announced the formation of the Acton Communist Party by discontented members of the Acton and Chiswick branch of the Herald League. The parliamentary constraints of the old parties and organisations were now hampering revolutionary propaganda, as Scott noted: 'We have stood always for the Revolution and the extreme propaganda but could not carry on whilst affiliated to the National Labour Party through no fault of our own' (The Spur, July 1920).

It was also at this time, in May 1920, that the Labour Abstentionist Party made its brief appearance. It was essentially the creation of Whitehead of the WSE Its programme was largely a summary of the anti- parliamentary 'Sinn Fein' tactic as evolved by Aldred in the 1918–1919 period, but spiced with Whitehead's distinctive conception of independent proletarian ideology. Although it is not clear how much support the party could command, it did at least have the unqualified approval of Tom Mann, who wrote a foreword to Whitehead's pamphlet The Labour

Abstentionist Party (1920), commending 'the fine tactics of the Irish Sinn Feiners', and desired 'to see the same tactics resorted to in Britain'. The formation of the party is thus another indication of the growing anti-parliamentarism in the movement.

Within a few months of these developments, however, hopes of a rapprochement between Marxists and anarchists were dealt a fatal blow by the Communist Unity Convention. I have already shown how the ensuing Communist Party, based on the ludicrous programme of participation in parliamentary elections and affiliation to the Labour Party, was completely out of step with the evolution of the revolutionary movement in Britain at this time. But why didn't this evolution continue independently of the new party? This is a very difficult question to answer. One historian, Walter Kendall in The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900–1921 (1969), has argued that the secret hand of Moscow gold was at work, which, in creating a situation of financial dependency for the small revolutionary groups, slowly but surely ensured that they were all sucked into the CPGB. There may be some truth in this, but the process was a little more complex.

It is clear that after the formation of the CPGB in August 1920 the new party was subject to a Comintern directive to unite with other selected revolutionary groups on the basis of the 'Twenty-One Conditions'. As a result, any further negotiations towards unity on an anti-parliamentary programme were a non-starter. But why didn't these other groups create their own initiative independently of Moscow? Unfortunately, they couldn't ignore Moscow and the CPGB, especially because most of them — including the SLP, the WSF, and the Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee Movement — were on the Comintern's hit-list. What is surprising, though, is that in the subsequent negotiations most of the revolutionary groups gave up their allegiance to their anti-parliamentary principles without much of a fight.

There was a fair amount of Comintern trickery in these negotiations through their British stooges. Most notable here, perhaps, was William Gallacher in his notorious attempts to discredit the leading Scottish Marxist John Maclean in the eyes of the SLP executive committee and his machinations in relation to the Communist Labour Party (which under his guidance became a conduit to funnel Scottish communists into the CPGB). But, despite Gallacher & Co., we must note that members of the various organisations were willing accomplices in this trickery and the intellectual somersaults it involved. As happens repeatedly in the history of British socialism in the twentieth century, there was a complete abdication of critical judgement when basic principles and beliefs are put to the test by supposed friends and allies.

Thus the British Communists were a push-over when faced with the simplistic and ludicrous arguments that the Russian Revolution depended on a united revolutionary movement in Britain and that, towards this end, Lenin and the Russian Bolsheviks knew best about tactics since they had already created a successful revolution. If there were any doubts, they could be rationalised away by fondly imagining that one could work for a change in policy from within the CPGB and/or the Comintern. The Scottish Communists accepted this latter nonsense tom Gallacher, and many others were to find themselves on the same slippery slope. In most cases intelligent people simply rejected their own revolutionary traditions and experience for the sake of a collective delusion — loyalty to the Party.

A good example of the process at work may be found in the political trajectory of Whitehead in the latter half of 1920. He was closely involved in attempts at unity among the anti-parliamentarian groups after the Unity Convention, including a proposed conference in September 1920 to bring together revolutionaries associated with the Spur, Worker and Solidarity papers. The 'anti-Labour Party and anti-parhamentary in tactic' nature of such revolutionaries was stressed. Later Whitehead wrote a series of uncompromising anti-parliamentary articles in The Spur. Thus in October 1920 he said:

> None more than ourselves desire complete unity for action throughout the whole of the parties inside the Moscow International, but it has got to be a unity on an effective tactic. With the salt of the proletariat instinctively opposed to Parliamentarianism it is impossible to march forward along a parliamentarian road.

And he repeated the argument with increasing eloquence in November in his discussion of 'Maiden Lane sophistries'. The sophistry to which he devoted particular attention was the current nonsense of 'revolutionary parliamentarianism'. For him 'Parliamentarianism means talk', and ' "revolutionary parliamentarianism" [means] revolutionary talk'! Or, from another perspective: 'It is on the industrial field where Communists must be busy, there and everywhere where there are workers. There are no workers in Parliament. Get out of it'

But by the following month, all had suddenly changed. In December 1920, at the Cardiff conference of the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International), Whitehead and others voted overwhelmingly in favour of acceptance of the Comintern's 'Twenty-One Conditions', including Point 11 in favour of parliamentary action. This amazing turn-around was justified, Whitehead explained, by the relative insignificance of British theoretical concerns in the face of demands for 'loyalty to the world revolution'. From then on he was to become a vigorous champion of the new CPGB and the Comintern.

Many other comrades followed a similar path; Henry Sara and Robert Selkirk are two who spring to mind. This kind of transformation was not limited to Britain; a similar process occurred in the United States, for example, with Robert Minor being a particularly famous and influential instance. The same kind of arguments were used; Minor stressed loyalty to the revolution, and suggested that the anarchists could act as the left wing of the Communist Party!

Most of these recruits subsequently left the CPGB within a few years, thoroughly disillusioned (though some, like Selkirk, remained in it). Sara, for example, was one of the founders of the British Trotskyist movement; but more common was the experience of Whitehead, who joined the Labour Party and became a vigorous anti-Communist propagandist. This was the fate of many good comrades, and it is too easy, as James Klugmann shows in his official History of the Communist Party of Great Britain (Volume 1, 1968), to dismiss them as opportunists and revolutionary dilettantes of no importance to the movement. But if anti-parliamentarism and real communism are ever again to have any importance, it is a trajectory which must be probed and understood beyond such convenient insults.

One contribution to such an understanding might, it could be argued, be the lack of any critical information about Lenin and the Russian Revolution in the British socialist press. This may have been true at an earlier period, but when decisions were being made to join the CPGB critical articles about Bolshevik policies were already beginning to appear. In The Spur, for example, a series of articles by the Austrian anarchist Rudolf Grossmann (Pierre Ramus) appeared from

September 1919 onwards lambasting Lenin and the Bolshevik government. At first these articles were greeted with hostile disbelief by Aldred and others, but as Aldred in particular gained more information he came to similar conclusions. Aldred, however, was an exception in conducting such uninhibited intellectual inquiry. For most people, it seemed that nothing could get through the mind-block of the 'unity at all costs' school.

It was not long before the attitudes of this school became frozen into immovable dogma. After the formation of the CPGB, you criticised Lenin and other Communist leaders at your peril. Thus, because of his criticisms of Lenin and Gallacher, Aldred suddenly found that his lecture engagements with the Greenock Workers' Committee and the Paisley BSP were cancelled, and that halls booked for meetings were no longer available (The Spur, August 1920). In this manner the openness of the movement, with its free discussion and debate, crumbled away after mid-1920 in the pursuit of unity with the CPGB.

Such developments also affected the SLP. Individual SLPers were joining the CPGB, especially in Scotland via the CLP (John S. Clarke being one notable example). The SLP, because of this loss and the effects of unemployment, was declining in numbers at a rapid rate. To stem this decline the remaining members closed ranks and reverted to an undiluted DeLeonist position, leaving little scope for any development in an anti- parliamentary direction.

As a result of such retreats and the consolidation of the CPGB, what was left of the evolving revolutionary and anti-parliamentary movement came to be centred on The Spur and Guy Aldred. He and his associates were now almost alone in both being enthusiastic supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution and yet not falling for the spurious unity line of the CPGB. All that could be accomplished now was to bring together the few remaining Communist and anarchist groups which still adhered to an anti-parliamentary programme.

It was hoped to create a Communist federation out of these remaining groups. The principle of federation — a federation of Communist groups developed voluntarily from below rather than an imposed centralisation from above — was always an important and consistent part of the anti-parliamentary movement's proposals for unity. Aldred summarised the position in The Spur:

> I have no objections to an efficient and centralised party so long as the authority rests in the hands of the rank and file and all officials can be sacked at a moment's notice. But I want the centralism to be wished for and evolved by the local groups and not imposed on them from a centre… The Communist party, the real party, must be evolved through a federation of local groups, a slow merging of them into one party, from the bottom upwards, as distinct from this imposition from the top downwards. (August 1920)

The idea of federation was coupled with a demand for self-determination — the British revolutionaries should determine their own policy in relation to British conditions, irrespective of what Lenin and the Bolsheviks might say. Lenin was faced with different circumstances, Aldred argued, and might be forced to compromise to save the Russian Revolution, but in Britain there was no such excuse for compromise:

> Lenin's task compels him to compromise with all the elect of bourgeois society whereas ours demands no compromise. And so we take different paths and are only on the most distant speaking terms.

Or, more directly, we should stop 'chasing the shadows of the great man [Lenin]... It is not he who is running the British Revolution, but "ourselves alone". The policy of looking to him to mind our business is hindering and not helping the revolution.' But increasingly such advice from Aldred and a few others was ignored, as the move to join the CPGB gathered pace.

In practical terms, however, little progress was being made towards the federation that Aldred and the anti-parliamentary communists wished to see. Early in 1920 the Glasgow Anarchist Group issued a manifesto and put forward a proposal for unity along federalist lines (The Spur, January/February 1920). The group hoped to form a communist federation for Lanarkshire akin to the already existing Fife Socialist League. A similar federation of communist groups was planned in Wales towards the end of 1920. But apparently such plans remained at the proposal stage.

The Leeds Unity Convention of January 1921 — with the final fusion of the CPGB with the Communist Labour Party and the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International), on the basis of the Comintern's 'Twenty-One conditions' — dashed any remaining hopes of a wider unity of anti-parliamentary groups. At this time, Aldred appealed to the example of the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD) as a party which had stood up to the Comintern on the question of parliamentarism. The KAPD had forced the Comintern to recognise it as a sympathising party with consultative status. If anti-parliamentary groups could unite in Britain into a National Federation or Party, they could then enter into a close alliance with the KAPD and other continental Communist Parties to form an International Anti-Parliamentary Federation. In this way Moscow would be forced to recognise the reality of anti-parliamentary organisation and be compelled to grant anti-parliamentary groups some form of representation on the Executive Committee of the Communist International.

But no one was listening any longer. Shortly afterwards, the KAPD was to get its 'marching orders' from Moscow — join the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) within three months, or else! Clearly the anti-parliamentary groups had no future inside the Comintern, and all hopes of this were now dropped. (It should perhaps be noted that Rose Witcop travelled to Moscow later in 1921 with APCF credentials to negotiate for 'associate membership' of the Comintern; ultimately nothing came of this, and it appears to have been her own initiative to gain financial support for the movement.)

Finally, at the 1921 Easter Conference of the Scottish antiparliamentary groups, a Scottish Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation was formed. This was the beginning of the AntiParliamentary Communist Federation which was to play a major part in keeping alive the hopes of a libertarian communism for the next thirty years.

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