

In 1982, *Black Star: Paper for Independent Working Class Organisation* (formerly *Treason*. Founded 1979), published by left-communist and anarchist workers, in the Tyne & Wear area of the UK, ceased publication. In 1983 former members of the Black Star Collective, now living in the Buckinghamshire area, reformed the collective, and subsequently re-launched *Black Star*. The 'new' publication was given a make-over, and re-named, *Black Star: Workers Journal for a Free Communist Society*.

Proletarian Aspirations is a 3-part pamphlet series of selected articles and features that appeared in *Black Star* between 1983 and its eventual demise in 1988.

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Proletarian Aspirations: Part One

ANTI-PARLIAMENTARISM

&

COMMUNISM IN BRITAIN

1917-1921

Bob Jones

Selected Essays from

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Introduction to the Pirate Press edition

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 was marginalized and in a large part obliterated may help us understand what went wrong. It might also help to undermine the assumption that ‘libertarian’ and ‘communist’ or ‘socialist’ are mutually contradictory terms.

Bob Jones
1991

Introduction to this edition

As Bob notes in his introduction *Black Star* folded, or, in Bob’s words, “expired”, before the article was published. (In fact, part of it was published in January 1987). I was Editor of *Black Star* at the time and felt pretty gutted when everything collapsed in 1988. I was very pleased when this informative and highly relevant text eventually got the viewing it deserved. This edition is reproduced from Bob’s original manuscript, entitled *Anti-parliamentarism and Communism in Britain: 1917-1921*. I still believe that the organisational history of the revolutionary movement highlighted in this pamphlet is as relevant today as it was then. I also believe that there is still scope for building a similar Libertarian Communist Movement. I was convinced of this in 1983, when along with fellow comrades, re-launched *Black Star* as the *Workers Journal for a Free Communist Society*, and still am today.

Ade Dimmick
2007

Anti-Parliamentarism & Communism in Britain 1917 - 1921

In this article I intend to look at the growing British anti-parliamentary movement in the years immediately preceding the formation of the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (APCF) in 1921. In particular I will look at the attempts to unite the different anti-parliamentary groups into one communist party. These attempts were, I will 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 based on the Comintern’s conditions. The subsequent formation of the APCF was, as a result, a pale reflection of what could have been.

At the outset we should try and clarify what we mean 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 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 prior to 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; 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, 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 first 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 Comintern's "21 conditions", which all communist parties had to accept. 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 "21 conditions" by the CPGB represented, therefore, a marked break with past British experience. What was the significance of this? For some, like the historian James Hinton, 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 via 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 not uncommon interpretation. For our present purposes we must be content 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 us 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 we shall see later, almost the whole of the revolutionary movement was anti-

parliamentary and uniting around an anti-parliamentary platform. For the moment we shall assume this point and examine how the incipient "party of a new type" handled the question. In doing so we shall see how the 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 of 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, as far as any move towards socialism was concerned (never mind about communism!), was seen as a bad joke. As D. Manoin noted at the 1920 Communist Union Convention:

"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 (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 many, why was Labour Party affiliation ever considered as a serious policy? The British Socialist Party, 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 CPGB 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, I think, indicative of the kind of reasoning that to undermine the communist movement in Britain.

It could be argued that up to this time the main aim of the 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 being content to rely on the ability of the working class to create its 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 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 “naïve” and “emotional”; one needed a longer-term tactical view. The ultimate source of such a view was the Comintern and V.I. Lenin. *Left-Wing Communism* appeared just before the unity negotiations of July and August 1920 and ably summarised the lectures and advice Lenin had been giving British communists in 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.” British communists should participate in parliamentary action, that they should from within parliament help the masses of the 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 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:

“The strictest loyalty to the ideas of Communism must be combined with the ability to make all the 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 Lenin’s oft-quoted phrase: Communists 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 Communist Unity Convention on the Labour Party affiliation issue. He readily agreed that “we were all sick of the

Labour Party”, but that 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 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 eliminations 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 “naïve” or “emotional”. Edgar T. Whitehead noted the process at work at an early period of its operation in 1920:

“I do like this word ‘naïve’. It clinches the argument. All logic falls flat before it. Anti-parliamentarians are so ‘naïve’, in face of the mephistophelian astucity (sic) of these revolutionary parliamentarians”.

There could be no direct answer to such charges of ‘naivety’ because the party had developed its own particular logic, impervious to any questions from outside.

Anti-parliamentary communists became increasingly puzzled by the attitude of the “Maiden Lane Communists” (CPGB) to the parliamentary question. Edgar T. 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-parliamentary groups, 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 the class-conscious vanguard (the Communist Party) had to press through to establish its supremacy. We have no space to document this process further, though we should note it can be seen in its most dramatic and pathetic form in the amazing intellectual somersaults of people like William Gallagher 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 (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 notes:

"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 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 developing towards a common communist philosophy. If carried forward, there was a possibility of uniting once again the differing contributions 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 describing the activities of the Communist Club at Ammanford (South Wales). Griffiths reports on a series of meetings held at the club 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."

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 "Kropotkinist Anarchists") by their acceptance of the Marxian 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, a member of the Glasgow Anarchist Group, were merely content with "fine phrases or poetical visioning." Thus Cohen concluded, "knowledge of economics, history and sociology are of primary importance," and due recognition should be given to the fact that "industrial unionism", IWGBism (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 Socialist Labour Party members 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. James Morton, for example, 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 the 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 group. 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 anarchist 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'." A number of anti-parliamentarians and anarchists 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 to note here, perhaps, 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). There were other fierce arguments between collectivists and communists, between those for and against action in the workshops, and between others on the precise nature of the anti-parliamentary attitude and the ballot box. Such arguments were, however, as Aldred noted in 1918, "becoming less real", with a "growing tendency of socialists to accept a common theory and to meet on a common democratic footing." Moreover, this tendency was "a natural growth, capable, truly, of extensive and intensive cultivation; but still a vital development from within a movement ..." But already in 1918 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 Aldred described it, would destroy the natural growth within the movement towards unity, and this is precisely what happened at the Communist Unity Convention in 1920.

But what happened in the intervening years? A number of important initiatives were made in this period (1918 – 1920) to articulate the approaching unity in organisational terms. We will briefly examine two of these initiatives: the formation of the Communist League and that of the Labour Abstentionist Party – both established in 1919.

The more important of the two, The Communist League, was an attempt to unite dissident branches of the SLP with anarchists centred on the *The Spur* and *Freedom* papers. From it we get the first paper in Britain to be called *The Communist* but – 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 who 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) A call for local workers' committees and councils to aim at seizing the means of production and creating a proletarian dictatorship.
- B) The ultimate aim of a republic of federated communes.
- C) A declaration that the parliamentary vote is obsolete and that direct industrial action should be adopted as an alternative.

The unity conference took place on March 16th, 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 *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 communist 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."

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 1919. Mainwaring did however 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"; "To say it was obsolete will lead many to suppose that it was once useful. To this we do not agree."

A novel feature of the Communist 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 proportional to membership) with mandated delegates to both immediate reporting back and instant recall if they failed to follow their mandates. The aim here was to sweep out "boss domination and cliqueism" – "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 disappears without trace towards the end of 1919 or early in 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 his important article "Bricks and Mortar" of October 1919, Aldred again spoke of the revolutionary movement "drawing closer together on a platform of practical revolutionary effort". There was now common agreement that the soviet republic could not be established 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 the 'Sinn Fein' tactic (ie. Communist anti-parliamentary candidates using 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 the ballot box, 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 1919/20, when Aldred offered to support the SLP candidate if he stood as a communist-anti-parliamentarian. Aldred's 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 particularly aimed 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."

Such action was perhaps indicative of a growing unease in the ranks of the SLP with the parliamentary policy of the party. Though we know quite a bit about the activities of SLP dissidents like Paul and Bell, who were to form the Communist Unity Group of the SLP, we know very little 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 under the auspices of the Shettleston SLP, which, in the words of its secretary, J. Bowen, was to "thump home that anti-parliamentary truth ..." Realising that, "this was not the SLP position", Bowman insisted "there must be no parliamentary sidestepping." This attitude to parliament also surfaced at the Carlisle conference of the SLP in April 1920, the conference spending an unusual amount of time discussing the case for and against parliamentary action.

Similar developments were also taking place in branches of the BSP (for example, in Scotland at the Tradeston and Anderston branches) and, almost certainly, in ILP branches. The rank and file of these parties were getting impatient with the traditional party arguments for parliamentary inaction and were beginning to co-operate 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, for example, in May 1920 a communist group was formed in Paisley of ex-BSP members, while in June 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 notes: "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."

It was also at this time (May 1920) that the Labour Abstentionist Party made its brief appearance, being largely the creation of Edgar T. Whitehead of the WSF. The Party's programme was largely a summary of the anti-parliamentary 'Sinn Fein' position as evolved by Aldred in the 1918-19 period, but spiced with Whitehead's distinctive conception of independent

proletarian ideology. Although it is not clear how much support the Party could demand, it did at least have the unqualified support of Tom Mann, who wrote 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 with the Communist Unity Conventions. We have seen how the ensuing CP, 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 CPGB? This is a very difficult question to answer. One historian 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 "21 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 independent of Moscow? Unfortunately they could not ignore Moscow and the CPGB especially as most (including the SLP, WSF and the SS & WCM) 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 is a fair amount of Comintern trickery in these negotiations via their British stooges. Most notable here, perhaps, is William Gallacher in his notorious attempts to discredit John Maclean in the eyes of the SLP executive committee and his machinations in relation to the Communist Labour Party (which under Gallacher's guidance became a conduit to funnel Scottish communists into the CPGB). But despite Gallacher & Co, it must be noted that members of SLP, CLP, WSF and other groups were willing accomplices in this trickery and the intellectual somersaults it involved. There was, as happens repeatedly in the history of British socialism in the twentieth century,

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 with respect to tactics as they had already created a successful revolution. If there were any doubts you could rationalise these away by fondly imagining you could work for a change in policy from inside the CPGB and/or Comintern. The Scottish communists accepted this latter nonsense from 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 processes at work is found in the political trajectory of Edgar Whitehead in the latter half of 1920. Whitehead was closely involved in attempts at unity among the anti-parliamentarian groups after the Communist Unity Convention of August 1920, including a proposed conference in September 1920 to bring together revolutionaries associated with *The Spur*, *The Worker* and *Solidarity* papers. The "anti-Labour Party and anti-parliamentary in tactic" nature of such revolutionaries was stressed. Later, Whitehead wrote a series of uncompromising anti-parliamentary articles in *The Spur*. In October 1920 he could write as follows: "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 parliamentarism it is impossible to march forward along a parliamentarian road."

And Whitehead 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 parliamentarism." For Whitehead, "Parliamentarianism means talk", and "'revolutionary parliamentarism' (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 the following month all had changed. In December 1920 at the Cardiff conference of the CP (British Section of the 3rd International), Whitehead and others voted overwhelmingly in favour of acceptance of the Comintern's 21 conditions, including Point 11 in favour of

parliamentary action. This amazing turnaround 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 Whitehead was to become a vigorous champion of the new CPGB and the Comintern.

Many other comrades were to follow a similar path; Henry Sara and Robert Selkirk are two that 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; thus Minor, for example, stressed loyalty to the revolution and suggested that the anarchists could act as the left-wing of the Communist Party!

Most recruits were subsequently to leave the CPGB within a few years, thoroughly disillusioned (though some, like Selkirk, remained in it). Sara, for example, was to return to his revolutionary roots, but perhaps 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 very easy, as Klugmann, the CPGB's historian shows us, to dismiss them as opportunists and revolutionary dilettantes of no importance to the movement. But if anti-parliamentarianism and real communism is ever again to be of importance, it is a trajectory that must be probed and understood beyond such convenient insults.

One contribution to such an understanding might, some would argue, be the lack of any critical information about Lenin and the Russian revolution in the British socialist press. This may have been true of an earlier period, but when decisions were being made to join the CPGB critical articles about Lenin and Bolshevik policies were already beginning to appear in British socialist literature. In *The Spur*, for example, a series of articles by Rudolf Grossman appeared from September 1919 onwards lambasting Lenin and the Bolshevik government. At first these articles were greeted by 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 enquiry. Seemingly 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 an immovable dogma. After the formation of the CPGB you criticised Lenin and

the Communist leaders at your peril. Thus because of his criticisms of Lenin and Gallacher Aldred suddenly found in August 1920 that his lecture engagements with the Greenock Workers' Committee and the Paisley BSP were cancelled and halls booked for meetings were no longer available. In this manner the openness of the movement, with free discussion and debate, crumbled away after mid-1920 in the pursuit of unity with the CPGB.

Such developments also affected the SLP, which we should briefly mention. Individual SLPers were joining the CPGB, especially in Scotland via the CLP (John S. Clark 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 around *The Spur* and Guy Aldred. Aldred and his associates were now almost alone in being both 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 that 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 anti-parliamentary movement's proposal for unity. Aldred summarises the position in 1920:

"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 the 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 the top downwards."

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 he might be forced to compromise to save the revolution, but in England there is 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 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 for 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, CLP and CP-BSTI), on the basis of the Comintern’s 21 conditions, dashed any remaining hopes of a wider unity of anti-parliamentary groups. At this time, Aldred appealed to the example of the KAPD (the Communist Workers Party of Germany) as a party that had stood up the Comintern on the question of parliamentarianism. 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 after, the KAPD was to get it’s ‘marching orders’ from Moscow: join the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) inside three months or else! Clearly the anti-parliamentary groups had no future inside the Comintern and all hopes of this were now dropped. Finally, at the Easter Conference of the Scottish anti-parliamentary groups, a Scottish Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation was formed. This was the beginning of the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation, which was to keep alive the hopes of a libertarian communism for the next thirty years.

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