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# Communist Strongholds in Inter-War Britain

Idris Cox

It was interesting to read in the March issue of *Marxism Today* that Stuart Macintyre is writing more on this subject. It's not clear whether his article will become one of the essays on the history of the Communist Party, or as part of the book on Marxism in Britain 1917-33. It's essential in my view that anyone writing this kind of book should first get the views of active Communists during those 16 years. Otherwise, some of the errors already in that article will be repeated on a bigger scale.

Marxist ideas were developing in Britain long before the 1917 Russian socialist revolution, but its impact in Britain upon the labour movement was a small one due to the strong reformist and opportunist trends associated with the British imperialist system. To deal adequately with the "Little Moscovs" which came into being in the mid-1920s it seems to me this kind of history should start at the beginning of the 19th century.

I'm unable from first-hand knowledge to write about Chopwell and Scotland, but I do know something about the position in South Wales. Stuart Macintyre has singled out Mardy as the "Little Moscow" in South Wales, and quotes the *South Wales News* two weeks after the general strike whose headline about Mardy was "Thousands of Communists who Christen their Town as 'Little Moscow' ". The fact is there were never "thousands" of Communists in Mardy, not even hundreds, but it was certainly a Communist stronghold.

However, there were several parts of Rhondda which could be described as "Little Moscovs" during the general strike, and also other parts of the South Wales coalfield. It's true that Mardy was outstanding because it became the centre for the Communist Party in South Wales during those days, and after his release from prison Arthur Horner became the elected miners' checkweigher, after Noah Ablett (a pioneer Marxist) had moved from Mardy to Merthyr.

Not every part of the Rhondda valley had outstanding leaders like Arthur Horner, but there were several parts of the two Rhondda valleys which could also be named "Little Moscow" and some of them were. So it seems to me unwise to take only the Mardy example, and to look instead at the Rhondda valley as a whole, and even other Welsh valleys where the Communist influence was strong, and after 1930 perhaps stronger than in Mardy itself.

It's my view that the growth of Marxism in South Wales (which has a strong syndicalist trend) needs to be considered as from the formation of the Plebs League in January 1909, the Ruskin College strike in March 1909, the Aberdare miners' strike in October 1910 and the Cambrian Combine strike in November 1910 until September 1911. Out of these struggles came *The Miners' Next Step* and the 1912 national strike which won the minimum wage. The Unofficial Reform Committee was in the forefront of these struggles, several of whose members (including Arthur Horner) became members of the Communist Party.

Of course, the level of mass struggle in South Wales was not equal in all parts of the coalfield, and after 1930 there were other parts of the coalfield where Communist influence was stronger than in Mardy. Communist influence was strong in most Rhondda miners' lodges, and there were ten Communist pit papers throughout the two valleys. In the 1930s there were eight Communists on what was then the Urban District Council. Communists also had mass influence in Aberdare, in the western valleys of Monmouthshire, and in the Maesteg valley—where there were also Communist pit papers and Communist members of the Urban Council.

## Other Aspects

In Stuart Macintyre's article, there were also other aspects dealt with which need to be qualified.

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Mardy was not the only place which had a Conservative Club and other reactionary outfits (which worked with the police against the Communists), nor the only place with a first-class Miners' Institute (there were ten in the Rhondda) and perhaps Porth had an even better one. I was not aware that the miners of Mardy "not only forced their own safety and enginemen to damp the fires and flood the pits . . ." in 1921, and would like to know more about it, nor was I aware that "South Wales valleys were subject to military occupation in 1921". I was then chairman of the Garth Lodge of the SWMF at that time and did not see even one battalion of soldiers, not even in the Rhondda which I visited during the lock-out.

It's hardly correct to equate Arthur Horner's position in the 1930s with that of Dave Proudfoot. True, there were sharp differences about strike strategy, but not about "an alternative and revolutionary industrial organisation" for Horner himself became leader of the Minority Movement when Harry Pollitt gave up this post to become general secretary of the CPGB.

Some reference is made (bottom of p. 88) to "an initial coalition of young Communists and ILPers". As Mardy and Lumphinnans are lumped together, it may be that applied in the latter, but not in Mardy. In fact, the whole section on "Politics" on p. 88 is confusing, and also on p. 89 where it stated that: "At times of greatest harmony, as in 1935, the Communist Party, ILP and Labour Party constructed a unity ticket of local government candidates and trounced the moderates", and later on this page it states that "After 1935 Communist-Labour agreements were more common and results improved".

All this is most confusing. It is stated that "Prior to 1927 the Labour and Communist Parties usually agreed upon a common candidate, and mostly won". Who won? Was it the Labour or the Communist nominee? In actual fact the Rhondda Borough Labour Party was disaffiliated in 1927, as was the Maesteg Labour Party (of which I was chairman) for not carrying out the anti-Communist decisions of the 1925 Liverpool conference of the Labour Party.

Even before then it was not a matter of "unity" tickets but of Communists being able until then to exercise their democratic rights as delegates from trade unions and trades' councils to become elected delegates to Labour Party conferences, and even the right to stand as *official* Labour candidates in parliamentary and municipal elections, as was the case with Communist candidates for Parliament up to 1924.

So the struggle for unity still goes on. It takes new forms, and the approach needs to be more flexible without giving up Communist principles. That is why the need for widest discussion on these matters.

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