

# The Fight for the Communist Party

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THE STORY OF the foundation of the Communist Party is the story of a long and tenacious struggle of the militant workers to overcome many obstacles and reach unity of programme, organisation and an effective revolutionary leadership.

The war of 1914 exposed the rottenness of the leadership of the Labour movement in this country, who deserted their pledges to fight against war and for the overthrow of the capitalist class if war broke out, and became recruiting agents for the capitalist warmakers.

This rottenness was shared by the majority of the parties of the whole Second International. The only party that stood firm as a whole against the shock of war was the party of Lenin, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (Bolshevik) which led the victorious October Revolution of the Russian working class. In all other cases the Social Democrats became Social Chauvinists. Only small groups in the other countries were left to carry on the revolutionary traditions of the First International. Right away Lenin saw the need for rebuilding the International but on this occasion purged of opportunism.

Following the October Revolution the decisive steps were taken to achieve this end. In order to disassociate the revolutionary movement from the discredited Social Democrats, the name of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (Bolshevik) was changed to that of the Communist Party. This was followed by the calling of the first Congress of the Communist International which met in Moscow in 1919. In the circumstances only a limited number of delegates were able to attend; but the first step had been taken towards the union of the revolutionary workers in all countries in the new revolutionary working-class International.

In Britain, as in other countries, the experience of the war of 1914 and of the bankruptcy of the old Labour movement, and the revolutionary awakening that followed, drew together the militant workers. United in the struggle against the old treacherous leaders, and inspired by the example of the victorious October Revolution, the militant workers united after the war to found the first revolutionary party of the working class, the Communist Party.

There had previously existed in Britain a number of small Socialist organisations which sought to base themselves on the programme of Marxism.

The principal of these groups was the British Socialist Party, which up until the outbreak of war had been under the domination of H. M. Hyndman, a notorious bourgeois corruptor of Marxism.

But with the war a split took place, Hyndman and a minority going over to the Imperialists, while the majority with Albert Inkpin as Secretary did their best, considering the evil influences with which the Party had been for years corroded, to maintain a front against the warmakers.

Then there was a "Left" group in the I.L.P. which produced such good comrades as Saklatvala and Ernest and Isabel Brown, but which also imposed on us the unpalatable liability of Walton Newbold.

The S.L.P., a severely doctrinaire party with a policy which had been formulated by the very confused American "Marxist" De Leon, was also split. Such active spirits as Arthur McManus, Tommy Bell, Willie Paul and T. A. Jackson were for unity and the formation of a Communist Party, while the more doctrinaire members, including the majority of the Executive Committee, were against.

Another small group, but one which was exceptionally vocal, was the "Workers' Dreadnought" group. The "Workers' Dreadnought" was a weekly paper under the control of Sylvia Pankhurst. Associated with this group was a semi-anarchist group in Wales.

Of vital importance for the establishment of a Party in this country was the widespread shop steward movement that had gained such influence during the war. The shop stewards represented the militant industrial workers, but their outlook was confused. This confusion arose in their reaction against the opportunism of the Labour Party leadership. In the war years the "Politicians", as the Labour members of Parliament were called, were so helpless and so useless where they weren't openly treacherous that the shop stewards began to idealise "industrial" action in opposition to "political" action. This developed in the Clyde area into Anti-Parliamentarism and in London, where Anarchist influence was strong, into Syndicalism.

In Scotland, the outstanding revolutionary, John McLean, was nominally a member of the B.S.P. (as I was). But with his strong Scottish traditions he was against the "Gang" in London. (He had always been a strong opponent of Hyndman and his associates, the corruptors of Marxism.) McLean's influence was thrown into the balance, not for a Communist Party of Great Britain but for a separate Communist Party in Scotland.

These were the principal organisations and groups whose coming together prepared the way for the Communist Party. As a result of conversations and negotiations that had gone on for many months, a Conference was called for July 31st and August 1st, in Cannon Street Hotel, London.

The foundation of the Communist Party thus represented at the outset a coming together of many diverse streams and elements, whose differences could only be overcome and fused into a single revolutionary party through a series of struggles in the ensuing period. In addition, in the wake of the revolutionary tide during the years after the war, a number of politically unstable elements temporarily attached themselves to the Party, such as C. L'Estrange Malone, Robert Williams, A. A. Purcell, W. Mellor, Ellen Wilkinson and W. N. Ewer, who did their best to destroy the Party.

The first Conference of the Communist Party was a great step forward and a historical landmark in that it brought into being the Communist Party. But the variety of elements represented at this first Conference, the confusion of outlooks, and the dangerous influences of the "saboteurs and wreckers" made the work of the Conference very difficult. Only the revolutionary enthusiasm of the delegates made it possible to overcome these handicaps. Worthy of special mention in the fight to establish a real Bolshevik party was our Comrade Bob Stewart. I was not present at the Conference.

I was not a party to, or a supporter of, the Conference, but on all hands I heard of the able, inspiring speech of Bob Stewart and of the stirring effect it had on the main body of delegates present.

The decisions were taken in the form of resolutions: first that the Communist Party of Great Britain be formed, adhere to the Communist International and second that an application should be made for affiliation to the Labour Party.

While this was going on I was over in Moscow at the Second Congress of the Communist International. I represented the Clyde Workers' Committee and, as I have already said, we were Anti-Parliamentarian and opposed to the unity movement going on in London.

Jack Tanner, who is now President of the A.E.U., was also there. He was representing the Shop Stewards in London. At that time he had strong syndicalist tendencies which brought him into conflict with those who believed in developing the unions along their present lines.

Mr. Tanner is now horrified at the perfidy of the Pétain Government and just a little suspicious that there might be those in this country who would be equally treacherous, but he conveniently forgets that he is now head of the "Government" of the A.E.U. and that his "Government" is proposing to expel some of the best Union members for daring to associate with, or speak to, the National Council of Aircraft Shop Stewards. According to the letter sent to these members, by this association they are seeking to "destroy trade unionism". If that has any meaning, then it follows that the President of the A.E.U. has spent most of his life trying to destroy the trade union movement. This is an example of what can happen when ingrained opportunism leads them into the camp of the bourgeoisie.

But in Moscow the question of the newly-formed party in London came up for very sharp discussion. I said that we were going to form a separate party in Scotland from which the opportunists and parliamentarians would be completely excluded. Already before I had arrived Lenin had published his book, *Left-Wing Communism—An Infantile Disorder*, and as I got particular mention in it they were all ready waiting for me.

Day after day we argued and fought around the question of the formation of a party, of revolutionary parliamentarianism and of the role of the Labour Party and the necessity for affiliation. On all of these questions my sectarianism brought me into bitter conflict with all the leading comrades and then as the days passed into bitter conflict with myself. It isn't easy, when you are confident that you are absolutely right, to face the realisation that you have been holding on to a quite untenable position.

But, however harsh or personal the discussions might become, Lenin never lost his patience or spared his kindly comradeship to help us out of difficulties. He was a comrade to all of us in the deepest and truest meaning of the word. A ready smile, a kindly word, but always insistence on revolutionary understanding. I said to my comrades when I returned that when you spoke to Lenin you couldn't think of Lenin, he made you think of what he was thinking of, and at all times he was thinking of the advance of the revolutionary movement.

After hard battles with the other comrades and a still harder battle with myself, I recognised where I had gone all wrong and promised on my return

to join the newly-formed party in Britain and to do my best to persuade my Scottish comrades to join up also.

When I got back to Scotland I was in time to attend a Conference in the Central Hall, Glasgow, called for the purpose of forming "The Communist Labour Party of Scotland". While the official group of the Socialist Labour Party was represented at this conference with the hope of making C.L.P. a new edition of S.L.P., the strongest personality in the leadership of the Conference was my old and much esteemed comrade J. V. Leckie. With his able assistance, after I had made a report on the Second Congress, I succeeded in getting the Conference to decide on unity with the newly-formed C.P.G.B.

To make this unity effective a Unity Conference was held in Leeds in January, 1921. The Scottish lads insisted in nominating me for President against Arthur McManus, who had been appointed President at the Cannon Street Conference. This was a mistake, as we were in considerable minority and according to the rules it prevented me from being nominated for the central committee.

However, the Unity Conference passed through fairly successfully and the united party got under way. But the real unity of a centralised Bolshevik Party was not yet achieved. There was not yet real unity of outlook and policy; there were still confusionist, opportunist and sectarian tendencies in the leadership and membership; and the organisation was still federal in character and carrying on the traditions of the old Social Democratic Parties. The Party had from the outset to struggle against the dangerous opportunist and unstable elements which played an active role in the early leadership. Owing to these difficulties the Party was faced with very grave dangers in its early period. The policy of the Party was being twisted and distorted; the early revolutionary enthusiasm of the Party was stifled and thwarted; and throughout 1921 instead of advancing, the membership of the Party showed a decline.

At the same time Government persecutions, wholesale arrests of members and victimisation, added to the difficulties of the Party. In the summer of 1921 the headquarters were raided and the Secretary, Albert Inkpin, was arrested and later sentenced to six months' imprisonment. But this check had its advantageous side. The unstable elements hurried to leave the Party in the ensuing period.

While the raid was taking place I was myself in prison, in Birmingham. I had been sentenced to three months for seditious language in connection with the "Black Friday" betrayal of the miners.

Shortly after I came out of prison the Central Committee took a decision to make me Vice-President of the Party and to invite me to work at the Party centre to help in getting the Party on its feet again.

With Albert Inkpin in prison and McManus and Tommy Bell away at the C.I., I was left to carry on as best I could with the acting secretary. We formed a sub-committee of the C.C., the first tentative approach to a Political Bureau. We worked hard to pull things together but it was a very difficult task. The membership was rapidly fading away, the finances of the Party were chaotic and the organisation had almost completely broken down.

Early in 1922 I made a report to the Central Committee. I spared no one. The situation in the party was so grave that urgent steps had to be taken, if we were to hold together. I proposed that a small commission be appointed

to make a ruthless examination into every phase of party work with especial reference to the party leadership.

Some of the "Guilty Men" tried to block this, but the St. Pancras Conference of the Party in the spring of 1922 adopted a resolution for the appointment of such a small commission, to be drawn from outside the ranks of the Executive.

Early in 1920, before I left for Moscow, I attended a Conference where for the first time I met Brailsford and I was immediately struck by his hopeless confusion of mind. When he spoke he argued for and argued against (whatever the subject was) until he had himself all tied up in knots. In striking contrast to him was a comrade whom I met in what has proved to be the beginning of a long and, I believe, fruitful association—R. P. Dutt. He made a deep impression on me with his theoretical clarity and his intense revolutionary earnestness.

I had no hesitation in proposing R. P. Dutt as Chairman of the small commission. Again there was opposition but a big majority of the Central Committee supported this proposal. Harry Pollitt and Harry Inkpin (the brother of Albert) were appointed as the other members and the Commission immediately got down to its work.

Up to this time Harry Pollitt, one of the most loyal and devoted of our young Socialist propagandists, had had no experience in the leadership of a political party. But he was to get plenty of it from that time on. For with appointment of the Commission the burden of sustaining and directing the party gradually passed over to these comrades.

By the time the Commission submitted its first report, the dangerous and unstable elements had almost all been got out of the party. We were thus in a position, true with a very small membership and in the face of a whole host of difficulties created by those who from the outside were beginning to attack the party with all kinds of venomous slanders, to re-start the building of the party on the lines of policy more in keeping with the tasks it has to accomplish.

With the second final report of the Commission the party may be said to have found its feet. By that time Dutt and Pollitt were firmly established in the leadership and although there were many hard battles still to be fought and many almost insuperable obstacles to be overcome the party has kept moving forward, however slowly, ever since.

But, however far down the party might have been at any time, there were always loyal comrades all over the country, as there were in the Central Committee, whose abiding faith in the workers and in the party of the workers, kept the party alive when the political adventurers were doing their best to frustrate and strangle it.

They are gone now, the Mellors, the Postgates and the Wilkinsons. They can fatten at the trough of the Imperialists, they can lick the pants of their masters for the dirty sops that may be thrown to them—but our party, conceived with such labour, striving and struggling against foes without and even worse foes within, has battled its way to lusty manhood and now stands forth the recognised leader of the fight against the Imperialists—proudly conscious of the task that lies before it—with the theoretical knowledge and the practical experience that will enable it to carry through to the end.