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**THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN AND
ITS STRUGGLE AGAINST FASCISM 1933-1939**

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**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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ABSTRACT

The sectarian tactics of the Comintern's Third Period prevented the Communist Party of Great Britain from articulating an effective response to the rise of fascism during 1933. The CPGB leadership saw the main threat of fascism in Britain coming from the National Government, whose measures were portrayed as leading to the gradual 'fascisation' of British society. This led to the Party leadership ignoring the BUF as politically irrelevant. However, sections of the CPGB rank and file felt differently, linking up with their Labour movement counterparts; organising activity on a mass scale to prevent BUF activity on the streets of Britain.

In mid 1934, reflecting pressure from below and the change in Comintern anti-fascist strategy as advocated by Dimitrov, the CPGB leadership changed tack and sanctioned counter-demonstrations to BUF meetings. In October 1934 it offered a united front electoral pact to the Labour Party.

In 1935 the CPGB embraced the popular front policy adopted by the Comintern at its Seventh World Congress. The popular front movement was designed to change the 'pro-fascist' foreign policy of the National Government and replace it with a people's government favourable to a military pact with the USSR. This guiding principle lay behind the popular front activity of the CPGB during 1935-39.

By 1939 after six years of hard work the CPGB had little to show for its struggle against fascism. Despite a small increase in membership, and a slight growth in influence amongst the trade unions and intelligentsia, it had failed to bring about a change in British foreign policy favourable to an alliance with the Soviet Union or to emerge as a significant force within the British Labour movement. This failure can be largely ascribed to its pursuit of an anti-fascist strategy determined mainly by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy and not by the concerns of British workers.

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List of Abbreviations

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
ASLEF	Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
ARP	Air Raid Precautions
ASSNC	Aircraft Shop Stewards National Council
BNP	British National Party
BUF	British Union of Fascists
Comintern	Communist (Third) International
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
ETU	Electrical Trades Union
IFTU	International Federation of Trade Unions ('Amsterdam')
ILP	Independent Labour Party
Inprecorr	International Press Correspondence
KPD	German Communist Party
LSI	Labour and Socialist (Second) International
MFGB	Miners' Federation of Great Britain
NCL	National Council of Labour
NCLC	National Council of Labour Colleges
NEC	National Executive Committee (of the Labour Party)
NKVD	Peoples Commissariat of Internal Affairs
NUDAW	National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers
NUGMW	National Union of General and Municipal Workers
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
NUT	National Union of Teachers
NUTGW	National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
PCE	Spanish Communist Party
PCF	French Communist Party
POUM	Workers Party of Marxist Unity (Spain)
RILU	Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern)
SFIO	French Socialist Party
SPD	German Social Democratic Party
SWMF	South Wales Miners' Federation
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)
YCL	Young Communist League
YFTC	Yorkshire Federation of Trades Councils

Introduction

Until the mid-1970s there had been little debate amongst historians as to the role of the CPGB within British society. What work there was on the Communist Party was often written by individuals whose anti-communism coloured their historical judgement.¹ In contrast to this, official histories of the Communist Party followed the safe path of narrative description avoiding any critical analysis. James Klugmann the Communist Party's official historian was one of the first to recognize the need for a new approach to CPGB history, '...reflecting the changed political thinking within the Communist Party and the need to re-examine and debate the movement's past'.² Since Klugmann's death the CPGB history group actively took up the question of the Party's history.

In 1979 the CPGB history group held a ground-breaking conference on the Party's role and political position during the first month of World War Two.³ Here, for the first time, was a critical evaluation of a crucial turning point in the CPGB's history. It represented a qualitative step forward not only for the Communist Party and its attempts to understand its history, but also for all historians interested in the British Labour movement. For the first time historians were given a glimpse into the internal debates within the CPGB which has greatly enhanced our understanding of its development.

Following the publication of Attfield and Williams' book, there has been a marked increase in interest in the CPGB amongst historians. This ranges from Branson's two volumes on the CPGB, to the recent biographies of its two principal leaders Harry Pollitt and Rajani Palme Dutt.⁴ Yet until the last decade most works on the CPGB carried little detail of its innermost workings, and even those which have, such as Branson's History Of The Communist Party Of Great Britain 1927-1941 (1985) and Kevin Morgan's Against Fascism And War (1989), were hampered by a lack of access to internal documents. As Michelle Gabbidon has noted, the problems of conducting research into the CPGB have hinged to a large degree around the lack of access to internal documentary evidence:

There are particular problems inherent in the study of the close-knit political party and the CPGB is no exception. A first problem is one of access to documentary evidence. Party records and documentation are fully available to Party members. The Party itself prefers to use its own historians. Non-Party members are forced to rely on Party publications ...for documentary evidence.⁵

However, with the collapse of Stalinism throughout Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, new archive material has become available on the CPGB; as the

Comintern's archives in Moscow have been gradually opened up to historians. Large quantities of internal CPGB material has been sent from the Comintern archives to this country, with the prospect of more to come in the future.

Kevin Morgan has observed that, 'the new abundance of archival materials is likely in many ways to transform our understanding of communist politics'.⁶ For the first time the CPGB archive is fully open to researchers at the National Museum of Labour History in Manchester, 'Located alongside the national records of the Labour Party, these archives provide a rich source for the history of the British Left that is so far virtually untapped'.⁷ Researchers will benefit particularly from the full verbatim accounts of Central Committee and Political Bureau meetings which, 'provide an immediacy and vividness of detail unique among formal records of the British labour movement'.⁸

In the light of Kevin Morgan's remarks, a re-evaluation of the CPGB and its relationship to the struggle against fascism would be of great value. It would help shed light upon areas of the CPGB's history which in many respects have only been touched upon by historians. Although work has been done on the CPGB during the period in question, the new archive material becoming available to historians is sufficient justification for a new study. The reason for focusing a proposed study on the CPGB and fascism is simple. The question of fascism dominated British society during 1933-39 in a way no other international issue has done this

century. The CPGB's contribution to the struggle against fascism has yet to be fully documented and analysed. The opening up of the CPGB archive means that a re-evaluation of the CPGB's role can now be attempted with more confidence than ever before.

This study will seek to question many conventional assumptions regarding the CPGB's role during the struggle against fascism 1933-39; and call to account the mythology surrounding this 'golden era' of the Party's history. It will explore the interrelated themes of the united front against fascism and the rise of popular frontism during this period. In examining the united and popular front campaigns of the Communist Party, which were the main axis of its anti-fascist strategy, particular emphasis will be placed upon its relationship to the Labour movement. In the eyes of the CPGB leadership central to the success of the united and popular front strategy was the Party's problematical relationship to the British Labour movement. Throughout 1933-39 the Communist Party attempted time and time again to involve both the leadership and rank and file of the Labour movement in its anti-fascist activities. The Party realised that in a country such as Britain, where the industrial working class carried a decisive social weight, that for any of its campaigns to have any chance of success then it needed to win the active support of the Labour movement.

The themes pursued by this study can be set out briefly as follows. First of all, there is the CPGB's gradual

emergence from the sectarian strictures of the 'Third Period' towards the united front against fascism during 1933-34, which is not as straight forward as many historians assume. Concomitant with this is the question of the struggle against the BUF, an organisation led by Oswald Mosley. Again, historians have tended to portray this in a rather one-sided manner presenting the CPGB as the leading force in this struggle. However, this was far from the case as the Communist Party was riven by divisions over its attitude towards the struggle against the blackshirts. Indeed, in the first year after Hitler's ascension to power the CPGB leadership regarded the struggle against the BUF as politically irrelevant, while sections of the Party rank and file linked up with their Labour movement counterparts in confronting the blackshirts on the streets of Britain.

In this study which is mindful of its limitations, such as the shortage of source material for the case studies on the local CPGB as well as the anti-Mosley movement and the limited scope of its investigation, it will be argued that a rank and file movement developed in the towns and cities of Britain to physically oppose the activities of Mosley's blackshirts. The main source for the case study of this rank and file anti-fascist movement has been the Daily Worker. The Daily Worker, which was not always in tune with the thinking of the CPGB leadership, recorded on a regular basis the numerous activities of this rank and file anti-fascist movement, turning a blind eye to the presence of Party

members in anti-blackshirt activities that were virtually ignored by the Central Committee and Political Bureau during 1933 and the first half of 1934. In giving coverage to this movement from below during the aforementioned period, it would appear that a section of the Party leadership merely paid lip service to the Central Committee's policy of playing down the anti-Mosley struggle in favour of concentrating upon the struggle against the pro-fascist National Government. How else are we to account for the discrepancy between the Daily Worker's coverage of the grassroots anti-Mosley movement and the Party leadership's negative attitude towards this branch of the anti-fascist movement? At the Central Committee in June 1933 the CPGB leadership came out unequivocally against the tactic of breaking up BUF meetings, indeed it was not until the early summer of 1934 that the Party leadership formally came out in support of the rank and file anti-Mosley movement, yet the Daily Worker continued to give coverage to this movement from below.⁹ This state of affairs may well have indicated continuing differences between the Party leadership over anti-fascist strategy. During the spring of 1933 when the CPGB leadership was debating the Comintern's new turn towards the united front against fascism Jimmy Shields and Bill Rust, who were on the Daily Worker's editorial staff, opposed the united front from above, as described in the ECCI's 5 March manifesto, and supported the united front from below. The debates on the Central Committee and

Political Bureau over the new united front line during 1933 reveal how Pollitt had to battle hard to get the Party leadership in line with the new Comintern directives. In May 1933 he was forced to admit that the Party Secretariat was still divided and unable to come up with a commonly agreed position on this rather pressing question.¹⁰ Shields and Rust may well have seen the grassroots anti-Mosley movement as a practical manifestation of the united front from below, with its emphasis upon rank and file activity to halt the growth of fascism.

There is, however, another possible explanation for this seeming contradiction between the Daily Worker's coverage of the anti-Mosley movement and the Central Committee's position of playing down this movement in favour of concentrating upon the struggle against the 'pro-fascist' National Government. The Daily Worker's coverage of the anti-Mosley struggle may well have reflected pressure upon the CPGB leadership from those sections of the Party membership involved in this movement from below. Let us not forget that it would not have been the first time that the Party leadership reversed its attitude towards the anti-Mosley movement in response to pressure from those sections of its membership active in the anti-BUF struggle. It was not until 2 October 1936 that the Communist Party leadership cancelled the YCL Aid-for Spain rally scheduled for the 4 October and came out publicly, on the front page of the Daily Worker, with a call for mass opposition to prevent

Mosley's men marching on the same day through the East End of London. In October 1936 Pollitt admitted, in a discussion with Herbert Morrison on the 'Battle of Cable Street', that he was, 'no enthusiast for such clashes but he insisted that his supporters would not be persuaded to surrender the streets to fascists'.¹¹ During 1933 and the first half of 1934 the CPGB leadership may well have decided to allow the Daily Worker to cover the anti-Mosley movement out of fear of alienating the most militant sections of the Party membership. It would have been a small price to pay for keeping its most active members on board the campaign for the united front with the Labour Party.

The case study on the grassroots anti-Mosley movement has drawn largely upon reports in the Daily Worker due to the scarcity of other national sources for this movement. It is worth pointing out that on the whole, rank and file movements, oblivious to the needs of historians in the future, do not leave many documents that illustrate their origins and development. Having said this, other national newspapers such as the Guardian and Daily Herald did comment upon some of the larger demonstrations in London, such as the 150,000 strong counter-demonstration in Hyde Park on 9 September 1934. But on the whole they gave little coverage to the anti-fascist movement from below which was made up of hundreds of activities all over the country. Undoubtedly, there are difficulties in locating alternative sources to the Daily Worker in the CPGB archives, for the increasing

preoccupation of the CPGB leadership with fascism as an international threat meant that there was little mention of the anti-Mosley movement from below in the official records of the Party such as the minutes of the Central Committee and Political Bureau. However, this is not a serious problem as the case put forward for a rank and file anti-fascist movement from below can also be corroborated by the memoirs of rank and file communists such as Phil Piratin and Joe Jacobs and the study of anti-fascism in the North East by Nigel Todd, of anti-fascism in the North West by Neil Barrett and that by David Turner of anti-fascism in Kent.¹² Undoubtedly there were regional variations between Party districts in their campaigning priorities however, the reports in the Daily Worker together with the regional studies mentioned above are sufficient evidence to back up the claim made in this study for a national anti-Mosley movement from below. Besides this, the case study of the West Yorkshire Communist Party in this thesis reveals that rank and file communists came together with their Labour movement counterparts to organize anti-Mosley activities without the sanction of King Street or the local Labour parties. This episode in the anti-fascist struggle has largely been ignored by historians and is a serious omission from the history of the 1930s. On a local level sources for the anti-Mosley movement include the Daily Worker as well as the memoirs of veteran Party members, such as Ernie Benson, and tape recorded interviews with CPGB members such as

Geoff Hodgson.¹³ The evidence found in these local sources, of a rank and file anti-BUF movement in West Yorkshire, is corroborated by local Labour movement newspapers such as the Bradford Pioneer, which describes a 1,000 strong counter-demonstration to one of Mosley's meetings in Bradford during mid-November 1934.¹⁴ The Yorkshire Post is another local source for the anti-Mosley movement in West Yorkshire, its comprehensive account of the 'Battle of Holbeck Moor' in September 1936 is heavily drawn upon by the Daily Worker in its description of this event.¹⁵ The case studies of the anti-Mosley movement from below and the West Yorkshire Communist Party reveal a dichotomy over anti-fascist strategy, between the national leadership and sections of the rank and file, that questions the image of the CPGB as a monolithic entity.

The CPGB's popular front phase will also be examined taking into account the controversy over its activities during this period. The Communist Party's campaign for affiliation to Labour in 1936 and the Unity Campaign of 1937 will be shown to have been undermined by its defence of the Moscow show trials and the class collaboration policies which it pursued. Finally the electoral manoeuvres of the CPGB's popular front activities during 1938-39 will be examined. These electoral tactics failed due to their attempt to compromise the political independence of the Labour Party, and were a reversion to the discredited Lib-Lab policies of Labour's political infancy.

In examining the popular front period this study will not delve into the question of the Spanish Civil War. This study acknowledges that the Communist Party's intervention in the Aid-for-Spain movement brought it hundreds of new recruits and considerable respect and kudos.¹⁶ The visit by Clement Attlee, who was strongly anti-communist, to the British Battalion of the International Brigades in 1937 was tacit recognition of the CPGB's leading role in the Aid-for Spain movement.

The omission of Spain from this study should not lead to the conclusion that Spain was not relevant to the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy or its relationship to the Labour movement. However, there is a tendency by many historians of this period to over emphasise the importance of the Aid-for-Spain movement in the CPGB's development during the late 1930s while neglecting or downplaying the importance of other issues such as the Moscow Show Trials.¹⁷ The Spanish issue is beyond the remit of this study which as noted before attempts to assess the CPGB's failure to become a mass party against the background of its relationship to the Labour movement. Ultimately, it was the Party's failure to win the active support of large sections of the Labour movement, which was due to the pro-Soviet orientation of its anti-fascist strategy, that explains its failure to emerge as a mass party of the British working class. The CPGB's intervention in the Aid-for-Spain movement undoubtedly had a beneficial effect upon its political fortunes and has

little bearing on the question of why it failed to become a mass party during this period. This study will contend that it was other issues such as the popular front campaigns for affiliation to the Labour Party, the CPGB's support of the Moscow Show Trials as a vital part of the international struggle against fascism, and the Party's failure to fully support the rank and file campaigns against Mosley that help explain its relatively small size. Besides this there is already a fairly comprehensive range of literature that deals with the Communist Party and the Spanish Civil War.¹⁸

This study makes no pretensions at being a comprehensive study of the CPGB's anti-fascist activities during 1933-39 for, besides the omission of the Spanish Civil War, this study effectively ends its examination of the CPGB in the spring of 1939 with the failure of the Communist Crusade For The Defence Of The British People and the Cripps Memorandum. By this time the united and popular fronts were dead as a political issue and with their demise went the Party's last chance for making any impression upon the British Labour movement before the imminent world war. Chapter five notes the detrimental effect of the CPGB's abstention from the Labour movement based No Conscription League during the spring and summer of 1939, and the debates within the Party leadership over its change of line from opposing to a conditional support for conscription. It is worthwhile pointing out how the very divisive debates, within the CPGB leadership, over changing the Party line over conscription

and its attitude towards the Second World War broadly confirm one of the central arguments of this thesis that the Communist Party's policies were effectively worked out in accordance with the requirements of Soviet foreign policy.

Beside the availability of new archive material, concern about the re-emergence of fascism throughout Europe in the last decade provides much of the impetus for research into the CPGB and its struggle against fascism 1933-39. In France and Belgium the National Front and Vlams Bloc have emerged as powerful forces on the national political stage taking between fifteen and twenty per cent of the vote in various elections. In Italy the renamed fascist party (with its roots leading directly back to Mussolini), became a coalition partner in the Berlusconi government of 1993-94. In Germany, Austria and the rest of Eastern Europe quasi-fascist organisations have re-emerged and are rapidly gaining support on a national basis. In his pioneering study of the Labour movement's struggle against fascism 1933-36 Michael Newman has commented on the relevance of studying the anti-fascist struggles of the 1930s for today:

It is my belief that an examination of the British Left's debates on fascism in the 1930s is not only of historical importance but will also be politically instructive in the situation today.¹⁹

Newman argues that his analysis of the Labour movement's role in the struggle against fascism, 'will prove justified if it provokes further research and discussion about fascist potential, and the means of countering it, both in the 1930s and today'.²⁰ Amongst historians of British fascism there is a common belief that on the whole the different varieties of British fascism have been negligible forces held in check by the strength of Britain's democratic traditions and the interventions of the state.²¹ The reality of the struggle against fascism has been somewhat different.

In the 1930s the hundreds of thousands who turned out against the BUF were instrumental in preventing Mosley's blackshirts emerging as a mass force in British society. As Nigel Todd has observed:

From political platforms, police stations and newspaper barons came the golden wisdom that if you ignored the blackshirts then they would simply go away....the fate elsewhere of democrats, trade unionists, Jews, Africans, Socialists, Liberals, entire countries - the list was vast - illustrated the extreme danger of leaving Fascism to its own devices. Anti-fascism was a response of the common people who, detecting the nightmare, took a fine stand for life and liberty. Fortunately for us all, they won through in the end.²²

Nina Fishman has noted the abundance of historical writing on British economic and social history during this period; while in the arena of political history the trade unions and the CPGB have been ill-served. As she points out, British political history is almost exclusively Westminster-centred.²³ Fishman notes that despite considerable differences in the conduct of communist activists, 'rigidly monolithic stereotypes of communist activities continue to permeate British historiography'.²⁴ She has observed that two opposing mythologies, both Communist and Labour, have obstructed her attempts at accurate historical vision. Communist mythology puts the CPGB and its activists behind every serious union struggle 1930-45, which is reflected in the official Party histories and the memoirs of many of its members.

In contrast to this is Labour mythology which denounces the CPGB's inflated claims of influence within the Labour movement. This mythology goes on to portray communists as unscrupulous perpetrators of notorious strikes, while at the same time contriving to disrupt trade union affairs. Fishman claims that this Labour mythology is reflected in many standard histories of this period and the autobiographies of many trade union leaders.²⁵ Thus while communist mythology has continued to conceal the CPGB's leaders consistent espousal of trade union loyalism above militant rank and file activity; Labour mythology has failed to reveal the

appeals of CPGB leaders for their members to abide by official trade union rules and decisions.

Fishman has observed that Kevin Morgan's Against Fascism and War (1989) marked an important new beginning.²⁶ She argues that its importance lay in its attempt to cut through the two opposing mythologies in order to get a clearer picture of the Communist Party during the 1935-41 period. Fishman further argues that her approach to writing CPGB history became revisionist because she found that the Party members she interviewed, did not conform to the stereotypes of communist or labour mythology. She found most CPGB members who she interviewed were not interested in repeating the myths of Party heroism and self-sacrifice.²⁷

This study follows in the footsteps of what may be termed the 'revisionist school' of CPGB history. For the same communist and labour mythologies which Fishman found to have obstructed her attempts at accurate historical vision apply with just as much force in the field of anti-fascist history during the 1930s. Communist mythology, with regard to the struggle against fascism, portrays the CPGB as the leading force in this struggle. This mythology claims that the Party's leading role in the Aid-for-Spain movement directly follows on from and was a direct consequence of its leading role in the struggles against Mosley. In other words it claims that there was a direct continuity in the anti-fascist activities of the Party running from 1933 through to the late 1930s. This study argues that the emphasis placed

upon the continuity in the Party's anti-fascist activity by communist mythology is incorrect. In the late 1930s the CPGB undoubtedly was in the vanguard of the Aid-for Spain movement, however, in the period 1933-36 the struggle against Mosley was led by a rank and file movement composed of communist and Labour movement activists not the Communist Party. Communist mythology claims that if it had not been for the role played by the Communist Party then there would never have been such notable victories over the BUF as the 'Battle of Cable Street' or the British Battalion of the International Brigades. This viewpoint is reflected in Branson's official Party history covering the years 1927-41, the account of anti-fascism in South Wales by Francis and in the collection of essays edited by Jim Fyrth on the popular front in Britain.²⁸

This study does not dispute the claims made about the CPGB playing a leading role in the formation and running of the British Battalion of the International Brigades. However, it is worthwhile mentioning that recent studies of the Aid-for-Spain movement record the contribution of the Labour movement towards supporting Republican Spain in a variety of initiatives, whose importance has been downplayed by communist mythology in its account of the Spanish conflict.²⁹ In stark contrast to communist mythology is labour mythology, which points to the disruptive effects of communist activity in opposing the BUF. This gives the

'democratic' British state the credit for defeating the threat from Mosley's blackshirts.³⁰

There is another historical mythology which must be taken into account when examining the CPGB and its struggle against fascism, and that is the Trotskyist one. This stresses the class collaboration approach of the CPGB, which is somewhat crudely portrayed as a monolithic entity whose policies were always determined by Moscow, which consciously tried to subvert the political independence of the Labour movement by allying it with non-socialist forces. This is best exemplified in the works of Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson.³¹ This study while in many respects is in broad agreement with much of the Trotskyist writing upon the CPGB takes issue with the rather simplistic mono-causal explanations put forward in the works of writers such as Bornstein and Richardson.

It is the intention of this study to critically examine these mythologies, for they have had a decisive impact upon most accounts of the period in question. In re-evaluating the role of the CPGB certain questions need to be asked. Taking into account that the period in question is universally portrayed as the 'golden era' of the CPGB, why did it fail in its intended aim of becoming a mass party? This period of radicalization of the West European working class saw the development of the PCE and PCF into mass parties. To what degree should the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy be held accountable for its failure to emerge as a

mass party? Did the CPGB lead the anti-Mosley movement or was the anti-Mosley struggle a mass movement from below led by rank and file communists and their Labour movement counterparts?

It is worthwhile stressing that while this study defines the Communist party's basic failure against the yardstick of a possible mass party, it acknowledges this failure as a relative failure. The CPGB tripled its membership between 1933-39 from around 5,000 to over 17,000 despite the failure of the united and popular front campaigns. In chapter three the failure of the CPGB is explored in a comparative context. This notes how the Spanish and French communist parties, during the era of the popular front, emerged as mass parties with considerable influence over the national political scene in their respective countries. This is in sharp contrast to the position of the CPGB which only saw a small scale improvement in its position as a result of its popular front activities. Both in France and Spain the PCF and PCE saw a growth in their membership and influence due largely to the huge social upheavals that gripped both countries; social upheavals which were signally absent from Britain for most of the 1930s. The absence of mass social upheavals in Britain together with the CPGB's failure to fully capitalise upon the opportunities presented by the struggle against fascism, help explain its relatively small size. In other words the Communist Party's failure to emerge as a mass party can be found in the dialectical interplay

between objective and subjective factors. At certain times during the decade subjective factors, such as the Party's continued sectarianism during 1933-34, help to explain its continuing isolation within the Labour movement. On other occasions objective factors such as the Moscow Show Trials cut across the appeal of British Stalinism. In its essence the anti-fascist strategy of the PCF, PCE and CPGB differed little, the popular front strategy which they pursued entailed class collaboration with non-socialist forces and which involved the downplaying of the class struggle and militant anti-fascism. All three communist parties were to pay a heavy political price for their pursuit of an anti-fascist strategy that in certain respects was inimical to working class interests.

Central to this examination of the CPGB will be its relationship with the CPSU and the Comintern, which were the ultimate arbiters of its political line. It will draw upon new research into the CPSU and Comintern that sheds a fresh perspective upon the international communist movement and developments in the USSR. These works show that internal developments within the USSR had an enormous impact upon the international communist movement. The Comintern's turn towards the united and popular front during 1933-35 was heavily influenced by Stalin's search for a military alliance with Britain and France to restrain German fascism. They also show how the Stalinist Terror which swept through the USSR 1936-39 and was exported to the civil war in Spain

had a very damaging impact upon the popular front campaigns of the European Communist Parties.³²

However, any examination of the CPGB would be incomplete if it took the view that it was a mere mouthpiece of the Soviet government. We need to look at the interaction between Comintern directives and the political situation in this country to see how the CPGB took up the anti-fascist struggle and with what success.

This study attempts to offer a history of the CPGB from both above and below. However, due to the shortage of local source material, this study will take as its main focus the activities of the Party on a national scale. Having said this, it will try to explore the dichotomy between the national Party line and the practice of local communists; and will treat the CPGB as an organic entity which developed through an interaction between the national leadership and the rank and file members. As Michelle Gabbidon has observed, 'As yet however, scant attention has been paid to branch life, as opposed to the life of the leadership at King Street, the Party headquarters between the wars'.³³

Kevin Morgan has commented that to write CPGB history is in part to trace the relationship, not always harmonious, between official pronouncements and the activities of its members. He has revealed the potential which existed for some discrepancy between the official Party line and the line followed by the rank and file:

That is one reason why it is so inadequate to write a history of the Communist Party based solely on its official and quasi-official statements of policy, with the sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit assumption that its membership consisted of docile, or steel hardened, cadres subordinating all other interests to the current party line.³⁴

This dichotomy between national policy and the activities of local communists has also been noted by Gabbidon in her study of CPGB branches in Brighton, Glasgow and North London.³⁵ It is important, therefore, to try and give weight to the variety of influences on local Communist Party activists. At the same time taking into account that the CPGB leadership, whilst having a substantial degree of autonomy in running the day-to-day affairs of the Party, looked towards the Comintern for guidance and approval for new developments in its anti-fascist strategy. Central to communist anti-fascist strategy was its problematical relationship with the British Labour movement. The dynamics of this relationship, and in turn the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy, can be more thoroughly examined by a local dimension to a national study. By relating the anti-fascist strategy of the national Party to an examination of the West Yorkshire Labour movement during this period, some indication will be gained as to how far and with what success, the Communist Party's strategy was applied by the

rank and file. This will give a greater insight into the question: why did the CPGB fail to gain a leading position of influence within the Labour movement? During this period of radicalization of the working class of Western Europe, most British workers never really questioned their allegiance to the Labour Party, never mind consider changing it.

As Morgan has pointed out, to judge the CPGB merely by the Party line laid down by its leadership is inadequate without also considering its application by 'quite human' communists, in social and political conditions which were not laid down by the Comintern, and which often bore no relation to the latter's theories as to the crisis of capitalism:

And in fact, the most enlightening works on British Communism have been studies, not of the 'Party line', but of specific areas of Communist politics or particular industries and communities in which its members were firmly embedded.³⁶

Stuart Macintyre, in his study of Communism and working class militancy in inter-war Britain, has pointed out that much labour history is merely a history of institutions which neglects the crucial relationship between classes and party. He suggests that if we are to better understand the limited appeal of Communism in this country, then we need to

know more about the social dynamics of the Labour movement, 'How do men and women constitute such a movement and under what conditions are they drawn into struggle?'³⁷ As Macintyre has observed the value of local studies lie in that they enable, 'us to say much more about the dynamics of Communism and militant working class politics than has so far emerged from national and institutional accounts'.³⁸

When examining the application of the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy in the West Yorkshire Labour movement, attention will be focused on the trades councils which were the backbone of the local Labour parties. The reasons for this are that the CPGB built up quite a strong position in the trade unions during the 1930s which was never reflected in a similar position in the Labour Party. The influence of the CPGB in the West Yorkshire Labour Party has already been examined by the study of Keith Laybourn and Jack Reynolds.³⁹ By comparing and contrasting communist activity within the local Labour movement with the national Party line it will bring out more fully the reasons for the failure of the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy.

In its examination of the CPGB on a local scale this study will draw heavily upon the recently opened CPGB archives. The reports on the West Yorkshire Communist Party given to the Central Committee and Political Bureau by Maurice Ferguson and Marion Jessop provide an immense amount of detail about the growth of local communist membership and the campaigning activities of local Party members. The

picture which is drawn by these reports, of a small communist membership whose campaigning priorities were just as often determined by local conditions as by King Street directives, is largely corroborated by the minutes of the Trade Councils in Bradford, Huddersfield and Leeds.

The united front against fascism 1933-35

The rapidity and ease with which fascism crushed the German Labour movement following Hitler's assumption of the chancellorship in January 1933 was a matter of great concern to the European Labour movement. Following the crushing of the KPD the Comintern failed to offer a coherent analysis of the fascist phenomenon, and throughout 1933 was paralysed by the sectarian principles of the 'Third Period' which prevented it from playing a meaningful role in the struggle against fascism. As McDermott and Agnew have observed, 'it is not surprising that communist approaches for a united front with the social democrats were rebuffed at this time'.⁴⁰

During 1934 the Comintern gradually abandoned its sectarianism towards social democracy and embraced the working class united front against fascism. This took place against a background of much internal wrangling within the ECCI which sought to dovetail its strategy with the interests of Soviet foreign policy for alliances with Britain and France.⁴¹ In the autumn of 1934 the united front was broadened out into the popular front against fascism which involved the Labour movement collaborating with non-

socialist parties. This class collaboration approach was formally adopted by the Communist International at its Seventh World Congress during July-August 1935 and set in motion, 'a highly contradictory period in Comintern history'.⁴²

The contradictory process whereby the Comintern adopted the united front and popular front will be examined in some detail against the background of developments in Soviet foreign policy in chapters one and two. This background knowledge is essential in helping us to understand the evolution of the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy, which took as its reference point developments in Soviet state policy. Throughout the 1930s the CPGB took the defence of the Soviet Union as the basic determinant of its anti-fascist policies. In an article for Labour Monthly in October 1935 on the decisions of the Comintern's Seventh World Congress Harry Pollitt commented that defence of the USSR which had seen 'The irrevocable victory of socialism' was 'the test of our socialist faith'.⁴³ He went on to declare that:

we of the Communist Party of Great Britain, in line with every section of the Communist International support 100 per cent, and without any reservations everything that the Soviet Union does in its foreign policy, because we understand that this foreign policy is in accord with the interests of the international working class.⁴⁴

J.R.Campbell was even franker in admitting that defence of the USSR was the basic determinant of CPGB policy:

Make no mistake about it. If we want the overthrow of capitalism, we must defend the country that has already overthrown capitalism...It means different tactics according to whether one's capitalist government is in the combination against the Soviet Union or is - for its own purposes - fighting alongside the Soviet Union.⁴⁵

The failure of the Comintern to develop an effective response to the rise of fascism in Germany raises the question of how did the CPGB react to the Nazi victory? Did its political line during 1933 reflect the Comintern's sectarian policy which blamed the 'social fascists' of social democracy for the victory of fascism in Germany; if so, what were the implications of this for its relationship with the Labour movement?

The persistence of stubborn disagreements within the Comintern leadership during 1933-34 raises several questions. To what degree were divisions within the ECCI reflected within the leadership of the CPGB? Was the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy shaped by a particular definition of fascism? The answers to these questions determined how the CPGB orientated itself to the British political scene. Throughout 1933 and for much of 1934 when the Comintern was paralysed by inaction due to a lack of direction from the

CPSU, was the CPGB affected in a similar manner, or did it go out and actively oppose fascism?

Many historians of the CPGB have portrayed its response to fascism in a rather simplistic manner, failing to take account of the nuances in its anti-fascist strategy; and the divisions within the leadership over the united front in 1933 and those between the leadership and sections of the membership over the Party's attitude towards the struggle against the BUF during 1933-34. There is a common perception that, from the rise of fascism in Germany, the CPGB led the struggle against the BUF and that it immediately adopted the united front against fascism.⁴⁶

Chapters one and two of this study will attempt to reveal that the CPGB during 1933 and for much of 1934 was crippled by the same sectarianism prevalent within the Comintern. This lack of firm direction from the ECCI created serious divisions within the CPGB leadership over the united front during 1933. It was not until October 1934 that the CPGB with Comintern approval threw over the sectarian principles of the 'Third Period' and finally adopted the united front from above.

Throughout 1933-34 the CPGB was also divided by its attitude to the struggle against the BUF. The leadership held a conception of fascism which saw the main threat of such reaction in Britain as stemming from the measures of the National Government which were leading to the gradual 'fascisation' of society; consequently it saw the struggle

against the BUF as politically irrelevant. To most workers and a significant minority of its membership the Communist Party's call for the overthrow of the 'pro-fascist' National Government seemed rather utopian. However, the fight against the BUF offered them an openly pro-fascist target which they linked with the fascist parties on the continent. Consequently during 1933 and 1934 sections of the CPGB membership linked up with their Labour movement counterparts to confront the blackshirts on the streets of Britain; in defiance of the Central Committee's disapproval for such tactics. By the summer of 1934 the CPGB leadership had changed its position in favour of participating in the struggle against the BUF. This change in attitude was brought about by pressure 'from below' of the anti-Mosley movement, and the new thinking in anti-fascist strategy pioneered within the Comintern by Dimitrov.

Taking this down to a local level: how did communists in West Yorkshire react to, and campaign against, the threat posed by fascism? Were they as slow as the national CPGB leadership in realising the mobilising potential of the anti-Mosley struggle, or did they get involved in the struggle against the BUF before the national leadership changed its position on this issue? Concomitant with this, was the local Communist Party gripped by the same sectarianism towards the Labour movement which during 1933-34 held back the Party's united front campaigns nationally?

The popular front against fascism 1935-39

Chapters three to five seek to examine how the CPGB sought to implement the new popular front policy adopted by the Comintern at its Seventh World Congress in 1935. Throughout these years Soviet foreign policy requirements were to determine the anti-fascist strategy of Comintern more openly than in the 1933-34 period. As McDermott and Agnew have observed:

From 1935 the on-going search for indigenous forms of the Popular Front became inextricably interwoven with, and indeed increasingly subservient to, the foreign policy requirements of the Soviet state.⁴⁷

The CPGB too, was not exempt from this process, its anti-fascist strategy during 1935-39 was geared towards the formation of a popular front movement capable of changing the direction of British foreign policy, from its pro-German orientation to one favouring a military pact with the USSR. In Britain the Communist Party's struggle for the popular front passed through several stages taking a more circuitous route than in France and Spain.

There has been considerable debate amongst historians as to the role of the CPGB's popular front campaigns in the second half of the 1930s. As Branson has noted the dominant conception amongst historians of the popular front has been that it was essentially an electoral manoeuvre which was

largely ineffective in realising its objective of an anti-government combination powerful enough to defeat the government.⁴⁸ Bornstein and Richardson, Grant and Jacobs go further in their criticisms of the popular front arguing that it led the CPGB to refrain from militant anti-fascist activity, such as the struggle against the BUF, in favour of popular front style alliances with non-socialists.⁴⁹

In assessing the veracity of such charges it would be most instructive to examine the claims of Joe Jacobs (who was secretary of the Stepney Communist Party in 1936) in his autobiography that the CPGB leadership refused to participate in the build up to the 'Battle of Cable Street' on October 4 1936. Indeed, he claims that it was only due to the strong pressure from the Party rank and file that the leadership changed its position, at the beginning of October, to one that opposed Mosley's march through the East End. This pressure led the CPGB leadership to sanction the Party's participation in the activities to block the blackshirts' march, thereby saving it from a humiliating loss of face and a considerable drop in support.⁵⁰ Chapter three of this study will provide evidence to substantiate the claims made by Jacobs, illustrating how there was a considerable distance between the position of the national leadership on anti-fascist strategy and sections of the rank and file.

There are, however, those such as Branson, Fyrth and Morgan who strongly dispute the above views. They believe

that the popular front had a considerable degree of success and dispute the view that it was an electoral contrivance which led the Communist Party to refrain from militant anti-fascist activity. They point to the key role played by the CPGB in delivering aid to Republican Spain, and how it mobilised tens of thousands in the campaign for peace.⁵¹

In defence of the CPGB Kevin Morgan has claimed that at the Comintern's Seventh World Congress both Dutt and Dimitrov insisted that fighting fascism in Britain meant fighting the National Government and its reactionary measures both at home and abroad. This view was central to the Party's understanding of capitalist development in Britain and is at the root of the contradictions in CPGB policy after the outbreak of war in September 1939.⁵² By the time of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War it was the spread of fascism on the continent and the attendant threats to peace that increasingly preoccupied Pollitt who began to regard the BUF as politically irrelevant.⁵³

In assessing the CPGB's popular front strategy in the late 1930s it will be necessary to establish the nature of the popular front. Was it an electoral contrivance, or was it a series of mass anti-fascist movements? It will be necessary to examine how the Comintern envisaged the popular front and then look at how the CPGB interpreted this and how it proposed to implement the new policy. From there the activity of the West Yorkshire Communist Party during 1935-39 can be examined to see how it reacted to the new policy

and what effect it had upon its standing in the local Labour movement. Finally, any examination of the CPGB's popular front strategy needs to ask did this bring it any nearer to the goal of gaining a leading position in the British Labour movement?

Chapters three and four examine the united front campaigns of 1936 and 1937 by which the CPGB sought to gain affiliation to the Labour Party, which was seen as the first essential step towards establishing a popular front movement in Britain. Previous accounts of these campaigns have not explored in any depth the CPGB's motives for participating in these campaigns, nor what the Party hoped to gain from participation in them. The answers to such questions will help provide a better understanding of these campaigns and what brought about their demise.⁵⁴ The role of the Moscow show trials in undermining support for them will be stressed in particular.

Chapters three to five of this study will assess what truth there is to the allegations that the CPGB, from the Comintern's adoption of the popular front, began to 'soft pedal' socialist propaganda and downplay the class struggle leading to a gradual withdrawal from militant anti-fascist activity, so as not to offend non-socialist allies away from supporting the popular front. Detailed study of the anti-Mosley movement during 1935-36 confirms that the Communist Party leadership put little emphasis upon the struggle

against the blackshirts, due to its pursuit of the popular front.

Chapter five of this study examines what truth there is in the allegations that the Communist Party's popular front campaigns of 1938-39 were electoral manoeuvres which tried to compromise the independence of the Labour movement in order to form an electoral coalition strong enough to change the direction of British foreign policy. This chapter will highlight the role of Soviet foreign policy in determining the popular front policy of the CPGB during these years. During 1938-39 the Soviet government tried to obtain a military alliance with Britain to no avail. The CPGB leadership, taking its cue from the diplomatic requirements of Moscow, continued to pursue affiliation to the Labour Party. It hoped that once communist affiliation to Labour had been achieved the latter could be persuaded to take a leading role in a popular front combination whose aim would be to bring down the government, and replace it with a people's government favourable to a pact with the USSR. However, these attempts at affiliation were undermined by the CPGB's leading role in the United Peace Alliance and the Communist Crusades of 1938-39. Communist affiliation failed because these campaigns sought to compromise the electoral independence of Labour by linking it up in a popular front coalition with non-socialists from the anti-appeasement wings of the Liberal and Conservative Parties.

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CHAPTER ONE

A Year Of Paralysis - 1933

"...in reality the victory of Hitler is the greatest defeat of the proletariat in the history of the world".
Leon Trotsky, August 1933.¹

The complete destruction of the German Labour movement, which followed Hitler's assumption of the Chancellorship, was viewed with great concern by the international Labour movement. It opened up the perspective of world war as Hitler undertook a massive rearmament programme.² The victory of fascism in Germany set in motion a chain of events that led to World War Two. The international struggle against fascism which was ignited by the Nazi victory in Germany, came to dominate world history for the next twelve years and reached its conclusion in May 1945.

The emergence of German fascism in 1933 led to a crisis in Soviet and Comintern policy. Their ineffective response to the fascist phenomenon had considerable repercussions for the CPGB. The central argument of chapter one will be that the British Communist Party's response to the struggle against fascism was conditioned primarily by the requirements of Soviet, and in turn, Comintern policy. With its anti-fascist policies guided in the main by edicts coming from Moscow, the British Communist Party often found itself out of touch with indigenous anti-fascist sentiment. This account will challenge the conventional view of this period that the Communist Party was the leading force in the struggle

against the British Union of Fascists (BUF).³ It will also bring to attention the numerous divisions which gripped the Communist Party during 1933, over its response to the emergence of German fascism; divisions which have largely gone unacknowledged by historians.

In the first section of chapter one the contradictory policies of Comintern will be examined against the background of developments in Soviet foreign policy. Following on from this, we shall look at how the CPGB responded to the victory of fascism in Germany. Did its political line faithfully reflect Comintern's sectarian line? If so, what were the implications of this for its relationship with the British labour movement? Did the Comintern line help or hinder the CPGB in developing an effective anti-fascist strategy, that would end its political isolation?

After examining the response of the Communist Party to the struggle against fascism, attention will be paid to how the rank and file responded to this phenomenon. Constrained by the sectarian principles of the 'Third Period' and the requirements of Soviet foreign policy, the national leadership of the CPGB remained aloof from the struggle against the blackshirts during 1933 and the first half of 1934. Meanwhile a section of the Party membership got actively involved in the struggle against the BUF; revealing a clear division of opinion over anti-fascist strategy between the leadership and sections of the membership who felt less constrained by the policy edicts of Moscow. The CPGB's response to the struggle

against fascism was conditioned primarily by the requirements of Soviet and Comintern policy, which led it becoming out of touch with indigenous anti-fascist sentiment when it came to the struggle against the BUF.

The international situation

The victory of fascism in Germany brought a new threat to the security of the Soviet Union. Throughout 1933 the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) developed a two-fold strategy to try and counter the threat posed by German fascism. This involved the Soviet Union trying to maintain the pro-German orientation of its foreign policy. As Soviet-German relations began to worsen in the second half of 1933, the leadership of the CPSU began to look towards improving its diplomatic relations with the Versailles powers (France and Britain).

The preoccupation of the Soviet leadership with internal and diplomatic affairs, meant that the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) during 1933 was usually left to its own devices when it came to working out a response to the new menace posed by German fascism. On the one occasion Stalin turned his attention to Comintern he instructed the ECCI to direct all communist parties, 'to step up the campaign against the Second International and its sections [which] are subverting the struggle against fascism...'.⁴ Apart from this one occasion, the lack of guidance from the CPSU (which was the ultimate arbiter of Comintern policy),

meant the ECCI dared not take any independent initiatives of its own; while waiting for a signal from the Kremlin, it merely carried on with the sectarian policies which had played such a part in helping the fascists to power in Germany. Thus the Comintern and its constituent sections were unable to work out an effective response to the emergence of fascism in Germany.

Hitler's assumption of the Chancellorship on 30 January 1933 left the European Labour movement in a state of shock.⁵ The first response from the European Labour movement came on 6 February 1933 in Paris, at an anti-fascist conference called by seven socialist parties.⁶ All parties present, called upon Comintern and the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) to convene a conference of the two internationals to work out a joint plan of action against fascism.

The LSI responded on 19 February 1933 with an appeal for workers' unity to defeat fascism. In its manifesto the LSI agreed to participate in joint anti-fascist action with Comintern provided that it ceased its sectarian attacks on social democracy.⁷ The Comintern's initial response was one of silence, this exemplified the sectarianism that had played such a major role in the defeat of the German Labour movement.⁸ The Nazi burning of the Reichstag on 27 February 1933, which was used as the pretext for the crushing of the German Communist Party (KPD), forced Comintern to respond to the L.S.I.'s overture. The Comintern manifesto of 5 March 1933, attempted to minimize the magnitude of the disaster in

Germany. Avoiding a critical appraisal of the Comintern's failure in Germany, it blamed the SPD for Hitler's victory and praised the KPD's anti-fascist strategy.⁹ To have criticised the KPD would have thrown some responsibility for Hitler's victory onto the Comintern. This in turn would have meant an implicit criticism of the CPSU which was the ultimate arbiter of Comintern strategy.

The Comintern manifesto of 5 March 1933 was a very contradictory document. It called upon its sections to approach the leadership of all the parties belonging to the LSI with united front proposals for joint anti-fascist action. At the same time Comintern believed that regardless of what attitude the social democratic leaders adopted, the united front from below could be built by communist and social democratic workers.¹⁰ As E.H.Carr has observed it was a 'half-hearted response to a half-hearted appeal' which invited rejection by the social democratic parties.¹¹ The Comintern manifesto of 5 March 1933, was a sop to the growing desire for unity within the European labour movement, in the face of the fascist menace, for after this, Comintern maintained the sectarian tactics of the 'Third Period' with renewed vigour.¹² To understand the reaction of Comintern, and in turn the CPGB, to fascism during the period 1933-1935 it is essential to look at communist anti-fascist strategy during the early 1930s.

In the early 1930s Comintern supported the idea of the united front from below, between communist and social

democratic workers. During this period Comintern pursued a sectarian policy that criticized the 'social fascist' leaders of the social democratic parties for their class collaboration with capitalism; and for refusing to organise any anti-fascist action with the communist parties. This policy injected fratricidal strife into the German Labour movement. The consequences of this were that there was no serious resistance from the German Labour movement to Hitler's rise to power. The German SPD leaders played an equally negative role in refusing to organise any mass struggles against the Nazis. In Britain, the 'social fascist' line led to the CPGB losing a large section of its membership and to its isolation within the British Labour movement. If it had not been for the financial and organisational support of Comintern then the CPGB would probably have collapsed as a result of the 'social fascist' line.¹³

As far as the Soviet government was concerned Hitler's victory changed nothing in its relations with Germany. Faced with acute internal economic problems and the perceived danger of intervention from the Versailles powers, the Soviet government was determined to maintain friendly relations with Germany. Following Hitler's ratification of the protocol extending the Soviet-German treaty of April 1926, Izvestia commented on 6 May 1933, 'The cornerstone of Soviet foreign policy is peace..., in this spirit the Soviet Union does not wish to alter anything in its attitude to Germany'.¹⁴ Trotsky observed at the time that the diplomatic pact which the Soviet

government had signed with Nazi Germany created revulsion within the European labour movement at such crude opportunism.¹⁵ The Comintern's uncritical defence of Soviet foreign policy was a source of serious friction between the ILP and the CPGB.¹⁶

At the Presidium of the ECCI on 1 April 1933, came the first formal assessment by Comintern of Hitler's victory; it blamed social democracy for Hitler's victory. While appealing for a, 'united front of social-democratic and communist workers', it maintained that the chief obstacle to a successful struggle against fascism was the socialist parties policy of, 'collaboration with the bourgeoisie and help for reaction under the pretence of pursuing the tactic of the "lesser evil"'.¹⁷

Alarmed by the increasingly hostile tone of Hitler's foreign policy pronouncements, the Soviet government sent out feelers to France and Britain. The second half of 1933 saw the steady improvement of relations between France and the Soviet Union and the slow decay of Soviet-German relations.¹⁸ Thus the Soviet government evolved a two-fold diplomatic strategy. It continued to seek good relations with Germany but as a kind of insurance policy against this relationship turning sour, the Soviet government secretly sought a rapprochement with France.

The end of 1933 saw a new turn in Soviet foreign policy signalled by Stalin in an interview given to the New York Times. By this time the desire to maintain good relations with Germany had been replaced by fear of Germany. In his interview on 25 December Stalin hinted at

a major reorientation in Soviet foreign policy, following Germany and Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations, '...if the League were to turn out to be an obstacle, even a small one, that made war more difficult....then it is not impossible we shall support the League'.¹⁹ On 28 December 1933, this new turn was made clear when the Soviet ambassador in Paris informed the French government of the conditions under which his government would join the League of Nations.²⁰

The Comintern resolution of 1 April 1933 set the tone for its anti-fascist policy for the rest of the year. Over the next eight months the Comintern carried on with the same contradictory line, attacking social democracy for paving the way for fascism while also calling for a united front with its various parties.²¹ This raises the question of whether or not the CPGB's political line during 1933 reflected Comintern's sectarian line? If so, what were the implications of this for its relationship with the British labour movement? Did the Comintern line help or hinder the CPGB develop an effective anti-fascist strategy, which would help it break out of its political isolation?

At the Thirteenth ECCI Plenum during December 1933, the resolutions adopted revealed that Stalin was gradually shifting his attitude from opposition to the Versailles Treaty to support for it as a means of restraining Germany.²² For example, the resolution on war referred to Germany as the chief instigator of war in Europe.²³ It reaffirmed the contradictory policies of the

5 March and 1 April manifestos, which combined hostility to social democracy with approaches to social democracy for the united front from above and below.²⁴ This contradiction in its anti-fascist policy left Comintern and its sections isolated bystanders to the struggle against fascism. As McDermott and Agnew have commented in their recent history of Comintern, during 1933 it was, 'paralysed by the sectarian postulates of the Third Period...'.²⁵

The failure of Comintern to admit any responsibility for the German defeat and to critically re-evaluate its policies, confirmed Trotsky's assessment, made at the time, that there had been a qualitative change in Comintern's character. Trotsky observed that Comintern had degenerated from a 'revolutionary' organisation to a 'counter-revolutionary' organisation. In other words the Comintern no longer stood for organising the world revolution, which had been identified at its first congress in 1919 as its principal objective. Instead Comintern now was to adapt itself to supporting, uncritically, the goals of Soviet foreign policy. Comintern's refusal to learn from the mistakes of the German defeat confirmed its departure from the goal of world revolution. From that time on, the role of the various communist parties was that of border guards in defence of the Soviet Union. Increasingly the national sections of Comintern were to be used as pawns in furthering the goals of Soviet foreign policy.²⁶

It is no coincidence that just as Comintern was abandoning the goal of world revolution the CPGB leadership were privately revising their own views about the proximity of a revolutionary crisis in Britain. Fishman has noted how Harry Pollitt and J.R.Campbell began the process of changing the British Party's position and adjusting the expectations of its members; telling them socialism was not just around the corner but a whole historical era away.²⁷ The long-term consequences for the CPGB and its anti-fascist strategy were to be profound. It helps to explain the later direction of CPGB policy with its championing of popular frontism in many guises and forms in the mid to late 1930s. The reaction of the CPGB to the emergence of fascism in Germany reveals how it was held back by the sectarian policies of the Comintern. The paralysis of the Communist Party leadership contrasted sharply with the desire of its members to campaign against the activities of the BUF alongside their Labour movement counterparts.

The CPGB and the united front against fascism

What were the consequences of the German workers' defeat for the CPGB? The Labour Party leadership on many occasions cited the German defeat as a prime example of the failure of communist policy.²⁸ More importantly the failure of the CPGB leadership to critically analyse the German workers' defeat condemned them to the sterile path of the united front from below during 1933. Throughout 1933 the CPGB obediently followed the ultra-left

sectarian line of Comintern, and not surprisingly failed to break out of its isolation within the British labour movement. Lacking any clear guidance from Comintern over its anti-fascist strategy, apart from the perennial attacks on the 'social fascists' of social democracy, the CPGB leadership, when left to their own devices, proceeded with great difficulty to come to any agreement over united front strategy.

While struggling to come to agreement over united front strategy, the Communist Party leadership remained firmly aloof from the campaign against the British Union of Fascists. During 1933 a spontaneous movement of thousands of workers arose to fight the BUF up and down the country. This movement which gained increasing momentum during 1933 was to peak in the summer and autumn of 1934 in a series of mass activities which were to temporarily stem the growth of the BUF. It would appear that a clear division of opinion emerged between the CPGB leadership and large sections of its membership over this question. The leadership maintained the line which had played such a disastrous role in Germany; namely to attack the 'social fascists' of social democracy for their class collaborationist policies and to refuse to engage in any practical action designed to combat the fascists. The theoretical justification for this line sprang from the conception that the danger of fascism in Britain, came from the National Government and not from the BUF. Although a majority of the Communist Party membership remained passively immersed in the sectarian

attitudes of the 'Third Period', a significant minority of its rank and file members engaged in united front activity with thousands of non-communist workers in confronting the BUF on the streets of Britain.

Divisions within the leadership

At an enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau on 9 March 1933, which was the first meeting of the CPGB leadership after the Comintern manifesto of 5 March, the sudden imposition of this new line sparked off a fierce debate with three different interpretations of the new Comintern line being put forward. Pollitt opened the discussion complaining that the manifesto had come as a complete surprise and that the CPGB should have been consulted by Moscow. He castigated the Communist Party for failing to see the new international situation brought about by Hitler's victory and for under-estimating the desire for unity amongst the working class.²⁹ In his view the new united front line, gave the 'approach to the masses of workers we are at present isolated from', and a means to mobilise the working class against the capitalists and the National Government:

This is an entirely new departure from the old line. Previously we have only been concerned with the United Front from below. Of course, our basis for this new form of activity is still the factories, the trade union branches, and the streets, but this must be done in cooperation and agreement with the

reformist parties. This will not only extend the basis of the class fight and develop it to a point when it will repel the advance of the capitalists, but it will accelerate the end of capitalist exploitation.³⁰

Gallacher agreed with Pollitt that the new line offered the Communist Party an opportunity to break down its political isolation, yet he emphasised that it was on the electoral front that this could be best achieved. He argued that the new line meant the united front from above in the form of an electoral bloc with the Labour Party at local and national level. Gallacher declared that in the impending East Rhondda by-election, the Communist Party should call a local united front conference of all working-class organisations, to choose a single candidate around which they could unite in order to defeat the National Government candidate. Such a policy if implemented nationally by the CPGB would not only bring it parliamentary representation; but would also bring it wide acceptance within the Labour movement by abandoning its past sectarian practice of standing against Labour.³¹

Not surprisingly this interpretation of the new united front line from Comintern came in for much criticism. Shields, who led the way for the sectarian old guard, accused Gallacher of wanting to dissolve the CPGB in an unprincipled bloc with reformism:

Does it mean that we are now in a situation where all we have learned of the leading role of the Party is pushed aside. No. Now the leading role of the Party is brought more to the front.³²

His call for the Communist Party to stand as an independent party in elections was endorsed by a majority of those present including Pollitt. Shields, however, came in for strong criticism from Pollitt when he argued that the Comintern manifesto should be used to help expose the 'social fascist' leaders of the Labour Party as being unwilling and unable to join in the fight against fascism. Throughout his contribution Shields emphasised the united front from below.³³

Springhall warned the Political Bureau that in carrying through the change in policy, it would have to guard against right and left deviations from the new line amongst the membership. But he did feel that it would be a less divisive issue than when they had to swing the Party behind the 'Third Period' line. Despite all of the disagreements it was agreed to write to the Labour Party calling for a united front agreement between the two parties.³⁴

Springhall turned out to be right in his estimation that the new united front line would be less damaging to the Communist Party than the debates over the 'Third Period' policy in the late 1920s. During 1933 the CPGB leadership would be left alone to interpret the new line because the ECCI itself was paralysed by a lack of

direction from the CPSU. As a result of this lack of firm direction from Comintern the CPGB leadership was to be plagued by divisions over the united front. Fierce controversy raged for months on both the Central Committee and Political Bureau over the new united front line.

At the Political Bureau on 6 April 1933, we find Pollitt complaining, 'If by this time we are not clear on the meaning of the CC letter and ECCI manifesto we will never get it clear'. He referred to the fierce controversy over the united front and electoral tactics as a side issue.³⁵ Yet a month later at the Political Bureau on 4 May 1933, Pollitt in giving a report from the secretariat, was forced to admit that the secretariat was divided and unable to come up with a commonly agreed position on this question.³⁶

At this meeting Gallacher reiterated his call for an electoral selection conference of all the workers parties, to choose a common united front candidate in all constituencies. In opposition, Pollitt argued that where Party branches had the resources they should stand independently in elections. Only if the branch was not standing in an area and if the local Labour or ILP candidate fully endorsed the Communist Party's united front programme would it be possible to advocate a vote for them. Shields called for the Communist Party to run candidates in the elections, 'no matter whether they conflict with the ILP or anybody else'. He was in a minority of one when he demanded that in areas where the

Communist Party had no candidate it should advise workers to write 'Communist' on their ballot paper.³⁷

Anxious to press on with the Communist Party's united front campaign, which had been held back by the divisions within the leadership, Pollitt was successful in his attempt to paper over these divisions. He proposed that the secretariat draw up a statement based on his majority point of view. However, owing to the controversial nature of the discussion, he proposed that the secretariat send a draft of this statement on the united front to the Political Bureau for approval, before sending it out to the membership as official policy.³⁸ This artificial unity within the leadership was to greatly hamper the Communist Party's united front campaigns.

The continuing divisions within the leadership found their reflection in the activities of the membership. In districts such as the Bradford, where the Central Committee member was an enthusiastic advocate of the Pollitt line, CPGB branches were far less sectarian in their attitudes towards the local Labour movement. This undoubtedly contributed to their united front successes; whereas in the neighbouring Sheffield district, which was led by Macilhoney, who was a firm advocate of the united front from below, the branches revealed evidence of strong sectarian attitudes to the local Labour movement.

At the Political Bureau in September 1933, the controversial question of united front strategy was raised once more by Pollitt, when he called for the Communist Party to change its position on the forthcoming

municipal elections, in order to breathe new life into its united front campaign. Yet only two days previously Pollitt had declared, 'The whole truth of the matter is that the united front is as dead as a doornail. No united front exists as we thought to achieve it'.³⁹ He was referring to the Communist Party's failure to achieve any kind of united front activity with the Labour Party and TUC at a national level. Meanwhile its tenuous united front with the ILP lacked any real substance and was largely confined to the odd joint meeting.

The new united front proposals put forward by Pollitt, called for the leadership of the various districts of the Communist Party to approach the ILP candidates for the municipal elections, with the demand for an electoral bloc between the two parties. Where no agreement was reached local communists would stand candidates as before.⁴⁰ This represented a considerable softening of the CPGB's line with regard to the united front. However when it came to the municipal elections in November 1933, the Communist Party had reverted back to the sectarianism of the 5 March Comintern manifesto. In a Daily Worker editorial on election day the Communist Party called on workers to vote for communist candidates who constituted, 'a clear class challenge to the moderate and Labour representatives of capitalist policy'; where there was no communist candidate it called on workers to write 'communist' on the ballot paper.⁴¹

Throughout 1933 the Communist Party leadership despite its divisions over united front policy, kept up a steady

stream of sectarian invective against the Labour Party and the ILP leadership. This coupled with the numerous declarations against communism by the Labour Party and TUC, played a considerable part in the CPGB's poor performance in the November municipal elections. The Communist Party only put up 97 candidates, in contrast to the 150 candidates in 1932, which in itself was a sign of its continuing weakness, the vast majority of whom polled less than five percent of the vote.⁴² Above all else, its poor results revealed the desire of most workers for class unity against the Tory enemy around their traditional organisations. They also revealed working class rejection of a tiny party, which had shown little sign of having overcome its reputation for strident sectarianism. In his report to the Thirteenth ECCI Plenum in December 1933 on the united front in Britain, Pollitt noted the negative effect upon the CPGB of its sectarian tactics:

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In fact so strong is this hostility to the National Government that in all the recent elections the question of the Communists splitting the workers votes now takes a sharper form than ever before, and this is fed by the Labour Party propaganda.⁴³

As will emerge later, when examining the Bradford district, the membership did not move uniformly behind the conception of the united front held by the national leadership. Reports from the districts to the Central

Committee and Political Bureau, reveal that a majority of the membership remained passively stuck to the sectarian line of the united front from below.⁴⁴ Yet a minority of the membership did shake off the sectarianism of the past, and managed to gain partial acceptance by local Labour movement activists. This was achieved in many areas through local communists getting involved in the campaign against the BUF. It is this particular struggle, which revealed divisions over anti-fascist strategy between the national CPGB leadership and sections of the rank and file, that we will now move onto.

The Communist Party and the struggle against the BUF

During 1933 the Communist Party leadership was preoccupied with the question of the united front and virtually ignored the growing movement of the BUF. It focused instead on what it saw as the emergence of fascism in British society, through constitutional channels by the National Government.⁴⁵ The CPGB leadership held the belief that the main fascist threat in Britain came from the National Government, and not from the BUF, this merely followed the line laid down by Comintern.⁴⁶ In declaring that the main threat of fascism came from the National Government, the Communist Party leadership failed to see the mobilising potential of the fight against the BUF. It also showed how out of touch they were with the majority of workers who saw the main threat of fascism in Britain coming from the BUF.

To most workers and a significant minority of its membership, the Communist Party's call for the overthrow of the National Government seemed rather utopian. However, the fight against the BUF offered them an openly fascist target which they linked with the victorious far-right parties on the continent.

The debates over the united front which dominated the meetings of the Central Committee and Political Bureau during the spring of 1933, meant that it was not until the summer that the Communist Party leadership got to discuss the question of fascism in Britain. At the Central Committee in June, which discussed a report back on the European Anti-Fascist Congress, of 4 June 1933, there was a large degree of unanimity that the main threat of fascism in Britain came from the National Government. In his report back from this congress organised by the Comintern, Ted Bramley stated that:

the big thing is to develop in the reporting campaign of what fascism is here in England and show what the so-called constitutional methods of the British Government are and the forces inside the government of a fascist character in order to give the workers a correct perspective.⁴⁷

Bramley went on to declare that the fight against the 'reactionary' TUC leaders will, 'need to be made part of the

fight against fascism'. In dismissing the fight against the BUF as irrelevant to the main anti-fascist struggle in Britain, he declared, 'We have already waged a fight against the line of breaking up fascist meetings'. Rejecting such activity as counter-productive, he argued for an ideological campaign exposing the reactionary nature of fascism in power.⁴⁸

Several other contributions to the meeting made similar points dismissing the struggle against the BUF. However, Willie Gallacher observed that many workers saw the BUF, rather than the National Government, as the main fascist enemy in Britain, 'The impression exists in many parts of the country that when a group of fascists come out that we should go out and beat them up'.⁴⁹

It was agreed by this meeting that the CPGB branches should build up local anti-fascist committees, and consider organising a national anti-fascist conference in September 1934. The Communist Party membership was called upon to step up its campaign for the Reichstag fire trial defendants.⁵⁰ The Party leadership also came out against the demand from sections of the membership, for a workers defence force to protect Labour movement events from fascist attack.⁵¹

Despite the refusal of the CPGB leadership to come out in support of the fight against the BUF, and their disapproval of the tactic of breaking up fascist meetings, it appears that sections of the membership ignored the line of the leadership on this question. Recent accounts of anti-fascist

activity in Lancashire and the North East reveal that local communists linked up with other Labour movement activists to physically confront the BUF and break up its activities.⁵² While not encouraging action against the BUF, it would appear that the Communist Party leadership turned a blind eye to the involvement of its members in such activities; for as one Central Committee member put it:

Whilst I agree with everything that has been said on the subject at the same time, we must be careful not to push the workers from action, for fear of alienating them from the Party.⁵³

Detailed study of the Daily Worker throughout 1933, reveals that in towns and cities up and down the country, thousands of workers turned out on demonstrations to oppose the menace of European fascism, and to oppose the meetings and activities of the BUF. The reports of these clashes with the BUF clearly reveal the presence of Communist Party members. In a majority of cases the workers' hatred for the fascists led them to disrupt and break up BUF meetings. This usually took the form of either vocally drowning out the fascist speaker or knocking over the platform. There were instances where fascist meetings went undisputed, but this was usually due to a large police presence.⁵⁴

To compound their failure to actively intervene in this movement against the BUF, the CPGB leadership, taking their

cue from Comintern, adopted the sectarian position of refusing to give any support to the Labour movement campaign boycotting German goods. In an article in Communist International, the point was made that the proposed boycott campaign was designed by the 'social fascists' of social democracy to draw the masses into a united front with their own bourgeoisie.⁵⁵ Following the Comintern line on this issue, which itself reflected the Soviet government's attempt to maintain good relations with the Hitler regime, the Daily Worker commented:

They talk of boycotting goods, but they are much concerned in boycotting the building of the workers' united front...Fascism can be beaten not by the boycott of German goods but by the building of the workers' front.⁵⁶

Needless to say that by boycotting this Labour movement campaign, the Communist Party was to reinforce its reputation for sectarianism within the Labour movement. The fact that this action of Comintern and the CPGB was dictated by the needs of Soviet foreign policy with its pro-German orientation, would not have been lost on many Labour movement activists.

The dichotomy between the national Party leadership and sections of the rank and file over the questions of anti-fascism and the united front will be explored further in the

next section. Close examination of the Communist Party in West Yorkshire will reveal that local communists often proved to be more in tune with the anti-fascist sentiment of ordinary workers than the national leadership, which was constrained by the dictates of Moscow. Having said this, the local membership still adhered to many of the sectarian beliefs of the national leadership.

The Communist Party in West Yorkshire - 1933

In January 1933 the Bradford district of the Communist Party, which covered the old West Riding, was reduced to the status of a sub-district, owing to its grave weakness and isolation and became part of the enormous Sheffield district.⁵⁷ Under the impetus of the new united front tactics, the membership of the Bradford sub-district grew from 92 in January to 162 by July and reached 190 by December 1933.⁵⁸ This growth led the Political Bureau to reconstitute Bradford as a district in its own right in August. It was also felt that the new Bradford district would benefit from its newly-found political autonomy. The Political Bureau felt that it would be more able to apply the new united front line to suit local conditions, than the Sheffield district leadership.

What emerges from the reports given to the Political Bureau is of a numerically small district, the smallest in the CPGB at that time, whose two principal centres were in Bradford and Leeds. Under the stewardship of Maurice

Ferguson, the district organiser and Central Committee for the area, the local Communist Party notched up some notable successes in its united front work, particularly in the trade unions.⁵⁹

In his contributions to the Central Committee, Ferguson emerges as a supporter of the Pollitt line in the united front debate. Out of all the district reports given at the Political Bureau and Central Committee, Bradford emerges as one of the least sectarian districts of the Communist Party. Districts such as Lancashire and Tyneside appear to have been gripped by sectarian attitudes towards the Labour movement, where a majority of the membership that was in work refused to get active in trade unions. By contrast, the Bradford district had one of the highest proportions of members active in a union in the country. The following figures illustrate the growing success of the district leadership in weaning members away from sectarian attitudes to the Labour movement:⁶¹

	<u>Bradford</u>		<u>Leeds</u>		<u>Keighly</u>	
	<u>July</u>	<u>August</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>August</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>August</u>
<u>Members in 1933</u>	50	50	55	55	29	30
<u>Active in union</u>	15	23	17	25	1	8
<u>Eligible for union membership</u>	9	-	9	-	2	-

At the Political Bureau in July 1933 it was noted of the Bradford district, 'In general we can see a remarkable

improvement in the mass work of the Party in this district, particularly in regard to trade union work and work in the Trades Council'.⁶¹ In the last section of this chapter the activities of the CPGB branches in Bradford and Leeds will be examined in some detail, with particular attention focused on their activities on the local trades councils, which were the backbone of the local Labour movement.

As Richard Stevens has commented, the influence and activities of communists on trades councils during this period have, 'often been referred to by historians, but has apparently been little investigated in detail'.⁶² On the Trades Councils of Bradford and Leeds the local communists exercised an influence out of proportion to their small numbers. Stevens study of communist influence on the trades councils of the East Midlands also reveals a similar picture.⁶³ In Bradford and Leeds as in the West Midlands, the key to the disproportionate influence exerted by communist activists was the support they got from left Labour activists.⁶⁴ In both areas local communists enjoyed rather mixed fortunes in the face of stiff opposition from Labour loyalists who sought to contain communist influence.⁶⁵ By examining the extent to which the local trades councils adopted left-wing stances, the depth of communist influence will be revealed.

Leeds Communist Party

The Communist Party had only a couple of delegates on the Leeds Trades Council in 1933. This together with the

weakness of the ILP in Leeds, meant that the local communists united front campaign started from a low base of support. Their united front approaches to the Leeds City Labour Party and the Trades Council were rejected out of hand. Undeterred the Leeds communists carried their united front campaign into the lower echelons of the local Labour movement, with a limited degree of success.

In April 1933 Blenheim Ward Labour Party and North Leeds Divisional Labour Party, declared their support for a united front with the Communist Party.⁶⁶ The local Communist Party focused in particular upon the local League of Youth branches. This proved to be a much more fruitful area of work, with communist speakers becoming a regular feature at League of Youth meetings. At least three of the League of Youth branches came out in favour of joint action with the Communist Party. This was the result of slow patient work by the Leeds communists, in cultivating contacts within the local Leagues of Youth.⁶⁷ Work such as this was all the more impressive given the anti-communist atmosphere, which prevailed at times within the Leeds Labour movement.

The Leeds Communist Party initially made some headway on the Trades Council with its anti-war united front work. Up until the end of May the Leeds Trades Council actively participated in the work of the Leeds Anti-War Committee, sending delegates to its conferences.⁶⁸ However, during the spring of 1933 alarm at the activity of the Communist Party within the local Labour movement led to the right-wing of

the Leeds City Labour Party launching a counter-offensive against the united front work of the local communists.

At the April executive of Leeds Trades Council a letter was read out from the City Labour Party; calling on the Trades Council to withdraw its support for the Leeds Anti-War Committee, for it was a communist front proscribed by the national Labour Party. The Trades Council executive unsure of how to proceed, wrote to the TUC for guidance in this matter.⁶⁹ Dissatisfied with the response of the Trades Council executive, Leeds Labour Party sent another letter this time to the April meeting of the full Trades Council, questioning the wisdom of the Trades Council in reading out correspondence from the Leeds Anti-War Committee. When the issue was put to the vote the Trades Council rejected the anti-communist manoeuvres of the local Labour Party; and voted 49 to 28 to carry on reading out correspondence from the Leeds Anti-War Committee.⁷⁰

Undaunted by this set back, Leeds Labour Party sent yet another letter to the Trades Council in May calling for loyalty to 'our own movement' which played upon memories of the sectarianism of the Communist Party's 'class-against-class' period. This together with the TUC reply to its enquiry about the British Anti-War Movement led the Trades Council, after a long and heated discussion, to agree to sever its ties with the local anti-war committee.⁷¹ Ultimately it was loyalty to national decisions rather than

any hostility to communism which explains the actions of Leeds Trades Council.

The offensive against the united front activities of the local Communist Party by Labour loyalists took many forms. In the Leeds branch of the National Union of Tailors and Garment workers (NUTGW) a full scale witch-hunt of local communists developed, with several of them being expelled from the union for producing a factory paper.⁷² Yet, sections of the Leeds Communist Party did play into the hands of the local Labour Party right wing, through sectarian activities at several Labour movement events.

At both the May Day rally in 1933 and at a Trades Council rally in June, local communists heckled Labour speakers and disrupted their meetings.⁷³ This would tend to suggest that the Leeds Communist Party was not solidly behind the less sectarian line as promulgated by Pollitt and Ferguson. While sections of the local Party engaged in slow patient work, winning over support for the united front in the Leeds Labour movement, others remained entrenched in the old sectarian attitudes. Take for example, the local branch secretary, Ernie Benson, who when he found work on the railways had to be convinced by J.R.Campbell of the importance of him joining a union.⁷⁴

On hearing of the BUF booking Town Hall Square for a meeting, the local communists saw an opportunity for going on the offensive against fascism. Ignoring the policy of the national leadership not to confront the BUF on the streets,

the local Communist Party organised a counter-demonstration of 1,200 people to a fascist meeting on 8 October 1933. The Daily Worker reported that the fascist speaker was, 'greeted with boos and catcalls and refused a hearing...the platform was rushed...', while the police had to escort the fascists away from the angry crowd. The crowd then listened to an anti-fascist speech by Ferguson of the Communist Party.⁷⁵

During 1933 the Communist Party in Leeds tried with limited success to implement the new united front policy as promulgated by the Comintern and the King Street leadership. However this turn towards the local Labour movement was to be severely hampered by the vigorous counter-offensive of Labour loyalists determined to implement the anti-communist directives of Transport House. The partial nature of the turn towards the Labour movement signalled by the new united front line is illustrated by the sectarian activities of local communists on occasions.

Bradford Communist Party

Writing in the Communist Review in October 1933, Maurice Ferguson, the Bradford district organiser, stated that the successes of the Bradford Communist Party in its united front work, were due to a complete transformation in the attitude of local Party members to the local Labour movement. From a position of total isolation within the local Labour movement, in the short space of ten months, the

Bradford Communist Party had gained a position of considerable influence.

In 1932 the local Communist Party had only one delegate on the Trades Council, this had mushroomed to eight delegates by 1933.⁷⁶ Ferguson pointed out how over the previous few months the hard work of local communists in trade union recruitment drives had broken down a lot of suspicion and hostility of workers to the Communist Party; which was largely a legacy of the its past sectarianism. Ferguson observed how:

The attitude of the active trade union workers to our party has completely changed. A man would be laughed at in Bradford who said the Communist Party were opposed to trade unionism.⁷⁷

Ferguson cited the example of the President of the Bradford TGWU, Luther Horner, as someone who changed from being hostile to the Party to someone supporting its united front activities. Apparently at the start of the year Horner had been very wary of the Communist Party but had commented to Ferguson in a recent discussion, 'I used to be scared to pass the car park (meeting place) when a communist meeting was on; I used to be pointed at as 'one of those trade union officials who let the workers down'.⁷⁸ However, by late spring of 1933 Horner had become an ally of the local

Communist Party, fighting for the united front both in the TGWU and on the Bradford Trades Council.⁷⁹

The work of the local Communist Party on the Trades Council, and in the campaign against war were the most successful examples of its united front work. In his article in the October issue of the Communist Review, Ferguson put this successful united front activity down to the persistent work of Party members getting anti-war council members as speakers into union meetings; and, 'the intense personal work carried on among the best "Left" wing trade unionists...'.⁸⁰

Following the Bermondsey anti-war congress in early March 1933, the Communist Party leadership called upon its local branches to organise local anti-war committees of a united front character. In many areas these were mere talking shops consisting of local communists and, maybe, a few ILP members. In Bradford, the Communist Party developed the local anti-war council into a representative body, which soon laid down roots within the Bradford Labour movement.⁸¹ By October 1933 the Bradford Anti-War Council had gained the affiliation of 21 different organisations, the majority of whom were trade union branches.⁸²

In July 1933 the Trades Council, which was by that time affiliated to the local anti-war council, passed a resolution moved by Communist Party members declaring its opposition to the TUC circular which called on trade unions to boycott all anti-war and anti-fascist organisations

linked to the Communist Party. The same meeting appointed Luther Horner, as Trades Council delegate to the anti-war demonstration on 30 July in Hyde Park organised by the proscribed British Anti-War Movement.⁸³ In the autumn the Trades Council sent delegates to two conferences organised by the Bradford Anti-War Council. These were held to organise opposition to a proposed military tattoo in Bradford.⁸⁴

The Bradford Communist Party's campaign for a united front against fascism got off to solid start, with the formation of an official united front agreement with the local ILP on 12 March 1933. However, the local communists' approaches to the Bradford Labour Party were rejected out of hand. As in Leeds the Bradford Labour Party remained staunchly loyal to the anti-communist pronouncements of Transport House. It was to be on the Trades Council that the local Communist Party was to obtain its greatest success.

After some prevarication, the Trades Council executive at its May meeting, finally agreed to receive a deputation from the local ILP and Communist Party. After a long discussion the executive, which had no communist members, agreed to recommend to the full council meeting that the Bradford Trades Council should form a united front with the local ILP and Communist Party.⁸⁵ This prevarication reflected the struggle between Labour loyalists and the left for the support of the, 'non-dogmatic, less ideologically committed...centre group'.⁸⁶ The bitterly contested debate

at the May meeting of the Trades Council brings out the full range of attitudes within the local Labour movement towards the Communist Party and the united front. It also illustrates the approach of the local Communist Party to this controversial question.

W. Illingworth, secretary of the NUGMW, moved the executive's recommendation for the united front. He was soon interrupted by M. Titterington, who asked if any reason was to be given by the executive for their decision. Fred Ratcliffe, the Trades Council President, replied that the executive felt that there was an urgent necessity for cooperation of all working-class organisations against the menace of fascism and war. Foster Sunderland of the NUT, and a leading figure in the Bradford Labour Party, seconded an amendment that the executive minutes be accepted with deletion of the recommendation for a united front. He argued that there could be no cooperation between trade unionists who believed in democracy and communists who were out to destroy the trade unions. Sunderland's fellow delegate from the NUT, C. Gibbs, stressed that a united front with the tiny Communist Party could be of no value to the movement.⁸⁷

Maurice Ferguson, of the TGWU, upon rising to participate in the discussion, was assailed by questions as to his legitimacy as a delegate. Luther Horner, President of the local TGWU, rose to Ferguson's defence, stating that such comments were an insult to his union. In his contribution Ferguson pointed out how the Nazis made no distinction in

their attacks upon workers, as to whether they were communists or socialists. He added that this was not a discussion about communism, and those who tried to make it so were trying to deflect attention away from the real issue at stake, which was cooperation against a common menace. The common menace in this country being the National Government, which was taking steps in the direction of fascism. Ferguson concluded by noting that the recent trade-union recruitment campaign had been successfully conducted by Labour and Communist Party members, along with workers of no political affiliation. He appealed for unity in a mass campaign against fascism and war.⁸⁸

Speaking in support of the united front, Luther Horner argued that in view of the destruction of the German Labour movement, it did not matter who brought forward proposals to combat fascism, the essential thing was unity. The speech of R.Barber, the Trades Council secretary, was constantly interrupted, causing him to strongly protest. His speech summed up most of the points made by those speakers opposed to the united front.

Barber noted that the proposal for unity came from an organisation of fewer than 5,000 members to an organisation of four million. He pointed out that the Communist Party was still bitterly opposed to the trade unions' political instrument, i.e. the Labour Party; which the trade unions had spent energy building up as a bulwark of defence against the attacks made upon them. Barber finished by asking if the

Trades Council still believed in that political instrument. Many of those speakers opposed to the united front also commented that in the Labour movement consisting of the Labour Party, the TUC and Cooperative Party, there already existed a broad united front covering the working class.⁸⁹

In closing the debate, W. Illingworth stated that every speaker agreed that unity was essential, and that fascism was the last attempt of capitalism to keep power, and appealed for a united front to defeat this mortal enemy of the Labour movement. On being put to the vote the executive's recommendation for a united front was carried 50 to 39.⁹⁰

Undaunted by this defeat the opponents of the united front pulled off a sharp tactical manoeuvre to deny the communists a major victory. An emergency amendment was moved, which declared that since the delegates had been so bitterly divided the whole matter should be referred back to all the affiliated unions, which could ballot their respective memberships on the question. This amendment was carried 55 to 27.⁹¹ The outcome of this decision was a rare consultation of the rank and file of the Labour movement. The results of the ballot given at the July Trades Council were as follows:⁹²

<u>FOR THE UNITED FRONT</u>	<u>AGAINST THE UNITED FRONT</u>
24 branches	28 branches
5,095 Votes (32.56%)	10,554 Votes (67.44%)
85 trade union branches affiliated, membership 18,000.	

These figures reveal a big gulf in attitudes to the united front and the Communist Party, between activists on the Trades Council and the inactive lay membership of the trade unions. It would appear that the local communists were much more successful in convincing ideologically committed activists, who were in the front line of the government's attacks upon workers rights and living standards, than they were the average lay member whose political inactivity reflected a lower political consciousness. Yet, the local Communist Party could take some comfort from the ballot result which revealed that a large number of politically inactive workers were prepared to put party differences aside for the sake of unity against a fascism.

At the same July meeting of the Trades Council in spite of the united front ballot result, there was another long and acrimonious debate on the united front, which arose from a TUC circular on communist auxiliary organisations. In this debate the majority of delegates saw the TUC circular as an infringement upon their local autonomy and expressed approval, 44 to 33, for a resolution moved by Maurice Ferguson along the following lines:

That this Trades Council regards the circular of the General Council of the TUC as a disservice to the Trade Unions and considers that the General Council would be

better employed in warning the workers of the real dangers of capitalism and fascism.⁹³

In Bradford the local Communist Party enjoyed considerably more success with its united front work than the branch in Leeds. Certainly the Bradford Communist Party benefited from the absence of an organised opposition, which proved to be so effective in undermining the united front activities of the Leeds Communist Party. In Bradford the local communists benefited from a politically tolerant atmosphere, as did the communists in the East Midlands, which was signally absent in Leeds.⁹⁴ However, it would appear that the Bradford Communist Party under the direction of Maurice Ferguson managed to shake off much more of the old sectarian attitudes towards the Labour movement than the Leeds Communist Party did, which proved to be an element in their success.

The results of the municipal elections in November 1933 were to reveal the very limited progress of the local Communist Party branches out of their political isolation after six months of united front campaigning. The Bradford district results reflected the Party's poor showing nationally by receiving under five per cent of the vote. The electoral results of the Communist Party on a national and local basis showed that it had barely emerged from the self-imposed isolation of the 'class-against-class' period.

In following the leadership line with regard to the united front and elections, the Bradford district fielded four candidates in the municipal elections. The best result came in Manningham ward (Bradford) reflecting the Communist Party's enhanced standing within the local Labour movement in that area. This result was the product of its turn to the unions, and united front campaigns over the question of war and high rents for tenants. The Leeds result would have done the Communist Party's standing in that city no good at all, and would have merely given further ammunition to the opponents of the united front within the Leeds Labour movement. This was due to the fact that the 173 votes cast for the communist candidate in Leeds came close to depriving Labour of victory in a close run contest with the Conservatives. The results for the Bradford district were as follows:95

BRADFORD

Labour - 3,136
Communist - 249

LEEDS

Labour - 1,921
Conservative - 1,916
Communist - 173

HALIFAX

Labour - 1,034
Communist - 74

KEIGHLEY

Conservative - 680
Communist - 62

Conclusion

In this examination of the Communist Party's reaction to the emergence of German fascism the rather limited and

ineffectual nature of this response has become apparent. Likewise the Comintern's response to the emergence of German fascism was similarly ineffective. The new turn towards the united front as reflected in the 5 March manifesto was both ambiguous and contradictory. This ambiguity was a hallmark of Comintern in the 1930s, in that it tried to cater for sudden turns either to the left or right in Soviet foreign policy. The hostility to social democracy combined with the sanction for communist parties to approach social democracy for the united front from above and below reflected this ambiguity and was the contradiction which effectively paralysed the Comintern's anti-fascist activities. This division between left and right in Comintern was reflected in the leadership of the CPGB.

There were the ultra-left sectarians such as Shields and Rust, who believed the new united front offer of Comintern to be a manoeuvre with which to expose social democracy. In opposition to the ultra-lefts were those on the right of the Party leadership grouped around Pollitt, who believed that the new united front campaign offered the Communist Party an opportunity to become accepted into the mainstream of the Labour movement. Despite these intentions, Pollitt's interpretation of the united front was effectively undermined by the need to keep up sectarian attacks upon Labour in line with Comintern policy. The divisions within the leadership of the Communist Party over united front

policy found their most cogent expression in the debates over electoral policy.

The balance sheet for the CPGB from 1933 was extremely meagre. In all of its major united front objectives on the electoral front, for a united front with Labour, for an ILP affiliated to Comintern and a substantial increase in membership the Communist Party had very little to show for its efforts. The CPGB's failure to formulate an effective response to the emergence of German fascism, whose origins lay in the Party's continuing sectarianism, is revealed by the drop in membership during 1933. In November 1932 CPGB membership stood at 5,600 this had fallen to 5,500 by September 1933 and continued declining, falling to around 5,000 in January 1934.⁹⁶ Reports from the districts to the Political Bureau and Central Committee during the year, reveal that a majority of the membership remained passively stuck to the sectarian line of the united front from below, while a minority of the membership did shake off the sectarianism of the past, and managed to gain partial acceptance by local Labour movement activists. When local communists did manage to engage in joint campaigns with the local Labour movement, more often than not it was over the issue of confronting the BUF on the streets of Britain. Yet such activity was frowned upon by the Party leadership which saw the struggle against the BUF as irrelevant. This division of opinion over anti-fascist strategy between the national leadership and sections of

the rank and file revealed how the local membership was often more in touch with the anti-fascist sentiments of British workers than the national leadership which proved more responsive to the edicts of Moscow.

On a local scale, the Bradford district proved to be one of the most successful districts in the country, having some results to show for its united front work. This success needs to be put into perspective and in reality the West Yorkshire Communist Party remained a marginal force within the local Labour movement, reflecting the position of the Communist Party on a national scale. Another thing about the local Communist Party which stands out is how the membership did not move uniformly behind the national leadership's conception of the united front. Study of the branches in Bradford and Leeds reveals differences of emphasis in their anti-fascist activities.

During 1933 the Communist Party was riven by numerous divisions over its response to the emergence of German fascism, which have largely gone unacknowledged by historians. The divisions between the Communist Party leadership over the application of the new united front tactics from Comintern, together with the divisions between the national leadership and sections of the membership over attitudes to the struggle against the BUF, shatter the conventional image of the Communist Party as a monolithic body which smoothly assumed the leadership of the struggle against fascism in Britain, once Hitler came to power.⁹⁷

NOTES

- 1) L.Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1933-1934, (New York, Pathfinder, 1972), p.73.
- 2) L.Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1932-1933, (New York, Pathfinder, 1972), p.265; R.Sewell, Germany From Revolution To Counter Revolution, (London, Fortress Books, 1988), p.80.
- 3) F.Beckett, Enemy Within-The Rise And Fall Of The British Communist Party, (London, John Murray, 1995), p.48, M.Newman, 'Democracy versus Dictatorship: Labour's role in the struggle against British Fascism 1933-1936', History Workshop, no.5, Spring 1978, pp.83-4, W.Thompson, The Good Old Cause British Communism 1920-1991, (London, Pluto Press, 1992), p.54.
- 4) K.McDermott and J.Agneu, THE COMINTERN A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin, (London, Macmillan, 1996), p.121.
- 5) E.H.Carr, The Twilight of Comintern, 1930-1935, (London, Macmillan, 1983), p.224.
- 6) A.I.Sobolev et al, Outline History Of The Communist International, (Moscow, 1971), p.331.
- 7) Ibid., p.332.
- 8) For a detailed description of Comintern's anti-fascist activity in Germany prior to the Nazi victory see Carr, The Twilight of Comintern, and L.Trotsky, Fascism, Stalinism and the United Front, (London, Bookmarks, May 1989).
- 9) Inprecorr, vol.13, no.11, (9 March 1933), pp.261-2.
- 10) Idem.
- 11) Carr, The Twilight of Comintern, p.85.
- 12) Inprecorr, vol.13, no.13, p.307.
- 13) K.Morgan, 'The CPGB and the Comintern Archives', Socialist History, 1993, Part 3, p.19.
- 14) Carr, The Twilight of Comintern, p.95.
- 15) Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1932-1933, p.232.
- 16) Carr, The Twilight of Comintern, pp.231,234,237.

- 17) Inprecorr, vol.13 no.17 (14 April 1933), p.377, for an account of this meeting see also, J.Degras, (ed.), The Communist International, 1919-1943: Documents, vol.3 1929-1943, (London, Frank Cass, 1971), pp.258-263.
- 18) J.Degras, (ed.), Soviet Documents On Foreign Policy, 1933-1941, (Oxford, 1953), pp.23,31-2,41-2, for Soviet alarm at the increasingly hostile tone of German foreign policy pronouncements; and pp.30-1, for the rapid improvement in Franco-Soviet relations.
- 19) Ibid., p.45.
- 20) Carr, The Twilight of Comintern, p.117.
- 21) Degras, (ed.), The Communist International, vol.3, pp.265-8,276,279.
- 22) Carr, The Twilight of Comintern, pp.112,115.
- 23) Degras, (ed.), The Communist International, vol.3, p.300.
- 24) Ibid., pp.296-306; Inprecorr, vol.14, no.5, (30 January 1934).
- 25) McDermott and Agnew, THE COMINTERN, p.121.
- 26) Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1932-1933 and 1933-1934.
- 27) N.Fishman, The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions 1933-1945, (Scolar Press, 1995), p.7.
- 28) Newman, 'Democracy versus Dictatorship', p.69.
- 29) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 9 March 1933.
- 30) Idem.
- 31) Idem.
- 32) Idem.
- 33) Idem.
- 34) Idem.
- 35) Ibid., 9 April 1933.
- 36) Ibid., 4 May 1933.
- 37) Ibid., 4 May 1933.
- 38) Ibid., 4 May 1933.
- 39) Ibid., 8 September 1933.
- 40) Ibid., 10 September 1933.

41) Daily Worker, 1 November 1933.

42) J.Stevenson and C.Cook, The Slump, Society and Politics during the Depression, (Quartet, 1979), p.131-5.

43) Inprecorr, vol.14, no.5, (30 January 1934), p.137.

44) There are many examples which could be sited of the sectarian attitudes of large sections of the membership here are two. At the Political Bureau on 10 September 1933 Pollitt lamented the fact that only 30 % of the membership was in a trade union. While at the Political Bureau on 9 November 1933 in a discussion on the Communist Party's failure to grow as a result of its united front activity Robson commented:

I am of the opinion that the changes which have taken place have been very largely confined to the leading committees and the leading elements in the districts....I could quote local after local as examples which are living, working and operating in exactly the same way as always, and which are very largely sterile from the point of view of Communist Party activity and methods....Our party comrades are either old comrades with deeply rooted sectarian tendencies and approach or on the other hand are fairly raw inexperienced new comrades who are not politically educated and are therefore unable to do the job.

45) At Shoreditch Town Hall on 14 June 1933 Ted Bramley gave a report back on the recent European Anti-Fascist Congress. His comments were reported in the Daily Worker on 1 June 1933, he argued that :

In England the main enemy was not, as suggested sometimes, those who wear blackshirts. The main Fascist enemy was the National Government whose policy and actions were calculated to destroy and break up the working class movement and organisations, and the privileges which generations of working class struggle have achieved.

46) Inprecorr, vol.13, no.26, (16 June 1933), p.574.

47) (Bramley) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 17 June 1933; for a report of the European Anti-Fascist Congress see also Inprecorr, vol.13, no.26, (16 June 1933), pp.573-5.

48) Idem.

49) Idem.

50) For an account of this campaign see, N.Branson, History Of The Communist Party Of Great Britain 1927-1941, (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp.115-6.

51) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 17 June 1933.

52) N.Barrett, 'A Bright Shining Star:The CPGB and Anti-Fascist Activism in the 1930s', Science and Society, vol.61, no.1, Spring 1997, pp.10-26, for anti-fascist activity in Lancashire; N.Todd, In Excited Times: The People Against The Blackshirts, (Bewick Press, 1995), for an account of anti-fascism in the North East of England; an account of anti-Mosley activity in Brighton and Glasgow can be found in C.M.Gabbidon, Party Life an examination of the branch life of the Communist Party of Great Britain between the wars, (DPhil., Sussex University, 1991), pp.59-62.

53) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 17 June 1933.

54) The following dates from the Daily Worker while no means exhaustive, give some idea of the scale of the anti-fascist movement: March,14,27,29; April,1,4,10,13; May,2,9,30; June,13,21; July,13,21,25; August,29; September,1,15,22; October,9,11.

55) Degras, The Communist international, vol.3, pp.263-4.

56) Daily Worker, 26 May 1933.

57) M.Ferguson, 'Breaking Through: Mass Work in Bradford', The Communist Review, October 1933, p.394.

58) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 13 July 1933, 29 October 1937.

59) Ferguson, 'Breaking Through: Mass Work in Bradford', pp.393-6.

60) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 13 July and 10 August 1933.

61) Ibid., 13 July 1933.

62) R.Stevens, Trades Councils In The East Midlands, 1929-1951: Trade Unionism And Politics In A 'Traditionally Moderate' Area, (PhD., Nottingham University, 1995), p.91, see also pp.4-18.

63) Ibid., p.403.

64) Ibid., pp.403-4.

65) Ibid., pp.2,7, see also the article by the same author, 'Containing Radicalism: The Trades Union Congress Organisation Department and Trades Councils, 1928-1953', Labour History Review, 62.1, Spring 1997, pp.5-21.

- 66) Leeds Trades Council Minutes, 23 April 1933 and Leeds Labour Party Archive-LP Files 185,186,(Miscellaneous local Communist Party documents).
- 67) Leeds Weekly Citizen, 5 May, 2 June, 22 December 1933.
- 68) Leeds Trades Council, Minutes, 25 January, and 29 March 1933.
- 69) Leeds Trades Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, 23 April 1933.
- 70) Leeds Trades Council, Minutes, 26 April 1933.
- 71) Leeds Trades Council, Minutes, 31 May 1933.
- 72) E.Benson, To Struggle Is To Live-A Working Class Autobiography, Volume Two, Starve Or Rebel, 1927-1971, (People's Publications, 1980), pp.103-4.
- 73) Leeds Weekly Citizen, 12 May 1933; and Leeds Trades Council, Minutes, 22 June 1933.
- 74) Benson, To Struggle Is To Live, pp.119-120.
- 75) The Daily Worker, 11 October 1933.
- 76) Ferguson, 'Breaking Through: Mass Work in Bradford', pp.393-4.
- 77) Ibid., p.394.
- 78) Ibid., p.393.
- 79) Idem.
- 80) Ibid., p.394.
- 81) Telegraph and Argus, 10 April, 1933.
- 82) The Daily Worker, 2 June, 1933.
- 83) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 20 July 1933.
- 84) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 21 September and 9 November 1933.
- 85) Bradford Trades Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, 4 May 1933.
- 86) Stevens, Trades Councils In The East Midlands, p.2.
- 87) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 18 May 1933; Bradford Pioneer, 26 May 1933; Daily Worker, 2 June 1933.
- 88) Idem.

- 89) Idem.
- 90) Idem.
- 91) Idem.
- 92) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 20 July 1933.
- 93) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 20 July 1933; Bradford Pioneer, 28 July 1933; The Daily Worker, 22 July 1933.
- 94) Stevens, Trades Councils In The East Midlands, pp.3,406.
- 95) Daily Worker, 3 November 1933.
- 96) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 9 September 1933; J.R.Campbell, 'From the 17th to the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union', report to the ECCI 3 February 1939, 1995 Moscow Reel; K.Newton, The Sociology of British Communism, (London, Penguin, 1969), p.159.
- 97) Branson, History Of The Communist Party, pp.112-3.

CHAPTER TWO

The united front and popular front against fascism 1934-1935

The rise of fascism on the continent during 1934-1935 led to a radical overhaul in Soviet and Comintern policy. Their response to fascism was to play a major part in the development of the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy. Chapter two of this study will attempt to reveal how the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy developed in response both to changes in Soviet and Comintern policy, along with the pressure of mass action 'from below' for an active fight against the BUF from sections of the Party membership.

In the first half of 1934 with its anti-fascist policy still conditioned by the sectarian principles of the 'Third Period' and the view that the main threat of fascism in Britain came from the National Government, the CPGB's isolation from the Labour movement continued. The division between the Communist Party leadership and sections of the rank and file over participation in the anti-Mosley struggle gradually narrowed during this period. However, in the second half of 1934 the CPGB's influence began to grow and break down its isolation as it developed a more pro-active anti-fascist policy which saw it intervene in the anti-Mosley movement and abandon much of its sectarianism toward the Labour Party. This was in response to changes in Comintern thinking and the pressure of indigenous anti-fascist sentiment.

The origins of the Comintern's turn towards the united front with social democracy and the popular front with both socialist and capitalist parties during 1934-1935 has been a source of great controversy amongst historians. There is one school of thought which proclaims that Comintern's anti-fascist strategy developed in accordance with the requirements of Soviet foreign policy; reflecting the USSR's search for military alliances with Britain and France against German aggression. The Comintern's sudden abandonment of the sectarian tactics of the 'Third Period' and its move towards multi-class anti-fascist alliances embracing both socialist and capitalist parties has been portrayed as a result of Stalin's intervention in Comintern affairs and determined by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy.¹

In opposition to this a school of thought has emerged which denies that Comintern was a mere mouthpiece for the Kremlin and argues that Comintern enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy in its policy-making during this period. The pressure for change in Comintern policy came not only from Stalin, but most decisively from the membership of the various Communist parties and sections of the Comintern leadership, who believed that the tactics of the 'Third Period' had failed to halt the rise of fascism.² Another approach which is a synthesis of the first two viewpoints is that the origins of the Popular Front are to be found in the 'triple interaction' of:

mass action 'from below' in national sections; internal debates and initiatives in the Comintern Executive; and the Soviet Union's quest for security in the face of perceived Nazi aggression.³

In the first section of this chapter examination of Soviet and Comintern policy documents, will reveal that the latter view is a more accurate expression of how Comintern responded to the threat posed by German fascism. Having said this, the Comintern leadership was gripped by sharp divisions over anti-fascist strategy during 1934.⁴ This raises the question of how did the CPGB respond to the gradual changes in Comintern strategy? How far was its anti-fascist strategy determined by international as opposed to national considerations? What were the implications of these changes in policy for its relationship to the Labour movement? After examining the response of the CPGB to the struggle against fascism, attention will then be focused on the response of the rank and file in West Yorkshire. During 1934-35 the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy developed in response to changes in Soviet and Comintern thinking and the pressure of mass action from the anti-Mosley movement. The Communist Party was to abandon its sectarianism towards the Labour Party and embrace the united front 'from above', as well as actively supporting the mass movement against the BUF.

The international situation

In a speech to the Central Executive Committee of the CPSU on 29 December, 1933, Molotov translated the hints which Stalin had made a few days earlier, in an interview with the New York Times, into a new direction for Soviet foreign policy. Molotov stated that in the new diplomatic era they were in, it was necessary to make a distinction between the handful of countries which were making preparations for war, and those capitalist states which, '...are for the time being interested in the maintenance of peace and are prepared so to conduct their policy as to defend peace'.⁵ This new interpretation of Soviet foreign policy dispensed with the Leninist goal of world revolution as the best form of defence for the first workers state; substituting in its place, a policy of forming military alliances with those capitalist states interested in restraining Germany and support for the League of Nations. In response to this change in Soviet foreign policy objectives, Comintern was to abandon the 'Third Period' policy and embrace united front agreements with the parties of social democracy. The culmination of this new tactical turn by Comintern came in its support for multi-class alliances otherwise known as the popular front. This entailed Comintern abandoning its revolutionary objectives and led to communists participating in capitalist governments in France and Spain.

Throughout the spring of 1934, Stalin, alarmed by Hitler's increasingly aggressive attitude and the

victories of fascism in Austria, Latvia and Bulgaria, encouraged Litvinov to bring the Soviet Union diplomatically closer to the major western powers. Having left Soviet diplomacy in the hands of Litvinov, Stalin concentrated his energies on the second Five-Year Plan. At that time he had no intention of extending the new diplomatic changes to the activities of Comintern. This absence of a clear lead from Stalin, who never paused to consider the implications for Comintern of the new turn in Soviet foreign policy, meant that Comintern officials spoke with different voices, sending conflicting and indecisive advice to the various Communist parties. However, by late spring the growing momentum of the fascist offensive throughout Europe, together with the interventions of Dimitrov, forced Stalin to consider how Comintern could be used to support the policy of rapprochement with the western powers.

In the face of the commonly held threat from German fascism, the French and Soviet governments were faced with the question of how to neutralise this threat to their security. This bond of common interest, led the French government, at the request of Moscow, to take the step of formally inviting the Soviet Union to join the League of Nations.⁶ The Soviet Union joined the League of Nations in September 1934, signalling its adoption of the collective security system upheld by the League of Nations as a means of restraining Germany. Having been formally accepted by the capitalist world, the Soviet

Union pushed ahead with its objective of seeking military alliances with the major imperialist powers.

Shortly after signing the Franco-Soviet Pact on 2 May 1935, Stalin publicly expressed his approval for the French government's defence policy; in doing so he jettisoned at one stroke the Leninist attitude to war and peace. In effect he publicly declared himself for popular frontism, with his call on Comintern and all its sections to subordinate every other consideration to the foreign policy requirements of the Soviet Union in its defence against fascism.⁷ As will be revealed later when looking at the Seventh World Congress of Comintern, Stalin's comments on that day were to have profound implications for Comintern's anti-fascist policy. From that time onwards Comintern abandoned the Leninist attitude to war and the goal of world revolution. Having considered Soviet foreign policy in the eighteen months leading up to the Seventh World Congress of Comintern in July 1935, let us now look at how this affected Comintern anti-fascist strategy.

The arrival of Dimitrov in Moscow in late February 1934, was a crucial turning point for Comintern. During the next ten months a debate raged within the Comintern leadership, between Dimitrov's faction in support of the new united and popular front line and those supporting the old 'Third Period' policies. The debate revolved around the question of how best to defend the Soviet Union from imperialist attack. The Comintern leadership saw the role of its different sections as that of acting

as border guards for the Soviet Union. Increasingly, the ECCI divided into two camps of opinion: those grouped around Bela Kun, who stuck to the discredited 'Third Period' policies, which were responsible for the disaster in Germany and in effect meant do nothing, whilst a new tendency of thought emerged based around Dimitrov. He believed that the defence of the Soviet Union could be best assured through the support, not of the various communist parties too weak to overthrow their own governments, but of those capitalist governments exposed to the same fascist menace as itself. The new role of the communist parties would be to encourage their respective governments to provide the Soviet Union with their military support against the fascist powers.⁸

Dimitrov arrived in Moscow to find the ECCI struggling with the demands made by recent events in France. The attempted coup d'etat by the fascists on 6 February 1934 posed a grave dilemma for the French Communist Party (PCF) and the ECCI of how to respond.⁹ The spontaneous mass demonstrations of socialist and communist workers which defeated the fascists, temporarily resolved the problem for them. However when the French Socialist Party (SFIO) leaders, reflecting the enormous pressure from below for action, called for an anti-fascist general strike on 12 February 1934, Comintern was faced with an even greater dilemma. Haslam in his study of Comintern and the origins of the popular front has commented, 'In Moscow it was apparently decided that an exception had to be made, at least temporarily, in view of the urgency of

the situation. The Communists joined in the [general] strike'.¹⁰

Laid up in hospital until early April 1934 and unable to act Dimitrov became convinced by events in France, and the suppression of the Austrian workers in February, that Comintern's anti-fascist strategy had to be changed. He came to believe that the 'Third Period' policies of Comintern were mistaken and that nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of unity of all anti-fascist forces.¹¹

At the CPSU Politburo on 7 April 1934, Dimitrov put Comintern's failure to win the allegiance of the masses to 'our incorrect approach to the European workers', arguing for a new anti-fascist strategy based on cooperation with social democracy. At Stalin's suggestion Dimitrov joined the ECCI, and was promised the support of the Soviet Politburo for his campaign to change Comintern's anti-fascist strategy.¹² It would not have been lost on Stalin how the new anti-fascist strategy outlined by Dimitrov dovetailed perfectly with the requirements of Soviet foreign policy.¹³

It can be no accident that just as the Soviet and French governments had agreed in principle to a pact of mutual assistance, Thorez, leader of the PCF, was summoned to Moscow and given orders by Dimitrov to abandon the 'Third Period' line.¹⁴ At this meeting on 11 May 1934, Thorez was told that, 'the walls between communist and social democratic workers must be broken down', and that the united front from above had to be

pursued.¹⁵ In late May the CPSU leadership gave the signal to the PCF for a new turn in its anti-fascist strategy.¹⁶ This was backed up on 11 June by the ECCI recommendation that once the united front with the SFIO was established it should be extended to incorporate the petty bourgeoisie. At the same time, the ECCI advised a number of other communist parties to be more bold in their approach to developing the united front, by endeavouring to draw the petty bourgeoisie into the anti-fascist camp.¹⁷

At its congress on 23-26 June 1934, the PCF reversed its sectarian policy of opposition to social democracy and came out for the new Dimitrov line. The congress declared that the defeat of fascism was its chief objective, and in pursuit of this it aimed to draw into the anti-fascist struggle not just the working class, but also the broad masses of the peasantry, petty bourgeoisie and intelligentsia. In outline this was the policy of popular frontism adopted by Comintern at its Seventh World Congress in 1935. On 2 July 1934, L'Humanite carried proposals for an anti-fascist pact with the SFIO; on 27 July 1934 both parties signed a formal anti-fascist pact.¹⁸

The example set by the PCF was rapidly followed by several communist parties, which adopted united front proposals along similar lines as those of the French. At the beginning of July 1934, the French, British, German, and Polish communist parties issued a joint manifesto which avoided criticizing social democracy, appealing

instead for unity of all working people, whatever party or trade union they belonged to.

The role of Soviet foreign policy in determining the anti-fascist strategy of Comintern at this time is illustrated further by a hitherto unknown resolution of the Presidium of the ECCI. On 9 July the Presidium of the ECCI directed the KPD to seek a united front with dissident elements in the Nazi party, in the belief that the events of 30 June (when Hitler purged the SA) showed that Hitler's regime was tottering.¹⁹

During 1934 most communist parties met with little success, in their campaigns for a united front with social democratic parties. This was due to the reluctance of many social democratic parties to join forces overnight with their former enemies; and also that the Comintern leadership was far from unanimous in support of Dimitrov's new policy. For even those supporting the new Dimitrov policy in the leadership of many communist parties were unsure how far to go in pursuing them.

Within the Comintern leadership great controversy raged throughout the summer of 1934 over the question of anti-fascist strategy. Despite the approval for a united front from above given to the PCF by Moscow, for the purpose of Soviet foreign policy requirements, it would appear that domestic problems such as the second Five-Year plan preoccupied the Soviet leadership for the rest of 1934, which meant that they failed to give a clear lead to the Comintern leadership. It was not until December 1934, at a meeting of the ECCI Presidium, that

Stalin declared himself for the new popular front line, developed by Dimitrov and his co-thinkers during the debates on the ECCI during the summer of 1934.²⁰

The extension of the united front into the popular front in France came in a speech by Thorez on 2 October 1934, on the eve of the Radical Party's conference. Thorez, with the support of Dimitrov, called for the Radical Party to join the anti-fascist united front established by the two main workers parties.²¹ He made this declaration in the teeth of an attempt by Togliatti, of the sectarian old guard on the ECCI, to prevent this expansion of the united front into a popular front. This appeal to the Radical Party coincided perfectly with the objectives of Soviet diplomacy i.e. a Franco-Soviet military pact. For when in October 1934 Laval became French Foreign Minister, he made it clear to the Soviet government that he favoured a rapprochement with Germany. Thus the popular front came to be seen by Stalin as an important source of pressure against a pro-German orientation of French foreign policy, and also a potential substitute for the French government.²²

Soon after the signing of the Franco-Soviet Pact Thorez put forward the slogan of the 'French Front', arguing that the popular front should be expanded in a rightward direction, to include all anti-fascists irrespective of political colour. In July 1935 the popular front of the PCF and SFIO, together with the Radical Party, came into being. Thus by the time of the Seventh World Congress, which had been called to proclaim

the popular front as the new direction for Comintern, the French version of the popular front was already established.

The following section reveals how the CPGB's progress away from the sectarian postulates of the 'Third Period' was much slower than its sister party in France. Influenced by events in France and the new thinking promoted by Dimitrov together with the pressure from sections of its own membership, the CPGB leadership slowly progressed towards an active involvement in the anti-Mosley movement and away from its previous sectarianism towards the Labour Party. This led to a gradual increase in communist influence.

The CPGB and the united front

In his report to the 13th ECCI Plenum in December 1933 on the CPGB's united front campaign, Pollitt noted that the British Government with its open preparations for war had taken over from France as the main organiser of the international anti-Soviet front. Dismissing claims that what had happened in Germany could never happen in Britain he commented that:

In actual fact we are proceeding at a rapid rate towards fascism in Britain, carried out under slogans of democracy and achieved by so-called constitutional means...But most significant of all are the tendencies towards Fascism contained in the National Government's new unemployment bill.²³

Pollitt reiterated the CPGB's adherence to the 'Third Period' line, with regard to:

the social fascist policy of social democracy, the Communist Party must much more concretely expose the whole line of the policy of the reformist leaders, and reveal them to the masses in the most simple and convincing manner as the agents of the capitalist class in the working class movement.²⁴

He put the British Communist Party's failure to make a breakthrough with its united front campaign down to its inability to expose the reasons behind the refusal of the reformist organisations to participate in the united front. Pollitt also added that the CPGB's, 'fight against reformism not being as consistent and sharp as the situation demanded...' was another factor.²⁵ He admitted that the most frequent objections of British workers to the Communist Party's call for the united front, revolved around the continuing sectarianism of the British Party. Pollitt noted that most workers saw the CPGB's united front campaigns as an unprincipled manoeuvre. He concluded by observing the great resentment caused by the splitting of the Labour vote, as a result of the Communist Party putting up candidates against Labour.²⁶

Pollitt declared that one of the main emphases of the CPGB's united front activities in 1934 would be the convening of a national united front congress in

February, and the organisation of a national hunger march to that congress. He believed this new united front initiative offered the British Communist Party a great opportunity to break out of its isolation, and gain acceptance into the mainstream of the Labour movement.²⁷

In his report back to the CPGB Central Committee on 5 January 1934, Pollitt stressed that :

much criticism was levelled against all Parties for their neglect in much more concretely taking advantage of this position [of crisis within the Second International] to be able to unmask social democracy before the eyes of the masses who still believe in them. [Success in the struggle against fascism depended particularly] upon the rate at which the Communist Parties overcome and wipe out the influence of social democracy over the organised worker.²⁸

Having said this, Pollitt then stated that while the main efforts of the Communist Party were to be directed towards the united front from below, future approaches to the Labour Party were not ruled out. He added that the reluctance of CPGB members to work in 'reformist' unions had been criticised at the Thirteenth ECCI Plenum.²⁹

When it came to the question of the threat of fascism in Britain, Pollitt reiterated the position he had argued for at the plenum.³⁰ He noted with some alarm the increasing amount of activity the BUF was engaged in on a

national basis, 'Therefore the question of what our line should be demands careful consideration'.³¹ However, Pollitt came out strongly against the activities of workers, and sections of the Communist Party rank and file, who broke up or disrupted fascist meetings, '... it will be fatal for us if the Communist Party's opposition to Mosley is looked upon by the working class as being in the nature of a brawl and not a real political struggle'.³² He called upon Communist Party members to refrain from attacks on fascist meetings, instead through questions to the speaker they should try and expose fascism to those workers in the audience. Meanwhile the CPGB should concentrate its efforts against the fascist measures of the government.³³

At the Thirteenth ECCI Plenum four central tasks were laid out for the British Communist Party in its forthcoming united front work. Firstly, that it should lead the struggle against the National Government and therefore should step up its activities for the united front congress and hunger march. Secondly, there was to be a drive within the Party for every member in work to join and become active in a trade union. Thirdly, the Party should carry on the campaign to win the ILP for sympathetic affiliation to Comintern, with the perspective of a merger between the two parties. Finally, the aim was to double the membership by the time of the Seventh World Congress of Comintern in the autumn of 1934.³⁴

In the ensuing discussion a large measure of agreement was expressed with Pollitt's report, while a depressing picture of the Communist Party's united front work emerged. Speaker after speaker commented upon the continuing sectarianism of large sections of the membership, and the great reluctance of many to even get active in the trade unions. Such remarks can be summed up by the following observation of one Central Committee member (Robson):

But with all the good prospects facing the Party I want to say that it is disheartening to go amongst the ranks of the Party membership. And this is our responsibility as the leadership. One can go to local after local in important centres and find that the whole politics of the situation which have been so carefully and clearly analysed by our Party leadership have completely passed over the heads of our membership. As a result of this only a relatively small proportion of the membership is able to work effectively. Many of the locals are living a life exactly the same as they were doing ten years ago.³⁵

Shields noted that in the face of the growing war preparations of the National Government the, 'work of the [Party's] anti-war movement has gone back, the movement remains passive and practically no anti-war activity is being carried out in a real sense'.³⁶ Faced with such a poor state of affairs the CPGB leadership went into the

campaign for the hunger march and united front congress with high hopes, that this at last would help break down the Communist Party's isolation.

The 1934 hunger march and united front congress

With less than three weeks to go to the united front congress and with the hunger marchers on the road, Pollitt commented at the Political Bureau on 8 February 1934, that the NUWM (with only 800 dues-paying members) was in a catastrophic position. Alarm was expressed over the failure of the Communist Party membership in many areas to mobilise support within the the Labour movement for the united front congress and hunger march. Robson commented, 'There has been a complete failure to get the comrades to see the possibilities of getting delegates sent to the congress and support for the march from the employed workers'.³⁷ He gave the example of Manchester, where the Party fraction on the Trades Council had not even raised the question of the united front congress, never mind organise support for it.³⁸ The London district gave greatest cause for concern, with a majority of Party members not even prepared to take the campaign into the local Labour movement.³⁹

In London as in most other areas, the local united front committees organising support for the hunger march and united front congress were made up in the main of Communist Party and ILP members, with little effort being made to involve local Labour movement activists. The local united front committees in most areas substituted

themselves for a mass campaign of the employed and unemployed workers. In the discussions on the Central Committee and Political Bureau after the united front congress, the sectarianism of the membership, revealed by the failure to try and involve Labour movement activists in the campaign, was viewed with great concern. As in most other united front campaigns what little work was done had been carried out by the same thin layer of Communist Party activists. After the united front congress Pollitt complained:

We did not have as many trade union branches represented as we have comrades active in these in London. We had to send out a special call [prior to the congress] for trade union representation...If we examine representation at this Congress it is less in proportion to the number of delegates we have had at such conferences in the past.⁴⁰

In the run up to the united front congress the subdivision of organising work for the congress broke down. Instead of many practical tasks being carried out as planned by rank and file bodies, a large amount of the organising work flooded back to the Central Committee. Not surprisingly, the Central Committee became rapidly overloaded by this sudden influx of practical tasks, and was not able to concentrate fully on the political oversight of the hunger march and united front congress.⁴¹ This found expression in the remarkable clash

between the Central Committee members present at the united front congress.

The origins of this clash lay in the Communist Party's original call for the hunger march and united front congress in November 1933. At the Thirteenth ECCI Plenum the CPGB's call for the hunger march and united front congress met with disapproval for, 'in that call there was no criticism of the reformists'.⁴² In response to Comintern censure the Daily Worker, in mid February, carried proposals for several amendments to the unity congress resolution. One of these amendments strongly criticised the role of the Labour Party in refusing to support the fight of the unemployed.⁴³

At the united front congress itself, the Communist Party delegation insisted on moving its amendment (drawn up by Gallacher) which criticised the Labour leaders. The Central Committee members present clashed over whether or not the Communist Party should press ahead with their amendment or go for the ILP amendment which was far less critical of the Labour leaders. Gallagher wavered in the discussion with the ILP, unsure whether to make the Party amendment a condition of its participation in the congress.⁴⁴ Other Central Committee members, such as Kerrigan, dismissed fears that the Party amendment might alienate some labour and trade union branches. In the end a composite amendment of the CPGB and ILP amendments was agreed to. This 'capitulation' of the Communist Party delegation to reformism was severely criticised by Pollitt after the congress on the Political Bureau.⁴⁵ The

resolution eventually passed by the united front congress called for a mass campaign against the government's unemployment bill, which was portrayed as another step in the direction of fascism in Britain. The congress also elected a committee to carry on the campaign, which by early April had largely faltered having held one badly attended meeting.⁴⁶

The CPGB's latest attempt at drawing the organised Labour movement into its united front campaign had fizzled out ignominiously due to the failure of large sections of its membership and parts of the leadership to try and involve the organised Labour movement in the campaign. This was compelling evidence of the fact that the CPGB was crippled by a deep-rooted sectarianism, which reflected the contradictory nature of the united front line as handed down by Comintern at the Thirteenth ECCI Plenum. Further evidence for such a conclusion, if further evidence were needed, comes in an article in the April issue of the Communist Review in 1934. In this Robson, who was a member of the Central Committee, draws attention to the organisational anarchy prevalent in the lower levels of the Communist Party and the bad organisational methods used by so many of its branches, which were incapable of implementing the new united front methods of work due to their sectarian outlook.⁴⁷ However the Communist Party found a partial way out of its isolation and lack of influence through its participation in the anti-Mosley struggle during the spring and summer of 1934.

The struggle against the BUF

It was to be through its participation in the anti-Mosley movement, which rapidly escalated in size and tempo during 1934 in response to the upsurge in BUF activity and membership, that the Communist Party was to partially overcome its isolation within the Labour movement. Yet during the first few months of 1934 the Communist Party leadership refrained from involvement in the anti-Mosley movement as it had done in 1933, while sections of the membership played a leading role in this struggle in many areas. By late spring 1934 the CPGB leadership decided to throw the full weight of the Party behind the anti-BUF struggle, influenced as it was by the failures of the united front campaigns to date, mass pressure 'from below' of the anti-Mosley movement, and the realisation of the great mobilising potential of this campaign.

Encouraged by the success of the fascist movements on the continent, and with the backing of an increasing number of business and military figures in Britain organised through the January Club, the BUF launched a mass recruitment campaign in the spring of 1934.⁴⁸ Imitating the tactics of the Nazis in Germany the BUF held provocative marches and rallies, under police protection, in dozens of towns and cities across the country. These well-attended activities were given the active support of Lord Rothermere's newspapers, and produced a rapid increase in the membership of the BUF. The BUF grew from 17,000 members in February 1934 to over 50,000 by July 1934.⁴⁹ As the BUF tried to establish

itself as a mass party, so popular opposition to the growth of fascism increased. The backbone of this resistance being the organised working class.⁵⁰ As one anti-fascist of the period commented:

The British working class gave the Blackshirts their answer. Every demonstration called by the fascists was answered by a great counter-demonstration of workers and anti-fascists.⁵¹

During the spring of 1934, the Daily Worker carried numerous reports of BUF meetings which were broken up or disrupted by anti-fascists. At Dumfries and Plymouth in April the anger of the workers was such, that the BUF meetings had to be abandoned with the speakers retreating under a police escort. In early May, over 2,000 workers in Greenwich turned out to oppose the fascists. During the meeting itself the workers drowned out the fascist speaker, chanting slogans such as 'No blackshirts in Greenwich'. After the fascists had left the meeting place having not spoken, Kath Duncan of the Communist Party got up and addressed the crowd.⁵² Meanwhile during a speaking tour on Tyneside in mid May, John Beckett of the BUF, found himself opposed by over 10,000 chanting anti-fascists in Gateshead and by over 5,000 in Newcastle. At the Newcastle meeting Beckett managed to speak for five minutes before he was pushed off the platform as the meeting broke up in pandemonium. Mounted police were used to clear a path for Beckett's retreat from the meeting.⁵³

While this rank and file movement of opposition to the BUF was unfolding before its eyes and rising in scale and tempo, the CPGB leadership maintained its long held attitude that the main threat of fascism in this country came from the National Government, and that the BUF was something of an irrelevance. An example of this attitude is shown by the following quote from a Daily Worker editorial in late April 1934:

The fight against this [Sedition] Bill is the most vital phase in our fight against fascism in this country. It is the acid test of all organisations who claim to be opposed to fascism. They will be judged by their attitude to the organisation of action against this bill....It is not a question of vowing our intention to fight Fascism in the future. It is a question of organising our forces to fight the important step to Fascism embodied in this bill.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, sections of the Communist Party membership took the opposite view, believing the main struggle against fascism in Britain lay with the BUF. During 1933 and again in 1934 this anti-fascist movement from below, which was covered by the Daily Worker, was actively supported by sections of the Communist Party membership. Further evidence of this division over anti-fascist strategy between sections of the membership and the leadership, is described by London communists in the anti-fascist classics Out of the Ghetto by Joe Jacobs and

Phil Piratin's book Our Flag Stays Red. Jacobs describes how the efforts of the rank and file communists in East London to combat the BUF came into increasing conflict with the branch and district leadership of the Communist Party; this included leading figures on the Central Committee such as Bramley and Springhall. They gave priority to building up the CPGB's presence in the trade unions. At the Political Bureau on 3 May, Pollitt stated that in London large sections of the membership had no confidence in the district leadership.⁵⁵ Jacobs comments that by autumn 1933 in the East End, increasing numbers of ex-servicemen were beginning to organise along anti-fascist lines independently of the Communist Party, while:

Some of us who were being criticised thought that those mainly engaged in trade union work, were neglecting the other important facets of the class struggle. For example, German fascism, unemployment, rents, Mosley, etc. This kind of argument had been going on for a long time and came to the surface more and more as time went on.⁵⁶

This division between the leadership and sections of the rank and file over anti-fascist strategy is graphically illustrated by the following example. When the Daily Worker noted the first big London rally of Mosley's spring campaign at the Albert Hall on 21 April 1934, there was no mention of any Communist Party counter-

demonstration.⁵⁷ This reflected the line of the CPGB leadership that fascist meetings should pass off unopposed. Despite the leadership's failure to sanction any counter-action, many Communist Party members from East London along with thousands of non-party workers, turned up to oppose Mosley's Albert Hall rally. As Jacobs pointed out, the failure of the Communist Party to mobilise for this event meant that, 'The opposition to this meeting was not organised on anything like the scale it should have been', and Mosley's meeting went ahead smoothly.⁵⁸

When the BUF announced another mass rally for 7 June at Olympia to follow its successful Albert Hall rally, the London district committee of the Communist Party initially took no action. As Pollitt revealed at the Political Bureau in June, it took strong pressure from the Political Bureau on the London district committee, before the London district committee made the call for a counter-demonstration against the BUF rally at Olympia. At the same meeting Pollitt commented that the Communist Party, with its call for action against Mosley's Olympia rally, was increasingly seen as the leading force in the struggle against the BUF. He added that a large portion of the London membership had been involved in this activity.⁵⁹ This comment in itself is further evidence to the popularity of the anti-Mosley struggle with the rank and file of the Communist Party, and how large sections of the membership saw the main threat of fascism in Britain coming from the BUF and not from the National

Government. It was not until 18 May that the London Communist Party made the call for a counter-demonstration against Mosley's Olympia rally, inviting all Labour movement organisations to participate in this activity.⁶⁰

The Political Bureau's decision to call for a counter-demonstration to oppose the Olympia rally raises the question of what brought about the sudden change in its attitude to the struggle against the BUF? The minutes of the Political Bureau meeting on 4 May 1934 make no mention of the BUF rally at Olympia. Some time between this meeting on 4 May and the 18 May declaration in the Daily Worker, the national leadership made a sharp change of direction in its attitude to the struggle against the BUF. There is nothing to indicate that intervention from Comintern brought about this change of attitude, for the Comintern leadership was preoccupied with the French situation and its own debates about united-front strategy. It would appear much more likely that this sudden change of attitude to the struggle against the BUF, which was going on independently of the Communist Party up and down the country, was brought about by the sudden realisation of the great mobilising potential of the anti-Mosley struggle. The Political Bureau's decision must also have been influenced by the successive failures of the united front campaigns to date. It would also have been influenced by the mass pressure 'from below' of those sections of the Communist Party membership who along with thousands of workers up and down the country,

were demonstrating their opposition to the BUF during its spring campaign.

It is interesting to note that nearly all of the previous accounts of the CPGB and its struggle against fascism give the impression that the Communist Party was always primarily concerned with the growth of the BUF. From this flows the misconception that the CPGB always played a leading role in the struggle against the BUF. With one exception, they make no mention of the CPGB's abrupt change in tactics; from opposing the struggle against the BUF to suddenly giving it unqualified support. The one exception is Branson's history of the Communist Party. In her chapter on fascism and the united-front 1933-1935, Branson gives a cursory and incomplete account, which is limited to two lines, of the CPGB's change of attitude with regard to the struggle against the BUF.⁶¹

The CPGB's sudden change of attitude towards the anti-Mosley struggle highlights the essential differences between the 'traditionalist' and 'revisionist' approaches to the history of the CPGB. In her history of the CPGB's involvement in the trade unions 1933-1945, Fishman has divided the various approaches to CPGB history into 'traditionalist' (made up of communist and non-communists) and a newly emerging 'revisionist' school.⁶² This tries to see beyond the accepted mythologies that have obscured our understanding of Communist Party history and prevented accurate historical vision. All of the 'traditionalist' approaches to CPGB history, both

communist and non-communist, take it for granted that the CPGB was always the leading force in the struggle against the BUF, and fail to bring out the different conceptions of fascism in Britain within the Communist Party. In contrast to this, Kevin Morgan (who might be termed a 'revisionist') in his book, Against Fascism And War, notes that most historians have failed to see that the Communist Party leadership saw the National Government as the main fascist threat in Britain.⁶³

The Communist Party's sudden about-turn in its attitude to the anti-Mosley struggle was to pay considerable dividends. The failure of the Labour and trade union leaders to organise any activity against the BUF meant the field was clear for the Communist Party to assume the leadership of this rank and file movement. With the weight of its whole apparatus now behind the campaign against the BUF, the Communist Party was perfectly poised to tap into the rich seam of support which existed among workers for this campaign. Against a background of the virtually unimpeded advance of fascism across Europe, tens of thousands of workers who normally would have remained loyal to the advice of the Labour leaders, decided to get involved in the fight against the BUF now led by the Communist Party. The leading role which the Communist Party began to play in the campaign against the BUF brought it considerable prestige and enhanced its standing within the Labour movement. However, it did not bring the Communist Party any great increase in its membership. For the first time since the

united front campaign started in March 1933, the CPGB nationally began to actively involve sections of the Labour movement in its activities, which was a major breakthrough.

Despite the late start in the Communist Party's campaign against Mosley's Olympia rally, it soon began to gain momentum and develop important points of support within the Labour movement. By 2 June 1934, the national committee of the engineers union and the London management committee of the furnishing trade union, had come out in support of the counter-demonstration to Olympia.⁶⁴ Meanwhile in the run-up to Olympia the campaign against the BUF in the provinces carried on unabated in its determination to sweep the fascists off the streets.

On 1 June BUF meetings in Bristol and Edinburgh were met with counter-demonstrations of thousands of workers. At the Bristol meeting the fascist speaker was hurled from the platform and the meeting was broken up. In Edinburgh the anti-fascists were unable to get into the heavily guarded meeting so they waited patiently for it to end. Despite the presence of a large contingent of mounted police, the anti-fascist demonstrators broke through police lines to the buses waiting to take the fascists away. They repeatedly attacked members of the BUF in the buses, causing great damage to the vehicles and hospitalising many fascists in the process. The Daily Worker commented that, 'The organised thugs, rushing

around the country in armoured cars and buses, received another good thrashing at Edinburgh on Friday night'.⁶⁵

The events which took place at the BUF's Olympia rally have been well recorded elsewhere, suffice to say that the actions of the anti-fascists who disrupted Mosley's rally, played an invaluable role in exposing the fascist movement.⁶⁶ British workers were given a graphic example of what to expect if fascism triumphed in this country. Undoubtedly the revulsion felt amongst all sections of the population at the brutal disposal of all those disrupting the Olympia rally, played a part in stemming the advance of the BUF.⁶⁷ On the day after Olympia the Daily Worker paid tribute to all those workers involved in the struggle against the BUF:

In the great industrial centres of this country thousands of workers have rallied (in most cases spontaneously and without leadership) against Mosley's travelling circuses.⁶⁸

After Olympia the BUF started to go into a slow decline, which was largely due to the enormous opposition it encountered wherever it organised meetings. Nigel Todd has observed this rank and file opposition movement during the summer of 1934, 'seems to have marked a turning point in the advance of the BUF', with its membership plummeting from 50,000 in June to 5,000 in October.⁶⁹ As a Daily Worker editorial in June pointed out, if police protection had been withdrawn from the

fascists they would have been unable to hold meetings in most areas; and that the anti-fascist struggle would be immeasurably stronger if the Labour and trade union leaders came out in support of it.⁷⁰

During the summer of 1934 Mosley began to cancel meetings for fear of violent opposition from the anti-fascist movement; he noted this in a letter to the Home Secretary in late June.⁷¹ Even with a high level of police protection the counter-offensive of the anti-fascist movement, under Communist Party leadership, was powerful enough to seriously knock the confidence of the BUF and began to erode its base of support. Throughout the summer of 1934 the BUF were routed and prevented from holding meetings by thousands of anti-fascists all over the country.⁷² The struggle against the fascists was most intense in East London, which remained the BUF's main bastion of support throughout the 1930s. The intensity of the struggle against the BUF can be attested to by the following comment of the Daily Worker on 13 June 1934:

the brutalities of the Mosley thugs at Olympia have roused the workers of Britain to action. Not a single fascist meeting is being held which does not meet the violent opposition of the workers.⁷³

In response to events in France and the new thinking in the Comintern leadership, the Communist Party began to develop its own conception of the popular front in Britain. At an anti-fascist rally on 16 June 1934,

J.R.Campbell called for the anti-fascist movement to be organised on the widest possible basis of all individuals and organisations prepared to fight against fascism, as expressed by the BUF and the National Government.⁷⁴ This new conception of the anti-fascist struggle rapidly came to involve the Communist Party with Liberal MP's which hitherto would have been anathema to it.

The negotiations (over the united front pact) between the PCF and the SFIO in July 1934, spurred the British Communist Party to write to the Labour Party, calling for a meeting of representatives of both parties to discuss joint anti-fascist activity. In his call to the membership to support this new united front approach to the Labour Party, Pollitt stated that they should take encouragement from events in France, where mass pressure from below had forced the SFIO leaders into united front negotiations with the Communist Party. In Britain, if the CPGB campaigned vigourously enough amongst the rank and file of the Labour movement for the united front, then the Labour Party leadership would be forced against their will into united front negotiations with the Communist Party.⁷⁵

Despite the growth in the influence and prestige of the Communist Party as a result of its leading role in the struggle against the BUF, it still failed to grow to any significant extent, much to the consternation of the King Street leadership. In a long and arduous discussion at the August Central Committee on why the Party had failed to grow, a plethora of organisational defects were

identified. Besides these, the major reason put forward for the Communist Party's failure to grow was that most of its members when carrying out their daily work did not have the idea of recruitment on their minds.⁷⁶

The notion that the political line of the Party was responsible for this state of affairs was never brought up. Although the Communist Party's anti-fascist work was starting to break down its isolation within the Labour movement, it was still seriously hindered by the sectarian hostility which it displayed towards the leaders of the Labour movement. Undoubtedly, the Communist Party's sectarian attacks upon the Labour and trade union leaders reinforced the suspicion and hostility which many activists held from the CPGB's 'class-against-class' period.

In opening the discussion on the united front at the August Central Committee, Pollitt quoted from a Central Committee resolution of June 1933, pointing out how the Party had failed to put this resolution into effect. He lambasted the membership for its sectarian refusal to actively campaign for the united front within the Labour movement:

The reason is that the Party comrades do not want the United Front and are very glad to receive the refusal [of the Labour Party to communist overtures]. We are still so cut off from the workers in the localities that we do not know who are the active members of the Labour Party. We have a local in London of 80 members

and the united front proposal is suggested to them and they are asked to get in touch with Labour Party members and they do not know the name of the local ward secretary...if the united front can be attained in France it can be done here...We must convince the Party that for the working class it is a life and death matter.⁷⁷

It was at this meeting that the CPGB leadership agreed upon a popular front style campaign to attempt to defeat fascism in Britain. The Communist Party would now call for the formation of a mass anti-fascist front embracing not only working-class organisations but also the anti-fascist elements of the middle and upper classes.⁷⁸ This was a response to the recent united front pact signed between the socialists and communists in France, the rapid growth of the anti-Mosley movement during the summer, and the Communist Party's continuing isolation within the Labour movement. According to Pollitt, 'our Party shall see in the organisation of this anti-fascist front the main line through which it is going to build up the working class united front'.⁷⁹ In other words this mass multi-class anti-fascist front would assist the CPGB in its task of forming a united front with the Labour Party. The road to this mass anti-fascist front would take three stages. The first stage would be to fill Hyde Park on 9 September with a counter-demonstration against Mosley's planned rally on that day. At this mass anti-fascist demonstration the call would then be made for an

anti-fascist rally in the autumn at the Albert Hall, drawing in as wide a spectrum of anti-fascist organisations as possible. The Albert Hall rally would then convene a national anti-fascist conference for November, which would form an elected organisation representative of all anti-fascist forces, to take the struggle against fascism forward. Pollitt commented optimistically:

if we tackle this thing now we can make it the biggest thing in the history of the Party, such as will give a tremendous impression on the rank and file of the Labour Party and the Trades Union movement.⁸⁰

The Communist Party succeeded in spectacular fashion in attaining the first stage of its anti-fascist strategy. On 9 September 1934 between 100,000 and 150,000 responded to the vigorous campaign of the anti-fascist movement led by the Communist Party.⁸¹ The build up to this had seen the distribution of over half a million leaflets and the active support of over fifty union branches.⁸² More than any other event of that summer this enormous show of strength by the anti-fascist movement decisively dented the confidence of the BUF and helped push the fascist movement into a rapid decline which would not be halted until 1936.

The great success of the 9 September demonstration led the Communist Party to write to the Labour Party once

again, with a request for informal discussions on the formation of a working-class united front. With the Labour Party turning down its latest request for a united front, it would appear that the Communist Party leadership abruptly dropped the idea of a mass anti-fascist front. It never attempted to put into practice the other elements to the anti-fascist strategy outlined in August. While the rank and file communists continued to play a leading role in the battles against the BUF, which carried on into the autumn, the CPGB leadership clearly felt a change of tactics was needed if it was to obtain a united front with the Labour Party.⁸³ The change in tactics would require the Communist Party finally dispensing with the sectarian principles of the 'Third Period' enabling it to approach the Labour Party as a common ally and not as an opponent.

The new turn in communist policy

The Communist Party leadership saw the formation of a united front with the Labour Party as the key to the defeat of the main fascist threat in Britain, that is the National Government. They saw the municipal elections in November as an opportunity to extend the Party's united front tactics on the question of electoral strategy, believing that this would boost its campaign for a united front with the Labour Party. This extension of the Communist Party's united front tactics entailed the abandonment of the united front from below and the attendant sectarianism which went with it, and for this

move the leadership had to seek Moscow's permission. Up until that permission was given the CPGB carried on as usual, with its sectarian attacks upon the Labour Party and the idea of a united front from below. This reflected the fact that Comintern had not yet officially abandoned its sectarian attitudes towards social democracy. The following passage from a Daily Worker editorial in early October is a typical example of this, 'In all basic essentials Labour Party policy stands for the upholding of capitalism. Its municipal record is one of defence of capitalist interests'. The editorial concluded that the choice facing workers was between the capitalist candidates of the three major parties and the revolutionary candidates of the Communist Party.⁸⁴ It was this sectarianism which continued to alienate most workers away from the Communist Party and produced such a hostile reaction from the Labour Party to its united front campaign.

At the meeting of the ECCI Presidium in October 1934, Pollitt gave a report on the CPGB's lack of progress in its campaign for a united front with the Labour Party. He put this lack of progress in the main down to the failings of the Communist Party. Pollitt noted how the reformist workers deeply resented the Communist Party splitting the working class vote in elections, and the continuing opposition of sections of the CPGB membership to the campaign for a united front with the Labour Party. Pollitt asked for, 'a clear line on united front tactics in elections'. He indicated the need for a re-evaluation

of the Communist Party's electoral strategy and the need to avoid being seen as letting in capitalist candidates at elections. Pollitt finished by stating that the CPGB's anti-fascist work had brought it closer to the workers than at any time in its history.⁸⁵

The ECCI's sanction for this extension of the CPGB's united front tactics flowed from the fact that it fitted in perfectly with the needs of Soviet foreign policy, and Dimitrov's views on the role of communism in the era of the anti-fascist struggle. Following Moscow's sanction for this extension of its united front tactics the Communist Party was to execute a rapid change of direction which moved it from left to right. This rapid about-turn, was to create alarm among some sections of the CPGB.

With less than two weeks to go before polling day in the municipal elections, the CPGB made a startling change in its electoral tactics, which was designed to further its campaign for a united front with the Labour Party. Unfortunately for the Communist Party the TUC was about to launch yet another crack down upon its united front campaigns in the trade union movement. The TUC General Council on 26 October 1934 issued the infamous 'Black Circulars', officially known as Circulars 16 and 17. Circular 16 informed trades councils that the TUC would withdraw its recognition from them if they persisted in accepting delegates who were known communists and fascists. In a similar vein Circular 17 called on all unions affiliated to the TUC to enforce similar bans on

communists, in effect debarring communists from holding any union office.⁸⁶ As will be revealed later, when looking at the activities of communists in Leeds and Bradford, Circular 16 was to have a mixed impact on communist activities on the trades councils. Where the communists had become accepted as a legitimate part of the local Labour movement such as in Bradford, Circular 16 was to have a nominal effect on their activities; however in Leeds it had a greater impact.

The new electoral proposals which were announced in the Daily Worker on 20 October 1934 saw a complete transformation in communist attitudes to the Labour Party. From outright opposition to the Labour Party as being another capitalist party, the Communist Party became a firm advocate of the need for working class unity to defeat the capitalist candidates of the National Government. These proposals were accompanied by the Communist Party renewing its united front offer to the Labour Party.⁸⁷

The CPGB's election proposals involved it pledging active support for all those Labour Party candidates prepared to support minimum united front demands such as lower rents and increased scales of relief for the unemployed. It declared that it would not put forward candidates against those Labour candidates who supported such united front demands. In the interests of class unity against the capitalist enemy the Communist Party was prepared to go even further in its concessions to Labour. Only in those areas where the Communist Party had

a serious chance of either winning or gaining a significant vote would it put forward candidates against Labour, elsewhere it would withdraw its candidates. In those areas where the Communist Party had no candidate, its members were called upon to consider support for Labour candidates, even though they might not agree to support any minimum united front demands.⁸⁸

The CPGB leadership portrayed these new electoral tactics, to its membership, as an extension of the united front. An internal secretariat circular sent to all branches stressed how the Party's anti-fascist activities had won large numbers of militants in the Labour movement for practical united front action. If the Communist Party was to be successful in its campaign for a united front with the Labour Party then it had to break down the many barriers and objections that at present existed among the reformist workers to the united front.⁸⁹

The new electoral tactics came as a shock to the Communist Party membership, which was halfway through an election campaign which they had fought on a strongly anti-Labour programme. Not surprisingly, they created great confusion amongst the membership which responded in a variety of ways to this abrupt change. As will be shown when looking at the Bradford district, the new electoral tactics were subject to a variety of different interpretations by the membership.

In some areas the membership completely ignored the new electoral tactics, pressing ahead with their own campaigns and standing against Labour. At the Political

Bureau in November 1934, Bramley gave the example of one London constituency where local communists were contesting three wards. He stated that the attitude of Party members in these three wards was that the new electoral tactics did not apply to them, and they went ahead in standing against Labour.⁹⁰

In other areas the membership used the new electoral tactics as an excuse to drop out of badly organised electoral campaigns. However there were areas where the branches tried to use the new tactics as a bridge to break down barriers with the local Labour movement. At the same Political Bureau meeting in November Pollitt praised the example of communists in Bolton who had been planning to contest three Labour marginals. Once the new electoral tactics had been declared the Communist Party in Bolton withdrew its candidates from the elections. This brought a complete change of attitude to the Bolton Communist Party from many in the local Labour movement. Even the most anti-communist elements had begun to adopt a more positive attitude to the united front.⁹¹

Despite the poor showing of the Communist Party candidates in most areas, squeezed as they were by the swing to Labour, the CPGB leadership expressed satisfaction with the election results on several counts. Firstly, the new tactics had brought branches in many areas into closer contact with the officials and leading figures in the local Labour parties. Secondly, the new tactics were beginning to break down the objections of many reformist workers to the united front campaign of

the Communist Party. Finally and most important of all were the defeats which the National Government had suffered at the hands of Labour.⁹²

When the Political Bureau came to assess the local election results Pollitt observed how, 'Any weakening of the capitalist forces are now of tremendous importance for our Party and has tremendous effect and importance abroad'.⁹³ He stated that without the united front in France fascism would probably have triumphed there, which would have placed Europe on the verge of war and put the Soviet Union in grave danger of imperialist attack. The election of a popular front government in France or the defeat of the National Government in Britain would transform the international situation and help stem the advance to fascism and war in Europe. Most crucially of all, 'It would mean we hold off war in Europe against the Soviet Union, a gain for the international working class'.⁹⁴ Pollitt maintained that whilst the criticisms of the Labour Party programme for government would remain, the Communist Party's attitude to the election of a Labour Government would have to change from the negative to the positive.⁹⁵

In discussing strategy for the forthcoming general election, the CPGB leadership agreed to stand in a handful of seats and elsewhere to actively campaign for a Labour victory. The new objective set for the Communist Party was to get a small fraction of MPs elected along with a majority Labour government.⁹⁶ This essentially was the electoral policy adopted by the Communist Party at

its Thirteenth Congress in February 1935 and around which it campaigned in the 1935 general election.⁹⁷

While Pollitt and his supporters on the CPGB's leading bodies got their own way over this extension of united front tactics, there still remained within the membership a deep rooted adherence to old sectarian attitudes.⁹⁸ Along with this there was alarm amongst the membership about the Communist Party moving to the right as a result of the new united front tactics.⁹⁹ Joss and Dutt were both criticised at the Political Bureau in November 1934 for their opposition to the new united front line, which allegedly, sowed confusion amongst sections of the membership as to what they should do in the elections. In many areas it appears the membership completely ignored the new united front guidelines. Bramley commented at the Political Bureau in November 1934 that:

The sectarianism of the Party is more widespread than I believed possible. [He recounted the behaviour of CPGB members towards Labour supporters at the count in West Ham]...you could hear the murmuring of 'rats, rats, rats, we must get rid of the rats'. This was terrible.¹⁰⁰

The dichotomy between the national leadership and the rank and file over anti-fascist strategy will be explored further by reference to the activities of communists in West Yorkshire. This reveals that the continuities and ruptures in practice between local communists and the

Communist Party on a national scale were quite substantial when it came to attitudes towards social democracy and the BUF.

The Communist Party in West Yorkshire - 1934

During 1934 the CPGB branches in Bradford and Leeds enjoyed rather mixed fortunes, with the struggle against fascism emerging as their main priority. While their anti-fascist activities brought them closer to sections of the local Labour movement, the credit accrued from such activities was undermined by occasional fits of sectarian activity. On balance it would appear that the Communist Party in Bradford emerged from 1934 with a stronger position in the local Labour movement than its counterpart in Leeds. The disparate fortunes of the two branches can be partly attributed to the differing effect in the two areas of the 'Black Circular'. This is in marked contrast to the experience of the CPGB in the East Midlands where the 'Black Circular' appeared to have less impact upon the activities of local communists. Richard Stevens has commented that while the 'Black Circular' made things more difficult for local communists, they escaped the worst effects of the circular due to, 'the fundamental tolerance that existed within most sections of the local Labour movement'.¹⁰¹

Leeds Communist Party

By the spring of 1934, the Leeds branch had become the biggest and most vibrant section of the Bradford

district. It had a flourishing YCL which had its own premises in the city centre. It even had its own football team which played in the local junior leagues. The Leeds branch, through its turn to trade union work, had more employed members than ever before. Through the medium of the Red Leader, which was a factory paper produced for the workforce at Montagu-Burtons, and the hard work of its members at other clothing factories, the Leeds Communist Party had built a position of considerable influence within the local clothing industry. The success of the Red Leader, (out of a workforce of 10,000 at Burtons its circulation peaked at 1,000 a week), brought requests from workers in other clothing factories for the local Communist Party to produce something similar for them. This led to the publication of the Garment Worker which covered the five factories where Leeds Communist Party had members and contacts.102

The success of the local Communist Party's work in the clothing industry sparked off a ferocious witch-hunt against its members in the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers (NUTGW). They spent the best part of 1933 fighting their expulsion from the union by local right wing union officials. The local communists in the NUTGW were readmitted to the union in the spring of 1934 under certain conditions. First of all, they had to cease publication of the Red Leader. They were also barred from holding any union office for three years.103

The growth of the Leeds branch was such that it agreed in the spring of 1934 to take Ernie Benson (the branch

secretary) on as a part-time organiser. He was to be paid one pound fifty for a three day week.¹⁰⁴ However the greatest success for the local Communist Party in 1934 came from its work on Leeds Trades Council, where it increased its representation from two to five. Of these five, Marion Jessop and Peter Mahoney were elected on to the Trades Council executive, with Jessop being elected to the post of second vice-president.¹⁰⁵

In the spring of 1934, the communist fraction on Leeds Trades Council successfully moved a variety of resolutions, which included one calling for the release of imprisoned German communists and another calling for the withdrawal of the charges against Harry Pollitt and Tom Mann, for their activity against the government's unemployment bill.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile the Leeds Communist Party maintained the close relations which its members had established in 1933 with sections of the local Leagues of Youth. At the Central League of Youth branch in early February 1934, they managed to get W.Spence (a national YCL organiser) in to speak.¹⁰⁷

In response to the BUF announcing its intention to hold a meeting in the city centre, Leeds Communist Party moved into action. At the BUF rally on 26 April 1934, the local communists organised a counter-demonstration outside several hundred strong. They were even able to smuggle anti-fascists into the meeting where they unfurled banners carrying slogans such as 'BRITAIN IS GOING FASCIST'. Despite this intervention there are no reports of any attempt to disrupt the fascist meeting.¹⁰⁸

On the 1934 May Day activities, the local communists clashed with the Leeds Labour Party, and committed a major tactical mistake in their united front activities. This sectarian blunder only served to undermine the political capital accrued from its anti-fascist activities. On the May Day demonstration itself, attempts were made to prevent the communist contingent from joining the march, despite the fact that Marian Jessop was President of the May Day committee. David Beevers, the chief marshal for the demonstration, who was a Labour councillor and a worker at the Burtons factory, instructed the police to keep the communist contingent from the rest of the demonstration. This attempt to split the demonstration failed, as the communist contingent evaded the police by immersing itself in the heart of the demonstration.109

At the May Day rally there was the official Labour movement platform and a united front platform. Marian Jessop made a major tactical mistake when she spoke from the united front platform organised by the local Communist Party. This act greatly angered many of those present and was to draw much criticism from the local labour movement. At the meeting of Leeds Trades Council on 30 May 1934, a letter was read from number two branch of the Boot and Shoe Operatives, which strongly protested at Marian Jessop's action in supporting the united front activities of the local Communist Party on May Day. After a short discussion the Trades Council passed a motion of censure by a large majority against Marrison Jessop.110

Members of the League of Youth who were involved with the united front activities on May Day, were also subjected to disciplinary action.¹¹¹

At the meeting of Leeds Trades Council Executive Committee in May, the delegates agreed to cooperate with the local Jewish Council in the setting up of a committee to organise a boycott of German goods and services. In what appears to have been another example of sectarianism, the Leeds Communist Party, following the national Party line on this issue, made no attempt to get involved in this campaign, losing another opportunity to get closer to the local Labour movement.¹¹² Instead it engaged in popular front style activities in support of the Relief Committee for the Victims of German Fascism. The local communists organised a meeting on 27 May 1934 at Leeds Town Hall. The chair was taken by a local vicar, W.Thompson, while the platform brought together the likes of J.R. Campbell with Vyvyan Adams, who was a Conservative MP. At this meeting the largely Jewish audience raised over seventy pounds for humanitarian aid to German refugees.¹¹³

The struggle against the BUF, however, was to offer local communists an opportunity to raise their profile and influence within the Labour movement in Leeds. Alarm at the successes of fascism on the continent and the rapid growth of the BUF led several trade union branches to send resolutions to the Trades Council, calling for it to organise effective action against the menace of fascism.¹¹⁴

At the June meeting of Leeds Trades Council, a resolution from the local branch of the NUTGW was the subject of considerable debate. The resolution referred to the 'drive towards Fascism in this country' and called for a local, 'labour movement conference to discuss the dangers of fascism in this country and decide on the best means of combatting it'. Despite calls for no action to be taken, the above resolution was passed with a large majority. The resolution was seconded by Nat Kline, a local communist, who withdrew his branch resolution which was along similar lines.115

It was not until July that the Trades Council Executive Committee took the decision, in the face of calls for no action to be taken on this issue, to put the garment workers' resolution into practice. The executive decided to organise a weekend of anti-fascist activity in the autumn, which was to take place on the 17 and 18 of November 1934. On Saturday 17 November there was to be an anti-fascist conference addressed by Aneurin Bevan, while on the Sunday there was to be an anti-fascist demonstration protesting against the government's sedition bill and the menace of the BUF.116

Throughout the spring and summer of 1934, the Leeds Communist Party held a series of anti-fascist meetings all over the city.117 During this period the communist bookshop in Hunslet was repeatedly attacked by fascists. After the windows were smashed for the fourth time, the insurance companies refused cover to the bookshop any longer.118

When the local BUF announced that it was going to have an open-air rally outside Leeds Town Hall on 28 July 1934, local communists immediately began preparations for a counter-demonstration. On the Friday night before the fascist rally, the local police-no doubt alarmed by the events at Olympia-visited the home of a leading figure in the Leeds Communist Party. The police allegedly said that they would arrest him and two other local Communist Party members if the anti-fascist counter-demonstration caused any 'trouble' the next day.¹¹⁹ This action of the police was seen by many in the local Labour movement as yet another example of state bias towards the BUF in its struggle with the anti-fascist movement. Ignoring this act of intimidation, the Leeds Communist Party proceeded with its plans to oppose the BUF public rally.

On 28 July the communist-led counter-demonstration started off over 400 strong but had swelled to over 1,000 people by the time it reached the Town Hall, where the BUF was supposed to be holding its open-air rally. No doubt fearful of what kind of reception they might encounter, in view of the determined opposition put up against them at Olympia and many other places around the country, the fascists never turned up for their public rally in Leeds. The failure of the fascists to turn up for their meeting was portrayed as yet another victory for the anti-fascist movement led by the Communist Party.¹²⁰

Along with fascism the other great international issue of the day was the threat of world war. It was on this

question that the communist fraction on the Leeds Trades Council, attempted to steer the Trades Council into adopting a Leninist position. At the Trades Council in July a letter from the National Joint Council was read out, outlining its attitude to the threat of war. The discussion on this letter was followed by a resolution from the communist fraction on the Trades Council. This protested at the position adopted by the National Joint Council, with regard to its attitude to war. The resolution advocated that in the event of war breaking out, the working class should unite and fight against the capitalist class, seeking to utilise the upheavals brought about by war to overthrow the National Government, and replace it with a workers government. In a hard fought debate, in which all five communist delegates spoke, the resolution was lost 17 to 25.¹²¹

Besides the anti-fascist and anti-war campaigns the local communists attempted to apply the Communist Party's electoral policy as part of their united front campaign; and found that this area of activity only served to alienate sections of the local Labour movement. In mid-June 1934, the CPGB announced its panel of candidates for the next general election. Included in this panel was the Leeds communist Jim Roche, who had played a key role in building up the communist cell at the Burtons factory.¹²² At the start of October 1934 Roche was put forward as one of the local Communist Party's two candidates for the municipal elections, the intention being to stand in the Central and Middleton wards.

In a leaflet on the elections, which included a long diatribe against the Labour Party, the Leeds Communist Party invited workers to its nomination meetings on the 9 and 12 of October. When the abrupt change of electoral tactics was announced on 20 October 1934, the Leeds Communist Party responded positively to these proposals, and immediately set about implementing them. It produced another open letter to workers, which invited them to a series of meetings where they could hear Maurice Ferguson speak on the Communist Party's new united front proposals. This new open letter to workers declared that the Leeds Communist Party was prepared to withdraw its candidates in the Central and Middleton wards if the Labour candidates would pledge their support for the united front against fascism and war. In support of its case the letter from Leeds Communist Party also cited the activity of the local fascists, who it claimed had repeatedly attacked communist paper sellers, and the police, who had also victimised communist paper sellers and hindered their anti-fascist activities.¹²³

Although these overtures to the local Labour Party were rejected, the Leeds Communist Party, in line with the directives contained in the secretariat letter of 20 October, withdrew its two candidates from the elections. Despite this withdrawal of its candidates from the elections, there were still complaints made against the Leeds Communist Party to the Trades Council Executive Committee, about the communist electoral campaign.¹²⁴ Such complaints could not have come at a worse time for

they tied in with an offensive against communist influence within the Leeds Labour movement led by local Labour loyalists alarmed at communist influence within the Leagues of Youth. This local anti-communist offensive was to be greatly reinforced by the effect of the 'Black Circular'.

Throughout 1934 communist speakers were a fairly regular feature of the various League of Youth branch meetings. The growing sympathy expressed within the local Leagues of Youth for the united front prompted the chair of the Leeds Labour Party Youth Advisory Committee, in October, to launch an unprecedented attack upon communist sympathisers within the Leagues of Youth. They were criticised for being 'drawing room revolutionaries' who 'are complete failures in constructive work'. The chair of the Youth Advisory Committee observed that, 'One of the most disturbing influences to which the League of Youth is subjected is due to members who hover round the Young Communist League'.¹²⁵

The issuing of the TUC's 'Black Circular' (Circular 16) in October 1934, which barred communists from being delegates to a trades council, prompted yet another attack upon the local Communist Party by the right wing within the Leeds Labour movement. The 'Black Circular' gave local Labour loyalists the means to launch their most successful campaign yet against communist influence in the Leeds Labour movement. At the Trades Council meeting in November 1934 the 'Black Circular' was read out, immediately after which a Communist Party member who

was part of the NUTGW delegation stood up and moved a resolution that, 'No action be taken by this council on this circular'. After a very bitter and divisive debate the resolution was lost by 43 votes to 24.¹²⁶

Following this decision, reaction against the Communist Party in Leeds came in swiftly from various quarters of the local Labour movement. At the Trades Council in November 1934 further discussion on the 'Black Circular' was ruled out of order. Besides this letters were read out from NUR Branch 5 and the local NUTGW, informing the Trades Council that they were withdrawing two delegates on the grounds that they were members of the Communist Party.¹²⁷ By February 1935, after the Trades Council annual meeting, the Leeds Communist Party was down to one delegate on the Trades Council, illustrating its failure to move beyond the fringes of the local Labour movement.

This failure can be put down to the combined effect of the 'Black Circular' and the sectarian lapses of local communists which only aided their political opponents within the Leeds Labour movement. These factors were given added potency by the atmosphere of political intolerance which pervaded the local Labour movement. It could also be argued that the local Communist Party's concentration on the anti-fascist campaign cut it off from many workers more interested with so-called 'bread and butter' issues such as wages and conditions. This situation is in sharp contrast to the experience of the Bradford Communist Party, where local communists had

succeeded in establishing a position where they were seen by a large number of activists as a legitimate part of the Labour movement, and consequently were better able to fend off attacks upon them such as the 'Black Circular'.

Bradford Communist Party

The Communist Party in Bradford made an impressive start to its united front activities at the beginning of 1934. It campaigned vigorously within the Bradford Labour movement for support of the national hunger march and united front congress. The local Communist Party met with a very favourable response when it took this united front campaign out into the local Labour movement. The campaign got off to a flying start in January, with the Trades Council coming out in favour of actively supporting the hunger march and united front congress. It elected Fred Ratcliffe, the Trades Council President, as delegate to the Bermondsey united front congress and sent six delegates to a local conference of the NUWM, which was convened to organise the Bradford leg of the national hunger march. The Trades Council also granted three pounds to the local NUWM to help with its preparations for the Bradford leg of the hunger march.¹²⁸

Other delegates from Bradford to the Bermondsey united front congress included Maurice Ferguson from the TGWU, the President of number 2 branch of the textile workers, the branch secretary of the Furnishing Trades Union and the assistant secretary of the local ILP. The local NUWM

received donations in support of the hunger march from a large number of local trade unions.

When the hunger march passed through Bradford in early February 1934, the building workers' trade union let the marchers stay overnight at their union hall. The local Cooperative Society fed the marchers in the evening free of charge at its cafe, while two Labour councillors arranged for blankets for the marchers.¹²⁹ Here was concrete evidence of the united front activities of the local Communist Party, successfully involving sections of the Labour movement in its activities.

On this occasion the united front was not confined to mere propaganda, but organising practical aid in support of the unemployed. The success of the Bradford Communist Party's united front campaign is shown by the fact that it organised the biggest trade union delegation from the provinces to the Bermondsey united front congress.¹³⁰ Further confirmation of this success came in the remarks of Fred Ratcliffe, President of the Trades Council, at the May Day Committee on 9 February 1934:

The Labour Party has just had its annual meeting and bemoaned the apathy of the workers and the difficulty in getting a meeting. Yet we who welcomed the marchers at the Building Trades Hall had to turn away 2,000 people for there was no room.

I am for the United Front and propose that we invite the Communist Party, the ILP and the National Unemployed Workers Movement, to send a representative

to this body so that we can have a united May Day demonstration this year.¹³¹

Ratcliffe's proposal which was approved by the May Day Committee, was the first time since 1925 that the Trades Council had officially invited the local Communist Party to participate in May Day. It is interesting to note that at the Hyde Park reception for the hunger marchers, Fred Ratcliffe seconded the resolution in support of the marchers, which had been moved by Pollitt's opening speech.¹³² This was further evidence of the local Communist Party's success in gaining the confidence and support of leading figures in the local Labour movement.

In response to the fascist activity in France and the crushing of the uprising of the Austrian workers, the Bradford Trades Council organised an anti-fascist rally. The anti-fascist rally was also in support of victims of fascism on the continent, such as Dimitrov and his co-defendants in the Reichstag Fire Trial. Over 8,000 handbills were circulated to advertise the rally on 27 February 1934 at the Building Trades Hall. The platform of speakers represented a wide cross section of the local Labour movement. There was Fred Ratcliffe, W.Hirst J.P., Foster Sunderland from Bradford Labour Party, and Maurice Ferguson of the local Communist Party, who had recently been elected as Trades Council delegate to the Yorkshire Federation of Trades Councils.¹³³

As the influence of the communist fraction grew on the Trade Council during the spring of 1934, for which it was

commended at the Central Committee, it slipped back into sectarian attacks on the leadership of the Labour movement.¹³⁴ At the April meeting of the Trades Council, it raised criticism of the disbursement of the TUC's Austrian worker's fund, reflecting the criticisms made of this in the Daily Worker. Somewhat surprisingly, the Trades Council responded to the criticisms made by the communists by writing to the TUC for an assurance that the fund was being distributed among the real victims of fascism.¹³⁵

At the May Day rally the Bradford Communist Party scored its greatest united front success to date. It had three speakers on the May Day platform, one each from the Bradford Communist Party, the YCL and the NUWM. Alongside these were speakers from every section of the local Labour movement, including Fred Jowett of the ILP. The record financial collection taken at the May Day rally reflected the fact this was the biggest local Labour movement event for some years.¹³⁶ The success of the 1934 May Day event was powerful ammunition in favour of the local Communist Party's united front campaigns. Was the success of May Day that year due to the united front platform? It is very debatable whether this was the case. Certainly it did nothing to diminish support for May Day that year as shown by the record attendance. It would appear more likely that the record attendance at May Day in 1934 reflected growing concern at the successes of fascism, particularly on the continent. For the local Communist Party to have gained acceptance into what was

symbolically the most important date in the calendar of the Labour movement was a considerable achievement. It was further evidence of how the communists had overcome much of the hostility and suspicion generated by their sectarian activities in the past.

The Bradford Communist Party's united front work in the first half of 1934, had won its members a wide measure of acceptance within the local Labour movement. The united front successes of the local Communist Party concealed a deep malaise within the branch. The main problem facing the Bradford Communist Party was its inability to recruit on any significant scale from the various united front campaigns in which it was involved. The surviving papers of local communist D.A. Wilson seem to indicate that the membership of the Bradford Communist Party fell to 37 in 1934.¹³⁷ What emerges from careful study of the Bradford Communist Party is of a small, highly motivated branch which was heavily overworked. This was due to its failure to recruit enough new people, to help shoulder the burden of the large number of campaigns it was involved in.¹³⁸ The reasons for this failure to recruit were partially subjective, and lay in some of the bad organisational methods used by the local Communist Party. Of far greater importance was the legacy of past sectarianism, during the days of the 'class against-class' period. At the Central Committee in April 1934, Maurice Ferguson admitted that while many workers were now willing to engage in united front work with local communists, they were not prepared to join the

Bradford branch due to lingering suspicions about its sectarian past:

We have had a feeling in Bradford where the workers have thought to be associated with the Party was dangerous and would involve them in artificial calls for strike action, open them to victimisation, etc. This is a heritage of the past [in particular the local Party's mishandling of a major textile strike in 1930] and is very difficult to break down. To a certain extent we have succeeded in breaking this down. There is a better relationship all round and yet this does not seem to lead further than a certain point.139

In the summer of 1934, Bradford Trades Council organised a campaign against the proposed rent increases for council tenants. The conference that launched this campaign, involved representatives of the Tenants League, the city Labour Party and various district and ward parties, along with the ILP and the local Communist Party.140 The local Communist Party's involvement in such a campaign, which had as one of its central objectives the discrediting of the Conservative council to further the electoral prospects of Labour, is testimony to their further integration into the mainstream of the local Labour movement.

This growing acceptance of the local Communist Party as a legitimate part of the Bradford Labour movement was

to be instrumental in defeating the threat posed by the TUC's 'Black Circular'. Over the following year, right wing elements within the local Labour movement tried to use the TUC's witch-hunting measures, as an instrument with which to drive communists out of the mainstream of the Labour movement.

In response to the battles against the BUF waged on a national scale and the attempts of the BUF to establish a branch in Bradford, the Trades Council took steps to counter this menace at its July meeting. It passed a resolution which was sent to the next half-yearly meeting of the Yorkshire Federation of Trades Councils (YFTC), that called on the TUC to organise a Labour movement defence force to protect its activities from the fascists.¹⁴¹ The communist fraction, in giving support to this resolution, broke the Party line on this question. As noted in chapter one the national line of the CPGB was against the idea of a workers defence force to combat the threat of attacks on Labour movement events by BUF members.

In breaking the national line on this issue, the Bradford Communist Party revealed how it was far more in tune with the mood and concerns of local Labour movement activists than the Communist Party leadership in King Street. It also reveals a difference in opinion between the local communists and the Party's national leadership over the priorities of the anti-fascist struggle. The CPGB leadership saw the main threat of fascism in Britain coming from the National Government even when it was

giving support to the struggle against the BUF. However, local communists reflecting the concerns of local Labour movement activists, saw the main threat of fascism in Britain coming from the BUF.

In the second half of 1934, the battle against the BUF and the threat of war was to dominate the activities of the Bradford Communist Party. During the latter part of the summer, it was able to get the Trades Council to support a variety of anti-fascist activities.¹⁴²

As the battle against the BUF reached a climax in the second half of the year, the Trades Council became increasingly concerned by the blackshirts' activities. It organised a conference to discuss methods of combatting fascism for Saturday 10 November 1934, with John Strachey as the main speaker. Working in tandem with the local anti-war council this was to be followed by an anti-war conference on armistice day, Sunday 11 November.¹⁴³ Whilst the Trades Council and Bradford Anti-War Council were engaged in making preparations for these activities, the BUF announced that Mosley would be coming to Bradford in mid-November, to open the new office of the local blackshirts and address a public rally.

On Saturday 10 November 1934, 131 delegates from 35 different organisations met at the Milton Rooms under the auspices of the Bradford Trades Council. Over 28 local union branches were represented, along with the local ILP and various ward Labour parties, and the Bradford Anti-War Council. In his speech, John Strachey aroused controversy when he attacked Labour's passive attitude

towards fascism. At the end of the conference Maurice Ferguson successfully moved an addendum to the Trades Council resolution. This called for the conference to elect a committee to organise opposition to Mosley's rally. From the conference a steering committee of 26 was elected, to oversee preparations for the counter-demonstration to the BUF rally.144

On the next day, over 300 people turned up to the anti-war conference organised by the Bradford Anti-War Council. The intensity of the discussion was shown by the large number of questions asked and the late finishing time of the meeting. At the end of the meeting, all those present expressed their support for a resolution dealing with the twin dangers of fascism and war. It ended:

I therefore pledge myself, wholeheartedly to resist war and Fascism...and to undertake to win the support of my colleagues, workmates, neighbours and acquaintances, and any organisation to which I belong.145

The large numbers attending both of these events revealed the depth of concern within the local Labour movement at the growing danger of war and the threat posed by fascism. At both of these events the Bradford communists played a key role in organising action against fascism and war. The prominent role which local communists were able to play in these events reflects how they were in

tune with the concerns of local Labour movement activists.

Inside the BUF rally on Sunday 18 November 1934, Mosley addressed a half-empty hall; meanwhile outside over a thousand people had turned out for the anti-fascist counter-demonstration. Under the chairmanship of Luther Horner, the crowd heard speeches from Fred Ratcliffe and Maurice Ferguson. At the end of the rally Fred Ratcliffe led an attempt to march on Mosley's meeting, but was prevented from doing so by the police. He then led a noisy demonstration through the city centre. As the one commentator in the Bradford Pioneer noted, the anti-fascist counter-demonstration was a considerable success in view of the many obstacles the organisers had to overcome, 'That was not bad at all in view of the apparently official ban that had been put on the demonstration by the Labour Party'.¹⁴⁶

The Trades Council followed this up with the formation of an anti-fascist committee.¹⁴⁷ Over 16 union branches regularly sent delegates to this anti-fascist committee. This issued a monthly circular and quarterly newsletter to all affiliates, with news of fascist activity both in Britain and abroad.¹⁴⁸

During this flurry of anti-fascist activity in the autumn of 1934, the Bradford Communist Party faced challenges on other fronts. In line with the new united front directives issued by the Party secretariat on 20 October, the Bradford Communist Party approached the local Labour Party for an electoral bloc of all working

class parties to fight the coming municipal elections. At a special meeting of the Bradford Labour Party executive in late October, a delegation from the local Communist Party put the case for an electoral united front between all working class parties. The meeting rejected these proposals 11 to 1.149

It is interesting to note how differently the Bradford and Leeds branches interpreted the secretariat's directives. These stated, that where the local branch had no chance of winning or obtaining a 'significant' vote, it should withdraw its candidates. Rebuffed by the local Labour Party, the Bradford Communist Party instead of withdrawing its candidate as the branch in Leeds had done, interpreted the new electoral directives in what appeared to be a sectarian manner. After a long and divisive debate which spanned two evenings (22-23 October) the Bradford Communist Party decided to stand Tom Tynan, a well known local communist who was on the Trades Council and President of the Bradford ETU, in the Manningham ward.¹⁵⁰ The bitter debate within the Bradford branch over whether to stand in the local elections revealed considerable confusion over the new united front line. This confusion was not cleared up until after the elections when the Central Committee sent a representative (Robson) up to Bradford to resolve the dispute within the branch over the new united front policy. At a meeting of the West Yorkshire district committee on 11 November Robson criticized the Bradford

branch for its sectarianism in standing a candidate against Labour during the local elections.151

The results for Manningham ward were as follows: Independent-2,530, Labour-2,408, Communist-107. 152 This close result would only have given ammunition to those in the local Labour movement who argued that communist sectarianism was a destructive influence, helping Labour's enemies. On the basis of the result it gained in 1933 the Bradford Communist Party was not in a position to attain a significant vote. Having said this, the local communists may not have acted out of sectarianism. Their standing against Labour did nothing to diminish their influence on the Trades Council, as we shall see with the struggle against the 'Black Circular'. They may have felt that on the basis of all their successes with united front work, they actually had a serious chance of gaining a significant vote. However, sectarian motives for standing against Labour are revealed by Maurice Ferguson, in a letter to D.A.Wilson, when he rejects the latter's call for the Bradford branch to withdraw from the local elections:

To withdraw effaces our Party, we have no platform, destroys the hopes of the workers...leaves them without a lead. Destroys the political face of the Party for the 12 months ahead. If we do this we are not even a mild ginger group even so much as the Socialist League.153

The different interpretations put upon the Communist Party's new electoral tactics by the Leeds and Bradford branches illustrates the difficulties in analysing the actions of the local membership. This, along with several other episodes from the united-front activities of the Communist Party in West Yorkshire, shows the membership were far from being a monolithic bloc which obediently carried out orders from King Street. The CPGB membership were subject to the often conflicting requirements of maintaining Party discipline and carrying out the Party line, and the difficulties of establishing or maintaining their hard-won position within the local Labour movement.

Soon after this the Bradford Communist Party was to face a far greater challenge in the form of Circular 16, one of the so called 'Black Circulars' issued by the TUC on 16 October 1934. At this TUC meeting the Bradford Trades Council was cited as a prime example of the disruptive nature of communist united front tactics.¹⁵⁴ The November meeting of the Trades Council overwhelmingly rejected the 'Black Circular', with only four votes in favour its acceptance. The Trades Council President, Fred Ratcliffe led the opposition to the 'Black Circular'. The Daily Worker noted that he:

paid tribute to the sterling work of the communist trade unionists in Bradford. In the union recruitment campaign in Bradford, the majority of the hardest workers were those the General Council wanted excluded. [While] Comrade Ferguson reminded the

delegates of the thousands of pounds won in wages for the tramwaymen in Bradford, the campaign for which had been led by the Communists. New union branches had also been formed by them.155

There were two essential ingredients to the Bradford Communist Party's successful application of united front tactics. It relied upon its members being loyal hardworking trade union activists, and being in the vanguard of the struggle against fascism and war on a local scale. This enabled them to fend off the attacks made upon them as a result of the 'Black Circular'.

Over the next eight months, until July 1935, the 'Black Circular' was to dominate proceedings of the Trades Council, embittering relations between left and right in the local Labour movement. In practical terms TUC Circular 16 was effectively ignored by the Trades Council. Despite the enormous pressures brought to bear on the Trades Council from within the Labour movement, on a local and national level, it never excluded any communists from being delegates. Indeed, in recognition of their services to the local Labour movement, two communists were elected onto the Bradford Trades Council executive in January 1935.156

The greater success of the Bradford branch in comparison to Leeds was reflected in its stronger position within the local Labour movement. The Bradford Communist Party unlike its counterpart in Leeds had become accepted into the mainstream of the local Labour

movement. Whereas in Leeds the 'Black Circular' proved to be highly damaging to the local Communist Party, in Bradford the branch was able to successfully fend off this threat to its position. The atmosphere of political tolerance which prevailed in the Bradford Trades Council and its left-wing stance on most political issues of the day provided the local communists with a more favourable environment in which to work. The absence of such conditions in Leeds was to be instrumental in holding back their united front work.

Conclusion

In drawing up a balance sheet of the Communist Party's anti-fascist activity during the period in question, what stands out is its inability to expand its membership and influence within the Labour movement on any significant scale. The CPGB's membership had inched forward from 5,000 in January 1934 to 5,800 by December 1934.¹⁵⁷ At the Central Committee in December 1934 Pollitt was very frank in his assessment of the united front campaigns over the previous two years:

With regard to the united front in Britain instead of the united front leading to the increasing influence of the Party and to increasing mass work and increases of sales of the Daily Worker, on all of the vital tests Comrade Ferguson has had to admit that we have failed....the decisive section of the workers without whom we will never bring down the National

Government are still outside the influence of our Party...158

What small gains the Communist Party did make in membership from its united front activities were usually lost very quickly due to a high turnover in membership. Throughout 1933 and 1934 the CPGB had been handicapped by its sectarianism towards the Labour Party. This was a central factor behind its continuing isolation within the Labour movement. At the Central Committee in December 1934 several members remarked that in every united front campaign since 1933, these activities had been confined to the same circle of sympathetic workers and the same layers of the Party.159

This position contrasts with the experiences of the Communist Party in West Yorkshire, where in Bradford the local branch managed to involve significant sections of the Labour movement in its united front activities. While this may well have been a product of local conditions to a degree, the local Party's lack of sectarianism towards the Labour movement (despite the occasional lapse) together with its positive attitude towards the struggle against the BUF helps account for this dichotomy.

It was only once the Communist Party nationally had thrown its weight behind the anti-Mosley movement and abandoned its sectarianism towards the Labour Party that it began to break down its isolation within the Labour movement. The failure of the 1934 hunger march to gain widespread support within the Labour movement reflects

this continuing isolation during the first half of 1934. The campaign against the BUF gave the Communist Party considerable prestige; despite this, the majority of workers on the anti-fascist demonstrations would have voted Labour in elections during this period, for they regarded the Communist Party as more of a ginger group than as a political party with serious pretensions of power. In being faithful to the political requirements of the leadership of Comintern and the CPSU, the CPGB lost an opportunity, presented by the emergence of German fascism, to emerge as a significant force in the British Labour movement during 1933 and 1934. By the time of the Comintern's Seventh World Congress in July 1935, the CPGB had made the necessary changes to its anti-fascist strategy for it to be in the vanguard of those supporting the new popular front line proclaimed there.

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- 7) Trotsky, Selected Writings 1934-1935, pp.287-312.
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- 9) It is worthwhile recalling that there is a debate about the nature of French fascism and whether there actually was such a phenomenon. Many historians do not view the 6 February events as an attempted fascist coup. F.Borkenau has argued that, 'the fascist danger in France, whether Moscow believed in it, was in fact largely imaginary', European Communism, p.115.
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- 14) Claudin, The Communist Movement, pp.178-9.
- 15) Haslam, 'The Comintern and the origins of the Popular Front 1934-1935', p.680; MacDermott and Agneu, THE COMINTERN, p.125.

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- 22) Claudin, The Communist Movement, p.179; Haslam, 'The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front 1934-1935', p.691.
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- 33) Idem.
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- 42) Daily Worker, 18 November 1933.
- 43) Ibid., 15 February 1934.
- 44) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 8 March 1934; for an account of this united front congress see the Daily Worker, 26-8 February 1934.
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- 53) Daily Worker, 19 May 1934; for an account of these meetings see also N.Todd, In Excited Times: The People Against The Blackshirts, (Bewick Press, 1995), pp.55-8.
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CHAPTER THREE

THE RISE OF POPULAR FRONTISM 1935-36

"Howard: Does this statement of yours mean that the Soviet Union has to any degree abandoned its plans and intentions to bring about a world revolution ?

Stalin: We never had any such plans or intentions".1

At its Seventh World Congress in July 1935 the Comintern gave its formal stamp of approval to the popular front strategy pioneered by the PCF. This new strategy entailed communists pursuing broad multi-class alliances in defence of the Soviet Union, and directly facilitated the election of Popular Front governments in France and Spain. These election victories were a catalyst for enormous social upheaval in both countries.

In the revolutionary situations which developed the PCF and PCE acted as a brake on the workers' struggles and played a key role in ensuring capitalism withered the revolutionary storm. Due to the Soviet Union's pursuit of alliances with Western capitalist powers, the Comintern was required to damp down and direct into safe channels any revolutionary outbursts of the masses.

In this chapter the reaction of the CPGB to the decisions of the Comintern's Seventh World Congress will be examined. How did it interpret the new popular front policy and what effect did it have on its anti-fascist activities? Taking into account the debate and controversy over the CPGB's popular front activities, this chapter will attempt to reveal how the CPGB's anti-fascist activities were conditioned more by the ethos of class collaboration inherent in the new Comintern line

than by indigenous anti-fascist sentiment; leading to it refraining from militant anti-fascist activity such as in the struggle against the BUF.² With its anti-fascist strategy guided in the main by the Comintern's popular front policy, which in turn was determined by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy, the CPGB was to engage in a year-long campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party. This campaign was defeated by a combination of the Labour Party's opposition to the popular frontism of the Communist Party and its defence of the first Moscow show trial. The needs of the new popular front policy for non-socialist allies to the right of the Labour movement led the Communist Party leadership to downplay the struggle against the BUF, and almost to miss playing a role in the famous 'Battle of Cable Street'; which has gone down into Labour movement mythology as being led by the CPGB.

In the first two chapters it was shown how the Comintern slowly moved towards an anti-fascist strategy which complemented Soviet foreign policy. In the first section of this chapter the decisions of the Seventh World Congress will be examined against the background of developments in Soviet foreign policy. The reaction of Soviet foreign policy and Comintern to the upsurge in fascist activity throughout the world has considerable bearing upon any study of the CPGB, which shaped its anti-fascist activity to fit in with its overriding objective of defending the Soviet Union.

After examining the policy and campaigns of the Communist Party nationally the activities of communists in West Yorkshire will be examined in an effort to determine the effectiveness of communist anti-fascist strategy. What effect did the CPGB's new popular front policy have on the fortunes and activities of local communists? Did local communists find that it served to strengthen their position within the local labour movement or did it make little or no difference to their fortunes and activities? By examining the Communist Party on a national and local level hopefully it will shed light on why it failed to become a mass party and a leading force within the British Labour movement, unlike its counterparts in France and Spain. The CPGB's anti-fascist activity was determined more by the spirit of class collaboration inherent in Comintern's popular front policy than by the anti-fascist sentiments of British workers; which led to it putting less emphasis upon militant anti-fascist activity, such as the campaign against the blackshirts.

Soviet Foreign Policy 1935-36

The signing of the Franco-Soviet Pact in May 1935 saw the first major triumph of Litvinov's policy of seeking an alliance system between the Soviet Union and other major powers threatened by Germany and Japan. Underpinning Litvinov's foreign policy was the belief that German and Japanese aggression could be contained by the imposition of collective sanctions by the major powers acting

through the League of Nations. Only by committing the Soviet Union to the defence of others could it expect to have allies in the event of a German or Japanese attack.

This represented a total departure from Soviet foreign policy which, since Lenin's day, had always been against any military commitment to one group of capitalist powers rivalled by others. In his study of Soviet foreign policy during the 1930s Haslam has commented:

Traditionally the Soviet regime had sought security through the exploitation of frictions and antagonisms within the capitalist camp, a policy which presupposed manoeuvre vis-a-vis the other powers, and which certainly precluded membership of any entangling alliance. This undifferentiated approach to the capitalist world was based on established Marxist theory reinforced by traditional Leninist practice.³

According to Lenin wars were an inevitable by-product of capitalist development, believing that military alliances precipitated rather than forestalled conflict. The best form of defence for the Soviet state lay in the success of the world revolution.⁴ The departure of Soviet foreign policy, away from the goal of world revolution as the means of defending the first workers state, towards rapprochement with the major western powers was to have profound consequences for the Comintern.

While Litvinov directed Soviet foreign policy, Stalin was preoccupied by domestic matters, particularly economic matters. Foremost amongst these economic matters was the second Five-Year Plan. Besides this Stalin was preoccupied with consolidating his grip on power through purges, a new round of which started in 1935 following the assassination of Kirov, the Leningrad Party leader, in December 1934; and culminating in the first Moscow show trial of old Bolsheviks such as Kamenev and Zinoviev.⁵

Since containing German expansionism was its foreign policy priority, the Soviet government was keen to maintain good relations with Italy. However, Mussolini's imperialist ambitions drove Italy into conflict with the League of Nations, presenting the Soviet government with an acute dilemma once Mussolini had made clear his intention to invade Abyssinia.

With continued misgivings and considerable reluctance the Soviet government gave Litvinov the go-ahead for Soviet support for League sanctions against Italy. Throughout the Abyssinian war Soviet diplomacy sought to preserve the outward appearance of conformity to the League's Covenant, so as not to discredit the League of Nations too much and weaken its future capacity for taking action against Germany. Reluctant to offend its French ally, the Soviet government privately accepted the French idea of a compromise deal to settle the Abyssinian dispute.⁶

By early 1936 the Soviet Union seemed as far away as ever from achieving an anti-German front with Britain and France; both of whom pursued a policy of seeking an understanding with Germany. Although isolationist sentiment temporarily held sway within the Soviet government during the spring of 1936, Stalin had not abandoned the pursuit of an anti-German alliance with Britain, France and the United States. In an interview with the American journalist Roy Howard published in Pravda, Stalin went out of his way to reassure those powers that the Soviet Union had never had any plans to bring about world revolution and would make a reliable ally.⁷ In effect, Stalin openly admitted that the Soviet government had abandoned its previous raison d'etre and now sought a relationship of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West. Trotsky commented at the time that the pacifism of Soviet foreign policy revealed the military and economic weakness of the first workers state.⁸

Soviet impotence and sense of frustration on the diplomatic scene was finally lifted with the election of the Popular Front government in France on 3 May 1936; which raised hopes that the Franco-Soviet Pact might yet be made to work. While the Soviet government welcomed the election of the Popular Front government in France, it also held many misgivings about it as well. It viewed the election successes of the PCF with alarm, out of fear that they might frighten the Radical party away from continued support for the Popular Front, and thus place

the Franco-Soviet Pact in jeopardy.⁹ In order to reassure its French allies Moscow vetoed calls for the PCF to participate in the Popular Front government.

The PCF, taking its cue from Moscow's reaction to events, viewed the revolutionary upsurge in May and June 1936 as a threat to French national security and not as an opportunity to overthrow capitalism.¹⁰ By mid July 1936, much to the relief of the Soviet government, the crisis in France was largely over and the Popular Front government had stabilised its position. Just as with events in France, the Soviet government was taken by surprise by Franco's insurrection on 17 July 1936 which plunged yet another country into revolutionary turmoil.¹¹ Once again the Soviet government was faced with a major foreign policy dilemma, between supplying arms to the Republican government and not wanting to threaten its relations with Britain and France.

During the summer of 1936 Stalin faced a groundswell of criticism within the CPSU over the Soviet government's failure to aid the workers' struggles in Spain and France. In the face of this, together with the oppositions' criticism of his personal abuse of power and discontent over social reforms, Stalin appeared to be losing his grip in Moscow and therefore launched the Trotsky-Zinoviev-Kamenev show trial in mid-August 1936 as a means of securing his position.¹² The purges of the CPSU and Soviet government which followed the trial, also referred to as the Terror, convulsed not only Soviet society but spread to the Comintern apparatus in Moscow

and were exported to Spain.¹³ In their recent history of the Comintern, McDermott and Agnew have argued that the purges within Soviet society, and their export to the Comintern and the Spanish conflict, alienated potential allies throughout Europe away from support of Popular Front movements.¹⁴

After signing the Franco-Soviet Pact in May 1935 the Soviet government developed high hopes of establishing an international front with the major western powers designed to contain German aggression. Yet by October 1936 it found this objective as far away as ever. Indeed, its diplomatic position in many respects was even weaker than in 1935. On the one hand it found itself embroiled in a foreign civil war against its will; while the states to which it sought an alliance with against Germany remained aloof from its overtures and appeared intent on appeasing German aggression. The foreign policy dilemmas of the Soviet government raise the question of how did the Comintern react to the security concerns of the Soviet government? The answer to this is provided by the decisions of the Comintern's Seventh World Congress whose edicts laid down a new policy for the popular front period 1935-39; that the communist parties' activities should be determined above all else by the need to defend the Soviet Union. In order to carry out this objective communist parties were required to form popular front alliances with socialists and non-socialists with the objective ultimately of forming popular front governments favourable to a military pact with the USSR.

The Seventh World Congress of Comintern July-August 1935

The seventh and last Comintern congress has aroused great controversy amongst historians leading to radically different interpretations of its decisions. There are two main schools of thought on the significance of the decisions reached at the congress. Many have portrayed its decisions as proof of the Comintern's subordination to the foreign policy requirements of the Soviet state. The world revolution was effectively abandoned as a means of defending the first workers' state and in its place came the popular front. This entailed the communist parties campaigning for multi-party anti-fascist unity 'with declared enemies of the revolution'; a policy which neatly dovetailed with the Soviet Union's quest for military alliances with Western powers against Germany. This viewpoint brings together a diverse range of historical opinion ranging from E.H.Carr and P.Broue to dissident Marxist historians such as F.Claudin, L.Trotsky and C.L.R.James.¹⁵

Yet orthodox communist historians ranging from A.I.Sobolev and M.Myant to N.Branson and E.Hobsbawm have taken a more positive view of the congress. They portray the congress decisions as elaborating a new strategic line which addressed the anti-fascist and general democratic tasks of the day, while enhancing the long-term prospects for world revolution.¹⁶ Non-communist historians such as McDermott and Agnew share this more positive interpretation yet refer to the congress

decisions as only a partial break with the past which set in motion, 'a highly contradictory period in Comintern history'.¹⁷

The key event of the congress was the report given by Dimitrov on the struggle against fascism. Dimitrov pointed out that fascism was becoming an increasing menace to the international Labour movement and to bourgeois democracy. Communists therefore should modify their rigid view of the capitalist camp, and draw a line of distinction between fascism and bourgeois democratic parties, and direct their fire against the chief enemy fascism. Fascism it was argued represented a tremendous step backward in comparison with bourgeois democracy. Dimitrov observed:

Now the fascist counter-revolution is attacking bourgeois democracy in an effort to establish the most barbaric regime of exploitation and suppression of the toiling masses. Now the toiling masses in a number of capitalist countries are faced with the necessity of making a definite choice, and of making it today, not between proletarian dictatorship and bourgeois democracy, but between bourgeois democracy and fascism.¹⁸

At that stage of the class struggle the most important things were the anti-fascist general democratic objectives i.e. the defence of bourgeois democracy. Dimitrov argued that the task of achieving the unity of

all working-class forces was inseparable from the task of uniting all anti-fascist forces. The efforts of even a united working class were not sufficient to secure victory over fascism. Therefore, after having achieved unity of all working-class forces, it was stated that the communist parties should strive to build national cross-class alliances comprising all those groups which, though not natural adherents to socialism, were concerned in defending democratic freedoms against fascist enslavement. In working for the union of all anti-fascist forces, the communist parties had to put forward a popular front platform based on demands for resistance to fascism, defence of the democratic rights and the living standards of the working and middle classes.

United in a popular front movement the anti-fascist masses had the potential to get reactionary governments removed. Dimitrov put the formation of anti-fascist popular front governments on the order of the day. The defence of the Soviet Union was proclaimed in all the speeches and resolutions of the congress as the primary duty of all communists. Implicit within Dimitrov's call for the formation of popular front governments, was the belief that these would link up with the Soviet Union against fascist aggression.¹⁹

The popular front strategy put forward by Dimitrov had no precedent in the history of the Comintern. Dimitrov attempted to justify the new popular front strategy by reference to the Fourth World Congress resolution on the united front. Yet in no way did this conceive of

collaboration with capitalist parties for the defence of bourgeois democracy. Claudin has commented that:

It is usually assumed, in studies of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, that the basic purpose of its work was the formulation of tactics for the struggle against Fascism and against Capitalism.²⁰

Yet in reality as Claudin points out, the congress defined as the central slogan for its supporters, 'The fight for peace and for the defence of the USSR'. In his report Togliatti, 'located the slogan of the united front "in the struggle for peace and for the defence of the Soviet Union"'.²¹ He declared that defence of the Soviet Union was the prime objective of all communist parties. This meant that all the activity of the communist parties had to be subordinated to this objective. In the speeches of the delegates arguments for the defence of bourgeois democracy invariably took second place to the argument for the defence of the Soviet Union.

In their speeches the delegates unanimously repeated that the chief threat of war came from Germany, presenting the imperialist antagonisms of Europe as a clash between the principles of democracy and fascism. At a stroke, this view dispensed with Lenin's doctrine of imperialism, which believed that the real cause of wars were imperialist antagonisms. Lenin considered it absurd to look for a 'guilty party' in the conflicts between

capitalist states. The new policies put forward were not based on a critical analysis of the problems of the class struggle, but represented a pragmatic response to the urgent needs of Soviet foreign policy.

The contradiction at the heart of the new policy lay in the fact that it instructed all sections to adapt their anti-fascist strategy to suit their own national conditions; yet at the same time it declared that all countries of the world were equally in need of the popular front and popular front government. Far from allowing its sections the autonomy to develop their anti-fascist strategy in response to national conditions, the Comintern imposed a new orthodoxy on its sections from which deviations were not tolerated.

Several historians have noted that the Popular Front policy was based on an unstable contradiction which, 'lay in the incompatibility of the economic aspirations of its component class elements'.²² Events in France and Spain during 1936 were to reveal that the aspirations of the working class for social and economic reform, went far beyond the threshold of change considered as acceptable by both the liberal bourgeoisie and the political representatives of the traditional workers parties.

Unlike any previous Comintern congress, this one deliberately avoided the theme of world revolution.²³ Dimitrov later admitted that, 'We deliberately excluded from the reports as well as from the decisions of the congress high-sounding phrases on the revolutionary perspective'.²⁴ E.H.Carr has noted:

the silent relegation of proletarian revolution to as inconspicuous a place as was decently possible in the proceedings and resolutions of the seventh congress. Lenin's united front had been designed to hasten the advent of the proletarian revolution. Dimitrov's "popular front" was designed to keep the proletarian revolution in abeyance in order to deal with the pressing emergence of fascism.²⁵

In assessing the historical importance of the Comintern's Seventh World Congress it is difficult to avoid supporting Trotsky's verdict on its proceedings; a verdict which is subscribed to by Comintern historians such as E.H.Carr.²⁶ The Seventh World Congress effectively abandoned the revolutionary tenets of Leninism and its goal of world revolution and put in its place the defence of bourgeois democracy. This was to find practical confirmation in the counter-revolutionary role of the Comintern and the PCF and PCE during the revolutionary upheavals in France and Spain during 1936 serve to confirm Trotsky's prognosis of the Comintern having abandoned the Leninist goal of world revolution. On 23 August 1935 Trotsky commented:

The Seventh Congress of the Comintern...will sooner or later go down in history as the liquidation congress. Even if all its participants do not today recognize the fact, they are all - with that

obligatory unanimity which in general has characterised the Third International over recent years - busy in practice with the liquidation of the program, principles, and tactical methods established by Lenin, and are preparing the complete abolition of the Comintern as an independent organization.²⁷

In both France and Spain, the communist parties tailored their anti-fascist strategy to meet the requirements of Soviet foreign policy. In both countries the communist parties abandoned revolutionary class struggle in circumstances uniquely favourable, to pursue class collaboration alliances which betrayed the interests of the workers. Both the PCF and the PCE saw a growth in their influence and membership due to the enormous social upheavals gripping their respective countries. Yet in passing over the unique revolutionary opportunities which were presented to them both, the communist parties lost their one chance of replacing the socialists' as the dominant influence within the French and Spanish working class. In both countries, the Popular Front proved to be a force which betrayed the workers' interests, in the name of anti-fascism, rather than a force which defended them.

Despite the negative role of the popular front in France and Spain the communist parties in both countries saw an increase in their membership and influence which is in sharp contrast to the situation in Britain where

the CPGB saw only a marginal improvement in its position as a result of its popular front activities. The attempts of the CPGB to put the new popular front line into practice are examined in the following section.

The CPGB and the new popular front line

In turning to Britain, the experience of the Seventh World Congress and the popular front in France and Spain raises several questions. Was the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy primarily determined by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy or was it shaped more by domestic political conditions? Did its Popular Front campaign entail the pursuit of cross-class alliances? What effect did pursuit of the new popular front policy have upon the fortunes of the CPGB in terms of membership and influence? Finally, bearing in mind the debate over the popular front, we need to assess what truth there is in allegations that the CPGB, from its adoption of popular frontism, began to 'soft pedal' the class struggle and refrained from militant anti-fascist activity.²⁸ An examination of communist anti-fascist activity at both a national and local scale will be helpful in answering such questions.

In assessing the CPGB's anti-fascist policy and activity it will be necessary to establish the nature of its Popular Front campaign. The first task is to establish how the CPGB interpreted the Seventh Congress decisions and what it saw as its objectives flowing on from these. Essentially the CPGB saw its main role being

to help bring about the downfall of the 'pro-fascist' National Government and replace it with a Labour Government favourable to a military pact with the Soviet Union. The first major step towards realising these objectives was to obtain the working-class united front i.e. Communist Party affiliation to the Labour Party. In its efforts to attain these objectives the Communist Party leadership saw the struggle against the BUF as politically irrelevant.

Speaking in the debate on Dimitrov's report to the Seventh World Congress, Pollitt declared that within the Comintern special responsibility fell on the CPGB. This was because the British Government, far from opposing fascism, was trying to direct Germany and Italy towards confrontation with the USSR; and that the Labour Party was the main obstacle to the establishment of a working-class united front in Britain and to united action between the LSI and the Comintern.²⁹

Taking his cue from Dimitrov's comment that, 'At the present stage, fighting the fascist danger in Britain means primarily fighting the "National Government" and its reactionary measures...', Pollitt noted that the British ruling class held the BUF in reserve, taking advantage of mass hatred of the BUF to push through the anti-democratic agenda of the National Government.³⁰ He complained that:

The great weakness of the fight against Fascism in Britain is that it is seen primarily as a fight

against Mosley. The tendencies towards Fascism, developed in the policy of the National Government, are not seen as a vital danger that makes it imperative to defeat this government.³¹

From this it followed that the main task facing the CPGB was to play a leading role in organising the defeat of the National Government. As will be shown later, this meant in practice that the CPGB leadership effectively downplayed the struggle against the BUF as politically irrelevant. This contradicts the established historical view which portrays the CPGB as the leading force in the fight against the BUF.³² It also contradicts the view of Kevin Morgan who argues that it was not until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War that Pollitt became preoccupied by international questions and effectively gave up on the struggle against the BUF as politically irrelevant.³³

In chapters one and two of this study the divisions of opinion within the CPGB over anti-fascist strategy were revealed. On the one hand there was the leadership, which saw the anti-fascist struggle in Britain as constituting the fight against the 'pro-fascist' National Government; while large sections of the rank and file saw the fight against the BUF as the main focus of the anti-fascist struggle in Britain. In the period after the Seventh World Congress this division of opinion within the CPGB continued.

In his speech to the Seventh World Congress Pollitt repeatedly emphasised that the CPGB should work towards the election of a Labour Government. To facilitate this it would propose to the Labour Party a joint election campaign and withdraw most of its candidates from the general election. He declared that in keeping with the congress resolution, which called for unity between the Comintern and the LSI, the CPGB would renew its application for affiliation to the Labour Party. Pollitt stated that the united front tactics of the CPGB:

can become the first step towards a mass political party of the working class in Britain, and make a substantial strengthening of all those forces in the world fighting against fascism and war.³⁴

Pollitt stressed the importance of fighting for the defeat of the National Government and the election of a Labour Government, but not from the perspective of how this would open up opportunities for the struggle for socialism in Britain. Rather, the election of a Labour Government would help to check the advance of fascism and war in Europe, and replace Britain's pro-Hitler foreign policy with, 'closer relations with the Soviet Union and full identification with its peace policy'.³⁵ Looked at in this light it would appear that the CPGB General Secretary saw the struggle against fascism in Britain as primarily determined by the requirements of Soviet

foreign policy and not by the concerns of British workers.

In concluding his speech Pollitt called on the CPGB to widen its united front tactics and pursue a broad amorphous cross-class alliance of all anti-fascist forces regardless of their political colour. The clear implication being that the British Labour movement on its own was not strong enough to bring about the defeat of the National Government:

The Communist Party of Great Britain now has the duty of bringing together in a people's front every section of the working class movement, the agricultural workers and all sections of the intelligentsia and professional classes, in fact all people who hate Fascism and War....and draw them into the political struggle against the whole policy of the National Government, a policy which leads towards German Fascism and War.³⁶

Unfortunately for the CPGB the obstacles to an effective anti-government combination were quite formidable. Undoubtedly, the biggest obstacle was the legacy of bitterness left by the Labour Party split in 1931. The role played by MacDonald and Snowden in the formation of the National Government was widely regarded within the Labour movement as an act of treachery. For the rest of the 1930s there existed very strong feeling within the Labour movement against any kind of involvement with

'capitalist' politicians; the split of 1931 created a deep suspicion of anybody who favoured political deals with them. The strong mood for unity in the face of the capitalist enemy was reinforced by the steady recovery of the Labour Party's electoral fortunes from 1932 onwards. It was played upon to great effect by the Labour Party leadership in their campaign of opposition to the CPGB's affiliation bid. This factor, together with the bitterness still felt from the communists sectarian 'class-against-class' phase, played an important role in undermining support for the CPGB's campaign for a united front with the Labour Party. The united front with the Labour Party was seen as the foundation stone of any popular front movement in Britain.

In the post-Seventh Congress discussion within the CPGB, the leadership interpreted the new Comintern policy and the subsequent tasks flowing from this, in line with the formulations laid down by Pollitt's speech in Moscow.³⁷ The Seventh Congress decisions were portrayed to the CPGB membership as a historic turning point for the world communist movement. They represented more than just a change in communist tactics as Dutt stressed at the Political Bureau on 6 October 1935:

We want to beware of a narrow approach that shows the Seventh Congress as a change in our tactics...It is that, but that is not all....It means we have a new approach to all political questions.³⁸

Dutt emphasised that the Seventh Congress decisions were aimed not just at the communist parties but also aimed at giving practical leadership to the whole working class and to the anti-fascist majority in all countries.³⁹ The struggle against fascism and war was inextricably linked with the defence of the Soviet Union; for in any future world war the Soviet Union would come under attack from the fascist powers with the active collusion of imperialist states such as Britain. Dutt noted that the fascist powers of Central Europe were looking to a war of conquest against the Soviet Union to solve their economic problems. For such a military adventure to be successful, the fascist states needed the acquiescence of Western powers such as Britain and France. Hence the fascist and potential fascist groups within the ruling classes in the West were trying to give their fascist allies this support. However, they were held back from this by the weight of anti-fascist feeling. France was cited as an example to be followed, where the united front movement had been able to transform anti-fascist feeling into such a force that not only prevented any French alliance with the fascist powers against the Soviet Union; but had forced the ruling class to conclude the Franco-Soviet Pact.⁴⁰

The views of Dutt were reflected in an article for Labour Monthly on the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, with John Mahon making public the strategic thinking behind the Communist Party's anti-fascist work. Mahon concluded that:

In this situation the supreme interest of the international working class is the defence of the USSR. At all costs the stronghold of socialism must be protected from the destruction which the Fascist powers with the support of the extreme reactionaries in all countries are planning. Only the successful defence of the USSR can guarantee the victory of socialism in all countries.⁴¹

If further proof were needed to show that the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy was worked out in accordance with the requirements of Soviet foreign policy, then the following admission by Dutt to the Political Bureau in October 1935 should suffice:

Our danger is the united front of imperialism and fascism against the workers, the Soviet Union, and the colonial peoples....the force of armaments at present are ten to one against the Soviet Union if imperialism were united and therefore if we are serious about victory for socialism it means we have got to find the way to change that proportion and see that the proportion out of this ten on the imperialist side shall be turned against each other and that becomes our policy.⁴²

He concluded with the following comment:

We have to find those elements in the imperialist camp who for whatever reason and the reasons do not matter to us a bit, who are prepared to oppose the fascist warmaking powers,...and so we get the position of the Franco-Soviet Pact.⁴³

Dutt went on to argue that only mass public pressure could prevent pro-fascist elements in the British and French governments from making agreements with Hitler. The CPGB's ultimate objective was the replacement of reactionary governments in these countries, with popular front governments committed to collective security and support for the Soviet Union's peace policy. However, in the short term the Communist Party's task was to try to force the National Government to actively support collective security so as to restrain fascist aggression, and for it to enter the Franco-Soviet Pact.⁴⁴

At the CPGB's national conference on 5-6 October 1935, 88 delegates heard Pollitt give a report from the Seventh World Congress and outline the tasks facing the Party. The Daily Worker report of the conference noted that the introspective nature of the Party over the previous two months was due to its intense study of the decisions of the Seventh World Congress. The conference approved the proposal to withdraw all candidates from the next general election with the exception of Pollitt and Gallacher, despite the fact that Labour had already rejected the Communist Party's united front proposals for the election. In all areas the branches were to approach

local Labour parties for a joint campaign during the municipal and parliamentary elections. Pollitt concluded with the following call to the delegates:

Organise the defeat of the National Government and to secure as a step towards this one united working class party in Britain, that not one working class vote from Cornwall to Aberdeen shall be split in the parliamentary elections.⁴⁵

While the national leadership geared the Communist Party up for the approaching elections, the struggle against the BUF took off once again. Divisions over anti-fascist strategy once again came to the fore between the leadership, which saw the main task as the organisation of a popular front to change British foreign policy, and sections of the membership which saw the struggle against fascism in Britain lying with the campaign against the BUF.

The anti-Mosley movement - Autumn 1935

During the late summer and early autumn of 1935, as the Abyssinian crisis escalated towards war, the BUF held a series of 'Hands Off Italy' meetings up and down the country. As in the 1933-34 period a largely spontaneous mass movement from below developed to counter Mosley's blackshirts.⁴⁶

In town after town, local Labour movement activists came together with local communists to organise counter-

demonstrations to BUF meetings; attempting in most cases to try and close the fascist meetings down. In the majority of cases the BUF had to abandon its meetings and retreat under a police escort. More often than not a provocative act by a fascist steward would lead to the anti-fascists charging the platform.⁴⁷ Over the weekend of 1-2 September 1935, BUF meetings across London ended in failure as thousands of anti-fascists forced them to close prematurely.⁴⁸

Throughout September and October 1935, fascist meetings, advertised as 'peace rallies' in support of Italy's aggressive stance towards Abyssinia, were invariably broken up or severely disrupted.⁴⁹ The highlights of the anti-fascist campaign in this period include the 10,000 strong counter-demonstration in Aberdeen on 26 September which closed down the fascist meeting and on 6 October in Sheffield where over 3,000 people disrupted the BUF rally.⁵⁰ The intensity of the anti-Mosley movement led the Daily Worker to comment:

In all parts of Britain Mussolini's blackshirted agents are being driven off the streets by the terrific anger of the workers....everywhere the Fascists are recognized as the supporters of war.⁵¹

Nigel Todd in his study of rank and file Labour movement opposition to the BUF in Tyneside, has noted how this movement from below helped bring to an abrupt end Mosley's campaigning in 1935. He has observed how,

'Nationally, the BUF had been reduced, by a combination of hard opposition and a self-acquired disreputable image, to a largely London based movement after 1934-35'.⁵²

There is no indication from the Political Bureau or Central Committee minutes that the national leadership paid any attention to the anti-Mosley movement during this period. While not opposing this movement as they had done in 1933 and early 1934, the King Street leadership failed to actively participate within it and throw the resources of the Communist Party behind it.⁵³ In the absence of a lead from King Street, local communists linked up with their Labour movement counterparts to organise a campaign of opposition to Mosley.

This episode reveals once again how the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy was out of touch with indigenous anti-fascist sentiment. The requirements of Soviet foreign policy, which desired the National Government to be replaced by a government partial to an alliance with the USSR, led the CPGB leadership to overlook this rank and file movement of opposition to Mosley. Knowing full well of the Labour leaders' opposition to extra parliamentary action, the Communist Party leadership, obsessed with defeating the National Government, missed out on an opportunity to extend the CPGB's influence amongst a layer of militant Labour movement activists. This episode in the anti-Mosley struggle which has largely been ignored by historians, is yet another dent in the popular

image of the Communist Party as being the vanguard of the anti-fascist movement.⁵⁴

While the rank and file movement against Mosley during the Autumn of 1935 was going from one success to another, the Communist Party leadership was immersed in preparations for the general election. The general election was seen as an opportunity to bring about the desired changes in British foreign policy.

The 1935 general election campaign

At the Political Bureau discussion of the general election campaign, the re-election of the National Government was blamed on the passive campaign of the Labour Party leaders, who had allowed themselves to be politically outmanoeuvred. The Labour leaders' opposition to the united front was cited as a major reason why the National Government had been re-elected. It was noted that the biggest gains for Labour came in areas where local Labour parties worked together with local communists. The National Government's re-election was viewed as especially serious from the standpoint of the worsening international situation, with regard to the strengthening of the international anti-Soviet front and increased fears of an understanding between Britain, France and Germany.⁵⁵

On the whole, most of the contributions to the discussion argued that the Communist Party's electoral campaign had been a success. It was reported that in most areas the branches had made a favourable impression

through their hard work in support of local Labour Party campaigns. The Secretariat circular on the lessons of the general election campaign, which summed up the Political Bureau discussion, stated:

The contacts which the Party made, the good relations they established, the favourable impression which our work encouraged, the unity in action which developed in some cases - these are our gains which must be consolidated, strengthened and further developed.⁵⁶

The Secretariat circular also noted the serious weaknesses in the Communist Party's election campaign which reflected its opportunistic adaptation to the Labour Party campaign:

We can say that generally speaking, it was the individual Party members who operated not the Party as an organisation....Very few Party meetings were organised, very few local Party leaflets were issued, and most significant of all, very little was done in the way of recruiting members to our Party.⁵⁷

The CPGB's failure to carry out the basic tasks of a revolutionary party in an election campaign, such as holding propaganda meetings, together with the absence of any criticism of Labour during the campaign, show how it hid its face from the electorate in an unprincipled bid to further its campaign for a united front with the

Labour Party. At the Central committee in January 1936 Pollitt criticised the Communist Party's general election campaign along similar lines:

In general our Party submerged the whole of its independent line. The general propaganda of the Communist Party in the election campaign became indistinguishable from the propaganda of the Labour Party.⁵⁸

In his speech which opened the discussion on the Political Bureau over the General Election campaign, Pollitt outlined future perspectives and tasks for the CPGB:

It is clear on the basis of this election...there will have to be many changes in policy on the part of the Labour Party and our policy. We are moving into a situation like France. The National Government is strongly consolidating its forces. It would be fatal to wait to the next General Election to defeat the National Government. On the basis of our experiences we have to apply not only for affiliation to the Labour Party but for comrade Gallacher to apply for the whip of the Labour Party.⁵⁹

The main objective of the Communist Party's new united front campaign, central to which was its application for affiliation to the Labour Party, was to develop the

Labour movement and its allies, 'into a fighting opposition to the National Government inside and outside of Parliament', capable of bringing about the government's downfall. Pollitt called upon CPGB branches to extend and develop the friendly relations which they had established during the election with local Labour parties. Communist Party branches were expected to get resolutions of support for the affiliation bid passed by all local working-class organisations. The campaign for affiliation was portrayed not as an end in itself but as a means to recruit to the Communist Party and build its influence throughout the Labour movement.⁶⁰ Affiliation to Labour was also seen as a vital stepping stone towards a popular front movement in Britain.

Towards the popular front

Over the next year, up to Labour Party conference in October 1936, the CPGB was to pursue a two-fold strategy in its campaign against the National Government. On the one hand, the Communist Party was to launch a major campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party, believing the united front with Labour to be an essential component in the building of a popular front movement strong enough to bring down the National Government. Complementing this, the CPGB was to cast its net out for political allies to the right of the Labour movement. This largely took the form of its intervention in the peace movement, which was composed of various middle-class organisations representing different shades of pacifism.

One example of the Communist Party's attempt to build support amongst the middle classes for its anti-fascist strategy was the national Congress of Peace and Friendship with the USSR held on 7 December 1935. It received messages of support from Air-Commodore Charlton and the leader of the Liberal Party. Delegations to the congress included representatives of 18 professional societies, 60 peace societies, dozens of religious bodies, 168 social, educational and cultural organisations and 37 local Labour parties. The congress passed a motion which declared that, 'the interests of international peace and the welfare of mankind require the closest possible cooperation in international affairs between the government of Britain and the USSR'.⁶¹ In an attempt to boost the appeal of its popular front propaganda and the campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party the Communist Party began to change its organisational structure to bring it into harmony with British forms and to gradually abandon the lexicon of Marxism-Leninism.

A turning point?

At the Central Committee meeting on 4-5 January 1936, and at the Political Bureau on 7 February, a two-fold strategy was elaborated, which was designed to bring about a mass popular front movement in Britain. The decisions taken, instituted far reaching changes in the Communist Party's structure and campaigning priorities, have been portrayed by some historians as a turning point

in its history. Noreen Branson claims that the changes approved by the January meeting, 'led to an enormous improvement in the Party's work', making recruitment to the ranks much easier.⁶² It could be reasonably argued that Branson exaggerates the impact of these changes. There is evidence to suggest that the new changes were not warmly received by sections of the rank and file who were very confused by it all and may have seen the changes as an attempt to abandon the practices of Marxism-Leninism.⁶³ However, the CPGB's membership was fairly stagnant up until the early summer of 1936. It was largely developments in the international arena such as the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War which turned the Communist Party's fortunes around, and gave it a popular issue around which to campaign and led to a rapid flow of new recruits into the ranks. The anti-Mosley activities of sections of the rank and file during the summer of 1936 also appear to have aided recruitment to the Communist Party.

At the Central Committee meeting on 4-5 January 1936, Pollitt declared that central to the preservation of world peace was the defence of the USSR. He praised the national Congress for Peace and Friendship with the USSR, held in December 1935, as a model example of popular front activity designed to build support for the defence of the USSR:

Never before have such different men and women got together all united in a common friendship with the

Soviet Union. The fact such a congress could be held is an indication of how strong is the feeling of friendship with the USSR.⁶⁴

Pollitt believed that the Communist Party should capitalise upon the momentum developed in the campaign building up to the peace congress, and called for all those groups supporting the congress to organise a peace ballot which asked the question, 'Are you in favour of a peace pact of friendship with the Soviet union or continuance of the present friendship policy with Hitler?' He believed that such a peace ballot could mobilise public opinion decisively in favour of an Anglo-Soviet pact with the object of pressurising the government to abandon the pro-German line of its foreign policy; 'No government and no foreign minister can help but be compelled to pay attention to such a ballot'.⁶⁵

Alongside activities such as the above, which were designed primarily to appeal to non-socialist allies of the popular front, went the campaign for affiliation to Labour. At this early stage of the campaign for the popular front the Party gave most emphasis to achieving affiliation to Labour.

In his report on the early stages of the campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party, Pollitt noted the poor response of the Communist Party membership in taking up the issue. Beside calling for the membership to step up a gear in support of the affiliation campaign, he also proposed that it launch a pro-affiliation petition with

the target of a million signatures, which would be handed in at Labour Party conference. This petition would later be abandoned due to a lack of signatures far below the million mark.

The same Central Committee meeting approved a far-reaching package of changes which Pollitt put forward to boost the campaign for affiliation to Labour and broaden the appeal of the Communist Party's popular front propaganda. Pollitt claimed that the new proposals on organisational structure and political strategy:

go much further than anything we have yet done in the building of the Communist Party. From the point of importance, I can only think of the central committee after the ninth plenum [of the ECCI which introduced the sectarian 'class-against-class' line-DLM] which took such important decisions in regard to the future work of the party.⁶⁶

The Communist Party on a local basis was reorganised to fit in more with British conditions. The old division of the membership into factory and street cells was abolished, and the local membership was reorganised into branches on a residential basis similar to the ward Labour Party system. This eliminated the old structure with its alien sounding terminology. In an article outlining the new organisational structure in the journal Discussion, R.W. Robson wrote, 'We must be able to approach Labour Party organisations on an equal level and

discuss questions in organisational terms common to both parties'.⁶⁷

The new popular front strategy was also applied to the trade union front, with the Communist Party campaigning for closer relations between the Soviet and British unions; for the British unions were seen as the strongest opponents of merger between the IFTU and the RILU. The merger of the two main trade union blocs was set down as a campaigning priority by the Seventh World Congress. Besides this, communist trade unionists were expected to campaign for all union branches to affiliate to the Labour Party, with a view to bolstering support for the affiliation campaign. There was to be a new emphasis on Party members becoming, 'the champions for trade union recruitment', particularly in the new industries of the Midlands and Greater London which were trade union blackspots. Again this was seen as a measure which would boost support for the campaign for affiliation to Labour.⁶⁸

More controversial was the proposal for the NUWM to merge with the unemployed associations organised by the TUC. Pollitt admitted that this proposal had led to 'very heated discussions' on the Political Bureau and in the Secretariat, and went on to criticise Wal Hannington and Harry McShane for their opposition to this proposal. Arguing in favour of this proposal, Pollitt said that unity amongst the unemployed would, 'help the fight for unity in the whole of the country'. He deliberately

downplayed the importance of the NUWM to justify the changes in the Communist Party's orientation:

We state that the NUWM is now in a complete rut. You are faced with the fact that there has never been a time in the history of the NUWM when the mass fight against unemployment was at such a low ebb. We can make all the excuses we like as to why this is so. I make the point that the basic reason is because of the split in the ranks of the unemployed....What we are doing now is to come forward with a line for the NUWM which corresponds to the line in the trade unions etc.69

The logic of the campaign for the popular front which sought political allies to the right of the Labour movement, was leading the Communist Party to downplay aspects of its militant past such as the NUWM. Pollitt's comments about the NUWM being a defunct organisation were a gross exaggeration as is shown by the success of the hunger march organised by the NUWM in the autumn of 1936, which was greeted by 250,000 people in Hyde Park.70

Beside approving the above set of proposals the January Central Committee launched a national recruitment drive, to offset the alarming decline in membership which had affected every district for the previous six months. In the first six months after the Seventh World Congress the CPGB's popular front campaigning had brought it few rewards. The blame for the fall in membership was put on

the conception, apparently widespread amongst the membership, that recruiting for, and building up, the Communist Party was a secondary issue to the question of affiliation with the Labour Party.⁷¹ No one saw fit to question the new popular front approach as being responsible for this declining membership.

Central to this new popular front approach was the objective of gaining affiliation to the Labour Party. After building up considerable momentum during the first half of 1936, the affiliation campaign experienced a substantial haemorrhage of support in the late summer due to two things. Firstly, there was the effect of the Labour leaders campaign of opposition which portrayed the affiliation campaign as part of the CPGB's wider popular front strategy which sought to compromise the Labour movement's political independence by allying it with non-socialists. The affiliation campaign was also undermined by the CPGB's support for the first Moscow show trial which unleashed the Great Terror in the USSR.

The campaign for affiliation to Labour

On 26 November 1935, the Labour Party received the CPGB's application for affiliation. At the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party in January 1936 this was turned down on the grounds that the rise of fascism in Europe did not necessitate unity between the two parties. It was alleged that communist campaigns in other countries had split the Labour movement facilitating the victory of fascism. The Communist Party's latest

affiliation application was portrayed as yet another manoeuvre designed to overthrow the democratic and socialist character of Labour's programme. If anything, communist affiliation to Labour would weaken its defence of political democracy, assist the forces of reaction and, 'would retard the achievement of socialism in this country'.⁷²

There was a grain of truth in the Labour leaders' criticisms of the Communist Party. Yet this was the first of many occasions when they would don the mantle of defending the Labour movement's socialist programme and heritage, in order to ward off the popular front.

The Labour Party's rejection of the affiliation application, together with the call made at the January Central committee for greater effort, served to spur the Communist Party membership into campaigning more vigorously for affiliation. At the Political Bureau in early February 1936 it was reported that 160 organisations had passed resolutions in support of the Communist Party's affiliation to Labour.

The same meeting decided to step up popular front propaganda in the peace movement, concentrating in particular on the Peace Councils and the League of Nations Union. It was presented with a long and detailed report which assessed the strengths and weaknesses of both organisations and concluded:

Both organisations,...provide possibilities for effective work along the Party's main line of

collective security against aggression, maintaining and strengthening of the League of Nations, for an Anglo-Soviet Peace Pact,.. and for the defence of the Soviet Union.⁷³

The Peace Councils were seen as the best forum for coordinating the activities of all the peace organisations in conjunction with local trade unions and Labour parties. Communist Party branches were recommended to focus on getting trade councils affiliated to local Peace Councils. Experience had shown where this occurred, the trades councils' intervention had led to the Peace Councils developing mass anti-war activity.⁷⁴

Throughout the spring of 1936 the Communist Party's affiliation campaign went from strength to strength, which is revealed in the rapid increase in the number of organisations passing resolutions of support for this issue. This reflected growing concern within the Labour movement at the expansionary activities of the fascist powers, as shown by Germany's military occupation of the Rhineland and Italy's conquest of Abyssinia. Besides this, the municipal and parliamentary triumphs of the Popular Front movements in France and Spain were most influential in swinging Labour opinion in Britain in the same direction.

On 29 February 1936 the Daily Worker reported that 280 Labour movement organisations had passed resolutions supporting the Communist Party's affiliation to the Labour Party.⁷⁵ By 20 April this had grown to over 400

organisations supporting communist affiliation to Labour.⁷⁶ This included important sections of the Labour movement such as the South Wales Miners' Federation and ASLEF.

On 16 June the Daily Worker reported that 906 organisations now supported affiliation. This included the most important socialist societies affiliated to Labour such as the Fabians and the Socialist League. Of more concern to the Labour Party leadership was the fact that over 577 union bodies had come out in support of affiliation, including the AEU national committee.⁷⁷

By August 1936 the Daily Worker was claiming the support of over 1,326 Labour movement bodies, including the Miners' Federation of Great Britain.⁷⁸ Several national newspapers such as the Morning Post and the Daily Telegraph in late July were predicting a very close vote over the issue at Labour Party conference in October. The Daily Telegraph estimated that both pro-affiliation and anti-affiliation factions in the Labour movement could count on over a million votes and believed communist success a possibility.⁷⁹

Having noted the successes of the affiliation campaign it must be acknowledged that its support was very patchy. It was concentrated in the Communist Party's four strongest districts - Scotland, London, South Wales, and Lancashire. Over 72 per cent of the pro-affiliation resolutions were from these areas.⁸⁰

The affiliation campaign, with the support of several union executives, appeared to have a strong foundations,

but its rank and file base of support was rather slender, concentrated as it was in two or three unions. This lack of grass-roots support throughout the Labour movement on a national basis was to undermine the affiliation vote at Labour Party conference.⁸¹

The June Political Bureau meeting acknowledged another major obstacle to the affiliation campaign; this being the implacable hostility of leading trade union figures such as Bevin. It was reported that Bevin had privately admitted receiving over 200 resolutions supporting affiliation from TGWU branches yet the Daily Worker only had public knowledge of 60 of these. Bevin was reported as saying that, 'he doesn't give a damn if he gets two million resolutions', the TGWU would still be voting against CPGB affiliation at the Labour Party conference in October.⁸²

Before looking at the Labour Party's response to the growing threat of communist affiliation, it is worth asking why did the CPGB feel that its affiliation campaign would be successful? The worsening international situation, together with the election of popular front governments in France and Spain, appeared to confirm communist claims that only unity of all anti-fascist forces could change the direction of British foreign policy to help reduce the threat of war internationally. The fascist uprising in Spain during July 1936 and the ensuing support for Franco's war effort from fascist

Germany and Italy served to strengthen pro-affiliation sentiment. Meanwhile the struggles against the BUF during the spring and summer also served to give momentum to the affiliation campaign. The resolutions and letters of support for affiliation from trade union and Labour Party branches, which were published in the Daily Worker, reveal how the above developments were central to many workers' support for the CPGB's affiliation campaign.⁸³

The growing momentum of the Communist Party's affiliation campaign during the spring and summer of 1936 made it obvious to Labour and trade union leaders that their anti-communist measures, most notably the so called 'Black Circulars', had far from succeeded in retarding the growth of communist influence within the Labour movement. In July the National Council of Labour responded with a pamphlet entitled British Labour and Communism.

This pamphlet reiterated many of the familiar objections to the Communist Party. The document played upon memories of the CPGB's disruptive influence within the Labour movement during the 'class-against-class' period; detailing the many slanders which it had heaped upon the Labour Party. It rejected as totally unfounded the claim that by granting affiliation to the tiny Communist Party, resistance to war in Britain would be increased. The Comintern and its sections were portrayed as an agency of the Soviet state; their united front overtures were, 'inspired by the change in Russian foreign policy'. It also noted that, 'the Communist Party

represents no substantial part of British public opinion', and that its united front overture to Labour was dictated by its abject failure, 'to secure a substantial membership'. The French popular front was portrayed as an electoral manoeuvre whereby the communists had managed to gain electoral strength at the expense of the socialists.⁸⁴ The pamphlet's conclusion argued that communist affiliation was a distraction from the real struggle for socialism:

The advance of British Labour and the success of British socialists will not be gained by such means. Only by convinced socialists will Socialism be won. Communist association with Labour will only serve to distract the movement, mislead the electorate generally, and store up difficulties against the day of socialist victory.⁸⁵

While the above document undoubtedly played a role in slowing down the momentum of the Communist Party's affiliation campaign, it was events in the Soviet Union which arguably played a more decisive role in undermining the campaign and sending wavering sympathisers back into support for the Labour Party's stance.⁸⁶ The first of the Moscow show trials which took place in mid-August 1936 severely undermined support for the CPGB's affiliation campaign.

The first Moscow show trial - August 1936

At this first trial the world was presented with the spectacle of Zinoviev, Kamenev and fourteen other old Bolsheviks confessing, 'to an implausible range of crimes.'⁸⁷ The CPGB leadership in attempting to justify the trial portrayed it, 'as vitally connected with the international struggle against fascism', and gave the trial their whole hearted support.⁸⁸ In their vigorous support for Stalin's Terror the CPGB gravely compromised itself in the eyes of many workers, who previously had given the affiliation campaign their support. McDermott and Agnew have described the effect of the Terror on the Comintern in great detail, noting how valuable this support from foreign communists was and how the Terror undermined support for Comintern's popular front campaigns all over Europe:

Such staunch international support was invaluable for Stalin, not least as a propaganda tool for domestic consumption. More important from a wider perspective, the Terror posed a grave threat to the anti-fascist struggle in Europe.⁸⁹

McDermott and Agnew put forward new evidence to show the direct complicity of many Comintern leaders in the purges of the international.⁹⁰ In light of this new evidence, it makes one wonder how much knowledge Pollitt and other CPGB leaders had of the mass purges within the Comintern. Apologists for the CPGB leadership such as Branson claim

that they were not aware of the enormous repression perpetrated by the Stalin regime and denies that they connived at a cover-up.⁹¹ Such claims, generally accepted by historians, must now be treated with a degree of caution, and will be re-examined in chapter four.

Documents recently released from the Comintern archives in Moscow suggest that the CPGB leadership collaborated to some degree in the purges. On 12 April 1937 Pollitt responded to Dimitrov's request for a statement on his relations with the recently arrested Petrovsky, who in the 1920s was the Comintern agent in Britain and worked under the name of Bennett.⁹² At the Political Bureau two days later Pollitt, in response to Dimitrov's request, asked all its members to make written statements of what they knew about Petrovsky.⁹³ As Kevin Morgan has commented, 'Who knows what dossier of murderous fabrications might have been drawn from this particular source?'⁹⁴

In its coverage of the first show trial the Daily Worker repeated the calumnies of Pravda that Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev had organised terrorist groups against the leadership of the Soviet government in close collaboration with the Gestapo. The Daily Worker's coverage of the trial culminated in the infamous headline, 'Shoot The Reptiles'.⁹⁵

When the Daily Herald and the TUC General Secretary Citrine supported a request from the LSI and IFTU for the defendants to be given a proper legal defence and be spared the death penalty, the Daily Worker and the rest

of the CPGB press reacted with a series of attacks upon Citrine and the LSI, accusing them of siding with the fascist enemies of the Soviet state.⁹⁶ The Daily Worker accused the Daily Herald of using its coverage of the trial to undermine the Communist Party's campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party.⁹⁷

Knowing full well the damage which the Daily Herald's opposition to the trial was inflicting on the Communist Party's affiliation campaign, Pollitt took the unprecedented step of writing to J.S.Middleton, national secretary of the Labour Party, asking him to stifle the Daily Herald's coverage of the trial.⁹⁸ Hand in hand with this denunciation of anyone who dare to oppose or even question the validity of the trial proceedings, went a systematic rewriting of Comintern and Bolshevik history. Articles in the CPGB press denied that Trotsky, Zinoviev and the other defendants had ever played a meaningful role in the world communist movement.⁹⁹

At the TUC conference in September 1936 Citrine, who had made a six-week journey to the Soviet Union and written an account of his experiences; used the Moscow show trial to great effect in discrediting the Communist Party's affiliation campaign.¹⁰⁰ Harold Laski, who at the time expressed grave doubts about the Moscow trial in a letter to Pollitt, later admitted that the CPGB's affiliation campaign had been severely damaged by its association with the juridical murder of the sixteen old Bolsheviks.¹⁰¹ Pollitt himself, in a letter to Arnot who was in Moscow to cover the trials for the Daily Worker,

admitted that the show trial had been politically damaging to the Communist Party.102

In its defence of the Stalinist Terror the CPGB gave substance to the charge made by the Labour Party leadership that it was merely a mouthpiece for the Soviet government; such charges helping to undermine support for the affiliation campaign.103 Before looking at how the affiliation campaign fared at the Labour Party conference in October 1936, it is necessary to briefly examine other elements in the Communist Party's anti-fascist activity. The Communist Party's role in the struggle against the BUF gives substance to the charge that it was downplaying militant anti-fascist activity so as not to alienate potential allies for the popular front. The same divisions between the leadership and sections of the rank and file over anti-fascist strategy which had been in evidence during 1934-35 were to re-emerge during 1936, most notably over the Communist Party's attitude to the BUF's attempt at marching through the East End of London on 4 October 1936.

The struggle against the BUF during 1936

In the spring of 1936 Mosley launched a new national recruitment campaign which held public rallies in dozens of towns up and down the country. In the majority of cases these rallies were vigorously opposed by counter-demonstrations organised by local communist and Labour movement activists.104

When Mosley announced that he was going to have a national rally at the Albert Hall on 22 March 1936, the Daily Worker, unable to ignore such an event without losing face, appealed for a counter-demonstration to this event. In the run-up to the counter-demonstration the emphasis of the Daily Worker's campaign was on getting the support of famous personalities and using their names as a means of building support amongst the trade unions and wider working class. On the 17 March 1936 the Daily Worker declared, 'With a clear lead from all from all progressive figures, London workers will rally on Sunday evening to answer Mosley' while noting also that, 'The biggest and broadest People's Front ever known in this country is being built up in London against Mosley's meeting'.

There was no call for mass working-class action to stop the BUF and drown it out in a sea of anti-fascist activity as in September 1934. Neither were there any appeals for the Albert Hall staff to go on strike on the day of the fascist rally, just appeals to the Albert Hall manager for 'fair play'. This rejection of militant anti-fascist activity reflected the Communist Party's attempt to appear respectable to potential middle class supporters of its popular front campaign; and to reassure the Labour Party leaders that the Communist Party would be a safe and reliable ally if it became an affiliate.

On the day of the Mosley rally, on 22 March 1936, a mere 8,000 people turned out on the counter-demonstration. This relatively small number was

outmanoeuvred by a large police presence, and failed to prevent Mosley speaking. The Daily Worker failed to acknowledge this victory for the BUF for only a day earlier it had described the counter-demonstration as the broadest movement against fascism ever seen before in London.¹⁰⁵

The failure of this anti-fascist activity, together with the relatively high level of police violence meted out to the anti-fascists on the counter-demonstration, led to calls within the London Labour movement for a workers' defence force to protect demonstrations and meetings from attack from either the police or the fascists. Within the Communist Party this demand found support particularly from sections of the Young Communist League.¹⁰⁶ The Communist Party leadership, in keeping with its desire to appear politically respectable to the Labour Party leaders and to court political allies to the right of the Labour movement, rejected such a demand as politically immature and stated that the best way of combatting fascism was to build a mass movement to defeat the National Government.¹⁰⁷

Throughout the summer of 1936 tens of thousands of anti-fascists turned out on counter-demonstrations to oppose BUF rallies.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the Communist Party leadership was preoccupied by the Labour affiliation campaign and by preparations for the World Peace Congress in early September in Brussels, which the Comintern had made a priority for its sections to work towards. It was hoped that the World Peace Congress would give a major

boost to the Soviet government's campaign for an international peace front to enforce collective security measures designed to restrain Germany.109

The East End of London was at the centre of the battle against the fascists with the confrontations becoming bigger and increasingly violent. On 21 June 1936 at Finsbury Park over 20,000 anti-fascists shouted down Mosley's speech, which led to repeated charges by mounted police to clear the counter-demonstration.110

At the London Communist Party congress in late June 1936, Springhall, the district secretary, who was also a leading member of the Central Committee, presented the main report. In this he made no mention of the struggle against the BUF. Instead he emphasised the decisive contribution London communists could make to the struggle for affiliation to the Labour Party. He declared that the London Communist Party should concentrate on building up its position in the unions and on helping the Labour Party to win two upcoming municipal by-elections. In the longer term the London Communist Party should set its sights on helping Labour retain control of the London County Council; for in doing so it would, 'deliver a powerful blow against the National Government....a Labour victory would shake the government to its foundations'.111

When the BUF announced a rally in the East End to coincide with a YCL youth rally on 7 June in Trafalgar Square, the Communist Party leadership called on workers not to confront Mosley but to support the YCL youth

rally. Only after the YCL Trafalgar Square rally was over should they march back to the East End for an anti-fascist rally.¹¹² In his autobiography Joe Jacobs, then secretary of the Stepney Communist Party, states that he and many other CPGB members were unhappy with this decision.¹¹³

Both Jacobs and Piratin, who were members of the Stepney Communist Party, note that as the BUF attempted to expand its geographical base of support within East London there was a growing conflict inside the East London Communist Party as to how it should respond to this.¹¹⁴ Jacobs recalls that, 'the majority view, certainly among the youth, was that Mosley should be met everywhere with the maximum force available'.¹¹⁵ While opposed to the strategy of confronting the BUF on the streets at the time, Piratin later acknowledged that a majority of the Stepney Communist Party favoured such action in 1936.¹¹⁶

Yet powerful figures within the London Communist Party opposed such tactics as inappropriate. This reflected the line of the national leadership that the struggle against the BUF was politically irrelevant when compared to the need to organise a mass movement to defeat the National Government. As the summer progressed other organisations in the East End, such as the ex-servicemen's anti-fascist movement, became as important as the Communist Party in deciding what should be done to oppose Mosley.¹¹⁷

On 26 September 1936 the BUF announced that it intended to march through the East End of London on 4

October. This clashed with a YCL Aid-for-Spain rally in Trafalgar Square on the same day. The Daily Worker was slow to respond to this announcement by the fascists. It was not until the 30 September that the Daily Worker finally responded. On that day the Daily Worker called on workers to go to the YCL Aid-for-Spain rally in Trafalgar Square during the day. In the evening they would go to an anti-fascist rally in the East End to protest about the fascist march in the afternoon, thus avoiding a confrontation with Mosley's demonstration.¹¹⁸

This decision not to confront the BUF in defiance of local sentiment clearly reveals how the Communist Party leadership had moved rightward in its opportunistic pursuit of political allies to the right of the Labour movement. The CPGB leadership clearly saw the popular front campaign around the Aid-for-Spain issue as politically more important than confronting Mosley's march through the East End.

On 20 September 1936 the London Communist Party held a parade attended by 4,000-5,000 people, hundreds of banners were carried which illustrated famous chapters and celebrated influential figures from English history. As Lewis Day commented at the time, what did this heterogeneous collection of Englishmen from Thomas More to Cobden have in common with the spirit and traditions of communism? The answer is very little. Rather it was crude attempt to court political allies to the right of the Labour movement in the pursuit of an anti-fascist policy determined not by domestic concerns, like the

fight against Mosley, but by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy. Communist Party members such as Lewis Day drew similar conclusions at the time. He commented that the 20 September march gave:

the impression that the Party was not seeking on this march to win the proletariat, but to impress more influential allies. It seems to be no longer a question of appearing as comrades of the most indigent, most oppressed strata of the workers, but as the bowler-hatted, Sunday-best allies of Liberals and petty-bourgeois Labourites.¹¹⁹

This attempt to try and appeal to middle-class patriotic sentiment proved successful and brought in over 800 recruits for the Communist Party.¹²⁰ Meanwhile large sections of the CPGB membership were preoccupied by the fight against the BUF. In the Stepney Communist Party there was great anger at the decision of the national leadership not to confront Mosley and try and stop his march through the East End. Joe Jacobs recalls how this decision was completely out of touch with the sentiment, widespread within the East End, that the BUF should be confronted and prevented from marching:

The pressure from the people of Stepney who went ahead with their own efforts to oppose Mosley left no doubt in our minds that the Communist Party would be

finished in Stepney if this was allowed to go through as planned by our London leaders.¹²¹

Jacobs describes how it was only the threat of open revolt by a large section of the East End membership which forced the Communist Party leadership to change its position and call on workers to oppose Mosley's march on 4 October.¹²² Apparently, leading figures on the Central Committee such as John Mahon, D.F.Springhall and Bob McLennan, had told Jacobs and others in the Stepney Party, who wanted to confront Mosley, that the Aid Spain march of the YCL was more important than Mosley's march through the East End.¹²³

This viewpoint is given credibility by the lateness of the Communist Party's decision to oppose Mosley. It was not until 2 October that the Communist Party cancelled the YCL rally scheduled for 4 October and came out publicly with a call for mass opposition to prevent Mosley marching.¹²⁴ Jacobs claim is also supported by the remarks of Pollitt in a discussion on the 'Battle of Cable Street' with Herbert Morrison on 14 October 1936. In this Pollitt remarked that he, 'was no enthusiast for such clashes but he insisted that his supporters would not be persuaded to surrender the streets to fascism'.¹²⁵

It is obvious that, even without the Communist Party's support, Mosley would have been opposed by tens of thousands of anti-fascists. By its sudden change of heart at the eleventh hour the Communist Party was able to avoid a humiliating loss of face and a potentially

serious loss of support and influence. The generally accepted view amongst most historians, that gives the Communist Party sole credit for organising the defeat of the fascists at the 'Battle of Cable Street' where 250,000 anti-fascists prevented Mosley's men from marching, is open to question and in need of revision.¹²⁶

The struggle waged against the BUF throughout the spring and summer of 1936 by thousands of activists from the Labour movement and the Communist Party, was largely responsible for the BUF's failure to emerge as a political force with a significant base of support. As Nigel Todd has commented, such anti-fascist activity was, 'far more effective than government bans on wearing uniforms and holding marches imposed under the 1937 Public Order Act'.¹²⁷ It was on the whole, a movement from below, 'a response of the common people' which lacked the conscious support not only of the Labour and trade union leaders, who rejected extra-parliamentary activity as a viable political strategy, but more surprisingly the Communist Party leadership.¹²⁸

The CPGB leadership throughout 1935-1936 was preoccupied by the need to build a multi-class alliance to defeat the National Government in order to help safeguard the Soviet Union, which led it to effectively abandon militant anti-fascist activity. The anti-Mosley struggle reveals how the Communist Party 'soft pedalled' the class struggle and refrained from militant anti-fascist activity unless forced to do so, as in the case of the 'Battle of Cable Street'. Such a statement must be

qualified by making a distinction between the national CPGB leadership preoccupied by international affairs and the campaign for affiliation to Labour, and large sections of the rank and file which held a different conception of the anti-fascist struggle. Undoubtedly, a large section of the Communist Party membership believed that only militant activity could effectively undermine the BUF, which they saw as the main focus of the anti-fascist struggle in this country. While large sections of the Communist Party rank and file were absorbed with the struggle against the BUF during 1936, the national leadership was more concerned with the campaign for affiliation to Labour which it believed it had a realistic chance of winning.¹²⁹

Failure of the affiliation campaign

The disastrous effect of the Moscow show trial upon the Communist Party's affiliation campaign has already been noted; the other factors which were responsible for the defeat of the affiliation campaign will also be examined now. The Labour and trade union leaders convincingly portrayed the CPGB's espousal of popular frontism as an attempt to ally the Labour movement with forces hostile to socialism. In the Communist Party journal Discussion in August 1936, Rust openly called for a political alliance between the Labour movement and the various strands of Liberal opinion in order to form a popular front capable of defeating the National Government.¹³⁰ Writing in Forward after the 1936 TUC conference, Herbert

Morrison stated, 'They went too far to the Right, for they were willing to make an alliance with the Liberals and other non-Socialist elements'.131

The Labour and trade union leaders successfully played upon the memory of the fall of the previous Labour Government and the subsequent mood for unity against the Labour movement's class enemies which produced a deep hostility to cross-class political alliances. Walter Citrine expressed this well at the 1936 TUC annual conference:

The Liberal Party has ceased to be a political force of any consequence in this country, and the Labour Movement is to be asked after all these years of fighting Liberalism, of trying to get people to come to a clear Labour platform, to put Liberalism on its feet and to take it into our bosom.132

Besides this, the accusation that the CPGB was merely a mouthpiece for the foreign policy requirements of the Soviet government struck a deep chord of support within the Labour movement. At the 1936 TUC annual conference Walter Citrine put this view most forcefully:

When the Communist Party speaks here it is expressing that governments point of view, certainly in all matters of foreign policy....I say to you that you may find the time will come along when that sort of thing [following a policy dictated by a foreign

government-DLM] will lead you up against the greatest principles of your life. The Trade Union Movement has been built up in independence of all governments. I would remind you of 1931 when this Movement, this Congress saved the soul of the Labour Movement.¹³³

By the time of the Labour Party conference in October 1936 between 850,000 and a million votes seemed committed to Communist Party affiliation. Yet when a card vote was taken only 592,000 votes were cast in favour, with 1,728,000 votes against.¹³⁴ The Communist Party may have consoled itself with the fact that it had gained a third of the conference vote, yet this ignored the question of what had happened to the missing pro-affiliation vote. Both the AEU and the MFGB had split their votes. Only 325,000 of the miners' 400,000 votes were cast for affiliation, and a section of the 145,000 AEU votes went against affiliation. Support from the Divisional Labour Parties was lower than expected; one estimate putting this at 150,000 votes. Meanwhile the CPGB's hopes of obtaining the support of NUDAW were not realised. ASLEF was the only major union to vote solidly in favour of affiliation.¹³⁵

The poor showing of the pro-affiliation vote at the Labour Party conference came as something of a shock to the Communist Party, which had developed high hopes that it could actually win affiliation to Labour.¹³⁶ The failure of the affiliation campaign testified to the CPGB's failure to build sufficient grass-roots support

within the Labour and trade union movement. This was largely the result of its pursuit of an anti-fascist strategy that was determined primarily by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy. The Communist Party's courting of middle-class Liberal opinion through its intervention in the peace movement, and its failure to throw its weight fully behind the anti-Mosley movement, along with its unconditional support for the Moscow show trial, are all examples of this.

The last section of this chapter will examine the anti-fascist activities of the Communist Party in West Yorkshire. This will illustrate the dichotomy between the national Party line and the activities of local communists who were more responsive to the anti-fascist sentiments of British workers, and who gave a higher priority to combatting the BUF than the campaign for communist affiliation to the Labour Party.

The West Yorkshire Communist Party 1935 - 1936

Before describing the activities of the local Communist Party during the period in question it is first necessary to point out that local source materials for 1935-39 are not as rich as the materials for the earlier 1933-35 period. Having said this, what does emerge from the limited source material which is available is that the campaigning priorities of local branches did not always follow the major concerns of the King Street leadership.

In Leeds the local branch largely concentrated its activities in the struggle against the BUF and did not

really take up the campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party. This reflected the enduring presence of anti-semitism and the BUF in Leeds which had the biggest Jewish population in Britain outside London.¹³⁷ It was also due to the effect of the 'Black Circulars' which weakened the local Communist Party's position on both the Trades Council and in certain local unions such as the NUR; the latter having removed Ernie Benson as its delegate to the Trades Council.¹³⁸ The Leeds branch used its anti-war committee as a vehicle for its popular front propaganda.

The situation in Leeds contrasted with the activities of the communist branch in Bradford. The activities of the Bradford branch reflected the concerns of the national leadership and the Comintern to a greater degree; with international developments in Abyssinia, France and Spain becoming the focus of local communist activity. In Leeds the Communist Party branch appeared less preoccupied with international issues when it had a pressing domestic issue on which to campaign in the form of anti-semitism and the BUF. The Communist Party in Bradford, in contrast to Leeds, took up the campaign for affiliation to Labour much more vigorously.

In the spring of 1935 the national leadership intervened in the affairs of the West Yorkshire Communist Party and had Maurice Ferguson removed from his position as district secretary. This reflected the frustration of the King Street leadership at the failure of the West Riding district to grow significantly at a time when the

CPGB nationally had recruited over 2,000 from the NUWM's struggles against Part Two of the Unemployment Act.139

Maurice Ferguson's replacement was Ernie Benson, the secretary of the Leeds Communist Party. In his autobiography, Benson later claimed that Ferguson was removed due to the poor state of his health. Yet after his removal Ferguson continued to play a full and active role in the Bradford Communist Party as is shown by his activities on the local Trades Council. Benson states that he took up the post of district secretary on the recommendation of Pollitt, who had come up to Bradford to address the West Riding district committee, specifically on the question of a new district secretary. 140

Behind the official reason of 'ill-health' for Ferguson's departure other more sinister influences may have been at work. There was a history of animosity between Pollitt and Ferguson which can be traced back to the Dawdon mining dispute of 1929 during the 'class-against-class' period.141 During the years 1933-1935 Pollitt and Ferguson had clashed on more than one occasion on the Central Committee.

The sharpest exchange between them came at the Central Committee in December 1934, when Pollitt accused Ferguson of political opportunism in his support for a Labour government at any price. The same charge of political opportunism was levelled at the work of the Bradford district under Ferguson's leadership. In his defence, Ferguson pointed out that the Bradford district had achieved many successes in its united front work under

his leadership. He also rejected the charges of political opportunism levelled against himself and the work of the Bradford district. Ferguson went to the extraordinary lengths of having a written protest from himself attached to the Central Committee minutes addressing the charges made by Pollitt.¹⁴² In February 1935 the Central Committee was reduced from 32 to 22 members with Maurice Ferguson being dropped, signalling his fall from favour with the leadership.¹⁴³

Soon after his appointment as the new district secretary Benson moved to Bradford where the district office was based. He lodged with Tom and Harriet Tynan who were members of the Bradford branch, and returned to Leeds at weekends. His decision to move to Bradford was also motivated by his belief that the Leeds branch had a 'good collective leadership' which had developed a larger membership and a stronger base of political support, particularly in the trade union field, than the Bradford branch. In his autobiography Benson recalls:

I thought that the situation in Bradford warranted my greatest attention. Leeds was in good hands and presented no problems, but in Bradford there was dissent between comrades.¹⁴⁴

Benson claims that the Leeds branch had a much stronger industrial base of support and greater influence in the local trade union movement than the Bradford branch, where it had developed a strong position in the local

clothing industry.¹⁴⁵ Yet study of communist intervention on the Bradford and Leeds Trades Councils does not really support his claim. The Bradford Communist Party had a much stronger position on the local Trades Council than its Leeds counterpart and was able to exert a much greater degree of influence. Having said this, a multitude of factors affected the strength of each communist fraction on their respective Trades Council.

The interventions of the communist fractions on the local Trades Councils were largely organised around the questions of war and peace and Labour affiliation, which reflected the main concerns of the national Party leadership. On these issues the local communists had rather varied success. On the Leeds Trades Council the communists had very little to show for their interventions, indeed they saw their position drastically weakened largely as a result of the 'Black Circulars'. Yet on the Bradford Trades Council the communist fraction managed to maintain its position of relative strength and enjoyed considerably more success with its interventions.

It is interesting to compare this situation with the fortunes of communists on Trades Councils in other parts of the country to see if a general pattern emerges which will tell us something about why the Communist Party never became a mass force within the Labour movement. In his study of communist activity within the Trades Councils of the East Midlands, Richard Stevens has found that during the second half of the 1930s there was a steady growth in communist influence and an annual

increase in the number of communist delegates. This was certainly the case in the largest trades councils of the region based in Nottingham and Leicester. However, in Derby the ILP was by far the dominant left influence on the Trades Council during this period, which is in contrast to the position in most British towns and cities where the ILP's influence steadily declined.¹⁴⁶ What emerges then is a slightly different picture in the fortunes of the Communist Party between the two regions. By looking in more depth at the Bradford and Leeds Trades Councils it will help to explain why this was so.

Bradford Communist Party

In Bradford the ILP's development reflected the fortunes of the party nationally, which was one of uninterrupted decline. By 1935 the Communist Party had become the strongest force on the left within the Bradford Trades Council. During 1935-1936 the Bradford Communist Party benefited from a steady flow of recruits from the local ILP.¹⁴⁷ The local Communist Party's emergence as a stronger force than the ILP was shown by the election of two of its members onto the Trades Council executive which was in contrast to the ILP's one delegate.¹⁴⁸

The Bradford Communist Party's intervention on the Trades Council during 1935-1936 largely reflected the main concerns of the national Party; namely the questions of war and peace. On 1 September 1935 the Bradford Communist Party held a 'Hands Off Abyssinia' rally which was over 300 strong.¹⁴⁹ At the Trades Council on 19

September the delegates agreed to participate in a local Peace Council conference called to discuss the Abyssinian crisis. The local Peace Council was controlled by the Bradford Communist Party. Tom Tynan, a CPGB member on the Trades Council executive, was elected to be one of the Trades Councils representatives to the Peace Council conference.¹⁵⁰

At the same Trades Council meeting a left resolution, probably inspired by the ILP delegation, was passed, opposing the TUC's support for sanctions against any Italian invasion of Abyssinia, 'reaffirming our resistance to all imperialist wars'.¹⁵¹ It would appear that on this occasion the local communists found themselves in the unprecedented position of being on the same side as the right-wing delegates, in support of sanctions against Italy.

Confirmation of the fact that the Communist Party's swing to the right over the question of war had served to isolate it from the left-pacifist wing of the local Labour movement is revealed by an article in the Bradford Pioneer on 20 September 1935. This lambasted the Communist Party for its support of League of Nations sanctions against Italy as a betrayal of socialist principles carried out in order to comply with the foreign policy requirements of the Soviet state.¹⁵²

At the Trades Council, in November 1935, the communist fraction suffered another reverse when the council voted 27 to 15 not to discuss a circular from the 'Peace and Friendship with the USSR' campaign. The same meeting also

rejected an ILP request for the Trades Council to hear one of its representatives outline its policy on the Abyssinian crisis. Instead, the November Trades Council passed an executive committee motion opposing the National Government's rearmament programme. This also called upon the government to pursue collective security through the League of Nations.¹⁵³ This meeting revealed that the left on the Trades Council although nominally in the majority, could not always count on getting its own way. It confirms another finding of the study by Richard Stevens, that the left and right always had to win over the politically uncommitted majority if they were to get one of their measures passed.¹⁵⁴

The Bradford Trades Council's long-standing opposition to the TUC Circular 16 finally came to an end in October 1935. At its meeting in October the Trades Council voted 41 to 30 to accept the 'Black Circular' which prevented communists from being union delegates to a trades council. This was in response to a threat from the TUC, which had informed the Bradford Trades Council that recognition would definitely be withdrawn if it failed to comply with national policy. It would appear that previously staunch allies of the local Communist Party such as the Trades Council President, Fred Ratcliffe, finally caved in under this pressure.¹⁵⁵

While committed to enforcing the 'Black Circulars' on paper, in practice Bradford Trades Council quite consciously failed to implement them. This reflected the recognition, from both right and left, of the local

communists' role as hard-working trades unionists who participated energetically in all the campaigns of the Trade Council. This situation corresponds with what Richard Stevens has described as one of the outstanding features of left-right relations within the East Midlands Trades Councils, which, 'was the fundamental tolerance that existed within most sections of the local labour movement'. Stevens shows that most trades councils in the East Midlands while eventually accepting the 'Black Circular' on paper, never enforced it and no communist delegates were disbared.156

Although committed to its formal acceptance Bradford Trades Council continued to campaign against the 'Black Circulars'. In December 1936 it wrote to the TUC General Council urging it, 'to give further consideration to circulars 16 and 17 with a view to their abolition'. The same meeting rejected 43 to 4 the General Councils questioning of its acceptance of communist delegates from the TGWU and the ETU; the delegates in question being leading figures in the Bradford Communist Party. They were Maurice Ferguson from the transport workers union and Tom Tynan from the electricians union.157

With the retirement of Fred Ratcliffe from the post of Trades Council President at the annual meeting in January 1936, the local Communist Party lost a long-standing left ally. However, his replacement, Roland Hill, while not as close politically to the CPGB as Fred Ratcliffe, was a long-standing advocate of the working-class united front and opposed to the 'Black Circulars'. The annual meeting

in January 1936 elected another executive with a left majority. It also retained the two communists, Ferguson and Tynan; this was a sign of the high regard with which the local Communist Party were held.¹⁵⁸

In early 1936 the Bradford branch tried to implement the first stage of the Communist Party's popular front strategy which involved campaigning for affiliation to the Labour Party. When Ferguson and Tynan put forward a motion to the Trades Council in February 1936, urging support for the Communist Party's affiliation to the Labour Party, it was rejected out of hand by an overwhelming majority. As the minutes do not describe the discussion at that meeting, one can only speculate as to the reasons for this surprisingly heavy defeat. One possible reason may have been the desire not to get into further trouble with the TUC or to alienate the local Labour Party any further. It is worthwhile recalling the storm of protest which had issued from the TUC and the local Labour Party when the Trades Council had first refused to accept the 'Black Circulars'.¹⁵⁹

The heavy defeat of the affiliation motion on the Trades Council executive, which was somewhat surprising, did not reflect the strong support which affiliation had from substantial numbers of local trade unionists. Among local trade union branches supporting communist affiliation to Labour were ASLEF, the NUR and the Painters Society.¹⁶⁰ This, together with the respect for the communist fraction on the Trades Council as hard working trade unionists, may explain the decision of the

Trades Council to allow the Bradford Communist Party representation on the May Day committee.¹⁶¹

As the international situation worsened the communist fraction on the Trades Council found increasing support for its anti-war activity and popular front campaigns. In early June 1936 the Trades Council executive wrote to the TUC General Council calling upon it to invite the Soviet trade unions to the IFTU meeting in London in early July as a precursor to joint anti-war action between the two internationals.¹⁶² It is worth noting that since the autumn of 1935 the Comintern and its various sections had been campaigning for joint anti-war activity between the two internationals and their trade union counterparts.

In mid-June the Trades Council passed a communist motion which praised the French workers for putting a popular front government into office. The motion also called for the TUC and Labour Party to launch a national campaign, 'to demand the resignation of the National Government', and for its replacement by a popular front government committed to maintaining peace and democracy.¹⁶³

In mid-July 1936 Maurice Ferguson tendered his letter of resignation to the Trades Council executive on the grounds he was leaving the area. The executive committee, 'placed on record their appreciation of the services rendered by Maurice Ferguson, and wished him success in his future work'.¹⁶⁴ Despite this considerable loss, the Bradford Communist Party maintained its influential presence on the Trades Council due to the leading role it

played in the local Aid-for-Spain movement which emerged during late July and August.

In mid-August 1936 the Bradford Communist Party organised a meeting attended by over 500 people which demanded the British Labour movement give its full support, both moral and practical, to the Spanish workers. Recognition of the leading role which the local Communist Party had been playing in the Aid-for-Spain movement, came in the form of an invitation from Bradford Labour Party and the Trades Council, for it to send a speaker to a Labour movement fund raising meeting. The West Yorkshire Communist Party rapidly escalated its intervention in the Aid-for-Spain movement planning meetings in Halifax and Dewsbury.165

Leeds Communist Party

During 1935-1936 the Leeds Trades council proved to be a very unfruitful area of activity for the local Communist Party. The Trades Council during this period appears to have been parochial in outlook preoccupied by local matters such as juvenile labour investigations, resolving local trade disputes, like that at the large Burtons factory, and acquiring new premises. International matters figured little in its deliberations, unlike its Bradford counterpart, where the Trades Council delegates in general displayed a higher level of political consciousness. From its few policy declarations on international matters the Leeds Trades Council invariably followed the national Labour Party line.166

The communist fraction on the Leeds Trades Council was reduced from at least six in 1934 to three in 1935. Most notable was the deselection of Marian Jessop, who was the communist Vice-President of the Trades Council in 1934. The tolerance which was the hallmark of left-right relations in the Bradford trade union movement and in other areas such as the East Midlands did not extend to Leeds, as noted in chapter two. In Leeds the 'Black Circulars' together with the sectarian antics of local communists on occasions had served to isolate the Leeds Communist Party within the local Labour movement.¹⁶⁷

Throughout 1935-1936 the communist fraction on the Leeds Trades Council was relatively ineffective and its interventions were rather sporadic. After the Comintern's Seventh World Congress, its interventions were focused around getting the Trades Council to support the local branch of the 'Peace and Friendship with the USSR' movement. The Trades Council spent a lot of time deliberating whether or not to support this organisation and in the end came out against this.¹⁶⁸

The communist fraction enjoyed more success with its campaign for the local Labour movement to send delegates to the World Peace Congress in Brussels during early September 1936. In July 1936 Leeds Trades Council agreed to send a delegate to the World Peace Congress.¹⁶⁹ However, in August the Trades Council agreed to the executive committee's request that this delegate be cancelled due to a lack of financial response from affiliates.¹⁷⁰ The lack of support from affiliates is

shown by the fact that only 18 shillings had been sent to help send a delegate to the World Peace Congress; this money was then transferred to the Trades Councils Aid-for-Spain fund.¹⁷¹

During 1936 it would appear that the Leeds Communist Party was much more preoccupied with the threat posed by the local fascists than with the campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party.¹⁷² This probably reflected the fact that throughout the late 1930s Leeds remained one of the few areas where the BUF enjoyed any consistent support.¹⁷³ The blackshirts were able to draw support from the strength of anti-semitic feeling in certain parts of the city. Support for the BUF in Leeds appears to have been concentrated in the Armley and Burley areas.¹⁷⁴ At this time Leeds had the highest Jewish population in Britain outside London.¹⁷⁵

When Mosley announced his intention to hold a rally in Leeds on 27 September 1936, which included a march through the Jewish section of the city, the local Communist Party advocated a counter-demonstration to stop the BUF march and rally taking place. The local fascists during 1936 had made regular attacks upon Jewish homes and shops and physically assaulted Jewish people.¹⁷⁶ While the local Labour Party and Trades Council refused to support this call, the ILP did come out in support of a campaign to prevent the fascists marching. The BUF's plan to march through the Jewish area of Leeds, which was Chapeltown at that time, was dropped on the insistence of the Assistant Chief Constable, Frank Swaby, who, 'deemed

it to be more trouble than it was worth in the face of the mounting campaign' of opposition to Mosley's march.¹⁷⁷

The Leeds Communist Party was unanimous in its decision to try and stop the BUF march and rally, unlike the Stepney Communist Party which faced opposition from Party officials to its campaign of opposition to try and stop Mosley marching through the East End. The defeats inflicted upon the BUF in rapid succession at the 'Battle of Holbeck Moor' and the 'Battle of Cable Street' were to bring to a premature end Mosley's campaigning work in 1936.

On 27 September 1936 a uniformed BUF contingent, about 4,000 strong, set off from Calverley Street up to Holbeck Moor. As the blackshirts reached Holbeck Moor they were greeted with cries of "murderers" and "Get Back To Germany", from 30,000 to 50,000 anti-fascist activists.¹⁷⁸ Several hundred police both mounted and on foot kept the anti-fascist counter-demonstration from swamping the BUF contingent.

As soon as Mosley started speaking he was greeted by a hail of stones and chanting which drowned out his speech. The police response to this was to mount baton charges into the huge crowd of anti-fascist demonstrators, injuring dozens of people. The fascists too began to attack the crowd knocking unconscious several people. Scores of people, mainly fascists, were injured by the barrage of stones with which Mosley's rally was pelted. Having abandoned attempts to address

his meeting, Mosley and his supporters were escorted off the moor by the police, who with great difficulty managed to clear a path for the fascists.

On their way back to their headquarters in the city centre the BUF were bombarded with stones. In Domestic Street the fascists were confronted with a barricade built by local workers, from behind this barrier they pelted the blackshirts with stones. It was at this point that Mosley was hit on the temple and the police again charged the crowd arresting three anti-fascists. After the BUF had left Holbeck Moor the local Communist Party held a meeting which collected three pounds to pay for a legal defence fund for those anti-fascist demonstrators who had been arrested.179

On a local scale, the communists in Leeds and Bradford had limited success with their united and popular front activities; a situation which largely reflected the fortunes of the Communist Party on a national scale. During 1935-36 the Leeds Trades Council was largely concerned with local matters such as union recruitment drives and investigations into juvenile labour; international matters figured little in its deliberations unlike its Bradford counterpart. In this hostile, parochial atmosphere, where the 'Black Circular' was actively implemented, the interventions of local communists on the Trades Council received little support. It would appear that they put more of their energies into combatting the BUF which proved politically more fruitful

than the work on the Trades Council or the campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party.

In Bradford where the Labour left and the ILP were a much stronger force, the local communists found the Trades Council to be a much more receptive environment in which to work. Building upon the goodwill established by its hard work within the trade union and anti-fascist movement, the Bradford Communist Party was able to maintain its position on the Trades Council. Yet at times, its anti-war campaigning, determined as it was by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy, occasionally isolated it from the rest of the left on the Trades Council. In the summer of 1936 Ernie Benson was replaced as district secretary by Sid Elias of NUWM fame, for in his own words, 'I did not set the West Riding on fire. There were some improvements but not sufficient for me to be kept on'.¹⁸⁰

Conclusion

The Communist Party's campaign during 1935-1936 to build a popular front movement in Britain capable of bringing about the downfall of the National Government ended in failure. The twin pillars of the popular front strategy in the form of the Party's interventions in the peace movement, and the campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party, had failed to build up sufficient mass support for them to bring about the desired national front of anti-government forces. At that time the central plank of the popular front campaign was the campaign for affiliation

to the Labour Party. The failure of the affiliation campaign can be put down to the effect of the first Moscow show trial and the impression widespread throughout the Labour movement that the Communist Party was seeking to align it with political forces hostile to Labour's socialist aspirations.

This was a clear example of how the CPGB's anti-fascist strategy was not determined by the concerns of the British working class but by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy. The Communist Party's preoccupation with building a multi-party alliance of forces capable of bringing down the government, led to a weakening of its commitment to militant anti-fascist struggle, as is revealed by the Cable Street episode. Concomitant with this, sections of the Communist Party rank and file saw the campaign against the BUF as the main focus of the anti-fascist struggle in Britain; and not the defeat of a seemingly impregnable National Government.

The failure of the Communist Party's popular front campaign during 1935-36 is further illustrated by the membership figures for this period. At the Seventh World Congress CPGB membership was put at 7,500. In the six months following this the membership, 'dropped to about 7,000 or less'; which the leadership ascribed to 'the false policy in carrying out the line of the Seventh Congress'.¹⁸¹ The leadership never paused to consider whether the declining membership might be due to its popular front policies and defence of the Terror in the

Soviet Union. The Communist Party's membership was relatively stagnant up until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936. It was the influx of recruits, aroused into political activity by the march of fascism on the continent and in particular the Spanish conflict, that pushed the CPGB's membership to 11,500 by the time of Labour Party conference in October 1936.¹⁸²

NOTES

- 1) J.Degras, (ed.), Soviet Documents On Foreign Policy, 1933-1941, (Oxford, 1953), p.165.
- 2) See the following essay for this debate and controversy N.Branson, 'Myths From Right and Left', in J.Fyrth, (ed.), Britain, Fascism And The Popular Front, (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp.118-29.
- 3) J.Haslam, The Soviet Union And The Struggle For Collective Security In Europe 1933-1939, (London, Macmillan, 1984), p.3.
- 4) V.I. Lenin, Lenin On War And Peace-Three Articles, (Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1970); for Lenin's views on the world revolution see T.Grant, Russia: from revolution to counter-revolution, (London, Wellred, 1997), pp.74-81.
- 5) For a description and analysis of the first Moscow show trial see I.Deutscher and D.King, The Great Purges, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp.94-95; V.Rogovin, 1937 Stalin's Year Of Terror, (Michigan, Mehring Books, 1998), pp.1-29; L.Sedov, THE RED BOOK on The Moscow Trial Documents collected and edited, (first published in Russian in October 1936, first English translation 1980, London, New Park); L.Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1935-1936, (New York, Pathfinder, 1970), pp.97-130.
- 6) Haslam, The Soviet Union And The Struggle For Collective Security, pp.70-77.
- 7) Degras, (ed.), Soviet Documents On Foreign Policy, pp.164-166.
- 8) Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1935-1936, p.87. The weakness of Soviet armed forces at that time is revealed in a letter from the Soviet diplomat Potemkin, who was based in Paris, to Litvinov, warning how the Soviet Union could not rely on France for military support in the event of a German attack, see Haslam, The Soviet Union And The Struggle For Collective Security, p.101.
- 9) F.Claudin, The Communist Movement: From Comintern To Cominform, (Peregrine Books, 1975), p.201.
- 10) For an account of events in France 1936-1937 see Claudin, The Communist Movement, pp.166-210; and D.A.Levy, 'The French Popular Front, 1936-1937', in H.Graham and P.Preston, (eds.), The Popular Front In Europe, (London, Macmillan, 1987), pp.58-83.
- 11) For an account of Soviet/Comintern intervention in the Spanish Civil War see Claudin, The Communist Movement, pp.210-242; H.Graham, 'The Spanish Popular

Front and the Civil War', in Graham and Preston, (eds.), The Popular Front In Europe, pp.106-130; F.Morrow, Revolution and counter-revolution in Spain, (first published 1938, London, New Park, 1976).

12) An analysis of the developments which lay behind the Moscow show trial of 1936 and the Stalinist Terror is provided by Haslam, 'The Soviet Union, the Comintern and the Demise of the Popular Front', in Graham and Preston, (eds.), The Popular Front In Europe, pp.155-6; J.Haslam, 'Political Opposition to Stalin and the origins of the Terror in Russia, 1932-36', Historical Journal, no.2, 1986, pp.395-418; Rogovin, 1937 Stalin's Year Of Terror, pp.xi-xxx,13; Trotsky, Selected Writings,1935-1936, pp.97-111,123-150.

13) The effect of the Stalinist Terror on the Comintern is described by K.McDermott and J.Agneu, THE COMINTERN A History Of International Communism From Lenin To Stalin, (London, Macmillan, 1996), pp.143-156; K.McDermott, 'Stalinist Terror in the Comintern: New Perspectives', Journal of Contemporary History, no.1 1995, pp.111-30.

14) Ibid., pp.156-157.

15) P.Broue, Histoire de L'Internationale Communiste 1919-1943, (Paris, Fayard, 1997) pp.649-73; E.H.Carr, The Twilight of Comintern, 1930-1935, (London, Macmillan 1983), pp.424-7; Claudin, The Communist Movement, pp.182-193; C.L.R.James, World Revolution 1917-36 The Rise and Fall of the Communist International, (London, Secker and Warburg, 1937), pp.385-88; Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1935-1936, pp.8-13.

16) N.Branson, History Of The Communist Party Of Great Britain, 1927-1941, (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp.127-128; E.Hobsbawm, 'Fifty Years Of The Popular Front', in Fyrth, (ed.), Britain, Fascism And The Popular Front, pp.237-244; M.Myant, '1935-The Turning Point', in Fyrth, (ed.), Britain, Fascism And The Popular Front, pp.30-55; A.I.Sobolev, et al., Outline History Of The Communist International, (Moscow, 1971), pp.371-98.

17) McDermott and Agneu, THE COMINTERN, p.131.

18) Sobolev et al., Outline History, p.375.

19) For the shortened version of Dimitrov's speech to the Comintern's Seventh World Congress see Inprecorr, vol.15, no.34, (10 August 1935), pp.889-92; and for the anti-fascist and anti-war resolutions passed see J.Degras, (ed.), The Communist International, 1919-1943 Documents, Volume 3, 1929-1943, (London, Frank Cass, 1971), pp.359-70, 372-8.

20) Claudin, The Communist Movement, pp.185-7.

- 21) Broue, Histoire de L'Internationale Communiste, p.664.
- 22) Graham and Preston, 'The Popular Front and the Struggle Against Fascism', in Graham and Preston, (eds.), The Popular Front In Europe, p.14; McDermott and Agnew, THE COMINTERN, p.133.
- 23) Broue, Histoire de L'Internationale Communiste, p.664.
- 24) Claudin, The Communist Movement, p.190.
- 25) Carr, The Twilight of Comintern, p.426.
- 26) Idem., p.427.
- 27) Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1935-1936, p.8.
- 28) The debate and controversy over the popular front is discussed in some depth by Branson, 'Myths From Left and Right', pp.118-129; for critics of the CPGB's popular front activities see S. Bornstein and A. Richardson, Two Steps Back: Communists and the Wider Labour Movement 1935-1945, (London, Socialist Platform, 1982); J. Jacobs, Out Of The Ghetto, (London, Janet Simon, 1978); and B. Pearce and M. Woodhouse, A History Of Communism In Britain, (London, Bookmarks, 1995), pp.211-224.
- 29) H. Pollitt, 'Unity Against The National Government', in Report of the Seventh World Congress, Moscow, July - August 1935, (London, Modern Books, 1936), p.11.
- 30) Inprecorr, vol.15, no.37, (20 August 1935), p.966.
- 31) Pollitt, Unity Against The National Government, p.12.
- 32) F. Beckett, Enemy Within The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party, (London, John Murray, 1995), pp.48,59; Branson, History Of The Communist Party Of Great Britain, pp.110-29, 159-71; W. Thompson, The Good Old Cause British Communism 1920-1991, (London, Pluto Press, 1992), p.54.
- 33) K. Morgan, Harry Pollitt, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993), p.95.
- 34) Pollitt, Unity Against The National Government, p.28.
- 35) Ibid., p.24.
- 36) Ibid., pp.29-30.
- 37) R.P. Dutt, 'Notes of the Month', Labour Monthly, October 1935, pp.590-98; H. Pollitt, 'The Seventh Congress Of The Communist International', Labour Monthly, October 1935, pp.611-20; H. Pollitt, 'The Seventh Congress Of The Communist International', Labour Monthly, November 1935,

pp.679-85; and CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 6 October 1935.

38) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 6 October 1935.

39) Idem.

40) Idem.; the views put forward by Dutt at the Political Bureau can also be found in the following articles, J.Mahon, 'Abyssinia, Fascist War And The Labour Movement', Labour Monthly, October 1935, pp.621-2; and Pollitt, 'The Seventh Congress Of The Communist International', Labour Monthly, October 1935, pp.611-20.

41) Mahon, 'Abyssinia, Fascist War And The Labour Movement', p.621.

42) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 6 October 1935.

43) Idem.

44) Idem.; the same viewpoint is in evidence in the following Daily Worker editorials, 27 August, 21 September, 25 September, 2 October 1935.

45) Daily Worker, 7 October 1935.

46) See chapters 1 and 2 of thesis for this movement from below.

47) Daily Worker, 20, 21, 26 August 1935.

48) Ibid., 2-3 September 1935.

49) Ibid., 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 23, 27, 28, September; 8, 9, 11, 15, 19, 23, 25, 28, October 1935.

50) Ibid., 28 September and 8 October 1935.

51) Ibid., 9 October 1935.

52) N.Todd, In Excited Times: The People Against The Blackshirts, (Bewick Press, 1995), p.109.

53) See chapters 1 and 2 of thesis.

54) The one notable exception to this being the study of anti-fascism in Tyneside by Todd, In Excited Times, pp.84,93.

55) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 21 November 1935.

56) 'THE LESSONS OF THE GENERAL ELECTION and NEXT TASKS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY', CPGB Secretariat Circular, 26 November 1935, CP/IND/DUTT/18/05/.

57) Idem.

- 58) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 4 January 1936.
- 59) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 21 November 1935.
- 60) Idem.
- 61) Daily Worker, 9 December 1935.
- 62) Branson, History Of The Communist Party, p.190.
- 63) N.Branson, 'On Party Organisation', Discussion, April 1936, p.19.
- 64) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 4 January 1936.
- 65) Idem.
- 66) Idem.
- 67) Robson, 'On Communist Organisation', Discussion, March 1936, p.26.
- 68) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 4 January 1936.
- 69) Idem.
- 70) Branson, History Of The Communist Party, p.156; R.Croucher, We Refuse To Starve In Silence A History of the National Unemployed Workers Movement 1920-1946, (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1987), p.179.
- 71) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 4 January 1936.
- 72) Labour Party Annual Conference, Report, 1936, p.51.
- 73) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 7 February 1936.
- 74) Idem.
- 75) Daily Worker, 29 February 1936.
- 76) Ibid., 20 April 1936.
- 77) Ibid., 16 June 1936.
- 78) Ibid., 8 August 1936.
- 79) B.Pimlott, Labour and the Left in the 1930s, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.87.
- 80) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 19 June 1936.
- 81) Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.88.
- 82) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 19 June 1936.
- 83) For examples of such resolutions see the Daily Worker, 30 May, 3 June, 4 June 1936.

- 84) Labour Party Annual Conference, Report, 1936, Appendix 10, pp.297-300.
- 85) Ibid., p.300.
- 86) Pimlott, Labour and the Left, pp.87-8; and Pearce and Woodhouse, A History Of Communism, pp.240-1.
- 87) Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.88.
- 88) R.Page Arnot report for the ECCI, 9 September 1936, 'The Campaign Of The CPGB In Relation To The Trotsky-Zinovievite Terrorist Trial', 1995 Moscow Reel; see also Daily Worker, 27 August 1936.
- 89) McDermott and Agnew, THE COMINTERN, p.156; and for an account of the effect of the Terror on the Comintern apparatus in Moscow see pp.142-156.
- 90) Ibid., pp.151-2.
- 91) Branson, History Of The Communist Party, pp.246-7.
- 92) H.Pollitt, letter to G.Dimitrov, 12 April 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.
- 93) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 14 April 1937.
- 94) Morgan, Harry Pollitt, p.176.
- 95) Daily Worker, 24 August 1936; for CPGB support of this trial see also the Central Committee statement on 26 August 1936 published in Inprecorr, vol.16, no.40., (5 September 1936), p.1092.
- 96) Daily Worker, 24 August, 25 August, 26 August, 29 August, 1 September, 3 September 1936; see also R Page Arnot, 'The Soviet Trial', Labour Monthly, October 1936, p.616; R.Bishop, 'The Daily Herald's Anti-Soviet Campaign', Inprecorr, vol.16, no.40, (5 September 1936), p.1090.
- 97) Daily Worker, 25 August 1936.
- 98) Ibid., 2 September 1936.
- 99) For examples of the CPGB's rewriting of Comintern history to cater for the Stalinist Terror see the articles in the following publications: Daily Worker, 31 August, 1 September, 4 September 1936; Jack Cohen, 'Heroes of Fascism and Counter-Revolution', Discussion, September 1936, pp.5-9.
- 100) TUC Annual Conference, Report, 1936, pp.424,427,436; for an account of Citrine's trip to the USSR see W.

Citrine, I Search For Truth In Russia, (London, 1936),
quoted in Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.88.

101) H.Laski, letter to H.Pollitt, 21 August 1936, 1995
Moscow Reel; Pearce and Woodhouse, A History Of
Communism, p.241.

102) H.Pollitt, letter to R.Page Arnot, 11 February 1937,
1995 Moscow Reel.

103) TUC Annual Conference, Report, 1936, p.427.

104) Daily Worker, 9 March, 10 March, 12 March, 17 March,
20 March, 23 March, 26 March 1936.

105) Ibid., 21 and 23 March 1936.

106) Articles in favour of a worker's defence force,
E.Burgess, 'The Necessity For Action', Discussion, May
1936, pp.21-22.; "Young Worker", 'Defence Against
Fascism', Discussion, May 1936, pp.22-3.

107) For articles opposing the idea of a workers defence
force see, J.Gollan, Discussion, May 1936, pp.23-4; and
Daily Worker, 30 March 1936.

108) Daily Worker, 4,5,11,12,14,18,22,25,26,29, May 1936;
9,10,15,17,22,25,30, June 1936; 11,13,20, July 1936;
29,31, August 1936; 29 September 1936; 5 October 1936;
see also N.Barrett, 'A Bright Shining Star: The CPGB and
Anti-Fascist Activism in the 1930s', Science & Society,
vol.61, no.1, Spring 1997, pp.17-8,21.

109) Daily Worker, 11 June, 15 June 1936.

110) Ibid., 22 June 1936.

111) Ibid., 27 June 1936.

112) Ibid., 3 June, 6 June 1936.

113) Jacobs, Out Of The Ghetto, p.204.

114) Ibid., p.222; P.Piratin, Our Flag Stays Red,
(London, 1948, reprinted 1978), pp.17-8.

115) Jacobs, Out Of The Ghetto, pp.205,222-3.

116) Piratin, Our Flag Stays Red, p.18.

117) Jacobs, Out Of The Ghetto, p.205.

118) Daily Worker, 30 September 1936.

119) For a report of the march which Lewis Day criticises
see Daily Worker, 21 September 1936; and for his

criticisms of the march see, L.Day, 'England Expects', Discussion, November 1936, p.26.

120) Day, 'England Expects', p.26.

121) Jacobs, Out Of The Ghetto, p.238.

122) Ibid., p.241-2.

123) Idem.

124) Daily Worker, 2 October 1936.

125) Morgan, Harry Pollitt, p.94.

126) For this viewpoint and for a description of events at the 'Battle of Cable Street' see, Branson, History Of The Communist Party, pp.162-8; other accounts of this event include the Daily Worker, 5-6 October 1936; Jacobs, Out Of The Ghetto, pp.235-58; Piratin, Our Flag Stays Red, pp.20-2.

127) Todd, In Excited Times, p.112.

128) Ibid., p.118.

129) The Communist Party's belief that the affiliation campaign could be won is illustrated by the following quote, 'we must confess that we are not thinking of possible defeat at the Labour Party conference', Discussion, August 1936, p.28.

130) W.Rust, 'The People's Front In Britain', Discussion, August 1936, pp.5-7.

131) H.Morrison, 'Communist Collapse At TUC-Reasons For The Failure', quoted in Leeds Weekly Citizen, 25 September 1936.

132) TUC Annual Conference, Report, 1936, p.425.

134) Ibid., pp.426-7.

134) Labour Party Annual Conference, Report, 1936, p.211.

135) Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.88.

136) Discussion, August 1936, p.28.

137) Tape Recorded Interview with Geoff Hodgson, 12 February 1996.

138) E.Benson, To Struggle Is To Live-A Working Class Autobiography, Volume Two, Starve Or Rebel 1927-1971, (People's Publications, 1980), p.127.

139) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 26 April 1935, for Pollitt statement that 2,167 new members had joined since

the Thirteenth Congress in February 1935, and for his stated intention of visiting the Bradford district that coming weekend to try and rectify its poor recruitment record.

140) E.Benson, To Struggle Is To Live, pp.136-9.

141) During 1932 Dutt and Pollitt had clashed over the CPGB's trade union policy, for this see the debate in the Daily Worker between September and November 1932. Dutt was supported by the Rust and the Tyneside district, dominated by Maurice Ferguson who had criticised Pollitt over the Dawdon miner's strike of 1929. Ferguson took the issue further by suggesting that the new departure [of Pollitt's-DLM] in favour of working through the trade unions had led to the liquidation of the MM, which he regarded as 'our greatest weakness- nay crime', M.Ferguson, 'Have We Liquidated the Minority Movement?', Communist Review, October 1932, pp.480-2.

142) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 15 December 1934.

143) Ibid., 1 February 1935.

144) Benson, To Struggle Is To Live, p.140.

145) Idem.

146) R.Stevens, Trade Councils In The East Midlands, 1929-1951: Trade Unionism And Politics In A 'Traditionally Moderate' Area, (PhD., Nottingham University, 1995), pp.138-9,142-52.

147) Benson, To Struggle Is To Live, p.140.

148) M.Ferguson, letter to Bradford Pioneer, 27 January 1935.

149) Daily Worker, 3 September 1935.

150) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 19 September 1935.

151) Idem.

152) Bradford Pioneer, 20 September 1935.

153) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 21 November 1935.

154) Stevens, Trades Councils In The East Midlands, p.2.

155) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 17 October 1935; Bradford Pioneer, 25 October 1935.

156) Stevens, Trades Councils In The East Midlands, p.3.

157) Bradford Trades Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, 12 December 1935.

- 158) Bradford Trades Council, Annual Meeting, 16 January 1936.
- 159) Bradford Trades Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, 13 February 1936.
- 160) Daily Worker, 29 January, 6 March, 22 April, 17 June 1936.
- 161) Bradford Trades Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, 9 April 1936.
- 162) Ibid., 11 June 1936.
- 163) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 18 June 1936.
- 164) Bradford Trades Council, Executive Committee Minutes, 9 July 1936.
- 165) Daily Worker, 25 August 1936.
- 166) Leeds Trades Council, Minutes, 17 December 1935, 24 June 1936.
- 167) See chapter 2 of thesis.
- 168) The communist fraction on the trades council raised the issue for support of this campaign on the following occasions: Leeds Trades Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, 24 November 1935; Leeds Trades Council, Minutes, 27 November 1935, 8 January 1936; Leeds Trades Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, 23 January 1936, 23 April 1936.
- 169) Leeds Trades Council, Minutes, 29 July 1936.
- 170) Leeds Trades Council, Minutes, 26 August 1936.
- 171) Leeds Trades Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, 24 September 1936.
- 172) Tape Recorded Interview with Geoff Hodgson, 12 February 1996.
- 173) G.Gedge, 'Mosley In Leeds', unpublished monograph, p.13., supplied by Geoff Hodgson.
- 174) Tape Recorded Interview with Geoff Hodgson, 12 February 1996.
- 175) Gedge, 'Mosley In Leeds', p.13.
- 176) Leeds Trades Council, Minutes, 30 September 1936.
- 177) Gedge, 'Mosley In Leeds', p.15.
- 178) Daily Worker, 29 September 1936, gives the estimate of 50,000 anti-fascists on the counter demonstration

opposing Mosley's rally; while the Yorkshire Post, 28 September 1936, gives the more conservative figure of 30,000.

179) This account of the 'Battle of Holbeck Moor' is based upon the descriptions provided in the Daily Worker, 29 September 1936; Yorkshire Post, 28 September 1936.

180) Benson, To Struggle Is To Live, p.141.

181) R Page Arnot, Report on Britain, Minutes Of The Marty Secretariat, (Moscow) 28 October 1936, ECCI Documents On Britain 1936-37.

182) The stagnation of the CPGB membership is revealed in Central Committee, Minutes, 4-5 January, 16 April 1936; while the growth in membership over the summer of 1936 is shown in Arnot's report to the Marty Secretariat noted above.

CHAPTER FOUR

The CPGB, the Unity Campaign and the second Moscow show trial - 1937

"The forthcoming trial is a part of that international struggle against Fascism which the masses of the people are conducting in all the countries of capitalism. Every anti-Fascist and every supporter of peace, is interested that the counter-revolutionary essence of Trotskyism should be fully revealed, and that the agents of Fascism should be destroyed". Daily Worker, 23 January, 1937.1

"Foreigners little realise how vital it was for Stalin in 1936, 1937, and 1938 to be able to declare that the British, American, French, German, Polish, Bulgarian and Chinese Communists unanimously supported the liquidation of the "Trotskyite, Fascist mad-dogs and wreckers"-among them even Zinoviev and Bukharin, the first two chiefs of the Comintern". W.G.Krivitsky, I Was Stalin's Agent, 1939.2

Following the juridical murder of the sixteen old Bolsheviks at the first Moscow show trial in August 1936, Stalin moved against his real and imagined enemies in the Soviet Union. Soviet society and the Comintern apparatus based in Moscow, were convulsed by a tidal wave of arrests and executions, commonly referred to as the Terror.3 Not satisfied with the elimination of his 'critics' within the Soviet Union, Stalin exported the Terror to Spain where critics of the Moscow show trials, most notably the POUM, were the subject of repression by Soviet security organs such as the NKVD.4 Throughout this period the Comintern and its sections devoted an increasing amount of time and energy to the defence of the Terror otherwise known as the struggle against 'Trotskyism'. Indeed the struggle against 'Trotskyism' was to play a major role in undermining the popular front campaigns of the Comintern all over Europe.5

The first section of the chapter sets out briefly to establish the interrelationship between events in the Soviet Union and the activities of the Comintern. In other words it aims to reveal how the main preoccupation of the CPSU (i.e. the Terror), became in turn a paramount concern of the Comintern. The second section examines the next stage in the attempt of the CPGB to establish a popular front in this country. Drawing upon evidence from the recently-opened archives of the Communist Party, it aims to take a fresh perspective on the Unity Campaign of 1937. It seeks to show how the CPGB's ardent defence of the Terror in the Soviet Union and Spain was to fatally undermine its popular front activities; principal among which in 1937 was the Unity Campaign. The results of the votes on the Unity Campaign at the conferences of the TUC and Labour Party in 1937 reveal that the Communist Party's standing in the Labour movement had slipped backwards, especially when compared with the votes for its united front campaign in 1936.⁶ Study of this period reveals that the dichotomy between the activities of the Communist Party nationally and local communists in West Yorkshire is less marked especially when compared to 1933-36. On both a national and local level the predominant issues appeared to be the Unity Campaign, defence of the Stalinist Terror and aid to Republican Spain.

The Great Terror 1936-7

As the Terror within the Soviet Union took on ever greater dimensions, Soviet diplomacy was effectively

paralysed as the Stalinist leadership retreated into a state of isolationism.⁷ During the autumn of 1936 and throughout 1937 Stalin was preoccupied by the struggle against 'Trotskyism' within the Soviet Union and Spain.

Beside the defence of the Terror, the other major concerns of the international communist movement were the pursuit of popular front governments favourable to an alliance with the Soviet Union, and the defence of Republican Spain. Both of the latter two were determined by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy, with its pursuit of allies to help guarantee Soviet security.

By the autumn of 1937 the requirements of collective security and the struggle against 'Trotskyism' were placing severe strains on the various popular front alliances in Europe. It was the latter, above all, which undermined the campaigns of the Comintern for a popular front against fascism.

The show trials and executions of those old Bolsheviks who, along with Lenin, were the leading figures of the October Revolution, served a variety of purposes. Stalin's primary objective was the destruction of all potential opponents to his personal dictatorship. Foremost in Stalin's mind was his long standing enemy Trotsky and the other old Bolsheviks who remained a potential focal point for any future opposition to his rule.⁸ The trials and the Terror were also an act of intimidation designed to quell oppositional moods in the CPSU and the country at large; which reflected discontent

at the growing social and economic inequalities in Soviet society.⁹

Finally, the executions of the old Bolsheviks drew a line between the revolutionary ideals of the October Revolution and the conservative aspirations of the young bureaucracy which ruled the country. By severing the regime's last link with its revolutionary past Stalin sought to convince his would-be allies in the West of his suitability as a potential partner. As the Russian historian Vadim Rogovin has observed:

By shooting people who had gone down in history as the leaders of revolutionary Bolshevism, Stalin wanted to present the world bourgeoisie with a "symbol of the new times", evidence of his break with the idea of world revolution.¹⁰

At the same time as Yezhov, the new head of the NKVD, rapidly escalated the Terror during the autumn of 1936, the Soviet government sent aid to Republican Spain. Beside a strictly rationed supply of arms, just enough to enable the Republican armies to hold their own against Franco, Soviet aid included the despatch of hundreds of NKVD agents as advisers on internal security to the Republican government. In practice this meant orchestrating a campaign of repression against the so-called 'Trotskyists'. This included the POUM and left elements of the anarchists who had criticized the first Moscow show trial and whose advocacy of the 'revolution

from below' jeopardised Soviet attempts at presenting a respectable face for Republican Spain to its would be allies Britain and France.¹¹

On 28 December 1936, the ECCI sent instructions to the PCE calling for the physical destruction of the Spanish 'Trotskyists' who were portrayed as agents of Franco trying to destabilise the popular front government.¹² The campaign against the 'Trotskyists' i.e. POUM and the left anarchists, culminated during May 1937 in Barcelona. The PCE provoked an armed clash between its own military forces and those of the POUM and the anarchist CNT. After convincing the popular front government that the POUM was a subversive ally of Franco, Comintern and Soviet military advisers led the repression of the POUM and its allies. This led to the infamous murder of Andres Nin, the POUM leader, and the death in communist custody of Bob Smillie of the ILP.¹³

On 23 January 1937 came the second Moscow show trial of seventeen old Bolsheviks headed by Radek and Piatakov. Trotsky, who was the chief defendant at all three Moscow show trials, noted how Stalin was taken aback by the hostile reaction of the world's media to the trial; forcing him 'to come out into the open' in defence of the trial.¹⁴

At the fortnight-long Central Committee of the CPSU in March 1937, Stalin defended the Radek-Piatakov trial and called for the struggle against 'Trotskyism' to be stepped up.¹⁵ The Comintern responded by convening an emergency ECCI plenum for 21 April 1937 in Paris.

Representatives of seventeen communist parties participated in the secret sessions of this meeting. It issued only a brief statement declaring that its deliberations were devoted to the struggle against 'Trotskyism', and that its decisions would not be published.¹⁶ Trotsky later recalled the significance of this meeting:

As is evident from the information at our disposal, and from all the ensuing events, this mysterious plenum was in reality a conference of the most important international agents of the GPU for the purpose of preparing a campaign of framed accusations, denunciations, kidnappings and assassinations against the adversaries of Stalinism in the labour movement the world over.¹⁷

This assessment of the Comintern's secret plenum is substantiated by the violent campaign waged by the Comintern in Spain against the POUM. All over Europe, the NKVD, with Comintern backing, engaged in a series of assassinations and kidnappings of prominent critics of the Terror. One of the most notorious examples being the murder of Ignace Reiss in Switzerland during September 1937. Reiss was an NKVD agent who had broken with Stalin in disgust at the Terror and had pledged to join Trotsky in exposing the Moscow trials.¹⁸

Following the spectacle of communists attacking socialists and anarchists in Barcelona during May 1937,

which had a divisive effect on the international labour movement, came the execution of the Red Army general staff in June.19 The NKVD fabricated evidence of a, 'Fascist organisation within the Red Army', in order to make these executions more palatable to Soviet and Western public opinion. The execution of Marshal Tukhachevsky and thousands of other officers greatly weakened the fighting capacity of the Red Army, and undermined the efforts of the popular front movement in Europe to present the Soviet Union as a potential partner against fascist Germany.

Throughout 1936 and 1937 the Terror in the Soviet Union revealed Soviet state power as an arbitrary despotism to large sections of opinion within the international Labour movement. The energetic campaign of the Comintern and its sections in defence of the Terror in the Soviet Union and their active collusion in the repression of the POUM in Spain were to be instrumental in undermining the popular front movements in Europe and support for the various communist parties. Vadim Rogovin has commented, 'Such policies were driving the working class of the capitalist countries away from the official communist parties'.20 Haslam in his study of Soviet and Comintern policy in the 1930s tells us that:

Across the board, association with Stalin's rule of terror made the position of all European Communist Parties that much more difficult; it weakened the case for the popular front, since it exacerbated

suspicious on the left and in the centre, that, should the communists attain power, a blood-bath might well engulf them. The terror gave those who opposed closer association with the communists (as in the British Labour Party) on other grounds a plausible argument against those pressing for unity with Comintern sections.²¹

It would appear that during 1936-37 the CPSU and in turn Comintern became preoccupied by the campaign against 'Trotskyism' to the detriment of the anti-fascist struggle throughout Europe. In Britain too, the popular front campaigns of the Communist Party were to suffer from its association with the Soviet Union. The following sections will show that the CPGB's defence of the Terror not only undermined support for the Unity Campaign but also came to play a part in defining the Party's objectives in relation to this campaign. The Communist Party sought to use the Unity Campaign as a means for gaining affiliation to the Labour Party, thus bringing it a step closer to the goal of a popular front movement in Britain.

The CPGB and the Unity Campaign

In the year following Labour's Edinburgh conference in October 1936, the Communist Party's campaign for a working class united front, as part of its wider popular front strategy, took a new form with its participation in the Unity Campaign. In looking at the Unity Campaign

afresh it is necessary to re-examine the motives and objectives of the Communist Party with regard to this movement. Previous accounts of the Unity Campaign have not delved very deeply into the reasons why the Communist Party agreed to participate in the Unity Campaign; nor have they fully answered the question of what the Communist Party hoped to gain out of participation in the Unity Campaign.²² The answers to such questions will help provide a greater understanding of the course of the campaign and what brought about its demise.

Did the Communist Party enter the Unity Campaign out of a feeling of political isolation? Alternatively, did it see the Unity Campaign as a vehicle for its popular front designs? Or was there a more sinister motive at work in its decision to participate in the Unity Campaign? Was there a conflict of interest between the Communist Party's publicly stated objectives with regard to the campaign and its own privately held agenda?

Close examination of the Central Committee and Political Bureau minutes and other material recently released from the Comintern archive in Moscow reveals that Dutt and Pollitt entered the unity negotiations despite serious misgivings about the whole enterprise, suggesting that a sense of political isolation played a part in its participation in the Unity Campaign. What also emerges is a fundamental contradiction between the publicly stated objectives of the Communist Party and the hidden agenda it held with regard to the Unity Campaign. The Communist Party's public declarations committed it to

a working-class united front to fight fascism, yet privately, the leadership saw the Unity Campaign as a means of advancing towards a popular front in Britain through gaining affiliation to the Labour Party. It also regarded the unity agreement as a means of stifling left criticism of the Soviet Union. The archives also reveal the role of the Comintern in framing CPGB policy towards the Unity Campaign and the Labour movement.

Opponents of the Unity Campaign at the time such as Reg Groves, who was chair of the London Socialist League, believed that the Communist Party had a dual purpose in entering the Unity Campaign. Firstly, the aim was to use the unity agreement, subscribed to by all three parties in the campaign, as a means of stifling left criticism of the Terror in the Soviet Union from the ILP and the Socialist League. Groves also believed that the CPGB wanted the Socialist League to participate in the campaign in the hope of drawing it into a clash with Transport House leading to the League's dissolution, and the drawing of its members into the campaign for the popular front in the Labour Party at large. At the same time a left rival would be eliminated in whose ranks there was growing opposition to popular frontism and increasing unease at the Terror in the Soviet Union.²³ This study of the Unity Campaign will provide evidence to substantiate the first charge levelled by Reg Groves. As for the second charge, while there is no direct proof to substantiate this, circumstantial evidence leaves a lingering suspicion on this front.

Unfortunately for the Communist Party its participation in the Unity Campaign coincided with the Terror in the Soviet Union whose public face were the Moscow show trials. The Communist Party was to be faced with a conflict of interest between its obligations to defend the Stalinist government in the Soviet Union and its campaign for a united and popular front in this country. The course of the Unity Campaign reveals that the Communist Party gave defence of Stalin's Terror priority over its publicly stated objective of workers unity to fight fascism. This judgement may seem a little harsh yet Harry Pollitt, the General Secretary, while privately conceding the negative impact of the Moscow trials, continued to make the struggle against 'Trotskyism' a major concern of the Communist Party throughout the Unity Campaign.²⁴ This attitude contrasts with that of the ILP which despite its misgivings over the Moscow trials refrained from publicly criticising them during the first six months of 1937, in keeping with a secret clause in the unity agreement not to criticise the Soviet Union. This illustrates how the ILP, unlike the CPGB, was prepared to put the cause of workers unity above narrow party concerns.

From the time of the first Moscow show trial in August 1936 through to 1939 the struggle against 'Trotskyism' became a major obsession of the Communist Party reflecting its devotion to the defence of the Stalinist dictatorship in the Soviet Union. The CPGB's ardent defence of the Terror in the Soviet Union and Spain, and

the vitriolic abuse which it levelled at its Labour movement critics were to be instrumental in undermining the Unity Campaign and its attempt at winning over the Labour Party to its popular front campaign. The Labour Party and TUC leadership were to use the Communist Party's defence of the Terror and their espousal of popular frontism to attack and undermine support for the Unity Campaign.²⁵

The conflicting motives of the Communist Party in its decision to enter the unity negotiations will be explored next. The divisions within the leadership over participation in the Unity Campaign, which have gone unnoticed by most historians, will also be highlighted. The debate within the Political Bureau and Central Committee also reveals how the CPGB leadership sought to use the Unity Campaign to further the Communist Party's campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party.

Towards the Unity Campaign

The defeat of the united front and its affiliation bid at the Labour Party conference in October 1936 posed an acute dilemma for the Communist Party. It had waged its strongest campaign to date in favour of affiliation to Labour, as shown by the 1,500 organizations passing resolutions of support and the 592,000 votes for this at the Edinburgh conference.²⁶ The CPGB's response to defeat at Edinburgh was typically defiant, with it pledging to carry on the campaign for affiliation to Labour.²⁷ Yet privately, the defeat suffered at Edinburgh provoked a

considerable degree of soul searching within the leadership of the Communist Party.

At the Central Committee held on the eve of the CPGB's national conference at Sheffield on 10 October 1936, there was a heated debate over the way forward with conflicting strategies being put forward. Examination of this debate reveals that the majority of the leadership, including Pollitt and Dutt, were initially opposed to any kind of Unity Campaign with the Socialist League. Yet by the end of the discussion leading figures in the leadership, such as Pollitt, had come round to the view that the Communist Party needed to significantly modify its strategy in favour of some kind of Unity Campaign with the Socialist League. The discussion also reveals the popular front designs which lay behind the Communist Party's campaign for affiliation to Labour.²⁸

At the Central Committee on 10 October 1936 Dutt delivered the main report on the tasks facing the party after Labour's recent conference. He declared that the Edinburgh decisions left the Labour movement, 'facing the gravest crisis in its history', and pointed out the need for a 'redoubling of the unity campaign'. In view of the rising international tensions which threatened war, Dutt stressed that they did not have time to wait for the possibility of a Labour Government at the next general election. What was needed was a multi-class popular front movement strong enough to change British foreign policy, from its 'pro-fascist' orientation to one of support for

collective security in league with the Soviet Union and France.29

According to Dutt the problem facing the Communist Party was how to bring about this ambitious objective of a multi-class popular front to force changes in British foreign policy. He observed that this would have to proceed in several stages. Firstly, the Labour Party would have to be won to the policy of a united front which would then serve as the inner core of a popular front coalition of anti-government forces. Dutt stated that the campaign for a working-class united front was still the main priority for the CPGB yet he acknowledged that there was:

At the present time the need for the People's Front, the need for concentrating the forces of the overwhelming majority of the population against the National Government....But nationally [at this stage] the question of the People's Front is still a question of propaganda because nationally our main fight is still that of unity of the Labour movement.30

This raised the question of how exactly was the working class united front to be brought about? Dutt drew encouragement from the twenty five per cent vote for unity at the Labour Party conference; believing this to be a solid foundation upon which to build the fight for unity within the Labour movement. The way forward was to

build the united front from below in the localities, over opposition to rearmament, support for the Soviet Union's peace policy and aid for Spain. Eventually the pressure from below would compel the Labour leaders to end their opposition to the united front, as happened in France, and accept communist affiliation as the first step towards a popular front movement in Britain.³¹

Pollitt seconded Dutt's lead, adding that to achieve this the Communist Party would have to modify its tactics and that the new strategy would be finally confirmed by a Comintern commission at the year's end, 'But the biggest task of the Party now is this work we have of literally to send thousands of our members inside the Labour Party'.³²

It was at this meeting that the idea of a Unity Campaign with the Socialist League was first raised. The Dutt-Pollitt line of merely continuing with the same failed strategy of mass pressure from below forcing communist affiliation upon Labour, was challenged by Gallacher and Rust; which may have reflected pressure from the Socialist League upon a section of the Communist Party leadership. It was the Socialist League which took the first formal step in initiating the unity discussions on 14 October 1936, yet the Communist Party leadership had already begun discussing the subject before this date.

It would appear that Gallacher first raised the idea of a Unity Campaign with the Socialist League, in the King Street headquarters with Pollitt and Dutt on

Wednesday 7 October 1936.³³ Then at the Political Bureau on Friday 9 October, Gallacher for the first time formally raised the issue within the CPGB leadership, only to be rejected out of hand. At the Central Committee on Saturday 10 October he complained that the questions he had raised the day before at the Political Bureau had not been treated seriously by the leadership.³⁴

Gallacher declared that all the main political questions facing the Communist Party such as rearmament and the government's 'pro-fascist' foreign policy, depended for their successful resolution upon it becoming an integral part of the Labour Party. Only once it was affiliated to Labour could the Communist Party bring about a change in Labour's policy that would lead to an effective challenge to the direction of the government's foreign policy. Gallacher argued that to ensure the success of the fight against fascism the Communist Party should make whatever concessions and changes were necessary to achieve a Unity Campaign with the Socialist League; which would help facilitate its affiliation to Labour.³⁵

Gallacher's initiative was fully supported only by Rust and Abe Moffat at this meeting. Most of the participants in the discussion denounced Gallacher's ideas as representing an attempt to dissolve the Communist Party into social democracy, when it should be striving to gain the leadership of the working class. Springhall's comment typified the response of those opposed to Gallacher's proposal:

But I regard the proposal which comrade Gallacher has made here is a proposition which is tantamount to a disbandment of the Communist Party in the interests of trying to make some form of hybrid revolutionary Socialist Party which would be another left independent Labour Party.³⁶

In summing up this controversial debate Pollitt revealed that he had moved considerable ground from his earlier position of outright hostility to Gallacher's proposal of unity talks with the Socialist League:

One thing is perfectly clear and that is that there has to be a new approach made to the whole question of how to get working class unity in the shortest possible time....We do not want to put off Gallacher's proposals because the Socialist League has only 2,000 members....it is not the size of the organisation that counts, it is the fact that we can make any contribution towards bringing along side with us for our line another working class organisation in this country.³⁷

When they received an invitation from the Socialist League for a unity discussion on 14 October 1937, Dutt and Pollitt without any clear mandate from the Central Committee went ahead and met Cripps, Bevan and Mellor. They only reported to the Political Bureau on the

negotiations, in mid-November, once considerable progress had been made towards a unity agreement.³⁸ While the Political Bureau was kept in the dark about the negotiations Pollitt kept the ECCI informed, via Arnot who was in Moscow covering the show trials, with regular updates.³⁹ In a letter to Arnot dated 6 November, Pollitt was eager to get Comintern approval for the proposed Unity Campaign, no doubt to help quell any opposition to the campaign from those sections of the Communist Party leadership which had been so hostile to Gallacher when he had first raised the idea in early October.⁴⁰

In view of the hostility expressed by most of the Central Committee to a Unity Campaign with the Socialist League, the Communist Party's national conference in Sheffield on 11 October 1936 did not discuss Gallacher's proposal. It merely restated the position of the Central Committee resolution of the previous day that the Communist Party would continue to strive for affiliation to Labour. The real importance of the CPGB's national conference lay in the secret report, given by Shields, on the first Moscow show trial and the struggle against 'Trotskyism'.⁴¹

The struggle against Trotskyism

In his report to the national conference on 11 October 1936, Shields put the struggle against 'Trotskyism' (in other words the critics of the Moscow show trials) as a major campaigning priority of the Communist Party. The Daily Worker's coverage of the conference made no mention

of Shields' secret report, whose purpose according to Pollitt was, 'to prepare this Party for further events in the Soviet Union'.⁴² This suggests that the Communist Party leadership had already been informed about preparations for the second Moscow show trial and the consequent need to prepare the membership for a campaign in defence of the trial. Let us not forget the Communist Party was taken by surprise by the first Moscow trial in August 1936 and was criticised for its slow reaction in coming to the defence of the trial.⁴³ The unfavourable press reaction to the first show trial led Moscow to inform the national sections of the Comintern of preparations for the second trial to help prepare the ground for this event. This contradicts those apologists for the CPGB leadership, such as Noreen Branson, who makes the claim that Pollitt and company had no idea of what was going on in the Soviet Union.⁴⁴

Shields noted the failure of the Communist Party to, 'grasp the tremendous importance' of the first Moscow trial. This sprang from its failure to realise:

That this trial was a mighty blow struck by the Soviet Union against the whole fascist movement, struck not only on behalf of the toilers of the Soviet Union, but on behalf of the international working class movement.⁴⁵

Shields attacked as 'Trotskyist elements' those on the left in the Labour movement, such as Brockway of the ILP,

who had criticised the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial. Right wing critics of the trial such as Citrine of the TUC, were classified as aiding the anti-Soviet campaigns of the fascist states. He added rather ominously :

These people are the agents of the enemy inside the ranks of the working class movement....We have got to raise the whole question of the importance...of clearing out from the whole working class movement those who are hostile to the working class movement.46

Reading between the lines this represented a call on the Communist Party to put the defence of the Terror in the Soviet Union above the interests of working-class unity in Britain. It made a mockery of the Communist Party's appeal to Labour movement activists to rebel against the 'reactionary' Labour leaders policy of opposition to the united front. On both a national and local scale the Communist Party was to give no quarter in its attacks upon those in the Labour movement who criticised or cast doubt upon the trials.

Shields concluded his report by informing the conference delegates of the preparations underway in the Soviet Union for a second trial of 'counter-revolutionary Trotskyists'. He called on the Communist Party to step up its defence of the Soviet Union and its struggle against

'Trotskyism' in Britain; a blanket term applied to those in the Labour movement who criticized or cast doubt upon the trials.⁴⁷

Thus from the beginning of the next stage in its campaign for working-class unity as a prelude to a full blown popular front, the Communist Party was to place defence of the Stalinist Terror, which involved the imprisonment and execution of millions of Soviet citizens, above its search for new political allies. In its defence of the Terror and its attacks on those in the Labour movement who opposed the show trials, the Communist Party was to fatally undermine the forthcoming Unity Campaign; and lose many allies who in 1936 had supported its campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party.⁴⁸

The turbulent unity negotiations between the Communist Party, ILP and Socialist League will be examined next. This section will also highlight the conflicting motives of the participants and notes the contradiction between the publicly stated objectives of the Communist Party and the hidden agenda it held with regard to the Unity Campaign.

The unity negotiations

On 14 October 1936, the Communist Party received an invitation from the Socialist League to attend a meeting with its representatives. At this meeting it was explained to Dutt and Pollitt that the League wanted to discuss the prospect of a Unity Campaign incorporating

itself along with the Communist Party and the ILP. The campaign's aim would be to offer a militant alternative to the 'disastrous' policies of the Labour leadership; which failed to challenge those of the government. The long-term objectives of the Unity Campaign were to secure a united front of all working class parties, which would fight for the defeat of the National Government and its replacement by a Labour Government, committed to the fight for the peace.⁴⁹

Dutt and Pollitt did not immediately agree to meet the Socialist League. Their initial reservations centred on two things, 'the existence in both organisations of the Trotskyists, and secondly, because so many of the leading comrades were renegade members of the Communist Party'.⁵⁰ They insisted on two conditions being met before entering any negotiations, which revealed a hidden agenda. Firstly, the Communist Party would not join any Unity Campaign that would lead to any splits or desertions from the Labour Party; revealing the centrality of Labour to the Communist Party's popular front scheme. They did not want any Unity Campaign to jeopardise the Communist Party's chances of affiliation to Labour. Secondly, there had to be, 'complete agreement on foreign policy and no attacks upon the policy of the Soviet Union'.⁵¹

This precondition was designed to prevent any criticism from the Socialist League and ILP of the upcoming show trial of the Radek-Piatakov group. Stalin had been surprised by the hostile reaction of the Labour and Liberal press to the first Moscow show trial; hence

the Comintern was ordered to take preventative measures for the second trial. Pollitt underlined this point further when he declared, 'that under no circumstances would we be identified with Brockway and the ILP', unless it agreed to change its 'hostile' policy towards the Soviet Union and the Labour Party.⁵²

With certain reservations, Pollitt consented to send a delegation to the unity talks. His aspirations centred on winning over the Labour Party to accept communist affiliation; and for Labour's participation in a popular front movement to change the direction of British foreign policy. Pollitt and Dutt believed that if the Unity Campaign was confined merely to the Socialist League, ILP and the Communist Party, there lay the danger of the Labour leadership portraying the campaign as a separatist movement designed to split the Labour Party.⁵³

During the negotiations Dutt made the proposal, which was rejected, that the Unity Campaign should not be confined merely to the ILP, Socialist League and Communist Party. He argued that it should be based on representatives of all sections of the Labour movement in sympathy with the objectives of the campaign:

thus preventing from the outset any impression of narrow separatist basis of only two or three organisations coming together, to the exclusion of the wide body of those supporting unity throughout the Trade Union and Labour Movement.⁵⁴

Once the unity negotiations began Dutt and Pollitt sensed a hidden agenda held by the ILP and a section of the Socialist League leadership around Bevan and Mellor, which ran contrary to the Communist Party's hopes of affiliation to Labour, for they:

gave us the impression that they would not be opposed to creating a new Party as a result of an amalgamation of the ILP, the Socialist League and the Communist Party. We made it clear right at the start that the united front that we stood for was within the framework of the Labour movement.⁵⁵

Why did Dutt and Pollitt consent to participation in the unity negotiations when they were fully aware that participation in the Unity Campaign held certain dangers for the Communist Party's policy of winning affiliation to Labour? This question has not been fully answered in previous accounts of the Unity Campaign; and its investigation should help indicate what they hoped to achieve from participation in the campaign.⁵⁶

From Pollitt's reports to the ECCI during the unity negotiations, and his report to the Comintern commission held on the Unity Campaign in early January 1937, it is possible to identify three motives for participating in the Unity Campaign. Firstly, to prevent a left split away from the Labour Party and the formation of a new left party comprising the ILP and elements of the Socialist League. This would be a new rival to the Communist Party,

made up of all those elements on the left most critical of the Soviet Union and popular frontism, and would undoubtedly weaken its campaign for affiliation to Labour and at bringing Labour into a popular front.⁵⁷ Secondly, to stifle left criticism of the Soviet Union at the height of the Terror, through the insertion of a gagging clause in the unity agreement.⁵⁸ Finally, to use the Unity Campaign to invigorate the Labour movement to such a degree that pressure from below would force radical changes in Labour policy such as accepting communist affiliation and participation in a popular front.⁵⁹

Of these motives the latter two figured uppermost in Pollitt's strategic thinking. At the Political Bureau on 13 November 1936, Pollitt claimed his reservations over participation in the unity negotiations had been overcome on the grounds that:

It was the first time we would have an opportunity for conducting a campaign for unity within the labour movement with an organisation already affiliated to the Labour Party and that also in the person of Cripps we had someone who was looked up to as being the representative of the local Labour Party's in their revolt against Transport House.⁶⁰

As Fenner Brockway has noted, Pollitt's main motive in the Unity Campaign was to use Cripps to further the Communist Party's popular front campaign:

I was fully aware, of course of Pollitt's motives in the struggle going on underneath the superficial unity of the [unity] committee, the struggle as to whether the Popular Front view of the C.P. or the Workers' Front view of the ILP should win the allegiance of the Left in the Labour Movement.⁶¹

Pollitt believed that the united front was lost at Labour's Edinburgh conference because of divisions between the left in the trade union delegations. He put the loss of the votes of the NUR and AEU down to this. Once the three parties started campaigning together:

this will have a tremendous effect on all the trade union conferences that take place and give us absolutely the possibility of winning the trade union vote that can change the situation of the Labour Party at the TUC.⁶²

Equally important for Pollitt was the objective of using the Unity Campaign to stifle left criticism of the Terror in the Soviet Union. At the ECCI in early January 1937 Pollitt boasted:

This [unity] agreement will also prevent the ILP's organ, the "New Leader" from being an anti-Soviet organ that it has been up to the present time. This is a very important thing, because the "New Leader" has still a big political influence in Scotland, and

therefore anything that we can do to stop it in its anti-Soviet campaign is exceptionally important.⁶³

The unity negotiations revealed a great deal of mutual mistrust and a lack of common purpose, which were to undermine the campaign from within. What drove the negotiations on was the alarm shared by all three parties at the slide towards war in Europe. All three parties held the National Government partly responsible for this situation, with its policy which was alleged to have appeased fascist aggression.⁶⁴

Not surprisingly it was over questions of foreign policy and attitudes to the Soviet Union that the unity negotiations ran into serious difficulties. There were bitter arguments between the Communist Party and ILP over the New Leader criticism of the Soviet Union and the popular front policy of the Comintern in Spain.⁶⁵

The Communist Party's proposal for an immediate non-aggression pact between Britain, France and the Soviet Union, open to all capitalist states, and based on the League of Nations Covenant, was rejected by the ILP and Socialist League. The latter two believed Britain could only join such a non-aggression pact once the National Government was out of office. They also rejected the pursuit of peace through collective security measures taken by the League of Nations. The ILP went further demanding that a socialist government in Britain could only make non-aggression pacts with other working-class governments, excluding the Soviet Union.

After prolonged wrangling a compromise was reached where it was agreed that the defence of the Soviet Union and its fight for peace would be included in the Unity Manifesto.⁶⁶ Alongside this went the demand for a pact between Britain under a new government, France and the Soviet Union; together with 'all other countries in which the working class has political freedom'.⁶⁷

Together with this, the three parties disagreed over what form the campaign should take in order to bring about the required change in British foreign policy. The Communist Party's demand for a popular front on the French and Spanish models, to be included in the Unity Manifesto, was vetoed by the ILP and the Socialist League. The Unity Manifesto called only for a working-class united front to defeat the government. The ILP and Communist Party representatives on the National Unity Campaign Committee clashed repeatedly over the communists encouraging non-socialists to join the Unity Campaign. While the Communist Party denied that they were trying to move the National Unity Campaign Committee towards an understanding with the Liberals, prominent Liberals such as Sir Richard Acland were becoming associated with the Unity Campaign.⁶⁸

The CPGB's demand for affiliation to Labour was also vetoed from inclusion in the manifesto by the ILP and Socialist League. Yet a clause in the agreement made provision for the Communist Party to publicise in its press the demand for a popular front and its affiliation to Labour.⁶⁹

On the surface, the disagreements between the three parties appear somewhat academic, yet they revealed fundamental differences in world outlook. The policy divisions, particularly over attitudes to the Soviet Union, which were papered over for the sake of an abstract artificial unity, were to re-emerge once the Unity Campaign was underway and played a major role in undermining support for it.⁷⁰

The most significant concession which the Communist Party won during the unity negotiations, was the clause in the agreement in which, 'all parties agree to abstain from any general criticism of the policy of the Soviet Union or its government'.⁷¹ This represented a considerable triumph for the Communist Party, for it involved the ILP and Socialist League being drawn into a conspiracy of silence over the purges conducted by Stalin in the Soviet Union and behind the front lines of the Republican forces in Spain.

Close examination of the New Leader from January to May of 1937 reveals that the ILP was rather muted in its comments on the show trials in the Soviet Union. It was not until after the POUM had been repressed by the Republican Government in Spain, in conjunction with the NKVD, that the ILP leadership began to speak out strongly against the Terror in the Soviet Union. It linked this up with the purge against the POUM in Spain as part of the same process of Stalin's government acting to repress all opposition to its reactionary policies.⁷² By this time the likes of Brockway no longer felt constrained by the

terms of the Unity Campaign, which was effectively over by early June.

The Communist Party's objective of using the unity agreement to stifle left criticism of Stalinism at the height of the Terror in the Soviet Union was recognised at the time by Reg Groves, chair of the London Socialist League:

The agreement denies the right of free criticism, either of the parties concerned, or of their personnel or of the actions and policies of the Soviet Government. This clause does not stop the Daily Worker from attacking individuals in the Socialist League: [such as Groves who opposed the show trials and the League's participation in the Unity Campaign] neither does it prevent the CPGB from attempting to destroy their critics and opponents in the working-class movement by slander and by malicious falsehood, but it does hamper those so attacked from replying freely, for to do so is to be accused of seeking to disrupt the unity agreement.⁷³

By 3 December 1936, a final draft of the Unity Manifesto had been agreed to. All that remained for the leadership of the three parties to the agreement was to get their own members to agree to what had been negotiated behind their backs. The undemocratic nature of the unity negotiations, during which the rank and file of all three

parties had not been consulted, was to have grave consequences for the Socialist League.⁷⁴

Before moving on to look at the course of the Unity Campaign it is worthwhile pausing to evaluate the potential appeal of the Unity Campaign to activists in the Labour movement. It sought to win the Labour Party to a programme far to the right of that which it had already accepted, in the form of For Socialism And Peace. The Unity Campaign involved only working-class parties yet it raised demands which called for minor reforms to the capitalist system; when that system was in the greatest crisis of its history.

The Unity Manifesto called for a limited number of reform measures such as higher pensions, abolition of the means test, along with an uncritical approach to the Soviet Union and its fight for peace. In practice this meant accepting Stalin's Terror and his diplomatic manoeuvres aimed at getting allies in the West.

During the unity negotiations the Socialist League had put forward a series of more radical measures such as a minimum wage, nationalisation of the land and the banks, which the Communist Party had opposed.⁷⁵ Presumably such radical demands might frighten off potential middle-class allies to the Communist Party's popular front campaign.

Before the Communist Party could go ahead with its participation in the Unity Campaign it needed the Comintern's stamp of approval. The role of the Comintern in the Unity Campaign has not been commented upon before

by historians; it is only the recent release of archive material which has brought this to light. The discussion at the ECCI commission reveals differences in emphasis with regard to the objectives of the Unity Campaign between Pollitt and the Comintern leadership.

Role of the Comintern in the Unity Campaign

During the unity negotiations while the Political Bureau was kept in the dark, Pollitt sent regular reports to the ECCI in Moscow. At a commission of the ECCI on 4 January 1937, Pollitt gave a detailed account of the unity negotiations.

In its questions to Pollitt the ECCI commission revealed four major concerns, with regard to the CPGB's participation in the Unity Campaign. Moskvin asked whether the struggle against Trotskyism would be a major concern of the Unity Campaign. Lozovsky expressed concern at the growing hostility towards the Soviet Union amongst both the leaders and activists of the British Labour movement. Rosa questioned the value of association with the Socialist League. Dimitrov feared that participation in the Unity Campaign might lead to the Communist Party's isolation within the Labour movement, especially if the Socialist League was expelled from the Labour Party.⁷⁶

In replying to these concerns Pollitt stated that the leaders of the ILP and Socialist League would not agree to make the struggle against 'Trotskyism' an objective of the Unity Campaign. Yet they had agreed to a clause in the unity agreement which forbade any criticism of the

Soviet Union. Pollitt declared that anti-Soviet sentiment in the Labour movement was being countered by a vigorous propaganda campaign. The value of associating with the Socialist League lay in that it, 'is looked upon by the local Labour Parties as the institution of Socialism within the Labour Party....Cripps has the support of very big DLP's'. Pollitt's reply to Dimitrov's question revealed little concern at the prospect of the Socialist League being expelled from the Labour Party, indeed he fully expected it to occur. By involving as wide a layer of activists as possible in the campaign, Pollitt somewhat naively believed it would prevent the attacks of the Labour leaders isolating the Communist Party.⁷⁷

At this ECCI meeting Pollitt admitted that the press had got hold of a copy of the Unity Manifesto through Special Branch interception of Socialist League mail. Apparently Special Branch had given this to the Times and Daily Herald who had published it. This admission is significant for later on in January 1937, in an attempt to politically discredit Trotskyist critics of the second Moscow show trial, the Daily Worker made great play of the unfounded charge that Reg Groves (a Trotskyist who was chair of the London Socialist League) had leaked a copy of the Unity Manifesto to the Daily Herald; and was collaborating with right-wing Labour leaders to sabotage working class unity in the face of the fascist threat.⁷⁸

The ECCI resolution on the Unity Campaign called on the CPGB to engage in mass infiltration of the Labour Party to further its united and popular front campaigns.

It also instructed the CPGB to significantly increase its propaganda campaign in support of the Soviet Union against 'Trotskyism' i.e. Labour movement critics of the Terror. The ECCI even called for a purge of Daily Worker staff who may have had doubts about the trials.⁷⁹

At the same time, the ECCI instructed the Communist Party to step up its propaganda calling for a popular front in Britain. It was directed to give its fullest support to the mass movement developing around the Left Book Club as providing, 'the wider basis for unity within the labour movement, and towards the formation of an effective basis for the popular front in Britain'.⁸⁰

Here then was a two-fold strategy for the development of the popular front in Britain. The main thrust of which was to use the Unity Campaign as a mechanism through which to win the Labour Party to a united front, as a precursor to Labour joining up with anti-appeasement Liberals and Tories in a popular front movement to change the direction of British foreign policy. Alongside the Unity Campaign the Communist Party was to engage in mass propaganda for the popular front through its intervention in the Left Book Club.

The Communist Party's call for a multi-class alliance against the National Government represented an attempt to compromise the political independence of the British Labour movement. This displayed a certain defeatism and lack of confidence in the organised working class to institute effective change; a charge which the Communist

Party often levelled at its opponents in the Labour movement.

The CPGB went into 1937 with great confidence believing that the Unity Campaign would herald a decisive breakthrough for its popular front strategy. However events in the Soviet Union in the shape of the second Moscow show trial were to undermine support for the Unity Campaign and played a part in it almost not being launched.

The Unity Campaign in trouble - January 1937

The Unity Campaign was due to be launched in Manchester at the Free Trade Hall on 24 January 1937. By early January, however, it was clear that the Unity Campaign was running into increasing problems which threatened to derail it before it was officially launched. The Labour Party was becoming more than a little disturbed at the prospect of one of its affiliated organisations, the Socialist League, becoming involved in a major political campaign with the Communist Party.

On 8 January 1937, Labour's National Executive warned the Socialist League that it would be disaffiliated if it participated in the Unity Campaign. This was followed by a circular on 12 January which called on the Labour movement not to participate in the Unity Campaign, and for loyalty to conference decisions that had rejected a united front with the Communist Party. It also made the charge, to be repeated on numerous occasions over the next few months, that the Unity Campaign could seriously

weaken Labour's electoral power for it presaged an alliance between the Labour Party and the Liberals. By portraying the Unity Campaign as an attempt to compromise Labour's political independence and its socialist objectives, the circular played up to discontented left sentiment in the party.⁸¹

The Daily Herald on 15 January 1937 published an article by Reg Groves, which exposed the unconstitutional way the Socialist League leadership had acted in signing the unity agreement without the approval of its own National Council. This together with the NEC's appeal for loyalty to the decisions of Labour Party regarding the Communist Party, almost led to the League being forced to withdraw from the Unity Campaign before it had even been launched. At a special conference of the Socialist League on 16 January, the Unity Manifesto was approved by a narrow margin on a minority vote (56 in favour, 38 against, with 23 abstentions).⁸²

The opponents of the Unity Campaign within the Socialist League were concerned that the League's participation would lead to its expulsion from the Labour Party. At the time, Reg Groves warned that certain members of the Executive Committee had contemplated the dissolution of the League, in the event of a clash with Transport House.⁸³ As the Daily Herald pointed out, Cripps had gained narrow approval for the Unity Campaign, 'by making the issue a rigid vote of confidence....and by assuring delegates that association of the Socialist League with the Unity Campaign did not mean

disaffiliation from the Labour Party'.⁸⁴ The decision to participate in the Unity Campaign was supported by representatives of a few hundred members of the Socialist League at most, and led to a large section of the membership seceding; valuing their Labour Party card more than membership of an organisation rapidly heading for the political wilderness.⁸⁵

When the Daily Herald announced the existence of the secret unity agreement it caused an uproar in the Labour movement. Embarrassed by this premature revelation of the Unity Manifesto, not due to be publicly unveiled until 18 January, the Daily Worker responded with an unfounded attack on Reg Groves. It accused him of trying to undermine the Unity Campaign by leaking the unity agreement to Transport House.⁸⁶ In a series of articles, the Daily Worker described all opponents of the Unity Campaign within the Socialist League as Trotskyists; in reality Trotskyists only formed a small if influential minority in the League.⁸⁷ The Daily Worker accused them of collaborating with the Labour Party right-wing to undermine attempts at working class unity when fascism was on the offensive internationally.⁸⁸

The Daily Worker came out with these unfounded charges in advance of the second Moscow show trial, due to start on 23 January, in an attempt to undermine the credibility of those left voices in the Socialist League who were to express opposition to the trial. The Trotskyists in the Socialist League in conjunction with other lefts such as H.N.Brailsford and J.F.Horrabin, were to form a Defend

Leon Trotsky committee at this time.⁸⁹ The Daily Worker's attacks were to be the first of many over the next months, suggesting that the Communist Party placed a higher premium on defending the Terror in the Soviet Union than the unity of the left in Britain. By attacking other lefts the Communist Party undermined the credibility of its declarations about the Unity Campaign being an attempt to unite all working class forces.

On the eve of the launch of the Unity Campaign the Communist Party threatened to withdraw from its planned activities. At a meeting of the National Unity Committee, Pollitt attacked the ILP for allegedly breaching the unity agreement with its 'criticism' of the Soviet Union. He declared that Communist Party speakers would not share platforms with Brockway for his anti-Soviet attitudes.⁹⁰ Not content with the gagging clause in the unity agreement which forbade criticism of the Soviet Union, Pollitt wanted further measures to guarantee that no criticism of the second Moscow show trial came from the ILP or Socialist League. Pollitt's attack on the ILP may well have reflected his dismay at the condemnation of the trial from both the Labour and capitalist press.⁹¹ The Unity Campaign was saved from a potential miscarriage by:

Cripps emphatically dissenting from the attitude of Brockway and the New Leader and arrangements were made for a further meeting at which the whole question of Trotskyism could be put both to the ILP and the Socialist League.⁹²

Following this episode the Communist Party's Political Bureau, gave instructions for the preparation of articles in the Daily Worker attacking the 'anti-Soviet' line of the New Leader and, 'that attempts should be made to get some expression in the next issue of Tribune in opposition to the line of the New Leader'.⁹³ Such instructions illustrate how the Communist Party injected an internecine conflict into the Unity Campaign, which was to be seriously undermined by this internal strife. They are also a graphic illustration of how the Communist Party put the defence of the Stalinist Terror above the cause of workers unity in Britain.

The second Moscow show trial of seventeen old Bolsheviks in late January could not have come at a worse time for the Communist Party, coinciding as it did with the launch of the Unity Campaign. The Communist Party's defence of the trial helped to undermine support for the Unity Campaign.

The second Moscow show trial - January 1937

In line with instructions from Moscow the Communist Party made preparations for a campaign in defence of the second Moscow show trial. On the eve of the trial N.Raylock, possibly a pseudonym, delivered to the leadership a secret report on Trotskyism in Britain. Raylock noted with alarm the hostile reaction of the Labour and Liberal press to the announcement of the forthcoming trial in Moscow. The report also described the formation of the British Committee for the Defence of Leon Trotsky, whose

aim was to expose the falsity of the trial proceedings in Moscow. It concluded:

The Party has decided to take special measures for increasing the struggle against Trotskyism as one of the most urgent tasks of the CP and the entire British working class....It is necessary for the Party to take steps to bring about the ...expulsion of the Trotskyists from the ILP and the Socialist League.(94) The Party will have to keep careful watch to see that the point of the agreement with the ILP and the Socialist League on the impermissibility of attacks against the policy of the Soviet Union is carried out, and in case such attacks do occur to consider them as an attempt to break the agreement.95

The recommendations of Raylock's report were taken up by the Political Bureau on 28 January 1937. This meeting gave instructions for the Daily Worker to prepare a four-page supplement defending the second Moscow trial, and for a new pamphlet attacking 'Trotskyism' by Dutt and Pollitt. All the districts were instructed to convene public meetings in support of the trial once the seventeen old Bolsheviks had been executed.96

Over the next year scores of articles appeared in the Communist Party press defending the Terror and attacking those who criticised it.97 Reports on the struggle against 'Trotskyism' became a regular feature at meetings of the Communist Party leadership.98

It is rather ironic that while Pollitt led the campaign in defence of Stalin's Terror in Britain, the NKVD had planned a trial at which Pollitt was to have been the principal defendant.⁹⁹ This may have been prompted by Pollitt having the temerity to speak out in defence of Petrovsky who was the Comintern agent in Britain during the 1920s and had been a close friend of his.¹⁰⁰

It is a relatively simple matter to demonstrate the higher priority which the Communist Party gave to the defence of the second Moscow show trial than the cause of workers unity. In the first two weeks of the Unity Campaign twice as much column space in the Daily Worker was devoted to defending the Radek-Piatakov trial as to the Unity Campaign.

Previous accounts of the CPGB's support for the Moscow trials do not highlight the way in which it tried to justify defence of Stalin's court, by portraying the struggle against 'Trotskyism' as a vital element of the international anti-fascist struggle.¹⁰¹ On the first day of the second Moscow show trial the Daily Worker, with the headline 'TERRORISTS ON TRIAL,' made the claim:

This trial is of vital significance to the international working class. It represents a mighty blow against the international forces of Fascism and reaction, working through and in alliance with the degenerate counter-revolutionary elements of Trotskyism.

The article concluded:

In Britain the workers will readily understand from their direct experiences, no less than from the experience of other countries, the necessity of settling accounts with Trotskyism and clearing out this poison from the ranks of the Labour movement.¹⁰²

Unfortunately for the Communist Party the British Labour movement rejected its appeals for repressive measures against those socialists who criticised Stalinist Russia. This, however, did not prevent the Communist Party from resorting to a variety of repressive measures to try and stifle criticism of the trial. In Hyde Park a Trotskyist meeting on the trial was attacked by 500 communists.¹⁰³ At the Political Bureau on 28 January 1937, Idris Cox boasted how in South Wales the local Communist Party was waging a campaign of intimidation against a NCLC lecturer with Trotskyist sympathies, designed to drive, 'this fellow out'.¹⁰⁴

Over the next few months the Communist Party injected an internecine conflict into the Unity Campaign with its persistent attacks on the ILP and those in the Socialist League who either criticised or voiced doubts about the Radek-Piatakov trial.¹⁰⁵ This assault on critics of the trial was widened to include anyone in the Labour movement who questioned the judgement of Stalin's court.

The Daily Worker waged a bitter polemic against the Daily Herald, in response to its criticism of the trial.¹⁰⁶

The epithets of abuse heaped upon Labour movement critics of the Stalinist Terror, together with its defence of the executions of old Bolsheviks, combined to spread a wave of revulsion against the Communist Party throughout the Labour movement; and played a major part in undermining support for the Unity Campaign.¹⁰⁷ Pollitt himself, in a letter to Arnot who was in Moscow covering the trial for the Daily Worker, confirmed the negative effect of the show trial upon most British workers:

Now after the most careful enquiries I find the two things on which there is the greatest difficulty in getting conviction, is first of all the character and completeness of the confessions, secondly why did they risk so much and how could such old timers try to make an alliance with Fascism. It is this last point that is still the hardest to get over.¹⁰⁸

During its short existence the Unity Campaign was undermined by internecine conflict and a vigorous campaign of opposition from the Labour leadership. Besides this it had to cope with a major handicap in the form of its association with the Moscow show trials thanks to the CPGB's support for Stalin's Terror.

The Unity Campaign January - May 1937

On 24 January 1937 the Unity Campaign was launched in Manchester by Pollitt, Cripps and Maxton. Following this,

meetings with speakers from all three parties were held in most major towns and cities. Attempts were made to form local unity committees involving sections of the Labour movement.

Compared to the united front campaign of 1936, around communist affiliation to Labour, the Unity Campaign made unimpressive progress. By late March a mere 18,000 pledge cards, supporting the Unity Manifesto, had been received by the Unity Campaign Committee. This peaked at 40,000 by late May 1937.¹⁰⁹ Resolutions of support from labour and trade union branches, sent into the Daily Worker, numbered under 200. This is in sharp contrast to the large swell of support for the Communist Party's united front campaign in 1936. By late September 1936 the Daily Worker reported nearly 1,500 Labour movement bodies in support of communist affiliation to the Labour Party.¹¹⁰

The isolation of the Unity Campaign from the Labour movement is revealed by internal documents of the campaign. In a memorandum to the Unity Campaign Committee in April, Pollitt acknowledged its failure to develop a base of support within the trade unions.¹¹¹ Perhaps the best illustration of the Unity Campaign's lack of support from the Labour movement is its financial weakness. John Aplin, treasurer of the Unity Campaign Committee, in a letter to its members on 24 May 1937, noted the campaign had a cash deficit of 243 pounds. In addition to this 95 pounds was owed to printers due to the large number of unsold unity pamphlets. Aplin concluded that the campaign

was financially bankrupt and suggested a variety of cost-cutting measures.¹¹²

This raises the question: why did the Unity Campaign fail to attract widespread support from the Labour movement? Several explanations can be offered for this. Attacks on the financial weakness of the Unity Campaign and the Socialist League and Tribune, the latter two being dependent on wealthy patrons to keep them afloat, were used to great effect by the Labour Party.¹¹³

In 1936 the Labour leadership had been relatively slow off the mark in its campaign of opposition to the Communist Party's affiliation campaign, allowing it to build up considerable momentum within the Labour movement. Having learnt the lesson from the late start to its campaign opposing CPGB affiliation in 1936, the Labour leadership in 1937 took strong measures against the Unity Campaign before it had even been formally launched.

During the spring and summer of 1937 the Labour Party issued several circulars calling on its members not to support the Unity Campaign. One of the most effective attacks on the Unity Campaign was the circular issued in May entitled, The Labour Party And The So-Called Unity Campaign. This reiterated the charge that the Unity Campaign represented an attempt to compromise the political independence of the Labour Party and ally it with the enemies of socialism such as the Liberals, who had been responsible for undermining the two minority Labour Governments.¹¹⁴

These statements were backed up by the launch of Labour's Immediate Programme, this was a brief declaration of the socialist measures which a Labour government would introduce; and was the product of four years of discussion. This sold over 300,000 copies in pamphlet form, while Your Britain, a sixteen-page pictorial presentation of Labour's Immediate Programme sold over 400,000 copies.115

In addition to this mass socialist propaganda the Labour leadership were able to attack the Unity Campaign from the left; for the Unity Manifesto had subordinated all talk of socialism to questions of foreign policy. Clement Attlee, leader of the Labour Party, was able to do this very effectively by drawing on the experience of the last Labour government:

The plain fact is that a Socialist Party cannot hope to make a success of administering the capitalist system because it does not believe in it. This is our fundamental objection to all the proposals that are put forward for the formation of a Popular Front in this country.116

Throughout the spring and summer of 1937 Transport House used the columns of the Daily Herald to great effect in undermining support for the Unity Campaign; it also published the pamphlet 'The Witchcraft Trial' by the IFTU Secretary Frederick Adler, which criticised the first Moscow show trial. The Daily Herald linked the communist

supporters of the Unity Campaign with the Moscow show trials and the execution of the Red Army's general staff on the pretext of them being agents of fascism. The following comment was typical:

Old Bolsheviks are being shot against a wall after state trials....The profound belief of British Labour that dictatorships do not dissolve, but perpetrate themselves, driving opposition to revolution, is being proved with terrible accuracy. It is the fundamental difference of belief that has determined British Labour that it cannot share its movement with the Communists. The Moscow Trial will scarcely relax that determination.117

After the execution of the Red Army generals in June, the Daily Herald challenged the Communist Party to lift its blanket of silence over the many victims of the Terror:

They have a daily newspaper. Except for the execution of the eight Communist generals, it has told its readers nothing of this vast and astonishing execution of leading Communist citizens of the Soviet Union.118

The Communist Party responded to this with a Central Committee statement in the Daily Worker on 1 July 1937, which can only have further discredited it in the eyes of many workers, 'Why have we not spoken about the "terrible

wave of executions"....The reason the communists have not dealt with these events is that they have not taken place'.119

Against a background of public acrimony between the three parties involved in the Unity Campaign, the Socialist League at its annual conference in May decided to wind up its own organisation, effectively killing off the Unity Campaign. By this time the League's membership had slumped to 1,600 from 3,000 in January; illustrating the detrimental effect of the Unity Campaign's association with popular frontism and the Moscow show trials.120 It was widely recognised within the Labour movement that the bitter infighting between the ILP and the Communist Party had lost the Unity Campaign many supporters. Brockway recalls that, 'Cripps remarked on the irony of unity meetings when at the door members of the two parties were selling literature bitterly attacking each other'.121

The demise of the Unity Campaign June - October 1937

After the Socialist League's dissolution in May, the Unity Campaign carried on in a half-hearted sporadic form up until October. Labour supporters of the campaign were instructed to form local Labour Unity Committees to carry on propaganda in favour of unity up to Labour Party conference; while the ILP and Communist Party would conduct their own unity propaganda on a separate basis. In its last public statement the National Unity Campaign Committee made the inflated claim that it had waged, 'one

of the most successful campaigns in the history of the Labour movement'.122

The proposal to disband the Unity Campaign Committee and change the format of the campaign came from the Communist Party with the approval of Stafford Cripps.123 The Communist Party's suggestion that former Socialist League members should publicly withdraw from the campaign reflected its desire that they continue working within the Labour Party to further its popular front designs.

The decision to disband the Unity Campaign revealed the lack of unity of purpose which was the hallmark of the campaign since its inception; different organisations supposedly campaigning together, but each having its own separate agenda to follow. By August the Communist Party believed that the doomed campaign was effectively over, and decided to withdraw from its activities and focus its energies on campaigning for a full-blown popular front. The CPGB was abandoning its earlier precondition of there being a united front with Labour before any popular front movement could come into being.124

The Unity Campaign was finished off with the defeats it suffered in the autumn at the TUC and Labour Party conferences. The Communist Party, through its defence of the Terror in the Soviet Union and the repression meted out to the POUM in Spain, had provided the most potent ammunition with which the TUC and Labour Party could attack the Unity Campaign.

At the TUC in early September, J. Donovan pointed out the contradiction which undermined support for the

campaign. He noted the irony of the Daily Worker spending great energy attacking ILP policy on Spain, whilst calling on the Labour movement to support the Unity Campaign.125

Marchbank for the General Council put matters more bluntly yet no less effectively:

we never hear anything from those acclaiming the principles of unity in this country about what takes place in Russia. If some of them were to offer the same opposition to the movement in Russia as they do to the movement here, they would not be given any opportunity to reply. A bullet would end their days.126

At the Labour Party conference in October 1937, Morrison replied to the debate on the Unity Campaign to great effect:

Suppose that Mr. Trotsky came to London, and it was suggested by the ILP that there should be a United Front meeting with Jimmy Maxton, Harry Pollitt, and Leon Trotsky as principal speakers....Would Mr. Pollitt appear on a platform with socialist, working class Trotsky? He would not. If some of the leaders of the POUM in Spain, a working class party, came to London, and the ILP wanted another United Front platform with them and Mr. Pollitt, Mr. Pollitt would not appear.127

The Labour leaders' policy of opposition to the Unity Campaign was endorsed by 2,116,000 votes to 331,000; conference had rejected unity with the Communist Party far more decisively than in 1936. Final confirmation of the disastrous effects of the Terror in the Soviet Union on the Unity Campaign is provided by leading supporters of the campaign itself. Harold Laski in the New York Nation for 20 November 1937 admitted:

There is no doubt the mass executions in the Soviet Union in the last two years have greatly injured the prestige of Russia with the rank and file of the Labour Party. In my judgement, the executions undoubtedly cost the supporters of the United Front something like half a million votes in the Bournemouth Conference.128

Reflecting on the defeat of the Unity Campaign in late 1937 Brockway commented:

I took the trouble to make enquiries in all parts of the country to discover the reasons for the set-back which the cause of unity had received at various trade union conferences...I was surprised to find how general was the explanation, that the series of executions in Russia had turned the workers against association with the Communist Party. This reaction

has gone wide and deep into the ranks of the working classes.¹²⁹

The Unity Campaign - what did it achieve?

Drawing up a balance sheet for the Unity Campaign poses the question, what had it achieved? According to Jupp it, 'led to the creation of a unified Left', and, 'helped to gain acceptance for left ideas in the...Labour Party'.¹³⁰ Much more realistic are the reflections of Brockway, McNair and Foot, who observed that the Unity Campaign did not unify the left in the Labour Party but had the opposite effect of leading to its destruction as an organised force. Brockway noted that, 'Its result was the loss of influence of Cripps, Bevan, Strauss and other "Lefts", the strengthening of the reactionary leaders, and the disillusionment of the rank and file'.¹³¹ Both John McNair of the ILP and Michael Foot lamented the role of the Unity Campaign in bringing about the demise of the Socialist League. McNair believed, 'The extinction of the League was a severe blow to the forces working for socialism in the Labour movement'. Foot acknowledged that the Unity Campaign's demise rendered the left without, 'any effective organisation, [and its supporters] found themselves hopelessly pitted as individuals against the Executive machine'.¹³² Hugo Dewar has noted that the Unity Campaign led to, 'a further weakening of the moribund ILP to the benefit of the CPGB'.¹³³

Undoubtedly, the organised left within the Labour movement emerged from the Unity Campaign as a

substantially weaker force. For the first time since the formation of the Labour Party there was no organised socialist opposition to the right-wing policies of the leadership. From 1900 to 1932 this role had been played by the ILP; following its split from Labour this mantle had been taken up by the Socialist League. By the autumn of 1937 the organised left within the Labour movement was a severely weakened force following the dissolution of the Socialist League and the continuing decline of the ILP. The one exception to this being the Communist Party for whom participation in the Unity Campaign was not the disaster which it had been for the ILP and Socialist League.

The Communist Party had managed to successfully attain one of its central objectives in relation to the Unity Campaign. It had succeeded in preventing a large block of Left opinion from commenting on the Moscow show trials at a time of great sensitivity for the Soviet government.

The Communist Party also emerged from the ruins of the Unity Campaign, in a position of organisational and intellectual dominance over the rest of the Left.¹³⁴ This raises the question: did the Communist Party get involved in the Unity Campaign with the aim of destroying the Socialist League?

In later years Brockway pondered this question.¹³⁵ Reg Groves, both in early 1937 and later in his life, maintained, 'The CP wanted to be rid of the Socialist League, with its dangerous potential as a centre for revolutionary socialist ideas'.¹³⁶ The Daily Herald had

forecast, in mid-January 1937, that the League's involvement in the Unity Campaign would lead to its demise to the advantage of the Communist Party.¹³⁷

At present there is only circumstantial evidence to support Groves's allegation. From the start of the unity negotiations Pollitt had been aware of the damage which involvement in the Unity Campaign could inflict on the Socialist League. Let us not forget that Pollitt had, supported and possibly persuaded Cripps to dissolve the Socialist League in order to prevent mass expulsions from the Labour Party. According to the ILP, 'it was on the advice of the CP that the Socialist League was dissolved. It was on the advice of the CP that the joint meetings between Labour Unity supporters, the ILP and the CP were stopped'.¹³⁸ Up until this point Cripps had appeared to court confrontation with the Labour Party. Cripps' decision faced widespread opposition from within the Socialist League; opponents of dissolution included Mellor, Groves and Brailsford. Mellor and Groves argued for the League to retreat from the Unity Campaign in order to remain in the Labour Party. According to Groves the vote for dissolving the Socialist League at its final conference was a minority one; in that abstentions and votes against dissolution outnumbered those for dissolution.¹³⁹ The Daily Worker did not lament the passing of the Socialist League, it celebrated its dissolution as a victory over Trotskyism.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile at the final meeting of the National Unity Campaign Committee on 1 June 1937, Pollitt had proposed winding up

the committee to enable its Labour supporters to carry on supporting the Communist Party's popular front campaigns at large within the Labour Party.¹⁴¹

With the demise of the Unity Campaign the Communist Party concentrated its efforts on campaigning for a popular front of all forces hostile to the government's pro-fascist foreign policy. Yet its efforts in this direction were to prove equally fruitless, partly as a consequence of the sectarian conflict it had introduced into the Unity Campaign, in its defence of the Moscow show trials. Pimlott has observed :

The bitter antagonism created by united front activities tainted any other policy favoured by the Left-especially if it received enthusiastic Communist backing. When the Left switched to the practical politics of a progressive electoral alliance which should include the Liberals, its arguments fell on deaf ears.¹⁴²

The Communist Party will be examined from a local perspective in the final section of this chapter. Its failings on a national scale, such as the defeat of the Unity Campaign and its relative isolation within the Labour movement were reflected on a local scale; and can be largely attributed to the same causes, such as the

defence of the Moscow show trials and the espousal of popular frontism.

The West Yorkshire Communist Party 1936 - 1937

During this period the West Riding district of the Communist Party enjoyed rather mixed fortunes. It recorded a modest growth of 40 new members taking its membership up to 320 by October 1937. By this time over 75 per cent of the membership were in employment and 148 were trade unionists. Of these 56 held trade union positions, while four factory groups had been organised—three in Leeds and one in Huddersfield.¹⁴³ However this modest growth in membership and trade union influence was not translated into wider political influence within the local Labour movement. The poor showing of the Unity Campaign in this area is proof of this.

Besides Leeds and Huddersfield, the rest of the branches recorded little progress in any area of activity; with perhaps the exception of the Aid-for-Spain campaign in which all of the branches participated. At the district congress in 1937 it was reported that only the Leeds and Huddersfield branches were carrying out continuous activity, the other branches were semi-active.¹⁴⁴

One outstanding feature of the district during the year was the virtual collapse of the Bradford branch. It would appear that the Bradford Communist Party sorely missed the strong guiding hand of Maurice Ferguson, district organiser from 1932 to the spring of 1935, who

left Bradford in July 1936. Under Ferguson's leadership the Bradford Communist Party had made significant progress in building up an influential position on the local Trades Council.¹⁴⁵

In the summer of 1936 the West Riding district acquired a new organiser in the form of Sid Elias of NUWM fame. He replaced Ernie Benson of Leeds, for in Benson's own words he had not, 'set the West Riding on fire. There were some improvements but not sufficient for me to kept on.'¹⁴⁶ Sid Elias however was to enjoy an even shorter tenure of office than Benson, for in December 1936 he was expelled from the Communist Party. At the Political Bureau in December 1936 Elias was expelled, 'for having offered his services to the Economic League in 1928'.¹⁴⁷ The West Yorkshire district had lost a very talented organiser on the basis of an anti-Communist leaflet put out by the Economic League during the hunger march of 1936; which accused Elias of having offered to provide information on the NUWM's activities. Without checking up the veracity of this highly dubious evidence the Communist Party expelled Elias. As Richard Croucher has commented, 'Elias denies the accusation to this day, and the case against him is indeed not proven'.¹⁴⁸

Trevor Robinson was then appointed as the new district organiser. In the struggle to build the Communist Party in the Labour heartlands of West Yorkshire Robinson was ably assisted by Marion Jessop of Leeds. During 1937 Robinson was replaced by Jessop as district organiser, for reasons unknown, and she became the first female

district organiser in the Communist Party's history. On 29 October 1937 Jessop gave a detailed report on the West Riding district to the Political Bureau in her capacity as district organiser. The lack of continuity and stability in the district leadership may well have been a factor in the district's slow progress during 1937.

At the Political Bureau on 29 October it was noted that Jessop was heavily overworked in her efforts to cover such a large district; and that efforts should be made to secure an assistant for her. The Political Bureau directed Jessop, 'To make a special concentration on Leeds and Bradford as the two principal cities in the West Riding District', and to, 'endeavour to get more attention paid to workers in the engineering industry'.149

In her report to the Political Bureau Jessop noted the few strengths and many weak points of the district. On the all-important front of extending the Communist Party's influence in the Labour Party it would appear that the West Yorkshire communists made little progress. Jessop acknowledged the success of Labour's Socialist Crusade Week in the West Riding and that, 'Our Party as a whole, did not react well to the importance of this Crusade, and very few of our comrades actually participated in this work'.150

In the municipal elections for 1937 the local Communist Party branches had squandered another opportunity to build the united front on a local scale with the Labour Party. This failure to even try and build

the united front on a local scale reflected a residual sectarianism towards the Labour Party, and was in many ways a product of the marginal position of local communists within the West Yorkshire Labour movement. With the exception of Leeds and Huddersfield, 'Our Party in the rest of the district has done very little to help the Labour Party....No independent Party activity has been conducted'.¹⁵¹ This failure to build a united front with the local Labour Party reflected the position of the Communist Party nationally whose campaign for affiliation to Labour had been ignored by Transport House during the autumn of 1937.¹⁵² On both a local and national basis the Communist Party met with determined opposition from the Labour Party to its united and popular front overtures.

The West Yorkshire Communist Party appears to have been beset by a variety of organisational problems which helped produce an inward-looking mentality, where branch meetings engaged in, 'the eternal discussion of inner party problems', rather than turn outward and discuss the problems of local workers and the Labour movement.¹⁵³ This insular mentality reflected the, 'many remnants of bad sectarian traditions in the Party', and was probably reinforced by the siege mentality created by the Communist Party's sectarian attacks on Labour movement critics of the Moscow show trials.¹⁵⁴ The problems of the West Yorkshire Communist Party were typical of a small political group whose position was precarious and which lacked any significant influence within the local working class.

There were however a few bright spots most notably the campaign to increase Daily Worker circulation and aid for Spain. Sales of the Daily Worker increased from 186 quires in February 1937 to over 235 quires by October 1937.¹⁵⁵ Jessop noted with satisfaction that with regard to Spain, 'Some very good work has been done'.¹⁵⁶ In most towns the local Communist Party branches had been to the forefront in creating cross-party Aid-for-Spain committees, which had raised thousands of pounds for humanitarian aid to Spain. Fourteen local communists had left the district to join the International Brigade.¹⁵⁷ Three communists from Leeds had been killed fighting on the Jarama front in February 1937; these were B.Aaron, P.Charlton, and P.Eluis.¹⁵⁸

At the district congress in 1937 it was recognised that the main problem facing the local Communist Party was the slow growth of membership and lack of influence in the local Labour movement. In trying to ascertain why the Communist Party in the West Riding failed to establish a significant membership and deeper roots within the local Labour movement, a situation reflecting the fortunes of the CPGB on a national scale, it will be necessary to examine the activities of the main branches in the district - Bradford, Huddersfield, and Leeds.

Bradford Communist Party

Within a year of Maurice Ferguson's departure from Bradford in July 1936, the local Communist Party branch had collapsed into a state of semi-activity. By October

1937 the local branch was down to 38 members, from 50 members in 1933. Marion Jessop observed the, 'Bad political atmosphere in the branch. Inability of comrades to utilise any situation that arises....Lack of political discussion at branch meetings. Party not seen [any more] as a force in Bradford'.159

The declining influence of the Bradford Communist Party within the local Labour movement is reflected in its position on the Trades Council; on which it had previously held a significant influence.160 After Maurice Ferguson's departure from Bradford, the Communist Party was left with two delegates on the local Trades Council. At the annual meeting of Bradford Trades Council, in late January 1937, when only two Party members were present; consolation was to be had from the reelection of Tom Tynan onto the executive of the Trades Council.161

This position of declining influence is further illustrated by the series of defeats suffered by the Communist fraction in its interventions on the Trades Council during 1936-37. When news broke of a BUF rally on 25 October 1936 the Trades Council suspended standing orders at its meeting on 15 October in order to discuss holding a counter-demonstration. The Trades Council was unable to determine a course of action, reflecting the relatively equal strength of the Left and Right at this meeting, and referred the matter to a joint meeting of the executives of the Trades Council and local Labour Party, held the next day. At this meeting it was decided not to take part in organising an anti-fascist counter-

demonstration to Mosley's meeting.¹⁶² The failure of the communist fraction to get the official Labour movement to take action against Mosley left the field open for the ILP, which organised a counter-demonstration on the evening of the BUF rally.¹⁶³ At the same meeting of the Trades Council and Labour Party executives on 16 October, a communist request for a Bradford contingent of marchers to join the national NUWM Hunger March to London was turned down.¹⁶⁴

In the New Year the Bradford Communist Party launched a local Unity Campaign Committee, in conjunction with the ILP and Socialist League. The Bradford Unity Campaign committee tried to involve the local Labour movement in the campaign and organised a Unity conference for 21 February 1937. At the Trades Council on 18 February a resolution sponsored by the communist fraction and ILP delegates, calling for Trades Council participation in the local Unity conference, was defeated by a large majority, the vote being 38 to 17 against.¹⁶⁵

The failure of the Unity Campaign to gain any significant support in Bradford can be put down to the loyalty of the local Labour movement to national policy decisions. Throughout 1937 Bradford Trades Council and Labour Party closely followed national policy in their own deliberations. Pressure to remain loyal to the national Labour Party's prohibitions regarding the Unity Campaign, would have been reinforced by the split in the Bradford Labour Party; which saw three ward Labour parties secede and put up candidates against Labour in

the municipal elections of 1937. The failure of the local Communist Party to offer any assistance to Labour in its electoral contests during 1936-37 can only have made the position of the local Unity Campaign weaker.¹⁶⁶ An additional factor working against the local Unity Campaign was the involvement of Roland Hill, President of Bradford Trades Council, and Fred Shaw, Yorkshire organiser for the NCLC, in the British Committee to Defend Leon Trotsky. Their hostility to the Moscow show trials and its communist supporters would have greatly weakened the attempts of the local Unity Campaign to gain Labour movement support.¹⁶⁷ It is worthwhile recalling that Hill had previously supported the united front, however the Moscow show trials were a powerful influence turning him against the united front with the Communist Party.¹⁶⁸

Huddersfield Communist Party

Until 1935, there was just a handful of communists in Huddersfield who worked sporadically in the local League Of Youth and the Trades Council. Sometime during 1935-36 a small but highly active Communist Branch was established.¹⁶⁹ During this period the local Communist Party successfully penetrated Huddersfield's Labour League of Youth branch. Harry Haigh had recruited at least four members of the League of Youth to the Communist Party by May 1937.¹⁷⁰ Meanwhile Gilbert Lawton and Laurie Shaw had established a small communist fraction on the Trades Council, which by 1937 had

developed a 'good standing' amongst Labour movement activists.171

By early December 1936 a branch of the Left Book Club had been established with Gilbert Lawton as its secretary.172 The local Left Book Club's energetic campaigning, particularly over Spain, greatly raised its standing in the local Labour movement. This standing had risen to such a degree that in September 1937 Huddersfield Divisional Labour Party agreed to a joint meeting with it to discuss Attlee's book, The Labour Party In Perspective.173

By October 1937 Huddersfield Communist Party had grown to 30 members, this reflected the considerable support which existed for its united and popular front campaigns in the local Labour movement. As had been the case in 1936, the starting point for the local Communist Party's united front campaign in 1937 was the League of Youth. At the League of Youth's meeting on 15 February 1937, an attempt to put forward a pro-Unity Campaign resolution was ruled out of order by the chair. After much wrangling a carefully worded resolution supporting the Unity Campaign was allowed to be put forward and carried; it managed to avoid mentioning the Unity Campaign while calling for a united front of all working class parties.174 This resolution was approved by the executive of Huddersfield Divisional Labour Party on 23 February 1937.175

The League of Youth from this time onwards sent delegates to the local Unity Campaign Committee. Its

support for the Unity Campaign brought it into repeated conflict with the national Labour Party.¹⁷⁶ Undaunted by admonishments from J.S.Middleton, the League of Youth agreed to sell the YCL's journal Advance outside Unity Campaign meetings, attended unity marches in other areas; and even put forward one of its members, as assistant secretary to the local Unity Campaign Committee.¹⁷⁷

Further success for the Communist Party in Huddersfield came with the decision of the Trades Council in March 1937 to send delegates to the local Unity Campaign Committee. The Trades Council went so far as to agree to a joint propaganda campaign with the local Communist Party on the question of arms for Republican Spain.¹⁷⁸

At the height of the Unity Campaign five members of the local League of Youth resigned together at a meeting on 2 May 1937, declaring their affiliation to the Young Communist League. This action was taken to preempt a Labour Party inquiry into communist infiltration of the local League of youth.¹⁷⁹ Despite this splitting action of the local Communist Party the Quarterly General Committee of Huddersfield Labour Party was unable to arrive at a decision for or against the Unity Campaign only two days later on 4 May.¹⁸⁰ The success of the local Communist Party in involving sections of the Labour movement in the Unity campaign is reflected in the repeated declarations of Huddersfield Labour Party, calling upon its members not to participate in the Unity Campaign.¹⁸¹

The Labour movement of Huddersfield, in the mid 1930s, was to the left of national policy on the united front with the Communist Party and Spain; and proved fertile political ground for the local Communist Party. The tolerant attitude displayed towards the campaigning activities of the local Communist Party by Labour loyalists, and which provided the essential background for communist work to succeed, can be ascribed to the fact that several of the leading figures of the local Labour movement had been long-standing members of various Marxist organisations.¹⁸² Huddersfield Communist Party does not appear to have suffered unduly from the backlash which greeted the Moscow show trials in other parts of the country. It even managed to get the Trades Council to question the partiality of the Daily Herald's coverage of the trials.¹⁸³

Leeds Communist Party

Following the success of its counter-demonstration at Mosley's rally on 28 September 1936, the so-called 'Battle of Holbeck Moor', the Communist Party in Leeds looked forward with confidence to the future.¹⁸⁴ Unfortunately for the local Communist Party, the kudos of having led the northern equivalent to the 'Battle of Cable Street' did not significantly improve its standing in the local Labour movement. Ever since the TUC's 'Black Circulars' of October 1934, the Leeds Communist Party had enjoyed little success with its united front overtures to the local Labour Party.¹⁸⁵ Over the next year, autumn

1936 to autumn 1937, the local Communist Party met with little success in its efforts to get Labour movement support for the united and popular front campaigns over Spain, unemployment, and the Unity Campaign.

One of the most important reasons for this failure was the counter-offensive, led by local Labour and trade union officials, against communist penetration of the Labour movement in Leeds. This action took various forms, the most common being the threat of disciplinary action to prevent their members participating in the Communist Party's united and popular front campaigns. During 1936-37 this counter-offensive found its most public expression in the broadsides against the Communist Party in the Leeds Weekly Citizen. The themes used most frequently to attack the Communist Party were the popular front, which was portrayed as an attempt to compromise the political independence of the Labour Party, and the Moscow show trials.¹⁸⁶

According to Dr. John Archer, who led a Trotskyist group in Leeds Labour Party during the 1930s, he and his wife, Mary Barclay, had formed an informal alliance with Len Williams who was the local Labour Party organiser; to fight off communist penetration of the Labour Party. This found practical expression in the reproduction of articles by Trotsky and his son Leon Sedov in Leeds Weekly Citizen, attacking the Moscow show trials.¹⁸⁷

In Marion Jessop's reports to the Central Committee in September and the Political Bureau in October 1937, she noted the informal alliance between Len Williams and the

local Trotskyists against the Communist Party. Jessop claimed that Mary Barclay was a sub-editor of the Leeds Weekly Citizen, an allegation which may well have been true for Barclay wrote numerous articles for the Citizen criticising the popular front and the Moscow show trials under various pseudonyms. Jessop also claimed that Len Williams was a Trotskyist. In fact Williams had never been a Trotskyist, he had earned the Trotskyist label from his clashes with the Communist Party while he was a NCLC organiser in South Wales during 1934-35; and from his opposition to the Communist Party in Leeds where he used the Moscow show trials to great effect in attacking Stalinism. At the Central Committee, in December 1937, Pollitt singled out Williams for attack, he acknowledged the important role Williams had played in blocking the Leeds Communist Party's penetration of the local Labour Party.188

As soon as news broke of the secret unity negotiations between the Communist Party, Socialist League and ILP in late December 1936, the Leeds Weekly Citizen went on the offensive against the proposed Unity Campaign. In an editorial on 25 December 1936, it declared that the proposed Unity Campaign would be a disruptive force in the Labour movement creating divisions over an issue already settled by the Labour Party conference.189

Both before and after the launch of the Unity Campaign, the Leeds Weekly Citizen reproduced articles by Trotsky and Leon Sedov, attacking the second Moscow show trial, in an effort to undermine local support for the

campaign.¹⁹⁰ On 29 January 1937 beside two articles by Trotsky criticizing the trial, an editorial in the Leeds Weekly Citizen called for the Socialist League to be expelled from the Labour Party if it persisted in its Unity Campaign with the Communist Party.¹⁹¹ As the Unity Campaign unfolded, the Leeds Weekly Citizen repeatedly made the link between the Terror in the Soviet Union and the Unity Campaign's communist supporters:

Who with the slightest knowledge of Communism has any doubt about the fate of domestic institutions and practices if the Communist Party became the government of the country? A free press would be suppressed, as would all opposition parties, and there would be no right to elect an alternate Government. Democracy as we understood it, and for which the Labour movement stands, would disappear under Communism as it does under Fascism.¹⁹²

After the Unity Campaign was launched on 24 January 1937, Len Williams wrote to all the divisional and ward Labour parties in Leeds reminding them that any association with the Unity Campaign was in breach of conference decisions regarding the Communist Party.¹⁹³ At the annual meeting of Leeds City Labour Party in mid-February 1937, which was attended by 170 delegates, a motion supporting the Unity Campaign was defeated by a large majority. In the face of this defeat the local Unity Campaign only managed to gain a few points of support in Leeds Labour Party.¹⁹⁴

Its lack of support in the local trade union movement is shown by the fact that it could not even get a resolution in support of the campaign onto the agenda of Leeds Trades Council.¹⁹⁵

The highpoint of the local Unity campaign was the 3,000 strong unity rally in Leeds Town Hall on 28 February 1937, which had Pollitt, Maxton and Bevan as the main speakers.¹⁹⁶ Even after the dissolution of the Socialist League in May 1937, the local Communist Party persisted in supporting the Unity Campaign; organising a unity march through Leeds city centre on 11 July.¹⁹⁷

Despite its failure at getting official support from Labour movement bodies for its united and popular front campaigns, the local Communist Party did manage to establish some unofficial cooperation at a rank and file level. In the municipal election campaign of 1937 five ward Labour parties, in defiance of Len Williams' instructions, did allow local communists to work secretly in their election campaigns.¹⁹⁸

In line with national directives the Communist Party in Leeds took up the campaign against 'Trotskyism' with considerable zeal. This included organising public meetings in defence of the second Moscow show trial. At the Central Committee in September Marion Jessop declared, 'It is such a burning issue with us that we are organising a school at the end of the month to deal with the whole question'. The paranoia and complete lack of proportion which typified the struggle against 'Trotskyism' is illustrated by the following comment:

In Leeds we have a position where the Trotskyists smashed the Labour League of Youth of 50 and the local Labour Party is in their hands, and they are now ferreting their way into the Borough Labour movement.¹⁹⁹

Not content with just organising public meetings the local Communist Party resorted to more direct methods in a bid to silence Left critics of the Soviet Union. John Archer recalls J.R.Campbell inciting a crowd against him in Town Hall Square in Leeds.²⁰⁰ The lowest point in this particular campaign came when the local Communist Party circulated a leaflet around Leeds declaring that Mary Barclay, a well known local Trotskyist, was an ally of fascism. When her employers at Montagu-Burtons got hold of this leaflet it led to her dismissal.²⁰¹

Despite the failure of its united and popular front campaigns to gain widespread Labour movement support, the local Communist Party through its energetic Aid-for-Spain campaign did register a significant growth in membership, reaching 160 members by October 1937. The Young Communist League in Leeds grew to an impressive membership of 120 making it, 'the best YCL club in the country'.²⁰²

In assessing the future prospects of the West Riding district Marion Jessop believed that a major priority was to strengthen its collective leadership; from this would flow improvements in the various fields of Party work:

One of the biggest achievements of the past has been the regular meeting of the District Party Committee every fortnight, which has enabled it to begin to act as a leadership. We are now discussing the problems of the District and beginning to lead the work.203

Out of the three main branches in West Yorkshire it would appear that the Huddersfield Communist Party had the greatest success in involving sections of the local Labour movement in its united and popular front campaigns. In Bradford the Communist Party collapsed into a state of semi-activity due to weak local leadership, Maurice Ferguson being a sorely missed figure; while the in-fighting in the local Labour movement also served to hinder the Bradford Communist Party. The Leeds Communist Party also failed to gain much Labour movement support for its campaigns due to a policy of anti-communist containment vigorously pursued by local Labour loyalists and the effect of the Moscow show trials. However its Aid-for-Spain campaign did bring in a layer of new recruits.

Conclusion

The situation of the West Yorkshire Party shared some similarities with the position of the Communist Party nationally. On both a national and local scale the Communist Party played a leading role in the Aid-for-Spain movement; this activity accounted for a large percentage of new recruits. As shown earlier the

Communist Party nationally made the campaign in defence of the Moscow show trials one of its main campaigning priorities and subsequently paid a heavy political price for this; for its support of Stalin's Terror which claimed millions of lives in the Soviet Union alienated many Labour movement activists. On a local scale too, where the Communist Party took up the defence of the Terror it played into the hands of its opponents in the Labour movement who used the issue to undermine support for the united and popular front.

On both a national and local scale the Communist Party had little success with its united front overtures to the Labour Party. The limited success of the Communist Party's work around the Unity Campaign in Huddersfield proved to be something of an exception to this. One reason for this being the political environment of the local Labour movement which was consistently to the left of national policy with regard to the united and popular front. While its refusal to implement the 'Black Circulars' created an atmosphere of political tolerance which proved conducive to the campaigning activity of the local Communist Party. Interviews with Labour movement activists from this period who were opponents and fellow travellers of the Communist Party reveal a high degree of mutual respect between the rank and file of the local Labour and Communist parties.²⁰⁴ The Huddersfield Labour Party organiser Arthur Gardiner often turned a blind eye to the cooperation between Labour Party members and communists over the Unity Campaign and Spain.

It could be argued that international and national events prevented a realistic opportunity for success for the local Communist Party. Whenever the Communist Party met with determined opposition from the Labour Party and trade unions to its united and popular front campaigns these invariably ended up in failure. Despite this it would appear that communist influence in West Yorkshire was often the product of highly localised conditions which sometimes ran contrary to the national political scene.

The results of the votes on the Unity Campaign at the conferences of the TUC and Labour Party, when compared to the votes gained for the united front in 1936, show how the Communist Party's influence within the Labour movement had declined during 1937. Its attempt to compromise the political independence of the Labour movement through its advocacy of a multi-class popular front alliance, together with its defence of the Terror in the Soviet Union, were to be instrumental in bringing about this declining influence. Compared to the united front campaign of 1936, the Unity Campaign was an abysmal failure succeeding only in weakening the Labour Left to the advantage of the right-wing Labour leadership. For the rest of the decade the Labour leadership was to suffer no further serious challenges to its policy of collaborating with the National Government's rearmament plans, as it prepared for the imminent world war. Yet through its vigorous humanitarian aid campaign in support of Republican Spain and movements such as the Left Book

Club, the Communist Party was to enjoy a limited growth in membership and growing influence amongst the middle class and the intelligentsia.205

NOTES

- 1) Daily Worker, 23 January 1937.
- 2) W.G.Krivitsky, I Was Stalin's Agent, (New York, Hamish Hamilton, 1939), p.79.
- 3) For an account of Stalin's Terror see, I.Deutscher and D.King, The Great Purges, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984); V. Rogovin, 1937 Stalin's Year Of Terror, (Michigan, Mehring Books, 1998); L.Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1936-38, (New York, Pathfinder, 1970). A recent contribution to the debate over the origins and scale of the Terror can be found in J.Getty and T.Manning, (eds.), Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 4) F.Claudin, The Communist Movement: From Comintern To Cominform, (Peregrine Books, 1975), pp.229-33; H.Graham, 'The Spanish Popular Front and the Civil War', in H.Graham and P.Preston, (eds), The Popular Front In Europe, (London, Macmillan, 1987), pp.106-30; K.McDermott and J.Agneu, THE COMINTERN A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin, (London, Macmillan, 1996), pp.139-42; F.Morrow, Revolution And Counter-Revolution In Spain, (London, New Park, 1976).
- 5) McDermott and Agneu, THE COMINTERN, pp.156-7
- 6) B.Pimlott, Labour and the Left in the 1930s, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.106.
- 7) J.Haslam, The Soviet Union And The Struggle For Collective Security In Europe, 1933-1939, (London, Macmillan, 1984), pp.140-2.
- 8) Rogovin, 1937 Stalin's Year of Terror, pp.139-46; D.Volkogonov, Trotsky, The Eternal Revolutionary, (London, Harper Collins, 1996), pp.371-81.
- 9) J.Haslam, 'The Soviet Union, the Comintern and the Demise of the Popular Front, 1936-39', in Graham and Preston, (eds.), The Popular Front In Europe, p.154; see also L.Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed-What Is The Soviet Union And Where Is It Going?, (New York, Pathfinder, Fifth Printing 1983) pp.115-43; Deutscher and King, The Great Purges, p.69; A.Orlov, The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes, (London, Jarrolds, 1954), pp.39-51.
- 10) V.Rogovin, 1937 Stalin's Year Of Terror, p.53; L.Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1937-38, (New York, Pathfinder, April 1970), pp.53-61.
- 11) Haslam, The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security, pp.107-24; Claudin, The Communist Movement, p.226-32; Rogovin, 1937 Stalin's Year of Terror, pp.349-56.

- 12) Haslam, The Soviet Union And The Struggle For Collective Security, p.116; an edited version of this ECCI resolution can be found in, J.Degras, (ed.), The Communist International, 1919-1941 Documents, Volume 3, 1929-1941, (London, Frank Cass, 1971), pp.398-9.
- 13) Claudin, The Communist Movement, pp.229-33; Morrow, Revolution And Counter-Revolution In Spain, pp.76-114; Rogovin, 1937 Stalin's Year of Terror, pp.357-73.
- 14) Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1937-38, p.46.
- 15) Stalin's speech was reproduced in two instalments by the Daily Worker, 30-31 March, 1937; Rogovin, 1937 Stalin's Year of Terror, pp.247-62,286-97; Volkogonov, Trotsky, The Eternal Revolutionary, p.373.
- 16) Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1937-38, p.117.
- 17) Idem.
- 18) Deutscher and King, The Great Purges, p.112; and Krivitsky, I Was Stalin's Agent, p.285; Rogovin, 1937 Stalin's Year of Terror, pp.323-34.
- 19) The bitter polemic waged between the ILP and Communist Party in this country is a good example of this.
- 20) Rogovin, 1937 Stalin's Year Of Terror, p.53; a similar point is made in McDermott and Agnew, THE COMINTERN, pp.156-7.
- 21) J.Haslam, 'The Soviet Union, the Comintern and the Demise of the Popular Front, 1936-1939', p.158.
- 22) F.Brockway, Inside The Left, (London, Allen and Unwin, 1942), pp.264-70; J.Jupp, The Radical Left In Britain 1931-1941, (London, Frank Cass, 1982), pp.104-10; Pimlott, Labour and the Left, pp.94-106.
- 23) R.Groves, 'The Socialist League', Revolutionary History, vol.1, no.1, Spring 1988, p.14.
- 24) H.Pollitt, letter to R Page Arnot, 11 February 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.
- 25) The best examples of this are the speeches made by Marchbank at TUC conference and that made by Morrison at Labour Party conference, both opposing the Unity Campaign: TUC Annual Conference, Report, 1937, p.382; and Labour Party Annual Conference, Report, 1937, pp.161-3.
- 26) Daily Worker, 25 September, 1936; and Labour Party Annual Conference, Report, 1936, p.211.
- 27) Daily Worker, 10 October, 1936.

- 28) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 10 October 1936.
- 29) Idem.
- 30) Idem.
- 31) Idem.
- 32) Idem.
- 33) Idem.
- 34) Idem.
- 35) Idem.
- 36) Idem.
- 37) Idem.
- 38) H.Pollitt, letters to R. Page Arnot, 29 October and 6 November, 1936, 1995 Moscow Reel; CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 13 November 1936.
- 39) H.Pollitt letters to R. Page Arnot, 29 October and 6 November, 1936, 1995 Moscow Reel.
- 40) Ibid., 6 November, 1936, 1995 Moscow Reel.
- 41) Report of CPGB National Conference at Sheffield on 11 October 1936, attached to Central Committee, Minutes, 10 October 1936.
- 42) Idem.
- 43) R. Page Arnot report to the ECCI, 9 September 1936, 'The Campaign Of The CPGB In Relation To The Trotsky-Zinovievite Trial', 1995 Moscow Reel.
- 44) N. Branson, History Of The Communist Party Of Great Britain, 1927-1941, (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp.246-7.
- 45) Report of CPGB National Conference at Sheffield on 11 October 1936, attached to Central Committee, Minutes, 10 October 1936.
- 46) Idem.
- 47) Idem.
- 48) The best example of this being the miner's union which in 1936 voted for the united front at Labour Party conference, but in 1937 voted against the Unity Campaign. In late 1937 Fenner Brockway, secretary of the ILP, reflecting upon the defeat of the Unity Campaign at Labour Party conference, noted that amongst delegates at

the miner's annual conference the most common explanation given by delegates for their opposition to the Unity Campaign being the Moscow show trials, F.Brockway, Workers Front, (London, 1938), p.234, quoted in S.Bornstein and A.Richardson, Two Steps Back: Communists And The Wider Labour Movement, 1935-1945, (London, Socialist Platform, 1982), pp.26-7.

49) Miscellaneous papers relating to the Unity campaign, CP/IND/DUTT/16/09/; and CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 13 November 1936.

50) H.Pollitt report on Unity Campaign to ECCI Secretariat on 4 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel. It is also worth pointing out that by the autumn of 1936 there were no Trotskyists left in the ILP, their group had left the ILP in May 1936. Pollitt's comments reveal how the term 'Trotskyist' came to be used as a blanket term of abuse against opponents of the Communist Party, particular in relation to the Moscow show trials. There have been various accounts of the British Trotskyist movement during this period including the following: J.Archer, Trotskyism In Britain:1931-1937, (PhD., Polytechnic of Central London, 1979); M.Upham, The History of British Trotskyism to 1949, (PhD., University of Hull, 1981); and S.Bornstein and A.Richardson, Against The Stream A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1924-1938, (London, Socialist Platform, January 1986); B. Hunter, The Life and Times of a Revolutionary A Lifelong Apprenticeship, vol.1, 1920-1959, (London, Porcupine Press, 1998).

51) H.Pollitt, letter to R.Page Arnot, 29 October 1936, 1995 Moscow Reel.

52) The hostile reaction of the Labour and Liberal press to the first Moscow show trial is illustrated by a pamphlet produced by The American Committee For The Defence Of Leon Trotsky, World Voices on the Moscow Trials A compilation from the Labour and Liberal press of the world, (New York, Pioneer Publishers, October 1936); for Stalin's response to the hostile media coverage of the first trial see Trotsky, Selected Writings, 1935-36, (New York, Pathfinder, 1970). The Pollitt quote is taken from a letter to Arnot, dated 29 October 1936, 1995 Moscow Reel.

53) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 13 November 1936.

54) 'Proposals Of The Communist Party For A National Unity Campaign', 29 October 1936, Miscellaneous papers relating to the Unity Campaign, CP/IND/DUTT/16/09/.

55) H.Pollitt report on Unity Campaign to ECCI Secretariat on 4 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.

- 56) Brockway, Inside The Left, pp.264-70; Jupp, The Radical Left, pp.104-10; Pimlott, Labour and the Left, pp.94-106.
- 57) H.Pollitt, letters to R.Page Arnot, 29 October, 6 November 1936; and H.Pollitt report on Unity Campaign to ECCI Secretariat on 4 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.
- 58) Idem.
- 59) Idem.
- 60) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 13 November 1936.
- 61) Brockway, Inside The Left, p.265.
- 62) H.Pollitt, report on Unity Campaign to ECCI Secretariat on 4 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.
- 63) Idem.
- 64) Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.96.
- 65) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 16 January 1937. According to John McNair of the ILP, the unity negotiations took place in Cripps legal chambers at which, 'there were frequently serious differences between the ILP and the CP which were only surmounted by the legal skill of Cripps. They were not finally solved but were at least smoothed over....', Groves, 'The Socialist League', p.13.
- 66) Brockway, Inside The Left, p.267.
- 67) Miscellaneous papers relating to the Unity Campaign, CP/IND/DUTT/16/09/.
- 68) Jupp, The Radical Left, p.106.
- 69) H.Pollitt, report on the Unity Campaign to ECCI Secretariat on 4 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel; Miscellaneous papers relating to the Unity Campaign, CP/IND/DUTT?16/09/.
- 70) Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.94.
- 71) BASIS OF UNITY CAMPAIGN, Agreed by ILP,CP, Socialist League, 3 December 1936, Miscellaneous papers relating to the Unity Campaign, CP/IND/DUTT/16/09/.
- 72) For a detailed study of how the ILP failed to publicly criticize the Moscow show trials during the Unity Campaign see, Bornstein and Richardson, Against The Stream, pp.222-7; and C.Summer, 'The case of Fenner Brockway', Revolutionary History, vol.1, no.1, Spring 1988, pp.24-6. It was not until after the repression of the POUM in Spain and the dissolution of the National Unity Campaign Committee that the ILP began to publicly

criticise the Moscow show trials, New Leader, 18, 25, June; 2 July 1936.

73) 'Reg Groves Replies', in Red Flag, new series, no.6, February 1937, pp.3-4, quoted in Bornstein and Richardson, Against The Stream, p.205.

74) Once the Unity Campaign started hundreds of members of the League left, preferring to keep onto their Labour Party cards to membership of an organisation heading for confrontation with the Labour Party, G.D.H.Cole, A History of the Labour Party from 1914, p.348, quoted in Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.104.

75) Miscellaneous papers relating to the Unity Campaign, CP/IND/DUTT/16/09/.

76) Questions from the ECCI Secretariat to Pollitt on his report on the Unity Campaign 4 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.

77) Pollitt reply to questions from the ECCI Secretariat on his report on the Unity Campaign 5 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.

78) Idem.; for the attacks on Reg Groves see the Daily Worker, 18, 20 January, 1937; and for Groves reply to these unfounded charges see Reg Groves, 'A Disclaimer', in The Socialist Broadsheet, no.1, February 1937, p.2., quoted in Bornstein and Richardson, Against The Stream, p.204.

79) ECCI Secretariat resolution on the Unity Campaign, 5 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.

80) Idem.

81) Labour Party Annual Conference, Report, 1937, pp.25-6.

82) Daily Herald, 18 January 1937.

83) Ibid., 15 January 1937.

84) Ibid., 18 January 1937.

85) Cole, A History of the Labour Party, p.348, quoted in Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.104.

86) Daily Worker, 20,22 January 1937. According to Al Richardson, when he was researching his history of the Trotskyist movement, Against The Stream:

I made a point of questioning Reg Groves expressly as to whether he was the one who sent the documents to the Daily Herald or Transport House. He denied it, though he took the responsibility of circulating the information around the branches of the Socialist

League about what their executive were agreeing behind their backs. Anyone of the secretaries could have sent it in, as he says.

Letter from Al Richardson, 15 September 1997.

87) Bornstein and Richardson, Against The Stream, pp.192-206.

88) For the attacks on opponents of the Unity Campaign within the Socialist League see Daily Worker, 18, 20, 22 January 1937.

89) N.Raylock, 'Information on Trotskyism in Britain', 21 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.

90) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 28 January 1937, Pollitt is probably referring to a statement from John McNair, the ILP representative in Spain, in which McNair does not openly criticise the second Moscow show trial but merely calls for an international Labour movement commission to verify the charges made against the old Bolsheviks in Stalin's court. McNairs's statement can be found in the New Leader, 22 January 1937.

91) The CPGB leadership kept a close eye on the media's hostile reaction to the trial see, 'British Press On The Terrorist Trial-News Bulletins 1-3', 1995 Moscow Reel.

92) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 28 January 1937.

93) Idem.

94) There were no Trotskyists in the ILP by this time they had dissolved their group in the ILP in May 1936, see Bornstein and Richardson, Against The Stream, p.186. In effect Raylock is calling for pressure to be put on the ILP leadership to expel any of its members for having doubts or criticisms about the second Moscow show trial.

95) N.Raylock, 'Information on Trotskyism in Britain', 21 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.

96) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 28 January 1937.

97) The energetic campaign of the communist press in defence of the trial and attacking its critics in the British Labour movement has been charted in great detail by the following, Bornstein and Richardson, Against the Stream, pp.214-33.; and B.Pearce and M.Woodhouse, A History Of Communism In Britain, (London, Bookmarks, 1995), pp.225-45.

98) The following examples can be given. CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 28 January, 11 February, 6 August; Central Committee, Minutes, 9 September 1937. The struggle against Trotskyism also became an important item on the agenda of the CPGB's Fourteenth Congress on 29-31 May 1937 at Battersea. Pollitt's speech to the congress

and the resolutions on Spain and Party building are examples of this, CP/CENT/CONG/03/07/.

99) McDermott and Agnew, THE COMINTERN, p.150.

100) H.Pollitt, letter to Dimitrov, 12 April 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.

101) Branson, History Of The Communist Party, pp.245-8; K.Morgan, Harry Pollitt, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993), pp.174-8.

102) Daily Worker, 23 January 1937.

103) Bornstein and Richardson, Against The Stream, p.220.

104) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 11 February 1937.

105) For communist attacks on the ILP and those in the Socialist League who voiced doubts or criticisms of the Moscow show trial see the following examples the Daily Worker, 29 January 1937, 6 February 1937; G.Graham, 'The Soviet Union And The World Today', Labour Monthly, August 1937, pp.497-501.

106) The Daily Worker spared no quarter in its attacks on the Daily Herald for an example of this see: Daily Worker, 1 February 1937, p.4., of special supplement on the second Moscow show trial.

107) Brockway, Inside The Left, p.269.

108) H.Pollitt, letter to R.Page Arnot, 11 February 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel.

109) Daily Worker, 20 March 1937; 7 June 1937.

110) Ibid., 25 September 1936.

111) PROPOSALS for NEXT STEPS in UNITY CAMPAIGN DRAWN UP by HARRY POLLITT and SUBMITTED for the COMMITTEE'S CONSIDERATION, 27 April 1937, Miscellaneous papers relating to the Unity Campaign, CP/IND/DUTT/16/09/.

112) John Aplin (Treasurer), letter to members of the National Unity Campaign Committee, 24 May 1937, Miscellaneous papers relating to the Unity Campaign, CP/IND/DUTT/16/09/.

113) Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.105.

114) Labour Party Annual Conference, Report, 1937, Appendix VII, pp.268-70.

115) Ibid., pp.58-9.

116) C.Attlee, The Labour Party in Perspective and Twelve Years Later, (London, Gollancz, 1937), pp.123-24.

- 117) Daily Herald, 30 January 1937.
- 118) Ibid., 29 June 1937.
- 119) Daily Worker, 1 July 1937.
- 120) Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.104.
- 121) Brockway, Inside The Left, p.269.
- 122) Miscellaneous papers relating to the Unity Campaign, CP/IND/DUTT/16/09/.
- 123) Ibid.; CPGB Secretariat circular, 'Next Steps In The Unity Campaign', 5 June 1937, CP/IND/DUTT/29/10.
- 124) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 6 August 1937.
- 125) TUC Annual Conference, Report, 1937, pp.380-1.
- 126) Ibid., p.382.
- 127) Labour Party Annual Conference, Report, 1937, p.163.
- 128) H.Laski, in the New York, Nation, 20 November 1937, quoted in Pearce and Woodhouse, A History Of Communism In Britain, p.241.
- 129) F.Brockway, Worker's Front, (London, 1938), p.234., quoted in S.Bornstein and A.Richardson, TWO STEPS BACK: Communists and the wider labour movement, 1935-1945, (London, Socialist Platform, 1982), pp.26-7.
- 130) Jupp, The Radical Left, p.123.
- 131) Brockway, Inside The Left, pp.269-70.
- 132) Groves, 'The Socialist League', p.15.
- 133) H.Dewar, Communist Politics In Britain: The CPGB From Its Origins To The Second World War, (London, Pluto Press, 1976), p.111.
- 134) Jupp, The Radical Left In Britain, p.101.
- 135) Brockway, Inside The Left, p.268.
- 136) Groves, 'The Socialist League', p.14.
- 137) Daily Herald, 18 January 1937.
- 138) Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.104. The ILP quote is from the New Leader, 12 November 1937, quoted in Jupp, The Radical Left, p.224.

- 139) Bornstein and Richardson, Against The Stream, p.205; Brockway, Inside The Left, P.268.; Groves, 'The Socialist League', p.15; Pimlott, Labour and the Left, pp.104-5.
- 140) Daily Worker, 'Socialist League Decision CRUSHING DEFEAT OF TROTSKYISTS', 18 May 1937.
- 141) CPGB Secretariat circular, 'Next Steps In The Unity Campaign', 5 June 1937, Miscellaneous papers relating to the Unity Campaign, CP/IND/DUTT/29/10.
- 142) Pimlott, Labour and the Left, p.106.
- 143) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 29 October 1937.
- 144) Idem.
- 145) See chapters 1-3 of thesis.
- 146) E.Benson, To Struggle Is to Live A Working Class Autobiography, Volume Two, Starve Or rebel 1927-1971, (People's Publications, 1980), p.141.
- 147) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 12 December 1936.
- 148) R.Croucher, We Refuse To Starve In Silence A History of the National Unemployed Workers Movement 1920-46, (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1987), p.184.
- 149) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 29 October 1937.
- 150) Idem.
- 151) Idem.
- 152) Daily Worker, 6, 10 October 1937. The editorials in these issues note the Communist Party's renewed application for affiliation to the Labour Party.
- 153) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 29 October 1937. These organisational problems included: a lack of political propaganda, an under estimation of the role of the Party, weak finances only fifty per cent of members paid a regular due, a lack of coordination of trade union work, some branches displayed a tendency to submerge themselves in the Labour Party.
- 154) Idem.
- 155) Idem.
- 156) Idem.
- 157) Idem.
- 158) Daily Worker, 19 August 1937.

- 159) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 10 August 1933, 29 October 1937.
- 160) See chapters 1-3 of thesis.
- 161) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 21 January 1937.
- 162) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 15 October 1936; meeting of the joint executives of Bradford Trades Council, Labour Party and Cooperative Party, 16 October 1936.
- 163) Yorkshire Post, 26 October 1936.
- 164) Meeting of the joint executives of Bradford Trades Council, Labour Party and Cooperative Party, 16 October 1936.
- 165) Bradford Trades Council, Minutes, 18 February 1937.
- 166) Bradford Telegraph and Argus carried regular reports on the year long split in the Bradford Labour Party; see also M.Jessop's comments on this CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 29 October 1937.
- 167) N.Raylock, 'Information on Trotskyism in Britain', 21 January 1937, 1995 Moscow Reel; John Archer recalls Roland Hill being sympathetic to Trotskyist groups in the early and late 1930s and claims that in 1939 the Revolutionary Socialist League regarded Hill as a member, J.Archer, interview 30 October 1997.
- 168) Bradford Pioneer, 28 July 1933.
- 169) D.Murphy, The Huddersfield Labour Movement And Its Relationship To The Struggle Against Fascism In Europe 1933-1939, (MA, Sheffield University, 1994), pp.10-17.
- 170) Idem.
- 171) Idem.; and CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 29 October 1937.
- 172) Huddersfield Labour League of Youth, Minutes, 14 December 1936.
- 173) Huddersfield Divisional Labour Party, Executive Committee, Minutes, 7 September 1937.
- 174) Huddersfield Labour League of Youth, 15 February 1937.
- 175) Huddersfield Divisional Labour Party, Executive Committee, Minutes, 23 February 1937.
- 176) Huddersfield Labour League of Youth, Minutes, 8 March 1937, 24 May 1937.

177) Ibid., 12 April, 31 May 1937.

178) Huddersfield Trades Council, Minutes, 24 March 1937, 18 August 1937.

179) Huddersfield Divisional Labour Party, Executive Committee, Minutes, 20 April 1937; Huddersfield Labour League of Youth, Minutes, 2 May 1937.

180) Huddersfield Labour Party, Quarterly General Meeting, Minutes, 4 May 1937.

181) Huddersfield Divisional Labour Party, Executive Committee, Minutes, 20 April 1937, 24 August 1937.

182) These included Arthur Gardiner who was a leading figure in the local Labour movement during the inter-war period, being both secretary and paid agent of Huddersfield Labour Party; he had helped to set up the Huddersfield branch of the British Socialist Party (BSP) which was the forerunner of the Communist Party, not joining the Labour Party until 1918. John Brook who was President of Huddersfield Trades Council 1930-36, and who had been a member of both the ILP and the Social Democratic Federation, a forerunner of the BSP.

Fred Shaw, who had an enormous standing in the Yorkshire Labour movement, was President of Huddersfield Trades Council 1917-30 and then became Yorkshire organiser of the National Council of Labour Colleges. He had also been on the BSP executive and a member of the Communist Party until 1923. For information on the above and other leading figures in the Huddersfield Labour movement see, C.Pearce, The Anti-War Movement In Huddersfield 1914-18, (M.Phil, Huddersfield University, 1988), Appendix 1, pp.iii-xi.

183) Huddersfield Trades Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, 15 September 1937.

184) For an account of this see chapter 3 of thesis.

185) Ibid., chapters 2 and 3.

186) Leeds Weekly Citizen, for attacks on the Moscow show trials see, 28 August 1936, p. 6,7., 4 September 1936, p.4,6., 22 January 1937, p.6., 29 January 1937, p.6., 5 March 1937, p.6., 28 May 1937, p.7., 25 June 1937, p.7,8., 2 July 1937, p.7.; for attacks on popular frontism see, 29 January 1937, p.4., 5 February 1937, p.4,9., 12 February 1937, p.4., 26 March 1937, p.7., 2 July 1937, p.2.

187) J.Archer interview, 30 October 1997; Leeds Weekly Citizen, 22, 29 January 1937 - two articles by Trotsky.

188) J.Archer interview, 30 October 1997; for Marian Jessop's comments on Trotskyist activities in Leeds see CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 29 October 1937 and

Central Committee, Minutes, 11 September; for Pollitt's attack on Len Williams see CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 3 December 1937.

189) Leeds Weekly Citizen, 25 December 1936.

190) Ibid., 22, 29 January 1937.

191) Ibid., 29 January 1937.

192) Ibid., 5 March 1937.

193) Leeds Labour Party, File 185, Miscellaneous papers relating to the Communist Party.

194) Idem., such as North Ward Labour Party.

195) In the minutes of Leeds Trades Council there is no record of motion supporting the Unity Campaign being placed on the agenda.

196) Daily Worker, 2 March 1937.

197) Ibid., 16 June 1937.

198) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 29 October 1937.

199) Idem.; for the quote from Jessop see Central Committee, Minutes, 11 September 1937.

200) J.Archer interview, 30 October 1997; Bornstein and Richardson, Against The Stream, p.220.

201) Letter from J.Archer, 20 September 1997; interview with J.Archer, 30 October 1997. J.Archer has still got a copy of the offending communist leaflet.

202) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 29 October 1937.

203) Idem.

204) Tape Recorded Interviews with Jimmy Allan, 14 June 1994; Harold Halstead, 16 May 1994; Harold Sims, 11 May 1994.

205) Branson, History Of The Communist Party, pp.204-39.

CHAPTER 5

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE POPULAR FRONT 1938-1939

"In England the Popular Front is only an idea, but it has already produced the nauseous spectacle of bishops, Communists, cocoa-magnates, publishers, duchesses and Labour MP's marching arm in arm to the tune of 'Rule Britannia'". George Orwell, 17 February 1938, New English Review.¹

In the two years leading up to the outbreak of World War Two, Europe was convulsed by one crisis after another due to the territorial expansion of Germany and Italy. Confronted with the advance of fascism in Europe, which presented an increasing threat to the Soviet Union, the international communist movement campaigned ever more vigorously for a military pact between Britain, France and the USSR. This strategy dovetailed with the requirements of Soviet foreign policy which also called for a military alliance between Russia, Britain and France.

During 1938-39 the CPGB engaged in a succession of campaigns all geared towards the objective of getting a British government to enter a military pact with the Soviet Union.² The following chapter will examine the changing policies and campaigns of the CPGB which were meant to bring about this objective. This study of the popular front during 1938-39 will show that as the international situation deteriorated there was a steady drift to the right in the political outlook of the Communist Party. All talk of socialism was abandoned in an attempt to win non-socialist allies to help it attain a major reorientation in British

foreign policy. The Communist Party found itself linking up with non-socialist allies in campaigns largely of an electoral character. These served to alienate it even further from the majority of the Labour movement, which saw the various popular front campaigns as an attempt to compromise the political independence of the Labour Party, taking it back to the discredited Lib-Lab politics of Labour's infancy; as well as the abandonment of socialist objectives.

The strategy and tactics pursued by the Communist Party in pursuit of this goal have been the subject of much controversy amongst historians. There are those historians, such as Bornstein and Richardson, who argue that the popular front was a mere electoral manoeuvre and an increasingly desperate attempt to form a multi-party coalition powerful enough to defeat the government at an election. This involved the Communist Party abandoning the last vestiges of its revolutionary heritage in an attempt to win the middle class over to the popular front. The Communist Party's electoral machinations which sought to compromise Labour's independence by allying it with anti-appeasement Liberals and Conservatives, were instrumental in alienating the Labour movement away from popular frontism; thus guaranteeing the failure of the anti-government opposition. The net effect of this activity was to leave the Communist Party an isolated and discredited political force.³

In opposition to this interpretation there are those historians, such as Branson and Fyrth, who give a positive reading of the Communist Party's popular front activity. They reject the claim that the popular front was an electoral contrivance and assert that the CPGB's activities mobilised movements of mass opposition to fascism, such as the Aid-for-Spain movement. While admitting that the Communist Party never managed to bring about a popular front movement powerful enough to defeat the government, they note that its activities greatly increased its influence and profile.⁴

The evidence presented in this chapter will suggest that the Communist Party's popular front campaigning during 1938-39 led it to downplay the struggle for socialism and engage in an increasingly desperate pursuit of an electoral coalition with non-socialist forces. This resulted in an electoral combination which tried to compromise the independence and socialist programme of the Labour Party.

The debate raises a number of pertinent questions. Did the Communist Party's pursuit of popular frontism involve it in class collaboration policies, from which flowed a steady rightward drift in its political outlook, the abandonment of militant policies and the downplaying of the class struggle? Was the pursuit of popular frontism primarily an electoral manoeuvre designed to obtain a parliamentary majority, as claimed by some historians? Looked at from another angle, was the popular front an attempt at rallying a mass movement

of opposition to the government, as claimed by others? Along with this, why did the Communist Party fail to achieve its main objective of getting a British government to enter a military pact with Russia and France?

These questions raise the related issue of what effect did the pursuit of the popular front, a strategy worked out in accordance with the requirements of Soviet foreign policy, have on its standing in British society? Did it weaken or strengthen its influence in British society?

To fully understand the evolution of the Communist Party's policy during this period, it must be placed against the background of developments in Soviet foreign policy. These developments provided the essential reference point from which it took its lead when working out its strategy. After a brief appraisal of Soviet foreign policy during 1938-9, attention will then be focused on the Communist Party's attempt to grapple with the difficulties of responding to its requirements in the British political situation.

First of all, the evolution of the Communist Party's political line will be examined; closely followed by scrutiny of several of the major campaigns it conducted. Finally, the activities of the communists in the West Riding district will be examined to help shed further light on why the Communist Party's popular front strategy failed.

Soviet Foreign Policy

During 1938-9 the Soviet government felt increasingly disappointed by British and French appeasement of Germany and their consequent refusal to enter an anti-fascist pact with Moscow. Throughout these years, Litvinov laboured at Geneva to achieve collective action against fascist aggression. His failure to gain British approval for a pact of mutual assistance between London and Moscow led to the emergence of isolationist forces in the Soviet government, which favoured a retreat into fortress Russia.

The refusal of Britain and France to countenance any resistance to the aggression of the fascist powers culminated in the infamous Munich agreement of October 1938. In the eight months following this, the Soviet government sought a rapprochement with Germany while continuing to press Britain and France for a military pact. It was in the face of British intransigence to agree to an Anglo-Soviet pact that the Soviet government came to a modus vivendi with Germany in the form of the Nazi-Soviet pact in late August 1939. Thus by giving Germany a free hand against Western Europe Stalin believed he had gained Russia a temporary breathing space from involvement in any European war.

In the period before the collapse of its pro-Western foreign policy the Soviet government realized that without British support measures to restrain the fascist powers were a non-starter. As Haslam has observed:

All Soviet efforts had to be directed towards encouraging anti-appeasement elements within the Western camp. One obvious focus, as Stalin came to realize, was the working class of the bourgeois world.⁵

This would explain Stalin's overture to the West European Labour movement in mid February 1938 when he commented in an interview:

The international connections of the working class of the USSR with the working class of the bourgeois countries must be intensified and strengthened; the political assistance of the working class of the bourgeois countries to the working class of our country must be organized in case of a military attack on our country....⁶

It would appear Stalin believed that the British government's appeasement policy 'did not represent the British people', viewing British foreign policy as open to change. The Soviet government took encouragement from the growth of the anti-appeasement wing of the Conservative Party, believing that collective security could be brought about with the likes of Churchill in power.⁷

As has already been noted, the CPGB's main objective throughout 1938-9 was to help bring about an Anglo-Soviet pact to protect Russia's western border from German attack.

The next section will show how the Communist Party extended the parameters of the popular front ever wider to incorporate non-socialist allies; to help bring about an electoral combination capable of bringing about the desired changes in British foreign policy.

Evolution of the popular front line 1938-9

Before looking at how the Communist Party line responded to changes in the international situation it is necessary to examine the main premises upon which this policy of class collaboration was based. In working out perspectives for a British popular front the Communist Party took as its point of reference the pivotal role of the National Government in preventing an anti-fascist alliance with Russia and France; Pollitt stressed to the Central Committee:

The big thing that comrades have to hammer home is that this Government represents the biggest menace to the peace of the world....it is at every turn strengthening [foreign] reaction at the same time as it makes separate arrangements to prevent any common front against Germany. This demands the unity of all progressive forces against the National Government in preparation for a People's Government.⁸

According to Pollitt, the primary objective of any People's Front government was not to address the social and economic

ills of Britain but to form an anti-fascist alliance with Russia and France:

I don't care how limited the programme on which that Government came to power, so long as the prerequisites of that coming to power were association with France and the Soviet Union,....⁹

It is commonly assumed that following the defeat of the Unity Campaign in 1937 the Communist Party put all its efforts into the popular front which entailed the abandonment of any further attempts at affiliating to the Labour Party.¹⁰ However, the Communist Party leadership realised that for any popular front movement to have any chance of success it needed the active support of the Labour Party, which was by far the strongest party of the parliamentary opposition. If any popular front against the government was to be brought into being then the Communist Party had to concentrate on getting unity in the Labour movement i.e. Communist Party affiliation to Labour, 'before an effective People's Front is possible, unity must come first in the working class organisations'.¹¹ Once affiliation to the Labour Party was achieved the Communist Party would then be in a position to win Labour to a policy of taking the lead in forming an electoral coalition of anti-government forces.

This perspective for a popular front was based on a profoundly pessimistic analysis of Labour's chances of winning the next general election:

At no time since the end of the war has there been less possibility of a Labour Government. For years and years we have made propaganda for a Labour Government yet we are now further off than ever.¹²

It was felt that the only hope for bringing about changes in British foreign policy lay in a multi-class electoral coalition to defeat the National Government:

The only possibility of this government being replaced lies in an alliance of the working class, with the middle class, the farmers and the anti-fascist sections of the bourgeoisie....¹³

The objectives of such a multi-class electoral coalition would be twofold. Firstly, to try and force changes in the government's foreign policy in the immediate period, while preparing an electoral combination strong enough to defeat it at the next general election:

the whole Labour and Progressive Movement [could] develop such power as could force changes in the policy of the National Government now, and help prepare the way

for its defeat at a coming general election by returning a majority of Labour and progressive members to Parliament.¹⁴

In the campaign for a popular front movement to defeat the government the only methods considered for bringing this about were electoral. In the debates of the Communist Party leadership on the popular front there was never any mention of any kind of movement of civil disobedience or industrial action to bring about the government's defeat. The only strategy considered depended upon an electoral combination of the Labour Party and the anti-appeasement sections of the Liberal and Conservative Parties. The Communist Party leadership believed that this was the only way the National Government's electoral dominance could be challenged. Noting that at the 1935 general election the government obtained two million more votes than the opposition parties combined, Pollitt argued:

any kind of perspective of defeating the National Government can only be realised in our judgement on the basis of this....that we begin to consider putting the possibility, the perspective to the whole democratic movement in this country, not a split [opposition] vote in a future by-election or general election.¹⁵

This simplistic electoral arithmetic was based on the unrealistic assumption that political parties representing antagonistic social classes could somehow be brought together to form an electoral coalition. Subsequent experience was to prove how unrealistic this assumption was in the British setting; for it was not based on an objective appraisal of British politics but determined by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy. The CPGB's assessment regarding the popular front in Britain, ran contrary to the experience of the Labour movement which had struggled over thirty years to gain a parliamentary majority for the Labour Party as an independent entity; not in alliance with non-socialist forces.

In the second half of August 1937 there was a special commission of the Comintern in Moscow held to discuss the CPGB's future strategy and tactics following the collapse of the Unity Campaign. The decisions taken there were adopted by the Central Committee in September 1938 and provided the guiding principles of the CPGB's policy up until the Austrian crisis of February-March 1938.¹⁶

Throughout the autumn of 1937 the Communist Party repeatedly called for its affiliation to the Labour Party as the essential precondition for uniting the Labour movement; which could then go forward in taking the lead in forming a popular front.¹⁷ The Communist Party declared that it would, 'accept in its full meaning the Constitution of the Labour Party...and will abide by all decisions of the Labour Party

conferences...', yet it effectively undermined this by calling for, 'an electoral agreement between Labour, Left Liberal and Communist candidates' in the November municipal elections. The Central Committee directed the Party membership to, 'place in the forefront our campaign for an electoral agreement to prevent any splitting of the working class and democratic vote'.¹⁸

During this period the Communist Party revised its previous slogan calling for a majority Labour government with the demand for a government representing all 'progressive' forces as something more practical and more likely to lead to the defeat of the National Government. By January 1938 the campaign for affiliation to Labour, which by then had taken the form of the Communist Crusade, was calling for the National Government to be replaced by a 'Labour and Democratic government'.¹⁹

In order to broaden its appeal to potential non-socialist allies the Communist Party began to cast off the last vestiges of its revolutionary heritage and dampen down its struggle against capitalism. In the first issue of the Daily Worker in 1938 the hammer and sickle mast-head along with the slogan 'Workers Of The World Unite' disappeared from the front page; symbolising its public abandonment of the goal of world revolution. Meanwhile the campaign for a 'Labour and Democratic government' took on unashamedly patriotic tones, which dispensed with the class approach to politics previously held by the CPGB. The Central Committee statement

issued on 8 January 1938 'Peace Or War - Poverty Or Plenty'
declared:

The Communist Party calls upon the British people to wipe out the shame; to struggle in 1938 to smash the Government which prevents the British people from taking their place in the ranks of freedom to which its whole history entitles it. 1938 can be a year of great change....if the British people, true to its historic traditions...unites its forces and strikes the decisive blow for democracy and peace.²⁰

As the campaign for the popular front gained renewed momentum during the spring of 1938, Dutt openly spelled out the implications of the Communist Party's class collaboration approach to politics. The anti-fascist crusade required that the struggle for socialism be postponed until fascism had been defeated; overturning the Marxist formula that the struggle against fascism was inextricably linked up with the struggle to overthrow capitalism of which it was a product.²¹ In a reply to Daily Herald criticism of the popular front, that the Communist Party was abandoning socialism in favour of unprincipled agreements with non-socialists, Dutt exclaimed:

...the aim of socialism is not included as an immediate object of the common fight. We have no hesitation in

declaring that the immediate issue at this moment is not socialism. The immediate issue is to defeat the National Government...22

The CPGB's exclusive concern with foreign affairs and the desire to acquire non-socialist allies which flowed from this led to a gradual neglect of its industrial activities. Up to 1935 the Communist Party placed great emphasis upon building militant rank and file movements in the unions. This can be illustrated by two quotations from the Communist Review. In the March edition of 1933 Shields noted:

the marked successes which have been recorded with regard to the development of the Busmen's Rank and File Movement, the Railway Vigilance Movement, and movements of a similar character. These advances point the way forward along which the movement as a whole can be further consolidated and extended.23

Meanwhile in October 1933 the Communist Review advocated the, 'need for the development of all in rank and file strike committees initiated by militant branches'.24 In the popular front period which followed cold water was poured on the idea of rank and file movements; where these continued to exist their activity revealed an emphasis upon utilising the trade unions official structures as opposed to the previous emphasis upon building up a rank and file structure

within the unions to act as an alternative leadership. The following quotes from Discussion in 1936 illustrate this point. In the June edition Alec Brown commented:

Similarly, in this question of the rank and file movement in the union, it is in the actual day to day work of utilising the unions to the full within the bounds of their present rules, and of awakening the full membership to fully conscious utilisation of the unions, that "constitutionalist" and revolutionary meet and learn to understand one another.²⁵

John Mahon made a similar point revealing an emphasis away from building up a revolutionary trade union opposition, 'Our role as a Party is to give leadership to this whole movement and to bury the old conception that we are only concerned with the revolutionary minority in the unions'.²⁶ As Pearce and Woodhouse have noted where rank and file movements continued to exist their activity revealed:

increasingly narrow concentration on recruitment to the unions and propaganda for amalgamation of the unions. Exposures of the officials and campaigning for democratisation of the unions both faded away.²⁷

Nina Fishman has observed how by the late 1930s the Communist Party leadership had, 'established that the

imperative of trade union loyalty superseded the imperative of rank-and-fileism when they openly clashed'.²⁹ In her study of the London Busmen's Rank and File Movement and the ASSNC she has established that they:

both placed rank-and-fileism first.[However] Pollitt and Campbell intervened to enforce union loyalty as the first imperative. They acted in a way which appeared identical to 'reformism' and 'Mondism', contrary to bolshevik principles.²⁹

During the 1938-9 period the Communist Party's neglect of industrial activity became even more pronounced. At the fifteenth congress of the CPGB in September 1938 there was no formal report on industrial work as such. J.R.Campbell, who usually gave this report, concentrated his attention on the struggle against 'counter-revolutionary Trotskyism'. In a report for the ECCI of Comintern in April 1939 Campbell admitted:

While the main resolution at the last Party Congress laid down the outlines of a trade union policy adapted to the present situation, there are no signs in the Daily Worker or in reports from the Party, that this policy is being concretely worked out and applied.³⁰

The Central Committee report to the sixteenth congress, scheduled for October 1939, noted the effect of the Communist Party downplaying the class struggle in order to further its popular front campaign:

The preoccupation on questions concerning War or Peace may seem at first to have led to a dampening down of the [class] struggle against capitalism at home...in the main there has been no real advance made in raising the standards of the workers as a whole...In many Districts there has been serious neglect of this work and opportunities for developing strong organisation in the factories have been missed.³¹

Another consequence of the Communist Party's 'dampening down' of the class struggle was the complete abandonment of the struggle against Mosley and his blackshirts. Shortly before the war Mosley held a large rally at Earl's Court, while on the same day the London YCL organised a hiking trip. The only demonstrators outside the BUF rally were a group of Trotskyists and a small number of other anti-fascists.³² As Pollitt admitted to the Central Committee in June 1939, the lack of opposition to the BUF had contributed to an 'alarming growth in anti-semitism in this country'. He lamented the Communist Party's abandonment of the struggle against the blackshirts:

...on our anti-fascist propaganda. There is none. We cannot at the moment organise another September 9th or October 4th. Must face the fact that Mosley is getting away with it. The fascist propaganda is catching on...33

During the Austrian crisis of February-March 1938, when the Western powers stood by and did nothing to interfere with Germany's invasion of Austria, the Communist Party broadened the boundaries of the popular front still further. The call for a Labour and Democratic government was replaced with the demand for a, 'Peoples Government based on the power of organised Labour in alliance with all genuine democratic and peace forces'.34 The Central Committee called on Labour to convene:

an emergency conference of all political organisations opposed to war and ready to act decisively to preserve peace, and formulate a programme which a People's Government could carry through.35

Although it was not publicly spelt out this meant a multi-class alliance involving Labour in an electoral coalition with the Liberals and the anti-appeasement wing of the Conservative Party. In a discussion with Morrison, the leader of the London Labour Party, arranged by Cripps, at the height of the Austrian crisis, Pollitt admitted as much:

He [Morrison] put a question to me. Are you aware that at the present time, no change of government could take place that did not include Churchill, and where would you stand?

In reply I said: We recognize Churchill would have to be in any new Government at this stage, that is why we want a strong person on the Labour side to take the lead so as to be able to hold the key position in the Government and guard against Churchill using his position for imperialist aims.³⁶

This formulae for a popular front government was retained throughout the other political crisis of 1938, yet the Communist Party never felt confident enough to publicly spell out that such a government would include the anti-appeasement Tories. It was not until the fall of Republican Spain and the German conquest of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939 that the Daily Worker ran the headline, 'COMMUNIST APPEAL TO ATTLEE SINCLAIR AND CHURCHILL Urged To Defeat Cabinet And Form New Government'. It made the following desperate appeal:

Let Attlee, Sinclair and Churchill get together without another minute's delay...to form a new government of the People, a Government that will truly represent all the Labour and democratic forces of our country, and on this

basis establish the Peace Front at home as well as abroad.³⁷

As the international crisis deepened throughout 1938-9 the Communist Party pushed outwards the parameters of the popular front in a vain attempt to win non-socialist allies. This attempt to win Liberal and Conservative backing for an electoral combination against the government involved the Communist Party in activity which only served to isolate it even further from the mainstream of the Labour movement; thus dooming the whole popular front scheme to failure. The Communist Party's attempt to put the popular front theory into practice will be examined next.

The popular front in action 1938-9

The debate over the Communist Party's popular front activity has considerable bearing on the following questions which shall be explored in this section: Why did the Party fail to achieve its popular front objectives? Was the popular front an electoral contrivance or an attempt at rallying a mass movement of opposition to the government? Did its choice of strategy for achieving the popular front have any bearing on the movement's ultimate failure? What effect did the pursuit of the popular front have on the Communist Party's standing and influence?

During the autumn of 1937 the CPGB's main efforts were devoted to an ineffectual propaganda campaign which called

on the Labour Party leadership to meet its representatives to discuss communist affiliation to Labour.³⁸ It would appear that up to half of the Communist Party branches failed to take up this campaign, suggesting a lack of enthusiasm from the rank and file who were more concerned with things such as the Aid-for-Spain movement and the Left Book Club.³⁹

In January 1938 this campaign for affiliation to Labour was relaunched as the Communist Crusade, with over 200 local meetings planned to raise support for this within local Labour parties. Expressing the high hopes of the leadership for this campaign Pollitt commented:

We want to see this campaign made a bigger success than the whole of the Unity Campaign meetings. This will be one of the most important means of stimulating the whole drive for unity and affiliation.⁴⁰

The Communist Crusade was launched on 23 January 1938 in Aberdeen. It had three interrelated objectives. Firstly, the affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party. Secondly, to win Labour to a policy of it taking the leading role in forming a popular front movement in Britain. Finally, to bring about the downfall of the National Government and its replacement by a government committed to a military pact with the Soviet Union.⁴¹ The Communist Crusade manifesto gave little attention to the social and

economic concerns of British workers, with its attention fixed almost exclusively on foreign affairs.

Undoubtedly it was the advance of fascism on the continent which gave the Communist Crusade its main stimulus. The German invasion of Austria gave it a very pertinent message. Playing upon people's fears at events on the continent the Crusade proved to be more successful than the Unity Campaign of the previous year. However the Unity Campaign unlike the Crusade, faced strong opposition from the Labour Party right from its inception.

While the Unity Campaign brought relatively few recruits to the Communist Party and was poorly supported by the Labour movement; the Communist Crusade held 200 meetings attended by over 62,000 people. It raised over 1,660 pounds for the Communist Party and brought 1,500 new recruits into its ranks.⁴² Despite its organisational successes the Communist Crusade failed to bring the Communist Party any closer to achieving affiliation to Labour. Yet the large amount of popular front propaganda put out during the Crusade helped, 'prepare the ground for the favourable response to Sydney Elliott's appeal for the United Peace Alliance' (UPA).⁴³

The Communist Crusade was effectively cut short and overshadowed by the emergence of the United Peace Alliance in March 1938, which developed as a response to the German invasion of Austria.⁴⁴ It was during the Austrian crisis of February-March 1938 that the Communist Party began to modify

its tactics regarding the popular front. It changed the emphasis of its popular front activity away from mere propaganda towards more practical action designed to bring into being a parliamentary combination powerful enough to defeat the government.

At the Central Committee in February 1938 the new developments in popular front thinking came to the fore. It was noted that if Labour strengthened its electoral position in urban areas, the government would still have a clear majority due to its electoral domination of the countryside; and that in the majority of rural seats the Liberals were the main challengers to the government with Labour invariably third. Cornforth's speech, which delivered a statement on behalf of a Central Committee commission on agriculture, summed up the main tenets of the new electoral approach to the popular front:

In many rural areas, Liberalism is something very deeply entrenched...Therefore in areas where Liberalism has this hold, we have to advocate an alliance of the Labour Party with the Liberals against the National Government, and such an alliance is all the more feasible because one finds in the main the progressive Liberals are prepared to support an anti-government policy for the land, along much the same lines as the Labour Party.⁴⁵

The Daily Worker put forward calculations purporting to show that only a multi-party electoral coalition had a realistic chance of defeating the government. It estimated that for Labour to win on its own it was confronted with the task of winning government seats which on average had majorities of up to 6,000; while a UPA combination would reduce the scale of the task considerably, only having to win seats from the government which had majorities of up to 2,500.⁴⁶

At the height of the Austrian crisis the Central Committee issued a manifesto on 19 March 1938, which called upon the Labour Party to convene an 'emergency conference' of all political forces opposed to the government's appeasement policy. The task of such a conference would be to formulate 'a programme which a People's Government could carry through'.⁴⁷ At a time when the government was in a state of turmoil the Communist Party's call for an electoral combination to bring about its downfall struck a chord with sections of the Labour movement and Liberal Party. As Eatwell has observed, to some extent support for the popular front derived from disillusionment with the Labour Party's failure to mount an effective challenge to the government's pro-fascist foreign policy.⁴⁸

On 20 March 1938 Sydney Elliott, editor of the Cooperative newspaper Reynolds News, responded to the call of the Daily Worker by raising the demand for a United Peace Alliance of all groups and individuals opposed to the government's appeasement policy. He put forward the view

that Labour and its allies could not only force a general election; but 'they could win a clear majority in the Commons immediately'.⁴⁹ The central objectives of such a popular front government would be a military alliance with the Soviet Union and France and the supply of arms to Republican Spain.

This call for a multi-party electoral alliance to defeat the government received swift support from Liberal newspapers such as the News Chronicle and the Manchester Guardian. The Communist Party was quick on the uptake and in late March put forward proposals for developing the United Peace Alliance into a practical reality. These called for an emergency Labour movement conference on the popular front which would prepare the way for a conference of all anti-government forces. The Daily Worker stressed the point:

What matters now above all is to carry forward the campaign in the Labour organisations. Especially in the trade unions decisive responsibility lies at this time. Councils of Action of all the Labour, peace and democratic forces are being built up in the localities.⁵⁰

On the 29 March the Daily Worker announced the formation of the first local Council of Action, in Fulham, to help draw all 'progressive forces' together in support of Labour's candidate in the forthcoming by-election. Local Councils of

Action were set up by the Communist Party and its fellow travellers in various parts of the country; their purpose being to rally voters around those candidates most likely to defeat the National Government candidate in by-elections, irrespective of their party label. In practical terms this meant the CPGB calling for a reversion to the discredited Lib-Lab politics of the 1900s; a policy which was anathema to most Labour movement activists who recalled the long hard struggle to free Labour from the coat tails of the Liberal Party.

The Communist Party believed that Labour's victory in the West Fulham by-election on 6 April 1938 to be practical confirmation of the new popular front line; claiming that, 'It was in fact the united front of Labour, Liberals and Communists that defeated the government at West Fulham'.⁵¹ It looked forward with confidence to the Easter conferences of the Labour movement.

At its first major test the United Peace Alliance won an unexpected victory which startled the Labour leadership. The Cooperative Party annual conference on 17 April 1938 gave its support to the United Peace Alliance by 2,340,000 votes to 1,547,000.⁵² As Eatwell has observed:

the alliance enjoyed considerable rank and file support. This support was probably accentuated by the fact that the peace alliance was supported by the communists for in 1937 the CPGB had decided to take a more active role

in the cooperative movement and had quickly succeeded in having members elected to official positions in several areas.⁵³

The CPGB's entrust penetration of the Labour movement seemed to be paying handsome dividends. It had over 2,000 of its members active in the Cooperative movement and over 2,000 secretly working inside the Labour Party; which gave the Communist Party a powerful lever with which to muster support for the United Peace Alliance.⁵⁴

The victory at the Cooperative conference on its first outing gave the United Peace Alliance the credibility that enabled it to develop considerable momentum within the Labour movement. In the three weeks after the Cooperative decision, the United Peace Alliance won the support of the Shop Assistant's Union, the SWMF with over 250,000 members and NUDAW the sixth biggest union with over 150,000 members.⁵⁵ Beside this dozens of local Labour parties, particularly smaller and more rural ones where Labour's electoral prospects seemed rather bleak, came out in favour of the alliance; along with the Tribunate MP's and a youth popular front between the Labour League of Youth and the YCL.

Alarmed by the rapidly growing momentum of the United Peace Alliance within the Labour movement the Labour leadership was forced to act. As Eatwell has observed, the NEC appointed a committee to prepare a statement answering

the case for a popular front, 'in an attempt to stem this rising tide of support for the popular front'.⁵⁶ This six-page pamphlet entitled Labour And The Popular Front, which came out on 12 May 1938, served as the principal NEC statement against the popular front. Its main arguments can be summarised as follows. For Labour to adopt the popular front after decades of struggling to establish its viability as an independent party would mean it losing its independence and once more becoming dependant on the goodwill of the Liberal Party which had sabotaged the two previous Labour governments. The popular front with its class collaboration approach meant giving up the struggle for socialism. Finally, the popular front represented the politics of defeatism for it assumed that Labour could not win an election without non-socialist allies; yet recent evidence such as Labour's victories in the Ipswich and Fulham by-elections indicated Labour's viability as an independent party.⁵⁷

With the Communist Party openly admitting that the struggle for the popular front meant postponing the struggle for socialism, it gave the Labour leaders a powerful weapon with which to attack the United Peace Alliance. As Martin Upham has observed, the Labour leaders:

now had to hand the plausible argument of Socialist fundamentalism with which to stem the growing Communist influence on the Labour Party. The convenient guise of

single-minded crusaders for the Socialist commonwealth well suited their intention to remain in unchallenged control of the Labour movement.⁵⁸

Confronted with such powerful pieces of propaganda as Labour And The Popular Front, the United Peace Alliance needed to maintain the momentum developed so far. With the Aylesbury by-election scheduled for 19 May 1938, the scene was set for a decisive confrontation between the supporters and opponents of the popular front.

The Aylesbury by-election

On 24 April the mid-Buckinghamshire district Labour Party selected Reg Groves, a Trotskyist who had led the opposition within the Socialist League to its participation in the Unity Campaign and its own dissolution, as its candidate to fight the Aylesbury by-election. The Communist Party and its popular front allies responded with a campaign designed to force the local Labour party to reverse its decision, and withdraw its candidate in favour of the United Peace Alliance candidate T. Atholl Roberts, a local Liberal.

Both the Progressive Alliance Group and the South Buckinghamshire Unity Committee demanded Labour withdraw its candidate and not contest the election. Meanwhile the small communist nucleus in the local Labour Party instigated moves designed to get Groves to stand down.⁵⁹ The bitter campaign of opposition waged by the Communist Party to the

candidature of Reg Groves sprang from a variety of influences. Martin Upham has commented, 'To the desire for an alliance was added distaste for Groves as a Trotskyist'.⁶⁰ It is worthwhile recalling that Groves was one of the leading figures in the 'Balham Group' which was expelled from the CPGB in August 1932 and became the British section of the international Left Opposition led by Trotsky; which opposed the united front and popular front policies of the Comintern.⁶¹

On the 5 May the Communist Party, which not so long ago had pledged to abide by the constitution and discipline of the Labour Party if affiliated, demanded that the local Labour party withdraw its candidate and support the Liberal who was standing for the United Peace Alliance. It declared, 'If this decision [to contest the by-election] is carried through it will mean that the by-election will be "on a plate" for Chamberlain even before the campaign has started'.⁶²

Reg Groves, with a majority of the local Labour Party executive behind him, stood firm in the face of this pressure from the popular fronters and Transport House to replace him; seeing the by-election campaign as an opportunity to demonstrate in practice the erroneous nature of the popular front.⁶³ By 6 May he had spoken at over 30 meetings which had led to the formation of new Labour Party branches in the constituency.⁶⁴

In return for standing firm against the popular front Groves received strong support from the Labour press; while dozens of Labour organisations and individual party members sent messages of support for his stand in defence of Labour's independence and socialist principles.⁶⁵ WS Wigham, who drove Groves around the constituency has described the approach of the campaign:

Reg Groves has put at every meeting, plainly, soberly, but resolutely, the case for turning out the whole ruling class, under whatever label, and winning the country for rule by those who do the work of the country. In a sentence he has fought the election on a straight, class struggle, socialist issue.⁶⁶

In recognition of the vigorous socialist fight which Groves was putting up, supporters of the popular front such as Harold Laski, Ellen Wilkinson and D.N. Pritt spoke on his platform.⁶⁷ As support for Groves grew both within the constituency and the wider Labour movement he faced a bitter campaign of opposition from the press supporting the popular front. The Manchester Guardian claimed Groves' campaign was a futile gesture and that he would lose his deposit.⁶⁸ The Daily Worker his bitterest enemy among the popular front press grew increasingly abusive. On the 9 May Pollitt declared that Reg Groves candidature was 'disgusting to the Labour movement' and argued, 'Aylesbury has become the

testing ground of the struggle between the forces of unity and socialism and the forces of reaction backed by the Cliveden set and the Trotskyists'. He called on local Labour parties to protest, 'against this cynical attempt to hand over a seat to Chamberlain and his fascist friends'.⁶⁹

Dutt took this line of reasoning a step further. On 14 May 1938 he explained that Labour support for a Liberal who stood against the government's appeasement policy was a step on the road to socialism, 'The People's Front is the door to Socialism'.⁷⁰

The election result came as major disappointment to the supporters of the United Peace Alliance and gave a tremendous boost to its opponents within the Labour movement. The result was as follows:⁷¹

	<u>1935</u>	<u>1938</u>
Conservative	24,728	21,695
Liberal	13,622	10,751
Labour	4,106	7,666

With the turn out falling from 70.2 per cent in 1935 to 63.1 per cent in 1938, Groves raised Labour's share of the vote from 11 per cent to 19.1 per cent and managed to keep Labour's deposit for the first time in that constituency. The Conservative vote fell by 3.3 per cent and the Liberal vote by 4.8 per cent.⁷² The importance of Groves' vote has largely been overlooked by historians of the popular front period. It marked a turning point in the fortunes of the

United Peace Alliance which suffered its first major defeat at Aylesbury; and knocked the momentum out of the popular front campaign. As Martin Upham has shown :

The swing against the Tories was greater than the average of all pre-Munich by-election results. He [Groves] also surpassed the anti-Tory swing of the Munich by-elections at Oxford and Bridgwater.⁷³

Not surprisingly, the Labour leadership greeted this result with acclaim and used it to great effect to discredit the United Peace Alliance. The Daily Herald commented:

Aylesbury did not want a Popular Front. Mid-Buckinghamshire traditional Liberal stronghold, gave Labour a record vote and an effective answer to those who would divert it from its purpose...By the loss of nearly 3,000 votes Liberalism drew nearer to the political grave....Congratulations Mr.Groves. And goodbye Popular Front.⁷⁴

The New Leader also noted the significance of the result, and observed that the supporters of the United Peace Alliance:

expected the result of the Aylesbury by-election to present them with a strong argument in their favour.

Instead, it has presented an overwhelming argument against them.

The working class movement must ask itself whether it is worthwhile dropping its own programme for an alliance with a Party which is obviously a spent force.⁷⁵

Even the Daily Worker acknowledged that the result would give a boost to those forces opposing the popular front:

there will be loud cheers at the result in Transport House. The increase in the Labour vote will be taken as justification for their opposition to the United Peace Alliance...⁷⁶

The result was a crushing answer to the Communist Party's argument that Labour needed Liberal allies in order to gain electoral ground in rural areas. In campaigning for a non-socialist against a highly respected Labour candidate who fought the campaign, 'on an old-fashioned class war platform',⁽⁷⁷⁾ the Communist Party inflicted great damage to its own standing and that of the United Peace Alliance in the Labour movement and, 'destroyed all illusions about it in the minds of thousands of the rank and file in the Labour Party'.⁷⁸ The Aylesbury by-election gave practical confirmation to the charges against the popular front made by the Labour Party. As the New Leader observed the Communist Party had committed a serious mistake which would

not be easily forgiven by the Labour movement, 'At Aylesbury the Communist Party supported a candidate of a capitalist party against the candidate of a working-class party. Nothing can excuse or remove that betrayal'.⁸⁰

The popular front in decline

The Aylesbury by-election undermined the momentum of the United Peace Alliance campaign and inflicted serious damage on its credibility within the Labour movement. Three weeks later at the Cooperative Party annual congress on 8 June 1938, the United Peace Alliance received another major setback when a motion in its support was defeated by 4,492,000 votes to 2,382,000.⁸⁰ This defeat came as something of a surprise to the supporters of the popular front considering the support given only two months previously to the United Peace Alliance by the Cooperative Party's annual conference. The popular front was paying a heavy price for its attempt to compromise the independence of the Labour Party.

In July 1938 Pollitt admitted, 'genuine fears that the Popular Front may split the Labour movement', were an important factor in the defeat of the United Peace Alliance at the Cooperative congress in June, 'The result was that many delegates who were mandated to vote for the Peace Alliance voted against it purely on this ground'.⁸¹

The Aylesbury result and defeat at the Cooperative annual congress halted the momentum of the United Peace Alliance; following these defeats it endured one defeat after another

at the union conferences during the summer of 1938.⁸² In a report for the ECCI of Comintern JR Campbell noted, 'On the whole the votes for this proposal were slightly less than those cast for the united front in 1937, as many trade unions were suspicious of any alliance with the Liberals'.⁸³

By the end of the summer the United Peace Alliance campaign had fizzled out only to see its fortunes briefly revived by the Munich crisis in the autumn of 1938. Against a background of a government seriously divided between pro and anti-appeasement wings, the United Peace Alliance managed to get local Labour backing for its candidates in the Oxford and Bridgwater by-elections; creating serious divisions within the Labour movement in both localities.⁸⁴

The surprise success of Vernon Bartlett at Bridgwater on 17 November 1938 should not obscure the fact that the popular front movement did not enjoy widespread support within the Labour movement by this time. Bartlett's victory failed to revive the fortunes of the United Peace Alliance, for by this time the vast majority of the Labour movement had come to accept the arguments of the NEC against the popular front. With the outbreak of war expected at any moment the Labour Party's exhortations for unity and loyalty to the movement served to further undermine support for the popular front.

Early in 1939, alarm at the continuing slide towards world war led Stafford Cripps to launch his ineffectual petition campaign, designed to get Labour's approval for a

popular front.⁸⁵ The Communist Party complemented this by launching the Communist Crusade For The Defence Of The British People, which lasted from January to April 1939. The central objective of this campaign was to, 'unite all those forces which are in opposition to the policy of the National Government', and, 'to get Chamberlain out and a new government in'. The main priority of the new popular front government was to form a military alliance with the Soviet Union and France that would restrain the aggressive actions of the fascist powers.⁸⁶ Compared with the Communist Crusade of 1938 this was relatively ineffectual and failed to have any impact upon the Labour movement.⁸⁷

The final defeat of the popular front came at the Labour Party conference in May 1939; by which time the campaign was largely dead as an issue within the Labour movement. The motion for the popular front was defeated 2,360,000 to 248,000.⁸⁸ In order to fend off the attempt of the popular front to compromise the independence of the Labour movement the Labour leaders drew upon class struggle arguments, posing as champions of the socialist cause. As had become customary, Morrison replied to the debate on the popular front, on behalf of the NEC:

Are fascism and war in part, and in substantial part, the result of economic forces inherent in the capitalist system itself? I believe they are. I believe they have a relation to the economics of capitalism, and if that is

so, it is a serious thing to abandon, even for the time being, our desire to transform the economic system, which alone in the long run will really remove the fundamental causes of Fascism and war.⁸⁹

The popular front was finally dead as an issue; its demise reflected the Labour Party's refusal to compromise its political independence with non-socialist allies and abandon its socialist programme for the sake of some abstract artificial unity. It could be argued that the popular front never had a realistic opportunity for success for the Labour leadership never regarded it as a viable possibility. Having said this, it is important to distinguish between the motives of the Labour leadership in opposing the popular front and those of many rank and file activists.

The Labour leadership's opposition to the popular front sprang from an intense hostility to communism, fear of alienating the trade union leaders, and of demoralising some of its 'most loyal supporters'.⁹⁰ Besides this, they also believed that any association with the Communist Party would be a huge electoral millstone around Labour's neck.⁹¹ Concern at the Terror in the Soviet Union also played its part, as Pollitt noted when commenting upon a discussion with Herbert Morrison:

The interview concluded with Morrison asking about the Moscow trials, and stating that it was this which was

the real reason why the Labour Party would not accept the affiliation of the Communist Party.⁹²

The Labour Party membership on the whole shared the antipathy of their leaders towards the Communist Party, with memories of the communists 'class-against-class' period still relatively fresh. Despite the Communist Party's protestations to the contrary, the popular front was widely perceived as a reversion to the discredited Lib-Lab politics of Labour's political infancy and an abandonment of socialism. The following letter to the New Statesman from a Labour Party member outlines these objections:

Over a generation ago, a small body of trade unionists and socialists decided that a Parliamentary Party was necessary; today we are being asked to reverse that decision-the decision that "Liberal Democracy" has nothing of final value to offer to the working classes, or at least that the achievement of Socialism was not possible through cooperation with the Liberal Party...Workers...have built up an organisation inspired by a belief in Socialism; an organisation that is so necessary to win this country for Socialism, and one not likely to be cast aside, because some faint hearts fear we might not be able to win alone.⁹³

The Communist Party leadership was fully aware of the fact that they were facing a difficult task in working against the grain of the past history of the Labour movement. In July 1938 Pollitt observed:

Here we need to bear in mind that it is precisely amongst those who have built up the trade unions and the Labour Party that the feeling of opposition is strongest...They remember the fierce struggle with Liberalism in the latter part of the last century and the beginning of this one, they remember that Liberal employers have always been notorious for victimising active trade unionists and shop stewards. These are the people we have to win for our policy.⁹⁴

In reflecting upon the popular front, the Central Committee came to realise that the predominantly electoral character of the popular front campaign and the pursuit of class collaboration policies which flowed from this, were important factors in the Communist Party's lack of progress:

There was also a tendency to treat the Popular Front as a mere electoral alliance...Because of this we tended to create the impression that our policy represented cooperation with capitalism...Thus we did not succeed in convincing many active people in the Labour movement.⁹⁵

The final part of this chapter will examine the Communist Party from a local perspective. Exploring the dichotomy between the Party on a national scale and the Party in West Yorkshire will help shed further light on the questions: why did the popular front campaigns fail? Did these campaigns lead to a strengthening or weakening of communist influence?

The West Riding district 1938-39

During these years the West Yorkshire Communist Party went through a difficult period and struggled to maintain its already marginal position within the local Labour movement. Between October 1937 and August 1939 the West Riding district saw little growth in its membership. The following figures illustrate how the local Communist Party failed even to keep up with the rather modest growth experienced by the Party on a national scale:96

CPGB Membership Figures 1937-39

	<u>Oct 1937</u>	<u>Dec 1937</u>	<u>Sep 1938</u>	<u>Jan 1939</u>	<u>May 1939</u>
<u>W. Riding</u>	320	-	267	317	400
<u>National</u>	-	13,979	15,750	17,256	17,560

What is striking about these figures is the fact that the West Yorkshire Communist Party suffered a severe decline, losing a quarter of its membership during the first half of 1938, when the CPGB nationally experienced a period of rapid growth. This is even more puzzling considering that the West

Riding district recruited at least 30 new members from the Communist Crusade of that year.⁹⁷

This points to a terribly high turnover in the membership with the local Communist Party unable to recruit new members at a rate fast enough to replace those departing from the ranks. However, this particular problem was not exclusive to the West Riding district, but was a major headache for the Party nationally. At the Central Committee in December 1937 Pollitt noted with alarm that during the year, 'more than 1,500 members have gone through the Party. The question of fluctuation has got to be taken up'.⁹⁸ The difference between the Party on a national and local scale lay in the former's faster recruitment rate which covered up the high turnover in members.

As noted earlier, it would appear that the Communist Party's popular front campaigns appealed largely to young middle-class professionals. In the West Riding too, the majority of new recruits were of this type.⁹⁹ The rapid decline in membership in West Yorkshire during the first half of 1938 may well have indicated widespread disillusionment with the Communist Party's turn towards the popular front nationally. This may not have appealed to a section of the older working-class membership to whom the abandonment of the hammer and sickle and all talk of socialism was too much to stomach. It is worthwhile pointing out that during the Aylesbury by-election when the class collaboration approach of the popular front was openly

revealed, a section of the Communist Party membership sent in protests to the Central Committee at its statement supporting the Liberal candidate's stand against Labour; despite the fact that Labour's candidate was the 'Trotskyist' Reg Groves.¹⁰⁰

Another development which may explain this decline in local membership was the re-emergence of Ernie Benson as district organiser for several months during the first half of 1938. He was appointed to the post to cover for Marian Jessop's enforced absence due to a prolonged illness.¹⁰¹ At least one local Party member from this period claims that Benson was hopelessly inefficient and that Marian Jessop had criticised Benson for being a 'lazy Party organiser'.¹⁰² The rather limited progress made by the district when under his stewardship during 1935-6 adds to these doubts about his abilities as an organiser.

Figures for sales of the Daily Worker confirm this picture of the local Communist Party struggling to maintain its precarious position. The West Riding district had only one Daily Worker readers league, in contrast to London which had 20, and it had the lowest Daily Worker circulation of the eight industrial districts in the Communist Party. In July 1939 this stood at 6,708 sales per day.¹⁰³

In a region where the Labour Party had, by this time, established a dominant position amongst the industrial working class; and had become the main vehicle for workers to express their political voice, the Communist Party faced

an uphill task establishing a position of influence in the local Labour movement.¹⁰⁴ In 1936 and 1937 the local Communist Party attempted to overcome its isolation through the various unity campaigns and recorded limited progress.¹⁰⁶ Following the defeat of the Unity Campaign of 1937 the local Communist Party appeared to turn rather inward-looking, with less emphasis put upon mass campaigning work and an approach taking up concerns common to the Labour movement. Springhall in a report to the Central Committee on Party organisation noted:

in the West Riding District, where an examination of a whole series of decisions of the meetings over a long time, reveals that every question which the comrades discussed was purely inner party. Never does the agenda indicate that the questions which were affecting the whole Labour Movement were discussed in our leading Party committees.¹⁰⁶

This picture of an introspective local Communist Party is reinforced by the comments of a Leeds communist, M.Kline, in an article for the Party Organiser entitled 'Experiences In West Riding':

In our own West Riding District many branches have not yet begun to operate simple changes and methods of work suggested at the last Party Congress. Open branch

meetings are the exception rather than the rule. Sometimes they are called open branch meetings but it is merely a change in name and not in character and content-the old procedure and methods of our sectarian days remain. Little effort is made to publicly advertise them, to make them attractive, to invite outside speakers and sympathisers, to conduct business efficiently.107

Kline concluded with the following indictment of the local Communist Party:

We still tolerate practices which no self respecting worker used to efficiently run T.U. branch meetings would tolerate and which often makes members ashamed to bring sympathisers along.108

Throughout 1938-9 Marian Jessop, struggled to forge a collective leadership for the West Riding which could take responsibility for supervising the day to day work of the local branches, for, 'in the past District Committees would meet and discuss the political problems but had nothing to do with the practical carrying out of the policies'.109 To help overcome the isolation of the local branches and develop the district committee as a collective leadership for the area, Marian Jessop had:

been trying to get the DPC [District Party Committee] to see the district, to go into other branches from their own and get to know the problems of the district as well as of the branches. Believes this will strengthen the branches.110

The lack of cadres, people capable of showing initiative and intervening in local struggles without being directed by the Party to do so, was a major problem for the district as it was for the national Party.111 It held back the West Riding District for it prevented the local Communist Party branches responding promptly to political issues as they arose:

A bad situation which exists in the [West Riding] branches is the tendency for the branches to take decisions and then check them up with the district. That even if mistakes are made, we have to strengthen the feeling of branch leaderships to be able to take decisions on their own.112

The lack of cadres within the district is further illustrated by the elevation of new members who showed any promise to the district committee. Colin Siddons, a teacher who joined the Huddersfield Communist Party in October 1938, is an example of this. He has claimed that due to the lack of competent public speakers within the West Riding district

that as soon as he joined he was, 'immediately put on the branch committee and the West Riding District Committee'.¹¹³

The one bright spot for the West Riding district during 1938-9 was its relatively successful youth work. The district developed nine branches of the Young Communist League which had a total membership of 327 out of a national membership of 4,602.¹¹⁴ This is in contrast with the national development of the YCL which during 1938-39 lost 1,000 members, 'which is about 25% of the whole membership'.¹¹⁵ Attention will now be focused on the campaigning activities of the CPGB branches in Bradford and Leeds, in an attempt to shed further light on the poor progress of the district.

Bradford Communist Party

In the last two years before the war the Communist Party in Bradford saw a continuing decline in its influence in the local Labour movement. This is illustrated by its position on the local Trades Council, on which it once had quite a powerful position.¹¹⁷ This declining influence owed at least as much to the effect of the 'Black Circular' as it did to the lack of appeal of communist campaigns.

At its first meeting of 1938, Bradford Trades Council was confronted with a demand from the TUC General Council to instruct two of its branches to withdraw recognition from two communist delegates Tom Tynan and Frank Smith. In the event of the refusal of their trade union branches to carry

out such action then the Trades Council was instructed to disaffiliate the respective branches. The Trades Council executive maintained its anti-witchhunt policy of tolerating delegates of all left-wing opinions, and tried to stall action by the TUC; requesting:

the TUC to give the specific reasons for asking for the withdrawal of these delegates; and also that the branches be requested to submit a report as to the work and standing of these members in their respective branches.¹¹⁷

The annual meeting of the Trades Council maintained this anti-witchhunt stance and allowed the election of three communists to its ranks.¹¹⁸ By 1938 however, the TUC was beginning to get tough with trades councils which refused to implement the 'Black circular'. It sent a reply to Bradford Trades Council insisting that it remove communists from its ranks or face disciplinary action.¹¹⁹

At the Trades Council meeting in February 1938 Tom Tynan, despite having the full support of his local ETU branch, offered his resignation to avoid getting it and the Trades Council into trouble with the TUC. While acceding to Tynan's request, the Trades Council placed on record its recognition of his services as delegate and Executive Committee member.¹²⁰ In a gesture of defiance which expressed resentment at national interference and attempts to curb its

local independence, the Trades Council agreed to send the letter of support for Tynan from his local ETU branch to the TUC; and put forward a motion to the annual conference of Trades Councils, calling for the 'Black Circular' to be withdrawn.¹²¹ Somewhat inexplicably the case against Frank Smith was not pursued by the TUC. Following Tynan's removal a number of trade union branches reaffiliated to the Trades Council, satisfied that it was at last complying with TUC directives regarding the Communist Party.¹²²

In a final gesture of defiance the Trades Council allowed Tynan to continue reporting on his visit to the USSR, while granting him a further 3 pounds for extra expenses incurred on the trip. It also passed a resolution which gave all affiliated trade union branches permission to receive a report from Tynan on his visit to the USSR in 1937, as the Trades Council delegate to the celebrations in Moscow of the twenty first anniversary of the October Revolution.¹²³

It would be misleading to construe Tynan's visit to the USSR as Trades Council delegate as expressing support for the local Communist Party. Rather it expressed the admiration of the local Labour movement for the social and economic achievements of the first worker state, as well as being a vote of confidence in the abilities of Tynan as a local trade unionist.

With the removal of Tynan the Bradford Communist Party maintained a small and ineffective presence on the Trades Council; its two remaining delegates had only come onto the

Trades Council in 1937. The removal of Tynan, who had gained widespread respect during his ten years on the Trades Council, and the loss of his knowledge, experience and contacts, left the local Communist Party's two remaining delegates as rather isolated figures who played little part in the deliberations of the Trades Council during 1938-9.

On the few occasions they tried to get Trades Council backing for communist campaigns and policies their attempts were rejected out of hand. In early June 1938 the executive committee of Bradford Trades Council rejected a communist motion calling on it to support the United Peace Alliance. The full Trades Council followed this lead and rejected the United Peace Alliance by 55 votes to 15.¹²⁴ The popular front was rejected on the grounds that it would compromise the independence of the Labour movement and force it into an 'anschluss', with the Liberals. The Labour movement alone was the only force capable of replacing the National Government with a socialist Labour government committed to collective security against fascist aggression.¹²⁵

At the time of the Czechoslovakian crisis in September 1938 the Trades Council agreed 43 to 32 not to receive a deputation from the local Communist Party to discuss a joint anti-war campaign. The same meeting also rejected a communist motion calling on the Trades Council to organise a local popular front demonstration against the government's appeasement policy; this was 'defeated by an overwhelming vote'.¹²⁶

During 1939 the Bradford Trades Council was preoccupied by the threat of military and industrial conscription. In January the Trades Council criticized the TUC for participating in the government's national voluntary service scheme which was seen as the forerunner of military and industrial conscription.¹²⁷ By April this opposition was translated into action with the Trades Council sending delegates to a regional conference of the No Conscription League in Leeds.¹²⁸ In May it organised a joint campaign with the local Labour Party against conscription.¹²⁹ By June the Trades Council had affiliated to the Labour movement based No Conscription League; and become actively involved in the activities of the local branch.¹³⁰

The Bradford Communist Party maintained a sectarian attitude towards the anti-conscription campaigns of the local Labour movement throughout 1939, and refused to participate in them. During the Spring of 1939 while the CPGB on a national scale was against conscription, the local Communist Party participated in the anti-conscription campaign of the Peace Pledge Union.¹³¹ Following the Communist Party's change of line with regard to conscription in May, from one of opposition to one of support for this measure; the Bradford Communist Party tried to change the anti-conscription policy of the local Labour movement. In July 1939 a communist motion calling on the Trades Council to disaffiliate from the No Conscription League was lost.¹³² This sectarianism which probably served to isolate the

Bradford Communist Party even further from the local Labour movement faithfully reflected the carrying out of the national Party line of hostility to the 'Trotskyist' No Conscription League.¹³³

While the Bradford Communist Party won little support within the local Labour movement for its campaigns, its popular front activities enjoyed some limited success amongst the wider population. The highlight of the local Communist Crusade in 1938 was a meeting addressed by Pollitt and Gallacher on 7 March at the Textile Hall, which was attended by over 200 people.¹³⁴ Meanwhile the Communist Crusade of 1939 brought a much needed injection of fresh blood into the Bradford Communist Party with over 35 new recruits joining the branch.¹³⁵

Despite these very limited attainments the local Communist Party remained a long way off from achieving a local popular front comprising all the anti-government forces. The failure to win the backing of the local Labour movement was instrumental in preventing the local popular front ever coming to fruition.

Leeds Communist Party

During 1938-9 the Leeds Communist Party enjoyed rather mixed fortunes in its campaigning activity. Its membership fell from 160 to 142, but it managed to maintain a few areas of support within the local working class.¹³⁷ For example, the local Communist Party managed to keep active a workplace

branch of twenty members at the massive Montagu-Burton factory.¹³⁷ Yet, as in Bradford, the popular front campaigns were to flounder on the rock of local Labour opposition.

Following the launch of the Communist Crusade of 1938 in late January, Leeds Communist Party tried to gain support for this campaign within the local Labour movement. Its efforts were focused on building support for the local Communist Crusade activities scheduled for Sunday 6 March, at which Pollitt and Gallacher were to be the main speakers. In the afternoon of 6 March there was to be a reception at the Georgian Cafe where Pollitt and Gallacher would meet sympathisers and potential recruits; while in the evening they were the main speakers at the Communist Crusade rally in Leeds Town Hall.

John Killingbeck, chair of Leeds Communist Party, wrote to Leeds Labour Party imploring it to merge its own public meeting, also on 6 March, with the Communist Crusade rally scheduled for that day.¹³⁸ Despite the local Labour Party's rejection of a joint meeting, the Crusade rally turned out to be quite successful. Over 2,000 people turned up to hear Pollitt and Gallacher argue the case for the popular front; with 51 pounds being collected and 31 people joining the Communist Party on the night.¹³⁹

Following this successful rally the local Communist Party sent another letter to Leeds Labour Party, calling upon it to merge its Peace and Security campaign with the local Communist Crusade to form a local popular front:

Into this campaign we appeal to you to draw all working class, peace and progressive forces in the town....The convening of such a conference of all such forces in Leeds would assist in rallying the whole of the population to save peace. If these two campaigns were united now into a great People's Crusade they could assure the resignation of the National Government.¹⁴⁰

Claiming that both campaigns shared the common goal of collective security the letter concluded, 'We feel sure that there are no halls in Leeds large enough to hold all the people who would respond to such a united call for peace'.¹⁴¹ In keeping with NEC pronouncements against the popular front the local Labour Party rejected this request. The Communist Crusade of 1939 proved to be much less successful in Leeds, in sharp contrast to Bradford, with only 7 people joining the local Communist Party.¹⁴²

The failure of the Communist Party's popular front campaign to gain much support in the Leeds Labour movement owed a lot to the strong opposition put up by local Labour and trade union officials. This counter-offensive found its most potent expression in the broadsides against the Communist Party in the Leeds Weekly Citizen. The following excerpt is a typical attack on the popular front:

Whatever circumstances may determine in the future should be its tactics the Labour Party must refuse to sacrifice its independence of organization or its policy of socialism through democratic means. To do anything else would be sheer opportunism and treachery to the ideals upon which the Labour movement of this country has been built up.¹⁴³

Throughout the spring of 1938 the Leeds Weekly Citizen harped on about the damage which the Stalinist Terror in the Soviet Union was inflicting upon the socialist cause.¹⁴⁴ It also used the third Moscow show trial of twenty one old Bolsheviks, headed by Bukharin and Rykov, to great effect in attacking the Communist Party and its popular front aspirations:

The present writer has no illusions as to what would be the fate of many Left wingers here in Leeds if a Stalinist-controlled Popular Front took power here. We should be isolated by a press campaign of slander, arrested and condemned of a non-existent connection with the Fascists...The rest would be a firing squad and silence.¹⁴⁵

In the spring of 1939 the local Labour movement made the campaign against conscription its main priority. The position of the local Labour movement with regard to

conscription was spelt out in an editorial in the Leeds Weekly Citizen in late March 1939:

in view of the betrayal of Abyssinia, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Republican Spain it is almost impossible to conceive of British Labour agreeing to any measure of compulsion while the present government remains in office, for Chamberlain and his friends are just as likely to betray democracy here as they have abroad.146

In April the Trades Council came out against conscription and passed a motion which called on the Labour Party to lead a national campaign against conscription, and to consider withdrawing its representatives from the national voluntary service committees, for:

it was felt that the forces of organised Labour must be fully mobilised on this issue, particularly in view of the danger that military conscription would prove to be no more than the prelude to industrial conscription, and thus one more step in a progress towards fascism.147

On 22 April 1939 the first meeting of the West Yorkshire No Conscription League was held with the local Labour movement playing a leading role in its deliberations. At this conference attended by 220 delegates were representatives

from 39 trade union branches, five trades councils and seventeen Labour Party branches. It was agreed to set up branches of the No Conscription League in Hull, York, Leeds, Bradford, Huddersfield, and Halifax.¹⁴⁸

As in Bradford, the Leeds Communist Party failed to get involved or give its support to the local Labour movement campaign against conscription which was based around the No Conscription League.¹⁴⁹ As noted earlier this refusal to support the No Conscription League reflected the Communist Party's hostility towards the ILP and Trotskyists who allegedly led this movement. The Communist Party regarded the activities of the No Conscription League as a threat to its campaign for a popular front of 'Labour and progressive forces' designed to get British foreign policy to support a 'peace bloc' with France and the USSR.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile in May 1939 the Communist Party dropped its policy of opposition to conscription following the intervention of the Comintern, for the CPGB's opposition to conscription did not accord with the foreign policy objectives of Moscow which still sought an alliance with Britain.¹⁵¹ The failure of the Leeds Communist Party to get involved in the anti-conscription campaign which aroused such depth of feeling only served to isolate it further; and to confirm the suspicion felt by many in the Labour movement that the Communist Party was merely a mouthpiece for the Soviet government.

Geoff Hodgson, a member of the YCL in Leeds at this time, recalls that even when the national Party opposed

conscription on paper, the Leeds Communist Party did not get involved in the anti-conscription campaign of the local Labour movement for the following reason:

There was in fact a Party line which suggested that if you were against fascism, remember Spain had just come to an end, one had to set an example. You couldn't have young men appearing to avoid being conscripted, indeed the Party suggested exactly that people should distinguish themselves in what we could do against fascism.¹⁵²

For the local Communist Party, the struggle against fascism meant participating in measures to defend the nation from attack; with the campaign for better ARP facilities in Leeds becoming one of its main campaigning priorities. Such an attitude illustrates further the depth of the Communist Party's political degeneration towards the right of the political spectrum; and away from its Leninist heritage of opposition to all military measures of a capitalist government.

Throughout 1938-9 the Leeds Communist Party made the campaign for better ARP facilities their main priority.¹⁵³ In February 1938 the local Communist Party issued a pamphlet Leeds Has A Plan For Health And Happiness which had a large section on the need for local air-raid precautions to be improved.¹⁵⁴

Following the German 'Anschluss' with Austria and the renewed threat of war the Leeds branch committee commissioned H.S.M.Hall, a local Party member who was a civil servant, to write a pamphlet on the ARP question.¹⁵⁵ On Wednesday 6 July 1938 the local Communist Party sent a delegation, led by Marian Jessop, to Leeds city council presenting their ARP proposals. The deputation also presented a petition with 3,250 signatures in support of their ARP proposals.¹⁵⁶ The ARP memorandum was a very comprehensive document which ran to thirty one pages with nine appendices, and was praised by Labour councillors for its thoroughness.¹⁵⁷ Ernie Benson recalls, 'It was a striking success, capturing the headlines in the local press and featured in every national daily newspaper which stressed the estimated cost of 6 million pounds'.¹⁵⁸

The ARP committee of Leeds city council was so impressed by the local Communist Party's ARP memorandum that it decided to forward it for consideration to the ARP section of the Home Office.¹⁵⁹ However the local council failed to adopt the proposals for Leeds claiming their excessive cost.

Nine months later in April 1939, when war loomed close following Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia, the local Communist Party issued an updated version of its ARP memorandum. This expressed the fear widespread at the time, that in the event of war breaking out Britain's cities would be razed to the ground by German bombers, as happened at Guernica in Spain. According to Ernie Benson this updated

version of the ARP memorandum was issued because, 'there was a lack of any suitable plan for the evacuation of Leeds school children in the event of air raids'.¹⁶⁰

Beside the ARP issue the other major campaign of the local Communist Party was its involvement in the China Campaign Committee, which was a front for the Communist Party's intervention around the Japanese invasion of China.¹⁶¹ The local branch of this committee sought to raise money to send medical supplies to the nationalist forces fighting the Japanese and organise a boycott of Japanese goods. The local campaign achieved a major breakthrough when the Leeds Trades Council agreed to actively support the boycott campaign.¹⁶²

Rather than concentrate almost exclusively on the popular front like the national Party leadership did, the Communist Party in Leeds was involved in a variety of campaigns which a enjoyed a measure of success. However they rarely got the support of the local Labour movement which prevented these campaigns realising their full potential. While maintaining its few points of support within the local working class, the Leeds Communist Party remained isolated from the mainstream of the Labour movement.

When compared to the branch in Bradford the Leeds Communist Party certainly enjoyed more success with its campaigning activity. This was reflected in a bigger membership and a higher profile. Yet ultimately both

branches remained isolated elements on the fringes of local Labour politics.

It would be unfair to blame the local communists for their failure to emerge as a much more significant political force. On the whole it would be fair to say that international events such as the Moscow show trials, and national developments such as the vigorous opposition of the Labour Party to the popular front, meant that there was little chance of success on a local scale. Yet the West Yorkshire Communist Party compounded this situation by displaying a sectarian attitude towards the anti-conscription campaign of the local Labour movement. This refusal to participate in the No Conscription Movement, which aroused support on a scale not seen for years, lost the West Yorkshire Communist Party an opportunity to extend its influence and membership.

Confronted with Labour's political dominance of the local Labour movement, and wider working class, the Communist Party branches in the West Riding faced an uphill task in establishing themselves as a significant political force. Local communists were all too aware of the enormity of the task they had set themselves in challenging Labour's hegemony over the industrial working class of the West Riding.¹⁶³ The CPGB leadership itself acknowledged the difficult task confronting its members in Labour heartlands such as West Yorkshire:

There is no doubt about it, we are weak where there are Labour majorities and we see this in other parts of the country, where the fact that there exists Labour majorities is one of the reasons our comrades are in a rut.164

Working in such a difficult political environment where Labour was the main vehicle of political expression for most workers, it would appear that the Communist Party branches did not share the same obsessive concern with the popular front which the national leadership displayed; which took its cue from the desire of Moscow for an Anglo-Soviet pact. For example in Leeds the local Communist Party branch devoted a large part of its efforts towards the issue of ARP once the Communist Crusade of 1938 had fizzled out. Meanwhile the national leadership devoted its energies throughout 1938-39 towards bringing about a popular front movement designed to change the direction of British foreign policy. The national leadership proved much more responsive to the demands of Soviet foreign policy than the local Communist Party.

On both a national and local level the majority of new recruits during 1938-9 appear to have been young middle-class professionals; attracted by the Communist Party's emphasis on the international struggle against fascism to save democracy. This reflected the fact that the main concern of the Communist Party both nationally and locally

lay in the field of foreign affairs, leading to the neglect of the social and economic concerns of British workers.

On both a national and local level the Communist Party refused to participate in the activities of the No Conscription League which was a Labour movement campaign. This sprang from its sectarianism towards the ILP and Trotskyists who were involved in this campaign and the change in the Communist Party's policy from opposition to support for conscription. The Communist Party's failure to support this Labour movement campaign of opposition to conscription lost it an opportunity to increase its influence and support; besides this it would also have served to alienate the Party even further from many activists in the Labour movement.

The popular front campaigning of the Communist Party proved more successful on a national scale than on a local level. In industrial areas such as West Yorkshire local members found that the class collaboration policy of the popular front had little appeal to the Labour movement and the wider working class which was firmly wedded to the Labour Party as an independent political force committed to socialism.

Conclusion

The popular front campaigns of the Communist Party during 1938-9 undoubtedly raised its profile within British society. Beside this had it brought any other benefits to

the CPGB? The vote on the popular front at the Labour Party conference in May 1939 revealed that the Communist Party stood further away than ever from realising this objective.¹⁶⁵ The Communist Party's failure to bring about the desired change in British foreign policy led to it being publicly chastised by Manuilsky at the eighteenth congress of the CPSU in March 1939.¹⁶⁶ The vote on the popular front at Labour Party conference in 1939 also revealed that the Communist Party remained as isolated as ever from the mass of the British Labour movement. In a report on organisation to the Central Committee Springhall admitted, 'many of our branches have such a puny membership that they despair of being able to influence the course of local politics'.¹⁶⁷

During the period from May 1937 to June 1939, when the campaign for the popular front was at its height the CPGB grew from 12,500 members to 17,662, recording a modest growth of over five thousand.¹⁶⁸ The most rapid period of growth came in the spring of 1938 when the United Peace Alliance had developed considerable momentum and was at the height of its popularity within the Labour movement.¹⁶⁹ It should be recalled that the derailment of the United Peace Alliance in May-June 1938 dealt a body blow to the popular front from which it never recovered.

It would appear that the majority of new recruits to the Communist Party during 1938-39 were young middle-class professionals who found its concentration on foreign affairs most appealing. However, it must be added that this

statement is largely impressionistic in nature due to the lack of official figures to confirm the class background of CPGB recruits during this period. The success of the Left Book Club is an obvious example of the Communist Party's heightened influence amongst the middle class, particularly the intelligentsia.170

The Communist Party's attempt to broaden its appeal to the middle class in order to further the campaign for the popular front, and the consequent downplaying of the struggle for socialism had the effect of reducing its appeal to most workers and helped weaken its influence in most working class areas. In a report on organisation presented to the Central Committee in June 1939, Rust lamented the stagnation in Communist Party membership and its lack of influence in most working class areas:

If we look at the membership of the Party in relation to the towns it is obvious we are in a very weak position from the standpoint of really influencing the mass of the workers there and shows how acute is the problem of strengthening the Party.171

The Communist Party's campaigns against Trotskyism which led to attacks upon respected activists in the Labour movement, its defence of the last Moscow show trial in March 1938, together with its espousal of a multi-party electoral alliance designed to bring about an Anglo-Soviet pact, all

combined to undermine support for the popular front in the Labour movement.¹⁷² For they all served to confirm, 'the suspicion in left Labour circles that cynical motives [i.e.Soviet state policy] quite remote from the interests of the working class were at work in determining Communist policy'.¹⁷³

The Communist Party's sudden about-turn over its attitude to conscription from a position of opposition to one of support for this measure, was yet further confirmation of the above charge.¹⁷⁴ The Communist Party's obsession with 'Trotskyism' arising from its defence of the Terror in the Soviet Union together with the requirements of Soviet foreign policy, for an Anglo-Soviet alliance, explain its failure to get involved in the Labour movement campaign against conscription up to May 1939.¹⁷⁵ The Communist Party's sudden conversion to a policy of support for conscription in mid-May continued its policy of non-participation in the Labour movement's campaign against conscription.¹⁷⁶ In March 1939 Pollitt complained to Campbell, 'Conscription is coming up everywhere as the real red herring to draw attention away from a real political fight against Chamberlain'.¹⁷⁷ The Communist Party's failure to get involved in the anti-conscription campaign of the Labour movement during 1939 served only to strengthen its isolation from the organised working class.

In the summer of 1939 with World War Two approaching the defeats of the popular front had left the Communist Party

with a stagnant membership, 'no clear perspectives', and floundering for a campaign to, 'get its teeth into as it did on the fight and campaign for Spain'.¹⁷⁸ The Communist Party was paying a high price for a political strategy largely worked out in accordance with the requirements of Soviet state policy. Perhaps worst of all, the defeats of the popular front had created a mood of pessimism which embraced both the CPGB leadership and the membership. In one of his last reports to the Central Committee before the war Pollitt commented:

Then the defeat at Southport of the Popular Front ,...the loss of Czechoslovakia and Spain, have tended to create the impression that every thing we put our hands to and everything we mobilise the Party comrades to work in ...turns out in the long run to be defeated, that we have no victories and it has a certain political influence in the Party so that many of the comrades, myself included, get the impression that we are up against a brick wall and we have not found ways and means of getting over this wall.¹⁷⁹

NOTES

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- 6) Daily Worker, 16 February 1938; this speech is also contained in J.Degras, (ed.), Soviet Documents On Foreign Policy, volume 3, 1933-1941, (Oxford, 1953), p.274-5.
- 7) Haslam, The Soviet Union And The Struggle For Collective Security, pp.168-9.
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- 9) Idem.
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- 14) Daily Worker, 4 October 1937.

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- 17) Daily Worker, 7 October 1937, 18 November 1937.
- 18) Central Committee resolution, September 1937, in Report Of The Central Committee To The 15th Party Congress, pp.76,78, CP/CENT/CONG/04/01.
- 19) CPGB Central Committee, Resolution, 'PEACE OR WAR-POVERTY OR PLENTY', 8 January 1938, in Report Of The Central Committee To The 15th Party Congress, p.111., CP/CENT/CONG/04/01.
- 20) Ibid., p.112; see also Daily Worker, 8 January 1938.
- 21) See decisions of the 13th ECCI Plenum, Inprecorr, vol.14, no.5, (30 January 1934).
- 22) Daily Worker, 16 April 1938.
- 23) J.Shields, 'One Year Of The January Resolution', Communist Review, March 1933, p.143.
- 24) 'The Fight Of The Taximen', Communist Review, October 1933, p.392.
- 25) Discussion, June 1936, p.27.
- 26) Ibid., April 1936, pp.12-13.
- 27) Pierce and Woodhouse, A History Of Communism In Britain, p.140.
- 28) N.Fishman, The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933-45, (Scolar Press, 1995), p.155.
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- 30) J.R. Campbell report to the ECCI of Comintern, 11 April 1939, Unlisted 1995 Moscow Reel.
- 31) Report Of The Central Committee To The 16th Party Congress, October 1939, p.3 and 8, (NOT HELD), CP/CENT/CONG/04/12.

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- 37) Daily Worker, 30 March 1939.
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- 49) Daily Worker, 21 March 1938.
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- 80) Daily Worker, 9 June 1938.
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- 159) Daily Worker, 25 July 1938.
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- 166) H.Pollitt letter to J.R.Campbell, 30 March 1939, Unlisted 1995 Moscow Reel.
- 167) CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 9 October 1938.
- 168) Idem., and 24 June 1939; Report Of The Central Committee To The Sixteenth Party Congress, 7-9 October 1939, (NOT HELD), CP/CENT/CONG/04/12, p.13; J.R.Campbell report to the ECCI, 'From the 17th to the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union', 3 February 1939, Unlisted 1995 Moscow Reel. I have arrived at this membership figure by the following method. Both the Sixteenth Congress report and the Campbell report to the ECCI give a figure of 15,750 for September 1938 by the time of the CPGB's Fifteenth Congress. I have added to this the growth in membership of 1,912 given by Rust in a report on organisation at the Central Committee on 24 June 1939.
- 169) CPGB Political Bureau, Minutes, 5 May 1938.
- 170) Branson, History Of The Communist Party, pp.213-16.
- 171) Rust report on organisation, CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 24 June 1939.

- 172) The attacks on Reg Groves during the Aylesbury by-election in May 1938, are an example of this.
- 173) Pearce and Woodhouse, A History Of Communism, p.223.
- 174) The intervention of Moscow in changing the CPGB's policy towards conscription is described in detail by Kevin Morgan in, Harry Pollitt, (Manchester University Press, 1993), pp.104-5, and 'The CPGB And The Comintern Archives', Socialist History, Part 3, 1993, pp.16-18. The fierce debate which this intervention aroused can be found in the Central Committee minutes for May 1939.
- 175) The CPGB's hostility to the campaign of the Labour movement based No Conscription League is revealed in the following article, Shields, 'The No Conscription League', pp.7-9. For an account of the widespread support which the No Conscription League built within the Labour movement, see the pages of the New Leader during 1939 which closely followed its development.
- 176) Daily Worker, 15 May 1939.
- 177) Pollitt letter to Campbell, 30 March 1939, Unlisted 1995 Moscow Reel.
- 178) Pollitt report to the CPGB Central Committee, Minutes, 24 June 1939.
- 179) Idem.

Conclusion

The collapse of Stalinism in the Soviet Union has had many repercussions; not least of which has been the opening of the archives of the CPSU and the Comintern whose headquarters were based in Moscow. Since 1991 there has been a flood of articles and books in Russia and the West rewriting the history of the October Revolution and the development of Russian society since 1917. Britain too has reaped the benefits of the collapse of Stalinism in the form of the returned archives of the CPGB; which present historians with an opportunity to not only re-evaluate the history of the Communist Party but also to take a fresh perspective on other sections of the British Left.

Despite the lack of published work drawing upon the CPGB archives a new generation of historians have been using this rich source. Much of this new research, primarily the work of PhD students, seeks to question the old mythologies concerning the CPGB's development.¹ These take a fresh perspective on the Communist Party's development and question the conventional image of it as a monolithic entity bound by the iron discipline of democratic centralism. They also explore the previously under-studied area of communist activity in the regions; and highlight, to a degree, the dichotomy between the policies and activities of the national leadership and those pursued by sections of the

rank and file, which felt far less constrained by policies determined by the interests of Moscow.

This study offers a fresh perspective on the CPGB and its struggle against fascism during the 1930s. It has presented some new insights into several areas of the Communist Party's activity, which question the historical paradigm that surrounds much of its anti-fascist activity.

Central to the debate over the CPGB's development during the years 1933-35 are the following questions: were the Communist Party's policies and activities primarily a product of British political conditions or were they determined in the main by the requirements of Soviet and Comintern policy? Alongside this is the question: why did the CPGB fail to gain a leading position of influence of influence within the Labour movement?

The CPGB's response to the conflicting requirements of British political conditions and the needs of Moscow reveals how its anti-fascist strategy and activity were determined in the main by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy. This led to the Communist Party adopting policies that isolated it from the majority of activists in the British Labour movement. During 1933-34 the CPGB's membership and influence within the Labour movement was held back by its sectarian attitude to the Labour Party and its failure to intervene at an early stage in the movement against the BUF. Meanwhile during the years 1935-39 the Communist Party's popular front activities led most Labour movement activists

to conclude that it was trying to ensnare the Labour Party in a class-collaborationist alliance with non-socialist forces.

Throughout the period 1933-39 the CPGB saw the defence of the Soviet Union as its first priority. During these years Stalin sought a pact of mutual assistance with Britain to help restrain German fascism. The strategic goals of the CPGB during this period were two-fold: in the immediate term to try and force the National Government to actively pursue collective security through the League of Nations. The long-term objective was to use the united front and popular front to bring about the downfall of the 'pro-fascist' National Government whose reactionary measures were leading to the gradual 'fascisation' of British society and replace it with a government favourable to a military alliance with the USSR.² As the international situation deteriorated the Communist Party devoted less and less attention to the political and economic concerns of the British working class giving credence to the charge that the CPGB was a mere mouthpiece of the Soviet government.

The united front against fascism 1933-34

This study questions many of the conventional assumptions regarding the CPGB's emergence from the sectarianism of the 'Third Period' during the years 1933-35. Most accounts of the Communist Party during this period portray its adoption of the united front in a somewhat simplistic manner. They

assume that following the triumph of fascism in Germany the CPGB immediately adopted the united front against fascism and assumed the leadership of the movement against the BUF.³ The Communist Party's response to the victory of fascism in Germany raises several interrelated questions that have not been fully answered by studies of the years 1933-35. Did the Communist Party's political line faithfully reflect the Comintern's sectarian line? If so, what were the implications of this for its relationship with the British Labour movement? Did the Comintern line help or hinder the CPGB in developing an effective anti-fascist strategy that would end its political isolation?

During 1933, and for much of 1934, the CPGB failed to formulate an effective anti-fascist strategy and remained in its marginal position within the Labour movement. The Communist Party's marginal position was largely a product of the paralysis that gripped the Comintern, which was lacking any direction from the Kremlin, and was effectively left to its own devices during 1933 and 1934; and consequently played it safe by regurgitating the 'social fascist' line of the 'Third Period' thereby preventing it from developing an effective response to the rise of German fascism.⁴ The CPGB leadership, lacking any firm guidance from the ECCI, during 1933 was divided over its approach to the united front against fascism; and repeated the ECCI's analysis of German fascism as being a temporary phenomenon that would soon be overthrown by a revolutionary upsurge of the masses.⁵

From March 1933 to October 1934 the CPGB was crippled by the sectarianism of the 'Third Period' line. The emphasis of its activity during this period was upon the united front from below, with the 'social fascist' Labour Party being criticised for its failure to actively oppose fascism. Not surprisingly the Communist Party remained an isolated force within the Labour movement and experienced little growth in its membership.

However, while the leadership of the CPGB was preoccupied with the struggle to overthrow the National Government sections of its membership linked up with their Labour movement counterparts to physically confront the BUF on the streets of Britain. This activity was frowned upon by the King Street leadership which saw the struggle against the BUF as politically irrelevant for it believed the threat of fascism in Britain came from the National Government.⁶ Yet by mid 1934 the Communist Party leadership had changed its position in favour of leading a struggle against the BUF. The origins of this change can be seen in the interaction of several developments: mass pressure from the anti-Mosley movement which involved a large number of communists; the new thinking in the ECCI as promulgated by Dimitrov which favoured a more active opposition to fascism; and the realisation of the mobilising potential of the anti-Mosley struggle in contrast to the failed policy of the united front from below. It was largely thanks to the rank and file anti-Mosley movement that the rapid growth of the BUF was

brought to a halt in 1934. The 150,000 strong counter-demonstration to Mosley's rally on 9 September 1934 in Hyde Park was the high point of this movement.⁷

By the autumn of 1934 the ECCI, by then led by Dimitrov, had largely abandoned the sectarianism of the 'Third Period'. In France this led to the united front against fascism between the SFIO and the PCF.⁸ The CPGB leadership in tune with the new thinking sought to adopt the new non-sectarian approach in Britain. In October 1934 it gained permission from the Presidium of the ECCI to abandon the old 'Third Period' line and approach the Labour Party for the united front from above.⁹

On the 20 October the CPGB in the midst of the municipal election campaign performed a spectacular about-turn; from a position of outright hostility towards Labour as another capitalist party to one of advocating an electoral pact with Labour.¹⁰ The Communist Party stated that the objective of such an electoral pact would be to defeat the National Government and elect a Labour government favourable to a peace pact with the USSR.

The activities of communists in West Yorkshire reveals both ruptures and continuities with the national Communist Party line. They took up the struggle against the BUF despite the opposition of the CPGB leadership to such physical confrontations. In taking up the struggle against the blackshirts local communists proved to be far more receptive to the concerns of Labour movement activists than

the Communist Party leadership, which was preoccupied by the international situation. The local branches also displayed a degree of individualism when it came to the implementation of national directives, which questions the image of the CPGB as a monolithic entity bound by the iron discipline of democratic centralism. During the years 1933-39 the West Yorkshire CPGB branches often adopted only those campaigns which they felt would gain an echo in the local Labour movement. Yet on occasions local communists also acted in a manner that opposed national policy while undermining their standing in the Labour movement. In October 1934 when the national leadership directed most branches to withdraw from the municipal elections the branch in Bradford persisted in standing against Labour, while the branch in Leeds which appeared the more sectarian in its attitude towards the local Labour movement during 1933-34, withdrew its candidate standing against Labour.

On both a national and local scale despite a great deal of campaigning effort the Communist Party remained a marginal force within the Labour movement by the end of 1934, with its membership largely stagnant during this period. The CPGB leadership saw the Comintern's adoption of the popular front as an opportunity to break out of its isolation and become a major force on the British political scene.

The popular front against fascism 1935-39

The new popular front policies adopted by the Comintern at its last congress in 1935 marked a turning point in its history. As Trotsky commented at the time, 'The Seventh World Congress of the Comintern will go down in history as the liquidation congress. Even if all its participants do not today recognize the fact...'.¹¹ The new popular front policies represented a fundamental departure from Marxism for implicit within them was a rejection of the, 'programme, principles, and tactical methods established by Lenin'.¹² The adoption of the popular front represented the Comintern's departure from the goal of world revolution which had been established by Lenin in 1919 as its raison d'etre. The political degeneration of the Comintern, which by this time had become a pawn in the diplomatic manoeuvres of Stalin, was to be reflected in the policies and activities of its various sections.

As McDermott and Agnew have noted the popular front era of the Comintern, 'has for many years stimulated a rich controversy'.¹³ It has been claimed that following its adoption of the popular front the Comintern abandoned the struggle for socialism to further the Soviet Union's search for military allies amongst the governments of Western Europe.¹⁴ This view has been rejected by scholars who argue that far from representing the abandonment of socialism the popular front was a long-term tactical device which entailed

the defence of parliamentary democracy before advancing to the struggle for socialism.¹⁵

Throughout the years 1935-39 the requirements of Soviet foreign policy were to determine the anti-fascist strategy of the CPGB and its sister parties more openly than in the 1933-34 period. During the popular front era the Communist Party believed that its first duty was the defence of the Soviet Union from fascist attack and devoted a major part of its activities to changing the 'pro-fascist' direction of British foreign policy. The CPGB made adjustments to its policies that led it in a rightward direction, in the belief that it would help it to form a movement capable of replacing the National Government with a popular front government favourable to a military alliance with the Soviet Union.

The CPGB's pursuit of popular front policies during the years 1935-39 led to it moving to the right of the Labour movement. During this period the Communist Party avoided mentioning the struggle for socialism while the Labour Party, in its propaganda, claimed that the struggle for a socialist society was one of its central objectives. Up until 1935 the CPGB had put forward the slogan of Soviet Power, the last time this was formally adopted into its programme was at the Thirteenth Congress in February 1935. The new popular front strategy led to this slogan being abandoned and the struggle for socialism being replaced by the struggle to defend bourgeois democracy. The dropping of

the slogan of Soviet Power was no mere tactical device it symbolised a far-reaching adjustment in the CPGB's orientation towards an accommodation with capitalism and the abandonment of the goal of working-class revolution.

The popular front not only led the CPGB to abandon the struggle for socialism in the short term but to dispense with the last vestiges of its revolutionary heritage. It is hardly surprising that the majority of British workers saw little attraction in a party which by 1939 had a programme to the right of the Labour Party.

As McDermott and Agnew have observed the adoption of the popular front set in motion a highly contradictory period in Comintern history.¹⁶ The CPGB found itself caught in the contradictory requirements of having to pursue a policy that dovetailed with the interests of Moscow, while trying to gain affiliation to the Labour Party. The latter saw the CPGB merely as a mouthpiece for the Soviet government, not as an indigenous part of the British Labour movement.

Throughout 1935-39 the CPGB campaigned for affiliation to the Labour Party. It saw Labour as the essential cornerstone of any popular front coalition, for Labour was, after all, the largest opposition party in the House of Commons. Yet the Communist Party believed that on its own Labour was not strong enough to defeat the National Government with its huge parliamentary majority; hence the pursuit of non-socialist forces in the Liberal and Conservative parties. This attempt to force the Labour movement into a popular

front combination with the anti-appeasement wings of the Liberal and Conservative parties was to flounder due to the determined opposition of the Labour leadership, whose stance was readily supported by a clear majority of the Labour movement. The heavy defeats suffered by communist affiliation and the popular front at Labour conferences during 1936-39 illustrate the solid backing which the Labour leadership enjoyed amongst the majority of activists in the Labour movement.

The closest the CPGB came to gaining affiliation to Labour during this period was in 1936, when it received a quarter of the vote at Labour Party conference.¹⁷ At one point during the summer of 1936 the affiliation campaign appeared to have a slim chance of success. However, the campaign of opposition waged by the Labour Party successfully played upon fears that communist affiliation would lead to Labour becoming entangled in a popular front alliance with non-socialists, threatening the Labour movement's independence and socialist objectives. This theme was repeated to similar effect by the Labour Party in its opposition to the Unity Campaign in 1937 and the popular front campaigns of 1938-39.

While much of this territory has been charted by others what is less appreciated is the role of the Moscow show trials in undermining the united and popular front campaigns of the Communist Party.¹⁸ New material in the CPGB archive such as that contained in the 1995 Moscow reels show how the

Communist Party made the defence of Stalin's Terror one of its main priorities. Chapter three of this study illustrates how the CPGB's defence of the first Moscow show trial cost its affiliation bid tens of thousands of votes at Labour Party conference in October 1936. Both the AEU and MFGB delegations, mandated to support communist affiliation by their annual conferences which took place prior to the first Moscow trial in August, split at Labour Party conference when it came to the vote. Prior to Labour's conference between 850,000 and a million votes seemed committed to communist affiliation, yet in the end only 592,000 votes were cast in favour of this.¹⁹

Despite this heavy defeat CPGB propaganda maintained that the campaign for affiliation to Labour was a viable proposition. The Communist Party believed that pressure from Labour movement activists would eventually reach such a point of intensity that the Labour Party leadership would be forced to concede communist affiliation. However, this analysis was based on an incorrect appraisal of how the deteriorating international situation would affect the ranks of the Labour movement. As the international situation gradually worsened during 1937-38 the Labour movement rallied round the Labour leadership rather than press for a change in policies as the Communist Party expected. The CPGB's defence of the Stalinist Terror during 1937-38 and its espousal of class-collaboration in the form of the popular front merely served to strengthen the determination

of most Labour movement activists to stick with the policies of the Labour leadership.

Undeterred by the defeat at Labour Party conference in 1936 the CPGB sought affiliation by a more circuitous route. In 1937 this took the form of the poorly supported Unity Campaign. The Communist Party's support for the second Moscow show trial in January 1937 and other aspects of the Stalinist Terror, such as the suppression of the POUM in Spain and the execution of the Red Army general staff in June 1937, were to cost the Unity Campaign very dearly. The CPGB's defence of the Terror injected an internecine conflict into the Unity Campaign which seriously compromised it in the eyes of many workers. Leading figures in the Unity Campaign such as Harold Laski and Fenner Brockway have noted the damage inflicted on the Unity Campaign by its association with the Terror, through the CPGB's defence of the Moscow show trials. Brockway claimed that this was to cost it the support of unions such as the MFGB which had voted for communist affiliation at its annual conference in 1936.²⁰ In November 1937 Laski estimated that, 'the executions undoubtedly cost the supporters of the United Front something like half a million votes in the Bournemouth conference'.²¹

The role of Soviet foreign policy in determining the CPGB's popular front strategy became even more apparent after the defeat of the Unity Campaign. During the years 1938-39 the Communist Party's popular front activities

became increasingly controversial and alienated many Labour movement activists who had previously supported its campaign for a working-class united front. The historical debate over this period centres around the following questions. Were the CPGB's popular front campaigns a mere electoral contrivance, or were they a series of mass anti-fascist movements that achieved practical results? Did the popular front lead to the Communist Party refraining from militant anti-fascist activity and to play down the struggle against capitalism and the BUF?

The rapid deterioration in the international situation during the years 1938-39 led to frantic efforts by the Soviet government to secure a pact of mutual assistance with Britain. Equally frantic were the efforts of the CPGB to bring about an electoral combination strong enough to defeat the National Government at the next general election. Chapter five has explored the role of the CPGB in the United Peace Alliance and shown how this built up considerable momentum within the Labour movement. It also examines the Aylesbury by-election whose importance has been largely overlooked by historians of the popular front during this period. The United Peace Alliance suffered its first major defeat at Aylesbury which undermined the momentum it had developed in the Labour movement.

The Communist Party's attempts to get the Labour Party to lead a popular front coalition against the government were undermined by its class collaboration policy, which saw it

campaigning with anti-appeasement Liberals and Tories against Labour candidates. In an attempt to broaden out the appeal of the popular front the CPGB abandoned the last vestiges of its revolutionary heritage. The dropping of the hammer and sickle mast-head from the Daily Worker along with the slogan 'Workers of the World Unite' was of great symbolic importance. It signified to potential non-socialist allies of the popular front that the Communist Party had severed its ties with its radical past and had become politically respectable. Most Labour movement activists quite rightly perceived the Communist Party's popular front activity as a reversion to the discredited Lib-Lab politics of Labour's political infancy.²²

Besides the attempts at gaining affiliation to Labour and the electoral manoeuvres of 1938-39 the era of the popular front saw the CPGB refraining from militant anti-fascist activity. This is best exemplified by the Party's attitude towards the struggle against the BUF during 1935-36. One of the most pervasive myths amongst those surrounding the CPGB's 'golden era' of the 1930s is that of its leading role in the struggle against the BUF which culminated in victory over Mosley at the 'Battle of Cable Street' on 4 October 1936.²³

During 1935-36 tens of thousands of anti-fascists confronted the BUF on the streets in an effort to halt its anti-semitic activity. While this struggle was going on the CPGB leadership was preoccupied by foreign affairs such as

Italy's invasion of Abyssinia and the campaign for affiliation to Labour. Chapter three examines the charges made by Joe Jacobs, which have been largely overlooked by historians, that it was only the threat of a split in the East London Communist Party that forced the hand of the national leadership into sanctioning a campaign to prevent Mosley marching through the EastEnd on 4 October 1936.²⁴ The eleventh hour decision of the CPGB leadership to reverse its decision not to oppose Mosley, in the face of the mass resistance being organised to the BUF march by East Enders independently of the Party, saved it from a humiliating loss of face and a major split amongst its membership.

Despite the failings of the CPGB leadership the role played by thousands of rank and file communists in confronting the anti-semitic activity of the BUF deserves recognition. Their role in the struggle against the BUF, often acting independently of the Communist Party leadership, should be acknowledged. The mythology that surrounds the Communist Party's role in the struggle against the blackshirts is open to serious question. This study confirms the findings of Nigel Todd that the growth of the BUF was undermined by the activities of a mass movement from below. This movement from below, contrary to historical mythology, was not led by the CPGB but by communist activists and their Labour movement counterparts at a local level. Throughout 1933-39 the Communist Party leadership were far more concerned with the international struggle

against fascism and the need to defeat the National Government than the struggle against the BUF which was largely seen as politically irrelevant.

In West Yorkshire too, the local Communist Party played a leading role in combatting the BUF, the counter-demonstration they organised at the 'Battle of Holbeck Moor' is a fine example of this. Despite their role in the struggle against the BUF, which ran contrary to the King street view of the BUF being politically irrelevant, local communists found themselves hampered by the policies and campaigns of the national Party. When local communists sought to campaign in favour of the popular front and in defence of the Moscow show trials they found that it merely played into the hands of their political enemies within the local Labour movement who used their support for such issues to great effect in discrediting the Communist Party. While the campaigning priorities of the local Communist Party did not always correspond with those of the Party nationally it found itself increasingly isolated by the late 1930s as a consequence of the 'Black Circulars' and the class-collaboration policies of the national Party which were driven by the dictates of Soviet foreign policy.

Between 1933-39 the CPGB's political trajectory saw it move from the left to the right of the Labour movement. It had travelled from one extreme to another: from the heights of ultra-left sectarianism in 1933 when it had called for a Soviet Britain to an intensely patriotic organisation which

in September 1939 had called on workers to support the war against German fascism. While there is some truth in Morgan's observation that the CPGB was hampered by the difficulties of operating in a non-revolutionary situation this does not fully account for its inability to emerge as a leading force within the Labour movement.²⁵ The Communist Party paid a heavy political price for working within the constraints of an anti-fascist strategy which was determined primarily by the needs of the Soviet state. The struggle against fascism presented the CPGB with an opportunity to emerge as a significant force within the Labour movement, especially given the ineffective nature of the Labour Party's response to fascism. However, this opportunity was squandered by its pursuit of the interests of the Soviet government which bore little relation to the concerns of the British working class. The CPGB's support for the Moscow show trials and its espousal of class-collaboration in the form of the popular front are good examples of this.

The inflated claims made by some scholars for the CPGB's importance during this period do not stand up to close scrutiny.²⁶ Despite a small increase in membership and growth in influence amongst the middle class intelligentsia during 1933-39 the CPGB failed to mount an effective challenge to the Labour Party's hegemony over the organised working class, and it remained a marginal force within the Labour movement. Indeed the Communist Party's sectarianism towards the Labour Party during the 1930s helped to confirm

Labour's position of unrivalled dominance over the British Labour movement. The importance of the CPGB during the 'golden era' of its anti-fascist period lay in the activities of its members at a local level in the Aid-for-Spain movement and in combatting the BUF. Despite its failure to emerge as a leading force in the Labour movement by 1939 the CPGB had, by this time, acquired the reputation for being a leading light in the anti-fascist movement. This reputation owed much more to the militant anti-fascist activities of its members on a local scale than the popular front campaigns launched by the CPGB leadership that were generally perceived as being determined by the interests of the Stalinist government in Moscow.

NOTES

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- 2) Fascisation is a Comintern term used in the early 1930s for an example of this see the resolution of the Presidium of the ECCI, Inprecorr, vol.13, no.17, (14 April 1933), pp.377.
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- 5) For an example of this see the theses of the Thirteenth ECCI Plenum in December 1933, J.Degras (ed.), The Communist International, 1919-43: Documents, vol.3, 1929-43, (London, Frank Cass, 1971), pp.281-306.
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- 9) Degras, (ed.), The Communist International, vol.3, p.336.
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- 16) McDermott and Agnew, THE COMINTERN, p.131.
- 17) Labour Party Annual Conference, Report, 1936, p.211.
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Appendix One

CPGB MEMBERSHIP 1932-39

NATIONAL		WEST YORKSHIRE	
November 1932	5,600	January 1933	92
September 1933	5,500	July 1933	162
January 1934	5,000	December 1933	190
December 1934	5,800	Bradford 1934	37
February 1935	6,500	October 1937	320
April 1935	7,600	September 1938	267
August 1935	7,500	January 1939	317
January 1936	7,000	May 1939	400
April 1936	7,000		
October 1936	11,500		
May 1937	12,500		
December 1937	13,979		
September 1938	15,750		
January 1939	17,256		
May 1939	17,560		
June 1939	17,662		
July 1939	17,756		

There are various difficulties in working out CPGB membership figures that are related to the high turnover in members and the late payment of dues by the membership. These two factors partly explain the fluctuations in the CPGB's membership.

These figures illustrate one of the main organisational problems facing the CPGB which was the high turnover in members. They illustrate the fluctuations in membership which were related to the various phases of the struggle against fascism. During the 1933-34 period the CPGB's continuing adherence to the sectarianism of the Third Period clearly held it back. The increase in membership during the spring of 1935 reflected the CPGB's involvement in the mass struggle against part two of the 1934 Unemployment Act. In the eight months following the Comintern's Seventh World Congress membership actually fell despite the momentum of the campaign for affiliation to Labour. There is a close correlation between the rise in membership and the worsening of the international situation during the late 1930s. It was events on the international scene such as the Spanish Civil War and the onward march of fascism throughout Europe, that were instrumental in leading to an influx of new members whose primary concern were foreign affairs. The CPGB's concentration on foreign affairs did lead to spurts of growth which reflected further downturns in the international situation. The Communist Crusade of 1938 which coincided with the German invasion of Austria recruited over 1,500 new members.

These figures, which I have tried to corroborate where possible, have been compiled from the following sources: Central Committee Minutes 1933-39; Political Bureau Minutes 1933-40; CPGB Congress Reports 1935-39; Marty Secretariat Minutes 28 October 1936; 1995 Moscow Reel; D.A. Wilson Papers; K. Newton, The Sociology of British Communism, (London, Penguin, 1969).