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### The Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1943

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was founded in 1920-1921 under the impetus of the October Revolution and the revolutionary wave which shook Europe at the end of the first world war. Unlike the main Communist Parties of continental Europe, it was not born out of a split in a mass party claiming adherence to Marxism but from the fusion of a number of small Marxist and semi-Marxist organizations.

Like the British Socialist Party (BSP) and other Marxist groups which preceded it, the CPGB's real possibilities of growth and influence were limited by being a revolutionary party in a non-revolutionary situation. Never more than a very small section even of manual workers, who comprised a majority of the occupied population, embraced revolutionary ideas even when participating in militant industrial struggles, of which the general strike of 1926 was the most notable. The large and united trade-union movement, and the Labour Party formed at the beginning of the twentieth century to give it political representation, grew in size and strength. Enjoying the advantages of parliamentary democracy and expanding legal rights, bolstered by material benefits from the empire, the British labour movement evolved from Liberal radicalism to Fabian social reformism, acquiring elements of syndicalism in the years of labour unrest immediately prior to the first world war. Only in 1918 did the Labour Party adopt a socialist programme.

With a membership varying from about 2,500 in 1920-1921 to 18,000 in 1939, and reaching its highest point of 56,000 in 1942, the CPGB was always overshadowed by the Labour Party, which with its predominantly trade-union affiliations recorded a membership fluctuating between just under two million and over four million in the same period. In the 1920s the Labour Party replaced the Liberal Party as the alternative leading party in Britain, forming the government in 1924 and 1929-1931. In the general election of 1929 the Labour Party's vote had risen to 8,360,000 as compared with a total of 50,000 obtained by the twenty-five Communist candidates who stood. Hence the question of the CPGB's relationship to the Labour Party was a crucial and hotly debated one throughout its history. As I.N. Undasynov has pointed out, "the struggle of the CPGB for the united front in England assumed almost from the beginning a pronounced strategic character", taking specific forms different from those of other Communist Parties.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the chronic mass unemployment in Britain between the wars, rising to nearly three million in 1931-1933, the radicalization of the masses predicted by the Comintern did not take place. However the CPGB was able, through its dynamic campaigning on immediate issues, to play in some important spheres a part in British left-wing politics out of all proportion to its membership and electoral support. As Eric Hobsbawm has noted, it "developed a first-rate group of native *proletarian* leaders much earlier than many much larger parties of its kind".<sup>2</sup> They were to remain in the leadership of the CPGB from the 1920s till the 1950s and 1960s, conferring on it a greater stability than characterised the leadership of many other Communist Parties. Their Achilles' heel was their loyalty to Moscow. Their implementation of the shifting instructions of the Comintern, though on occasion preceded by some serious resistance, proved a liability which discredited the party and often cut across the efforts to build up working class and progressive unity, to which it had committed itself.

The CPGB was always a legal party. However in the twenties and early thirties many Communist activists were imprisoned under a variety of laws ancient and modern. In 1925 twelve of the party's top leaders were jailed for six to twelve months for sedition. The CPGB leadership expected that the party would be suppressed on the outbreak of war in 1939.<sup>3</sup> The possibility of such action was considered by a Cabinet Committee later, in January and February 1941, but was rejected.<sup>4</sup> However the party's paper, the *Daily Worker*, was banned under a Defence Regulation from January 1941 till August 1942, though its weekly and monthly journals

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<sup>1</sup> I.N. Undasynov, *Kommunisty i lejboristskaja Partija, 1919-1923* (Moscow, 1979), p. 238.

<sup>2</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in Labour History* (London, 1969), p. 237. Emphasis in original.

<sup>3</sup> Communist Party Archive (London), Harry Pollitt's Notes, 5 August 1959, on 1939-1941, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (London, 1985), pp. 315-319; Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War. Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-41* (Manchester and New York, 1989), pp. 236-242.

were allowed to continue.

There is a remarkably large literature on the CPGB. Along with the available primary sources indicated in the Appendix, there has since the 1960s been a growing number of secondary studies comprising several hundred titles. The most important of these for an overview of our period are mentioned in the footnotes. They include both histories of the party or of substantial periods of its life, and books, articles and academic theses dealing with particular aspects of its activity. Articles, reviews, controversial discussion and reports of conferences on CPGB history are to be found particularly in *Labour History Review* (formerly *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*) and *Socialist History Journal* (previously *Our History Journal*, published by the Communist Party History Group, now the Socialist History Society).

### 1. Formation and Possible Periodization

The formation of the CPGB took place in three stages from 1918-1921. From the end of the war in 1918 the first tentative discussions exploring co-operation took place between the representatives of the Marxist BSP and Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and the non-Marxist Independent Labour Party (ILP). From March 1919 to May 1920 more serious talks were held between the BSP, SLP, Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF) and South Wales Socialist Society with a view to their unification. The final stage from May 1920 to January 1921 saw the calling and holding of two Communist Unity Conventions bringing about the fusion of the main revolutionary parties and groups into a single Communist Party, whose affiliation to the Communist International was unanimously agreed. The first and most important of these was held in London from 31 July - 1 August 1920, embracing the BSP, the largest of the founding organizations, the Communist Unity Group, comprising a substantial minority of the SLP, and a variety of groups including socialist societies and Guild Communists. The second Convention was held in Leeds on 29 - 30 January 1921 and effected the merger with the CPGB principally of the Communist Labour Party, representing revolutionaries in the Scottish Shop-Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement, and Sylvia Pankhurst's WSF, which had renamed itself, on its own responsibility, Communist Party (British Section of the Third International). After the ILP's Easter 1921 conference had rejected affiliation to the Communist International (CI) by 521 votes to 97, one or two hundred members of the Left-Wing Group in the ILP joined the CPGB.<sup>5</sup>

The periodisation of the subsequent history of the party up to 1943 suggested below relates to the changing strategic objectives and political priorities determining its work at different stages of its history. They fall within the broad parameters of Comintern strategy in the corresponding periods:

1921-1927: Building a Leninist party oriented to militant industrial struggle and to securing a Labour government as the next stage.

1928-1933: "Class against Class"-strategy with total opposition to the Labour Party.

1933-October 1939: Struggle for United Front and People's Front against British National Government and against Fascism and War.

October 1939-June 1941: Campaign against "imperialist war" and for a "People's Peace".

July 1941-1943 (continuing till 1945): Support for national unity around the Churchill government in the war against the Axis powers.

### 2. Strategic Goals and Party Programmes

The "fundamental bases of communist unity", on which the party was formed, were agreed to be "(a) the Dictatorship of the working class; (b) the Soviet system; (c) the Third International".<sup>6</sup> The October Revolution

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<sup>5</sup> James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, Vol. 1 (London, 1968), pp. 16-69, 161-165; L.J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party. Its origin and development until 1929* (London, 1966), pp. 17-72.

<sup>6</sup> *Communist Unity Convention (London, 31 July and 1 August, 1920). Official Report* (London, 1920), p. 3.

pursue".<sup>7</sup> However, with the melting away of the militant Shop-Stewards' Movement built up in the war and the rapid disappearance of the Councils of Action created in the "Hands off Russia" movement in August 1920, a Soviet revolution was recognised not to be on the *immediate* agenda. Lenin's argument in his "*Left-Wing Communism - an Infantile Disorder*" for working for a Labour government as the next step was accepted.<sup>8</sup>

The CPGB's Election Manifesto of 1924, after the defeat of the first Labour government, declared: "The task of the moment is to return a Labour majority at the present election, in reply to the challenge of the capitalist class. But it warns the workers that a new Labour government will not bring emancipation unless they are prepared to fight for a class programme and to break the resistance of the capitalists."<sup>9</sup> However the party's programme for the next general election, in 1929, entitled *Class against Class*, represented the "New Line" approved by its tenth congress at the beginning of that year. In place of the realistic objective of a Labour government, it called for a "Revolutionary Workers' Government". Outlining an "Immediate Programme of Action" it claimed that "the struggle for reforms in the present period leads to revolution".<sup>10</sup>

Paradoxically it was in February 1935, when the CPGB was in the process of revising these unreal perspectives, that it launched its pamphlet *For Soviet Britain*. This was introduced as "a special programme for the immediate situation" in keeping with the Comintern's adoption at the end of 1933 of "Soviet Power" as the general slogan for all its sections.<sup>11</sup> Socialism could not be established in Britain through a parliamentary majority. It required a workers' revolution based on workers' councils exercising a workers' dictatorship.<sup>12</sup>

Increasingly after its adoption *For Soviet Britain* was pushed into the background by the much broader united and people's front policies for which the party was campaigning. However, a new Draft Programme issued in August 1939 for debate and adoption by the Party congress scheduled for that October<sup>13</sup> retained the party's traditional Soviet conception. It envisaged a Dictatorship of the Working Class, based on workers' councils and a "central popular assembly". This would replace Parliament, would not be directly elected by universal suffrage, but would comprise delegates chosen by local and district councils, themselves elected from workplaces.<sup>14</sup> Although such a perspective was silently dropped after 1941, it would not be until 1951 that it would be explicitly repudiated.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Relationship to the Labour Party

Two issues of major controversy faced the Communist Unity Convention of 1920. The first was that of participation in parliamentary elections, which was approved "as a valuable means of propaganda and agitation towards revolution" by 186 votes to 19,<sup>16</sup> and was in subsequent years to become generally accepted in the party. The second was the problem of the CPGB's relationship to the Labour Party. Diverging views on this at

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<sup>7</sup> *A Call for a Communist Party* (7 July 1920), quoted by Klugmann, *History of the CPGB*, Vol. 1, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 31 (Moscow and London, 1966), pp. 81-89.

<sup>9</sup> *Communist Party of Great Britain Election Manifesto* (London, 1924), p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Class against Class. The General Election Programme of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1929* (London, 1929), pp. 5, 16-32.

<sup>11</sup> *For Soviet Britain* (London, 1935), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-29.

<sup>13</sup> It was not in fact held.

<sup>14</sup> *Draft Programme to be Submitted to the 16th Party Congress* (London, 1939), pp. 38-39, 41.

<sup>15</sup> See M. Johnstone, "Early Communist Strategy for Britain: An Assessment", *Marxism Today*, September 1978, pp. 287-293.

<sup>16</sup> *Communist Unity Convention*, pp. 9-21.

that time reflected the different traditions of the two main parties (BSP and SLP) from which the new party's members had been drawn. The issue was to remain throughout the CPGB's history a recurring source of controversy and reassessment. After a full debate the Convention voted by a narrow margin of 100 votes to 85 to apply for affiliation to the Labour Party, to which the BSP had been affiliated.<sup>17</sup> Consequently on 10 August 1920 such an application was addressed to the National Executive of the Labour Party, but was rejected.<sup>18</sup> Fundamental differences with the Communist Party on issues of parliamentary democracy and revolutionary violence were stressed at the Labour Party conferences of 1921, 1922, 1923 and 1924, when Communist applications for affiliation were turned down by large majorities. At the 1924 and 1925 Labour Party conferences Communists were officially deprived by small majorities of the right, which they had hitherto enjoyed, to be individual members of the Labour Party, and in 1925 affiliated trade-unions were asked not to choose them as delegates to Labour Party conferences. In fact, at the end of 1926, there were still 1,544 Communists belonging to the Labour Party as individual members, and in 1927 Communists like Harry Pollitt were able to speak at the Labour Party conference as members of their trade-union delegations.<sup>19</sup>

Communists played an important part in the National Left-Wing Movement (NLWM), which was formed shortly after the general strike and embraced numbers of leftward moving Labour Party and ILP members and organisations. Its second annual conference in September 1927 claimed to represent 150,000 members. Most came from disaffiliated Labour Parties.<sup>20</sup> At the Communist Party's ninth congress in 1927 emphasis was put on helping the NLWM to build up a revolutionary Socialist opposition in the Labour Party to replace its "most reactionary of the middle class bureaucratic leaders" by "militant working class fighters".<sup>21</sup>

In the next two years this approach to the Labour Party was completely reversed after a period of hectic inner-party struggle following the intervention of the Comintern. In January 1928 the CPGB's Central Committee debated and approved by 16 votes to 6 a thesis entitled "Ourselves and the Labour Party", which essentially reaffirmed the party's previous position.<sup>22</sup> However, following the British Commission of the Ninth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the CI (ECCI) the next month, the line was changed by degrees and throughout 1928 and 1929 became more and more hostile to the Labour Party. The CPGB's tenth congress in January 1929 declared that "the Party must avoid creating the illusion that it is possible to reform the Labour Party and force the leaders to fight".<sup>23</sup> Against the recommendation of the Central Committee the congress decided by 55 votes to 52 that Communists should leave the NLWM, which led to its being disbanded shortly afterwards.<sup>24</sup> The eleventh congress, held at the end of 1929, pushed the "New Line" even further. The Labour Government, which had come into office six months previously, had "already begun to show clearly its Social-Fascist character, namely a policy of Fascism and violent suppression of the working class, concealed by legal, democratic and Socialist phraseology". It was "a government of armed attack on the Soviet Union". The "pseudo-Lefts" were its "main prop".<sup>25</sup> Any idea of affiliation to this "third capitalist party" was now abandoned.

In the two years after receiving instructions from the Comintern in March 1933 to approach the leaders of social-democratic parties for "joint actions against fascism

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-59.

<sup>18</sup> See the exchange of correspondence on this in Tom Bell, *The British Communist Party: A Short History* (London, 1937), pp. 63-67.

<sup>19</sup> Branson, *History of CPGB*, pp. 5, 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> See Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party*, pp. 189-192.

<sup>21</sup> *Report of Ninth Congress of CPGB*, October 1927, quoted *ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>22</sup> *Communist Policy in Great Britain* (London, 1928), pp. 132-152; *The New Line* (London, 1929), p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party*, pp. 223-229.

<sup>25</sup> *Resolutions of the 11th Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (London, 1929), pp. 9, 15.

and the capitalist offensive",<sup>26</sup> the CPGB step by step discarded its "Class against Class" antagonism to the Labour Party, which however spurned its unity proposals. In 1935 it committed itself wholeheartedly to work for the return of a Labour government.<sup>27</sup> To contribute to this it withdrew all but two of its candidates in the general election that November. Immediately after the election it applied for affiliation to the Labour Party.<sup>28</sup> This was turned down by 1,728,000 votes to 592,000 at the 1936 Labour Party conference. Subsequent attempts to forge a united front failed in face of the Labour leadership's bans and proscriptions. However until 1939 quite a number of Communists worked inside the Labour Party concealing their CPGB membership.<sup>29</sup>

Whilst the CPGB from 1935 accepted the objective of a people's front, it insisted that in Britain "our first job is to bring about unity within the Labour Movement" rather than trying "to apply to this country in a purely mechanical fashion methods that have been used in France and Spain with their totally different political conditions".<sup>30</sup> However in 1938-1939 it campaigned for a broad United Peace Alliance, which could be "a step to a People's Front, as could other forms of electoral agreement between Labour and Democratic forces", led by the labour movement, to bring down Chamberlain's National Government.<sup>31</sup>

In July 1939 the Communist Party once again applied for affiliation to the Labour Party, stressing, i.a., the advantages of eliminating competing candidatures in elections.<sup>32</sup> In November, after the CPGB had adopted an anti-war line, its Central Committee adopted a resolution indicating another change. The demand for affiliation was now to be seen as "a lever of struggle against the official leadership and policy" of the Labour Party. In elections the Communist Party could "in no case support a Labour candidate who is supporting the imperialist government and its war", but would work for anti-war candidates.<sup>33</sup>

After the Soviet Union entered the war in 1941 unity with the Labour Party was once again sought and affiliation applied for.<sup>34</sup> This was debated at the 1943 Labour Party conference. It was rejected by 1,951,000 votes to 712,000, after a debate in which its statement of November 1939 was quoted to argue that it was a "thoroughly unreliable" organization.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. Relations with the Independent Labour Party

In 1920-1921 the 37,000-strong ILP, which had decided to withdraw from the Second International, explored but subsequently rejected affiliation to the Communist International. The experience of the world economic crisis and of MacDonald's second Labour government (1929-1931) pushed the ILP to the left, leading it, at its July 1932 conference, to disaffiliate from the Labour Party. Interest was now expressed by ILP leaders in developing

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<sup>26</sup> *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 15, No. 4, April 1933, pp. 267-269.

<sup>27</sup> See Branson, *History of CPGB*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>28</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 150-155.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>30</sup> Harry Pollitt in *It Can Be Done. Report of the Fourteenth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (London, 1937), p. 50.

<sup>31</sup> Resolution of the Fifteenth Congress of the CPGB, in *For Peace and Plenty* (London, 1938), pp. 144-145.

<sup>32</sup> *Report of the Central Committee to the 16th Party Congress* (London, 1939), pp. 69-72.

<sup>33</sup> *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 21, No. 12, December 1939, pp. 759-760.

<sup>34</sup> See exchange of correspondence on affiliation application between H. Pollitt, for CPGB, and J.S. Middleton, for Labour Party, in *The Communist Party and the Labour Party and Letters on Affiliation* (both London, 1943).

<sup>35</sup> *Labour Party Annual Conference Report - 1943* (London), pp. 159-168.

unity with the CPGB, but was rebutted by the latter as "nauseating" and "unprincipled". The ILP, said Communist General Secretary Harry Pollitt, "as the Left Wing of reformism" was "the most dangerous enemy within the ranks of the working class movement".<sup>36</sup> This approach was however rapidly reversed with the Comintern's unity proposal of 5 March 1933. To the CPGB's appeal to British labour movement organizations for co-operation five days later only the ILP gave a favourable response.

Negotiations between Communist and ILP leaders quickly led to the two parties working together in anti-fascist campaigns, the anti-war movement, Hunger Marches and many other spheres.<sup>37</sup> Correspondence was exchanged between the ILP and the CI, which suggested that it consider joining it "as a party sympathizing with communism".<sup>38</sup> This was however rejected by a two to one majority at the ILP's 1934 conference. The CPGB called for a united Communist Party based on the programme of the CI. Its proposal to the 1935 ILP conference to bring this about was not taken up. In October of that year the leaders of the Revolutionary Policy Group of the ILP, which had supported the Communist proposal, resigned and joined the CPGB together with the members of three London branches. The CPGB, whose membership had by this time grown to 7,700 from 5,600 in 1932, was now larger than the ILP, which had declined from 16,773 to 4,392 in the same period.<sup>39</sup> Its growth and the ILP's decline would continue in the following years.

Differences over such issues as collective security, the Moscow Trials and repressive measures against the POUM in Spain made co-operation difficult between the CPGB and the ILP. In its "revolutionary" perspectives the previously reformist ILP was now placing itself to the left of the CPGB. One final effort was however made with the Unity Campaign of the CPGB, the ILP and the Socialist League launched in Manchester in January 1937. In the following months many public meetings of the Campaign were held, but it was brought to an end by Labour Party threats of expulsion against the Socialist League, which was affiliated to it, and against Labour Party members campaigning with the CPGB and the ILP. Henceforth, in the face of growing differences and suspicions, co-operation between CPGB and ILP members was limited to a few specific issues such as unemployment. It was replaced by extreme hostility after June 1941 when the ILP persisted in its opposition to the war.

##### 5. The CPGB and the Trade-Unions

The CPGB's main strength for the greater part of its history lay in the industrial field. Many of its most important leaders had their roots in the trade-union movement. Due to the energy displayed by Communists in defence of pay and working conditions in their industries and workshops, Communists were able to obtain the votes in trade-union and shop-stewards' elections of workers who would deny their political support to Communists - sometimes the same individuals - standing in parliamentary elections.

Following the foundation of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), or Profintern, in Moscow in 1921, a British Bureau of the RILU was set up in London and financed by Soviet money.<sup>40</sup> Its first objective was to campaign for the British Trades-Union Congress (TUC) and national unions to leave the International Federation of Trade-Unions (Amsterdam International) and affiliate to the RILU. The British Bureau advanced a programme of militant demands for which it sought to win support, particularly through its monthly paper, *All Power*.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> H. Pollitt, "The Bradford ILP Conference and After", *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 14, No. 8, August 1932, pp. 486-487.

<sup>37</sup> Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left* (London, 1942), pp. 248-249.

<sup>38</sup> The communications between the CI and the ILP from May to September 1933 are published in *Lenin on the ILP* (London, 1933), pp. 9-26.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London, 1958), pp. 77, 192.

<sup>40</sup> J.T. Murphy, *New Horizons* (London, 1942), pp. 157-161.

<sup>41</sup> H. Pollitt, "A Brief History of the Minority Movement" (1927), in id., *Selected Articles and Speeches*, Vol. 1 (London, 1953), pp. 37-43.

This work was carried further with the establishment in 1924 of the largely Communist-led National Minority Movement (NMM) following discussions the previous year in Moscow between the leadership of the CPGB and the Comintern.<sup>42</sup> A national conference was organised by the British Bureau of the RILU in August 1924 with 270 delegates representing 200,000 workers. The NMM which it established embraced individual minority movements in specific industries.<sup>43</sup> It worked for factory committees; one union for each industry; stronger factory-based trades councils; and a TUC General Council directing "a united attack in order to secure, not only our immediate demands, but to win complete workers' control of industry".<sup>44</sup> Its inaugural conference pledged "to maintain the closest relations with the RILU",<sup>45</sup> of which it was to be recognised as the British section.

For the next two years support built up. Its 1925 conference represented 750,000 workers; a special conference in March 1926, just before the general strike, 957,000; and its 1927 conference, three months after the strike, 956,000.<sup>46</sup>

The Communist Party and the Minority Movement were active from the summer of 1925 in seeking to prepare the labour movement for the struggle looming ahead. In the general strike itself their members played a significant role in a number of areas in setting up and leading Councils of Action.<sup>47</sup> They sought to keep the struggle going after the strike was called off after nine days by the General Council of the TUC, whose action they attacked. For the next six months they campaigned in support of the miners, who were locked out till November 1926. The NMM's third annual conference in August 1926 criticized "the bankruptcy of the General Council" of the TUC "and especially of the so-called left-wing leaders" and launched the slogan "Change your Leaders".<sup>48</sup>

If the first period of the NMM's existence (1924-1926) was one of expansion, the second (from 1927 till its effective demise in 1933) was one of decline for a combination of objective and subjective reasons. The calling off of the general strike and the defeat of the miners led to a feeling of demoralisation in the labour movement. The TUC leaders launched an attack on the NMM in 1927 withdrawing recognition from trades councils affiliated to it. In some unions Communists were banned from holding office or being elected as delegates to TUC conferences. The NMM was accused of disruption. Particular objection was taken to its being financed by the RILU and to its being organised into Communist-controlled fractions operating within the trade-unions.

On top of TUC attacks and the effects of rising unemployment on industrial organisation, the CPGB and the NMM suffered increasing isolation from 1928-1929 as a result of the sectarian "New Line". A resolution of the CPGB's eleventh congress (November-December 1929) declared that "the ever-growing fascisation of the trade-union apparatus will necessitate the formation of new unions". This was counterbalanced by a statement that "the necessity for the independent leadership of all struggles [...] in no way signifies a weakening of our work in the unions; nor does it mean calling on the workers to leave the unions".<sup>49</sup> In fact only two separate "red unions" were formed: the United Mineworkers of Scotland (UMS), provoked by a right-wing breakaway recognised by the Scottish Executive of the Miners' Federation, and the United Clothing Workers' Union

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<sup>42</sup> Bell, *British Communist Party*, p. 85; Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party*, pp. 115-117.

<sup>43</sup> Roderick Martin, *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-1933: A Study of the National Minority Movement* (Oxford, 1969), p. 36.

<sup>44</sup> Harry Pollitt, quoted by Allen Hutt, *British Trade Unionism: A Short History* (London, 1941), p. 99.

<sup>45</sup> *Report of National Minority Conference, 1924*, quoted by Martin, *Communism and British Trade Unions*, p. 37.

<sup>46</sup> Macfarlane, *British Communist Party*, p. 323.

<sup>47</sup> See Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, Vol. 2 (London, 1969), esp. pp. 147-153.

<sup>48</sup> *Report of Third Annual Conference of National Minority Movement* (London, 1926), p. 57.

<sup>49</sup> *Resolutions of 11th Congress*, pp. 22-23.

(UCWU), which was London-based.<sup>50</sup> Pressure came from the RILU leadership in Moscow to set up a new Seamen's Union by 1 January 1932. This was successfully sidestepped by Harry Pollitt, who opposed such breakaways, at the Eighth Session of the RILU Central Council in November 1931, where he criticised "a tendency for liquidation of work in the reformist trade-unions".<sup>51</sup>

The next month Pollitt reached agreement with the Comintern leadership on a resolution highlighting the need for "systematic revolutionary mass work in the reformist trade-unions". This was adopted the next month by the CPGB Central Committee and came to be known as the "January Resolution". It set the task of fighting for the "transformation of the trade-union branches from organs of class collaboration into organs of class struggle".<sup>52</sup>

In the public discussion prior to the party's twelfth congress in November 1932, R. Palme Dutt disputed Pollitt's claim that "the Communist Party is for powerful trade-unionism", counterposing to this the old conception of "a powerful united revolutionary trade-union opposition".<sup>53</sup> The congress supported Pollitt's approach and marked a turn towards the trade-unions, in which the previous line had contributed to the virtual erosion of all the party's earlier influence.

The Minority Movement was now allowed to fade away section by section, whilst attention was given to building up rank and file movements among London busmen, engineers and others within their trade-unions.<sup>54</sup> In South Wales, Arthur Horner, who in 1931 had been nearly driven out of the CPGB for "trade-union legalism", was from 1933 editing a miners' rank and file paper and building up support in the South Wales Miners' Federation, laying the basis for his election as its President in 1936. A growing number of Communists were now being elected to trade-union executive committees and paid official union positions despite the TUC's "Black Circulars" of 1934 prohibiting the nomination of "members of disruptive bodies" to official positions. Meanwhile Communists were active in building up workshop organisation, recruiting women and young people to the unions and leading strikes.<sup>55</sup>

After the outbreak of war in 1939 the CPGB worked with considerable success to extend shop-stewards' organisation in the factories and to link it up nationally. Kevin Morgan has demonstrated that, despite the party's condemnation of the war as imperialist from October 1939 to June 1941, its main industrial work was around wages, working conditions and trade-union and democratic rights, without generally relating these issues to the question of ending the war.<sup>56</sup> They were to build on the positions gained in this period and secure an impressive strengthening of their influence in the unions on the basis of their full support for the "People's War" after Russia's entry in June 1941.

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<sup>50</sup> Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party*, pp. 255-260, 265-274. The UCWU was dissolved in 1935 and the UMS in January 1936.

<sup>51</sup> *RILU Magazine*, Vol. 2, Nos. 1 & 2, 1 February 1932, pp. 69-70.

<sup>52</sup> *Immediate Tasks before the Party and the Working Class* (London, 1932).

<sup>53</sup> *Daily Worker*, 20 August and 19 September 1932.

<sup>54</sup> Martin, *Communism and British Trade Unions*, pp. 168-178, 188-191; Branson, *History of CPGB*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-98, 172-187.

<sup>56</sup> Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, esp. pp. 128-146.

## 6. The National Unemployed Workers' Movement

From its earliest days the CPGB recognized the importance of organizing resistance to the scourge of unemployment, which from 1921 to 1939 fluctuated between one and three million. In 1921, on Communist initiative, was formed the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM), the only national organization of the unemployed, which right up to the second world war campaigned tirelessly and imaginatively to improve the lot of Britain's jobless. Though its main leaders, like Wal Hannington, were Communists, it saw itself as a united front organization drawing in many from other sections of the labour movement. Most striking among its public activities were the six national Hunger Marches of 1922-1923, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1934 and 1936.

With unemployment reaching nearly three million in 1931-1933, the NUWM's membership built up to a high point in 1933 when it claimed 100,000 members in 349 branches.<sup>57</sup> In 1931 MacDonald's National Government cut scales of benefit by 10% and introduced an inquisitorial Means Test to restrict entitlement. The NUWM launched a vigorous protest against this. In a number of industrial cities, particularly in 1931-1932, pitched battles took place between the police and demonstrators. In 1934 and 1935 further militant action was followed by government concessions on benefit scales and regulations.

In 1927 the TUC General Council terminated the co-operation which it had practised since 1923 with the NUWM. At the beginning of the 1930s, it recommended that trades councils should set up separate Local Unemployed Associations.<sup>58</sup> These were initially opposed by the CPGB, but after the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935 there was a reappraisal. The objective now became "the closest unity of action between the Local Unemployed Associations and the NUWM", leading towards one united unemployed organisation ultimately affiliated to the Trades-Union Congress.<sup>59</sup>

### *The CPGB and the British Empire*

Operating in the metropolitan centre of the world's largest empire, the CPGB from its early days recognised that it had a special responsibility for championing liberation struggles of colonial peoples. The Colonial Resolution passed at its sixth congress in 1924 called for linking workers' struggles in Britain with the "struggle for autonomy and separation" of "those nations held in subjection by Great Britain".<sup>60</sup>

In the mid-twenties the party set up a Colonial Committee and a Colonial Department. Contacts were made with Communist Parties and circles in countries in the orbit of British imperialism. In 1925-1927, as part of a world-wide campaign launched by the Comintern, energies were directed with some success to the development of a "Hands off China" movement. Special attention was naturally also given to India, assisted by the Indian origins and expertise of CPGB theoreticians R.P. and Clemens Dutt and of Shapurji Saklatvala, Communist M.P. for Battersea (London).

Of particular significance was the practical work of British Communists like Ben Bradley and Philip Spratt, who in the 1920s were sent to India to help build up the trade-union movement and the Communist Party there. In 1929 Bradley and Spratt were arrested with 28 Indians and a left-wing British journalist and tried for conspiracy at the Meerut Trial lasting from 1929 till 1933.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Croucher, *We Refuse to Starve in Silence: A History of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, 1920-46* (London, 1987), p. 148. This figure is disputed by a researcher who has recently calculated that the NUWM never had more than 25,000 members at any one time: Sam Davis, "The Membership of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, 1923-1938", *Labour History Review*, Vol. 57, Part 1, 1992, pp. 29-36.

<sup>58</sup> Allen Hutt, *British Trade Unionism*, p. 126.

<sup>59</sup> *Report of the Central Committee to the 15th Party Congress* (London, 1938), pp. 36-37.

<sup>60</sup> *Speeches and Documents of the Sixth (Manchester) Conference of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (London, 1924), pp. 42-43.

<sup>61</sup> See special note by John Saville, "The Meerut Trial, 1929-1933", in Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (eds.), *The Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. 7 (London, 1984), pp. 84-91.

From 1927 to 1937 active campaigns in support of national liberation struggles were carried out by the especially active British section of the League against Imperialism, set up on the initiative of Willi Münzenberg and the Comintern.<sup>62</sup>

The CPGB's conviction from 1925 that industrial growth had been taking place in India brought it into conflict with the Comintern leadership at the Sixth Congress of the CI in 1928. Whilst accepting the Congress's turn away from tactical alliances with the colonial bourgeoisie, speakers for the British delegation made a closely reasoned case against its analysis of Indian socio-economic trends.<sup>63</sup>

Up to 1937 CPGB congresses continued to place the struggle for the complete independence of the colonies in the forefront of the party's tasks. At its fourteenth congress in May 1937 Pollitt spoke of the necessity of "giving full support to all the demands of the colonial peoples and their national movements for liberation and independence".<sup>64</sup> However at its fifteenth congress the following year these demands were almost entirely absent. This may well be related to the view expressed by Dimitrov to Arthur Horner towards the end of 1937, and reported by him to the party's Central Committee, that "he would have no hesitation in presenting demands as the defender of the territorial integrity of the British Empire" in face of the fascist threat.<sup>65</sup> A statement of the CPGB's Central Committee, drafted by R.P. Dutt,<sup>66</sup> was published in August 1939 warning of "the new danger" that the colonial peoples' "struggle for independence is liable to be unscrupulously used by fascism to serve its own predatory ends".<sup>67</sup> Whilst the statement expressed support for the Indian National Congress demand for complete independence, the immediate demand "in the majority of colonial countries" was seen more modestly as "the conquest of elementary democratic rights" such as adult suffrage and representative institutions.<sup>68</sup> This position was quickly abandoned by the party in its "imperialist war" period (October 1939-June 1941) but reverted to in its subsequent "people's war" phase.

#### 8. Aid for Spain

The CPGB's work in support of Republican Spain represents the high point of its activity in the 1930s. It was the main initiator and dynamic driving force of the many-sided "Aid for Spain" movement of 1936-1939. It worked consistently to involve the widest numbers of both workers, intellectuals and middle class people, including even some Conservatives, in demanding arms for Spain's anti-fascist struggle and in organising medical aid collections and supplies for the victims of the war. It campaigned against the policy of "non-intervention" initially accepted by the Labour Party and the TUC and sought to spur the labour movement into the active implementation of their subsequent resolutions of solidarity with Republican Spain.

In response to the call of the CI, the CPGB organised the recruitment of volunteers for the International Brigades. Of the 2,000-odd, mainly industrial workers, who fought in the British Battalion, probably upwards of 400 were members of the CPGB. They included all the Political Commissars at battalion level and mostly at company level, but this was not the case with the military leadership.<sup>69</sup> Of the 526 British Brigaders who

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<sup>62</sup> See special note by John Saville, "The League Against Imperialism", *ibid.*, pp. 40-50.

<sup>63</sup> *Sixth World Congress of the Communist International, July-August 1928 (Inprecorr. Report)*, pp. 1198-1199, 1320-1324, 1365-1367, 1420-1426, 1471-1473.

<sup>64</sup> Pollitt, Concluding speech, *It Can be Done*, p. 200.

<sup>65</sup> Communist Party Archive (London), Stenogram of CPGB Central Committee meeting of 24 September 1939. Horner's speech, 4/1.

<sup>66</sup> Dutt Papers, British Library (CUP) K4, 8 May 1939.

<sup>67</sup> "Colonies and Fascism", *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 21, No. 8, August 1939, p. 466. Emphasis in original.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 471-474.

<sup>69</sup> Branson, *History of CPGB*, pp. 229-235; Bill Alexander, *British Volunteers for Liberty, Spain 1936-1939* (London, 1982), p. 38.

died in Spain over 200 were members of the Communist Party and the Young Communist League.<sup>70</sup> Those killed included several of the party's most important younger intellectuals like Ralph Fox, Christopher St. John Sprigg (Christopher Caudwell) and John Cornford.

### 9. The Moscow Trials

The CPGB had no hesitation, sometimes in extremely immoderate and "un-English" language,<sup>71</sup> in publicly defending the four great Moscow Trials of 1936-1938, as it had done earlier Soviet political trials. Its overriding faith in, and loyalty to, the Soviet Union led it to see this as a high priority even though it cut across the party's efforts in this period to develop unity above all with the Labour Party. Professor Harold Laski, who favoured such a United Front, commented that the Soviet executions had cost its supporters something like half a million votes at the Labour Party's 1937 conference. Labour's rank and file felt that those who accepted the trials without discussion were "not satisfactory allies".<sup>72</sup>

Harry Pollitt was second to none in his defence of the trials. However when Rose Cohen, a British Communist to whom he was very attached, was imprisoned in the USSR with her Soviet husband,<sup>73</sup> he protested so vigorously that "soundings" were made by the Comintern among British Communist leaders to find support for his replacement as General Secretary.<sup>74</sup> However, although he never accepted her guilt,<sup>75</sup> Pollitt dropped the matter when his protests proved unsuccessful and never spoke of it outside an extremely narrow circle of leading Communists.

In subsequent years the CPGB frequently referred to the Moscow Trials as proof that the Trotskyists had become "a special detachment of fascism".<sup>76</sup>

### 10. Attitude to War

The struggle against imperialist war was from its foundation high on the CPGB's agenda. At the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, in accordance with the current line of the Comintern, a major threat of armed intervention against the Soviet Union was held to emanate from Britain and France. After Hitler's seizure of power in Germany in 1933 the main danger was recognised to come from the fascist powers, and the party gave its full support to Soviet proposals for collective security. In September 1938 it denounced the Munich agreement, and threw itself into campaigning for a British-French-USSR mutual assistance pact to block further Axis aggression. In March 1939 it urged the replacement of Chamberlain's government of appeasement by one led by Labour leader Attlee, Liberal leader Sinclair and anti-appeasement Conservative Winston Churchill to stand up to Hitler.<sup>77</sup>

The day after Hitler invaded Poland, on 2 September 1939, the CPGB Central Committee published a

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<sup>70</sup> Alexander, *British Volunteers*, p. 261; William Rust, *Britons in Spain* (London, 1939), pp. 189-199.

<sup>71</sup> See, e.g., the headline in the *Daily Worker*, 24 August 1936, prior to the conclusion of the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial: "Shoot the Reptiles!"

<sup>72</sup> H.J. Laski, in *New York Nation*, 20 November 1937, quoted by Brian Pearce, "The British Stalinists and the Moscow Trials", in Michael Woodhouse and Brian Pearce, *Essays in the History of Communism in Britain* (London, 1975), p. 235.

<sup>73</sup> She had married D. Petrovsky ("A.J. Bennet"), who had been the Comintern representative in Britain.

<sup>74</sup> See Branson, *History of CPGB*, quoting R.P. Dutt in *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 May 1966.

<sup>75</sup> See John Mahon, *Harry Pollitt: A Biography* (London, 1976), p. 457.

<sup>76</sup> See, e.g., John Mahon, *Hitler's Agents Exposed* (London, 1943), p. 12. Emphasis in original.

<sup>77</sup> *Daily Worker*, 30 March 1939.

manifesto supporting military struggle by Britain against Nazi Germany in support of Poland alongside a political struggle against the Chamberlain government at home. The German-Soviet non-aggression pact of 23 August, which the Central Committee had defended, had not been seen as in any way contradicting the need to "resist fascism whether it comes from abroad or at home".<sup>78</sup>

This "struggle on two fronts" line, which had had the unanimous support of the Central Committee, was challenged for the first time in the Political Bureau on 15 September by R.P. Dutt, the day after the arrival from Moscow of a press telegram describing the war as "imperialist" and "predatory" on all sides. This was followed by the arrival from Moscow on 24 September of D.F. Springhall, CPGB representative in the Comintern, and then, a few days later, by a directive from the Comintern Secretariat insisting on opposition to the war. Stormy debates took place in the Central Committee on 24-25 September and on 2-3 October, which ended with the adoption of the Comintern line. Three of the party's four members and candidate members of the ECCI - Pollitt, Campbell and Gallacher (the other member being R.P. Dutt) - spoke and voted against the new anti-war line (although Gallacher's vote was subsequently, for tactical reasons, recorded as being in favour). They argued above all that the crucial distinction between fascism and bourgeois democracy, on which the international Communist movement had insisted since 1935, retained its validity and made the war of 1939 crucially different from that of 1914.<sup>79</sup>

Well attended internal party meetings were now held at which Central Committee members reported on and won overwhelming support for the new anti-war line, which was set out in a new party manifesto published on 7 October.<sup>80</sup>

The anti-war line was to continue with various tactical shifts until the German attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941.<sup>81</sup> The CPGB leadership then agreed to support the war but differed on the attitude to adopt towards the Churchill government. This was soon resolved by the intervention of the Comintern in support of the minority in the Political Bureau headed by Pollitt, who was for the broadest national unity around the Churchill government.<sup>82</sup> For the next four years this would be the position of the CPGB under the leadership of Harry Pollitt, who now returned to the position of General Secretary, which he had had to give up in 1939.

## 12. Political Relationship with the Comintern's Central Bodies

From its foundation up till the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, the CPGB sought to apply, and where necessary to bend, the line of the CI in accordance with its first hand knowledge of the situation in Britain and the British Empire. However disagreements sometimes manifested themselves. Thus in August 1926 there was a clash in the ECCI Presidium between Stalin and J.T. Murphy, who conveyed a protest from the CPGB against the sharpness of a Soviet Trade-Union Central Council attack on the General Council of the British TUC.<sup>83</sup>

More serious was the CPGB's opposition to the ECCI's theses on the colonies at the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928, which the great majority of the British delegates voted against. On behalf of the British delegation, Andrew Rothstein protested to the congress against the distortion of the British position and "all the

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<sup>78</sup> "War! Communist Party Policy: Manifesto", in Harry Pollitt, *How to Win the War* (London, 1939), pp. 25-31; *Daily Worker*, 23 August 1939.

<sup>79</sup> The verbatim record of these debates, obtained from the Comintern Archives, appears in Francis King and George Matthews (eds.), *About Turn. The British Communist Party and the Second World War* (London, 1990).

<sup>80</sup> "Peace or War?", reprinted in John Attfield and Stephen Williams (eds.), *1939: The Communist Party of Great Britain and the War* (London, 1984), pp. 169-174.

<sup>81</sup> For an examination of these see Attfield and Williams, *1939*, pp. 28-40, 89-91, 98-99, 128-129, and Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, pp. 105-242.

<sup>82</sup> Communist Party Archive, Pollitt's Notes, pp. 17-18.

<sup>83</sup> Murphy, *New Horizons*, pp. 226-229; J. Stalin, *Works* (Moscow and London, 1954), Vol. 8, pp. 205-214.

accusations, which unfortunately are becoming almost a sort of mechanical reaction against those who dare to criticise a thesis put forward in the name of the ECCI".<sup>84</sup> The isolated stand of the CPGB at this congress when Stalinist unanimity was becoming the norm singled it out from the other parties.

The illusions of Stalin and Bukharin from the end of 1927 about revolutionary prospects for the British labour movement placed the majority of the CPGB's Central Committee at loggerheads with the central bodies of the CI. Eventually in political battles through 1928 and 1929 the Comintern succeeded in securing the acceptance of its "third period" line of implacable hostility to the "Social Fascist" Labour Party by a greatly diminished CPGB.

At the end of 1931, without questioning the Comintern's overall "Class against Class" strategy, Pollitt managed to secure the agreement of the Comintern leadership, by now rethinking its trade-union tactics, for the more serious concentration on work in the reformist trade-unions set out in the January (1932) Resolution, referred to earlier. However it required the initiative of the ECCI from March 1933 to bring the CPGB to break out of the sectarian isolation in which the "New Line" had placed it. For the next six years the party was to build on and extend the new approach confirmed at the Comintern's Seventh World Congress in 1935. It took many initiatives of its own and was able through Pollitt, a full member of the ECCI Presidium, to make a significant contribution to Comintern political debates.<sup>85</sup>

In September 1939 the Comintern Secretariat intervened directly to adopt a position of all-round opposition to the war. Its directive of 9 September stated that "the Communist Parties of France, Britain, Belgium and the USA, which have taken up positions at variance with this standpoint, must immediately correct their political line."<sup>86</sup> We have already seen that this was achieved only after a bitter struggle in the CPGB's Central Committee.

The last occasion on which the Comintern intervened to change the CPGB's line was immediately following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, as indicated above. Two years later the party's Central Committee gave its support to the dissolution of the Comintern. It stressed that it removed one of the principal arguments used by the Labour Party leadership against its renewed application for affiliation, for which it was campaigning at the time.

### 13. Organisational Relations with the Comintern

The October Revolution created great sympathy for Bolshevism and the desire for unity among the revolutionary groups which were to form the Communist Party. However the Comintern's representatives in Britain played a crucial part in helping them to overcome their political differences and sectarian squabbles sufficiently to fuse. Outstanding among them in 1919-1920 was Theodore Rothstein, who was able to back well-informed advice with financial assistance.<sup>87</sup>

The CPGB's 1922 Commission of Party Organization, discussed below, was able to benefit from the advice of Mikhail Borodin, who lived in Britain illegally whilst it was sitting.<sup>88</sup> The departments and bureaux

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<sup>84</sup> *Sixth World Congress Report*, pp. 1472, 1529.

<sup>85</sup> See, e.g., A.I. Sobolev, *et al.*, (eds.), *Outline History of the Communist International* (Moscow, 1971), pp. 416, 422-423.

<sup>86</sup> Russian Centre for the Storing and Study of Documents of Contemporary History (Moscow), Comintern Archive (hereafter, Russian Centre), 495/18/1292, pp. 47-48.

<sup>87</sup> Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party*, pp. 20-23. The role played by Rothstein and the Comintern is extensively discussed and its effect deplored in Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21. The Origins of British Communism* (London, 1969), esp. pp. 233-302, and Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (London, 1977), esp. pp. 220-226, 241-242, 244-245. A critical review and reply by Andrew Rothstein, Theodore's son, to Kendall appears in *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 51, No. 12, December 1969, pp. 563-568.

<sup>88</sup> Murphy, *New Horizons*, pp. 183-184; Robert Stewart, *Breaking the Fetters* (London, 1967), pp. 121-124.

of the CPGB resulting from the reorganization received advice and instructions from corresponding Comintern departments in Moscow.<sup>89</sup> The CPGB took a certain responsibility for work in India and other countries in the British Empire with which it was linked in one of the eleven "Ländersekretariate" set up in March 1926.<sup>90</sup> Subsequently the British party came under the supervision of the Anglo-American Secretariat, and later, from 1936, of the Marty Secretariat.<sup>91</sup>

From 1920 Britain was represented at the Comintern's congresses, and one or more CPGB leaders were elected to the ECCI. Fraternal delegates from the Comintern participated in CPGB congresses and, on occasion, expressed their views on the composition of the Central Committee to be elected.<sup>92</sup> In August 1929 was effected "the reconstituting of the P.B. and Secretariat [...] in accordance with the proposal of the C.I."<sup>93</sup> This resulted in the appointment of Harry Pollitt as General Secretary.

There was always a permanent CPGB representative at Comintern headquarters, as well as other British Communists working at different times in its particular departments. CPGB representatives attended meetings of the Comintern's West European Bureau in Berlin in the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>94</sup> Up till the early 1930s the Comintern had representatives and "instructors" working in Britain with the CPGB. Selected Communist Party and Young Communist League cadres were sent to the Comintern's Lenin School in Moscow from 1925 when it first opened.

In 1922 a Comintern allocation of £ 18,500 was made to the CPGB, constituting the major part of its total income of £ 27,883. 12s. 7d. An additional allocation of £ 1,086. 10s. was made for Borodin's visit including his legal defence after he was discovered and arrested.<sup>95</sup> In 1924 the Comintern's subsidy to the CPGB was £ 5,000, which was raised to £ 16,000 for 1925, of which £ 4,000 went to assist the *Sunday Worker*.<sup>96</sup> In October 1929 it was decided to subsidize the *Daily Worker*, which the British party was to start on 1 January 1931, "for the first couple of years".<sup>97</sup> The Comintern's public accounts show a sharp rise in subsidies for Party papers and publishing from \$ 435,897 in 1929 to \$ 641,230 in 1930, \$ 756,900 in 1931, \$ 601,000 in 1932, \$ 560,500 in 1933, and \$ 605,900 in 1934.<sup>98</sup> It may reasonably be inferred that the newly launched *Daily Worker* was one of the beneficiaries.

#### 14. Opposition Groups

Apart from the first three years of its existence, when there were disputes on party organization between members coming from different organizations and traditions, the CPGB was notable for the almost total absence

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<sup>89</sup> See *Communist Papers. Documents Selected from those obtained on the Arrest of the Communist Leaders on 14 and 21 October 1925* (London, 1926).

<sup>90</sup> E.H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country 1924-1926*, Vol. 3, Part 2 (London, 1964), p. 909.

<sup>91</sup> Russian Centre, 495/14.

<sup>92</sup> See, e.g., Extracts from meetings of leading Comintern bodies relating to Britain, Political Commission of ECCI Political Secretariat, 23 November 1929, Russian Centre, 495/14/190.

<sup>93</sup> *Resolutions of 11th Congress*, p. 14.

<sup>94</sup> See May Hill, *Red Roses for Isabel* (London, 1982), p. 47.

<sup>95</sup> Russian Centre, 495/100/63.

<sup>96</sup> *Communist Papers*, pp. 57, 62.

<sup>97</sup> Russian Centre, 495/14/179: Extracts, Political Commission to ECCI Political Secretariat, 27 October 1929. No sum is specified.

<sup>98</sup> *Die Kommunistische Internationale vor dem VII. Weltkongress* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1935), pp. 715-718.

of factional struggles characteristic of so many other Communist Parties in the 1920s.

In 1921 a conflict developed between the party leadership and the celebrated Sylvia Pankhurst. She was expelled for refusing the Executive's request to hand over to the party the control of the *Workers' Dreadnought*, which she had been publishing since 1914 and wanted to continue to use as a platform for a left, anti-parliamentarist and anti-NEP opposition in the CPGB, the Comintern and Soviet Russia.<sup>99</sup> Her subsequent appeal to Communists to link up with a pre-Trotskyist "Fourth International" found little response.<sup>100</sup>

The CPGB was virtually untouched by the battles around Trotskyism into which other Communist Parties were drawn in the 1920s, but on which it was prepared to give formal credence and support to the majority in the Soviet Communist Party and the Comintern, as it did already at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in 1924.<sup>101</sup> An amendment expressing support for the Trotskyist opposition in the Soviet Communist Party received only 10-15 votes out of 200-300 present at a London membership meeting in January 1925.<sup>102</sup>

In 1932 a small group based on Balham in South West London emerged in opposition to the party leadership, establishing themselves as the British Section of the International Left Opposition. In August 1932 their leading members were expelled from the CPGB for "fractional activities in connection with Trotskyism" and the Balham Group, with its fourteen members, was "liquidated".<sup>103</sup> No further opposition groups were to appear on the scene.

### 15. Membership, Composition, Votes

The CPGB was always a small party with a high turnover of members. If between 1920 and 1924 it probably fluctuated between 2,000 and 4,000 members, it rose to 6,000 in April 1926 on the eve of the general strike. By October 1926 it had reached 10,730, but a year later had fallen to 7,377. The move to the "New Line" the following years helped to bring about a decline to 3,200 in December 1929. It reached its nadir at 2,555 in November 1930.<sup>104</sup> After MacDonald's defection in 1931 it rose to 6,500, but declined to 4,300 at the end of 1932.<sup>105</sup> From 1933 till the war it experienced a continuous rise in membership: 5,000 in February 1934; 6,500 in February 1935; 7,500 in July 1935; 12,250 in June 1937; 15,750 in September 1938; 17,756 in July 1939.<sup>106</sup> In December 1941, following the Soviet Union's entry into the war that June, it recorded a membership of 22,738, rocketing by December 1942, at the height of the Battle of Stalingrad, to its highest membership attained before or since of 56,000.<sup>107</sup>

The CPGB's social composition was predominantly proletarian. At its 1925 congress 69% of the delegates were industrial workers, with 44% coming from "decisive" heavy industries (coal, iron, steel, engineering, shipbuilding) and 25% from light industry. A quarter were from clerical occupations, and 6% were

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<sup>99</sup> *Workers' Dreadnought*, esp. of 17 September 1921.

<sup>100</sup> Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party*, p. 68.

<sup>101</sup> Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International 1919-1943. Documents*, Vol. 2 (London, 1971), p. 141.

<sup>102</sup> Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain 1925-1938* (London, 1986), pp. 4-5; Klugmann, *History of CPGB*, Vol. 2, p. 327.

<sup>103</sup> Reg Groves, *The Balham Group: How British Trotskyism Began* (London, 1974), pp. 63-96.

<sup>104</sup> Pelling, *The British Communist Party*, p. 192.

<sup>105</sup> *Die Kommunistische Internationale vor dem VII. Weltkongress*, p. 222.

<sup>106</sup> Russian Centre, 495/100/1037: Report of J.R. Campbell, 3 February 1939 (for figures up to September 1938); Report to 16th Party Congress, p. 13 (for July 1939 figure).

<sup>107</sup> Pelling, *The British Communist Party*, p. 192.

housewives.<sup>108</sup> The proportion of party members unemployed rose to 47% in 1931 and 60% in 1932.<sup>109</sup> In 1935 however 205 of the 294 congress delegates were in employment.<sup>110</sup> At the 1938 congress only 34 out of 539 delegates were out of work. The largest number were classified as "in industry", whilst 73 were described as "in clerical work, etc." For the first time, reflecting the party's significant recruitment in this sphere, a separate category of "professionals" was recorded, of whom there were 64, along with 16 students, another growth sector.<sup>111</sup>

Throughout these years the CPGB was a young party. Delegates under 35 comprised 64% of the total at its 1925 congress and 67% at its 1938 one.<sup>112</sup>

The proportion of women members was estimated at 14% in 1924.<sup>113</sup> At the 1938 congress just under 18% of the delegates were women. Wartime conditions favoured the rise in the number of women delegates to 26% at the 1943 congress. However they only comprised five out of the thirty members of the Executive Committee which it elected<sup>114</sup> (though this was a higher number than previously).

Parliamentary election results only provide a limited picture of Communist influence since the party only contested a small number of constituencies.

In 1922 two Communists were elected to parliament, one of them (Saklatvala) as an official Labour candidate. Although both were narrowly defeated in 1923, Saklatvala regained his seat the next year standing as a Communist with local, but not national, Labour Party support.

In only one constituency did a Communist stand against a Labour candidate in a general election before 1929. In 1922 six Communists stood obtaining 44,948 votes - 20.2% of the total cast in those constituencies; in 1923 nine Communists gained 76,741 - 26.8%; and in 1924 eight CPGB candidates received 55,346 - 19.1%. In 1929, fighting against Labour candidates on the "Class against Class" line, twenty-five Communists obtained only 50,634 votes - 5.1% of the total; in October 1931, after MacDonald's desertion from Labour, 26 Communists received 74,824 votes - 7.6% of those cast. No Communist was elected in 1929 or 1931.<sup>115</sup> In 1935 the CPGB decided to support Labour candidates in all except two constituencies, which they contested. In West Fife Gallacher was returned with 37.4% of the vote. In this period the CP obtained 54 seats on Urban and County Councils.<sup>116</sup>

## 16. Internal Structure and "Apparatus"

Initially the CPGB was loosely organised on a federal and territorial branch basis similar to the BSP, from which the majority of its members came. Its fourth congress in March 1922 decided that a commission should be appointed to make detailed recommendations for the implementation in Britain of the "Theses on the Structure of Communist Parties" adopted the previous year at the Third Congress of the Comintern. The report of the

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<sup>108</sup> *Workers' Weekly*, 23 October 1925.

<sup>109</sup> *Communist Review*, Vol. 3, No. 7, July 1931, p. 292, and Vol. 4, No. 12, December 1932, p. 577.

<sup>110</sup> Report of Credentials Committee, in *Harry Pollitt Speaks... A Call to all Workers. With the Resolutions of the 13th Party Congress* (London, 1935), p. 79.

<sup>111</sup> Report of Credentials Commission, in *For Peace and Plenty*, p. 135.

<sup>112</sup> *Workers' Weekly*, 23 October 1925; *For Peace and Plenty*, p. 136.

<sup>113</sup> *Speeches and Documents of Sixth Conference*, p. 56.

<sup>114</sup> *For Peace and Plenty*, p. 135; *Unity and Victory. Report of the 16th Congress of the Communist Party* (London, 1943), pp. 59, 62.

<sup>115</sup> See Alan Mc Kinnon, "Communist Party Election Tactics - a historical review", in *Marxism Today*, August 1980, pp. 20-26, esp. table of Communist votes on p. 22.

<sup>116</sup> Central Committee's Report, in *It Can Be Done*, pp. 242-243.

commission, comprising R. Palme Dutt (Chair), Harry Inkpin and Harry Pollitt, emphasised the need for "Centralized Direction". In place of a federal leadership with district representatives, congresses would elect a small strong working executive committee. This "would hold in its hands all the threads of Party activities". It would be divided into a Political Bureau and an Organizational Bureau, each of which would be responsible for a number of departments with an executive member in charge of each. Further detailed recommendations were made for party district and local organization, fraction work in the trade-unions etc., and press.<sup>117</sup>

It was well beyond the capacity of a very small party to institute all the complex hierarchical structures and perform the multiple tasks set out in the seventy-nine pages of the report. None the less it was adopted by the party's fifth congress in October 1922 and corresponding new Statutes and Rules were endorsed. Although some modifications would be made subsequently (including enlarging the executive committee later to be called the Central Committee), it did largely determine the forms of organization with which the party strove to operate in the years ahead.

From 1924, in keeping with the Comintern's "Bolshevization" drive, the CPGB made special efforts to prioritize the organization of factory groups ("nuclei" and "cells"), as already proposed in the 1922 Organisation report.<sup>118</sup> In 1926 it was claimed that 1,000 of the party's 6,000 members were organized in 183 factory cells, but these had dropped to 100 in October 1927,<sup>119</sup> and were down to only twenty-four in June 1931.<sup>120</sup> The CPGB's twelfth congress in November 1932 revealed that less than 10% of the membership were organized in factory cells and less than 30% in "street cells", the only basic units then allowed for.<sup>121</sup>

Even with some growth the membership was too small and dispersed for more than a minority to be organized into a workplace or street group. A recognition of this led the Central Committee in January 1936 to decide to re-establish branches. These would comprise area groups, street groups (where six or more members lived in the same or adjacent streets), and factory groups (the term "cell" was dropped) in a given locality.<sup>122</sup> In the period up to the war some success was achieved in building up factory groups, but they continued to embrace only a small proportion of the membership. In the best District, London, this amounted in 1938 to 9%.<sup>123</sup>

Only with the second world war was the CPGB able to implement the oft-repeated injunction to ensure that "the main weight of Party membership and organization be established in the factories".<sup>124</sup> This was made possible by the big expansion of war production factories to be followed by the substantial growth in party membership after June 1941. Factory groups mushroomed and the most successful reported mass recruitment increasing their membership to 200 or more.<sup>125</sup> Paradoxically, the CPGB was for the first time successfully implementing organizational forms seen earlier as integral to its "Bolshevization" at the very time when

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<sup>117</sup> *Report on Organization presented by the Party Commission to the Annual Conference of the Communist Party of Great Britain, October 7, 1922* (London, 1922).

<sup>118</sup> <sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38; "Theses on Bolshevization", in *Report of the Seventh Congress* (London, 1925), pp. 200-201.

<sup>119</sup> E.H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, p. 933; Kenneth Newton, *The Sociology of British Communism* (London, 1969), p. 176.

<sup>120</sup> <sup>120</sup> *The Communist International*, 15 March 1932, p. 165.

<sup>121</sup> *Resolutions Adopted by the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain [...] 1932* (London, n.d.), p. 20.

<sup>122</sup> R.W. Robson, "On Communist Organization", *Discussion*, No. 2, March 1936, pp. 25-27.

<sup>123</sup> *London District Congress, 1938. Discussion Statement* (London, n.d.), p. 19.

<sup>124</sup> *Draft Discussion Statement for the Congress of the London District of the Communist Party of Great Britain [...] 1940* (London, n.d.), pp. 13-14.

<sup>125</sup> See, e.g., Eric Godfrey, "The Factory Brigade at Work", in *Organizing an Offensive Action* (London, 1943), pp. 16-19.

politically it was moving furthest from Bolshevik revolutionary perspectives.

When it was formed the CPGB had very few paid officials. Thanks to the subsequent introduction of a tighter budgetary and dues system with a membership that was steadily rising up to the end of 1926, an increase in the number of full-time workers soon became possible. It was assisted by the Comintern subsidies. By 1927 Comintern records showed the CPGB with a membership of some 10,000 employing twenty-six party workers (political and technical) at its headquarters and another twenty-three working in the districts.<sup>126</sup> It is however doubtful if all of them were receiving a regular party wage, low as this was.

With a rising membership and home-based income particularly in the second half of the thirties, the number of full-time workers again increased.<sup>127</sup> New central departments were established and old ones expanded with a modest increase in paid staff. Alongside the more experienced activists selected for these posts were promising, highly active and deeply committed younger people including graduates both of the Lenin School in Moscow and of British universities.

The introduction in 1929 on the Comintern's insistence of the recommended list system for electing the Central Committee helped to promote and perpetuate the control of the party by a small and able group of full-time officials, most of whom enjoyed both popularity in the CPGB and the approval of Moscow.<sup>128</sup>

### 17. The Communist Press

The publication and sale of Communist papers represented one of the most successful spheres of the CPGB's activities. From 1920-1929 it published successively *The Communist* (1920-1923), *Workers' Weekly* (1923-1927) and *Workers' Life* (1927-1929) every week as its main organ. The *Sunday Worker*, though with a broader labour movement sponsorship, was Communist-edited.

These papers were superseded by the *Daily Worker*, launched on 1 January 1930, which was the CPGB's most ambitious and important publishing venture. Overcoming enormous difficulties it managed to sustain unbroken daily publication with the exception of the nineteen months following the ban imposed on it in January 1941. Acting as the party's mouthpiece and edited by members of its Political Bureau, it unflinchingly agitated and sought to win support for the prevailing political line of the CPGB.

The *Daily Worker's* circulation rose from 11,000 in 1930 to 40,000-50,000 in 1939, with higher sales figures for the Saturday issues. In 1943 it was selling 100,000 copies limited by newsprint restrictions.

Among the other journals associated with the CPGB a special position was occupied by *Labour Monthly*, appearing from 1921 as "A Magazine of International Labour". Although never officially a CPGB journal, it was edited by R. Palme Dutt in accordance with the party's policies which he helped to frame. Its circulation increased from 3,000-3,500 in 1930 to 20,000 at the end of 1940.<sup>129</sup>

Particularly notable were the party's factory papers, most appearing fortnightly, of which by the mid-1920s there were over a hundred.<sup>130</sup> In 1931 40,000-50,000 readers were claimed.<sup>131</sup>

### 18. "Sympathizing Organizations"

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<sup>126</sup> O. Piatnitsky, *The Organization of a World Party* (London, 1928), p. 61.

<sup>127</sup> See announcements in *Party Organiser* in 1938-1939 of organizers appointed to new districts and growth areas.

<sup>128</sup> In 1939 the head of the Comintern's Personnel Department sent a list of the new CPGB Political Bureau to the Soviet security organs "for checking on"! (Fridrikh Firsov, "Die Säuberungen im Apparat der Komintern", Paper to Mannheim University Scientific Symposium, "'Weisse Flecken' in der Geschichte des Weltkommunismus", February, 1992, pp. 18-19.)

<sup>129</sup> Dutt Papers, K4: To PB, 4 January 1930; *Labour Monthly*, Vol. 23, No. 1, January 1941, p. 2.

<sup>130</sup> Klugmann, *History of CPGB*, Vol. 2., pp. 340-343.

<sup>131</sup> *The Communist International*, 15 March 1932, p. 169.

We have already seen how the CPGB guided and influenced such "sympathizing organizations" as the NUWM, the NMM, and the LAI. It worked in a similar way in the International Class War Prisoners' Aid (later renamed the International Labour Defence), Workers' International Relief (WIR), and the Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU; later called the Russia Today Society), which was formed in 1927 and soon claimed a membership of over 20,000.<sup>132</sup> All these organizations were proscribed by the Labour Party along with a number of *ad hoc* campaigning bodies such as the Anti-War Movement, started in 1932, and the Relief Committee for the Victims of German Fascism, formed in 1933.

Another organization which came under strong Communist influence, though by no means total control, was the Left Book Club, which flourished from 1936 till 1939 and provided a mass basis for the Popular Front campaign championed by the Communist Party. By April 1939 membership of the club was about 57,000, a large part of whom participated in its 1,200 discussion groups. However in October 1939 the publisher Victor Gollancz, a member of the Labour Party, who founded and retained a firm control over the club, strongly opposed the CPGB's anti-war turn. An irreparable breach developed with Communists leaving the club.<sup>133</sup>

The Young Communist League (YCL) was formed in 1921 as the British section of the Young Communist International. It was mutually agreed with the CPGB that it would be organizationally independent but "under the political direction of the Party", with the two organizations represented on each other's executives. The YCL's membership increased from about 500 in 1924 to 1,800 at the end of 1926.<sup>134</sup> It dwindled to a few hundred in the "Class against Class" period, when its leaders spearheaded the Moscow-inspired campaign against the "Right danger" in the CPGB leadership. From 1934 it grew steadily, reaching 4,602 members in 1938. It reached its highest figure of 10,000 in 1942.<sup>135</sup> In 1935 it launched a popular monthly paper, *Challenge*, which became a weekly in 1937 and sold an average of 20,000 copies in 1938.<sup>136</sup>

#### 19. Elements of a British Communist Culture

British Communists combined their own national, regional and class cultures with elements of a specific Communist culture. When they joined the party they were absorbed into an unusually high degree of political activism. From 1930 much revolved around collecting bundles of *Daily Workers* from the railway stations in the early hours of the morning, taking supplies to local newsagents and selling the paper publicly themselves. Around Christmas time they were to be found working for *Daily Worker* bazaars to raise money for the paper.

Extra efforts were required during drives and campaigns on immediate issues as well as in special "recruiting weeks". At the turn of every year there was a "re-registration campaign" aiming to get all members to pay off any dues arrears and take out cards for the new year.

1 May was a particularly important date in the Communist calendar. Whereas official Labour demonstrations were on the first Sunday in May, the Communists made a point, especially in London, of celebrating with like-minded left-wingers on 1 May itself. On Empire Day, officially celebrated every year on 24 May, members of the CP and the YCL organized "Down with Empire" demonstrations.

Marxist political education through classes, schools, public lectures and private study were a central part of the Communist culture.<sup>137</sup> In the second half of the 1930s the CPGB organized a series of colourful pageants in London and other towns commemorating important episodes in British popular and working class history.

In a very few localities between the wars the CPGB exercised political and cultural hegemony in association with left-wing Labour councillors. These were places like Mardy in South Wales, Chopwell in

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<sup>132</sup> E.H. Carr, *Foundations of a Planned Economy*, Vol. 3, Part 1 (London, 1976), pp. 309-310.

<sup>133</sup> See John Lewis, *The Left Book Club: An Historical Record* (London, 1970); Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, pp. 254-272.

<sup>134</sup> Klugmann, *History of CPGB*, Vol. 1, p. 224; Vol. 2, pp. 352, 357.

<sup>135</sup> Newton, *The Sociology of British Communism*, p. 161.

<sup>136</sup> Branson, *History of CPGB*, p. 182.

<sup>137</sup> See Stuart Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-1933* (London, 1986).

Durham (with a "Communist Club" established in 1912),<sup>138</sup> and the Vale of Leven in Scotland, which were dubbed "Little Moscows".<sup>139</sup> In these areas Communists combined well-supported political and educational activities with concerts, dances, workers' sport, unemployed bands, lively celebrations on 1 May, "red funerals", and flourishing branches of the Friends of the Soviet Union. Through the FSU reciprocal visits by workers' delegates, children and sports teams were arranged. In these places Communist leadership, deeply rooted in the local community, build on the consciousness and concerns of the working people around them and fostered a wider national and international socialist outlook. They succeeded in achieving what so clearly eluded the Communist Party in the country as a whole. However, as L.J. Macfarlane, one of the most serious historians of the CPGB, has concluded: "All had not been in vain. The Communist Party for all its faults, had helped to keep alive a spirit of resistance to the meek acceptance of hardship and poverty as economic facts of life."<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Raymond Challinor, *John S. Clarke: Parliamentarian, Poet and Lion-Tamer* (London, 1977), pp. 20-21.

<sup>139</sup> See Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows. Communism and Working Class Militancy in Inter-War Britain* (London, 1980).

<sup>140</sup> Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party*, p. 287.

## Appendix: Available Sources

### a) Archives

The largest collection of CPGB material is in the Communist Party Library, Picture Library and Archive, at 99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN. It is owned by the Democratic Left, the successor organization since 1991 to the CPGB. Its own extensive records of all aspects of the activities of the CPGB and "sympathizing organizations" have been supplemented in recent years by stenograms and minutes on microfilm of Central Committee and Political Bureau meetings from 1930-1939, which had been sent to Moscow at the time. It is now accessible to all researchers and students by arrangement with the librarians.

An extensive collection of material related to the CPGB and "Sympathizing organizations" is in the Comintern Archive (Stock 495) at the Russian Centre for the Storing and Study of Documents of Contemporary History (formerly the Central Party Archive). It appears now to be generally accessible to researchers. (The CPGB, and subsequently the Democratic Left, signified to the Centre their agreement that free access should be given to all CPGB material.)

Other relevant archive material can be found at: Marx Memorial Library, London (including the International Brigade Memorial Archive); the Working Class Movement Library, Salford; the Modern Records Centre of the University of Warwick; the Labour Archive at the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull; the Archive of the South Wales Miners at University College, Swansea; the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex; the Department of Sound Sources at the Imperial War Museum London (interviews on Spanish and second world wars); Public Record Office, Kew (Cabinet Papers, Home and Foreign Office Records, and Metropolitan Police Reports).

### b) Personal Collections and Papers

These include: R. Page Arnot and Reginald Bridgeman in the Labour Archive at the University of Hull; Ben Bradley, Emile Burns, Ivor Montagu and Harry Pollitt in the Communist Party Archive; R.P. Dutt, partly in the Communist Party Archive, partly in the British Library; William Gallacher, partly in the Communist Party Archive, partly in the Marx Memorial Library; Arthur Homer in the Miners' Archive at the University of Swansea; Tom Mann, partly in the Communist Party Archive, partly in the Tom Mann Archive, Coventry; J. Walton Newbold in the Rylands Library, University of Manchester; Sylvia Pankhurst in the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

### c) Public Source Materials

These include reports of Congresses, meetings of leading bodies, Constitutions and Rules, programmatic documents, as well as books and pamphlets on a wide range of themes. In addition there are newspapers, particularly the *Daily Worker*, and periodicals.

### d) Autobiographies, Memoirs and Biographies

Autobiographies and memoirs have been published by, i.a., Tom Bell, Fred Copeman, William Gallacher, Wal Hannington, George Hardy, Arthur Homer, Douglas Hyde, Joe Jacobs, Harry McShane, Abe Moffat, J.T. Murphy, Will Paynter, Phil Piratin, Harry Pollitt, Philip Spratt, Robert Stewart and Ernie Troy.

Biographies have been written of Isabel Brown, Tom Mann, Sylvia Pankhurst, Harry Pollitt and Shapurji Saklatvala.

Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (eds.), *The Dictionary of Labour Biography* (London, 1972ss.), eight volumes to date, carries valuable material on a number of Communists and associates.

### e) Bibliography

Alan J. MacKenzie, "Communism in Britain: A Bibliography", *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, No. 44, Spring 1982, pp. 23-41, provides a valuable comprehensive list of both books and articles up to 1981. It is supplemented by Martin Durham, *ibid.*, No. 45, Autumn 1982, pp. 9-10.