

LABOUR'S CONSCIENCE

The Labour Left, 1945–51

Jonathan Schneer

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JONATHAN SCHNEER

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THE LABOUR LEFT 1945–51

JONATHAN SCHNEER

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To my father



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Contents

Preface	page xi
Acknowledgments	xiv
List of abbreviations	xv
Introduction	1
1 The Labour Left in the General Election of 1945	15
2 The Labour Left on Russia and America	28
3 The Labour Left and the Third Force Movement	52
4 The Alternative Economic Program of the Labour Left	79
5 The “Hard” Labour Left	104
6 The Labour Left and the Trade Unions	134
7 The Labour Left in the Constituencies	158
8 The Climax of the Labour Left	191
Conclusion	211
Appendix 1: The Labour Left in Parliament	227
Appendix 2: CLPs Demanding an Emergency Conference	236
Select Bibliography	239
Index	246



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Preface

Labour's Conscience: The Labour Left, 1945–51 analyzes the attitudes and activities of a critical force in modern British politics during a period that proved decisive in the history of Labour and the British Left generally. Inevitably it emphasizes events in Westminster, but it attempts to indicate the role of the Labour Left in the trade unions and constituencies as well.

Perhaps I should state at the outset that I am aware of the difficulties in using the term “Labour Left.” During 1945–51 the Labour Left never was an organized force. It had no formal membership. For the most part the men and women who may be said to have “belonged” to it considered themselves first and foremost members of the Labour Party. If they were critical of some of the policies laid down by their party’s leaders, often they were equally critical of each other. Moreover there were periods during Attlee’s premiership when the Labour Left was inactive and virtually silent—when, in fact, some might have been tempted to question whether it existed at all. It is one of the main purposes of this book, however, to show that it did exist—as a tendency, if not as a coherent, easily delimited political group—and that its experiences and evolution during the early postwar era constitute a vital chapter in the history of the British Left and of the Labour Party as well.

My interest in the subject flows from my previous scholarly work which focused on the labor and socialist movements in Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Few of Labour’s pioneers lived to see the Attlee governments, and while researching and writing a biography of the dockers’ leader, Ben Tillett, I often wondered what he and his contemporaries would have thought of them. The present volume, which, of course, makes no attempt to provide answers to such anachronistic musings, nevertheless was sparked by them.

If my interest in the early postwar years stemmed in part from my studies of a previous generation of Labour leaders, I was led to examine them too by my efforts to understand the continuing drama which the Labour Party has offered up for public viewing ever since I began to follow British politics. As a result of my studies I have come to believe that the thoughts and actions of the Labour Left of 1945–51 offer crucial insights into Labour history of the pre- and post- World War II eras.

Over the years during which I have been occupied with this project, so many people have helped me that it is impossible to mention them all by name. I want at the outset to express my gratitude to Yale University, Georgia State University and the American

Council of Learned Societies for financial assistance and for making possible time off from my teaching responsibilities. Without their support this book could never have been written.

While carrying on my research, archivists and librarians all over Britain provided me with unstinting assistance. I wish particularly to thank Stephen Bird, the Labour Party archivist; Norman Higson of Hull University; Tommy Marshall, local history librarian of the Gateshead Public Library; Dr Angela Raspin of the British Library of Political and Economic Science; and Richard Storey of the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University. Professor John Saville and Dr Joyce Bellamy generously opened the files of their *Dictionary of Labour Biography* to me; and Andrew Roth and Judy Tench most generously permitted me to use their own "Parliamentary Profiles" files which they have compiled over the years. There is not an archive usually available to historians, and I am most grateful to them for permitting me to benefit from their hard work.

Then there were many who experienced at first hand the events described in this volume, and who proved willing to tell me about them. I learned much from interviews with Austin Albu, Lord Brockway, Lord Davies of Leek, Michael Foot, Lord Hale, E. R. Millington, Ian Mikardo and Lord Strauss. I am particularly grateful to Mr Albu and to Lord Hale for allowing me to view papers of the period which were in their possession, and for their hospitality. I wish, too, to acknowledge the generosity of Stephen Solley, who made his father's scrap-book available to me, and of Inigo Bing, who shared memories and insights into his father's political career with me. And I will never forget the helpfulness of Jim Murray, who induced some veterans of the Gateshead labor movement to reminisce in my presence about their first postwar Labour MP, Konni Zilliacus. I want, too, to acknowledge in print my gratitude to John Grigg, with whom I have often discussed various aspects of this work, and from whose insights and knowledge I have never failed to profit.

Many veterans of the period with whom I was unable to schedule an interview were nevertheless most helpful to me. I am very grateful to John Platts Mills, who sent me excerpts from his unpublished autobiography. Tony Benn, MP, astonished and flattered a young American historian by finding time to read and comment upon an article about the third force movement which later became the basis of Chapter 3 of the present volume. I have corresponded too with Lord Bruce, Barbara Castle, Lady Jeger, John Freeman, Jo Richardson, MP, Lyall Wilkes, Woodrow Wyatt and Michael Young.

My debt to historians is equally great. I wish to thank the participants in Gareth Stedman Jones's social history seminar at King's College, Cambridge, and in Pat Thane's, Jonathan Zeitlin's, Ben Pimlott's and Alice Prochaska's seminars at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, for their comments and suggestions on early drafts of what proved, eventually, to be Chapter 1 of the present volume. I wish also to thank Jim Cronin, John Field, Gary Fink, Pat Hilden, David Howell, Paul Kennedy, Standish Meacham, R. K. Webb and Peter Weiler, who have read and commented upon portions of the manuscript, and in some cases the entire work. I have tried to follow their suggestions. Needless to say, however, where errors of fact or interpretation remain, they are mine alone.

My most profound debt as a historian is to my former teacher and friend, Stephen Koss, who died suddenly in October 1984. I miss his guidance more than it is easy to express.

Finally I must thank my wife, Margaret Hayman, for bearing with me over the years during which this manuscript has been in preparation.

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Abbreviations

ADA	Americans for Democratic Action
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
BLPES	British Library of Political and Economic Science
CEEC	Committee of European Economic Coordination
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
DLP	Divisional Labour Party
EC	Executive Committee
ETU	Electrical Trades Union
FIB	Fabian International Bureau
FO	Foreign Office
GMC	General Management Committee
ILP	Independent Labour Party
NEC	National Executive Committee
NUDAW	National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PPS	Parliamentary Private Secretary
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UDC	Union of Democratic Control
USDAW	Union of Shopworkers, Distributive and Allied Workers
USSE	United Socialist States of Europe
VfS	Victory for Socialism



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Introduction

IN JULY 1945 the Labour Party scored its greatest electoral victory. With 393 seats in the House of Commons, it had converted a deficit of approximately 233 against the Tories into a majority of 146 over all parties combined. No parliamentary combination could block its legislation. For the first time Labour had the power to embark upon the socialist project which, since 1918, had been its declared aim.¹

Under Prime Minister Clement Attlee, Labour held office until October 1951. During those six years it carried many far-reaching reforms. It fulfilled its election promises to nationalize the Bank of England, the mines, railways, gas, electricity, aviation, road haulage, and iron and steel. Despite the crippling economic burdens imposed by World War II, it provided for the first time diverse forms of social insurance to all Britons, “from the cradle to the grave.” Unlike previous administrations it actively promoted Indian independence, which was achieved in 1947. No wonder that many Labour supporters believe these great accomplishments imparted to the Attlee governments a luster which time has only burnished. During the 1983 general election, Labour Party leader Michael Foot held up Attlee’s governments as his ideal. Historian Kenneth Morgan notes that right- and left-wing Labourites, who agree on little else, concurred with Foot. Morgan himself concludes in his widely acclaimed study, *Labour in Power, 1945–51*, that Attlee’s were “without doubt the most effective of all Labour Governments, perhaps amongst the most effective of any British Government since the passage of the 1832 Reform Act.”²

Although many Labourites today perceive the early postwar era as an almost mythic, golden and all too short-lived moment, Attlee’s governments had numerous critics at the time. Of course Conservatives found much to oppose during Attlee’s tenure as Prime Minister. For the first few years of peace, however, they lacked confidence and impact, and after 1947 they found many of Labour’s policies to their liking, especially in foreign affairs. Party conflict was sharp enough at mid-century, but observers from every political perspective thought the 1950 and 1951 general elections relatively tame. As Richard Crossman, the Labour Member for Coventry East and future Cabinet minister under Harold Wilson, remarked, “The mood of this 1951 election is quiet, even quieter than in 1950, and the voter is watching the two contestants with a cool and reserved detachment.” This is not, perhaps, what might have been expected after the first six years of the transition to socialism which Labour had promised in 1945.³

In fact, some of Attlee's sharpest and most effective critics were on the Left, and belonged to his own party. As wartime gratitude and respect for the Soviet Union waned, British communists found themselves increasingly isolated and on the defensive. British Trotskyists were still a negligible force. Left-wing Labourites, however, while lacking formal organization, were perhaps more in tune with public opinion than ever before or since. The war had generated a popular radicalism which found expression in unprecedented support for the Left. In 1945 Labour reaped the electoral benefits, in part because it seemed the most effective vehicle for promoting "one hundred per cent Socialism," as an important left-wing candidate put it almost immediately after the election. When later it became evident that Attlee's government was following a less militant path than they had expected, left-wing Labourites appeared strategically placed to criticize its policies and to attempt to change them.⁴

The alienation of Labour's left wing was a gradual and painful process. Because the Labour Left was extraordinarily heterogeneous it responded to the government's policies in diverse and occasionally conflicting fashions. Uneven and multifaceted as it was, however, that response proved to be of great significance in the history of both the Labour Party and the British Left as a whole. The government's unprecedented parliamentary majority meant that for five crucial years the Labour Left had the opportunity of voting its conscience in the House and, in the trade unions and constituencies, of agitating for change without worrying about contributing to the downfall of Labour rule. Moreover, for the first time in history, the Labour Left could consider realistically, not hypothetically, how to implement its ultimate aims. The result, as I hope to demonstrate, was an extraordinary burst of creativity, in which the Labour Left sought to provide blueprints for the party leadership to follow. Perhaps at no other time in history had so many people attempted to think about, and to solve, the problems British socialists would encounter during "the transition" period.

As the Labour Left grew disillusioned with the government, another dynamic became evident. Precisely because it expected more far-reaching measures from a government with so massive a majority in the House, the Labour Left was forced to consider more seriously than ever before its place in the Labour Party and its relationship to the leaders. A searching reassessment of Labour's commitment to socialism and of its ability to achieve it replaced the early optimism. The party's wafer-thin parliamentary majority during the second Attlee administration (1950-1) gave added point to this rethinking. Now the Labour Left was forced to choose between the socialist yardstick it had fashioned during the previous five years, and the government which it had charged with failing to measure up. This situation forced the Labour Left to define more self-consciously than ever before its role as keeper of what it considered to be the party's conscience. Simply as a result of the political balance in Parliament, therefore, the period 1945-51 is among the most revealing in Labour's history and in what might be termed the intellectual history of the British Left.

Another factor enhanced its importance for Labour. The cold war fractured the alliance between communists and democratic socialists which had helped to defeat fascism. Grimly, inexorably, the world divided into massive, hostile blocs. In Britain, as throughout Europe, libertarian and Marxist socialists came into portentous collision.

The Labour Left, refashioned by this clash, took on its modern lineaments. The postwar Labour Party derives essential characteristics from that remaking. In this respect, too, 1945–51 were watershed years for Labour and the British Left generally.

The period has rarely been treated as such, however. Naturally historians of Labour's foreign policy during the postwar era have emphasized the duel with Stalin, the development of the Marshall Plan, the creation of NATO. These historical works pay scant attention to the evolution of attitudes within the Labour Party or Labour movement. Equally, diplomatic historians who have considered Labour's internal debates have tended to stress the negligible significance, or the questionable motives, of the left-wing critics. More recently, Alan Bullock has traced Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin's patient and successful tutelage of the Labour Party in anti-communism. It is the partial burden of this study, however, to suggest that the Labour Left was both more important, and came to hold views more nuanced, than Bevin could accept or than Bullock records.⁵

Historians of the 1945–51 Labour governments, and even of the Labour Left itself, likewise either have minimized the significance and scope of left-wing disaffection with the government or have emphasized the political ascendancy of the Labour center and right wing. By way of contrast, this book seeks to place the Labour Left at the heart of Britain's postwar experience and to demonstrate that 1945–51 were crucial years for it and, therefore, for the party and the movement to which it belonged. The resignations from the government of Aneurin Bevan, Harold Wilson and John Freeman in 1951 because they objected to taxing the National Health Service in order to help pay for rearmament marked the culmination of the Labour Left's disenchantment with Attlee's administrations. Labour's subsequent history, notably the battles between Gaitskellites and Bevanites, unilateralists and multilateralists, "Europeans" and "little Englanders," Tribunites and Bennites, even perhaps Militants and Kinnock supporters, is rooted in that fatal fracturing.⁶

The main themes of this book, then, are the centrality of the Labour Left during 1945–51, the broad implications of its early postwar experience and its enduring, if ambiguous, significance.

II

The Labour Left has been a critical force in British politics since the foundation of the Labour Party in 1900. At that time there were three main socialist groupings in Britain: the Fabians, the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and the Independent Labour Party (ILP). None of these were capable of competing with the two great established political parties, the Liberals and Conservatives. Indeed, the Fabians initially thought it more realistic to attempt "permeating" them with socialist ideas than to run candidates against them in elections. By the turn of the century, however, enough trade unions believed in independent labor representation to join with the socialist groups in a working-class political party. This was Labour. It did not adopt a socialist platform, however, because many trade unionists would not accept one, and therefore socialists constituted its left wing.⁷

The socialist wing of the Labour Party played a crucial role in the organization's early history. The ILP leader, Keir Hardie, became known as the "father of the Labour Party," because he provided the formulation which made possible its establishment. "Let us have done," Hardie intoned at the founding conference in 1900, "with every 'ism that is not Labourism." In 1901 the Marxist SDF concluded that this was not enough. It left Labour in pursuit of purer politics and after many splits and schisms eventually evolved into the British Communist Party. The ILP and the Fabians, however, were more constant. A member of the ILP, James Ramsay MacDonald, became Labour Party leader. Other Fabians and ILP members—Keir Hardie, Philip Snowden and Sidney Webb, for example—had influence on Labour Party policy out of all proportion to socialist numerical strength within it. They and others spoke for ideals with which Labour has been identified ever since: the brotherhood of man regardless of national frontiers, women's rights, the immorality and inefficiency of unrestrained capitalism and, often from a pacifist perspective, opposition to armaments and war.⁸

World War I greatly strengthened the socialist element of the Labour Party, although initially it seemed as though the war would have quite the opposite effect. A xenophobic wave swept the country. Keir Hardie died, of a broken heart, it was said. MacDonald was driven from his position as Labour Party leader, because he would not unambiguously endorse British participation in the conflict. The ILP, almost alone, stood out bravely against the nationalist tide. By 1917 the ILP was less isolated. The war of attrition on the western front horrified almost everyone. The Russian Revolution revitalized egalitarian and internationalist sentiments. The famous "secret treaties" which the Bolshevik regime discovered and published, and which a left-wing Labour newspaper edited by George Lansbury, the *Herald*, printed in Britain, seemed to make a mockery of everything British soldiers had thought they were fighting for. Although victory in war generated a second patriotic upsurge which Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, unscrupulously exploited during the 1918 "khaki election," it proved ephemeral. MacDonald was re-elected Labour Party leader. By 1922 almost all the old ILP-ers were back in Parliament. Labour had a future. Lloyd George did not.

Two developments during this period were of the utmost significance for the Labour Left. Their ranks had been augmented by a body of new recruits, former radical Liberals who opposed their party's position on the war and who, typically, joined first the Union of Democratic Control, an anti-war body, and then the Labour Party. These ex-radicals were a critical addition. Their internationalism, rooted in the old Gladstonian sympathy for "subject peoples struggling to be free," was as deep seated as that of the socialists. Their devotion to civil liberties was, if anything, stronger than that of many collectivists for whom social equality, not freedom, was the touchstone of belief. Ever since World War I old-fashioned radical liberalism has found a more or less congenial home on the left wing of the Labour Party.

Another consequence of the war proved even more significant for the Labour Left. It won the battle it had been fighting since the party's inception. Labour's constitution was rewritten so that its fourth clause finally committed the party

to secur[ing] for the producers by hand or brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the Common Ownership of the Means of Production and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry and service.

Since 1918 Labour has been one of the world's leading democratic socialist political parties.⁹

The new constitution was profoundly important to members of Labour's left wing and not only because it seemed to endorse their long-standing goals. Previously the Labour Party had made little provision for individual membership. Rather it had accepted affiliated bodies, for example trade unions and various socialist and professional societies. After 1918, however, the basis for a mass membership was laid. Local Labour parties were established in virtually every electoral district, and their members belonged to the national party. Although not appreciated at the time, this provision was bound to erode ILP influence in the Labour Party as a whole. The ILP sponsored its own parliamentary candidates, held its own annual conferences and issued its own programs, while attempting to convince the rest of the Labour Party to share its goals and personnel. It really was a "party within a party" and could be accused, legitimately, of acting like a competing organization. After 1918 militant socialists discovered increasingly that if they wished to influence Labour they could do so more effectively through their local parties than through the ILP. During Labour's periods of office, in 1924 and especially during 1929–31, the diminution of ILP strength was evident. Ramsay MacDonald, though still a nominal member of the ILP, ignored it. In 1932 the ILP despaired of influencing the party in a socialist direction, and voted to disaffiliate. Like the SDF in 1901 it chose the purer and perhaps psychologically satisfying but politically unwise path of "no compromise."

Nineteen thirty-two was a crucial moment in the history of Labour's left wing, teaching it a negative lesson. Although ILP militants argued that the decision to separate from Labour would spark a massive upsurge of popular radicalism which they could steer in a socialist direction, it led the other way—to a catastrophic lessening of ILP membership and effectiveness. A young MP from a Welsh mining district had foreseen this. "I tell you what the epitaph on you Scottish dissenters will be," Aneurin Bevan warned one ILP loyalist, his future wife, Jennie Lee. "You will be pure all right. But . . . at the price of impotency. I tell you," Bevan is reported to have said, striding back and forth in Jennie Lee's Guilford Street flat in London,

it is the Labour Party or nothing. I know all its faults, all its dangers. But it is the party that we have taught millions of working people to look to and regard as their own. . . And I am by no means convinced that something cannot yet be made of it.

These words have served, ever since, as a sort of unofficial credo of the Labour Left.¹⁰

In order to avoid the political wilderness Bevan had predicted for the separatists, a group of Labour Party militants founded the Socialist League. This new organization was designed to carry on ILP traditions within the Labour Party. It had its own officers,

membership and program, but no MPs. Still it ran into the same problems which had debilitated the ILP. Socialists who hoped to influence Labour now had to belong primarily to it, not to other organizations, however much these insisted that their purpose was to complement and not to criticize the parent body. In 1937 the Socialist League voted to disband. "This is not a funeral," one member argued in justification of the decision, "but a deliberate political tactic." The speaker was Barbara Betts, who as Barbara Castle became a prominent Labour leftist in the postwar period, a Bevanite and, finally, a Cabinet minister under Wilson.¹¹

The dissolution of the Socialist League marked the end of an era. There never has been, since then, a formally constituted, organized, "loyal opposition" within the Labour Party.

III

During the interwar period, political discussion on the Left was dominated by two momentous issues: whether socialism could be achieved in Britain primarily by parliamentary means, and whether democratic socialists and communists could cooperate with each other. The first issue was fought out, primarily, before about 1935. The second, though significant during the 1920s, attained paramount importance after the Nazi seizure of power in Germany in 1933.

The Labour Left did not unanimously favor the parliamentary road to socialism during the early postwar period. Profoundly alienated by the "khaki election" because they believed that its results did not truly reflect public opinion, many left-wing Labourites demanded industrial action on behalf of political goals. They supported threats of a general strike in 1920 to oppose British intervention against the Russian Bolsheviks and, although it never was called, the famous "triple alliance" strike in 1921, on behalf of the miners who opposed decontrol of the coal industry. During the General Strike of 1926 and the lock-out of miners which followed, the ILP was conspicuously tougher than the Labour Party itself, both in the localities and in Parliament. During these years the "Red Clydesiders" James Maxton, John Wheatley and David Kirkwood, all members of the ILP, cemented their reputations for militancy, which they had earned as outspoken critics of the war.

Militants in the industrial wing of the labor movement were defeated during 1918–26. Yet the extra-parliamentary path to power which they and their PLP allies had broached was not completely discredited. This was because Labour's parliamentary experiences, especially during 1924 and 1929–31 when it formed the government, inspired deep suspicion.

In the first instance, Labour was the second largest party in the House, but the Conservatives, who had the most seats, did not command a majority. The Liberal leader, Herbert Henry Asquith, concluded that this was an opportune moment for Labour to form the government. Without Liberal support it could not pass legislation. MacDonald accepted the dubious honor of attempting to lead the country in these circumstances. Insisting that Labour must prove that it was "fit to govern," whatever that might mean, he ignored left-wing calls for the party to live up to its socialist

constitution and program. Despite this moderate agenda, however, Asquith, the king-maker, withdrew Liberal support nine months later, and MacDonald's first Labour government fell ignominiously.¹²

Labour's second stint of "power," which coincided with the depression, was even worse. This time the government was overwhelmed by economic problems, the most important of which was unemployment. Again the Left pushed for a more radical and imaginative approach than either MacDonald or Snowden, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer, or J. H. Thomas, who was initially the responsible minister, was willing to contemplate. In the end, this triumvirate accepted Conservative-inspired suggestions for significant decreases in unemployment benefits and other programs for the poor. MacDonald resigned as Labour Prime Minister, only to reappear with the King's commission to form a "National government." This "betrayal" as many called it led to his expulsion from Labour. Snowden and Thomas were the only important party members to follow him.¹³

From this debacle many among the Labour Left concluded that the parliamentary road to socialism was at least as problematic as the extra-parliamentary one. At the heart of the ILP decision in 1932 to disaffiliate from Labour was its conviction that the disaster of the previous year could not be explained by reference to the apostasy of individuals and that it stemmed, in part, from the party's exclusive emphasis upon electoral politics. The Labour Party itself remained divided over the issue. A new generation of leaders had already begun to emerge—Clement Attlee, Herbert Morrison, Hugh Dalton—all of whom were strict parliamentarists. But Harold Laski, a professor at the London School of Economics and, after 1937, a member of Labour's National Executive Committee, warned that establishment forces might violently oppose a Labour government that carried out its election promises. John Strachey, in *The Coming Struggle for Power*, agreed. He and Laski were among Britain's most prominent left-wing intellectuals. Stafford Cripps, a wealthy lawyer and former member of the 1929–31 government, gained the greatest notoriety for predicting violent revolutionary struggle. The son of the great Conservative Lord Parmoor, Cripps foresaw Conservative counter-revolution if a determinedly socialist Labour government took power, and argued that such a government would be justified in taking sweeping emergency measures to protect itself.¹⁴

Prewar debates over parliamentarism continued to resonate during the postwar era. More relevant for the Labour Left after 1945, however, was the ongoing discussion about cooperation with communists. This issue had first divided Labourites in 1920 when Welsh and Scottish sections of the ILP briefly advocated membership in the communist Third International. The ILP rejected this proposal, but relations between communists and Labourites remained uncertain. When Lenin recommended that his British followers strive for revolution from within Labour's ranks, supporting the party "as a rope supports a hanged man," Labour's leaders determined to settle the matter permanently. In 1924 they persuaded the annual party conference to prohibit communists from membership. Many on the Labour Left, however, rejected this solution. During 1926–7 twenty-three CLPs were disaffiliated for refusing to expel communist members.

The issue of cooperation between the two wings of the Labour movement in Britain became supremely important during the 1930s when the communists, who in accordance with the 1929 "new line" had been denouncing democratic socialists as social fascists, reversed themselves and called for a popular front of all forces opposed to fascism. Left-wing Labourites who had withheld support from the earlier Labour Party ban on communists fervently embraced this appeal, while the Labour Party leadership, with equal vehemence, denounced the possibility of an alliance with representatives of a totalitarianism they found as loathsome as Hitler's.¹⁵

The Labour Left favored the popular front for a variety of reasons. For many the ban on cooperation with communists contradicted common sense. Communists were effective allies in the trade unions. Indeed often they had been effective allies in the Labour Party against what later became known as "MacDonaldism"—until they had been expelled. At any rate they were essentially on the same side of the great divide which separated the working class from its enemies. The Labour Left admired the agitation carried on by communists on behalf of the unemployed and believed that their party should cooperate in it. To the dismay of Labour's leaders, left-wing Labour members frequently participated in demonstrations organized by the communist-led National Unemployed Workers' Movement. Perhaps more important, the Labour Left agreed with the communists that only a popular front could effectively combat fascism both at home and abroad.

The Labour Left held a darker view of the National government than the party leadership did, especially after Chamberlain became Prime Minister. Such a government, according to Cripps, might slide into a sort of "country gentleman's fascism." Cripps was as much worried by Chamberlain's foreign as by his domestic policies. After 1935, when the pacifist George Lansbury resigned as Labour Party leader, Transport House favored rearmament so that Britain could deal with the fascists from a position of strength. Cripps and many others on the Labour Left, however, believed that the government might strike a deal with fascist leaders in Germany and Italy. British "neutrality" during the Spanish Civil War, which could not help but benefit Franco, seemed to confirm such fears. Therefore the Labour Left opposed giving weapons to Chamberlain on the grounds that they were as likely to be used against the international labor movement as against international fascism. The answer of the Labour Left to the threat of fascism was not rearmament, but collective security based primarily upon a strengthened League of Nations and alliance with the Soviet Union.¹⁶

Labour Left agitation for this alliance grew more intense, as the aggressive and insatiable nature of Hitler's regime became evident. The agitation was conducted primarily on two fronts. Cripps, Bevan and George Strauss, the Labour Member for North Lambeth, founded a newspaper, *Tribune* (which still exists), to press it in the country as a whole, while the Socialist League, during its brief existence, acted as spearhead for the campaign within the Labour Party. The party leadership, however, remained rocklike in its opposition. And the leaders commanded the big battalions. Labour's annual conferences, dominated by the trade-union bloc vote, decisively repudiated the popular front. In 1939 Cripps was expelled for continuing to speak from

platforms on which communists were present. Bevan and Strauss, who had been expelled with Cripps, were readmitted only after promising to toe the line.

This unequal struggle was a formative political experience for the generation which constituted the postwar Labour Left. Michael Foot, Richard Crossman, Konni Zilliacus, Geoffrey Bing and Barbara Castle, to name only a few in the postwar Parliamentary Labour Party, Walter Padley, Bob Edwards and Jack Tanner among the non-communist left-wing trade-union leadership, and Laski and the Oxford don G.D.H. Cole among the intelligentsia affiliated with Labour, carried memories of the campaign for a popular front into the postwar period. From it they gained knowledge of the party hierarchy's power, but also of the methods and tactics of carrying on an agitation. The "class of '45," as Labour Members who entered Parliament in the first postwar general election often were called, gained their primary education during the 1930s.

They went to secondary school during World War II. Its impact upon them was at least as profound as the crusade for a popular front with the communists. Russian neutrality during the first year and a half of the conflict caused great bitterness on the Labour Left both at the time and during the cold-war era. During most of the war and its immediate aftermath, however, the Labour Left thought not of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, but of the Anglo-Russian alliance, which represented the popular front at government level and seemed to vindicate the Labour Left's earlier agitation for such an arrangement. Equally, the conflict confirmed many postwar Labour leftists "in the belief," as one of them put it, "that planning by the state was not only desirable but practicable." The history of the Labour Left during 1945-51 is, in large part, the history of its evolving attitudes towards these two ideals.¹⁷

Moreover, the experience of total war, and revulsion against the British politicians who so poorly prepared their country for it, led many Britons to support the Left generally. For once the Left rather than the Right could convincingly claim to wear the patriotic mantle. This reversal, unprecedented during modern British history, was encapsulated in the publication in 1940 of *Guilty Men*, a pamphlet pseudonymously co-authored by three radical journalists, one of whom was Michael Foot. The heroes of *Guilty Men* were Churchill and Lloyd George. In biting prose Foot and his co-authors contrasted the stature of these giants with that of the "pygmies" who, in keeping them from power during the interwar years, had left the country nearly defenseless against the fascists. Yet the Left was as much the beneficiary of the pamphlet as were the former and current occupants of 10 Downing Street. Labour's leaders and policies also had been ignored during the 1930s. Now Labour entered Churchill's coalition government. A wise move, it enabled Attlee and his lieutenants to prove, finally, that Labour *was* fit to govern. In the 1945 general election they reaped their reward.

During the war, however, the party's official conduct seemed tame to some. Left-wing activists called for an end to the political truce which went hand in hand with participation in the coalition. They demanded that a second front be established in western Europe to relieve pressure on Russia in the East, that the government commit itself to implementing the famous Beveridge Report, that civil liberties be maintained

even during wartime. As the party leaders demurred, prewar divisions reappeared. This time the clash produced a new political party altogether, Common Wealth.¹⁸

The politics of Common Wealth were vague and inspirational. Members advocated a confusing and often contradictory mix of Christian, radical Liberal and Marxist principles and goals. The party appealed, above all, to middle-class “progressives” who looked forward to a new beginning in Britain and who believed in cooperative, selfless, ethical standards of conduct. Some left-wing intellectuals like Laski and Strachey were suspicious of the organization, because it lacked a theory of society and a working-class base. Nevertheless, like the ILP and the Socialist League, Common Wealth was a training school for the postwar Labour Left. Its founder, Richard Acland, became a Labour MP in 1947. Its general secretary and chairman, R. W. G. Mackay, gained entrance to the House of Commons as one of the Labour Members for Hull in 1945. Both Tom Driberg, an independent socialist standing in Maldon in 1942 and endorsed by Acland, and E. R. Millington, a Common Wealth candidate in Chelmsford, won their by-elections and later joined the Labour Party, becoming prominent on its left wing. Equally important were those among the rank and file who, radicalized and politically energized by the war, came to share Common Wealth’s crusading socialist spirit. They supported the new party in by-elections that Labour refused to contest. When Labour finally repudiated the political truce at the end of the war, these new recruits tended to gravitate in its direction. Such men and women played their part in the party’s great victory in 1945 and afterwards, in the Labour Left’s struggle to push Attlee’s governments along a more radical path than they wished to follow.¹⁹

IV

Who belonged to the Labour Left in 1945? How may their mental universe be described? The views and social composition of this critical force within the Labour Party will emerge in the body of the text. Nevertheless several fundamental and unchanging aspects of Labour’s left wing deserve emphasis at the outset.

Most striking is the Labour Left’s ideological heterogeneity. This single section of the Labour Party brought together socialist fundamentalists who had been inspired by Keir Hardie, Christians and pacifists in the mold of George Lansbury, former radical Liberals for whom, perhaps, the young Lloyd George was a model, trade unionists who had been influenced by the preachers of “direct action” immediately before and after World War I, and Marxists who admired Lenin and Stalin, or Lenin and Trotsky. Its own left wing included communist sympathizers (four of whom were later expelled from the PLP for being “fellow-travellers”) and former ILP crusaders who were equally militant but objected to communist discipline and connections with Moscow. Its right wing was composed of pacifists who usually supported the party leadership, but whose objection to the use of force was based upon a powerful British tradition which authority ignored at its peril. The Labour Left brought together an array of dissenters, reformers and revolutionaries. It was more a “militant tendency” than an organized, disciplined movement.

Diversity of outlook was promoted by diversity of experience. In the constituencies, trade unions and even the PLP there were left-wing Labourites who remembered the struggle to found a national working-class political party before the turn of the century and who had attempted, once the party was organized, to push it in a more radical direction than its leaders favored. Others could recall the anti-war movement of 1914–18 and the industrial conflicts of the early 1920s. Many had participated in the prewar battle to establish a popular front between Labour and the communists against fascism, while yet another cohort had come to socialist politics during World War II. Age was rarely a factor in the divisions which beset the Labour Left after 1945, but each generation was capable of speaking with a distinctive voice. The slogans and rallying cries of earlier battles conducted by the Labour Left echoed and re-echoed during 1945–51.

Class differences further divided left-wing Labourites. The parliamentary combinations which they developed during the early postwar era usually lacked significant proletarian representation. A Labour Left Member of Parliament elected in 1945 was more likely to come from a middle-class than a working-class family. Michael Foot, Richard Crossman, Ian Mikardo, Stephen Swingle, Geoffrey Bing, Woodrow Wyatt, Leslie Hale and Konni Zilliacus, for example, were more typical of the postwar parliamentary Labour Left in this regard than say a working-class trade unionist like the pacifist Tom Scollan, who belonged to the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (NUDAW), or Fred Lee of the Amalgamated Engineers (AEU).

Middle-class preponderance was less overwhelming in the left-wing constituency Labour parties, although Chapter 7 will argue that Labour Left CLPs tended to have a disproportionately high number of non-working-class members. In some instances inter-class communication in left-wing CLPs may have been a problem. Coventry alderman Reverend Richard Lee, for example, had “worked in past days with the SDP [Social Democratic Party, as the SDF briefly called itself during 1910], the ILP and the SLP [Socialist Labour Party, a pre-1914 DeLeonite group] as well as the CPGB.” Yet this devoted and experienced socialist could address the working class only from outside, complaining (almost from above) at one point that the “Socialist spirit” did not yet “permeate the mass of the workers. They have got to realise that in working for civic and State enterprise they are working for themselves and the common people.” Compare this with the exhortation delivered by Ernie Roberts, president of the Coventry Amalgamated Engineers, to his “Fellow trade unionists, socialists and comrades that they urge that the things we at the bottom know to be necessary should be done.” Roberts and Lee were equally prominent in Coventry during the early aftermath of the war as Labourites demanding a more resolute socialist program from Attlee’s government. Yet they spoke nearly a different language.²⁰

Roberts’s role in Coventry underlines another point about the Labour Left in the early postwar era. Commentators tended naturally to concentrate on the highly visible activities of the Labour Left at Westminster. Yet Chapter 6 will argue that a non-communist left was powerful not only in Roberts’s own AEU but also in the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), the Chemical Workers’ Union and the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (which amalgamated with the Shop