



THEATRE WORKSHOP

JOAN LITTLEWOOD
AND THE MAKING OF
MODERN BRITISH THEATRE

ROBERT LEACH

Theatre Workshop

This book is the first critical analysis, by someone outside the Company, of the work of Joan Littlewood, Ewan MacColl and Theatre Workshop, including the Company's unique actor training programmes.

'Who was Joan Littlewood? Why was she so famous? What was Theatre Workshop?' Robert Leach provides answers to these questions. Writing with the needs of Theatre Studies students in mind, Robert Leach sets the Company's aims and achievements in their social, political and theatrical contexts, and explores the elements which made its success so important.

Robert Leach is a theatre scholar and a practising theatre director; he teaches acting at the Cumbria Institute for the Arts; he has taught drama at the universities of Edinburgh and Birmingham. He was a close friend of Ewan MacColl during the latter's lifetime. His many successful theatre books have concentrated on revolutionary and political theatre, most recently *Makers of Modern Theatre* (2004).

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Theatre Workshop

*Joan Littlewood and the Making of
Modern British Theatre*

Robert Leach

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Preface

I am one of those who saw *Oh What a Lovely War* when a student, and found that the experience made a difference for the rest of my life. *Oh What a Lovely War* worked on me and many like me in two dimensions: first, it enlightened us, changed our attitudes to the First World War and, as a consequence of that, helped us to re-think the narratives of history and of our own times; second, it unveiled a kind of theatre that we had never conceived of before.

It invited us to ask: who was this company that was so extremely original, so unlike anything else in the theatre of the time? Where did it come from? What was its secret? Questions that have never been properly answered.

There are probably a number of reasons for this. The company, Theatre Workshop, was an embarrassment to the arts establishment, being unconventional and original. The Arts Council never subsidised it properly, and were therefore happy for it to be forgotten. The theatre establishment, meanwhile, did not on the whole wish to understand, being more concerned with the power games of huge national companies with huge national subsidies. Theatre Workshop's politics concerned the real world, and were radically left wing, which was generally disapproved of. Besides which, Theatre Workshop's leader, Joan Littlewood, was a woman, and could therefore be ignored by the men in charge. She was disrespectful, and would swear when she was angry. And, at least in her later years, it seems she did little to assist researchers or those who might have wanted to understand what Theatre Workshop was.

Thus, no analytical study of the roles played by Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop in making modern British theatre has appeared until now. This book is therefore a first attempt to rectify this omission.

For want of such a study, a number of legends have been allowed to grow up. For instance, I know at least three actors who claim that they auditioned for Joan Littlewood at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, and tell the story of how they approached the building and saw the char scrubbing the doorstep. They asked this woman where the auditions were and were directed to the dressing rooms. Imagine their surprise on entering the stage to perform their audition piece, when they saw sitting in the stalls that very same charwoman whom they had accosted as she scrubbed the front

doorstep. It was, of course, Joan Littlewood. 'You did your audition out there' was the punchline of all these stories.

Could all my informants have had the same (unlikely) experience?

Then there are the stories of her rehearsals in which she would cry to an actor performing falsely—'I don't believe you!' And it is certain that she was fiendish for 'truth' on the stage. But that cry was actually Stanislavsky's, which has by a kind of osmosis been transferred to her in this apocrypha of 'Joan stories'.

Joan's Book, Littlewood's published memoir, may itself be part of that apocrypha. I have been warned by several of her closest associates from Theatre Workshop to treat its contents with extreme caution. They flatly deny that some of the occurrences recorded in *Joan's Book* ever actually happened. Or, it wasn't like that, they protest. I am inclined to think they are telling the truth.

Yet Theatre Workshop remains probably the single most outstanding and original company in twentieth-century British theatre history. This is partly because so much of its practice was new. For instance, Theatre Workshop insisted on its actors constantly training in their art, and undermined the 'star' system. It used a resident playwright. It battled for adequate subsidy and against censorship. It radically re-evaluated the classical repertoire, and it applied classic drama to contemporary life. It introduced the ideas of major European theorists, from Appia to Stanislavsky and Laban, to Britain and developed a technique of performance, probably derived from Meyerhold and Mikhail Chekhov, which relied on honest spontaneity, something still extremely rare in British theatre.

Theatre Workshop's achievements were in large measure due to the fearlessness and brilliance of its leader herself, Joan Littlewood. But beyond her, other members of the company also made significant marks in different, often underestimated, ways, including Ewan MacColl, Jean Newlove, Harry H. Corbett, John Bury, Howard Goorney and Gerry Raffles, whose name now attaches to the square upon which the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, stands. This book attempts to investigate and critique the work of all these, and the others who made Theatre Workshop what it was.

In completing this work, I have been assisted in many ways by many people and organisations, which I am glad to acknowledge. I received a generous research grant from the British Academy and considerable additional financial help from Cumbria Institute of the Arts, for which I am extremely grateful. I would also like to thank David Bishop, archivist at the Charles Parker Archive, Birmingham; Patrick Clark of the Arts, Languages and Literature Department of Birmingham City Library; Patrick Ward, supervisor of the Working Class Movement Library, Salford; David

Horsfield, Chris Keable and Valerie Moyes at Ruskin College Library, Oxford; Patrice Fox and Richard Workman at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, at the University of Texas in Austin; and the staff at the Theatre Museum, the Victoria & Albert Archive and Library Reading Room, Blyth House, London.

I am also greatly indebted to four people who gave me a good deal of their time and support over years, and who are now no longer alive to see the fruits of our conversations and correspondence: Ewan MacColl, especially for three days spent at Birmingham University discussing his theatre, its roots and aspirations, and for time also at his cottage in southern Scotland; Clive Barker, whose generosity in talking through ideas, discoveries and memories was unmatched; Charles Parker, for sharing his thoughts, especially on the subject of documentary; and Philip Donnellan, with whom I created 'The Red Megaphone' in November 1990. Their friendships were stimulating, and their ideas challenging. They each informed my understanding, but clearly none of them is in any way responsible for any mistakes in this book.

For permission to use the illustrations in this book, I am grateful to the Theatre Royal, Stratford East; Peter Rankin; and Jean Newlove.

I would also like to thank: all those who took part in 'The Red Megaphone' at the Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham, in November 1990; the casts and crews of my own productions of *Johnny Noble* and *Landscape with Chimneys*; Murray Melvin, for answering my questions, encouraging me, and using his position as archivist at the Theatre Royal to supply some of the most striking photographs in this book; Howard Goorney, for answering my questions, especially during the 'Red Megaphone' weekend in November 1990; Peggy Seeger, for pointing me to Ewan MacColl's plays and granting permissions; Georgia Edmondson, for obtaining photographs; Claire Atree, for stimulating conversations and meaningful insights into the plays of Ewan MacColl; John Topping, for reading and commenting on an early draft of this book; Olga Taxidou of Edinburgh University, for obtaining documents as well as for her continual intellectual challenges; Professor Maggie Gale of Birmingham University, Bella Merlin of Exeter University and Karen Bassett and Charles Mitchell of Cumbria Institute of the Arts, for support; Professor Peter Thomson for his critical support of this project; and Simon Baker and Jessica Cuthbert-Smith for firm but friendly editorial support.

Perhaps most important to the making of this book has been the support and interest given to it by Jean Newlove, keeper of the flame of Laban, a brilliant performer, choreographer and teacher, and a barely acknowledged but profound influence on Theatre Workshop's style and achievements. Her friendship over the years has been extremely important.

Finally I would like to thank my wife, Joy Parker, for her unswerving support, and for the picture of the icosohedron, without which the book would be completely indecipherable!

Chronology

<i>Year</i>	<i>Politics and society</i>	<i>Theatre, arts and culture</i>	<i>Theatre Workshop</i>
1926	General strike	Cambridge Festival Theatre founded	
1927	First NUWM Hunger March	Tom Thomas, <i>The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists</i> Piscatorbuchne, Berlin: Toller, <i>Hoppla, wir leben!</i> ; Tolstoy, <i>Rasputin</i> ; Hasek, <i>The Good Soldier Schweik</i>	
1928		Moscow Art Theatre visits London Sherriff, <i>Journey's End</i>	
1929	Labour Government elected: MacDonald PM	Griffith, <i>Red Sunday</i> , Arts Theatre Hackney Red Radio debut, <i>Strike Up!</i>	
1930			
1931	MacDonald rejects Labour, forms 'National' government, wins election	<i>The Spirit of Invergordon</i> Moussinac, <i>The New Movement in the Theatre</i> BBC Radio: <i>Crisis in Spain</i> <i>Red Stage</i> first published	May Day: Red Mega- phones debut performance
1932	Unemployed total: 3.5 million F.D. Roosevelt US president 200,000 attend Hunger March rally Lancashire cotton industry strike	Group Theatre founded 1st National Congress of Workers' Theatre Movement	Red Megaphones support striking cotton workers
1933	Hitler Chancellor of Germany	Terence Gray resigns from Cambridge Festival Theatre WTM activists at Moscow Workers' Theatre Olympiad	
1934	Gresford Colliery disaster British Union of Fascists founded	Left Theatre founded	Red Megaphones dissolved Joan Littlewood in Man- chester, meets Ewan MacColl Theatre of Action formed: <i>Newsboy, Waiting for Lefty</i>

Year	Politics and society	Theatre, arts and culture	Theatre Workshop
1935	Peace Pledge Union formed National Government wins election Italy invades Abyssinia Comintern calls for 'united front'	BBC Radio: Brecht-Weill, <i>The Tupenny-Ha'penny Opera</i> 'Grand Re-opening' of Theatre Royal, Stratford East	Toller, <i>Draw the Fires</i> , Manchester
1936	First Moscow 'show trial' 'The Battle of Cable Street' Outbreak of Spanish Civil War	Auden & Isherwood, <i>The Dog Beneath the Skin</i> , Group Theatre Unity Theatre, Left Book Club founded	Chlumberg, <i>Miracle at Verdun</i> , Peace Pledge Union Theatre Union founded
1937	Japan invades China	M. Slater, <i>Towards Tomorrow</i> , Wembley Stanislavsky, <i>An Actor Prepares</i>	da Vega, <i>Fuente Ovejuna</i> , Manchester
1938	<i>Anschluss</i> : Germany annexes Austria By-election victory of 'Peace' candidate, Bridgwater, Somerset		Hasek/MacColl, <i>The Good Soldier Schweik</i> , Manchester
1939	Franco's Fascists take power in Spain Germany occupies Czechoslovakia Germany invades Poland: World War	Pilgrim Players founded	
1940	Chamberlain resigns: Churchill PM German 'Blitz' on Britain	CEMA founded: grants £150 to Pilgrim Players	Theatre Union, <i>Last Edition</i> , banned
1941	Germany invades Soviet Russia Japan attacks Pearl Harbor	Adelphi Players founded	MacColl/Littlewood, <i>Classic Soil</i>
1942	Beveridge Plan published		Theatre Union disbanded
1943			
1944	Education Act Battle of Stalingrad Normandy landings	Compass Players founded	
1945	Death of Roosevelt: Truman US president End of Second World War Labour government elected: Attlee PM Hiroshima and Nagasaki atom bombed	David Horne takes lease of Theatre Royal, Stratford East Adelphi Guild Players founded	Theatre Workshop formed, Kendal, then touring MacColl, <i>Johnny Noble</i> , Molière, <i>The Flying Doctor</i> ; Lorca, <i>Don Perlimpin</i>
1946	Labour government begins to build British atom bomb Coal industry nationalised	Rattigan, <i>The Winslow Boy</i> CEMA becomes the Arts Council	MacColl, <i>Uranium 235</i> Theatre Workshop perform at Butlin's, Filey

Year	Politics and society	Theatre, arts and culture	Theatre Workshop
1946 <i>cont</i>			Arts Council rejects Theatre Workshop application for subsidy Littlewood meets Rudolf Laban
1947	Fuel crisis Cripps becomes chancellor of exchequer	Rodgers & Hammerstein, <i>Oklahoma!</i> , London Stewart, <i>Men Should Weep</i> , Glasgow Unity Theatre, <i>Golden Boy</i> , S. Wales tour First Edinburgh People's Festival Gorelik, <i>New Theatres for Old</i>	Jean Newlove joins Theatre Workshop Theatre Workshop tours West Germany Theatre Workshop propose Theatre Centre, Liverpool Nelson Illingworth teaches voice
1948	Communists seize power in Czechoslovakia National Health Service founded Berlin blockade	McLeish, <i>The Gorbals Story</i> , Glasgow Unity Society for Theatre Research founded National Theatre Conference Fry, <i>The Lady's Not for Burning</i>	Theatre Workshop temporarily disbands MacColl, <i>The Other Animals</i> Theatre Workshop tours Czechoslovakia and Sweden
1949	Communists seize power in China USSR tests nuclear bomb		Littlewood, <i>Alice in Wonderland</i> Theatre Workshop first appear at Edinburgh People's Festival
1950	Labour win election with reduced majority Outbreak of Korean War	Theatre Royal, Stratford East, becomes 'tryout' venue for new musicals	Theatre Workshop temporarily disbands New policy: one-night stands as far as possible
1951	Conservative Government elected Burgess and MacLean flee to Moscow Timothy Evans hanged		MacColl, <i>Landscape with Chimneys</i> Theatre Workshop tours Sweden
1952	George VI dies; accession of Elizabeth II D. Eisenhower US president Britain explodes its own atom bomb		MacColl, <i>The Travellers Uranium 235</i> at Embassy Theatre, Swiss Cottage
1953	Death of Stalin Conquest of Mt Everest Coronation of Elizabeth II End of Korean War	<i>Plays and Players</i> founded	Theatre Workshop takes lease of Theatre Royal, Stratford East Shakespeare, <i>Twelfth Night</i> ; Houghton, <i>Hindle Wakes</i> ; Jonson, <i>The Alchemist</i> ; etc.

Year	Politics and society	Theatre, arts and culture	Theatre Workshop
1954	Commercial television in Britain	David Scase appointed Director of Manchester Library Theatre Tynan appointed <i>Observer</i> theatre critic English Stage Company formed	Shakespeare, <i>Richard II</i> ; Marston, <i>The Dutch Courtesan</i> ; Shaw, <i>The Devil's Disciple</i> ; Ibsen, <i>An Enemy of the People</i> ; Anon, <i>Arden of Faversham</i> ; MacColl/Hasek, <i>The Good Soldier Schweik</i> Arts Council gives Theatre Workshop £150 subsidy
1955	Churchill resigns as PM Conservatives win election: Eden PM Ruth Ellis hanged	<i>Waiting for Godot</i> , Arts Theatre <i>Richard II</i> , Old Vic	Jonson, <i>Volpone</i> Paris Theatre Festival: <i>Volpone</i> , <i>Arden of Faversham</i> Brecht, <i>Mother Courage</i>
1956	First Aldermarston march Khrushchev denounces Stalin's 'Cult of Personality' Introduction of Premium Bonds Visit of Bulganin and Khrushchev House of Commons votes to abolish hanging Suez: Britain, France and Israel invade Egypt USSR invades Hungary	Osborne, <i>Look Back in Anger</i> , Royal Court Unity Theatre, <i>World on Edge</i> Berliner Ensemble visits London	Marlowe, <i>Edward II</i> ; Behan, <i>The Quare Fellow</i> Tour of Scandinavia: <i>Arden of Faversham</i> Theatre Workshop temporarily closed Arts Council subsidy: £500 Paris Theatre Festival: <i>The Good Soldier Schweik</i>
1957	Eden resigns: Macmillan PM Sputnik launched	Rattigan, <i>Variation on a Theme</i>	Shakespeare, <i>Macbeth</i> ; Chapman, <i>You Won't Always Be on Top</i> East European tour: <i>Macbeth</i>
1958	CND founded	Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, opened MacColl, <i>Ballad of John Axon</i> : first Radio Ballad (last Radio Ballad, 1964) Wesker, <i>Chicken Soup with Barley</i> , Royal Court Theatre Arts Council subsidy to Royal Court Theatre: £5,500	Delaney, <i>A Taste of Honey</i> ; Behan, <i>The Hostage</i> West Ham Council increases grant to Theatre Workshop Arts Council threatens to remove subsidy; Theatre Workshop temporarily closed; re-opens when subsidy is restored Theatre Workshop loses court case to Lord Chamberlain
1959	Conservatives win election		Norman, <i>Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be</i> ; Mankowitz, <i>Make Me An Offer</i> Paris Theatre Festival: <i>The Hostage</i>

Year	Politics and society	Theatre, arts and culture	Theatre Workshop
1960	J.F. Kennedy US president Gagarin first man in space	Royal Shakespeare Company founded Arts Council subsidy to Royal Court Theatre: £8,000 'Fun Palace' first proposed	Saroyan, <i>Sam, the Highest Jumper of Them All</i> ; Jonson, <i>Every Man in His Humour</i> ; Lewis, <i>Sparrers Can't Sing</i> ; Owen, <i>Progress to the Park</i> Paris Theatre Festival: <i>Every Man in His Humour</i> Arts Council subsidy: £2,000 <i>Fings Ain't Wot They Used</i> <i>T'Be</i> Evening Standard Best Musical
1961		E15 Acting School opened Centre 42 Wellingborough Festival	Joan Littlewood leaves Theatre Workshop Theatre Workshop suspended
1962	Philby flees to Moscow Macmillan sacks a third of cabinet	BBCTV: <i>That Was the Week That Was</i> BBC Radio: <i>The Long Long Trail</i> Centre 42: five festivals Peter Cheeseman appointed Director, Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent	
1963	Britain's application to join Common Market rejected Profumo scandal Great Train Robbery Macmillan resigns: Home PM Kennedy assassinated: Johnson US president	National Theatre founded MacColl, <i>Ours the Fruit</i> , Drury Lane RSC, <i>Wars of the Roses</i> , designed by John Bury	Theatre Workshop reconstituted: <i>Oh What a Lovely War</i>
1964	Labour wins election: Wilson PM Khrushchev ousted in USSR	<i>The Jolly Potters</i> , Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent: first 'Stoke documentary' (last Stoke documentary, 1974) Joan Littlewood forms Fun Palace Trust	Shakespeare, <i>Henry IV</i> <i>Oh What a Lovely War</i> in New York
1965	Death penalty abolished	Tynan, 'The Royal Smut Hound' Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, forms first Theatre in Education company RSC, <i>Hamlet</i> and <i>The Homecoming</i> , both designed by John Bury	Joan Littlewood in Tunisia

<i>Year</i>	<i>Politics and society</i>	<i>Theatre, arts and culture</i>	<i>Theatre Workshop</i>
1966	Labour wins second election	Berliner Ensemble visits London	
1967	Devaluation of the pound		Farson, <i>The Marie Lloyd Story</i>
1968	'Prague Spring' crushed by USSR 'Les événements', Paris Assassinations of R.F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King R. Nixon US president	Lord Chamberlain's power to censor plays abolished MacColl, <i>Festival of Fools</i> (annual review: last Festival 1974) AgitProp Information Service established	Joan Littlewood in India
1969			
1970	Conservatives win election: Heath PM Conference on Women's Liberation		Ken Hill director of Theatre Workshop
1971		7:84 Theatre Company formed Women's Street Theatre Group formed	
1972	Miners' strike		
1973	Second miners' strike: 3-day week	Red Ladder Theatre Company formed Women's Theatre Festival McGrath, <i>The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black Black Oil</i> , 7:84 Company John Bury, head of design, National Theatre	Rankin, <i>So You Want to Be in Pictures</i> G. Raffles resigns as general manager
1974	Two elections: Labour wins: Wilson PM	Banner Theatre of Actuality formed	
1975		Monstrous Regiment Theatre formed John Bury, chairman, Society of British Theatre Designers	Death of Gerry Raffles Maxwell Shaw director of Theatre Workshop
1976	Wilson resigns: Callaghan PM		Clare Venables director of Theatre Workshop
1977			
1978			Theatre Workshop dissolved
1979	Conservatives win election: Thatcher PM		
1982		7:84 'Clydebuilt' season, includes production of <i>Johnny Noble</i>	
1988		John McGrath resigns from 7:84 Theatre Company	

PART ONE

Before Theatre Workshop, 1926–45

Politics and Performance

CHAPTER ONE

Class Against Class

The 1926 General Strike was a marvellous ‘performance’. It had almost no direct political impact, but it conveyed a whiff of revolution and exposed the smooth betrayal of the workers by their political and trade union leaders. Its enactment set the political stage for the next decade or more, when politics was often best understood as performance: the Jarrow ‘Crusade’, the ritualised mass signing of ‘Peace Pledge’ cards, even Ramsay MacDonald’s Palace Revolution, a sort of Shakespearean usurpation, after which, he claimed, ‘every Duchess in England would want to kiss me’. During the General Strike, the participants played (and watched) cricket, went to concerts and attended theatrical performances. But the reality of capitalism remained, along with its crisis and the depression of the workers.

In the deepening slump, the working class were apparently ‘extras’, largely unable to influence what was happening. They were too exhausted by a home life of poverty in perhaps a two-room slum with a shared outdoor privy, and racked by disease—polio, diphtheria, tuberculosis and rickets. At work, ‘rationalisation’ was the vogue word: it meant processes speeded up, multiple sackings and wage cuts. The depression lent life a ‘quality of fatality’, made it seem an almost ‘impersonal calamity’.¹

Yet working-class life was not without its drama, as Ewan MacColl discovered. The factory where his father worked was

An awesome, exciting place. The glare of the open furnace bathes everything in a fiery glow, the heaps of sand on the floor, the iron rails with the bogies on them and the giant ladles. And there is the noise, the scream of compressed air from the fettling room, the sustained roar of the furnaces, the clank of metal and the rattle of steel chains as the overhead gantry lowers its grab for a tub of newly tapped molten metal. Then a hooter sounds. ‘Stand back there,’ says my father as he pushes me against a wall, ‘don’t move!’ And suddenly the air is filled with a swirling mass of yellow cloud. For a minute or two I am convinced that I am choking to death. As it begins to clear the moulders and their apprentices appear like devils struggling through the flames of hell. One of them pulls me to him and gives me a quick hug. His shirt smells scorched. It is my father, though he looks different here in the foundry.²

It was not the same kind of performance as that of politics, but it was not necessarily less dramatic. More tragic were the accidents at work, which often devastated working-class lives. The lack of any sort of National Insurance provision or employers' liability—the reason for MacColl's father's anxiety for his son—greatly intensified the suffering. When 265 miners and three rescuers were killed in a terrible pit disaster at Gresford Colliery in North Wales in 1934, those left behind had no recourse to compensation, despite a spirited performance on their behalf—and for no fee—by Sir Stafford Cripps, a left-wing barrister who put their case to the official inquiry. The truth was recorded in a grim folk ballad of the time:

A fortnight before the explosion,
To the shotfirer Tomlinson cried,
'If you fire that shot we'll be all blown to hell,'
And no-one can say that he lied.

The fireman's reports they are missing,
The records of forty-two days;
The colliery manager had them destroyed
To cover his criminal ways.

The Lord Mayor of London's collecting
To help both our children and wives.
The owners have sent some white lilies
To pay for the poor colliers' lives.³

After 1926, the overwhelming majority of working-class people, when they thought of politics, probably thought of themselves as 'Labour'. But the Communist Party, which had been founded in 1920 in the wake of the Russian Revolution, seemed an increasing threat to this allegiance. The struggle between the two groupings was fierce and lasted until the Second World War. Labour tried to purge the movement of Communists, while the Communists labelled Labour members 'social fascists' and promulgated a policy of 'class against class'. When Labour won the election of 1929, the working class, and especially the poor, looked to the new government for relief. They got little. In August 1931, the prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, discarded Labour in favour of the Conservatives and his duchesses. 'Class against class', indeed!

That September, in economic crisis, the now 'National' government cut the wages of—among others—the armed forces. Immediately, large numbers of naval ratings stationed at Invergordon, apparently organised by Communists, mutinied. They held a series of meetings and effectively went on strike. The government was forced to backtrack, there was a run on the pound, and MacDonald, perhaps panicking, called a general election. The incident was to stimulate a popular workers' drama, *The Spirit*

of *Invergordon*, but the election results did not justify such progressive hopes. MacDonald's *soi-disant* 'National' government was returned with 551 MPs. The combined opposition totalled 57 MPs.

With Labour thus enfeebled, the 1930s seemed a decade of opportunity for the Communists. Their membership, a little over 2,000 in 1930, rose steadily to reach nearly 20,000 by 1939. To people who were idealistic and angry about the ongoing situation, Communism offered the apparently real dream of belonging to a movement that was changing the world. Many were proud of their membership of the Comintern, were inspired by Russia, and supported all the contacts with the Soviet Union that could be arranged. These were often cultural and theatrical—the Russian Ballet visited Britain, the films of Eisenstein and Pudovkin found dedicated minority followings, and when the Moscow Art Theatre visited London in 1928 even *The Times* was excited by its ensemble, commenting on the 'quality of collective understanding conveyed to the audience in a group of performances so fused in imagination that they give an impression of one performance, not of an aggregate of personal achievements'.⁴ The Communist theory, propagated in the newly established *Daily Worker*, was that economic strikes would lead to political strikes, which in turn would lead to revolution. Consequently, though few in number, Communists were always to be found at the battlefront of the class war, and they added a noisy, flamboyant, even theatrical, element to the workers' struggles.

Most significantly, many Communists fought alongside the unemployed, whose numbers inexorably rose to one and a half million at the end of 1929, and then dramatically to over three and a half million by the middle of 1932. The government seemed powerless against this, and when a delegation of the unemployed visited the Ministry of Labour in 1929, they were ejected by the police. But unemployment was real enough, and terrible enough. It meant genuine hunger, a feeling of uselessness, and exclusion from the social and cultural life of the community. 'Nothing to do with time; nothing to spend; nothing to do tomorrow nor the day after; nothing to wear; can't get married. A living corpse; a unit of the spectral army of three million lost men.'⁵ George Orwell calculated that two million unemployed men meant effectively over ten million persons underfed.

The Communists organised the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM), though they struggled to keep control of it: Wal Hannington, the NUWM leader, sat on the party's Central Committee for most of the 1920s and 1930s, except between 1932 and 1935. The NUWM demanded 'work or full maintenance', and by 1932 it boasted 37,000 members, paying fourpence per month in 386 branches. A prime function of NUWM was to reduce out-of-work men's personal and social

alienation, and to provide mutual support for each other. They held meetings, organised educational activities and mounted demonstrations, for instance outside labour exchanges after Lord Trenchard, chief commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, banned them from meeting there. As a consequence, pitched battles between police and unemployed workers were fought across London for weeks.

They particularly protested against the cruelty and humiliation of the means test, an extraordinarily intrusive way of judging an unemployed person's circumstances, but without the results of which no 'dole' could be paid. Its potency may be judged by the case of a man named Taylor, whose body was found in December 1932 in the Birmingham canal. At the inquest,

The widow said that her husband had been very depressed and nervous on account of being out of work. There had been a decided change in his condition since 12 November when he had to go before the means test committee in connection with his benefit. A son said his father's benefit had been reduced under the means test, from 27s 3d per week to 10s 9d. The coroner in recording a verdict of 'suicide whilst temporarily insane,' said, 'This man's worries following a "means test" provided the last push sufficient to make him temporarily insane and in that state he threw himself into the canal.'⁶

Situations such as this were repeated many times.

In response, the NUWM organised 'Hunger Marches', the first in 1927, but with increasing efficiency and impressiveness over the following eight years. In January 1929 they marched from Scotland to London, gathering supporters all the way. In March and April 1930, marchers converged on the capital from all over Britain. At the end of the 1932 march, over 200,000 people attended the final rally in Trafalgar Square. The marches were colourful, raucous and theatrical, especially at the rallies held along the way and at the climax of the event. There were bands, banners and a scaffold stage for the speakers bedecked with bunting, slogans and flags. The marchers sang songs, the 'Internationale', the 'Red Flag', and others such as (to the tune of 'The Youthful Guardsman'):

From Scotland we are marching,
 From shipyard, mill and mine,
 Our scarlet banners raise on high,
 We toilers are in line.
 For victory we'll fight: we'll show the enemy our might.
Chorus: We are the Hunger Marchers of the Proletariat,
 We are the Hunger Marchers of the Proletariat.⁷

These demonstrations roused the ire of their opponents, and street battles between police and the unemployed were vicious but regular occurrences

across Britain. Thus, in the autumn of 1932, bloody battles were fought in Liverpool and Birkenhead, West Ham, Belfast and other places in September; in October, police, backed by Coldstream Guards, attacked over 100,000 demonstrators in Hyde Park, and there were further battles in Trafalgar Square and across London. In Glasgow, 50,000 unemployed fought with police all day on 1 October. The battle lasted till midnight, and flared again next day. In Birkenhead

The police, without any apparent reason, made a baton charge. Unemployed and employed workers stood their ground, and one policeman was thrown through a plate-glass window. The crowd took up the offensive and the police were ultimately compelled to run; but they rallied again, and a pitched battle ensued. Workers tore up railings to defend themselves and the fighting went on until past eleven at night, thirty-seven policemen being carried to hospital. Most of the wounded among the workers were taken into the homes of their class to have their wounds dressed, in order that they should not be marked for police arrest.⁸

If it sounds like the Wars of the Roses, it was certainly as violent, and as dramatic.