The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933-1945

Nina Fishman

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1933–45

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Nina Fishman

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To my father and mother and the men and women who fought the economic struggle, who were generous with their time and memories, from whom I have learned and come to admire greatly.

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List of Abbreviations

ACM	Amalgamation Committee Movement
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers
ASLEF	Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
ASSNC	Aircraft Shop Stewards' National Council
AST	Amalgamated Society of Toolmakers
ASW	Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers
AScW	Association of Scientific Workers
ATTI	Association of Teachers in Technical Institutions
AUBTW	Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers
BDC	Biennial Delegate Conference
B&MM	National Society of Brass and Metal Mechanics
BSP	British Socialist Party
CAWU	Clerical and Administrative Workers' Union
CBC	Central Bus Committee of the Transport and General Workers' Union
CGT	Confederation Generale du Travail
Confed.	Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Trade Unions
Comintern	Communist International
CPGB / CP	Communist Party of Great Britain
CWC	Clyde Workers' Committee
DMA	Durham Miners' Association
DPC	District Party Committee of the CPGB
EATSSNC	Engineering and Allied Trades Shop Stewards National Council
EEF	Engineering Employers' Federation
ESC	English Steel Corporation
ETU	Electrical Trades Union
FKCMA	Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan Mineworkers' Association
the Fed	South Wales Miners' Federation (also described as the Federation and the SWMF)
F&GP	Finance & General Purposes Committee
GEC	General Executive Council
ILO	International Labour Organisation

ILP	Independent Labour Party
Inprecorr	International Press Correspondence
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
JPC	Joint Production Committee
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (German Communist Party)
LCC	London County Council
LGOC	London General Omnibus Company
LMU	Lanarkshire Miners' Union
LPC	Local Party Committee of the CPGB
LPTB	London Passenger Transport Board
LRD	Labour Research Department
MFGB	Miners' Federation of Great Britain
MMM	Metalworkers' Minority Movement
NAUL	National Amalgamated Union of Labour
NMA	Nottinghamshire Miners' Association
NMIU	Nottinghamshire and District Miners' Industrial Union
NMM	National Minority Movement
'non'	non-trade unionist
'non-pol'	non-political trade union
NPWU	National Passenger Workers' Union
NUDAW	National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers
NUGMW	National Union of General and Municipal Workers
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
NUT	National Union of Teachers
NUTGW	National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers
NUSMW	National Union of Scottish Mineworkers
NUVB	National Union of Vehicle Builders
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers Movement
ODD	Organising Divisional Delegate of the AEU
PCF	Parti Communiste Francais (French Communist Party)
PCI	Partito Communista Italiano (Italian Communist Party)
PEP	Political and Economic Planning
Politburo	Political Bureau of the CPGB ('inner cabinet')
RILU	Red International of Labour Unions
RIRO	Regional Industrial Relations Officer (title given to the Ministry of Labour chief regional Conciliation Officers during the 1939–45 war)
RTUO	Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SDP	(British) Social Democratic Party
SLP	Socialist Labour Party

SMW	National Union of Sheet Metal Workers and Braziers
SPGB	Socialist Party of Great Britain
STC	Standard Telephone Company
SWMF	South Wales Miners' Federation (also referred to as 'the Fed' and the Federation)
SWMIU	South Wales Miners' Industrial Union
SWML	South Wales Miners' Library
TGWU T&G	Transport and General Workers' Union
TMM	Transport Minority Movement
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UMS	United Mineworkers of Scotland
UMWA	United Machine Workers' Association
USSR Soviet Union	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UVW	United Vehicle Builders
VIAS	Voluntary Industrial Aid for Spain
WU	Workers' Union
WIL	Workers' International League
YCL	Young Communist League
YMA	Yorkshire Miners' Association

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This book is based on my PhD research, which began in 1976. Initially, I wanted to investigate the Joint Production Committees (JPCs), which were established in British engineering factories during 1941–2 as part of the war effort in which Communists were reputed to have played a leading role. I knew about Coventry JPCs from a friend whose father, an enterprising local journalist, had worked in a war factory and become friendly with the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) District Officer, Jack Jones. My friend retold his dad's stories in the reverent tone normally reserved for wartime exploits of relatives who had been fighter pilots.

As a product of the post-war baby boom, I was intensely curious about wartime events. Within my own time horizon, the 1939–45 war formed an absolute watershed. I was interested in industrial democracy and assumed that JPCs had produced qualitative, if temporary, changes in workplace relations during their heroic wartime existence. I was keen to find out what Communist activists had been doing on them and how they had affected the balance of power on the factory floor.

Professor Eric Hobsbawm agreed to supervise my research but suggested that I should begin looking at Communists, factories and trade unions six years earlier, in 1933. He pointed to the revival in trade union membership in that year and observed that Communist activists' role should be viewed from this longer perspective. I set out accordingly to discover what and why Party members had been doing in British trade unions between 1933 and 1945. I was greatly assisted by making early contact with Communist veterans of the 'economic struggle' who gave generously of their time, hospitality and memories. The networks of Party activists which had been forged in the 1930s were still functioning well in the 1970s and I found that one interview soon led to another.

Given the vicissitudes of research, I found myself immersed in this fascinating past for nearly a generation. This has included reliving events over and over as the men and women who had made them happen recalled them. It is not surprising that I have assimilated much of their idiom. I am well aware that my prose may seem anachronistic to many readers. I have tried to compensate, for example by adding inverted commas to the 'economic struggle' and 'rank-and-file' when I remember. I was somewhat reassured by Lord Taylor of Mansfield's unselfconscious use of 'economic struggle' and 'revolt' to describe the same economic conflicts.[1] The pervasive martial terminology of British trade union cul-

ture coincides with the era of militarism and total war in Europe and would repay a more scholarly examination by a semiologist.

I have used 'the Party' throughout to denote the Communist Party. This idiomatic contraction gained wide currency in the 1930s and 1940s among people who were interested in politics and participated in the culture of the 'working class movement'. For these labour/trade union activists, the CPGB was '*the* Party' because it extracted and expected rigorous and almost secret things from its members. As the General Secretary Harry Pollitt ruefully remarked in 1935: 'We still believe it is better to have "a small party of the elect" of those "we can rely on in a crisis" than to have a mass party of the workers.'[2]

It seems not only convenient but also meet to continue using this idiom with all its Calvinist connotations. This aspect of Party membership is one of the unusual sides of British Communism which we shall explore in Chapter 8. I have usually used the contemporary term used by Party members to describe their Party leadership, the Anglicized bolshevik terminology Party Centre. (I have sometimes adopted the contemporary idiom of King Street, the place in Covent Garden, London, where the Communist Party's national headquarters were located throughout 1933–45.)

My research fell somewhat awkwardly between two historiographical specialisms, labour and political history. Moreover, while there is an ample literature on inter-war and wartime economic history, there was a comparative paucity of research on interwar collective bargaining and trade unions on which to draw. I found myself involved in making some provisional judgements about engineering collective bargaining in particular which I am aware need more rigorous examination.

In the arena of political history, the Communist Party has been particularly ill served. British political history is almost exclusively Westminster-centred, and the British Communist Party has only had two MPs during its entire span. Henry Pelling's standard account of the Party was written in 1958, when the Cold War was still frozen and before any research into the Comintern and other Communist Parties afforded standards for comparison.[3] The excellent histories by L.J. Macfarlane and Roderick Martin do not go beyond 1929 and 1933 respectively.[4] I was forced to rely almost exclusively on primary sources for the political aspect of my research.

Perusal of the meagre store of secondary sources soon revealed two opposing mythologies which effectively obstructed my attempts at accurate historical vision. Communist mythology placed the Party and its doughty Communist/trade union heroes 'behind' every serious trade union struggle during the 1930s and the war. It pervaded the official histories and many Party veterans' autobiographies. Labour mythology

offered a ritual denunciation of the Party's inflated claims and then descended into demonology within which Party activists appeared as the unscrupulous perpetrators of notorious strikes.[5] They were a duplicitous and tiny minority of highly motivated men and women who unaccountably contrived to disrupt trade union affairs.

The Labour mythology is found in standard histories of the inter-war and war periods, and autobiographies and biographies of trade union leaders. Communist Party activists are usually conspicuous by their absence from day-to-day life, the basic rhythms of existence and the varied vicissitudes of British trade unions. When Lord Taylor of Mansfield wrote his autobiography, he gave the official strike of the Nottinghamshire Miners' Association (NMA) at Harworth in the Nottinghamshire coalfield in 1937 pride of place.The strike was formally a conflict with the pit's owners, Barber-Walker. In fact it was also a pitched battle again the 'breakaway' union formed by Labour MP George Spencer in the wake of the General Strike. In retrospect, the strike seemed to Taylor to be perhaps the most portentous event in which he had participated. He told its story without mentioning the Communist Party. He wrote about Mick Kane, the President of the Harworth NMA lodge without informing the reader that he was a Party member. Nor did he offer any mature reflections about the important role which the Party's support networks, publications and other activists played in sustaining the dispute.

Similarly, Kenneth O. Morgan in an essay on the Labour leader Jim Griffiths, discusses his prominent part in the 1934–45 strikes in South Wales without once mentioning the other prominent roles played by Communist Party activists. This notable omission may be a reaction against the recent official history of the South Wales Miners' Federation by Hywel Francis and David Smith which reproduces much Communist mythology and devotes little space to Griffiths. Nevertheless, the reader of both books is left in some confusion about whether they are really addressing the same sequence of events.[6]

The difficulty for the scholar is that Communist and Labour mythologies are each accurate in some respects. They would not have survived otherwise. Party activists did play a unique and significant role in economic conflict between 1933–45 although, as we shall see, it was not always the part which Communist mythology and official histories assigned them. If Party activists are excised from accounts of inter-war collective bargaining and trade union organization, that history becomes distorted.

Party activists remained a small minority of trade union members. They nevertheless came to hold a substantial proportion of lay union positions and won increasing numbers of full-time positions up to 1945.

They were often the most skilled and capable leaders available on the ground. One of the carefully camouflaged parts of Party history is the rigorous self-selection which marked recruiting to the Communist Party. Despite the Party Centre's continued dedication to the goal of making the CPGB a mass Party, veteran Party activists discouraged indiscriminate recruiting. They felt that the hardships imposed by Communists' 'daily mass work' required people who were like themselves, who had emerged from the trials of life and learned the art of discernment in their judgements.

The most prominent union leader in the 1930s, TGWU General Secretary Ernest Bevin, publicly fulminated against the subversive activities of the Communist Party. But Bevin also worked with Party members daily and relied on their efforts on the shopfloor to recruit more union members.[7] Pragmatic union officials' behaviour was marked by tolerance and trust towards Communists. They recognized well enough the veracity of Harry Pollitt's New Year statement in 1937. He appealed to 'the tens of thousands of militants' who were in 'complete agreement' with the Communist programme but were not joining the Party: 'If they would only realise that joining the Communist Party does not mean *weakening* the Labour Party, the trade union or co-operative organisation in which they are already working, but will actually *strengthen* it.'[8]

Pollitt's *cri de coeur* was accurate. From 1931, he and his close colleague at the Party Centre, Johnny Campbell, had moulded the Party's attitude towards the 'economic struggle' to ensure that its members were trade union loyalists and activists. Moreover, Pollitt and Campbell were willing positively to enforce their injunction to union loyalty on members who proved sometimes reluctant to accept its strictures. As we shall see, however, they took care to hide this aspect of their approach.

* * *

The opening chapters describe the evolution of the British Communist Party's approach to trade unions and the 'economic struggle'. In 1930, faced with the Party's increasing isolation from the organized working class, Harry Pollitt and Johnny Campbell began a determined effort to guide Party members into undertaking their prescribed daily Communist duties of 'mass work' inside trade unions, as lay officials and activists. Their vision of Communist trade union activists was highly contentious inside the Party leadership. They had the firm backing of a group of contemporaries who like themselves had risen to prominence in the foundation years of the Party, the pragmatic proletarian cohort, including Willie Gallacher, Arthur Horner, Wally Hannington and Bob Lovell.

This cohort keenly supported Pollitt's and Campbell's arguments about the need for Communists to become shop stewards and lead mundane factory 'economic struggle'. Their support at the Party Centre was reinforced by other members who were working on the ground, such as Joe Scott, Claude Berridge and George Crane, who had similar political and trade union backgrounds and whom we will frequently encounter leading industrial conflict. These activists also were tireless in organizing trade union branch and district activity. They moved steadily up the hierarchy of trade union office. They were responsible for the successful implementation of Pollitt's and Campbell's injunctions.

I have focused on Harry Pollitt and Johnny Campbell when examining the development of the Communist Party leadership's attitude to trade unions and 'the economic struggle'. The evidence shows that by 1930 Pollitt and Campbell had become the key figures in formulating and overseeing Party policy towards trade unions. They proved particularly apt and increasingly adept. They shared a common socialization in socialist and trade union culture with the founding cohort of Party working-class activists in the 'economic struggle'. Their reflexes and impulses were usually representative of a critical mass inside the Party who came to accord these two men an increasingly strong loyalty.

Throughout his tenure at the Party Centre, Harry Pollitt laboured under a keen sense of his own intellectual inferiority. He was unfailing in acknowledging a personal debt to Palme Dutt for keeping him from straying from the Marxist straight and narrow. But Pollitt actually had no need to become fluent in Marxism. Indeed, by remaining regretfully inured to theory, his excellent political pragmatic reflexes could operate unimpeded. His supposed mental block clearly had great practical utility. One wonders when he recognized that he was often the one who discovered the 'correct' answer to a difficult problem, and that solutions rarely originated from the Party intellectuals who were adept at manipulating the Marxist–Leninist canon.

Johnny Campbell found the ideological cement with which to bind members to Party policy. This was a particularly difficult job as collective bargaining in Britain appeared to be taking a most 'reformist' course. He combined a command of Marxist dialectic with an unrelenting will to achieve practical results. His fluent Marxist defences of apparently common sense policies which were not 'revolutionary' ensured his indispensability. His writing illuminated a bolshevik approach in contradistinction to earlier left-sectarianism.

Pollitt contributed to the developing partnership exceptional personal charisma, Utopian socialist oratory, and a shrewd grasp of the realities of trade union organization and the 'economic struggle'. Campbell became habituated to translating Pollitt's emotional and subjective reactions,

rendering them into effective policy and propaganda. He developed great skill in giving Pollitt's pragmatic, often reflexive, responses to the British 'economic struggle' an ideological shape which conformed to Comintern strictures while retaining and communicating their crucial practical content.[9]

Pollitt learned to trust Campbell's judgements about how to manœuvre Party policy between often conflicting views coming from Party activists about how to wage the 'economic struggle': more or less militantly, in expeditious retreat or epic struggle. Despite the evidence, however, received Party mythology does not view Pollitt and Campbell as a duo. This may explain why non-Party historians, with the exception of Macfarlane, failed to discern the partnership.

Macfarlane observed Pollitt's and Campbell's growing combined effectiveness and concerted efforts to keep the CPGB from left extremes in 1926–8. He concluded that the firm alliance between the two had developed during this time.[10] The strength of the bond between them is reflected in Pollitt's decision to purchase a house in the same road as the Campbell family when they moved to Lodore Gardens in Colindale, north-west London, in the late 1920s. The two men would often spend their evenings in the local pub, deep in discussion. Douglas Hyde confirmed that their working relationship had continued to be habitually close and mutually reliant.[11]

Pollitt and Campbell worked with a strong sense of urgency. They possessed the advantages of youth: abundant reserves of energy, ambition and optimism. They had both become committed to socialist revolution and belief in its inevitability through their pre-war membership of the British Socialist Party (BSP). Their experiences in the industrial conflict which accompanied the 1914–18 war and its aftermath and the inspiration provided by the Russian revolution and the bolshevik seizure of power served to deepen their commitment to revolution and cement the new bond to Lenin's Third Communist International.

The task which Pollitt and Campbell set themselves was to make the Communist Party a major force inside trade unions and in the leadership of the 'economic struggle'. Following bolshevik doctrine and their own perception of the balance of class forces in Britain, they were certain that the terrain on which the fight for state power would take place was the factory floor and pit bottom. They were also convinced that trade unions provided the sturdy foundation of the proletarian new model army.

Communists needed to be in a pivotal position throughout the trade union movement. They had to transform their workplaces into 'factory fortresses' of class power from which they would be called on to lead the masses of organized workers in executing the difficult manœuvre which the bolsheviks had shown was eminently feasible. They would move

from fighting partial 'economic struggle' to demanding the seizure of state power and a socialist State. The trade unions would become a vehicle for revolution.

In 1930, when Pollitt and Campbell began to articulate and form this vision, their belief in the efficacy of trade unions as serviceable vessels for Communist activity was coming back into favour at the centre of the Communist International (Comintern). The Comintern was interested in results. Its officials wanted Communist Parties with increasing membership and influence and a strong track record of leading the class struggle. Pollitt's and Campbell's extreme leftwing rivals at the British Party centre, whom I have described as Young Turks, failed dismally to deliver these goods. Accordingly, the Comintern switched horses and backed Pollitt's and Campbell's more pragmatic approach. The results were notably better and the two men used the Comintern's approval to consolidate their hold on the Party leadership.

Contrary to conventional assumptions, the British Communist Party leadership had already moved leftwards in late 1926, *before* the Comintern had enunciated Class Against Class. Concern over the growing gulf between the Party and trade union activists impelled the leadership to begin a centrewards turn during 1928. Their attempt to position the Party at the heart of the organized working class was temporarily overwhelmed in the spring of 1929 by the Comintern's support for the Young Turks who argued that CPGB's problems stemmed from not operating Independent Leadership rigorously enough.

We shall examine how Pollitt and Campbell integrated their new approach to the 'economic struggle' into Party members' practice. The slow but steady recovery of the British economy during 1933–34 from the 1931 financial crisis assisted their aim of anchoring the Party inside the organized working class. Party activists who agitated inside factories and pits found workers who listened to their message. They were also willing to 'have a go' in gaining redress for long-standing grievances or to fight employers' attempts to introduce new working practices which involved speed-up and more intensive exploitation.

We shall observe that Party activists often tried to escalate each dispute to the maximum possible extent and to fight each skirmish as if it were all-out war. The unspoken assumption was that revolution was imminent on the British horizon and that every outbreak of class struggle would bring it palpably nearer; the fiercer the fight at each factory, the sooner the revolution would arrive. However, during 1933 Pollitt and Campbell revised their own views about the proximity of the revolutionary crisis in the light of evidence that it was certainly not just over the horizon. Consequently, they began the arduous process of formally moving the Party's position and adjusting the membership's expectations to take account of this reality.

A powerful motivation for this awkward and potentially divisive rejigging was that the Party was suffering serious losses in the number of its members available for active industrial service. Too many able activists were being victimized and martyred in the course of leading intense economic struggle. How could Party members win leading positions inside the trade union movement if they were constantly being sacked and out of work?

The British Party leadership were assisted in their revisionism by parallel developments in the French Communist Party and also by some favourable currents and eddies swirling around the Comintern sea. Pollitt and Campbell charted their own course firmly towards the indefinite postponement of revolution. They returned to their own pre-war socialist culture with its emphasis on the Utopian aspects of revolution. It might have receded into the distance, but its presence was no less real for being far away. The inevitable certainty of revolution was a beacon, lighting the way for Communists toiling away at their unremitting daily mass work. Pollitt and Campbell revived this aspect of British socialism, and skilfully incorporated utopian idealism as part of the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB) canon. I have described this part of their approach as Life Itself, drawing on their own perception of how the revolutionary crisis would eventually occur.[12]

By the time the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern finally convened in August 1935, the British Communist Party had already made most of the essential adjustments to enable its membership to cope with the non- appearance of revolution. The new policy enunciated at the Congress, of a cross-class political alliance to fight fascism and secure democracy, made no discernible difference either to the CPGB's policy towards the trade union movement or to its industrial members' practical activity. Pollitt and Campbell had long relied on the continuing appearance of the 'united front from below' in the Comintern's *dicta* to justify their injunctions to British Party members to work inside 'reformist' trade unions.

In Chapter 3 we shall observe how they stretched and trimmed the 'united front from below' when the occasion demanded. Its various denominations moved from 'fighting united front' through 'united front of the rank and file' and finally to the 'real united front' which sealed the formal re-dedication of the Party to 'united frontism' after the Seventh World Congress. For Pollitt and Campbell, however, the united front's content continued substantially unchanged through its many nominal permutations.

The united front lay at the heart of their approach to the economic struggle because they conceived it to be the ultimate and lethal weapon which the working class possessed against the employing class. They had

opposed the Young Turks' plans for revolutionary red unions in 1928–29 because they would fracture the united front. They opposed the London busmen's breakaway union in 1938 for the same reason. As Pollitt responded to Citrine when the TUC General Secretary had summarily refused to consider a formal alliance with the Party:

'The Communist Party fights for real trade unionism, the trade unionism which organises the working class for struggle against the exploiting class . . . The Communist party does all in its power to strengthen the trade union branches, to recruit the unorganised and to develop powerful movements of the rank and file, which are able to conduct the fight against the employers and their allies . . . Because of the consistent policy of the Communist Party in the interests of the whole working class . . . the united front of the rank and file against the employing class is becoming stronger day by day.'[13]

* * *

The economic recovery in Britain continued to gather momentum. After the 1935 general election, the Conservative Government intensified its rearmament programme and concentrated increasingly on aircraft production. We shall see in Chapters 4 and 5 that Party engineering activists were in a particularly good position to take advantage of the opportunities which government orders with guaranteed profits offered for economic struggle. Nevertheless, there were no notable pitched battles or all-out wars.

Most Party activists were content to extend trade union organization gradually, almost by stealth. They did not hesitate to embark on small engagements which did not involve a large commitment of force and thus did not carry the risk of wiping out their new union recruits and neophyte shop stewards. Moreover, they continued to record tangible, if mundane, concessions from employers from such skirmishing activity. It is no wonder that full-time union officials were content to cooperate with Party members.

The successes chalked up by Communist shop stewards in the economic struggle were not due to their following prescriptive formulae laid down by King Street, nor could they be ascribed to their earnest emulation of Marxist– Leninist methods of dialectical materialism. Most Party activists learned to wage the economic struggle through trial and error, watching their elders and peers and generally assimilating the trade union culture of which the Party Centre insisted they must become an integral part. This culture contained two generalized guides to action which transcended local differences and economic vicissitudes. I have described them in this book as 'trade union loyalism' and 'rank-and-fil-

ism'. While these denominations are not arbitrary, the same elements could as easily be described as the principles of 'solidarity' and 'militancy' or 'unity' and 'agitation', invoking the union ASE credo, 'Educate, Agitate and Organize'.

It has seemed appropriate to adopt 'trade union loyalism' and 'rank-and-filism' because Party members in this period viewed their own situation in these terms. The 'trade union movement' had gained in prestige and power as a result of the 1914–18 war, and that position was reinforced by the events of 1926–28, the General Strike and the subsequent Mond–Turner talks between prominent employers and union leaders. Trade union activists in the 1930s felt that they were part of an important civil institution, and their conduct of union branch business and relations with employers on the factory floor reflected their sense of worth and self-respect.

Trade union loyalism was not viewed as a stricture, but rather an acknowledgement of one's place in the order of things, a voluntary act of allegiance to one's primary social institution. Communists had imbibed trade union loyalism with their first experiences of work and economic conflict, along with every other working-class activist of their generation. They acquired the reflex developed by British trade union activists since the 1860s, that a 'good' trade union member was unflinchingly and unquestioningly loyal to the 'movement'.

When Pollitt pulled the British Party back from the brink of repudiating trade unions, he did so out of gut instinct. His initiation into trade union culture, before the war, at Gorton Tank in the Boilermakers' Amalgamation had bitten deeply. Johnny Campbell's analytic abilities arrived at the same conclusion as Pollitt's visceral emotions. They both recognized that if the Communist Party was to be at the centre of the proletariat, as Lenin and the Comintern decreed, then it must be in the very heart of the trade union movement. In practice, this meant accepting its culture – and solidarity or trade union loyalism was its first commandment.

Nevertheless, Pollitt's and Campbell's stance can be quite clearly distinguished from those 'reformist' leaders to whom they enjoined their members to pledge allegiance. They seized on the rich vein of rank-and-filism in British trade union culture and audaciously appropriated it for the Communist Party. We shall observe in Chapters 8 and 9 that it is hardly an exaggeration to observe that by 1938 any young man or woman whose shopfloor experience impelled them towards militancy was attracted to the Communist Party. They might not actually join the Party or they might belong to the Party only briefly. But as long as they remained militant trade union activists it was Party members with whom they had to work and come to terms. Other militants measured themselves against the standards set by the Communists around them.

The recent academic dispute about the importance of 'rank-and-filism' for British trade union culture has been curiously unproductive, perhaps because of the tendencies of some of the participants to impute thoroughly partisan and dogmatic positions to their 'opponents'. In the 1930s, lay activists were essential to sustaining trade unions. Despite the growth in numbers and arguably status of the full-time officialdom, unions still relied on lay activists to lavish large amounts of their voluntary labour. Richard Hyman has drawn attention to the tendency of this cadre of union activists to view themselves as the 'rank and file' from the 1890s.[14] He observed that the appropriation of the military terminology by trade unionists was unexceptional in view of the growing importance of militarism in European nation–states, a development in which Britain was an integral part.

The experiences of the 1914–18 war reinforced the tendency of union activists to view the 'rank-and-file' as the vital centre of trade unions. The people on the ground, the ones who were doing the actual fighting, were after all the foundation of the unions' power, without whom there could be no advance. Moreover, observant and able full-time union officials certainly recognized the importance of their foot-soldiers and of maintaining their troops' morale. Lay officials viewed themselves as being the 'NCOs of the movement', (the Webbs' phrase, coined in the period when militarism was becoming part of British popular parlance). It never occurred to them that because they were part of the 'rank-and-file', they were automatically opposed and in principled disagreement with their full-time officials. When activists defined themselves as rank-and-file, they were often only observing their place inside the movement The description was often an expression of self-confidence and pride in their own place rather than signifying their own unimportance.

When Pollitt and Campbell asserted the Party's primacy in the economic struggle, they did so on behalf of the rank and file. They unhesitatingly assumed its practical existence and told Party activists that if they did their daily mass work properly, they would be able to mobilize the 'rank-and-file' in militant economic struggle. As we shall see in Chapter 6, King Street knew as well as Ernest Bevin that 'the rank and file' did not always fight to the last ditch. They continued to purvey the myth that it was invariably the reformist leaders who halted the workers' forward march and prevented full victory being attained.

The evident potential for conflict between trade union loyalism and rank-and-filism did not deter Pollitt and Campbell from espousing both. Their insistence that Party members must act according to both principles was not disingenuous. They were convinced that Communists could not be effective leaders in the economic struggle without sincerely adhering to the two, and energetically denied that their contradictory nature might produce problems for Party activists.

* * *

I have described the four components of Pollitt's and Campbell's guide to action, trade union loyalism, rank-and-filism, the united front, and Life Itself, as revolutionary pragmatism. This paradoxical epithet seems apt to describe an approach to the world which succeeded precisely because it was contradictory. It provided Party members with a flexible guide to action and definite boundaries within which different activists made many different, sometimes opposing, decisions about how to conduct the 'economic struggle'.

Revolutionary pragmatism was hardly a hermetically sealed view of the world: its success depended on Party members possessing sound practical reflexes and a discerning judgement. They were required to choose the appropriate blend of its conflicting tenets to apply in their particular circumstances. Its conventions reflected the culture within which trade union militants had functioned in Britain since the 1890s. Pollitt and Campbell took the raw material from their own experience and adapted it to suit the changed circumstances of inter-war economic conflict.

Although rank-and-filism remained an important part of daily culture for shopfloor activists, they usually proved quite capable of striking bargains with the governor and not reflecting too deeply on their departure from its strictures. Concluded swiftly and cleanly in hot blood, compromise settlements appeared the only thing to do. They were entered into on the spur of the moment, under pressure from fellow workmates or under threat from an employer. Stewards might differ about whether the time had come to compromise and organize a united retreat. But the need to face up to this eventuality was habitually accepted by Party activists who were building factory organization and advancing working class strength on the shopfloor.

Party activists whose inexperience and/or idealism combined to create a belief in the infallible efficacy of rank-and-filism were disabused of this notion sooner or later through applying pragmatic common sense to their own observations and experiences and/or being trained up by a seasoned veteran. As a young Birmingham Communist and novice shop steward, Les Ambrose learned to emulate Teddy Ager, the full-time Birmingham District Secretary of the Algamated Engineering Union (AEU). Ager was not a Party member, but Ambrose found his judgement and opinions to be more reliable than AEU Party veterans, George Crane and Jim Crump. At the West London aero-engine factory, Napier's, Ralph Fuller and the other young AEU stewards learned the art of leading the economic struggle from the old Party hands, Fred Arter and Fred Elms. Party activists who failed to discover or were oblivious to the pragmatic, cautious techniques of waging economic war inside engineering collective bargaining conventions were routinely martyred.[15]

As the 1930s progressed, the balance maintained by Pollitt and Campbell within revolutionary pragmatism between rank-and-filism and union loyalty swung away from rank-and-filism. Some national union leaders had reacted to the setbacks and defeats of the early 1920s by rejecting all-out industrial conflict as a reliable instrument of collective bargaining. Instead of routine, endemic trials of strength, they wanted to adapt the comprehensive national negotiations of the war economy for peacetime use.

In the wake of the embarrassing débâcle of 1926, Walter Citrine, the resourceful General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), steered the General Council towards a new understanding with employers embodying this approach. His efforts culminated in the Mond–Turner talks in 1928.[16] They anticipated the dominant trend in collective bargaining in the inter-war period towards centralization and control over 'custom and practice' by management. Trade union leaders, including the AEU Executive, who were imbued with the culture of British trade union activism, denounced the talks as 'collaborationist'. A new term of abuse, 'Mondism' appeared to describe the increasing tendency of union leaders to compromise in negotiations. Hugh Clegg concludes:

> It does not seem likely that rank and file trade union members had been converted to Citrine's new philosophy, which was elitist. Nineteenth century trade unionism had relied on the solidarity of the members to regulate industrial relations. Citrine, by contrast, emphasised negotiations and the skills of the negotiatior. Converts were therefore to be found primarily among full-time officers and executive members. Consequently support for Mond–Turner was probably assisted by the additional authority conferred on trade union leaders by national collective bargaining, the centralisation of power in the unions, and the advance of bureaucratisation.[17]

The new norm was a more incorporated collective bargaining with more elaborate and rationalized agreements. Full-time officials were under pressure to deliver a *more* disciplined, ordered and dispute-free shopfloor. Nevertheless, certainly the more flexible and opportunist union leaders, like Ernest Bevin and Arthur Horner, leading Communist activist who became President of the South Wales Miners' Federation (the Fed) in 1936, exploited this trend to great advantage in gaining concessions from employers, but also to concentrate more power in central union institutions. The union leaders often were forced to come to terms with the stubborn persistence of local exceptions to the rules which they had negotiated centrally with the employers. Both Horner and Bevin encountered difficulties in fulfilling their side of the comprehensive collective agreements which they had signed on behalf of their members.

In 1937, Horner signed away significant areas of union control over

custom and practice, and agreed to a conciliation scheme which preempted the ability of pit militants to resist changes by industrial action. An important part of the friction inside the London Busmen's Rank-and-File Movement was the need to operate under the agreement which Bevin had made with London Transport: it required a surrender of lightning strikes, walk-outs and go-slows. The militant lay officials and activists concluded that their own ability to fight and win battles on the shopfloor had been seriously impaired by the new arrangements.

Full-time officials' justification for these new ways was twofold: they gained material results when no other way would have succeeded; and they permitted unions to keep their precious human and financial capital intact when strikes would only bring suffering and not gain their desired objective. Nevertheless a generation of union loyalists and activists was still operating at factory and pit level who had been socialized into the earlier, less structured *modus operandi*. They had reason to feel that things had changed and reacted accordingly.

It was clear by 1934 that the CPGB was reaping substantial gains from its membership's adopting Pollitt's and Campbell's approach towards the economic struggle. Communist Party membership had begun to expand, albeit not to the extent that King Street hoped. But a very high proportion of the new recruits were industrial workers who became active trade unionists and shop stewards. Pollitt in particular was proud of the place which Communists had earned inside the trade union movement by dint of dedicated daily mass work and exhibiting leadership qualities. The assumption was that whenever Life Itself produced the revolutionary crisis, these industrial activists would be in a strategic position: they would form the vanguard to lead the organized working class to take power.

Though the Party Centre had adjusted to the failure of revolution to appear on the scene, the widespread expectation persisted that a militant upsurge of the whole working class would occur if Party members were correctly organized in their unions to promote 'national wages movements'. Unlike a revolutionary situation, which remained hypothetical for British Communists, dramatic militant national industrial conflicts had occurred in the years before the 1914–18 war.

Then there had been the surprisingly volatile and spirited strikes of the wartime period, and then the protracted set-piece battles of the 1920s. A leading activist of the pre-war new unionism, Tom Mann was a foundation member of the CPGB. His continuing activity on behalf of the Party represented an important link with the militant upsurges and revolts of the past. He was a potent symbol of trade union militancy, and his unswerving optimism and faith in socialism was often invoked by King Street.

The Party Centre had enjoined members to promote 'national wages movements' inside trade unions from 1932, without result. The pattern of national collective bargaining became distinctly stable, and union leaders showed no inclination to embark on national confrontations. Though local militancy was increasing, there were few opportunities for transforming such sparks into prairie fires. And as most Party members became accustomed to the new terrain upon which the economic struggle was being waged in the 1930s, they made no attempt to do so.

We shall see in Chapter 5 that the wave of strikes and militant revolts in France after the Popular Front Government took office in 1936 revived expectations of a popular upsurge here. French Communists had assumed a leading role in their events; many British Communists, evidently including King Street, became convinced that their activists would lead 'national wages movements' which would decisively alter the balance of class forces. Their conviction led in the spring of 1937 to a renewed emphasis on rank-and-filism in Party propaganda and in the behaviour of many Party activists.

As we shall observe in Chapters 6 and 7, the result of the Party's subsequent *démarche* was not what activists had anticipated. In each of the much-vaunted confrontations between unions and employers, trade union leaders negotiated compromise agreements which were accepted by their members, though many of the returns to work were accompanied by great bitterness and resentment. Nevertheless, in each instance, Communists, including the Party Centre, invoked trade union loyalism. They not only acquiesced in these settlements but promoted 'unity' in the ranks behind them. Union leaders, like Bevin, might have betrayed the strikers, but their treachery could only be fought inside the unions.

Between 1935 and 1937, the problems encountered in operating rank-and-file movements presented an increasingly serious threat to the CPGB's growing industrial membership and influence inside trade unions. When rank-and-file movements were led by activists who took rank-and-filism seriously, their encounter with the fundamental contradiction between union loyalism and rank-and-filism was inescapable. Chapter 6 follows the fortunes of the the two most successful rank-and-file movements, the London Busmen's Rank and File Movement and the Aircraft Shop Stewards National Council (ASSNC). We analyse how Party activists reacted in the extreme situations where they were forced to choose between rank-and-filism and trade union loyalism. We also observe Pollitt's and Campbell's moves to ensure that union loyalism won out when the between-the-two imperatives reached crisis point.

Chapter 7 chronicles the official strike by miners at Harworth in 1936–37. During this strike, Party members also had to choose between rank-and-filism and union loyalism. Pollitt and Campbell had to deal

with the reality of Arthur Horner promoting a compromise solution to the strike which violated rank-and-filism. We shall observe that the Harworth strike shows that the CPGB and its activists became a vital part of trade union and labour history because they chose to remain a loyal and integral part of the movement's united front.

Pollitt and Campbell tried to ensure that the Party abstained from any involvement in the conflicts which ensued between full-time officials and their 'rank-and-file'. This did not mean that their members or groups of their members did not take up their own positions against full-time officials, but rather that they did so on their own initiative, without instructions from the Party Centre. However, as their members were also increasingly elected to full-time positions inside unions, it meant that Party members were regularly called on to enforce collective agreements on an unenthusiastic or even rebellious 'rank-and-file' of lay activists, usually including other Communists.

* * *

King Street extricated the Party from a complex and difficult situation by invoking the potent ideological balm of Life Itself in large amounts. Even though the strikes of May 1937 had not produced the militant upsurge, it was still certain that Life Itself would eventually bring the revolution. In addition to this ritual repetition of the Communist catechism, the frightening conflicts on the Continent intervened to divert members' attention from any debilitating feelings of domestic disillusion. We shall observe in Chapter 9 that Party trade union activists were increasingly pre-occupied in discussing and thinking about fighting Franco and fascism, and comparatively successful in organizing activities to involve their workmates in support of the democratic side.

Pollitt and Campbell were also increasingly preoccupied by the European crisis. They continued to emphasize the importance of party members' mass work, but they did so within the context of the trade unions taking a political stand against fascism and Chamberlain's Government. They did not apply their minds to reflecting about some notable setbacks suffered by Party activists in the economic struggle. The four components of revolutionary pragmatism remained solidly in place and there was apparently no pressure on King Street from its own membership to revise its approach. Nor did the 1939–45 war throw up any situations with which the British Communist world view on the economic struggle was unable to cope.

We shall examine the Party's attitude to the war and the gains made by Party activists within the war economy in Chapters 10 and 11. The war economy machine which Ernest Bevin designed and presided over pre-

sented many favourable opportunities for Party trade union activists not only to lead successful skirmishes in the economic struggle but also to build up shopfloor union organization. Chapter 11 on the wartime economy looks in some detail at how Party activists responded to the circumstances of wartime engineering factories and charts the varied and sometimes conflicting initiatives to take advantage of extraordinary opportunities.

Most Party activists did not try to exploit the dislocation and flux of the war production drive to promote radical changes in trade unions and collective bargaining. They were content to operate within the strictures of Pollitt's and Campbell's injunctions to maximize production to save the Soviet Socialist Fatherland while not neglecting their duties as lay union officials to maintain the balance of class forces on the shopfloor. The different uses which Party members found for Joint Production Committees are surveyed and the question is considered whether JPCs were seen as potential vehicles of socialism or of radical structural reform.

The Party Centre made intermittent gestures towards implementing the Leninist model of tightly disciplined democratic centralist factory cells. We shall see in Chapter 8 that these 'factory groups', as they were renamed, became informal kitchen cabinets within which Party shop stewards could meet and discuss strategy without reference to King Street or the Comintern line. The reality of industrial activity within this notably uncentralized Party was that Party activists conducted the economic struggle within their own parochial parameters.

Communist engineering shop stewards in Glasgow behaved differently towards the union and employers than their counterparts in Barrow or Sheffield. Their trade union culture had evolved on a district basis. Despite attempts to centralize some engineering unions, their district committees had been the channel for relations with employers until the 1914–18 war, and many of them still functioned engergetically in the inter-war period and continued to exhibit wide variations in their conduct. For example, the AEU District Committees in Coventry and Birmingham took diametrically opposed attitudes towards the admission of semi-skilled workers.

Such parochial differences were not confined to engineering. As President of the Fed, Arthur Horner had to take account of widely differing customs and practice which had evolved in the different coalfields in South Wales, and even between different lodges in the same valley. These differences persisted despite serious attempts by employers and union officials to impose greater uniformity. The lay officials who were the pillars of trade union organization, without whom membership would fall away and recruitment cease, retained sufficient authority to respond to

'Mondist' attempts to rationalize production methods and energetically led their members to claim redress of traditional grievances, even if only in 'unofficial' strikes.

Despite these notable differences in the conduct of Party activists, rigidly monolithic stereotypes of Communist activists continue to permeate British historiography. Elsewhere, notably the USA, France and Italy, a 'revisionist' school of historians has begun to examine events and their respective Communist Parties' part in them with greater distance and objectivity. These scholars have decided that it is not conceding an ideological point to recognize that Party members were important participants in political and economic conflict in the inter-war and war periods. Freed from the need to see robotic uniformity in Party members' behaviour, they have been able to recognize great variation in their responses to events and difficult problems.[18]

My approach to writing Party history became revisionist because I soon found that Party members did not conform to the stereotypes of either official Communist heroics or ritual Labour witch-hunts. I have had the audacity to transcend the conventional polarities of British historiography in the hope of contributing to a revisionist approach to British Communism. Since British trade unions and the CPGB have now lost their important social and public roles as pillar of society and bogeymen/bolshevik heroes respectively it should now be possible to reveal their secrets. Kevin Morgan's account of Party members' attitudes to fascism and the 1939–45 war published in 1989 marked an important beginning.[19]

Remarkably few of the Party activists whom I interviewed were interested in repeating the myths of Party heroism and self-sacrifice. The few self-proclaimed heroes who proudly paraded their own and the Party's importance used knowing winks to gloss over silently the gaps in their story. Their true stories consisted of predictable Party clichés, interspersed with morsels of fact, anecdote and allusion. The paradoxical Achilles heel of the Labour myth is that Party union activists remained, for the most part, staunchly loyal to their respective trade unions and rarely indulged in back-stabbing 'reformist' Labour colleagues on the shopfloor.

On the whole, Party activists were outstandingly candid and open in their dealings with the full-time union officials for whom Labour mythology decreed they should feel profound distrust. There was, of course, regular Party caucusing about 'internal' union affairs, and concerted *démarches* organized by Party activists to influence union policy. But these 'conspiratorial' activities were conducted on the terrain of culture of trade union activism which they shared with their Labour colleagues/opponents.

Communist mythology has continued to conceal the Party Centre's consistent espousal of trade union loyalism as an absolute imperative in extreme situations. Equally Labour mythology certainly has had no interest in revealing that Party leaders promoted adherence to official union rules and decisions. It is not surprising that a distorted stereotype of Party activists has emerged from these polarities. I hope that this book will assist readers in judging for themselves whether there is not some point in between the two which accurately reflects the reality of Communists' contribution to British trade unions.

Notes

1. Lord Taylor of Mansfield, 1972; *Uphill All the Way*, Sidgwick & Jackson,19 and 64. For Taylor's involvement in the 'Battle of Harworth', see Chapter 7. Taylor's autobiography has a Foreword by Harold Wilson and an Afterword by Jim Griffiths. It is typical of the Labour hagiography which is interesting, but remains an account of events which is as partial as the Communist Party's crop of published memoirs.
2. *Daily Worker*, 16 January 1935.
3. Pelling, H., 1958, *The British Communist Party, A Historical Profile*, A. & C. Black.
4. Macfarlane, L. J., 1966, *The British Communist Party, Its Origin and Development until 1929*, Macgibbon and Kee. Martin R., 1969, *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-1933, A Study of the National Minority Movement*, Oxford.
5. See for example, Bullock, A., 1960, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, vol. I, 1881–1940, Heinemann, 217–8 and 606–14.
6. Morgan, K. O., 1987, *Labour People*, Oxford University Press:198–9. Smith, D. and Francis, H., 1980, *The Fed, A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, Lawrence & Wishart.
7. Party members were important recruiting agents for the TGWU in the early 1930s in Birmingham, in Pressed Steel, Oxford from 1934, in most engineering factories from 1939, and, of course, on the buses. See pp. 59, 67–8, 125–9 and 332.
8. *Daily Worker*, 2 January 1937.
9. There are two biographies of Pollitt. The first by John A. Mahon is a voluminous hagiography, while containing an enormous amount of interesting detail. Kevin Morgan's biography, published in 1993, marked an important first step in assessing Pollitt's career objectively. However, Morgan was constrained by space and does not deal with Pollitt's relation to the 'economic struggle' and trade unions in any depth. Johnny Campbell has not even inspired a Party hagiography.
10. Macfarlane, op. cit., 218–9. See also Martin, op.cit., 153–4.
11. Information from conversations with William Campbell and Douglas Hyde. The Campbells moved a mile away to Temple Fortune shortly before 1939; William Campbell felt the move had been precipitated by his mother's increasing resentment of the intimate bond between her husband and Pollitt.

12. See Chapter 4, note 19. Life Itself continued to play an important part in the world view of muscular pragmatic Communists. In 1990, Timothy Garton Ash observed Mikhail Gorbachev's regular invocations of 'life itself' to account for twists and turns of fate which did not accord with the Marxist view of the world, but which nevertheless had to be accommodated. ('Germany Unbound', 1990, *New York Review of Books*, Vol. XXXVII No. 18, 22 November:11.)
13. *Daily Worker*, 7 March 1934.
14. See Hyman, R., 1987, 'Rank and File Movements and Workplace Organisation 1914–39', Wrigley, C.J. (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations*, Vol. II, 1914–39, Harvester:129–31,139–42. See also *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 1983, No. 46, Spring. 'Officialdom and Opposition: Leadership and Rank and File in Trade Unions', Report of Society Conference paper: 4. The 'rank-and-file' issue is debated by the main protagonists, Jonathan Zeitlin, Richard Price and James E. Cronin in the *International Review of Social History,* Vol. XXIV–1989–1: 42–102, and their debate is commented on by Hyman. R., 1989, in Vol. XXIV–1989–2, 'The Sound of One Hand Clapping': 136–49.
15. Les Ambrose described the Birmingham Party engineering activist Jim Crump as 'wanting to wear the martyr's crown' (interview with Les Ambrose by N. Fishman). For Ambrose and Fuller, see Chapter 8.
16. Clegg, H. A., 1985, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889*, Vol. II, 1911–1933, Clarendon Press, Oxford: 461–71.
17. Ibid: 471.
18. For the USA, see the review article by Brinkley, A., 1990, 'The Best Years of Their Lives', *The New York Review of Books,* 28 June. Brinkley welcomes the 'new' labour historians who have 'challenged the view (expressed most strongly by Theodore Draper and Harvey Klehr) that American communism had little significant life apart from its subservience to Moscow.' 'However obedient Communists may have been to national and international leaders in other ways, Nelson sees no evidence that they behaved as a disciplined, centrally directed cadre in their union activities.' (p. 18). (Brinkley is reviewing Bruce Nelson, 1990, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s*, University of Illinois Press.)

    For France, see Stavall, T., 1989, 'French Communism and Suburban Development: The Rise of the Paris Red Belt', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 24: 437–60. For Italy, see Urban, J. B., 1986, *Moscow and the Italian Communist Party,* Tauris & Co., London. 'Revisionist' history probably started with Western European and US historians' investigations of the Soviet Communist Party and the USSR. Merle Fainsod (*How Russia is Ruled, 1963*), Jerry Hough (with Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed*, Cambridge Mass., 1979) and Sheila Fitzpatrick (*The Russian Revolution, 1917–1932*, Oxford University Press, 1984; *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, (Ed.), Bloomington, Ind., 1978.) are acknowledged 'revisionists'.
19. Morgan, K., 1989, *Against Fascism and War, Ruptures and continuities in British Communist politics, 1935–41*, Manchester University Press.

CHAPTER TWO

The Origins of Revolutionary Pragmatism

In 1933, the British Communist Party was 13 years old. For most of this time its members had expected the imminent arrival in Britain of the worldwide wave of proletarian revolution. The majority of foundation members were already Marxist socialists, who believed that the working class must emancipate itself through revolution. A desire to emulate the bolsheviks' success had stimulated them to join the British affiliate of the Third Communist International (Comintern) and accept the theses imposed by Lenin at its second congress in 1920 as a condition for membership. They now asserted that, for the British working class to fulfil its destiny and join in the worldwide proletarian revolution, the leadership of a vanguard Communist Party was required.

The process of bolshevization imposed by the Comintern on all affiliated parties in 1922–23 was comparatively painless and straightforward inside the British Communist Party. The veteran officials of the British Socialist Party (BSP) who had assumed comparable posts in the Communist party were swept aside by others who had discovered how to lead men and women during the wartime economic conflict. They emerged in 1918 with their youthful self-confidence not just intact, but reinforced by their experiences. Their experience of leading economic struggle combined with their idealistic commitment to socialism to produce an overweening desire to preside over revolutionary change in Britain.

The exception to this common background among the bolshevizers was Ranjani Palme Dutt, a highly proficient intellectual from a middle-class family. Dutt had recognized the Manchester boilermaker, Harry Pollitt, as a valuable and charismatic ally, and commended him to the Comintern's notice. Mainly because of this patronage, Pollitt soon became the *primus inter pares* of the working-class militants on the Central Committee – Johnny Campbell, Arthur Horner, Willie Gallacher and Wally Hannington.[1]

Harry Pollitt, born in 1890, followed in his mother's footsteps and joined the Openshaw Socialist Society in Manchester, his neighbourhood BSP branch, at the age of nineteen. He also became an active member of his craft union, the Boilermakers' Society. In 1915 he found work in the Southampton shipyards. He soon became a shop steward and from this

cockpit experienced the extraordinary flux of wartime production conditions and the turbulent mood of fellow workers. At the outbreak of war, Johnny Campbell was a BSP member in Paisley (in the West of Scotland industrial belt). He was a clerk at the local Co-op, and immediately volunteered for the army. After early 'conspicuous valour' he was decorated and invalided out. He become a gifted propagandist for the shop stewards' Clyde Workers' Committee. Like Campbell, Willie Gallacher came from Paisley and was a keen BSP member. He was active in the skilled Brassmoulders' Union, and in 1914 arrived in Glasgow to take a prominent part in the Clyde Workers' Committee.[2]

Arthur Horner was a flamboyant miner from Maerdy who had given up a promising future as a Baptist preacher because he had become increasingly drawn to socialist faith through activities in the 'rank-and-file' South Wales Miners Unofficial Reform Movement and the Rhondda Socialist Society. After being blacklisted in the coalfield for unremitting militancy, he escaped from military service by arranging a covert passage to Dublin where in 1917 he joined the Citizen's Army. Arrested in Holyhead when he arrived home on leave with anti-war leaflets, he was imprisoned until April 1919. In his absence, he was elected a lay official at his local pit.[3]

Wally Hannington was one of many engineering shop stewards in West London who became Communists. He was active in the BSP, in his union, the Amalgamated Society of Toolmakers (AST) which became part of the Amalgamated Engineers Union (AEU) on amalgamation in 1920, and the unofficial Amalgamation Committee Movement (ACM), a 'rank-and-file' pressure group campaigning for an industrial union in engineering. He met another AST and BSP member, Bob Lovell, in the Amalgamation Committee Movement, and they soon became good friends. During the war they joined forces with militants from the main constituent union of the AEU, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), notably George Crane, Joe Scott, Claude Berridge and Jack Tanner. Their loose network apparently was an important part of the West London shop stewards movement.

There were notable outbreaks of militant industrial conflict during the war and the early 1920s on the purpose-built industrial estate Park Royal and in the new factories along the Great West Road. But the strikes and agitation of which these men were leaders have been comparatively neglected by historians. Nevertheless their experiences were formative. They all featured prominently in the AEU's fortunes until the late 1950s. With the exception of Tanner, they all joined the infant Communist Party.[4]

Johnny Campbell and Palme Dutt soon proved to be the most astute and acute Party ideologues, possessing that scarce commodity, reliable

political judgement, in ample supply. There were other equally qualified auto-didacts besides Campbell, notably Tommy Jackson, J.T. Murphy, and Tom Bell, who were often more prolific in the production of classical Marxist sermonizing.[5] But they were incapable of providing useful guides to action. Campbell's uniquely practical intellectual abilities were early acknowledged by the Party. Palme Dutt specialized in the production of Comintern orthodoxy and assumed the role of respected Party theoretician.

Before 1914 the BSP, of which Pollitt, Campbell, Gallacher and Hannington had all been members, was a Marxist sect which propagated its own version of socialism zealously enough. It had not aspired to influence events in the 'economic struggle' nor to monitor its members' conduct within it. The BSP leadership was positively hostile towards trade unions because they were 'reformist' organizations which fragmented the working class and diverted workers away from the fight for socialism. BSP working-class members were typically members of skilled trade unions, and indeed provided a vital militant element in trade union institutions. The young bolshevizers were no exception, having been shop stewards, branch officers, and involved in the 'rank-and-file' movements connected with their unions.

The pre-war 'rank-and-file' movements functioned alongside the official union structure. They were not viewed by their members as an alternative to their unions, but rather as a complement. Thus the Amalgamation Committee Movement and the South Wales Miners Unofficial Reform Movement both attempted to influence unions' political direction and elections for full-time and lay officials. Many ACM members became enthusiastic participants in the wartime shop stewards' movement, and the continuity between the outlooks of the two 'rank-and-file' movements has probably been underestimated by historians anxious to find a dramatic break in British working-class consciousness induced by the war and the bolshevik revolution.[6]

The experiences of the 1914–18 war reinforced the tendency of union activists to view the 'rank-and-file' as the vital centre of trade unions. The people on the ground, the ones who were doing the actual fighting, were after all the foundation of the unions' power, without whom there could be no advance. Moreover, observant and able full-time union officials certainly recognized the importance of their 'troops' and of maintaining their morale. The consciousness of lay officials of their position as the NCOs of the movement, as being part of the 'rank-and-file', did not imply their automatic opposition and *a priori* disagreement with full-time officials. It was often only an observation of their differing places inside the institution, and actually implied a recognition of the importance of both positions inside the movement.

BSP trade union activists were drawn towards Lenin's new Communist International. Their post-war outlook was marked by an important change of emphasis influenced by their wartime experiences. The October revolution was based on workplace soviets in Petrograd and Moscow, and this model now became a talisman for the youthful British Communists who had been shop stewards in Park Royal, the Clyde and Sheffield. They had come to the same conclusion as the Comintern: factory organization had a strategic political role in addition to its economic functions. Communists' immediate political task was to make every factory a fortress.

> No communist party will be in a position to lead the decisive masses of the proletariat to struggle and to defeat the bourgeoisie until it has this solid foundation in the factories, until every large factory has become a citadel of the communist party.[7]

It followed that their urgent priority was developing the Communist Party's ability to influence industrial conflict. For these men, it was axiomatic and uncontentious that as Party members became shopfloor leaders they would also be involved in trade unions. The unions might be 'reformist', but there was no doubt in their minds that they would be transformed into revolutionary institutions by pressure from below when the time was ripe.

> To become the Party of the masses the Party cannot ignore the unions. The character of the struggle they are compelled to wage becomes increasingly revolutionary, in spite of all the desire of the trade union bureaucracy to prevent it.
>
> They [Communist shop stewards] will use that position for carrying out Communist work. Even though some of the duties may be distasteful to them, yet by accepting such positions and by fighting loyally on behalf of their workmates on every question affecting their interests, they will not only get the backing of their fellow workers, but may occupy an important place for Communist activity during the period of crisis.[8]

This first cohort of Communist trade union activists had all won their laurels in economic battles, and seen that their common political socialization consisted of trade union, 'rank-and-file' movement and socialist sect. While displaying little active prejudice against the Labour Party, it evidently never occurred to them to concentrate their own or the Communist Party's energy exclusively in the political arena, which to them meant Westminster and the Westminster-oriented non-Marxist Independent Labour Party (ILP) and Fabians. Lenin's warnings to British Communists against left-wing sectarianism applied to Communist participation in both the unions and the Labour Party. While accepting

the need to include Westminster Labour politics within their ambit, they nevertheless believed that the crucial battleground for British Communists would be the workplace.[9] It is worth noting that Ernest Bevin, whose political socialization was almost identical to theirs, also placed traditional politics firmly beneath the 'economic struggle' in his priorities and strategy at this time. It was only after the disasters of the 1931 Labour Government that he decided to apply his own mind and his union's forces systematically inside the Labour Party.[10]

This order of priorities is reflected in Harry Pollitt's own progress in the Party. Following on his rise to prominence during bolshevization, he was given the urgent task of developing the National Minority Movement (NMM), the militant 'rank-and-file movement' for trade unionists intended to operate as the 'transmission belt' conveying British workers from reformism to revolution. Pollitt proved a notable success as Hon. Secretary of the NMM. Horner and Hannington enthusiastically and ably assisted him in leading the miners' and metalworkers' sections. He finally joined the Party Centre, and became General Secretary in May 1929.

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The 1922 Engineering Lock-Out presented the CPGB with an ideal opportunity to exercise its influence among engineering workers, which the Party Centre and engineering activists were not slow to exploit.[11] AEU District Committees were persuaded to form all-in Lock-Out Committees including representatives from the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM), the CPGB and any other local rank-and-file organizations. The Party Centre criticized the AEU Executive for its failure to deploy all its forces to fight the employers. Nevertheless, after the unions' defeat, the Party Centre was swift to encourage activists to staunch the flow of disillusioned members from the AEU.

> the Communist Party launched a 'Back to the Unions' campaign. Conferences were held by the RILU [Red International] in the autumn in London, Glasgow, Newcastle, Birmingham, Sheffield and Cardiff . . . These conferences called for united resistance to attacks on wages and hours, trade union affiliation to the Red International and the reorganization of trade unions along industrial lines.[12]

After 1923, the bolshevized British Communist Party made rapid strides in its chosen fields of action. Its increasing influence inside the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) can be gauged from the victory of Arthur Cook, the South Walian candidate endorsed by the Miners' Minority Movement, as MFGB Secretary during 1924. The MFGB was the largest and probably the most prestigious union in Britain at this