

ANTI-PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNISM IN BRITAIN 1917-1945

VOLUME ONE

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## ABSTRACT

During the early years of the 1917-1945 period, anti-parliamentary communism in Britain was represented by the suffragists-turned-socialists associated with the Workers' Dreadnought (edited by Sylvia Pankhurst) and the anarchist-communists associated with the Spur (edited by Guy Aldred).

Anti-parliamentarians opposed workers' subordination to the dictates of leaders within organisations that struggled for position within capitalism (e.g. Parliamentary parties and trade unions). They advocated forms of organisation and activity which would enable the mass of the working class to participate consciously in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of communism (i.e. a world-wide community where the state, classes, wage labour and money would be abolished).

The anti-parliamentarians were enthusiastic supporters of the Bolshevik regime in the immediate aftermath of the Russian revolution, recognising the soviets (workers' councils) that had emerged in 1917 as the instruments workers would use to overthrow capitalism and administer communist society. By the early 1920s, however, the anti-parliamentarians came to realise that what existed in Russia was not socialism/communism, but a form of capitalism in which the state had taken over the role normally fulfilled by private capitalists.

In their initial enthusiasm for Bolshevism, many anti-parliamentarians participated in the formation of a Communist Party in Britain, but they were soon forced to withdraw in opposition to tactics foisted on the CPGB by the Communist International. In particular, the anti-parliamentarians opposed participation in elections and Parliament, and affiliation to the Labour Party (on the grounds that it was a capitalist party).

Following the disappearance of the Workers' Dreadnought group in 1924, the basic principles of anti-parliamentarism were kept alive throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s by the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation.

After the onset of the world economic crisis in 1929, and the formation of a National Government headed by the leader of the Labour Party in 1931, some anti-parliamentarians concluded that the basis of Parliamentary reformism had been destroyed, and thus that anti-parliamentary propaganda had become superfluous. Moreover, the rise of fascism made unity between all 'socialists', whether Parliamentary or anti-parliamentary, the paramount need of the hour. Consequently, the United Socialist Movement was formed as a breakaway from the APCF in 1933-1934.

At the start of the Spanish civil war the APCF and USM both supported the 'democratic' Republican Government against its 'fascist' opponents. During 1937, however, this attitude was replaced among some anti-parliamentarians by one of opposition to capitalism in all its forms, fascist and democratic. This development served the anti-parliamentarians in good stead at the beginning of the Second World War. The APCF, USM and Glasgow Anarchist Federation (another breakaway from the APCF) refused to choose sides in the conflict, and called on workers to turn the capitalist war between nations into a civil war between classes. This appeal received practically no response, but in making it the anti-parliamentarians had continued to fulfill one of the most important duties of revolutionary organisations: to sustain communist principles, even in the face of the indifference or hostility of the mass of the working class.

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Mark Shipway

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AAUD	Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands (General Workers' Union of Germany)
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AFB	Anarchist Federation of Britain
APCF	Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation
ARP	Air Raid Precaution
ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers
AWRU	All-Workers' Revolutionary Union
BSP	British Socialist Party
CEDA	Confederacion Espanola de Derechas Autonomas (Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rightists)
CLS	Communist League of Struggle
CNT	Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour)
CO	Conscientious Objector
COMINTERN	Communist International (Third International)
CP(BSTI)	Communist Party (British Section of the Third International)
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CWP	Communist Workers' Party
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
EWO	Essential Works Order
FAI	Federacion Anarquista Iberica (Iberian Anarchist Federation)
GIC	Groep van Internationaal Communisten (Group of International Communists)
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IUDA	Industrial Union of Direct Actionists
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
KAI	Kommunistische Arbeiter-Internationale (Communist Workers' International) (Fourth International)
KAPD	Kommunistische Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands (Communist Workers' Party of Germany)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)
MFCB	Miners' Federation of Great Britain
NCL	No-Conscription League
NEP	New Economic Policy
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
NUSM	National Union of Scottish Mineworkers
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement

POUM	Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista (United Marxist Workers' Party)
PSOE	Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol (Socialist Workers' Party of Spain)
PSUC	Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (United Socialist Party of Catalonia)
SATC	Socialist Anti-Terror Committee
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social-Democratic Party of Germany)
SPGB	Socialist Party of Great Britain
SWMF	South Wales Miners' Federation
SWRP	Scottish Workers' Republican Party
SWSS	South Wales Socialist Society
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UCT	Union General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union)
USM	United Socialist Movement
UWO	Unemployed Workers' Organisation
UWP	United Workers' Party
WRL	Workers' Revolutionary League
WSF	Workers' Suffrage Federation/(from May 1918) Workers' Socialist Federation
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

## INTRODUCTION

"Wait not to be backed by numbers.  
Wait not till you are sure of an  
echo from the crowd. The fewer  
the voices on the side of truth the  
more distinct and strong must be  
your own."

William Channing's advice, quoted above, was one of the 'mottoes' with which the prominent anti-parliamentary communist Guy Aldred prefaced his autobiographical work, Dogmas Discarded. It is not difficult to understand why these remarks should have appealed to Aldred. The various anti-parliamentary communist groups to which he and others belonged attracted no more than a few hundred adherents at the best of times, and during other periods were reduced to a mere handful of diehards. Had they waited to be 'backed by numbers', or until they were 'sure of an echo from the crowd', the opportunities for them to raise their voices 'on the side of truth' would have been very few and far between.

This may give some readers cause to question the worth of studying such an obscure and (they might wish to imply) 'insignificant' collection of groups and individuals. However, the significance of the anti-parliamentary communists should be sought in the ideas which they propagated, rather than in the level of response or support which those ideas did or did not receive.

It is one of the contentions of this study that the political views held by the anti-parliamentary communists in Britain place them among the relatively small number of groups and individuals which have put forward a genuine alternative to the existing world-wide capitalist system. This alternative, which the anti-parliamentarians described interchangeably as socialism or communism, had nothing to do with what is popularly understood by such terms, for instance the policies of the Labour Party or the

system which developed in Russia after 1917. As we will see, the anti-parliamentary communists regarded the Labour Party as a capitalist organisation, and Russia as a capitalist state. The socialism/communism advocated by the anti-parliamentarians meant the complete abolition of the system which forces the majority into dependence on the slavery of wage labour, producing wealth for exchange in a market economy, to the profit of an idle few who rule society in their own interests. It would involve wrenching the productive resources of the world out of the hands of their present controllers, and using them in common to produce wealth directly for use, so that everyone's individually-determined needs would be provided for in abundance.

Virtually all of the political organisations claiming to stand for socialism/communism have paid no more than lip service, and in most cases not even that, to such ideas. At no time have the measures advocated by the anti-parliamentarians ever been put into practice in any of the so-called 'communist states' in the world.

In short, capitalism still exists in every country in the world, with the inevitable consequences of its normal way of functioning: unemployment, war, relentless material insecurity and deprivation for the working class, and so on. The political parties of the left, in and out of office, offer nothing more than a slight re-shuffle of bosses within the same money-market-wages system; none of its basic features are changed, nor any of its basic problems solved. As long as this state of affairs continues to exist, therefore, groups such as the anti-parliamentary communists will always retain their significance, for the socialism/communism they advocated offers the working class its only hope of salvation from the wars and barbarism held in store by capitalism. As the anti-parliamentarians frequently warned, 'All Else Is Illusion'.

During the period covered by this account (1917-1945), anti-parliamentary communism in Britain drew much of the intellectual inspiration for its ideas from two main sources.

One of these had its origins abroad: in the Bolshevism of the 1917 Russian revolution, in left communism (a dissident Western European opposition to Bolshevism), and in council communism (a later development of left communism). 'Bolshevism' is probably a term with which most readers will have some familiarity, but the other two may require a few words of explanation. Before the First World War, the future left communists were generally to be found on the left wing of the Social-Democratic parties of the Second International. After 1914 they began to disengage themselves from the Second International, in order to oppose the War. They were quick to support the 1917 Russian revolution, and in its wake participated in the formation of Communist Parties as constituents of a new, Third International. Although the left communists aligned themselves with the Bolsheviks, they disagreed with the tactics advocated by the Bolsheviks, and adopted by the new International, for use in the class struggle in Western Europe. They were also critical of the direction taken by events in Russia after the revolution. Eventually, they argued that the Russian state consisted of a capitalist economy run by and for the benefit of the Bolsheviks, and that the policies of the Third International reflected the Russian capitalist state's interests in the field of foreign policy. Consequently, the term 'left' communism had become obsolescent, because the 'orthodox' communists, i.e. the Bolsheviks, were now part of the capitalist political spectrum. Thereafter the left communists became more widely known as council communists, because of their emphasis on workers' councils or soviets, and not political parties, as the means which workers would use to overthrow capitalism and administer communism.

It was mainly from these sources that one person who figures prominently in the following account, Sylvia Pankhurst, drew the greater part of the inspiration for her communist ideas.

Sylvia Pankhurst was born in Manchester in 1882. In her formative years she was influenced strongly by the radical politics of her family



background. At an early age, around the turn of the century, she became an active member of the Independent Labour Party, and was also involved slightly later in the militant suffrage activity of the Women's Social and Political Union, for which she was imprisoned in 1906 and 1907. In 1912, Sylvia Pankhurst's growing disagreements with the policies of her mother, Emmeline, and sister, Christabel, led her to set up a branch of the WSPU in the East End of London, in the belief that working class women had to be involved more actively in the 'Votes For Women' campaign. During 1913-1914 she was imprisoned, released and re-imprisoned repeatedly under the Prisoners' Temporary Discharge For Ill Health (or 'Cat and Mouse') Act, again on account of her suffrage activity. In 1914 her break with the WSPU became final when she established the East London Federation of Suffragettes, later known as the Workers' Suffrage Federation. At the outbreak of the First World War she adhered to a pacifist position, and organised several schemes among workers in the East End in an attempt to alleviate the suffering and hardship caused by the War. She also edited the Woman's Dreadnought newspaper, first published in March 1914. It is only from towards the end of the First World War that Sylvia Pankhurst becomes of interest to a study of anti-parliamentary communism. A detailed account of her ideas and activities from 1917 to 1924 occupies most of Part One of this study.<sup>1</sup>

The second source from which anti-parliamentary communism in Britain was also nourished was the older tradition of anarchism; to be more specific, an anarchism based on the 'anti-authoritarian' Bakuninist criticisms of the so-called 'state socialist' marxism of the First and Second Internationals. The Bakuninists adhered to a version of the materialist conception of history in which they emphasised the primacy of the economy over politics, and therefore the primary importance of

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1. For a more detailed account of Pankhurst's life before 1917 and after 1924 see the biography written by her son, Richard Pankhurst, Sylvia Pankhurst: Artist And Crusader, (London, 1979).

revolutionary action on the economic field as opposed to action in the political realm. In the mid to late nineteenth century, when these ideas were being formulated, political action was conceived of as nothing other than the capture of state power through the Parliamentary apparatus. Bakuninist anarchism's opposition to 'politics' became synonymous, therefore, with opposition to Parliamentarism. It was mainly from this source that a figure we have already encountered, Guy Aldred, derived many of his ideas.

Guy Aldred was born in London in 1886. During his late teenage years he made rapid intellectual progress from being an 'Anglican Boy Preacher' in 1902 to becoming an 'Anarchist Socialist Impossibilist' by the end of 1906, passing via Theism, Atheism and membership of the Social Democratic Federation. During 1907 he came into contact briefly with the anarchists of the Freedom group in London. With John Turner he published the Voice Of Labour newspaper, and tried to organise the Industrial Union of Direct Actionists as an organisation of workers at the point of production aiming at the expropriation of the capitalist class. To infuse the IUDA with knowledge of revolutionary ideas, Aldred also set up a number of Communist Propaganda Groups around the country from 1907 onwards.<sup>2</sup> During 1909-1910 he served a sentence of twelve months' imprisonment for defying the authorities by publishing an issue of the suppressed Indian nationalist newspaper, the Indian Sociologist. From December 1910 he published the Herald Of Revolt, which was renamed the Spur in June 1914. After he had visited Glasgow on a speaking tour in December 1912, a Glasgow Communist Group was set up. This group became the nucleus of the anti-parliamentary communist movement in later years, once Aldred had settled in Glasgow in the early 1920s. Aldred opposed the First World War and served several terms of imprisonment during 1916-

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2. Aldred gives a detailed account of his early life and ideas up to this date in Dogmas Discarded: An Autobiography Of Thought 1886-1908 Part I: to 1904, (Glasgow, 1940), and Dogmas Discarded (Part II) An Autobiography Of Thought 1902-1908, (Glasgow, 1940).

1919 for resisting conscription.<sup>3</sup> The details of Aldred's involvement in the anti-parliamentary communist movement from 1917 onwards are dealt with in all three Parts of this study.

As the term itself implies, 'anti-parliamentary communism' involved a rejection of the use of elections and Parliament as weapons in the class struggle. However, anti-parliamentarism cannot be reduced to this tactical peculiarity, which was in fact one of the outcomes, rather than the starting-point, of a much more profound underlying philosophy.

From the point of view of anarchist-influenced anti-parliamentary communism, 'Parliamentarism' was a shorthand term connoting the subordination of the working class to corrupt, careerist and above all reformist leaders. Anti-parliamentarism was thus a critique of all methods of struggle and forms of organisation which perpetuated the subordination and subservience of the working class, both within capitalist society and within the organisations which purported to emancipate the workers. Thus the anti-parliamentary communists opposed Parliamentarism and Parliamentary parties, trade unionism and trade unions, and so on. In their place, they emphasised the need for forms of class struggle and organisation which gave the fullest scope to the conscious participation of the entire working class in the struggle for its own emancipation, such as the mass strike and workers' councils or soviets.

Left communists and council communists shared this emphasis on class consciousness and self-emancipation. They also shared anarchist-influenced anti-parliamentarism's healthy disgust with corrupt, careerist and reformist politicians. However, the left communists and council communists sought to situate the critique of Parliamentarism, Social-Democracy and trade unionism within a more rigorous historical perspective.

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3. For an excellent account of the anti-War movement in which both Aldred and Pankhurst were involved, see Ken Weller, 'Don't Be A Soldier!': The Radical Anti-War Movement in North London 1914-1918, (London, 1985). Some of the anarchist roots of the anti-parliamentary communist tradition in Britain can be seen in the so-called "rebel milieu" described in Weller's account.

The impulse for this came from the fact that the left communists and council communists had emerged (mainly in Holland and Germany) from the mass Social-Democratic parties of the Second International. These parties had been based on the Parliamentary and trade union struggle but at the same time claimed to be revolutionary. After the First World War the left communists' and council communists' theories had to explain the 'betrayal' of the working class by these organisations in 1914. The left communists, and more so the later council communists, argued that the old mass Parliamentary parties and trade unions had been necessary and useful when capitalism was still expanding and the communist revolution was an objective impossibility. The First World War, however, marked the onset of the era of the permanent crisis of capitalism; the time had come for the working class to make the revolution. The workers could no longer get by through relying on leaders: the revolution would be made by the masses themselves or not at all. It depended on the masses learning to organise and lead themselves, throwing off their subservience to the leadership of a minority.

Obviously, this analysis pointed to the same practical conclusions as anarchist-influenced anti-parliamentarism had reached by a different route. However, the council communists' views on capitalism's movement through 'ascendant' and 'decadent' periods were taken up only fragmentarily by the anti-parliamentarians in Britain. One of the reasons for this was that in Britain there had been no supposedly-revolutionary mass Social-Democratic party based on the Parliamentary and trade union struggle. The only such organisation in Britain, the Social Democratic Federation, had never grown beyond a few thousand members, and revolutionary minorities - such as the Socialist League, Socialist Labour Party and Socialist Party of Great Britain - had detached themselves from the SDF years before comparable groups did so elsewhere in Europe. In Britain, therefore, the vast majority of workers' representatives in Parliament and the trade unions were openly reformist and opposed to revolution. Anti-

parliamentarians in Britain thus had no need to develop any theory of 'capitalist decadence' to account for these representatives' actions during and after the War. This can be taken as an example of a point that will become more apparent later, which is that the distinctiveness of British anti-parliamentary communism, and many of its strengths and weaknesses, can be explained by the way in which it tried to combine the two strands of anarchism and communism described above, within the specific context of the working class movement in Britain.

The anti-parliamentary communists' basic views on Parliamentarism, communist society, the Russian revolution, Social-Democracy, and trade unionism, are discussed in the four chapters in Part One, which covers the years 1917-1924. This choice of themes has been circumscribed by the fact that this study is the first serious, lengthy and detailed account of the theory of anti-parliamentary communism in Britain, and of the history of the groups which adhered to this theory from the end of the First World War to the end of the Second. Had there been any earlier work on which to build, it might have been possible to develop a wider range of themes. Circumstances being what they were, however, it seemed sensible to concentrate on the basic issues of capitalism, communism, how to get from one to the other, and some of the obstacles standing in the way.

The first years of the 1917-1924 period witnessed the transformation, under the impact of the Russian revolution, of Sylvia Pankhurst's previously reformist Workers' Suffrage Federation into a revolutionary communist group. The Workers' Socialist Federation, as it became known, thus took up a position fairly close to that already occupied by Guy Aldred and the groups associated with him. As the post-War wave of radicalisation receded from around 1921 onwards, however, Pankhurst's group experienced difficulties in coming to terms with the change in circumstances caused by the down-turn in the level of class struggle,

and eventually disappeared from the revolutionary scene in mid-1924 when it ceased to publish its newspaper, the Workers' Dreadnought.

This left the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation, formed on Aldred's initiative in 1921, as the sole surviving anti-parliamentary communist group in Britain. The first chapter of Part Two carries the account forward through the relatively barren years of the late 1920s to the beginning of the 1930s, by examining how the APCF continued to propagate, and occasionally developed further, the essential principles of anti-parliamentarism discussed in detail in Part One. During the early 1930s, differing responses to events such as the world capitalist crisis, the split in the Labour Party and the formation of the National Government, and the rise of fascism on the continent of Europe, brought about a rupture in the anti-parliamentary communist movement in Britain, with Guy Aldred and his supporters leaving the APCF in 1933 to form the United Socialist Movement in 1934. The second chapter of Part Two examines the circumstances of the 1933-1934 split, and the separate activities of the APCF and the USM during the first two or three years afterwards.

The final section, Part Three, covers the years 1936-1945. Its two chapters look at how the anti-parliamentarians faced up to the challenge of the two major events of the period: the civil war in Spain, and the Second World War. In 1937 a second split occurred within the APCF, with the departure of some anarchists who were involved later in the formation of the Glasgow Anarchist Federation at the beginning of the Second World War. Although the APCF is regarded here as the genuine standard-bearer of anti-parliamentary communism in Britain during the 1930s and 1940s, the ideas and activities of the USM and the Anarchists are also discussed extensively in Part Three.

As stated earlier, this work is presented as the first serious, lengthy and detailed account of anti-parliamentary communism in Britain.

Accounts of the origins and formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain do mention that section of the anti-parliamentary communist movement associated with Sylvia Pankhurst, but only in the most cursory fashion.<sup>4</sup> In such studies, organisations which impinged only briefly on the history of the CPGB, and ideas which were at odds with those that became dominant within the Party, are pushed to the margins. Anti-parliamentary communism is regarded as a minor tributary flowing into the mainstream, later to emerge as an effluent which disappears into the void. The ideas of anti-parliamentary communism are not assessed in their own right, and even some of the most banal 'factual' comments about the anti-parliamentarians are mistaken.

Even less attention has been paid to Guy Aldred, since the groups associated with him played practically no direct role in the process which led to the formation of the CPGB. The only person to have written about Aldred's ideas and activities is John Caldwell, whose biography of his old comrade, The Red Evangel, has never been published. Its great merit - the author's intimate knowledge of his subject - is at the same time the source of some of its shortcomings, since it suffers occasionally from too great a reverence for its subject. In particular, Caldwell tends to identify the anti-parliamentary communist movement completely with Aldred, which is an interpretation disputed in the following account, especially in Part Three covering the years 1936-1943.

While academic historians appear to have regarded anti-parliamentary communism as too 'marginal' to their concerns and interests to be worth bothering about, due credit must be given to the few present-day revolutionary

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4. See: Raymond Challinor, The Origins Of British Bolshevism, (London, 1977); Hugo Dewar, Communist Politics In Britain: The CPGB From Its Origins To The Second World War, (London, 1976); Walter Kendall, The Revolutionary Movement In Britain 1900-21, (London, 1969); James Klugmann, History Of The Communist Party Of Great Britain Volume One: Formation And Early Years 1919-1924, (London, 1968); L.J. MacFarlane, The British Communist Party: Its Origin And Development Until 1929, (London, 1966); and Henry Peilling, The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile, (London, 1958).

groups which have acknowledged, to varying degrees, their indebtedness to the past work of the anti-parliamentary communists, and which have kept alive some knowledge of this tradition. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the communist groups which began to re-emerge as a product of the international resurgence of the class struggle arrived at their revolutionary positions in part through a re-appropriation of the 'lost history' of the communist movement. In Britain, the groups known as Workers' Voice and Revolutionary Perspectives (which joined together to form the Communist Workers' Organisation) and World Revolution (which became the British section of the International Communist Current) all went through this process to some extent, although the communist tradition in Holland, Germany and Italy was usually regarded as a more fruitful source of enlightenment than the tradition in Britain.

Even so, a history submerged by decades of counter-revolution could not be retrieved all at once. For example, the 'Address To Revolutionaries In Britain' adopted by the first congress of World Revolution in April 1976 spoke of the 'brutal interruption' of "organic continuity with the past workers' movement" in Britain, "where there has been no tradition of left communism since the disappearance of the Workers' Dreadnought in 1924";<sup>5</sup> it was apparently only much later that World Revolution became aware that the tradition of left (or anti-parliamentary) communism in Britain had extended well beyond 1924. Even in accounts which have made valuable efforts to rediscover the history of anti-parliamentary communism in Britain, therefore, there are still gaps which need to be filled.

The history of the anti-parliamentary communists thus remains relatively obscure and unknown. Rather than going into a more exhaustive survey of the literature here, some of the works mentioned above, and others, will be referred to again more specifically at appropriate points

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5. World Revolution, 'Address To Revolutionaries In Britain', International Review 6, August 1976, page 39.



in the analysis.

Because of the errors contained in other studies, the following account necessarily incorporates a substantial amount of factual detail concerning individuals, organisations and events. What is being dealt with here is, after all, the lives and activities of revolutionary men and women, whose efforts deserve to be accorded the respect of at least being remembered correctly. In the main, however, this study is intended as a critical account and analysis of the theories and ideas to whose propagation these men and women dedicated their time and energy. The material on which this account and analysis is based has been culled for the most part from the many leaflets, newspapers and pamphlets published by the various anti-parliamentary groups. Material from these sources is quoted frequently and often at some length. However, in the study which follows these quotations have not always been scrutinised with quite the same scrupulous attention to every last dot and comma which typically characterises the 'close textual analysis' of 'fully articulated' works of political philosophy. There is a straightforward reason for this: the publications of the anti-parliamentarians were not written as such. Therefore it has been felt that the same demanding standards of critical analysis would not have been useful or appropriate in a study of this sort.

R.M. Fox's vivid description of his experience of being involved in the production of the Industrial Worker just before the First World War could well give a fair idea of the manner and conditions in which the anti-parliamentarians produced their own newspapers and pamphlets:

"Everything was done to the accompaniment of a clamour of talk. One man scribbled in a corner. Others cut out articles from American Labour journals and swept them into the editorial heap. Then everybody would forget about the paper and launch into one of those endless shouting discussions which they loved. I was horrified at this way of running a journal, and refused to scribble little bits to fill the paper in this careless way. I maintained that it was an important matter and should be done with care and a sense of responsibility - if only to the ideas they wanted to spread." 6

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6. R.M. Fox, Smoky Crusade, (London, 1937), page 185.

It should be borne in mind that the anti-parliamentarians were first and foremost active communists, for whom writing was just one activity ranged alongside selling their publications, speaking at regular public meetings indoors and in the open air, attending conferences, etc. Such conditions made it a practical impossibility for them to weigh carefully each word they wrote as to every possible impact it might make or interpretation it might be given. Moreover, their newspapers and pamphlets were in all probability read in just as hurried a manner by the workers among whom they circulated.

The following study therefore tends to reconstruct anti-parliamentary communism as a theory by concentrating on the broad sweep of constantly recurring themes and ideas, rather than on the nuances of every single published phrase or sentence. To give just one example of what this approach implies in practice, Sylvia Pankhurst's admiring remarks, written in her first flush of enthusiasm for the Russian revolution, that "The Bolsheviks have hitherto used the money of past regimes, but the Soviet paper money is now being prepared. It is said that it will be the best paper money in the world and impossible to falsify..."<sup>7</sup> should not be taken as sufficient evidence to condemn Pankhurst's conception of communism when set alongside her far more frequent and adamant statements that the establishment of communism would involve the abolition of money and all forms of exchange.

It has not been possible to track down every last publication issued by the anti-parliamentary communists from 1917 to 1945. As with any historical study, the account which follows is not so much an analysis of the past as an analysis of what has survived from the past. There are variations in the quantity and quality of surviving material relating to the various groups. The precise extent of these variations can be gauged from the sources given in the footnotes and Bibliography.

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7. Workers' Dreadnought 3 August 1918.

Generally, pamphlets issued by the organisations, and complete (or virtually complete) sets of their newspapers, have been relatively easy to locate. The main exception to this has been the newspapers published by the APCF during the second half of the 1930s and during the Second World War: there are fairly large gaps in the runs of Solidarity (1938-1944) and, to a lesser extent, Advance (1936-1937) and Workers' Free Press (1937-1938). By comparison, minute books and personal correspondence have been a less rich source: there is practically no useful material of this sort other than that which relates to Sylvia Pankhurst and the WSP up to and including 1920, and to Guy Aldred and the USM from 1933 onwards. In some cases, unfortunately, individuals' self-assessment of the importance of their own activities, and therefore their inclination to preserve their publications, minute books, correspondence, etc., appears now to have been in inverse proportion to the actual, objective worth of their efforts. For example, the amount of available material relating to the USM during the Second World War is voluminous compared to that concerning the APCF, even although the APCF was at that time making a far superior contribution to anti-parliamentary communism than the USM.

It can be asserted fairly confidently, however, that enough material has been located to form the basis of a detailed and comprehensive account of what the anti-parliamentarians were doing and thinking at each stage of the period covered. Even so, this account has not been written in order to stake out the field of anti-parliamentary communism as the exclusive scholarly preserve of the author. If it inspires others to take an interest in the subject, and to correct, improve or expand what is presented here, then it will have been worth the effort.

## PART ONE

BASIC PRINCIPLES 1917-1924

**Workers' Dreadnought**

**Tells How to Get  
THE  
SOVIETS  
in BRITAIN.**

**Plenty for all when we  
Abolish the Capitalists.  
Equality for the Workers.  
Do Away with Idlers.**

## CHAPTER 1

'ANTI-PARLIAMENTARISM' AND 'COMMUNISM'

To use the term 'anti-parliamentary communism' is to beg two questions. Firstly, what is 'anti-parliamentarism'? And secondly, what is 'communism'? This opening chapter is intended to answer these questions, building on the brief outlines given in the Introduction. It begins with a chronological account of the history of the anti-parliamentary communist groups in Britain from 1917 to 1924. This is followed by a fuller examination of the meanings given to 'parliamentarism' and 'anti-parliamentarism' in the debates over tactics which took place within the revolutionary movement during the same period. After an explanation of the deeper philosophy of anti-parliamentarism that informed its adherents' views on a wide range of issues, the chapter ends with a discussion of the anti-parliamentarians' conception of communism.

Breaking With Suffragism: The Impact Of The Russian Revolution.

It would probably come as a surprise to most people to find that Sylvia Pankhurst occupies a prominent place in the following account of anti-parliamentarism, so firmly established in the popular consciousness is the association between 'the Pankhursts' and 'Votes for Women'. This association is certainly not weakened by accounts of Sylvia Pankhurst's life which omit any mention of her years spent as an advocate of anti-parliamentary communism. A typical example of the way in which "...books dealing with Sylvia, or the Pankhursts in general, leave a large gap in her life over the war and post-war years"<sup>1</sup> can be found in Josephine Kamm's Rapiers And Battleaxes. This book describes how Sylvia Pankhurst "...spent the war years in the East End helping to organise infant welfare centres, day nurseries, cost price restaurants and a co-operative

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1. D.S., 'Sylvia Pankhurst: From Feminism to Left Communism', World Revolution 33, October/November 1980, page 25.

toy factory, and any other scheme to offset the ravages of war", but makes no further reference to any of Pankhurst's activities until it informs us that after the War she "...found another cause - a crusade against the evil effects of Fascism in Ethiopia".<sup>2</sup> An article written by Mary Stott to commemorate the centenary of Pankhurst's birth tells a similar story. Stott asserts that Pankhurst's "...chief concern before, during, and after the First World War was the plight of working women", and then goes on to say that "...the direction her life was to take in its next phase was - a steadfast and unshakeable opposition to Fascism..."<sup>3</sup>

While it might perhaps have suited the purpose of Kamm and Stott's accounts to deny, in effect, that there was ever a period in Sylvia Pankhurst's life during which she was an anti-parliamentary communist, some mention of Pankhurst's views before she became an anti-parliamentarian is important at the outset of this account - if only for use as a yardstick to demonstrate the extent to which she had transcended her earlier views by the end of the First World War. At certain points we will also be introducing the views held by Guy Aldred during the same period, as this too will serve to illustrate the rate of Pankhurst's progress in the direction of anti-parliamentarism.

During 1917 Pankhurst's attitude to Parliamentarism was summed up by the aim of the Workers' Suffrage Federation, published prominently in every issue of the Woman's Dreadnought from 6 January to 21 July: "To secure Human Suffrage, namely, a Vote, for every Woman and Man of full age, and to win Social and Economic Freedom for the People". From 28 July onwards the Woman's Dreadnought was renamed the Workers' Dreadnought.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Josephine Kamm, Rapiers And Battleaxes, (London, 1966), pages 183 and 186.

3. Mary Stott, 'A suitable saint for the young feminists', Guardian, 3 May 1982.

4. This is incorrectly dated as occurring in October 1917 by David Widgery in 'Sylvia Pankhurst: Pioneer of Working Class Feminism', Radical America Volume 13 number 3, May-June 1979, page 27.

and the WSP's statement of its aim was expanded slightly in order to make it clear that 'Social and Economic Freedom for the People' would be established "...on the basis of a Socialist Commonwealth".

The WSP argued that until they were able to vote "...the women workers of the country would still remain without any real measure of political power."<sup>5</sup> The vote would give women workers 'political power' in the sense that it would enable them to exert influence over the fundamental decisions affecting their lives. In the specific circumstances of 1917, for example, universal suffrage would mean that everyone would have "...an equal share of the power to decide the issues of Peace and War..."<sup>6</sup> According to the WSP, universal suffrage would "...make Parliament obedient to the people's will."<sup>7</sup> If it was the will of the people that a socialist society should be established, they could bring this about by electing socialists to Parliament. A prerequisite of this strategy was that the suffrage should be extended to every woman and man.

The demand for adult suffrage was voiced frequently in the Dreadnought during 1917, and was also the subject of two resolutions adopted by the WSP at that year's Annual Conference. One of these resolutions demanded complete adult suffrage for men and women in Parliamentary and local government elections and the abolition of plural voting, while the other called for women to be made eligible for all elective and administrative offices.<sup>8</sup> The demand for adult suffrage was often accompanied by calls for the abolition of the House of Lords, since it was felt that it would be "...useless to secure a democratic House of Commons if its Acts may be vetoed by an Autocratic House of Lords."<sup>9</sup>

The centrality of the suffrage issue in the WSP's political outlook during 1917 was reflected in the organisation's response to the

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5. Woman's Dreadnought 3 February 1917.

6. Ibid. 27 January 1917.

7. Workers' Dreadnought 13 September 1917.

8. Woman's Dreadnought 2 June 1917.

9. Workers' Dreadnought 13 September 1917.

February revolution in Russia. The news that the Tsarist autocracy had been overthrown, and that "...a constituent assembly is to be elected by the men and women of Russia by secret ballot and on the basis of Universal Suffrage",<sup>10</sup> was not the least of the reasons for the WSP's favourable attitude towards the February revolution.

It would be appropriate to introduce the views of Guy Aldred here, for at this stage they contrasted markedly with those of Pankhurst and the WSP. While Pankhurst thought that universal suffrage would result in the election of governments reflecting, and responsive to, ordinary people's wishes, Guy Aldred's rejection of such a view was evident in his own response to the February revolution:

"We know that the vote does not mean freedom...In Britain, our parliament has been a sham. Everywhere parliamentary oratory is bogus passion, universal suffrage an ineffective toy gun of the democracy at play in the field of politics. Why celebrate the triumph of the toy in the land of the ex-Czar?"<sup>11</sup>

The differences between these two points of view were highlighted further by the 'Soviet Convention' which met in Leeds in June 1917. Intervening in the debate about a resolution to set up Councils of Workmen's and Soldiers' Delegates in Britain, Sylvia Pankhurst warned the gathering that

"I hope you are going to see to it that some of the women you choose are those sweated workers and the mothers who live in the hovels and slums. I hope you are not going to leave them out when you form your Committees and Central Government."<sup>12</sup>

Pankhurst's remarks were criticised by Rose Witcop, who had attended the Convention, and who was then editing Aldred's newspaper, the Spur, while he was in prison serving successive sentences imposed for resisting conscription. Witcop interpreted Pankhurst's comments as implying that

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10. Minutes of WSP General Meeting 19 March 1917, Pankhurst Papers.

11. Spur May 1917.

12. What Happened At Leeds, Report Published By The Council Of Workers' And Soldiers' Delegates, (London, 1917), reprinted in British Labour And The Russian Revolution, (Nottingham, n.d.), page 33.



the future 'co-operative commonwealth' would "permit of Governments and Parliaments", because "...she pleads - alas for our limited vision! - that we should bear in mind that woman is entitled to the vote." Witcop considered it "...strange how even when standing on the threshold of freedom we cannot find it in ourselves to put away the tawdry trinkets belonging to the state of bondage." It was "...superfluous and unintelligent to ask that the vote be extended to women under the new order, which, if it means anything, stands most certainly for sex equality." But, Witcop concluded, "...Miss Pankhurst has worked hard, and it is not pleasant to have to tell her that the vote will not be of any use to her in the social commonwealth; that she will have freedom instead when the intelligent voice of the people is heard."<sup>13</sup>

Rose Witcop's criticism of Sylvia Pankhurst's fixation on the suffrage issue was certainly an accurate portrayal of the WSF's political priorities during 1917. However, this was soon to change in the most dramatic fashion. Starting with the issue of 26 January 1918, the WSF's statement of intent "To Secure a Vote for every Woman and Man of full age, and to win Social and Economic Freedom for the People on the basis of a Socialist Commonwealth" was removed from the Workers' Dreadnought. The explanation for this could be found in the same issue of the paper: an article by Sylvia Pankhurst giving a highly favourable account of the Bolsheviks' dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in Petrograd just eight days previously. In March 1917 the WSF had looked forward to the establishment of the Constituent Assembly with keen anticipation; in January 1918 the Bolsheviks dispersed the very same Assembly, before its first meeting - with Pankhurst's endorsement. During 1917, the WSF had viewed events such as the February revolution through the prism of the suffrage issue; from 1918 onwards, it would view issues such as suffrage through the prism of the October revolution.

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13. Spur July 1917.

That the October revolution was by far the greatest catalyst in the political evolution of the WSP is one of the central arguments of Part One of this study. The October revolution made a political impact of unprecedented magnitude. This study therefore disputes Walter Kendall's argument that the impact of the October revolution was primarily financial. If anything "...impose/s<sup>7</sup> an unbearable burden on human credulity" it is Kendall's suggestion that decisions taken by revolutionaries in Britain were "...at least as much determined by financial need as political conviction..."<sup>14</sup> The dramatic change in the WSP's point of view from 1917 to 1918 took place long before the first agent of the new Russian Government appeared on the horizon bearing vast amounts of lucrative 'Bolshevik Gold'. Therefore it requires some explanation other than one based on the prospect of material benefit.

It was the emergence of the soviets in Russia, seen as the means by which the revolution had been carried out, and as the administrative machinery of the post-revolutionary society, which caused the WSP to reject the Parliamentary route to socialism. The WSP did not abandon its previous commitment to 'Popular Control of the Management of the World'.<sup>15</sup> Rather, it recognised that the soviets were far better suited than Parliaments to the realisation of this goal. In her article on the Bolsheviks' dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, Sylvia Pankhurst argued that "As a representative body, an organisation such as the All-Russian Workers', Soldiers', Sailors' and Peasants' Council is more closely in touch with and more directly represents its constituents than the Constituent Assembly, or any existing Parliament."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the view of the WSP Executive Committee was that the soviets were "...the most democratic form of government yet established..."<sup>17</sup>

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14. Walter Kendall, The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21, (London, 1969), pages 255 and 252. See Chapter 13 in particular.

15. Woman's Dreadnought 27 January 1917.

16. Workers' Dreadnought 26 January 1918.

17. Minutes of WSP Executive Committee meeting 26 July 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

The WSF's recognition of the superiority of the soviet form soon caused doubts to be cast on the Parliamentary approach to which it had adhered previously. Thus, in February 1918, Sylvia Pankhurst asked:

"Is it possible to establish Socialism with the Parliament at Westminster as its foundation?...We must consider very seriously whether our efforts should not be bent on the setting aside of this present Parliamentary system...and the substitution for it of a local, national and international system, built upon an occupational basis, of which the members shall be but the delegates of those who are carrying on the world's work..." 18

Pankhurst's doubts about the possibility of establishing socialism by Parliamentary means, and her tentative suggestion of soviets as an alternative means, matched a similar change in ideas taking place within the WSF as a whole. Resolutions adopted by the Annual Conference of the WSF on 19-20 May 1918 showed that the organisation had not yet rejected Parliamentarism completely, since one resolution urged workers in Britain to elect 'International Socialists' to Parliament, and not to vote for any candidate who supported the War. On the other hand, another resolution argued that "...Parliament organised on a territorial basis and government from the top are suited only to the capitalist system", and urged workers to "...organise on an industrial basis and to build up a National Assembly of Local Workers' Committees, directly representing the workers which shall render Parliament unnecessary by usurping its functions." The Conference's decision to change the organisation's name from the Workers' Suffrage Federation to the Workers' Socialist Federation was also a sign of the growing rejection of Parliamentarism within the WSF.<sup>19</sup> Another symbol of this evolution was the removal of the slogan 'Socialism, Internationalism, Votes For All' from the masthead of the Workers' Dreadnought

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18. Workers' Dreadnought 16 February 1918.

19. Ibid. 1 June 1918. Stephen Graubard's account betrays a lack of elementary research when he writes of the renaming of the WSF: "The precise date of change is not certain...it occurred some time between March and September 1918." British Labour And The Russian Revolution 1917-1924, (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), page 120 note 22.

in July 1918, and its replacement with a simple appeal 'For International Socialism'. However, the WSF's attitude during the general election at the end of 1918 showed that the organisation's views on Parliamentarism continued to be in a state of transition until the following year.

Raymond Challinor's statement that Sylvia Pankhurst "...did not always oppose the contesting of elections. In the 1918 general election she called upon people to vote Labour and went out of her way to applaud the SLP for using the electoral opportunity to propagate revolutionary ideas"<sup>20</sup> omits too many details to be an accurate description of the WSF's position at the time of the election, since the WSF's views at this stage were more complex than Challinor would lead us to believe. At the end of 1918 many WSF branches were still affiliated to the Labour Party at a local level, but the organisation was becoming increasingly critical of the Labour Party (see Chapter 3). Sylvia Pankhurst's own opinion of the Labour Party in November-December 1918 was hardly likely to have encouraged people to vote for it: in her opinion the Labour Party had "...crawled at the heels of the capitalist Government throughout the War..."<sup>21</sup> and if it won the election "...it would give us nothing more than a wishy-washy Reformist Government, which, when all the big issues that really matter came to be decided, would be swept along in the wake of capitalist policy."<sup>22</sup> Pankhurst made her personal position on the issue of contesting elections clear after a group of her supporters in Sheffield proposed that she should stand as a general election candidate in the Hallam constituency. The Dreadnought reported that Pankhurst had declined this invitation, on the grounds that "...in accordance with the policy of the Workers' Socialist Federation, she regards Parliament as an out-of-date machine and joins the Federation in working to establish the soviets in Britain."<sup>23</sup> However, when questioned about its attitude to the

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20. Raymond Challinor, The Origins Of British Bolshevism, (London, 1977), page 222.

21. Workers' Dreadnought 30 November 1918.

22. Ibid. 14 December 1918.

23. Ibid. 7 December 1918.

election, a General Meeting of the WSF stated that it "...would not run candidates and would only support Socialists, but that it could not prevent members working for Labour candidates if they wished to."<sup>24</sup> If this showed some latitude on the issue of support for the Labour Party in the election, the following statement by Sylvia Pankhurst could also be interpreted as supporting involvement in the election in order to spread revolutionary ideas:

"The expected General Election interests us only so far as it can be made a sounding-board for the policy of replacing capitalism by Socialism, and Parliament by the Workers' Councils. We shall be at the elections, but only to remind the workers that capitalism must go." <sup>25</sup>

Thus despite the growing anti-parliamentarism within the WSF, the organisation still felt able to give its support to three Socialist Labour Party candidates (J.T. Murphy, Arthur MacManus, and William Paul) and also to David Kirkwood and John Maclean.<sup>26</sup> In the case of Maclean, Pankhurst herself travelled to Glasgow in mid-November 1918 to open a Grand Sale Of Work in aid of his campaign fund.

Pankhurst's support for Maclean's candidacy in the Glasgow Gorbals constituency brings us back to Guy Aldred. In June 1918 Aldred had already criticised and opposed Maclean's decision to stand for Parliament. Aldred argued that it was "...a Marxian truism that the workers for their own political purpose - which is the social revolutionary one of expropriating the ruling class - cannot seize and use parliamentary machinery of the capitalist state." Here Aldred was basing his case on Marx's statement in The Civil War In France that "...the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes."<sup>27</sup> Aldred urged Maclean instead to 'Make your programme analogous to the Sinn Fein programme only with Socialism and

24. Minutes of WSF General Meeting 15 November 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

25. Workers' Dreadnought 2 November 1918.

26. Ibid. 30 November and 7 December 1918.

27. Marx, The Civil War In France; Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association, 1871, (Peking, 1977), page 66.

not mere nationalism for its objective."<sup>28</sup>

The 'Sinn Fein' tactic advocated by Aldred in June 1918 was one of a number of anti-parliamentary tactics proposed by revolutionaries in Britain during the period after the Russian revolution. It was based mainly on an analogy with the strategy of the Irish nationalist party Sinn Fein, which said that its elected Members of Parliament would boycott the Parliament at Westminster and instead establish their own Parliament in Dublin. This strategy was put into practice by Sinn Fein after the 1918 general election. John Caldwell has explained that, transferred to the context of communist candidatures, the 'Sinn Fein' tactic meant that

"Successful candidates would not go to parliament, but would remain in their constituencies till they had a quorum, then they would constitute an assembly, insisting on the right to represent the district which elected them. Thus a dual authority is established, which could possibly spread like wild-fire, as these innovations do, and eventually challenge the state." <sup>29</sup>

In Aldred's opinion, the election of a communist candidate standing on the 'Sinn Fein' programme would "...establish the total inability of any parliamentarian, whether nominally labour or Socialist, or avowedly capitalist and reactionary to get returned."<sup>30</sup> The votes cast for the communist candidate "...would have the effect of expressing the electors' opinion that political authority should be withdrawn from Parliament and represented in Councils or Soviets created by and responsible to the workers."<sup>31</sup> It would seem to be the case, therefore, from Aldred's mention of 'Councils or Soviets' and Caldwell's reference to 'dual authority', that to some extent the example of the 1917 revolution in Russia had also entered into the thinking behind the 'Sinn Fein' tactic, as well as the more obvious influence derived from the Irish nationalists.

We will return to the 'Sinn Fein' tactic later, since the question

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28. Spur June 1918.

29. John Caldwell, 'Guy Alfred Aldred', Black Star Second series number 1, October 1983, page 17.

30. Spur October 1919.

31. Red Commune February 1921.

of what form of electoral activity, if any, might be acceptable to revolutionaries was one of the most contentious issues which would be discussed in the negotiations to form a communist party in Britain during 1919-1920. Meanwhile, however, we will return to the WSF, whose path would now cross Aldred's with increasing frequency.

At the beginning of February 1919, a conference was held in Berne to reconstitute the Second International, which had collapsed in 1914 when virtually all its member parties had lined up behind the imperialist war aims of their respective ruling classes. Commenting on a pro-parliamentary, anti-soviet resolution adopted by the Berne conference, Sylvia Pankhurst wrote:

"Circumstances are forcing the Socialists of every country to choose whether they will work to perpetuate the Parliamentary system of government, or to build up an industrial republic on Soviet lines. It is impossible to work effectively for both ends." 32

During 1919 it became abundantly clear which of these options the WSF had chosen. In March a resolution "...to ignore all Parliamentary and Municipal elections and to expose the futility of workers wasting their time and energy in working for these ends" was submitted to the WSF Executive Committee for inclusion on the agenda of the forthcoming Annual Conference.<sup>33</sup> At the Conference, on 7-8 June, the resolution was passed and became WSF policy.<sup>34</sup>

On the recommendation of a courier from the newly-formed Third (Communist) International, the conference delegates instructed the Executive Committee to take practical steps towards linking up with the new International and with other communist groups in Britain. Meetings were held on 13 and 21 June, attended by delegates from the WSF, British Socialist Party, Socialist Labour Party, and South Wales Socialist Society. The Executive of the WSF instructed its delegates beforehand to

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32. Workers' Dreadnought 22 March 1919.

33. Minutes of WSF Executive Committee meeting 28 March 1919, Pankhurst Papers.

34. Workers' Dreadnought 14 June 1919.

"stand fast" on the position of "No Parliamentary Action" in any discussions about the issue.<sup>35</sup>

The WSF's attitude around this time was noticed with approval by Guy Aldred, whose favourable comments in May 1919, when contrasted with the slighting remarks made by Rose Witcop two years previously, demonstrate the distance travelled by the WSF during that period: Aldred observed that

"...the Workers' Dreadnought, under the editorship of our comrade, Sylvia Pankhurst, has been making great strides intellectually speaking, and seems now to have become a definite Revolutionary Marxian Anarchist weekly with a clear outlook on the question of Soviet Republicanism as opposed to Parliamentarism." 36

In July 1919 Pankhurst made contact with Lenin, in an attempt to enlist his support for the WSF's anti-parliamentary stance in the communist unity negotiations. In a letter to the Bolshevik leader, she suggested that "If you were here, I believe you would say: Concentrate your forces upon revolutionary action; have nothing to do with the Parliamentary machine. Such is my own view."<sup>37</sup>

Lenin's reply was, in part, conciliatory. He said that he counted anti-parliamentary communists among "...the best, most honest and sincerely revolutionary representatives of the proletariat..." and that communist parties which were in the process of being formed "...would be making an irreparable mistake, if they repulsed those workers who...are against participation in the parliamentary struggle." The issue of Parliamentary action was a "partial, secondary question" which should not be allowed to delay the formation of a communist party in Britain. That much aside, however, Lenin made his own position on the issue perfectly clear: he wrote that he was "...personally convinced that to renounce

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35. Minutes of WSF Executive Committee meeting 12 June 1919, Pankhurst Papers.

36. Spur May 1919.

37. Letter dated 16 July 1919, Communist International (Petrograd edition) number 5, September 1919.



participation in parliamentary elections is a mistake for the revolutionary workers of England...", and that workers who held anti-parliamentary views simply showed thereby their "lack of revolutionary experience".<sup>38</sup>

Lenin's reply was not the sort of response that anti-parliamentarians in Britain had hoped, or expected, to receive. As we have seen, the example of the Russian revolution had been instrumental in causing the WSF to abandon notions that Parliamentary action could play any role in the revolutionary struggle. It must have come as a surprise, therefore, for anti-parliamentarians in Britain to learn that Lenin was now apparently contradicting the lessons of 'his own' revolution.

Furthermore, what little anti-parliamentarians in Britain knew of Bolshevism had caused them to identify it with anti-parliamentarism of the anarchist variety described in the Introduction. This interpretation of Bolshevism was based on evidence such as Lenin's State And Revolution, first published in English in 1919. In this work Lenin returned to Marx's The Civil War In France (1871), and revived from that work the idea of smashing, rather than taking over, the existing state apparatus. In its own day Marx's argument had been regarded by his anarchist critics as a retraction of his previous views on the state, and as an admission that anarchist views on the question were correct. We have already seen how Guy Aldred used the 'Marxian truism' (derived from The Civil War In France) that the working class 'cannot seize and use parliamentary machinery of the capitalist state' as an argument against John Maclean's decision to stand for Parliament in 1918. Thus it is hardly surprising that Aldred should have regarded State And Revolution, which put forward the same line of argument, as one of the "...immense services rendered to the cause of the workers' world revolution by Lenin..."<sup>39</sup> Reviewing

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38. Letter dated 28 August 1919, in V.I. Lenin, British Labour And British Imperialism; A compilation of writings by Lenin on Britain, (London, 1969), pages 243-245.

39. Commune June 1924.

Lenin's pamphlet in December 1919, Aldred wrote that the author, "...in showing the revolutionary one-ness of all that is essential in Marx with all that counts in Bakunin, has accomplished a wonderful work."<sup>40</sup>

Aldred summed up his perception of the affinity between Bolshevism and anarchist anti-parliamentarism when he wrote: "...no man can be really and truly an Anarchist without becoming a Bolshevik...no man can be really and truly a Bolshevik without standing boldly and firmly on the Anarchist platform."<sup>41</sup> This was not a view confined to Aldred. Willie McDougall of the Glasgow Anarchist Group, for example, toured Scotland as a Spur 'missionary' in the winter of 1919-1920, speaking on, among other topics, "Lenin's Anarchy".<sup>42</sup>

#### The Anti-Parliamentarians And The Formation Of The CPGB.

The communist unity negotiations in Britain, which had provoked Pankhurst to seek Lenin's views in July 1919, continued throughout the rest of 1919 and most of 1920. The unity negotiations are documented in the various histories of the origins of the CPGB, and it would be unproductive to go over exactly the same ground here.<sup>43</sup> Instead, the following account concentrates on the anti-parliamentarians' attitude to the negotiations, and the relationship between the anti-parliamentarians over the issue.

At the heart of the protracted negotiations to form a single, united communist party in Britain lay disagreement over two issues. One of these issues was whether or not the communist party should affiliate to the Labour Party. This aspect of the unity negotiations is discussed in Chapter 3, and need not concern us now. The second issue was whether or not the communist party should engage in Parliamentary action. The

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40. Worker 13 December 1919.

41. Spur January-February 1920.

42. Bob Jones, 'William C. McDougall' (Obituary), History Workshop Journal number 13, Spring 1982, pages 205-207.

43. See Introduction note 4. The most comprehensive account is given in Walter Kendall, op. cit., Chapters 11-14.

arguments in favour of Parliamentary action put forward by the Bolsheviks, and supported by some of the British groups, and the counter-arguments of anti-parliamentarians such as Pankhurst and Aldred, will be examined in greater detail later in this chapter. For the time being, the briefest of outlines will suffice as background to the course of events during 1919-1920.

All of the main participants in the unity talks were in basic agreement that the Parliamentary form was not suited to be the administrative form of communist society, and that the communist revolution would not be carried out by using the existing Parliamentary machinery. In both cases, these roles would be filled by the workers' soviets. Disagreement arose over the question of whether or not Parliament could be put to some sort of revolutionary use before the revolution. The British Socialist Party and the Socialist Labour Party supported the use of election campaigns for propaganda purposes, and the use of Parliament as a 'tribune' from which to make revolutionary speeches. This tactic, known as 'Revolutionary Parliamentarism', was advocated by the Bolsheviks. The other participants in the negotiations, the WSP and the South Wales Socialist Society, disagreed with Revolutionary Parliamentarism and tended to favour complete abstention from all involvement in electoral and Parliamentary activity. As we shall see, however, the WSP did not approach this issue in a dogmatic manner.

Neither Guy Aldred nor any of the groups with which he was associated at this time were directly involved in the unity talks, which were confined mainly to the four groups mentioned above. However, their position on the issue of Parliamentary action is still relevant to this account, since they could be said to be involved indirectly, through their relationship to the WSP.

In October 1919 Aldred spelled out his position on the issue of Parliamentary action. He suggested two options. One tactic would be for communists to contest elections in order to measure the level of

opposition to capitalism and support for communism, and to "...demonstrate the supreme political strength and unity of the Communist Party, as a prelude to revolutionary action." Alternatively, communists could "...proclaim and...organise a disciplined boycott of the ballot box." Aldred wrote that he favoured the tactic of an organised boycott, because it was "the simplest and most direct method". However, the choice was a matter of "tactics and expediency"; Aldred could support either option "without any violation of principle".<sup>44</sup> In a later expansion of his position, Aldred revived the idea of the 'Sinn Fein' candidature, with elected candidates pledged not to take the Parliamentary oath of allegiance, not to sit in Parliament, and not to receive any political payment (such as an MP's salary) from the state.<sup>45</sup>

The 'bottom line' of Aldred's position was that under no circumstances should successful communist candidates take their seats in Parliament. There was, therefore, an unbridgeable divide between his position and the Revolutionary Parliamentarism advocated by the Bolsheviks, since the latter tactic required communists to enter Parliament and use it as a platform for revolutionary propaganda. Aldred argued that Revolutionary Parliamentarism was a contradiction in terms: "There can only be revolutionism OR parliamentarianism."<sup>46</sup> Lenin's advocacy of the tactic was a "fatal compromise".<sup>47</sup>

This view meant that as it became increasingly clear that unity in Britain would have to be based on the terms laid down by the Bolsheviks, anti-parliamentarians such as Aldred were faced with the choice of either compromising their principles, or else excluding themselves from the moves towards unity. It was the latter course of action which Aldred and his comrades chose to follow. In July 1920 the Glasgow Communist Group announced that it declined to "...identify itself with any Unity Convention

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44. Spur October 1919.

45. Ibid. May 1920.

46. Ibid. January 1921.

47. Ibid. May 1920.

willing to...support men and women sitting in the capitalist Parliament House."<sup>48</sup> Not long afterwards it announced that it had 'suspended' its support for the Third International "...until such time as that body repudiates its "wobbling" on the question of Parliamentary Action..."<sup>49</sup>

If we look at the history of the Glasgow Communist Group, it provides a good example of the way in which the Bolsheviks first inspired then disillusioned some of their new supporters in Britain.<sup>50</sup> The origins of the Group can be traced back to the 1890s, when the original Glasgow Anarchist Group was formed following the break-up of the Socialist League. For a while in the first decade of the 1900s the Glasgow Group was partially eclipsed by the neighbouring Paisley Group, but by May 1912 it had revived to the extent that it was able to publish the first of 34 issues of a weekly paper called the Anarchist.<sup>51</sup> The effort involved in producing a weekly paper led to the formation of a clique around the editor, George Barrett, and it seems to have been from disgruntled 'rank and file' anarchists that the Glasgow Communist Group recruited much of its membership when it was formed after Aldred's visit to the city on a speaking tour in December 1912. There seems to have been some fluidity of membership between the two groups and at the end of 1916 they united, under the name of the Glasgow Anarchist Group. Members of the Group wrote for Guy Aldred's London-based paper, the Spur, which was also used to advertise the Group's meetings. In May 1918, together with the Cowdenbeath Anarchist Group, the Glasgow Anarchists published a manifesto,

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48. Spur July 1920.

49. Ibid. October 1920.

50. This account is based on information in John Caldwell, The Red Evangel: A Biography Of Guy Aldred, (unpublished typescript) and Keith Millar's 'Notes Towards An Anarchist Chronology: 1890-1950s' and 'Chronological Chart Of Libertarian Socialism: 1890/1950' (both unpublished).

51. The Anarchist was set up as a national newspaper by an Anarchist Conference held in Leeds in February 1912; see Joseph Buckman, 'The 1912 Anarchist Conference in Leeds as Reported by the Local Jewish Group' in Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin number 47, Autumn 1983, pages 13-17. For an impression of the Glasgow Anarchist Group at this time see John Paton, Proletarian Pilgrimage: An Autobiography, (London, 1935), pages 218-232.

which can best be described as 'anarcho-syndicalist' in content. It rejected Parliamentary action, and called on workers to organise at the point of production in order to expropriate the capitalist class and organise a socialist society.<sup>52</sup> The Group's next manifesto, published two years later, showed significant changes compared to its predecessor. The Group now announced that it was renaming itself the Glasgow Communist Group (in order to express its support for communist unity), and that it stood for "...the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, the Soviet Republic, anti-Parliamentary agitation, and the Third International."<sup>53</sup> As we have seen, however, by October 1920 the Group had realised that this combination of views amounted to an untenable position; principled commitment to anti-parliamentarism meant that the Group had to exclude itself from the unity talks and suspend its support for the Third International.

The path of the WSF followed a rather different course over the same period. In August 1920 Rose Witcop criticised the WSF for the way it had been "...prepared to waive the question of parliamentary action for the sake of unity."<sup>54</sup> This seems to have been an accurate assessment of the WSF's attitude during the first few months of 1920. Sylvia Pankhurst suggested that the issue of Parliamentary action was "...not a matter of principle but of tactics, always provided, of course, that Parliamentary action by Communists is used in a revolutionary manner."<sup>55</sup> While there was within the Executive Committee of the WSF "...a very strong feeling against Parliamentary action",<sup>56</sup> WSF delegates to the unity talks were advised by their Executive that although "...we should not in any event compromise on the question of Affiliation to the Labour Party...we might leave the question of Parliamentary Action to be worked out by the party

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52. Spur May 1918.

53. Ibid. July 1920.

54. Ibid. August 1920.

55. Workers' Dreadnought 10 April 1920.

56. Minutes of WSF Executive Committee meeting 20 February 1920, Pankhurst Papers.

as the situation developed."<sup>57</sup> Thus the WSF's attitude during the first half of 1920 points strongly to the conclusion that it was the issue of affiliation to the Labour Party which proved to be the insurmountable obstacle in the way of unity between the WSF and the other groups, and not the issue of Parliamentary action as is suggested in several accounts of the unity negotiations.<sup>58</sup>

In June 1920 the WSF called an 'Emergency Conference' of 'left wing' communist groups. It had been announced that there would be a Communist Unity Convention in London on 1 August, at which a united communist party would definitely be formed, and that policy decisions taken at the Convention would be binding on all participants. The WSF felt that the 'left wing' communists needed to plan their strategy in advance, in view of the fact that any such Unity Convention would be dominated by delegates from the 'right wing' (i.e. pro-parliamentary and pro-affiliation) groups.<sup>59</sup> At the 'Emergency Conference', held in London on 19-20 June, the participants decided to take no further part in the unity negotiations, and to form instead their own Communist Party (British Section of the Third International).<sup>60</sup> Having thus freed them-

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57. Minutes of WSF Executive Committee meeting 3 March 1920, Pankhurst Papers.

58. This is contrary to Henry Pelling's version, that "...Sylvia Pankhurst decided to withdraw, apparently to avoid being overwhelmed by the BSP on the question of parliamentary action"; The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile, (London, 1958), page 7. L.J. MacFarlane makes the same mistake when he says that the WSF "...was irresponsible in making this issue [anti-parliamentarism] the plank for forming a 'united' Communist Party of their own..."; The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development Until 1929, (London, 1966), page 56. Finally, Tom Bell's account is also inaccurate, for the same reasons, when he writes that "The WSF, failing to secure an agreement on the question of anti-parliamentarism, remained aloof from any further proceedings on unity and assumed the title, 'The Communist Party (British Section of the Third International)'"; Pioneering Days, (London, 1941), page 179. The correct interpretation of events is given by Walter Kendall: "The truth would seem to be that Labour Party affiliation was an insuperable barrier as far as the WSF was concerned"; Kendall, op.cit., page 208.

59. See minutes of WSF Executive Committee meeting 10 June 1920, Pankhurst Papers, and Workers' Dreadnought 12 June 1920.

60. Workers' Dreadnought 26 June 1920.

selves at one stroke from any necessity to compromise, the members of the new party adopted a platform of seven 'cardinal points', the sixth of which stated their "Refusal to engage in Parliamentary action".<sup>61</sup>

Besides the WSF, the other organisations which attended the June conference were the Communist Groups of Aberdeen, Croydon and Holt (Norfolk), Gorton Socialist Society, the Manchester Soviet, Stepney Communist League, and the Labour Abstentionist Party. Some idea of the political views of the Aberdeen Communist Group can be gleaned from correspondence concerning the Group published in Forward between June and October 1920. A critic using the pen-name "Socialist" paraphrased the Group's views as follows:

"Lenin has been guilty of some fatal compromise [c.f. quote from Aldred at page 40 note 47], and Guy Aldred is entirely wrong in seeking to use the ballot box in order to register the strength of his following. Johnnie Maclean is a reformist...Willie Gallacher is a job hunter."

This letter provoked an exchange of correspondence, with members of the Group writing to justify and explain their views, and to refute "Socialist's" increasingly-wild accusations. William Greig of the Aberdeen Communist Group wrote that it stood for a "clear-cut Revolutionary, anti-Parliamentary, anti-Trade Union, anti-Reform policy". He opposed the trade unions because they split the working class into "1,300 different sections", and described Parliamentary elections as "job hunting expeditions at the polling booths of the capitalist class".<sup>62</sup>

The Stepney Communist League - a fellow participant with the Aberdeen Communist Group in the formation of the CP(BSTI) - was originally the Stepney branch of the Herald League, and became a branch of the Communist League when that organisation came together in March 1919.<sup>63</sup> The Communist League was formed on the initiative of the London District

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61. Workers' Dreadnought 3 July 1920.

62. See Forward 26 June, 17 and 31 July, 14 and 28 August, 11 and 18 September, and 2 October 1920.

63. Spur April 1919.



Council of the Socialist Labour Party, and consisted mainly of a few SLP branches and Aldred's surviving Communist Propaganda Groups, including the Glasgow Anarchist Group.<sup>64</sup> Maud Hebbes of the WSF attended the founding conference and the WSF decided to affiliate after hearing her report.<sup>65</sup> According to John Caldwell, Guy Aldred "...was undoubtedly the outstanding personality of the organisation."<sup>66</sup>

The Communist League's manifesto stated that "To bring about the new society the working class must form its own political organisation on the same basis upon which it will establish Communism, viz. the administration of industry." The activity of Communist League members would be

"...centred around the formation and work of the Workers' Committees and councils...As members of the working class the Communists enter the workers' committees and councils and by their agitation and education develop and extend the growing class-consciousness."

During a revolutionary upsurge the Workers' Committees would assume increasingly political functions: "...that is, they resist all legislation and industrial action directed against the working class, and ultimately assuming all power, establish a working class dictatorship." This would be followed by the emergence of "the Co-operative Commonwealth", described as "...a Republic of Federated Soviets, or Communal Councils, controlled and administered from the bottom upwards."<sup>67</sup>

The programme of the Labour Abstentionist Party - another of the CP(BSTI)'s founder-groups - was published in May 1920. This declared the aim of the Party to be "The Collective Well-Being of the People", to be achieved by the "Tactical Method" of "(a) Securing the election of Parliamentary Candidates pledged to abstain from taking their seats (b) Propagation of the Futility of Parliamentary Action."<sup>68</sup> The secretary/treasurer of the Labour Abstentionist Party, Edgar T. Whitehead, was elected to the

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64. Communist August 1919.

65. Minutes of WSF General Meeting 21 March 1919, Pankhurst Papers.

66. John Caldwell, 'Guy Alfred Aldred, Antiparliamentarian, 1886-1963; a Memoir', in Ian MacDougall, ed., Essays in Scottish Labour History, (Edinburgh, 1978), page 229.

67. Spur March 1919; Communist May 1919; Communist League leaflet, file 48, Pankhurst Papers.

68. Spur May 1920.

post of secretary of the CP(BSTI) at the June conference.

In August 1920 Whitehead wrote to Aldred in an attempt to gain the latter's support for the CP(BSTI). On the subject of Parliamentary action, Whitehead wrote:

"You will note we are definitely against parliamentary action. This does not mean that we are necessarily against taking part in elections, but the party is against running candidates for the present. It will always be dead against any candidates taking their seats, and should it decide to run them, they would have to adopt your ['Sinn Fein'] programme as suggested by you in the May Spur." 69

Aldred declined Whitehead's invitation to support the CP(BSTI); he and Rose Witcop both had some strong criticisms to make of the new party. Although Aldred said that he was in "complete agreement" with the CP(BSTI)'s political programme, he was "...opposed to the way in which that programme has been foisted on the movement." In his opinion, the founding conference of the party had been unrepresentative, because the delegates had no real mandates from the groups they claimed to represent. If a communist party was to be formed, Aldred argued, it "...must be evolved through a federation of local groups, a slow merging of them into one party, from the bottom upwards, as distinct from the imposition from the top downwards."<sup>70</sup>

Aldred and Witcop had other criticisms apart from ones based on organisational principles. Rose Witcop described Sylvia Pankhurst as "a lady comrade who accepts the Gospel according to Lenin".<sup>71</sup> Behind this jibe lay a serious political point. As its name made clear, the CP(BSTI) had laid claim to being the British section of the Third International; however (Aldred pointed out), surely it was inconsistent for an avowedly anti-parliamentary organisation - the CP(BSTI) - to declare its support for another organisation - the Third International - which advocated the tactic of Revolutionary Parliamentarism.<sup>72</sup> It was precisely this dilemma which had led the Glasgow Communist Group to 'suspend' its support for

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69. Spur August 1920.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid. April 1921.

the Third International rather than compromise its adherence to anti-parliamentarism. The inconsistency pinpointed by Aldred was to perplex the CP(BSTI) for several months after its formation, and the party's attempt to resolve this problem turned out to have fractious consequences.

In his pamphlet "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder, written in April-May 1920, Lenin had just directed a strong attack against anti-parliamentary tendencies within the various Western European communist groups. The WSP was among those specifically singled out for criticism; Lenin had written that "...the British Communists should participate in parliamentary action..." and that unity between the British groups should be based on "...obligatory participation in parliament."<sup>73</sup> Extracts from Lenin's pamphlet were published in the revolutionary press in Britain during the summer of 1920, and, given Lenin's prestigious standing in the eyes of most British revolutionaries, the pamphlet probably exerted considerable influence in the debates about Parliamentary action.

Lenin made another intervention in these debates in July 1920, with a message addressed to the Communist Unity Convention scheduled to take place in London on 31 July - 1 August. In his message, Lenin criticised the WSP for withdrawing from the unity talks, stated that the WSP - now the CP(BSTI) - held an incorrect position on the issue of Parliamentary action, and repeated that he was "...in favour of participation in Parliament..."<sup>74</sup> At the Unity Convention, the Communist Party of Great Britain was formed, with the delegates present deciding by a margin of 186 votes to 19 in favour of adopting the tactic of Revolutionary Parliamentarism. At the same time, the Second Congress of the Third International was being held in Moscow. Lenin defended the policy of

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73. Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder, 1920, (Peking, 1973), pages 85 and 87.

74. Letter dated 8 July 1920, in Lenin, British Labour And British Imperialism, page 261.

Revolutionary Parliamentarism in the open sessions of the Congress and in private conversations with the British delegates. The Congress itself adopted various Theses advocating Revolutionary Parliamentarism, and included the tactic among the Twenty-One Conditions of Admission with which parties seeking to join the International would be required to comply.

Clearly, Lenin's pamphlet, his letter to the Communist Unity Convention, and the decisions of the Second Congress, were all nails in the coffin of the idea that a group such as the CP(BSTI) could declare itself to be, at one and the same time, against Parliamentary action and for the Third International. The British delegates to the Second Congress, Sylvia Pankhurst among them, left Russia with instructions that a single, united British Communist Party was to be formed within four months of their return, on the political basis of the Theses adopted by the Second Congress. At first the CP(BSTI) remained defiant. At a conference of the party held in Gorton, Manchester, on 18-19 September, it voted in favour of accepting the Conditions of Admission to the Third International, "...with the reservation that the passages referring to the discipline to be applied to Parliamentary representatives does not affect our Party, which does not take Parliamentary action."<sup>75</sup>

In October 1920 Sylvia Pankhurst set out her own views on what course of action the CP(BSTI) should follow. She advanced three arguments. Firstly, if (as the advocates of Revolutionary Parliamentarism argued) the issue of Parliamentary action was a matter of tactics rather than principles, many arguments could still be brought forward in favour of abstention on tactical grounds, even within an organisation formally committed to Parliamentary action. Secondly, Pankhurst believed that the decisions made at the Second Congress were not irreversible, and that it was "...unlikely that the Third International will continue to approve of

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75. Workers' Dreadnought 2 October 1920.

parliamentary action." Thirdly, there would probably be no chance to put the tactic of Revolutionary Parliamentarism into practice anyway, since it was unlikely that there would be a general election in Britain before the next Congress of the International, at which the policy could be abandoned. Pankhurst therefore recommended that the CP(BSTI) should accept the International's terms of admission, and - by implication - that it should unite with the CPGB to form a single, united Communist Party in Britain.<sup>76</sup>

Sylvia Pankhurst's advice was based on impressions she had formed at the Second Congress in Moscow. In "Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder", Lenin had criticised not just the British anti-parliamentarians, but also similar groups in other countries, such as the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD), and the Abstentionist Communists in the Italian Socialist Party. These groups, and others opposed to Parliamentary action from other countries, had attended the Second Congress; Pankhurst believed that if they held to their point of view and grew in strength they would be able to form the basis of an anti-parliamentary majority by the time the Third Congress was held.

Pankhurst had also had private discussions with Lenin during the Second Congress, and he had told her that the issues of Parliamentary action and affiliation to the Labour Party were

"...not questions of principle at all, but of tactics, which may be employed advantageously in some phases of the changing situation and discarded with advantage in others. Neither question, in his opinion, is important enough to cause a split in the Communist ranks."

According to Pankhurst, Lenin had "dismissed" the issue of Parliamentary action as "...unimportant, saying that if the decision to employ Parliamentary action is a mistake it can be altered at next year's Congress."<sup>77</sup> The arguments Pankhurst used to recommend the CP(BSTI) to unite with the

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76. Workers' Dreadnought 16 October 1920.

77. Sylvia Pankhurst, Soviet Russia As I Saw It, (London, 1921), pages 45-46.

CPGB on the basis of affiliation to the Third International clearly suggest that she had been won over in Moscow by Lenin's persuasive reassurances.

Subsequently, at a conference of the CP(BSTI) held in Cardiff on 4 December, the party voted to accept in full all Statutes and Theses of the International - although once again "It was made abundantly clear in the argument that this vote did not mean that this party had in the slightest degree changed its views on the advisability of Revolutionary Parliamentarism for Britain."<sup>78</sup>

This set the wheels in motion for unity with the CPGB. However, not all CP(BSTI) members agreed with the decision taken at the Cardiff conference. In December, the four Manchester branches, which claimed a membership of 200 - i.e. one third of the total membership of the party - wrote to the Dreadnought stating their refusal to accept the Third International's Conditions of Admission as a basis for unity with the CPGB.<sup>79</sup> Soon afterwards, they resigned from the party, regarding the decision to unite with the CPGB, on the basis of a programme including a commitment to Parliamentary action, as a "sell-out" to Parliamentarism.<sup>80</sup> The party's national secretary, E.T. Whitehead, responded by arguing that the 'tactical' basis of Revolutionary Parliamentarism allowed for the possibility of adopting an abstentionist policy on equally tactical grounds, and that as far as he was aware "...no single member of this Party is prepared to be a member of a party which adopts revolutionary Parliamentarism as one of its tactics."<sup>81</sup> In other words, unity with the CPGB and affiliation to the Third International would involve joining an organisation committed to the possibility of using the tactic of Revolutionary Parliamentarism, but the CP(BSTI) would still be free to argue against that tactic ever being used in practice. To this end,

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78. Workers' Dreadnought 11 December 1920.

79. Ibid. 18 and 25 December 1920.

80. Ibid. 1 and 8 January 1921.

81. Ibid. 1 January 1921.

Sylvia Pankhurst argued that after uniting with the CPGB the former members of the CP(BSTI) should "...keep together and form a strong, compact left block within the Party", and that "The left elements should insist that the constitution of the Party should leave them free to propagate their policy in the Party and in the Third International as a whole." The Workers' Dreadnought would continue to be published, as "...an independent organ giving an independent support to the Communist Party from the Left Wing standpoint."<sup>82</sup>

The CP(BSTI) finally united with the CPGB at a second Communist Unity Convention, held in Leeds at the end of January 1921. This conclusion to the part played by the CP(BSTI) during the unity negotiations provoked new developments among those anti-parliamentarians who had doubted the compatibility of opposition to Parliamentary action and support for the Third International. In February 1921, the Glasgow Communist Group brought out the first issue of a new paper, the Red Commune, explaining that it was doing so because "...there is no other party organ in this country, owned, controlled, and published by or at the direction of any party, that stands fearlessly for Communism. They all urge or compromise with, in some shape or form, parliamentarianism." The fifth point of the Glasgow Communist Group's platform, and an article signed by the Group's chairman, Douglas McLeish, and secretary, Jane Patrick, both advocated "Anti-parliamentary Activity; (a) Boycotting the Ballot Box; (b) Communist Anti-Parliamentary or Sinn Fein Candidature."<sup>83</sup> The Red Commune also offered to host an anti-parliamentary communist conference at which like-minded groups would be invited to "...unite with us in an anti-Parliamentary Federation or Party." It was at this conference, held in Glasgow at Easter 1921, that the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation was formed, as a direct challenge to the pro-parliamentary CPGB.<sup>84</sup> The Glasgow Communist Group became the Central

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82. Workers' Dreadnought 15 January 1921.

83. Red Commune February 1921.

84. Spur April 1921.

branch of the new organisation.

Opposition To Parliamentarism After The Formation Of The CPGB.

Prior to the Leeds Unity Convention, members of the CP(BSTI) had argued that unity with the CPGB and affiliation to the Third International would not mean that the CP(BSTI) would be forced to abandon its commitment to anti-parliamentarism; anti-parliamentarians would still be able to advocate their views within the united party. This turned out to be a mistaken and naive view, for by mid-September 1921 Sylvia Pankhurst had been expelled from the CPGB.

The first of the Twenty-One Conditions of Admission to the Third International stated that

"The periodical press and other publications, and all party publishing houses, must be completely subordinated to the party praesidium...Publishing houses must not be allowed to abuse their independence and pursue a policy which is not wholly in accordance with the policy of the party." 85

Ever since the Leeds Unity Convention, however, Sylvia Pankhurst had carried out her intention of continuing to publish the Workers' Dreadnought as an independent newspaper giving critical support to the CPGB from a 'left wing' standpoint. In practice, the amount of 'criticism' far outweighed any 'support'. By publishing repeated criticisms of CPGB policy, Pankhurst blatantly contravened party discipline as laid down in the Conditions of Admission. In July 1921 Pankhurst was the subject of a motion of censure passed by the CPGB's Bow branch, of which she was a member.<sup>86</sup> Shortly afterwards, a sub-committee of the CPGB Executive requested Pankhurst to hand over control of the Dreadnought to the Executive Committee. When Pankhurst refused to obey this request, she was summoned before a meeting of the full Executive Committee on 10 September

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85. 'Conditions of Admission To The Communist International Approved By The Second Comintern Congress', 6 August 1920, in Jane Degras, ed., The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents Volume 1 1919-1922, (London, 1956), page 169.

86. Workers' Dreadnought 30 July 1921.



1921. At this meeting she maintained her view that freedom of discussion and criticism was of greater importance than the preservation of party discipline, and was therefore expelled from the party.<sup>87</sup>

The position adopted by Aldred and the Glasgow Communist Group proved to be the more perceptive view: anti-parliamentarism and support for the Third International were mutually exclusive commitments. After the formation of the APCF, there was still some contact between it and the Third International. In 1921, while Aldred was in prison serving a one-year sentence for sedition arising out of the publication of the Red Commune, the APCF authorised Rose Witcop to go to Russia to seek 'associate membership' of the International. The status of associate membership could be granted to "...groups or parties that could after examination satisfy the Executive of the Third International that similar aims were held, and who in due course would be prepared to join the national Communist Party of their country."<sup>88</sup> According to John McGovern, who was then a member of the Shettleston branch of the APCF, the CPGB financed Witcop's mission because they thought that Guy Aldred would be a "valuable capture" for the party.<sup>89</sup>

In his unpublished biography of Aldred, John Caldwell disputes McGovern's account. According to Caldwell, the Third International did make an approach to the APCF, but this was rejected by Aldred; Witcop went on a tour of Europe with Margaret Sanger and visited anti-parliamentarian comrades in Germany, but did not travel as far as Moscow.<sup>90</sup> However, Caldwell has confused two separate trips made by Witcop. Witcop did travel to Germany, in the autumn of 1920, and sent back reports which were published in the September and October issues of the Spur. In his autobiography Guy Aldred mentions this trip - and also writes: "Later, following my Red Commune arrest /March 1921/, Rose went to the Soviet

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87. Workers' Dreadnought 17 September 1921.

88. John McGovern, Neither Fear Nor Favour, (London, 1960), page 95.

89. Ibid.

90. John Caldwell, The Red Evangel, page 174.

Union and attended a Congress of the Third International /June - July 1921/...the Eastern or Shettleston Group of the APCF gave her delegate credentials..."<sup>91</sup> Aldred was not against Witcop going to Moscow; what he did reject was the idea of accepting associate membership on condition of eventual unity with the CPGB; "...he was strongly opposed to the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation joining up with the Communist Party. He was not opposed to the mission seeking information and financial backing."<sup>92</sup> Delegates from the KAPD attended the Third Congress of the International in June-July 1921, and the report they presented to the KAPD's Central Committee following their return confirms that Rose Witcop did attend the same Congress. The report mentioned the 'Glasgow delegation' as being among those with which the KAPD delegates had "a certain number of points in common". It added that "The Glasgow Group is in theoretical agreement with us, but its organisation is not yet sufficiently strong."<sup>93</sup>

When Witcop returned from Russia, she reported that

"...she had received promise of solid financial backing for the Spur, payment of all legal and other expenses of the High Court trial at Glasgow /i.e. the Red Commune sedition case/, maintenance for Guy Aldred whilst in prison, and financial backing when liberated..."<sup>94</sup>

However, such support would be given only "...on condition that she could secure the promise by Aldred and the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation of acceptance of membership of the Communist Party and the Moscow line." Since this obviously would have required the APCF to abandon its commitment to anti-parliamentary principles, when Guy Aldred

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91. Guy Aldred, No Traitor's Gait!. Volume 2 number 6, (Glasgow, 1959), page 431.

92. McGovern, op. cit., page 95.

93. 'Rapport Du KAPD Sur Le Troisième Congrès De L'Internationale Communiste', in Denis Authier and Jean Barrot, La Gauche Communiste En Allemagne 1918-1921. (Paris, 1976), pages 328-329.

94. McGovern, op. cit., page 96. In March 1921 the CPGB secretary, Albert Inkpin, had also agreed to pay the legal costs of Aldred's defence in the Red Commune trial from the CPGB's Fighting Fund. This promise was never honoured. See Commune June 1923.

was released from prison in mid-1922 "...all contacts were dissolved."<sup>95</sup>

Following her expulsion from the CPGB in September 1921, Sylvia Pankhurst involved herself in efforts to regroup anti-parliamentary communists at a national and international level. In Germany, the 'Essen Tendency' of the KAPD, led by Herman Gorter, had initiated the formation of a Fourth (Communist Workers') International, in opposition to the Third International from which the KAPD had been excluded following the Third Congress. The KAPD had been in increasing disagreement with the policies of the Third International, which, it felt, reflected the increasingly anti-working class nature of the Russian regime itself. The Manifesto of the Fourth International, drawn up by Gorter, is discussed in Chapter 2. Following the formation of the Fourth International the Workers' Dreadnought announced its support for the new anti-parliamentary organisation,<sup>96</sup> and during the winter of 1921-1922 Pankhurst set about organising a Communist Workers' Party in Britain. In February 1922 the new party's programme was published, and Dreadnought readers were invited to apply for membership. One of the principles of the Communist Workers' Party stated that it was resolved "To take no part in elections to Parliament and the local governing bodies, and to carry on propaganda exposing the futility of Communist participation therein."<sup>97</sup>

The anti-parliamentarism of the Communist Workers' Party programme was repeated in the programme of the All-Workers' Revolutionary Union, another Workers' Dreadnought initiative, in September 1922. As we will see in Chapter 4, after 1921 the Dreadnought group tended to move towards a 'syndicalist' position, in which anti-parliamentarism came to be associated with opposition to political action of any sort. This reflected the anarchist influences on anti-parliamentary communism mentioned in the Introduction. The All-Workers' Revolutionary Union was intended to be

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95. McGovern, *op. cit.*, page 96.

96. Workers' Dreadnought 8 October 1921.

97. Ibid. 11 February 1922.

'One Big Union' which would unite all workers as a class for the struggle against capitalism, and then, upon the successful culmination of that struggle, become the machinery for administration of production and distribution within a communist system of common ownership. Such a conception of revolution left no role for Parliamentary action; the AWRU's statement of principles, to which all members were obliged to adhere, declared that "The AWRU rejects all responsibility for the administration of the capitalist State or participation in the elections to Parliament and the local governing bodies."<sup>98</sup>

The programmes adopted in 1922 by the Communist Workers' Party and the All-Workers' Revolutionary Union set the tone for Pankhurst's remarks about the general election held in November of that year:

"We expect nothing from the General Election. It belongs to the Capitalist civilisation which is nearing its end. With that civilisation Parliaments and Cabinets as we know them today will disappear.

We are looking forward to the advent of Communism and its industrial councils."<sup>99</sup>

A slightly different attitude was taken by Guy Aldred. In the Spur at the beginning of 1921 it had been announced that Aldred would be nominated as a Communist Anti-Parliamentary candidate, standing on the 'Sinn Fein' programme, for the constituency of Shettleston in Glasgow.<sup>100</sup> This intention was fulfilled nearly two years later in the general election of November 1922. Aldred's candidacy caused some dissension within the ranks of the APCF. According to John Caldwell, the "anarchist faction" within the group "...asserted its opposition to the use of the ballot box even as a weapon against parliamentarism", and the APCF refused to give its official support to Aldred's campaign in Shettleston. As Caldwell rightly points out, the APCF's decision was strange, considering that its forerunner, the Glasgow Communist Group, had endorsed the 'Sinn Fein' policy as a valid anti-parliamentary tactic in

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98. Workers' Dreadnought 23 September 1922.

99. Ibid. 28 October 1922.

100. Spur January 1921.

the Red Commune in February 1921. Caldwell goes on to record that "Repudiating the election campaign as a group, the comrades still helped, unenthusiastically, as comrades."<sup>101</sup>

In his election address, Aldred stated: "I stand for the complete and final overthrow of the present social system and the immediate establishment of a Socialist Commonwealth." He rejected all canvassing, electioneering, and promises of reforms. He stated his opposition to "...the capitalist State and the Parliamentary system of Government" and urged workers to "...discover and evolve into a new political or social structure their power on the industrial field." He promised that if elected he would refuse to take the Parliamentary oath of allegiance to the monarchy or take his seat in Parliament.<sup>102</sup> The result of the election was as follows:<sup>103</sup>

John Wheatley (Labour)	14,695
T.B.W. Ramsay (National Liberal)	9,704
Guy Aldred (Communist)	470
spoiled papers:	49

When the Glasgow Communist Group had announced its support for the 'Sinn Fein' tactic in the Red Commune in February 1921, the Dreadnought group had regarded the tactic as confusing, commenting that "It is a puzzle to us how to reconcile the anti-parliamentarism of the platform of this Group with its tactics of running anti-parliamentary candidates pledged not to take the oath and pledged not to sit..."<sup>104</sup> Consequently, the Dreadnought criticised Guy Aldred's Shettleston campaign, dubbing him an 'Anti-Parliamentary Parliamentarian'.<sup>105</sup> In June 1923 Aldred and Pankhurst spoke in opposition to each other in a debate in London, and according to Aldred's account Pankhurst "...proclaimed herself a convinced anti-parliamentarian and again denounced my Shettleston candidature."

101. John Caldwell, 'Guy Alfred Aldred, Antiparliamentarian, 1886-1963: a Memoir', in MacDougall, *op.cit.*, page 231.

102. Guy Aldred, General Election, 1922: To The Working-Class Electors Of The Parliamentary Division Of Shettleston, (Glasgow, 1922).

103. Evening Times (Glasgow) 16 November 1922.

104. Workers' Dreadnought 19 February 1921.

105. Ibid. 25 November 1922.

Aldred continues: "In the Workers' Dreadnought for 7th July, 1923 Sylvia Pankhurst returned to her attack on me for the Shettleston campaign and again sneered from the absolute Anti-Parliamentarian standpoint of one who believed in boycotting the ballot-box entirely."<sup>106</sup>

After bearing the brunt of the Dreadnought's criticisms for so long the APCF gladly seized the opportunity to turn the tables on Pankhurst in November 1923. In October 1923 George Lansbury was due to address a Trades Council meeting in Glasgow on the subject of unemployment. Lansbury was a member of the Poplar Board of Guardians which had been responsible for a police baton charge on a demonstration of the Unemployed Workers' Organisation, which had been petitioning the Poplar Board, in September (see Chapter 3). The Unemployed Workers' Organisation was closely associated with the Workers' Dreadnought (see Chapter 4), and a leaflet based on the Dreadnought's account of the Poplar incident was issued by John Maclean's Scottish Workers' Republican Party to coincide with Lansbury's visit to Glasgow.<sup>107</sup>

Very soon after this Sylvia Pankhurst travelled to Glasgow to address two meetings of the SWRP, which was contesting twelve seats in the Glasgow municipal elections. Pankhurst claimed afterwards that she had spoken against Parliamentarism at the meetings,<sup>108</sup> but her appearance on the public platform of a 'Parliamentary' organisation proved irresistible to the APCF, which distributed a leaflet for the occasion entitled 'Sylvia's Anti-Parliamentary Comedy'. In the leaflet, Pankhurst's criticisms of Aldred's 'anti-parliamentary Parliamentarism' were paid back in full measure:

"How can the person who urges you to "boycott the ballot box" also advise you to "Vote Red Labour" /the SWRP's campaign slogan/? ... If it is wrong to support a candidate pledged not to take his seat, is it not more wrong to support candidates who intend to take their seats?"<sup>109</sup>

106. Commune November 1923.

107. Nan Milton, John Maclean, (London, 1973), pages 298-300.

108. Workers' Dreadnought 10 November 1923.

109. Leaflet reprinted in Commune November 1923.

Although the APCF scored a propaganda point with their leaflet, Pankhurst's appearance on the SWRP platform did not signal any change in her attitude towards elections or Parliament. Not long after her visit to Glasgow, in the context of the general election towards the end of 1923, she called for propaganda to expose the futility of involvement in Parliamentary elections.<sup>110</sup> During the same general election the APCF also distributed leaflets urging workers to boycott the ballot box.<sup>111</sup> By the time of the next general election, towards the end of 1924, the Workers' Dreadnought had ceased publication, but anti-parliamentary propaganda was sustained by the APCF, which repeated that workers "...have nothing to gain from voting. Consequently they should boycott the ballot box."<sup>112</sup>

'Revolutionary Parliamentarism'.

To judge from the preceding chronological account, it would appear that there were no hard and fast definitions of 'Parliamentarism' and 'anti-parliamentarism' on which all of the protagonists in the debates could agree. For example, Guy Aldred described himself as an 'anti-parliamentarian', yet his attachment to the 'Sinn Fein' tactic was sufficient to condemn him as a 'Parliamentarian' from Sylvia Pankhurst's point of view. In fact, 'Parliamentarism' and 'anti-parliamentarism' can be given more precise definitions, if we look in greater detail at what the respective sides were advocating when they used these terms. After 1917, the immediate cause of the anti-parliamentary communists' efforts to define their opposition to Parliamentarism was the Bolsheviks' support for 'Revolutionary Parliamentarism' as a tactic to be adopted by the member parties of the Third International, so to begin with the communist theory of anti-parliamentarism is perhaps best considered in the context of this tactic.

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110. Workers' Dreadnought 17 November 1923.

111. Commune December 1923 - January 1924.

112. Ibid. October 1924.

There was a certain amount of agreement between the Bolshevik and anti-parliamentary points of view. Indeed, this is only to be expected, since if there had been no agreement between the two, the anti-parliamentary communists in Britain would hardly have been such initially-enthusiastic supporters of the Bolsheviks in the first place.

When the Bolsheviks advocated Revolutionary Parliamentarism, they were not suggesting that communists should enter Parliament in order to agitate for reforms. The Third International had been founded by the Bolsheviks in March 1919 on the premise that the era of reforms was past, and that "The epoch of the communist revolution of the proletariat" had begun.<sup>113</sup> Thus,

"In the preceding epoch parliament, as the instrument of developing capitalism, accomplished work which was to a certain extent historically progressive. In present conditions of unbridled imperialism...parliamentary reforms, lacking system, durability, and order, lose all practical significance for the working masses..."<sup>114</sup>

The Communist Party's official historian, James Klugmann, therefore reveals a lack of understanding of the Bolshevik tactic when he criticises early CPGB members for failing to "...see how the combined struggle, inside and outside [Parliament], could win concrete gains for the working class even within the framework of capitalism..."<sup>115</sup>

Nor were the Bolsheviks suggesting that the social revolution could be carried out by Parliamentary means. Only "the most execrable traitors to the working class", its "most inveterate and dangerous enemies", could support such a view.<sup>116</sup> The socialist revolution could not take place "within the framework of the old bourgeois parliamentary democracy." The "most profound revolution in mankind's history" required

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113. 'Platform of the Communist International Adopted by the First Comintern Congress', 4 March 1919, Degras, op. cit., page 18.

114. 'Theses On Communist Parties And Parliament Adopted by the Second Comintern Congress', 2 August 1920, Degras, op. cit., page 151.

115. James Klugmann, History Of The Communist Party Of Great Britain Volume 1: Formation And Early Years, 1919-1924, (London, 1968), page 195.

116. Circular Letter On Parliamentary Action from the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), Workers' Dreadnought 22 May 1920.



"the creation of new forms of democracy, new institutions", which the experience of the revolution in Russia had revealed to be the soviets or workers' councils.<sup>117</sup>

On these points the anti-parliamentary communists in Britain were in full agreement with the Bolsheviks. As we have seen, when Guy Aldred opposed John Maclean's decision to stand for election in 1918, he had argued that the working class could not use the Parliamentary apparatus for revolutionary purposes. Rose Witcop stated in the Spur that "It is impossible for the working class to gain its emancipation by Act of Parliament."<sup>118</sup> The WSF also argued that the social revolution could not be carried out by Parliamentary means. In a revolutionary situation existing social relations would be overthrown, and production and distribution would have to be restarted on a new basis; "The only people who could deal with the great new situation would be the people who do the work and the people who use the produce...the Soviets would be the only solution."<sup>119</sup> The soviets would "...make the revolution by seizing control of all the industries and services of the community."<sup>120</sup> The "guiding and co-ordinating machinery" of the revolutionary struggle "...could take no other form than that of the Soviets."<sup>121</sup>

Although this area of agreement did exist, however, the Bolsheviks differed from the anti-parliamentary communists in drawing a distinction between, on the one hand, "...the question of parliamentarianism as a desirable form of the political regime...", and, on the other hand, "...the question of using parliament for the purpose of promoting the revolution."<sup>122</sup> Even although the revolution itself would be carried out

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117. 'Theses On Bourgeois Democracy And Proletarian Dictatorship Adopted by the First Comintern Congress', 4 March 1919, Degras, op.cit., page 13.

118. Spur July 1917.

119. Workers' Dreadnought 3 December 1921.

120. Ibid. 4 February 1922.

121. Ibid. 3 December 1921.

122. ECCI Circular Letter On Parliament And Soviets, 1 September 1919, Degras, op. cit., page 67.

by the soviets and not by Parliament, this did not rule out the possibility of using Parliament to 'promote the revolution' in the meantime. For the Bolsheviks, this was entirely a matter of tactics.

Principles did not enter into the issue:

"'Anti-parliamentarianism' on principle, that is, the absolute and categorical rejection of participation in elections and in revolutionary parliamentary activity, is therefore a naive and childish doctrine which is beneath criticism, a doctrine which is...blind to the possibility of revolutionary parliamentarianism." 123

While the Bolsheviks recognised that the abstentionist position was "...occasionally founded on a healthy disgust with paltry parliamentary politicians..."<sup>124</sup> they criticised the abstentionists for their "unconditional repudiation of certain old forms" and for their failure to recognise the possibility of creating "...a new, unusual, non-opportunist, non-careerist parliamentarianism..."<sup>125</sup> During the debates at the Second Congress of the Third International, Lenin agreed that "If by parliamentarism [the anti-parliamentarians] understand the present day English and American parliamentarism, then we are likewise opposed to it." But the shortcomings of certain Parliamentarians did not necessarily mean that all Parliamentary action was bankrupt.<sup>126</sup>

The Bolsheviks argued that Parliament was a 'tribune' of public opinion, a platform which revolutionaries could and should use as a means of influencing public opinion outside Parliament. Parliamentary election campaigns should also be used as an opportunity for revolutionary propaganda and agitation. This was what the Bolsheviks meant by 'Revolutionary Parliamentarianism'. As Lenin put it: "...participation in parliamentary elections and in the struggle on the parliamentary rostrum is obligatory for the party of the revolutionary proletariat precisely for the purpose

123. 'Theses On Communist Parties And Parliament Adopted by the Second Comintern Congress', 2 August 1920, Degras, op. cit., pages 153-154.

124. Ibid.

125. Lenin, "Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder", pages 111 and 104.

126. Publishing House of the Communist International, The Second Congress Of The Communist International: Proceedings Of Petrograd Session Of July 17th and Moscow Sessions Of July 19th - August 7th 1920, (USA, 1921), page 73.

of educating the backward strata of its own class..."<sup>127</sup>

The anti-parliamentary communists in Britain doubted that this tactic could be put to any effective use, and they advanced a number of arguments to support their opposition to it.

Firstly, during election campaigns the aim of winning votes would come into conflict with the aim of putting across revolutionary propaganda, and this would inevitably result in candidates advocating reforms which fell far short of the revolutionary goal. In her letter to Lenin in July 1919, Pankhurst argued that

"...our movement in Great Britain is ruined by Parliamentarism, and by the County Councils and Town Councils. People wish to be elected to these bodies...All work for Socialism is subordinated to these ends; Socialist propaganda is suppressed for fear of losing votes...Class consciousness seems to vanish as the elections draw nigh. A party which gains electoral successes is a party lost as far as revolutionary action is concerned." <sup>128</sup>

In September 1919, after the Swiss Socialist Party had reversed its earlier decision to join the Third International, Pankhurst attributed this change of mind to the imminent elections in Switzerland: "...the way to secure the biggest vote at the polls is to avoid frightening anyone by presenting to the electors diluted reformist Socialism...Whatever party runs candidates at the election will trim its sails."<sup>129</sup> Expressing the same point of view, Guy Aldred described the behaviour of the typical Parliamentary candidate in the following way: "Seeking votes from an electorate anxious for some immediate reform, he puts aside the need for social emancipation in order to pander to some passing bias for urgent useless amelioration."<sup>130</sup>

Secondly, the anti-parliamentary communists did not agree that Parliament could be used effectively as a platform for revolutionary speeches aimed at the masses outside. The Workers' Dreadnought pointed out that according to Parliamentary procedure, the government controlled

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127. Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder, page 52.

128. Letter dated 16 July 1919, Communist International (Petrograd edition) number 5, September 1919.

129. Workers' Dreadnought 27 September 1919.

130. Guy Aldred, Socialism And Parliament, (London/Glasgow, 1923), page 3.

the Parliamentary agenda, while the Speaker of the House had a large degree of control over who could participate in debates, could rule remarks 'out-of-order', expel members from the House if they did not obey rulings, and so on.<sup>131</sup> All this would make it difficult for communists in Parliament to make their revolutionary speeches, especially since the tactic of Revolutionary Parliamentarism required communist MPs to disregard established Parliamentary customs and manners.

The Dreadnought also pointed out that "...most people do not read the verbatim reports of Parliamentary debates..." Furthermore, revolutionary speeches were rarely reported by the capitalist press, and were certainly never given the same prominence as those made by capitalist politicians. On the rare occasions that revolutionary speeches were reported, all that appeared were "...those least wise, least coherent sentences...which the Press chooses to select just because they are most provocative and least likely to convert."<sup>132</sup> Guy Aldred argued that "Obviously the value of speeches in Parliament turn upon the power of the press outside and exercise no influence beyond the point allowed by that press." What appeared in the newspapers was dictated by the interests of their capitalist proprietors. As long as this remained the case, revolutionary speech-making in Parliament would be "...impotent as a propaganda activity."<sup>133</sup> Consequently, in his Shettleston election address Aldred argued that "Street-corner oratory educates the worker more effectively than speeches in Parliament..."<sup>134</sup> This being the case, there was little point in communists entering Parliament in order to make revolutionary speeches; as the Glasgow Anarchist Group argued, "...fighters for Revolution can more effectively spend their time in propaganda at the work-gates and public meetings."<sup>135</sup>

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131. Workers' Dreadnought 11 March 1922.

132. Ibid. 24 March 1923.

133. Guy Aldred, Socialism And Parliament (1923), page 6.

134. Guy Aldred, General Election, 1922; To The Working-Class Electors Of The Parliamentary Division Of Shettleston.

135. Spur May 1918.

A third objection raised by the anti-parliamentary communists was that "...it is the revolutionary parliamentarian who becomes the political opportunist."<sup>136</sup> The Glasgow Communist Group saw "...nothing but menace to the proletarian cause from Communists entering Parliament: first, as revolutionary Communists, only to graduate later, slowly but surely, as reformist politicians."<sup>137</sup> No matter what the intentions of communist MPs when they first entered Parliament, they would quickly "...lose themselves in the easy paths of compromise."<sup>138</sup> As Pankhurst argued in September 1921: "...the use of Parliamentary action by Communists is... bound to lead to the lapses into rank Reformism that we see wherever members of the Communist Party secure election to public bodies."<sup>139</sup>

When they sought to explain why out-and-out revolutionaries turned into tame reformists after entering Parliament, the anti-parliamentary communists referred to the class nature of the capitalist state, of which Parliament was a part. According to Sylvia Pankhurst, the Parliamentary system was "...the characteristic machinery of the capitalist state..."; it had been "...fashioned by the ruling class for their service." Its main purpose was "...to protect the possessions of the landlords and capitalists, and to apply whatever coercive measures were necessary to provide the landlords and capitalists with disciplined workers."<sup>140</sup> Parliament had to buy-off the possibility of revolt through the provision of dole and social welfare, legislate to curb the worst excesses of capitalist exploitation, and generally maintain the optimum conditions for the exploitation of the working class as wage labourers and a source of surplus value.<sup>141</sup> As Aldred argued, "Whether controlled outwardly by Tory, Liberal, or Labour Party, the State exists merely to perpetuate policemanism and slavery, to keep the workers in submission, and the condition of the

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136. Spur May 1920.

137. Red Commune February 1921.

138. Workers' Dreadnought 30 July 1921.

139. Ibid. 24 September 1921.

140. Ibid. 11 March 1922.

141. Ibid. 13 January 1923.

people problem unsolved."<sup>142</sup>

The entire function and business of Parliament was concerned with the administration and palliation of the capitalist system in the interests of the ruling class. Parliament was "...the debating chamber of the master class."<sup>143</sup> Anyone who entered Parliament and participated in its business automatically took on the responsibility of running capitalism. When the Poplar Board of Guardians, charged with administering a part of the capitalist state, stood shoulder-to-shoulder with another part of the state, the police, against the unemployed workers in September 1923 (see Chapter 3), the Workers' Dreadnought commented:

"One thing stands out clearly: it is that the result of working class representatives taking part in the administration of capitalist machinery, is that the working class representatives become responsible for maintaining capitalist law and order and for enforcing the regulations of the capitalist system itself...working class representatives who become councillors and guardians assist in the maintenance of the capitalist system, and, sooner or later, must inevitably find themselves in conflict with the workers..."<sup>144</sup>

The only way to avoid such lapses into reformism or outright reaction was to shun all responsibility for participation in capitalism's administrative apparatus - and that meant rejecting any notion that communists should enter Parliament.

Despite the strength of many of the arguments with which the anti-parliamentary communists opposed the tactic of Revolutionary Parliamentarism, their case still contained one weakness which their opponents could, and did, try to exploit. The Bolsheviks could argue that the opportunism, careerism and reformism usually associated with election campaigns and Parliament were not inevitable consequences of Parliamentary action, as the anti-parliamentarians claimed they were. For example, what better refutation could there be of the anti-parliamentarians' argument that

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142. Guy Aldred, General Election, 1922: To The Working-Class Electors Of The Parliamentary Division Of Shettleston.

143. Red Commune February 1921.

144. Workers' Dreadnought 6 October 1923.

any party which stood candidates for election would "...tune its song with reference to the existing prejudices and political backwardness of the electorate"<sup>145</sup> than Guy Aldred's own Shettleston campaign in 1922, when he had rejected all reforms and advocated nothing less than the immediate revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of communism.

Opportunism, careerism and reformism may have been the characteristic behaviour of capitalist politicians, but - the Bolsheviks argued - there was no reason why communists who put elections and Parliament to revolutionary use should necessarily or inevitably end up behaving in the same manner. This was precisely the line of argument adopted by Lenin in conversation with Willie Gallacher during the Second Congress of the Third International. Gallacher, whose anti-parliamentary views had been criticised by Lenin in "Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder," relates that

"Once again I repeated what I had been saying in the Commission and the Plenum; that any working-class representative who went to Parliament was corrupted in no time. I started to give him examples.

"Comrade Gallacher," Lenin interrupted, "I know all about these people. I have no illusions about them. But if the workers sent you to represent them in Parliament, would you become corrupt?"

I sat and looked at him for a moment; then I answered: "No, I'm sure that under no circumstances could the bourgeoisie corrupt me."

"Well then, Comrade Gallacher," he said with a smile, "you get the workers to send you to Parliament and show them how a revolutionary can make use of it".<sup>146</sup>

Yet, in retrospect, this was an argument from which the anti-parliamentary communists emerged victorious - if only by default. All of the reasons for anti-parliamentary opposition to Revolutionary Parliamentarism turned out to be completely justified. The CPGB did use its election campaigns to advocate all sorts of reforms which fell far short of revolutionary demands. The few MPs who represented the CPGB in Parliament

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145. Workers' Dreadnought 20 May 1922

146. William Gallacher, Last Memoirs, (London, 1966), pages 152-154.

did not use the Parliamentary rostrum as a platform for revolutionary speeches: soon after the 1922 general election Sylvia Pankhurst pointed out that

"The members of the Communist Party of Great Britain have thus far told the House of Commons nothing about Communism ...Yet it is to secure Parliament for speeches on Communism, and for denunciations of Parliament as an institution, that they claim to have sought election." 147

Where they won places on elected bodies, often at a local level, CPGB members did participate in reformist or reactionary administration of parts of the capitalist state. The apparent weakness in the anti-parliamentary communists' case increasingly became a strength with every 'incorruptible' communist who turned reformist. The anti-parliamentary communists in Britain did not need to develop any systematic explanation for this phenomenon: in practice, it inevitably occurred, and they were able to point to a never-ending series of examples to support their contentions.

#### Working-Class Self-Emancipation.

We can conclude this discussion of anti-parliamentarism by looking at elements of the anti-parliamentary case which have not been discussed so far in this account. The arguments which will be outlined in the next few pages were not the specific responses to Revolutionary Parliamentarism upon which we have been concentrating so far. Rather, they reveal elements of the wider philosophy of anti-parliamentarism, and as such will serve as a useful introduction to the other aspects of anti-parliamentary communism discussed in later chapters.

Before 1918, the WSP had regarded the extension of the suffrage as one of the essential prerequisites of social change. Once all working-class men and women had won the right to vote, this would enable them to use Parliamentary power to reorganise society in their own interests. When the

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147. Workers' Dreadnought 2 December 1922.



WSF came to reject the use of Parliament, however, one of the reasons for this was the group's view that Parliament did not in fact possess the sort of power which would be required in order to carry out a complete reorganisation of society. Even if the working class did win Parliamentary power, this would not by itself enable it to effect the necessary abolition of the whole capitalist system of production and distribution. The reason for this was that

"Parliament and the local governing bodies do not administer production, distribution and transport. These services, in the main are carried out by Capitalist private enterprise. Parliament...merely passes laws to palliate the inevitable evils which arise from the private ownership and management of the means of production, distribution and transport." 148

It was the WSF's belief, in other words, that it was beyond the power of Parliament to alter the fundamental features of the capitalist system; Parliamentary power could be used only for reformist purposes, not revolutionary ones. In order to bring about fundamental social change, the working class would have to organise itself on the 'economic' field, which was where the real source of its oppression and exploitation was located.

A similar point of view can be found in the writings of Guy Aldred and the groups he influenced. In Aldred's case, this line of argument was derived from anarchist criticisms of the so-called Parliamentary- or state-socialist marxism of the era of the First and Second Internationals. Although the anarchists were enthusiastic popularisers of Marx's economic writings, they rejected marxist views on politics and the state. To do so, they based their arguments on a version of Marx's own materialist conception of history; politics and the state were superstructural products of, and controlled by, the economic base, so in order to bring about social change the working class had to concentrate its forces on the economic field; the state could not be used to bring about social change, since in

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148. Workers' Dreadnought 18 November 1922.

relation to the economic system it was in a position of subservience, not dominance.

These ideas, Aldred argued, showed that anarchists such as Bakunin "...believed in the materialistic conception of history even more thoroughly than Marx", since, "contrary to the logic of his own writing"<sup>149</sup> Marx had advocated the conquest of state power as a prelude to the establishment of communism (in the Communist Manifesto, for example). Aldred wrote that

"It has always seemed strange to me that the Marxists, whose economic explanation of politics or the State is correct, should have become, in practice, parliamentarians and pretend to believe that parliament controls industry." 150

On the basis of such ideas, the Spur argued that anyone who sought to abolish capitalism by first gaining control of Parliament was proceeding from the wrong direction, because "Parliament is not the master of capitalism, but its most humble servant."<sup>151</sup> In order to establish a communist society, the working class would have to overthrow the power of the capitalist class. The source of this power did not lie in the capitalists' control over Parliament, but in their ownership and control of the means of production, which Parliament was impotent to challenge. Thus the manifesto of the Glasgow Anarchist Group argued that "The State cannot be destroyed by sending men to Parliament, as voting cannot abolish the economic power of the capitalists."<sup>152</sup> Again, this led to the conclusion that the working class had to organise on the economic field in order to exert the power necessary to achieve social change. As Aldred argued,

"...the working class can possess no positive or real power politically until the workers come together on the industrial field for the definite purpose of themselves taking over directly the administration of wealth production and distribution on behalf of the Workers' Republic." 153

149. Guy Aldred, Pioneers Of Anti-Parliamentarism, (Glasgow, 1940), page 5.

150. Guy Aldred, Bakunin, (Glasgow, 1940), page 46.

151. Spur June 1918.

152. Ibid. May 1918.

153. Worker 22 July 1922.

The anti-parliamentary communists' ideas about how exactly the working class should set about organising itself on the industrial field will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4.

It was Guy Aldred's view that "Parliamentarism can never give the workers control of industry, can never solve the problem of Capitalism, can never secure to the wealth-producers the ownership by themselves of the means of production and distribution."<sup>154</sup> The anti-parliamentary communists therefore regarded Parliamentary action as a futile diversion from the real tasks facing the working class. It was necessary for workers to "...look, not to Parliament, but to their own Soviets."<sup>155</sup> In order to convey this view to the rest of the working class, it was the duty of revolutionaries to reject Parliamentary activity, "...because of the clear, unmistakeable lead to the masses which this refusal gives..."<sup>156</sup> It was the belief of the Dreadnought group that "...the revolution can only be accomplished by those whose minds are awakened and who are inspired by conscious purpose..."<sup>157</sup> In order to be able to make the revolution, therefore, the working class would have to break its ideo-logical attachment to Parliament, before going on to break this attachment in practice by creating its own revolutionary organisations, the soviets:

"For the overthrow of this old capitalist system, it is necessary that the people should break away in sufficient numbers from support of the capitalist machinery, and set up another system; that they should create and maintain the Soviets as the instruments of establishing Communism.

To do this, the workers must be mentally prepared and must also possess the machinery which will enable them to act." <sup>158</sup>

Revolutionaries could help in this process of 'mental preparation', by spreading among the working class an awareness of the need to break with Parliamentarism in thought and action, but only if they themselves took up a clear position on this issue. To denounce Parliament as a capitalist

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154. Guy Aldred, Socialism And Parliament. (1923), page 9.

155. Workers' Dreadnought 24 March 1923.

156. Ibid. 24 September 1921.

157. Ibid.

158. Ibid. 27 August 1921.

institution whilst at the same time leading workers to the polling booths to elect communist candidates into that institution, for whatever 'tactical' purposes, would only create confusion. The use of elections and the Parliamentary forum was "...not the best method of preparing the workers to discard their faith in bourgeois democracy and Parliamentary reformism",<sup>159</sup> because "...participation in Parliamentary elections turns the attention of the people to Parliament, which will never emancipate them..."<sup>160</sup>

The anti-parliamentary communists thus rejected participation in elections and Parliament because this rejection would be the most effective way of spreading the vital idea that Parliamentary action would be of no use to the working class in its struggle to overthrow capitalism. This illustrates a point made in the Introduction: that an apparently tactical opposition to the use of Parliament was in fact one of the outcomes of a much deeper set of principles. One of these principles was the anti-parliamentary communists' emphasis on the need for the working class as a whole to be fully aware of the revolutionary tasks which it faced, and of the ways in which it could carry out those tasks successfully. Only by taking up an attitude of outright opposition to Parliamentarism could revolutionaries expect to raise the workers' level of class consciousness on these questions.

The anti-parliamentary communists emphasised the importance of mass consciousness because they held the view that the revolution would have to be made by the masses themselves or not at all. It could not be the work of any small group of leaders with ideas in advance of the rest of the working class. As Guy Aldred put it, "...the revolution must not be the work of an enlightened minority despotism, but the social achievement of the mass of the workers, who must decide as to the ways and means..."<sup>161</sup> This was another reason for rejecting Parliamentary action,

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159. Workers' Dreadnought 27 August 1921.

160. Ibid. 1 December 1923.

161. Spur March-April 1918.

since such activity would restrict workers to the passive role of voters and leave everything up to the 'leaders' who happened to be elected to Parliament. Anti-parliamentary communists opposed Parliamentarism because "Any attempt to use the Parliamentary system encourages among the workers the delusion that leaders can fight their battles for them. Not leadership but MASS ACTION IS ESSENTIAL..."<sup>162</sup> Opposition to Parliamentarism was therefore vital in order to "...impress upon the people that the power to create the Communist society is within themselves, and that it will never be created except by their will and their effort."<sup>163</sup>

In fact, the term 'Parliamentarism' was used by the anti-parliamentarians to describe all forms of organisation and activity which divided the working class into leaders and led, which perpetuated the working class's subservience, and which obstructed the development of revolutionary consciousness among the mass of the working class. These reasons for opposing 'Parliamentarism' were expressed in a very clear way in 1920 by Anton Pannekoek, a Dutch revolutionary who was at that time one of the foremost theoreticians among the left communists in Germany. Arguing against "the utilisation of parliament as a means of struggle by the proletariat", Pannekoek wrote that

"...parliamentary activity is the paradigm of struggles in which only the leaders are actively involved and in which the masses themselves play a subordinate role. It consists in individual deputies carrying on the main battle; this is bound to arouse the illusion among the masses that others can do their fighting for them...the tactical problem is how we are to eradicate the traditional bourgeois mentality which paralyses the strength of the proletarian masses; everything which lends new power to the received conceptions is harmful. The most tenacious and intractable element in this mentality is dependence upon leaders, whom the masses leave to determine general questions and to manage their class affairs. Parliamentarism inevitably tends to inhibit the autonomous activity by the masses that is necessary for revolution."<sup>164</sup>

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162. Workers' Dreadnought 31 July 1920.

163. Ibid. 24 March 1923.

164. Anton Pannekoek, 'World Revolution And Communist Tactics', 1920, in D.A. Smart, ed., Pannekoek And Gorter's Marxism, (London, 1978), pages 110-111.

As Pannekoek said, Parliamentary action was a 'paradigm' - that is, the clearest example of the sort of activity to which the anti-parliamentarians were opposed, but not the only example. Other forms of activity were open to criticism on precisely the same grounds. Thus, for example, Sylvia Pankhurst also described trade unionism as a "parliamentary" form of organisation, because it "...removes the work of the union from the members to the officials, [and] inevitably creates an apathetic and unenlightened membership which, for good or ill, is a mere prey to the manipulation of the officials."<sup>165</sup>

We can conclude this section by summarising the points made so far. The anti-parliamentary communists did not believe that gaining control of Parliament would give the working class the power to carry out the fundamental changes in the organisation of society which would be necessary if workers were to achieve their own emancipation. Instead, they argued that workers would have to create their own revolutionary organisations - soviets - which would be able to reorganise production and distribution directly in the interests of the working class. The anti-parliamentary communists also believed that the revolution could be carried out only by the mass of the working class acting by and for itself, fully aware of what it was attempting to achieve and how to go about it. This belief determined the anti-parliamentary communists' attitude towards Parliamentary activity. By directing the workers' attention towards Parliament, Parliamentary action would confuse or obscure the vital point that Parliament would be useless as a means of working class emancipation. By focusing attention on the few individuals who were chosen as candidates or who were successfully elected to Parliament, Parliamentary action would also diminish the capacity for action by the working class as a whole. The anti-parliamentary communists applied such criticisms not only to Parliamentary action strictly defined,

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165. Workers' Dreadnought 21 April 1923.

but to all forms of working class activity and organisation, including, for example, trade unionism. The anti-parliamentary communists' negative opposition to 'Parliamentary' forms of organisation and activity therefore had a positive aspect as well: support for all forms of working class activity which encouraged the development of the class's own consciousness and capacity to act by and for itself.

#### The Meaning Of Communism

Having concluded our exploration of the term 'anti-parliamentarism', we can now turn our attention to a discussion of the 'communist' content of anti-parliamentary communism. While the meaning of the term 'anti-parliamentarism' might be said to have fallen into obscurity through lack of use, the real meaning of 'communism' is probably just as obscure, albeit for the opposite reason, that is, through generations of mis-use. This alone is sufficient justification for dwelling in detail at such an early stage on what some may regard as a very distant goal. A second and more pertinent justification is that the description of communist or socialist society (the two terms were used interchangeably) occupied no less prominent a place in the anti-parliamentary communists' own writings than it does in this study.

The reason for this emphasis lay in the anti-parliamentary communists' belief that "...until the minds and desires of the people have been prepared for Communism, Communism cannot come."<sup>166</sup> This belief made it the duty of revolutionary organisations, composed of the minority of the working class who were already communists, to "...spread the knowledge of Communist principles amongst the people", as the programme of the Communist Workers' Party stated.<sup>167</sup> The APCF saw the role of revolutionary organisations as the propagandist one of "...education towards the Social Revolution",<sup>168</sup> attacking the capitalist system and

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166. Workers' Dreadnought 15 April 1922.

167. Ibid. 11 February 1922.

168. Commune December 1924.

the institutions and organisations which upheld it, advocating the communist alternative to capitalism, and supporting working class activity which could bring that alternative into being. In 1923 Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that "Since the masses are as yet but vaguely aware of the idea of Communism, its advocates should be ever vigilant and active in presenting it in a comprehensible form."<sup>169</sup> The subject of the final section of this chapter is the 'idea of Communism' which the anti-parliamentary communists 'presented' to 'the masses'.

According to the anti-parliamentarians, communist society would rest on the foundation of common ownership of all wealth and all the means by which wealth was produced. Guy Aldred considered the abolition of private property and the establishment of common ownership as the definitive act of the communist revolution - "Social revolution means that the socially useable means of production shall be declared common-wealth...It shall be the private possession of none"<sup>170</sup> - while one of the ways in which Sylvia Pankhurst defined communism was as "...the holding and using of all things in common..."<sup>171</sup> Pankhurst's reference to common use is an important point which will be taken up later when we come to consider how 'common ownership' would be realised in practical terms.

The anti-parliamentary communists anticipated that one of the consequences of the abolition of private property and the establishment of common ownership would be the emergence of a classless society. Sylvia Pankhurst argued that under communism there would be "...no class distinctions, since these arise from differences in material possessions, education and social status - all such distinctions will be swept away."<sup>172</sup> In fact, 'differences in material possessions, education and social status' are signs of class distinctions; their source is groups of people's differing relationship to ownership of wealth and the means of

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169. Workers' Dreadnought 24 March 1923.

170. Commune December 1924.

171. Workers' Dreadnought 18 March 1922.

172. Ibid. 26 November 1921.



wealth-production. Once private property had been abolished, all men and women would stand in equal relationship to the means of production; "the division of society into classes" would "disappear"<sup>173</sup> and be replaced by "...a classless order of free human beings living on terms of economic and political equality..."<sup>174</sup>

The establishment of communism was also expected to bring to an end the existence of the state. The anti-parliamentary communists adhered to "...Marx's view of the state as but the executive committee of the ruling class...";<sup>175</sup> a resolution adopted by the Annual Conference of the WSP in May 1918, for example, described the state in capitalist society as an institution "...erected for the specific purpose of protecting private property and perpetuating wage-slavery..."<sup>176</sup> The state as an instrument of class domination would thus disappear as a consequence of the abolition of private property and of the division of society into classes.

In the anti-parliamentarians' view, communist society - the classless human community based on common ownership of the means of production - would also involve production for use, democratic control, and free access. In the remainder of this chapter, these three features of communist society will be explained and examined.

One of the reasons why, throughout the ages, human beings have always tended to live socially, rather than in isolation from each other, has been in order to provide themselves with the material necessities of life, such as food, clothing, shelter and so on. In order to begin to analyse and understand any society, it is essential to start by looking at the way in which it produces these basic material necessities i.e. its 'mode of production'. In societies where the capitalist mode of production prevails, virtually all wealth is produced in the form of

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173. Spur March 1919.

174. Workers' Dreadnought 3 July 1920.

175. Spur March-April 1918.

176. Workers' Dreadnought 1 June 1918.

commodities i.e. goods which are produced to be sold (or otherwise exchanged) for profit via the market. Judged by its success in providing the necessities of life, capitalism is a relative improvement on previous modes of production, but in absolute terms it is an inefficient system. It is characterised by, on the one hand, the accumulation of extremes of wealth by a small minority - those who own and control the means of production - and, on the other hand, the accumulation of relative deprivation by the vast majority - those who are excluded from ownership and control of the means of production.

It was by explicit reference to the production of wealth in the form of commodities that the author of an article published in the Workers' Dreadnought in 1923 sought to explain the phenomenon of extremes of poverty existing side-by-side with extremes of wealth. It was argued that the system of commodity production meant that if goods could not be manufactured or sold profitably, then they would not be produced; if already produced (in the expectation that a profit would be realised), then they would not be sold or distributed, and might even be destroyed. It meant that the capitalists could create 'artificial' scarcities by deliberate under-production, with the aim of creating a sellers' market and forcing up prices. It meant that regardless of their real material needs people's actual consumption would be limited by their lack of the means of purchase.<sup>177</sup>

In short, under capitalism there was no direct link between the production of wealth and the satisfaction of people's material needs. Such a link was established only tenuously, if at all, through the mediation of the market and the dictates of production for profit. Sylvia Pankhurst argued that the solution to this problem lay in the abolition of the market and the establishment of a system "...in which production is for use, not profit";<sup>178</sup> in other words, a system in which production

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177. Workers' Dreadnought 28 July 1923.

178. Ibid. 11 August 1923.

would be undertaken to satisfy people's needs directly. This idea was also put forward in the manifesto of the Glasgow Anarchist Group, which said that a communist society would "produce for use instead of for profit",<sup>179</sup> and in the manifesto of the Communist League, which stated that under communism "The production of goods will be for their use-value..."<sup>180</sup>

A system of production for direct use instead of for profit was also seen as the solution to other social problems, apart from material poverty, such as unemployment. In 1923 a headline in the Workers' Dreadnought stated that 'Production For Profit Breeds Unemployment Inevitably',<sup>181</sup> meaning that if goods could not be produced or sold profitably then there would be no demand for the labour power used to produce them. Hence Douglas McLeish of the Glasgow Communist Group wrote in 1921: "What is the remedy for this universal state of unemployment? The answer of every thoughtful person must be: The overthrow of Capitalism and its system of production for profit and the substitution of a system of Communism and production for use."<sup>182</sup>

Production for the direct satisfaction of people's needs leads us to the second feature of communist society mentioned earlier: democratic control, or as Guy Aldred described it, "...the administration of wealth by those who produce wealth for the benefit of the wealth producers..."<sup>183</sup> As we have seen, one of the anti-parliamentary communists' fundamental beliefs was that the communist revolution would involve the conscious and active participation of the mass of the working class. They also believed that there would be an element of continuity between the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the running of a communist society, in the sense that both would be characterised by the same high level of participation by 'the masses'. Another element of continuity

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179. Spur May 1918.

180. Ibid. March 1919.

181. Workers' Dreadnought 7 July 1923.

182. Red Commune February 1921.

183. Guy Aldred, General Election, 1922: To The Working-Class Electors Of The Parliamentary Division Of Shettleston.

would be provided by the institutional means of mass participation - the soviets or workers' councils - regarded by the anti-parliamentary communists as "...the executive instruments for creating and maintaining the socialist community."<sup>184</sup>

In a remark quoted earlier, Sylvia Pankhurst defined communism as the holding and using of all things in common. Her mention of use is important as it moves away from formalistic definitions of communism towards saying something about the content of communist society. Under capitalism, the capitalist class is often the formal, de jure owner of the means of production, but legal entitlement to exclusive ownership is not an essential characteristic of capitalism. The present ruling class in Russia, for example, has no legal property rights; nevertheless, to all intents and purposes it functions as the de facto owner of the means of production, because it alone decides how the means of production under its control should be used. The essence of 'ownership' is actual control of the use of the object which is 'owned'. Ultimately, private ownership in capitalist society rests less on legal property rights than on the owning class's power to enforce these rights by forcibly excluding anyone else from determining the uses to which wealth should be put.

It follows, therefore, that in a communist society common ownership would be established less by the formal abolition of legal property rights than by the active participation of the mass of the people in actually deciding in common how the means of wealth-production should be used.

In institutional terms, this active mass participation would be realised through the soviets or workers' councils, which would form "...the administrative machinery for supplying the needs of the people in communist society..."<sup>185</sup> The soviets would be "...councils of

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184. Workers' Dreadnought 14 December 1918.

185. Ibid. 4 February 1922.

delegates, appointed and instructed by the workers in every kind of industry, by the workers on the land, and the workers in the home."<sup>186</sup> The council delegates would be "...sent to voice the needs and desires of others like themselves."<sup>187</sup> In this way,

"...the average need and desire for any commodity [meaning here, 'any object'] will be ascertained, and the natural resources and labour power of the community will be organised to meet that need." <sup>188</sup>

In a communist society, therefore, decisions about what to produce, in what quantities, by what methods, and so on, would no longer be the exclusive preserve of a minority as they are in capitalist society. Instead, the soviet decision-making machinery would "...confer at all times a direct individual franchise on each member of the community."<sup>189</sup> Furthermore, these decisions would no longer be made according to profit and market considerations. The market mechanism and production for profit would be done away with, and replaced by direct production for use to satisfy the needs and desires expressed by all members of society.

We come now to the third feature of communist society mentioned previously: free access. Sylvia Pankhurst argued that the abolition of commodity production and the establishment of common ownership would also involve an end to all forms of exchange: "Money will no longer exist...There will be no selling, because there will be no buyers, since everyone will be able to obtain everything at will, without payment."<sup>190</sup> Selling and buying imply the existence of private property: someone first has to have exclusive ownership of an object before they can be in a position to dispose of it by selling it, while someone else first has to be excluded from using that object if the only way they can gain access to it is through buying it. The right of individuals to control the supply of objects as they alone see fit is incompatible with common

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186. Workers' Dreadnought 2 November 1918.

187. Ibid. 16 February 1918.

188. Ibid. 27 April 1918.

189. Spur June 1918.

190. Workers' Dreadnought 26 November 1921.

ownership, while if common ownership did exist there would be no reason for people to have to buy objects which they already owned anyway. In short, access to wealth would be free.

As we have seen, the anti-parliamentary communists argued that communism would be a classless society. This would involve the abolition of the working class or 'proletariat' in the sense of a class of people who can only gain access to the means of life through selling their ability to work in return for a wage or salary. Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that "wages under Communism will be abolished"<sup>191</sup> and that "...when Communism is in being there will be no proletariat, as we understand the term today..."<sup>192</sup> Consequently, the direct bond between production and consumption which exists in capitalist society would be severed; there would be no "direct reward for services rendered";<sup>193</sup> people's needs would be supplied "unchecked" and "independent of service".<sup>194</sup> On the basis of the principle that "...each person takes according to need, and each one gives according to capability",<sup>195</sup> everyone would share in the necessary productive work of the community, and everyone would freely satisfy their personal needs from the wealth created by the common effort.

The anti-parliamentary communists argued that the establishment of free access to the use and enjoyment of common wealth would facilitate the disappearance of the state, and in particular the abolition of its coercive apparatus. Where private property no longer existed, and where people could freely supply themselves with whatever material wealth they desired, the concept of 'theft', for example, would lose all meaning. Thus the programme of the CP(BSTI) stated that "Under Communism, Courts of Justice will speedily become unnecessary, since most of what is called crime has its origins in economic need, and in the evils and conventions of capitalist society."<sup>196</sup> Likewise, Sylvia Pankhurst argued that under

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191. Workers' Dreadnought 13 August 1921.

192. Ibid. 10 December 1921.

193. Ibid. 23 September 1922.

194. Ibid. 21 February 1920.

195. Ibid. 20 May 1922.

196. Ibid.

communism "Stealing, forgery, burglary, and all economic crimes will disappear, with all the objectionable apparatus for preventing, detecting and punishing them."<sup>197</sup>

Most people who have argued for the abolition of capitalism and its replacement by a communist society based on free access will be familiar with some of the most common objections raised by sceptics and opponents: that free access to wealth would be abused through greed and gluttony, that all incentive to work would be removed, and so on. Such arguments are frequently based on a certain view of 'human nature' which holds that ever since Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden (assuming that such a person and place ever existed) covetousness and sloth have been inherent parts of the nature of the human race in its 'Fallen' state.

A standard communist response to such objections is to deny that there is any such thing as 'human nature'. It is argued that what these sceptics and opponents are referring to is actually human behaviour, and that human behaviour is not a fixed, eternal set of traits, but is something which varies according to material circumstances. The arguments of the anti-parliamentary communists, however, do not fit neatly into this position. As we will see, a distinction between human nature and human behaviour is useful in making sense of some of the anti-parliamentarians' arguments. Nevertheless, a conception of human nature does appear to lie beneath other arguments used by the anti-parliamentarians. However, the conception held by the anti-parliamentarians differed radically from what might be termed the 'post-Fall' view.

Whereas the 'post-Fall' conception sees people as 'naturally' lazy and idle beings who can be compelled to work only by the lash of wage labour, Rose Witcop argued the precise opposite: in her view, "...the physical need for work; and the freedom to choose one's work and one's methods" were in fact basic human needs and urges.<sup>198</sup> Indeed, this could

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197. Workers' Dreadnought 26 November 1921.

198. Spur August 1917.

be taken as another example of capitalism's inability to satisfy basic human needs, since within the capitalist system workers are not free to choose what work they do and how they do it. Such decisions are not made by the workers themselves, but by their bosses, and are the subject of a never-ending struggle between these two classes. Only "...when the workers manage the industries", Sylvia Pankhurst argued, would they be able to make decisions about the conditions of production "...according to their desires and social needs."<sup>199</sup>

At this point in the discussion it might be helpful to introduce a distinction between 'work', in the sense of freely-undertaken creative activity, and 'employment', in the sense of the economic or material compulsion to carry out tasks not for any intrinsic pleasure to be derived from them but simply as a means of earning a living. The anti-parliamentary communists felt that aversion to the latter was perfectly understandable, since 'employment' in this sense could be seen as 'un-natural': "We hold that a healthy being does not need the whip of compulsion, because work is a physical necessity, and the desire to be lazy is a disease of the capitalist system."<sup>200</sup> In a communist society, employment, or forced labour, would give way to work in the sense of fulfilment of the basic human need for freely-undertaken creative activity. As Guy Aldred pointed out, the urge to satisfy this need was evident in workers' behaviour even within capitalist society; communism would provide the conditions for its most complete fulfilment:

"Men and women insist on discovering hobbies with which to amuse themselves after having sweated for a master. Does it not follow that, in a free society, not only would each work for all, but each would toil with earnest devotion at that which best suited and expressed his or her temperament? ...The forms and modes of productivity and distribution would tend to good food, healthy living, decent clothing ...the thoroughness of production and distribution would be co-existent with a minimum of labour and a maximum of pleasure." <sup>201</sup>

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199. Workers' Dreadnought 15 April 1922.

200. Spur September 1917.

201. Guy Aldred, The Case For Communism, (London, 1919), pages 4-5.



Aldred's expectations concerning attitudes to work in a communist society were shared by Sylvia Pankhurst, in whose vision of communism "...labour is a joy, and the workers toil to increase their skill and and swiftness, and bend all their efforts to perfect the task..."<sup>202</sup> The anti-parliamentary communists therefore anticipated that the breaking of all direct links between 'services rendered' and 'rewards' would not result in any lack of inclination to work, because in a communist society work would become something which would be enjoyable and satisfying in itself, rather than simply a means to an end.

The anti-parliamentary communists approached the second problem - abuse of free access - in a number of ways. On a 'common sense' level, Rose Witcop pointed out that "...a man can consume two lunches in one day only at his peril, and wear two suits of clothing, or make a store-house of his dwelling, only to his own discomfiture." She added that in the unlikely event that anyone would seek to discomfit themselves in this way, "We will be content to humour such pitiful perverseness. It is the least we can do."<sup>203</sup>

To understand a second of the anti-parliamentary communists' refutations of the problem of over-indulgence, it might be useful to return to the distinction made earlier between human nature and human behaviour, although once again it should be pointed out that it would be an oversimplification to say that the anti-parliamentarians denied the existence of the former completely in favour of the latter. In fact, the anti-parliamentarians occasionally seem to have been arguing that capitalism was 'un-natural', because it encouraged human behaviour which was at odds with human nature. Greed, for example, was seen as an understandable but 'un-natural' behavioural response to the artificial scarcity which characterised capitalist society. Thus the Glasgow Anarchist Group's manifesto in 1918 argued that after the establishment of a communist

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202. Woman's Dreadnought 3 March 1917.

203. Spur August 1917.

society,

"Although men will not suddenly become angels, the new conditions will provide a soil in which the social instincts of mankind will rapidly develop. The anti-social propensities not being stimulated by unbearable economic pressure will tend consequently to die out." 204

Sylvia Pankhurst also argued that greed was a behavioural response to scarcity, and that the disappearance of such behaviour would follow the abolition of the circumstances which stimulated it. Thus, while suggesting that in a communist society no-one would be permitted to "...hoard up goods for themselves that they do not require and cannot use...", she went on to argue that

"...the only way to prevent such practices is not by making them punishable; it is by creating a society in which... no-one cares to be encumbered with a private hoard of goods when all that they need is readily supplied as they need it from the common storehouse." 205

Pankhurst's comments hint at a third way in which the problem of abuse of free access could be overcome. The question of over-indulgence presupposed a continuation of scarcity: if one person consumed more than his or her 'fair share', there would not be enough left over to satisfy everyone else's needs. If it could be argued that a communist society would be characterised by abundance - in other words, that there would be sufficient wealth to satisfy everyone's needs no matter how much any individual wanted to consume - then the whole issue of abuse of free access would become redundant, as would any need to refute such an objection by reference to arguments concerning altruism, human nature and so on.

This was precisely the main way in which the anti-parliamentary communists did address the problem of abuse of free access. According to Sylvia Pankhurst, communist society would be characterised by "Abundance for all."<sup>206</sup> People's needs would be satisfied "without stint or measure."<sup>207</sup>

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204. Spur May 1918 (emphasis added).

205. Workers' Dreadnought 10 December 1921.

206. Ibid. 1 April 1922.

207. Ibid. 18 March 1922.

The community would be "...zealous to supply the needs of its members in overflowing measure",<sup>208</sup> and would in fact be "...able to produce more than its members can consume..."<sup>209</sup>

Of course, as soon as the problem of abuse of free access is solved in this way, a fresh problem arises: how would it be possible for a communist society to produce enough wealth to satisfy, and continue to satisfy, the sum total of individually-determined needs? The anti-parliamentary communists answered this question in several ways.

First of all, the meaning of 'abundance' has to be understood in the context of expectations concerning the level of needs which people in a communist society would express. Rose Witcop observed "how few things we really need". In her view, the provision of food, clothing and shelter by way of material essentials, and work, comradeship and freedom from restrictions by way of non-material essentials, would suffice to satisfy people's basic needs.<sup>210</sup> If this sounds more like a prescription for austerity than abundance, then it should be remembered that if a communist society fulfilled only these basic needs and nothing more, it would still be, for most of the world's population, a vast improvement in comparison to capitalism, since the capitalist system has never shown any sign of actually providing even these most basic of needs for any more than a small minority of the world's inhabitants.

Even if abundance is defined merely as the adequate provision of basics such as food, clothing and shelter, however, this still leaves unanswered the question of how a communist society would be able to provide such things for all its members when capitalism patently cannot. We must therefore move on to a second argument put forward by the anti-parliamentary communists, which was that the capitalist system, through its constant, rapid development of the means of production and distrib-

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208. Workers' Dreadnought 26 May 1923.

209. Ibid. 24 March 1923.

210. Spur August 1917.

ution, had itself brought into existence the pre-conditions for abundance. In 1921 Sylvia Pankhurst wrote of "The abundant production now possible".<sup>211</sup> So long as the capitalist system remained in existence, the dictates of production for profit via the market would act as a fetter preventing any such possibility or potential for abundance from ever being realised. However, the communist revolution would smash this fetter: once the market system and production for profit had been abolished and replaced by direct production for use, the Glasgow Anarchist Group argued, there would be "plenty for all".<sup>212</sup>

A third argument put forward was that while under capitalism the application of new inventions and technology in the field of production was strictly subordinated to considerations of profit and the market, in a communist society the satisfaction of human needs would become the primary consideration. New inventions and technology would be used to "constantly facilitate" greater and greater increases in society's productive capacity and would "...remove any need for rationing or limiting of consumption."<sup>213</sup> The emergence of the radically altered attitudes towards production anticipated by Pankhurst and Aldred would also contribute in large measure towards realising the potential for the creation of an abundance of wealth, as would the integration into socially-useful productive activity of the vast numbers of people whose occupations were specific to a money-market-wages system. A particularly good explanation of the latter point can be found in the 'Principles And Tactics' of the APCF (1939). Although this text was written much later than the others we have been using so far, the ideas it expressed were still the same, and the clarity of its argument makes it worth quoting in this context:

"Just consider the immense untapped reservoirs for the production of almost unlimited supplies of every imaginable

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211. Workers' Dreadnought 26 November 1921.

212. Spur May 1918.

213. Workers' Dreadnought 26 November 1921.

form of useful wealth. Think of the scores of millions of unemployed, not forgetting the useless drones at the top of the social ladder. Estimate also the millions of officials, attendants, flunkies, whose potentially valuable time is wasted under this system. Consider the wealth that could be created by the huge army of needless advertising agents, commercial travellers, club-men, shop-walkers, etc., not to mention the colossal army of police, lawyers, judges, clerks, who are ONLY "NECESSARY" UNDER CAPITALISM! Add now the scandalous waste of labour involved in the military machine - soldiers, airmen, navymen, officers, generals, admirals, etc. Add, also, the terrific consumption of energy in the manufacture of armaments of all kinds that is weighing down the productive machine. Properly used, these boundless supplies of potential wealth-creating energy, could ensure ample for all - not excluding "luxuries" - together with a ridiculously short working day. Likewise, there would be pleasant conditions of labour, and recreation and holidays on a scale now only enjoyed by the rich!" 214

Finally, the anti-parliamentary communists envisaged the establishment of communism on a global scale: "...Communism must be either international", Sylvia Pankhurst argued, "or it cannot succeed."<sup>215</sup> While the creation of abundance in any particular locality taken in isolation might have seemed implausible, with the productive capacity and resources of the entire world at its command, and with all national and racial barriers abolished - as the CP(BSTI) programme demanded<sup>216</sup> - the possibility of a communist society being able to produce 'abundance for all' would appear to be that much more realistic.

In general, therefore, only when abundance was not assumed did the anti-parliamentary communists have to fall back on arguments which relied on a view of people as naturally altruistic beings. Sylvia Pankhurst, for example, acknowledged that there could be no cast-iron guarantee against the possibility that "some untoward circumstance" - an unforeseen natural disaster, perhaps - might produce "a temporary shortage". In her vision of how a communist society would cope with temporary scarcities in such circumstances, Pankhurst suggested that everyone would "...willingly share what there is, the children and the weaker alone receiving

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214. Solidarity June-July 1939.

215. Workers' Dreadnought 16 October 1921.

216. Ibid. 3 July 1920.

privileges, which are not asked, but thrust upon them."<sup>217</sup>

When the anti-parliamentarians described themselves as 'communists', therefore, they meant that they stood for the establishment of a classless, stateless society, based on common ownership and democratic control of the world's resources, in which money, exchange and production for profit would be replaced by production for the direct satisfaction of people's needs and free access for all to the use and enjoyment of all wealth.

The description of communist society was a vital element in the anti-parliamentarians' propaganda, since it held out the prospect of a permanent solution to the myriad of problems confronting members of the working class every day of their lives. However, the description of communist society was more than just a pole-star guiding the direction of the class struggle. After the Russian revolution, the anti-parliamentary communists were confronted with a regime under which, it was widely believed, the distant goal of communism was actually being brought into reality. In the following chapter, one of the issues which will be discussed is the extent to which the anti-parliamentarians were able to evaluate this claim, using the conception of communism described in this chapter as their yardstick.

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217. Woman's Dreadnought 3 March 1917.

## CHAPTER 2

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Just as revolutionaries in the nineteenth century formed many of their ideas through reference to the 'bourgeois' revolutions of 1789 and 1848, so, in like manner, have the ideas of revolutionaries in the twentieth century been shaped, perforce, through reference to the Russian revolution of 1917. This is at least as true for the ideas of the anti-parliamentary communists as it is for any other current of revolutionary thought. In one way or another, positively or negatively, the events of the Russian revolution and its aftermath influenced virtually all the areas of anti-parliamentary communist thought discussed in Part One of this study. Particular aspects of the impact of the Russian experience - such as the way in which perceptions of the soviets' role during and after the revolution affected the WSP's views on Parliament as an instrument of social change - are each dealt with in appropriate places in other chapters. While the impact of the Russian revolution reverberated throughout a whole range of positions held by the anti-parliamentarians, the focus of the present chapter is rather narrower: it concentrates on the anti-parliamentary communists' interpretation of the revolution itself, their theoretical and practical response to it, and their assessment of the changes which took place in Russian society after 1917.

The attitudes of the different anti-parliamentary groups towards the revolution which took place in Russia in February 1917 have already been mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, and will be discussed again in greater detail in a moment. Judging by their widely differing reactions to the February revolution, it is obvious that, at the outset of the period under consideration here, there was little in common between the WSP and the Spur group. As we saw in the first chapter, this was also the case in relation to the issue of Parliamentary action - yet, in the

space of two years, the WSP's views became radicalised to the extent that its ideas on Parliamentary action eventually converged with those of the Spur. Two separate groups, starting from very different premises, ended up adhering to virtually identical positions. Over a longer period such a degree of homogeneity was rarely evident in the two groups' attitudes towards Russia. In 1924, seven years after the event, the two groups' views on many crucial issues relating to Russia were as far removed from each other as they had been at the beginning of 1917. It reflects the nature of its subject, therefore, that this chapter concentrates rather less on views which united the anti-parliamentary communist movement than it does on some of the contrasting opinions of its various constituent organisations. And it is on account of these differences of opinion that the views of the various anti-parliamentary groups are, for the most part, treated separately. In contrast to most of the issues discussed in other chapters, it is not possible to present a 'composite' description of anti-parliamentary communist thought in relation to the subject of this chapter.

#### From The February To The October Revolution.

During 1917, the WSP's propaganda was dominated by two demands: for the extension of the suffrage to every man and woman of adult age, and for an end to the War. Because of these emphases in its own politics, the WSP welcomed the February revolution. For one thing, the tyrannical Russian monarchy had been overthrown, thus clearing the way for government by a constituent assembly elected on the basis of universal suffrage.<sup>1</sup> The prospect of the establishment of a Parliamentary democracy was perceived by the WSP as the major achievement of the February revolution, since "...the political revolution which in other countries was gradually effected by many generations of effort" had been accomplished in Russia

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1. Minutes of WSP General Meeting 19 March 1917, Pankhurst Papers.



in only "a few weeks".<sup>2</sup> The WSF also regarded the February revolution as a step towards peace. Its understanding was that war-weariness and a desire for peace had been the motivating sentiments which had led the poverty-stricken workers and peasants of Russia to overthrow the Tsar;<sup>3</sup> it seemed logical to conclude, therefore, that given the opportunity, these same forces would proceed to elect a government pledged to end Russia's involvement in the War. The ramifications of the February revolution were also expected to be felt beyond Russia: the revolution would act as an inspiration to the democratic and anti-War movements (of which the WSF considered itself a part) within the other belligerent countries.

The WSF's position was not one shared by Guy Aldred and his comrades. With ten years of anti-parliamentary agitation behind him already, it would have been surprising if Aldred had greeted the establishment of a Parliamentary regime in Russia with anything but the cynicism which indeed underlay his response. Aldred did not deny that the new Russian government might well be "more enlightened" than its predecessor, nor that a Republic would be "saner" than a Monarchy. Unlike the WSF, however, he did not regard the prospect of the establishment of Parliamentary democracy in Russia as anything for revolutionaries to support, and he warned against harbouring any illusions on the matter:

"We know that tomorrow, the apostle of socialism will be jailed again in Russia, for sedition and what not. And so "we do not celebrate the Russian revolution". We prefer to work for Socialism, for the only possible social revolution, that of the world's working-class against the world's ruling-class." 4

Other anti-parliamentary communists who wrote for the Spur also differed from the WSF in their ideas concerning ways of ending the War. While the WSF regarded peace as something for 'the people' to demand and for governments to negotiate, anti-parliamentarians associated with the

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2. Woman's Dreadnought 30 June 1917.

3. Ibid. 24 March 1917.

4. Spur May 1917.

Spur advocated direct action by the working class. The differences between these two positions were brought out in Rose Witcop's remarks following the Leeds Soviet Convention of June 1917. In his assessment of the Convention, Stephen White argues that the aspect of the February revolution most welcome to the majority of those who attended the Convention was "...the support it soon began to provide for a renegotiation of war aims and the achievement of a "people's peace".<sup>5</sup> In the second resolution passed by the Convention, for example, the delegates "...call~~ed~~<sup>7</sup> upon the British Government immediately to announce its agreement with the declared foreign policy and war aims of the democratic Government of Russia", while the third resolution stated that "This Conference calls upon the Government of Great Britain to place itself in accord with the democracy of Russia..." by establishing a number of basic civil and political liberties.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, Rose Witcop was critical of those delegates who had treated the Convention as an opportunity to make their voices heard by the Government, and who had 'called upon' their rulers to meet certain demands:

"...the suggestion of telling the Government what we want points to the incapacity...to grip the spirit of the Russian people. In Russia they did not reason with or explain to the Czar...they just gave the Government to understand by downing their bayonets."

In addition to the view implied by this remark, that mutiny among the armed forces would be one way of bringing the War to an end, Witcop also advocated "industrial action" and urged that there should be "no bargaining with Governments".<sup>7</sup>

Despite their markedly contrasting responses to the February

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5. Stephen White, 'Soviets In Britain: The Leeds Convention of 1917', International Review of Social History Volume XIX, 1974, page 168.
  6. What Happened At Leeds, Report Published by the Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates, (London, 1917) reprinted in British Labour And The Russian Revolution, (Nottingham, n.d.), pages 23 and 27.
  7. Spur July 1917.

revolution, one thing about which writers in the Spur and the Dreadnought did agree was that the struggle in Russia would be unlikely to come to a halt at whatever had been achieved in February.

In October 1917, Freda Cohen of the Glasgow Anarchist Group reported that there was widespread dissatisfaction in the ranks of the Russian army, and that "...there is some rumour of the peasants seizing the land." She went on to say that it was plain to all close observers of events in Russia that the struggle going on there was "...not, as it seemed at the beginning, simply a political or anti-Czarist one..." According to Cohen, "...the struggle going on there in broad daylight, just reflects the self-same struggle that has been, and is going on underground, all over the world." By this, Cohen meant the class struggle between capitalists and workers, and she predicted that workers in Russia would not be content with "...settling down in the old work-a-day world with no other gain than a new set of masters and newly forged chains."<sup>8</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst had hinted at a similar prognosis in the Woman's Dreadnought in June 1917, when she had asked rhetorically: "Is it not plain that still the Russian Revolution is continuing; still the struggle is going on; still the hold of the capitalists is upon the country and only in part is it overthrown?"<sup>9</sup>

In the months after the February revolution, the Dreadnought followed the continuing upheaval in Russia as closely as it could, despite the difficulties it sometimes complained of in trying to obtain reliable information and in sorting out fact from fiction. Following the February revolution, the Dreadnought had drawn attention to the existence of "two governments" in Russia: the Provisional Government appointed by the Duma, and the "Council of Labour Deputies" responsible to workers and soldiers.<sup>10</sup> Three months later, at the end of June 1917, it was reported that the "Council of Workers' And Soldiers' Deputies" had now

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8. Spur October 1917.

9. Woman's Dreadnought 9 June 1917.

10. Ibid. 24 March 1917.

gathered sufficient strength to be able, if it so wished, to displace the Provisional Government from its position of power. In a discussion of the various Russian revolutionary groupings' attitudes towards the potential contained in this situation, the Dreadnought explained that although the Mensheviks were disinclined to support any seizure of power by the workers' and soldiers' councils,

"The Maximalists and Leninites, on the other hand, desire to cut adrift from the capitalist parties altogether, and to establish a Socialist system of organisation and industry in Russia, before Russian capitalism, which is as yet in its infancy, gains power and becomes more difficult than at present to overthrow. We deeply sympathise with this view."<sup>11</sup>

In the months that followed, the Dreadnought continued to note the growing strength of the Bolsheviks, and to express its own support for their aims. In August, for example, the desertion of Russian soldiers from the front and the rapid deterioration in living standards in Petrograd were said to be winning soviet delegates and socialist leaders around to "...the position adopted at the outset by Lenin...namely, that Free Russia must refuse to continue fighting in a capitalist War." The Dreadnought added that Lenin's view was "...a position which we ourselves have advocated from the first..."<sup>12</sup>

By the end of September, the paper had reported with "great satisfaction" that "...the Socialists who are variously called Bolsheviks, Maximalists and Leninites have secured a majority on the Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates." For the benefit of its readers, the report went on to outline the main points of the Bolshevik programme:

"The Maximalists are the International Socialists who recognise that this is a capitalist War and demand an immediate peace, and who desire to establish in Russia not a semi-Democratic Government and the capitalist system such as we have in England, but a Socialist State. They desire Socialism, not in some far away future, but in the immediate present. The Maximalists desire that the CWSD [Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates] shall become the Government of Russia until the Elections for the Constituent Assembly have taken place." <sup>13</sup>

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11. Woman's Dreadnought 30 June 1917.

12. Workers' Dreadnought 11 August 1917.

13. Ibid. 29 September 1917.

Finally, when the news reached Britain that the growing support among the Russian workers for the Bolsheviks had culminated in their seizure of power in the October revolution, the Dreadnought announced its wholehearted support for this latest turn of events. In its opinion,

"...the latest revolt of the Russian Revolution, the revolt with which the name of Lenin is associated, has been brought about in order that the workers of Russia may no longer be disinherited and oppressed. This revolt is the happening which definitely makes the Russian Revolution of the twentieth century the first of its kind."

The Bolsheviks' seizure of power was described as "a Socialist Revolution", the "aims and ideals" of which were said to be "incompatible with those of capitalism".<sup>14</sup>

The Spur's first reaction to the October revolution echoed the Dreadnought's assessment of its nature and historic significance. An article signed by 'Narodnik' drew comparisons with the French revolution of 1789; like its historic predecessor, the October revolution was

"...a social revolution in the fullest meaning of the word; a radical changing of all the economic, political and social arrangements; a grand attempt to reconstruct the whole structure of society, upon an entirely new foundation." <sup>15</sup>

#### War And Intervention.

From the very beginning, therefore, the Bolshevik revolution was applauded by both the Workers' Suffrage Federation and the anti-parliamentary communists associated with the Spur. However, these two groups supported the revolution for different reasons. For the Spur group, the Bolshevik revolution was the first breakthrough of the 'social revolution of the world's working-class against the world's ruling-class' to which Guy Aldred had preferred to look forward when refusing to celebrate the February revolution. The WSF, on the other hand, welcomed the October revolution initially because it seemed to promise the accomplishment of rather more modest aims. These limited objectives were summed up by

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14. Workers' Dreadnought 17 November 1917.

15. Spur January-February 1918.

Sylvia Pankhurst in the mid-1930s when she recalled her own immediate response to the Russian revolution:

"Russia went out of the War with the cry 'Peace and Bread'. Working as I had during the War to aid the poorest during the pressures of war-hardship and working also for Peace, I heard this cry from Russia as one sees the dawn on the horizon after a long and painful night." 16

During 1918-1919, the WSP's response to the Bolshevik seizure of power was dominated by two issues: demands for the conclusion of a peace to end the World War, and the campaign against Allied intervention in Russia. This shows that, at first, the WSP supported the Russian revolution more as a blow struck for world peace than as a blow struck for world revolution.

The peace appeals issued by the new Bolshevik Government were initially couched in terms designed to deter the fewest potential supporters throughout the world. As E.H. Carr has observed, "Nothing was said of capitalism as the cause of war or of socialism as its cure."<sup>17</sup> The Bolsheviks' appeals called instead for a 'just, democratic peace', based on a policy of no annexations, no indemnities, and the right of nations to self-determination. As such, the Bolsheviks' appeals "...contained an element of calculated appeal to American opinion and to such radical opinion in other countries as might be sympathetic to it."<sup>18</sup>

As far as the WSP was concerned, the War was a hindrance to the cause of socialism. It was an 'interruption' which had to be ended in order to allow the advance towards socialism to be resumed, and the peace terms on which the War was settled would have an important bearing on the fate of the socialist cause in the years that followed. This was a very different point of view from that hinted at in the remarks made by Rose Witcop quoted earlier: that the War itself, by arming millions of workers, in fact presented a golden opportunity for revolution. This

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16. Draft of The Red Twilight (unpublished typescript), File 26c 73-2, Pankhurst Papers.

17. E.H. Carr, The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923 Volume 3, (London, 1966), page 11.

18. Ibid., page 10.

had been the argument put forward during the War by the Bolsheviks, in marked contrast to the calls issued by the Bolshevik Government after October 1917. Consequently, the 'element of calculated appeal' in the Bolsheviks' calls for a 'just, democratic peace' struck a sympathetic chord with the WSF. In August 1917 Sylvia Pankhurst had already suggested that the WSF should make a new banner bearing the slogan "Negotiate For Peace On The Russian Terms: No Annexations: No Indemnities",<sup>19</sup> and the linking of the demand for peace on these terms with the fact that these were also the Bolsheviks' demands was a frequent feature of Pankhurst's articles in the Workers' Dreadnought around this time. In December 1917, for example, Pankhurst stated that "We take our stand on the Russian declaration: 'No annexations, no indemnities, the right of the peoples to decide their own destiny'".<sup>20</sup>

The WSF sought the widespread acceptance of the Bolshevik peace terms as the basis for a negotiated settlement of the World War. Sylvia

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19. Minutes of WSF General Meeting 13 August 1917, Pankhurst Papers.

20. Workers' Dreadnought 29 December 1917. The basis of the WSF's opposition to the First World War has been the subject of several confusing or mistaken claims. Raymond Challinor contrasts anti-War individuals who "based their objections on pacifist or religious grounds" with the opposition of the "handful of socialists, small groups like those led by John Maclean in Glasgow and Sylvia Pankhurst in London" (The Origins Of British Bolshevism, London, 1977, page 124). Similarly, in the British publication of the International Communist Current the WSF has been described as a "Zimmerwaldist" group ('Origins Of The CPGB/2', World Revolution 27, December 1979-January 1980, page 20) which upheld "a revolutionary defeatist position on the question of the war" ('The General Strikes Fifty Years On', World Revolution 6, March 1976, page 26) and which "attempted to put into practice the Bolsheviks' slogan 'Turn the imperialist war into a civil war' by working for a revolution at home" ('The Communist Tradition In Britain', World Revolution 33, February 1981, page 5). Elsewhere, however, the ICC moderates its claims. The WSF's "militant opposition to the capitalist war" ('Origins Of The CPGB', World Revolution 23, August 1979, page 21) becomes "a more or less militant anti-war stand" (*ibid.*, page 20), and is then toned down to "the Dreadnought opposed the war... although it saw no clear, practical way of stopping it" ('Sylvia Pankhurst: From Feminism To Left Communism/2', World Revolution 34, December 1980-January 1981, page 29), until all that is left is that the WSF's politics were really "basically pacifist and avowedly reformist" (*ibid.*). This last description is the correct one. Sylvia Pankhurst herself referred to the WSF as "We Pacifists..." (Woman's Dreadnought 13 January 1917), while the organisation's opposition to

Pankhurst argued that "The only way to a people's peace is to support the efforts of the Russian Socialist Government...",<sup>21</sup> and in March 1918 a general meeting of the WSP passed a resolution calling on the British Government to initiate peace negotiations with its adversaries on the Russian terms.<sup>22</sup> While the WSP's efforts in Britain seemed to yield little success, the group could at least draw some comfort from the opening of peace negotiations between Russia and Germany at Brest-Litovsk towards the end of 1917. The WSP argued that other belligerent governments should follow the example set by Russia - "The Russian Socialist Government is showing us the way to obtain a just Peace" - and urgently called on the British labour movement to give "...strong backing for the Russian negotiators at Brest-Litovsk."<sup>23</sup>

After Russia's withdrawal from the War in March 1918, the WSP's demands for peace were voiced in a different context. While the Brest-Litovsk negotiations were in progress, Sylvia Pankhurst had drawn attention to the fact that "Whilst some capitalist sections would endeavour to cajole the Russian Socialists [e.g. the German Government, which had agreed to negotiate], others would coerce them."<sup>24</sup> The 'coercers' were governments which sought to overthrow the newly-established Bolshevik regime by means of military intervention and aid to the Bolsheviks' internal enemies.

Opposition to such intervention in Russia by foreign powers became

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the War was consistently based on the policy of no annexations, no indemnities, and national self-determination (see, for example, the resolutions adopted by the WSP's Annual Conference in May 1918, Workers' Dreadnought 1 June 1918). Those communists who did uphold a 'revolutionary defeatist' opposition to the War, and who were 'Zimmerwaldists', such as Herman Gorter of the Dutch 'Left', argued that "...the way out of war and Imperialism does not lie through... 'Peace Without Annexations or Indemnities'...or 'The Right of Self-Determination'. These are all lies and deceitful frauds used to bind you tighter to Imperialism and to strengthen it." Herman Gorter, The World Revolution, 1918, (Glasgow, 1920), page 38.

21. Workers' Dreadnought 12 January 1918.

22. Minutes of WSP General Meeting 18 March 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

23. Workers' Dreadnought 5 January 1918.

24. Ibid. 12 January 1918.



the predominant element in the WSF's response to the Russian revolution during its immediate aftermath. In his memoirs, Harry Pollitt recalled that his

"...main sphere of activity at this time was with the Workers' Socialist Federation, doing propaganda for Russia. Sylvia Pankhurst was, of course, the leading spirit in the Federation...I covered the greater part of London with her group. We held meetings on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings, afternoons and evenings."

It was Pollitt's experience of his involvement with the WSF in the anti-interventionist 'Hands Off Russia' campaign that caused him to remark, even twenty years later, that the WSF had been "...made up of the most self-sacrificing and hard-working comrades it has been my fortune to come in contact with..."<sup>25</sup> Since, at the time of writing, Pollitt was a high-ranking member of the CPGB, and therefore not a witness who would as a matter of course be given to flattering 'infantile ultra-leftists', his comments can be taken as a reliable indication of the importance which the WSF, in common with virtually every other left-wing and socialist group of the time, attached to opposing intervention, and of the amount of time and effort which the organisation put into the campaign. Opposition to intervention was also a persistent theme of Sylvia Pankhurst's articles about international affairs in the Workers' Dreadnought from the earliest days of the revolution until the autumn of 1920 when the threat of intervention finally came to an end.<sup>26</sup>

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25. Harry Pollitt, Serving My Time: An Apprenticeship To Politics, (London, 1940), pages 109-110.

26. During 1919 several of these articles were published in Communist International, the monthly journal of the Third International. 'You Are Called To War', Workers' Dreadnought 19 April 1919, appeared as 'The New War' in Communist International 2, June 1919. 'Labour And The League Of Nations' appeared in Workers' Dreadnought 5 April 1919 and Communist International 3, July 1919; 'The Workers Again Betrayed' in Workers' Dreadnought 8 March 1919 and Communist International 4, August 1919; and 'Italy And The Revolution' in Workers' Dreadnought 18 October 1919 and Communist International 7-8, November-December 1919. Some substantial claims have been founded on the basis of these articles: Raymond Challinor says that "Sylvia Pankhurst was probably the foremost British contact of the International" (Challinor, op.cit., pages 241-242); David Mitchell that Pankhurst was "Appointed English correspondent of the International".

The WSF's campaign against intervention was aimed at three targets. One of these targets was the British Government. In March 1918 Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that "...there is urgent need that the Governments of all Europe should feel the pressure of the workers in their respective countries to prevent the crushing of Socialism in Russia."<sup>27</sup> Not long afterwards, incidentally, Guy Aldred made a similar appeal to workers to demand that the British Government recognise the Bolshevik regime.<sup>28</sup> Apart from such calls for the working class to make its feelings known to its respective national governments, the WSF also appealed directly to the British Government. A resolution passed by the organisation at its 1918 Annual Conference, for example, called on the British Government to recognise its Russian counterpart and to initiate peace negotiations on the Bolshevik terms of no annexations, no indemnities, and the right of peoples to decide their own destiny.<sup>29</sup>

A second group which the WSF's anti-intervention campaign was intended to influence was the organised labour movement in Britain. In a Dreadnought editorial intended to be read by delegates attending the Labour Party conference in January 1918, Sylvia Pankhurst urged the labour movement to "...bring every means at its disposal to support the Russian Socialist Government, the first working class Government that

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Communist /sic/ (The Fighting Pankhursts: A Study In Tenacity, London, 1967, page 84); and the ICC that "Sylvia Pankhurst was a regular writer in the journal Communist International, and it was her analyses of the British situation which were accepted by Lenin and the Executive Committee of the CI" ('Origins Of The CPGB', World Revolution 25, August 1979, page 21). These are all rather inflated claims. Pankhurst did not enjoy any particular position of favour with the editors of Communist International, who were eager to use her writings when it suited their purposes, but just as quick to dispense with them when it did not. Articles written by many other British communists, apart from Pankhurst, were also published in Communist International during this period. Pankhurst's articles were not written specially for Communist International, and were two, three or even five months old by the time they were republished. With their focus on opposition to intervention, these articles dealt with one of the least controversial aspects (from the Communist International's point of view) of Pankhurst's politics.

27. Workers' Dreadnought 2 March 1918.

28. Spur July 1918.

29. Workers' Dreadnought 1 June 1918.

the world has ever seen",<sup>30</sup> while later the same year, a general meeting of the WSP passed a resolution calling on the organised labour movement to "...stand by the Russian Soviet Republic."<sup>31</sup> This meant protesting against any foreign military intervention in Russia.

Most of the leaders of the organised labour movement in Britain were reluctant to respond to the appeals made by the WSP and other organisations, hence the third target at which the WSP's campaign was aimed: rank and file workers. If the leaders of the labour movement were unwilling to save the Bolshevik regime from destruction, then the workers themselves would have to organise their own efforts to stop intervention. At the end of 1919, the WSP demanded recognition of the Russian Government, the cessation of aid to its internal enemies, and an end to intervention, and called for the organisation of a rank and file conference to make these demands and to censure the leaders of the TUC, Triple Alliance and Labour Party for their failure to organise militant opposition to intervention.<sup>32</sup>

In the previous chapter, we saw that the anti-parliamentary communists assigned an essentially propagandist role to revolutionary organisations. A widespread awareness of and desire for communism was regarded as one of the preconditions of revolution, and one of the main ways in which workers could achieve this knowledge and desire would be through coming into contact with propaganda spread by revolutionaries. This pedagogic conception also lay beneath some of the WSP's efforts to involve workers in the campaign against intervention in Russia. In March 1918 Sylvia Pankhurst complained that "Our workers...gulled by a capitalist press...do not know that they, citizens of Imperial Britannia, have the power to save the Russian Workers' Republic..."<sup>33</sup> Others seem to have shared Pankhurst's apparent belief that it was ignorance, rather

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30. Workers' Dreadnought 19 January 1918.

31. Minutes of WSP General Meeting 16 September 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

32. Workers' Dreadnought 13 December 1919.

33. Ibid. 16 March 1918.

than any other factor, which was preventing workers in Britain from rallying to the defence of the Bolshevik regime. In the 1930s Pankhurst recalled that "Because I was defending the revolution I was approached by messengers coming from Moscow who supplied me with information and asked my aid in publishing and distributing literature etc in this country."<sup>34</sup> One of those who approached Pankhurst was Edward Soermus, who informed the WSP that he was "...very anxious to have an organisation in England to promote the knowledge of Russia in this country."<sup>35</sup> As a result of these approaches, in July 1918 the WSP participated in the formation of the People's Russian Information Bureau, along with representatives from the ILP, BSP, SLP, NUR and London Workers' Committee.<sup>36</sup>

By means such as the Information Bureau, the WSP sought to increase workers' awareness of developments in Russia, and arouse workers from what the WSP regarded as their role as "passive spectators" and "...inarticulate tools in the great struggle between the old regime of capitalism and the uprising workers of the world."<sup>37</sup> The WSP believed that workers in the Allied countries held "the key to the situation", since "...the International Capitalist war against the Workers' Soviet Republics cannot be carried on a day without the assistance of Allied workers." Accordingly, in July 1919 the organisation called for a "Workers' Blockade Of The Counter-Revolution", which would involve an international general strike against intervention to force the 'International Capitalists' to make peace with the 'Soviet Republics'.<sup>38</sup>

As we have seen, then, during the first two years after the October revolution a large part of the WSP's propaganda was devoted to the campaign to defend the newly-established regime in Russia against intervention by hostile capitalist powers, and to persuade these powers

34. Draft of The Red Twilight (unpublished typescript), File 47a 73-1, Pankhurst Papers.

35. Minutes of WSP Executive Committee meeting 17 May 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

36. Minutes of WSP Executive Committee meeting 26 July 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

37. Workers' Dreadnought 31 August 1918.

38. Ibid. 12 July 1919.

to make peace with the Bolsheviks. The WSF encouraged workers in Britain to act as a 'pressure group' to try to influence the policies of the British Government in favour of the interests of the Russian Government. This approach was typified by the Dreadnought's statement of 2 March 1918, quoted earlier, that 'the Governments of all Europe should feel the pressure of the workers in their respective countries to prevent the crushing of Socialism in Russia'.

Occasionally, a different approach to the survival of the Bolshevik regime was hinted at in the pages of the Dreadnought. In April 1919 Sylvia Pankhurst argued that the "most effectual way" to end "the war against the Soviets of Russia" would be to "set up the Soviets in Britain".<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in May 1920 she wrote that there would be no peace with the Russian regime, nor with any other "Communist republic" which might be established, "...whilst capitalism rules the powerful nations of the world."<sup>40</sup> Comments such as these suggested that the fate of the revolution in Russia depended on the overthrow of capitalism elsewhere in the world - that the best way of defending the Bolshevik regime would be to attack the capitalist regimes. As will become apparent later in this chapter, however, the infrequency with which such a line of argument was put forward by the WSF is particularly interesting and significant in view of the anti-parliamentary communists' subsequent reappraisals of the events of this period.

#### 'Socialism In The Making'.

Since the WSF put so much of its time and energy into the 'Hands Off Russia' campaign, it might be interesting to consider what the group thought it would be protecting when it called for defence of 'Soviet Russia'. What did the anti-parliamentary communists think were the major achievements of the revolution, and what terms did they use to describe

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39. Workers' Dreadnought 12 April 1919.

40. Ibid. 1 May 1920.

post-revolutionary Russian society?

One of the most noticeable features of many of the comments quoted from the Workers' Dreadnought in the last few pages is the frequency of their references to the "socialist" or "working class" Government in Russia, and to Russia as a "soviet" or "workers'" Republic. As this suggests, the WSP believed that as a result of the October revolution, the working class - or its socialist representatives (no distinction was made between the two at this stage) - had gained control of state power in Russia. This idea was based on the belief that post-revolutionary Russian society was being run by the soviets or workers' councils. Since the soviets were organs of the working class, and Russia was being ruled by the soviets, this meant that the working class was now exercising its own power over society as a whole.<sup>41</sup>

It is the anti-parliamentary communists' perceptions of the nature of Russian society, rather than the reality of what was actually happening there, which is the important point here. The notion of working class power in Russia after 1917 may have been a fiction, but this does not detract from the power of the myth so long as it is sincerely believed. What is certain is that the notion that soviets or workers' councils could act as the means of overthrowing capitalism, and as the administrative machinery of communist society, was one of the foremost ideas which the anti-parliamentary communists derived from their view of what had happened during and after the Russian revolution. As we saw in Chapter 1, the emergence of the soviets made a tremendous impact on the WSP's ideas concerning the way in which a socialist society could be established, while the impact of the soviets was also evident in the anti-parliamentary communists' descriptions of how a communist society would be run.

In the Workers' Dreadnought, accounts of the changes taking place in Russia after the revolution were frequently published under the headline 'Socialism In The Making', implying that in Russia the working

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41. Workers' Dreadnought 26 January 1918.

class was presiding over a society in which socialism was being built. If we are looking for ways in which the Russian revolution and its aftermath made an impact on the ideas of the anti-parliamentary communists in Britain, there are few more striking examples than the ideas which the anti-parliamentarians put forward during 1919-1921 concerning this notion of a 'transitional period'.

In August 1921 Sylvia Pankhurst wrote: "Frankly, we do not believe that society will reorganise itself without the use of force on both sides, because the present system is maintained by force."<sup>42</sup> Not only would the ruling class resist violently any attempt by the workers to seize power (thus making it necessary for the working class to resort to violent means too), it would also try to mount a violent counter-revolution in the event of the workers' revolution being successful. In short, the revolutionary period would be like a "civil war".<sup>43</sup>

The WSP argued that during this period of civil war the working class would have to exercise a dictatorship over the rest of society through its soviets. The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was advocated in a resolution adopted by the WSP at its Annual Conference in 1919,<sup>44</sup> in two major programmatic statements written by Pankhurst during the winter of 1919-1920 - 'Ideas For A Programme' and 'Towards A Communist Party',<sup>45</sup> and in the programme adopted by the CP(BSTI) at its foundation in June 1920.<sup>46</sup>

Guy Aldred and his comrades also believed that in the period immediately after the revolution the working class would have to exercise a dictatorship over the rest of society: in 1920 Aldred wrote that

"...there must be a transitional period during which the workers must protect the revolution and organise to crush the counter-revolution. Every action of the working-class during that period must be organised, must be power-action, and consequently dictatorial." <sup>47</sup>

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42. Workers' Dreadnought 6 August 1921.

43. Ibid. 3 December 1921.

44. Ibid. 14 June 1919.

45. Ibid. 29 November 1919 and 21 February 1920.

46. Ibid. 3 July 1920.

47. Guy Aldred, Michel Bakunin: Communist, (Glasgow, 1920), page 18.

Aldred asserted this belief all the more strongly because, following the October revolution, the notion of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' became a contentious issue amongst many anarchists who might have been inclined to support the revolution but for the way in which the idea of dictatorship of any sort conflicted with literal interpretations of anarchy as the abolition of all authority. Opposing this point of view, Aldred argued that "...there can be no efficient pursuit of working class emancipation without the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship."<sup>48</sup> This implied that opposition to the dictatorship of the proletariat meant, in effect, opposition to working class emancipation; in other words, anarchists who did not support the dictatorship were practically counter-revolutionaries. Thus, in September 1919 Aldred wrote:

"I believe that those Anarchists who oppose the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transitional measure are getting dangerously near assisting the cause of the reactionaries, though their motives may be the highest. As a believer in the class struggle, I do not share their infatuation for abstract liberty at the expense of real social liberty."<sup>49</sup>

Aldred regarded the dictatorship of the proletariat as a 'transitional' measure - a view with which Sylvia Pankhurst agreed: "The dictatorship, so far as it is genuine and defensible, is the suppression by Workers' Soviets of capitalism and the attempt to re-establish it. This should be a temporary state of war."<sup>50</sup> The dictatorship would be necessary until the capitalist counter-revolution had been quelled and the expropriated ruling class had "settled down to accept the new order",<sup>51</sup> or, as Rose Witcop proposed, "until all individuals become useful members of the community".<sup>52</sup> Douglas McLeish and Jane Patrick argued that as soon as a classless society began to emerge, the dictatorship - initially the political expression of the workers' power over the rest of society - would gradually wither away: "As the counter-revolution weakens, the Soviet Republic will lose its political character and assume purely useful

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48. Spur June 1920.

49. Ibid. September 1919.

50. Workers' Dreadnought 10 December 1921.

51. Ibid. 24 December 1921.

52. Spur July 1919.



administrative functions..."<sup>53</sup> Aldred shared this view: the soviet system did not aim at "governing persons" but was intended to "administer things"; as time passed after the revolution it would tend "...more and more to lose its political character and to assume a purely industrial function."<sup>54</sup>

Before the classless communist society could be reached, however, a whole series of transitional measures would have to be taken by the working class during the period of its dictatorship. While the civil war between the revolutionary workers and the counter-revolutionary capitalists was still going on, the workers would have to disarm the ex-ruling class and create their own 'Red Army'.<sup>55</sup> Anyone who attempted to re-introduce exploitative economic relations, or who refused to engage in socially useful work, would be deprived of political rights: the CP(BSTI) programme declared that

"No person may vote, or be elected to the Soviets who refuses to work for the community, who employs others for private gain, engages in private trading, or lives on accumulated wealth. In the Soviet community such persons will soon cease to exist." <sup>56</sup>

This system would be enforced in part through the administration of 'revolutionary justice' by judges elected by, and answerable to, the soviets.<sup>57</sup>

During the transitional period, work would be compulsory for everyone. Sylvia Pankhurst suggested that

"...in the early stages before the hatred of work born of present conditions has disappeared, the community might decide that an adult person should show either a certificate of employment from his workshop or a certificate from his doctor when applying for supplies from the common storehouse." <sup>58</sup>

In other words, the compulsion to work would come from material necessity, since nobody, apart from those who were officially too ill to work, would

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53. Red Commune February 1921.

54. Spur September 1918.

55. Workers' Dreadnought 21 February and 3 July 1920.

56. Ibid. 3 July 1920.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid. 26 May 1923.

be allowed to satisfy their needs from the common storehouse unless they had first made a contribution towards production.

It would not be mistaken to interpret Pankhurst's suggestion as implying that during the transitional period after the revolution some sort of wages system would still exist. Indeed, Pankhurst was explicit that this would in fact be the case: "...after long experience of Capitalism...it would be difficult to abolish the wage system altogether, without first passing through the stage of equal wages."<sup>59</sup> Equality of wages was regarded as a step towards their complete abolition, but no indication was given of how long it might take to complete this 'step': on some occasions, as above, equality of wages was described as a "stage", on other occasions as an "era".<sup>60</sup> Equal wages would be accompanied by free provision of staple necessities<sup>61</sup> and "equal rationing of scarce commodities".<sup>62</sup> Free and unrestricted access would only become possible once the application of technology had begun to produce wealth in abundant quantities.<sup>63</sup> No indication was given of how the 'step' from the 'equal wages' system to a wage-less society might be effected.

In two articles mentioned earlier - 'Ideas For A Programme' and 'Towards A Communist Party' - Sylvia Pankhurst called for "The socialisation and workers' control of all production, distribution and exchange."<sup>64</sup> In Chapter 1, it was argued that buying and selling would be incompatible with common ownership, and that communism would therefore involve the abolition of all forms of exchange. However, Pankhurst does not seem to have regarded the demand for 'socialisation' of 'exchange' as a contradiction in terms; in fact, she appears to have envisaged a continuation of commodity production, and a retention of buying and selling, during the post-revolutionary transitional period. The programme

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59. Workers' Dreadnought 29 November 1919.

60. Ibid. 29 November 1919 and 21 February 1920.

61. Ibid. 3 July 1920.

62. Ibid. 21 February 1920.

63. Ibid. 3 July 1920.

64. Ibid. 29 November 1919 and 21 February 1920.

of the CP(BSTI), for example, assumed that during this period all the trappings of the market system would still exist, and demanded that all exchange transactions should be under the exclusive control of the 'soviet state': "For the period in which money and trading still continue, local and national Soviet banks will be set up and shall be the only banks."<sup>65</sup>

From what source did the anti-parliamentary communists derive these ideas about the post-revolutionary period of transition? These detailed descriptions of a working class dictatorship, civil war, Red Army, obligatory work, equal wages, state monopoly of banking, and so on, were not conjured out of the imagination. The anti-parliamentarians' speculation concerning post-revolutionary societies was based on observations of a single concrete example: post-revolutionary Russia. Practically all the features of the anti-parliamentarians' description of the transitional period were also features of Russian society in the first years after the October revolution. During 1918-1920 a civil war raged in Russia as the White forces and foreign powers fought to try to overthrow the newly-established Bolshevik regime. The Red Army was created under Trotsky's command in order to defend the state against this onslaught. During the same period the economic system known as 'War Communism' came into being. Work became, in effect, compulsory for all: "On every wall... 'He who does not work, neither shall he eat', was blazoned abroad."<sup>66</sup> Staple necessities were provided free, and scarce commodities were strictly rationed: "At its lowest, in the first quarter of 1921, only 6.8 per cent of 'wages' were paid in money, the rest being issued free in the form of goods and services."<sup>67</sup> Efforts were made to reduce wage differentials with the aim of achieving equality of wages.

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65. Workers' Dreadnought 3 July 1920.

66. Victor Serge, Year One Of The Russian Revolution, (London, 1972), page 357.

67. Alec Nove, An Economic History Of The USSR, (London, 1969), page 114.

Between November 1917 and February 1918 the State Bank and all private banks were seized, nationalised and amalgamated into the People's Bank of the Russian Republic. State finance came under the control of the Supreme Council of National Economy. Attempts were made to bring all trade under state control; there was "...a resolute attempt to suppress free trade in essentials. Private trade in a wide range of consumers' goods was forbidden."<sup>68</sup> Such, anyway, was the 'official' version of what was happening in Russia under 'War Communism'. In reality, the wages in cash and kind received by urban workers fell far short of bare subsistence levels; whatever 'resolute attempts' there may have been to 'suppress free trade', the spur of hunger forced more workers than ever before to engage in widespread black market exchanges in order to obtain the necessities of life. Once again, however, it should be stressed that what matters here is not what was really happening in Russia, but what the anti-parliamentarians thought was happening.

During 1919-1921, therefore, the anti-parliamentary communists in Britain generalised from the specific experience of post-revolutionary Russia in order to construct a model for all future communist revolutions. This tells us a great deal about the anti-parliamentarians' views concerning the Russian revolution and the society which emerged afterwards. They would not have generalised from the Russian example in such a manner if they had not believed that the October revolution had been a working class, communist revolution, and that Russian society after 1917 was in the midst of a transition towards a communist society.

#### The 'Reversion To Capitalism'.

While such an assessment sums up the anti-parliamentarians' view of Russia during the first three years after the revolution, a very different point of view began to emerge thereafter. During the first three years

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68. Nove, op.cit., page 55.

after the revolution, Sylvia Pankhurst could write that "Soviet Russia is not yet Communist"<sup>69</sup> and that "Russia is not Communist yet",<sup>70</sup> but the implication was that although the final goal had not 'yet' been reached, events within Russia were still tending to progress in the right direction. What characterises the Dreadnought's analyses from the end of 1921 onwards, however, is the identification of a reversal of the direction of this movement - a "reversion to capitalism".<sup>71</sup>

One of the earliest intimations of this view was given by Sylvia Pankhurst in the Dreadnought in September 1921, when she referred to "The drift to the Right in Soviet Russia, which has permitted the re-introduction of many features of Capitalism...", and noted that there were "...strong differences of opinion amongst Russian Communists and throughout the Communist International as to how far such retrogression can be tolerated."<sup>72</sup> In the same issue of the Dreadnought an article by A. Ironie drew attention to the recent re-establishment of payment for basic material necessities, restoration of rents, and re-instatement of owners of expropriated property. Ironie concluded with a criticism of the Bolsheviks: "...the bureaucratic revolutionaries cannot justify their claims to being the means of transition towards common-ownership whilst the decrees quoted above witness a retrogression in the opposite direction."<sup>73</sup>

These two articles marked the beginning of a radical revision by the Dreadnought group of its assessment of the nature of the society which had emerged in Russia after the revolution.

In August 1918 the Dreadnought had reported that the revolution had established a system of collective workers' control of industry, exercised through workshop committees, and that the role of the trade unions had been transformed by the revolution from the amelioration of

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69. Workers' Dreadnought 16 October 1920.

70. Ibid. 13 August 1921.

71. Ibid. 25 March 1922.

72. Ibid. 17 September 1921.

73. Ibid.

working conditions to the search for ways of increasing and improving production.<sup>74</sup> At the time, the Dreadnought had regarded this as one of the most worthwhile achievements of the October revolution. In January 1922, however, Sylvia Pankhurst argued that "In Russia, as a matter of fact...there is an antagonism between the workers and those who are administering industry", and she contrasted this with a "theoretically correct Soviet community", where "...the workers, through their Soviets, which are indistinguishable from them, should administer. This has not been achieved in Russia."<sup>75</sup>

Another of the supposed achievements applauded by the Dreadnought during the earliest days of the Russian revolution was the expropriation of large landowners and the re-distribution of land amongst the peasantry. The Bolsheviks' rubber-stamping of this 'fait accompli' with the land decree of 8 November 1917 was one of the measures referred to by Sylvia Pankhurst when she expressed the hope "...that these are not mere decrees, but actual living facts."<sup>76</sup> In May 1922, however, Pankhurst criticised Dutt of the CPGB and Hunter of the ILP for stating, in a debate, that socialism existed in Russia: they were "...entirely ignoring the fact that the land of Russia is privately worked by the peasants..."<sup>77</sup> This shows that by 1922 Pankhurst had completely reversed her initially-favourable attitude towards land re-distribution.

Another belief that was called into question was the Dreadnought's view that in Russia the working class had been exercising a dictatorship over the rest of society through its soviets: in July 1923 Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that "...the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' has been used to justify the dictatorship of a party clique of officials over their own party members and over the people at large..."<sup>78</sup>

In one of Pankhurst's last articles in the Dreadnought on the

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74. Workers' Dreadnought 3 August 1918.

75. Ibid. 21 January 1922.

76. Ibid. 24 November 1917.

77. Ibid. 20 May 1922.

78. Ibid. 7 July 1923.

subject of Russia and the Bolsheviks, the party she had once admired for its apparent determination to establish socialism 'in the immediate present', and the country which had previously been taken as a model for the post-revolutionary society, were now assessed very differently; the Bolsheviks, Pankhurst wrote,

"...pose now as the prophets of centralised efficiency, trustification, State control, and the discipline of the proletariat in the interests of increased production...the Russian workers remain wage slaves, and very poor ones, working, not from free will, but under compulsion of economic need, and kept in their subordinate position by... State coercion..." 79

What had happened to bring about such a drastic revision in the Dreadnought's attitude towards Russia? As we have seen, the Dreadnought group's ideas about the post-revolutionary transitional period were based on the example of the period during which the policy of 'War Communism' was in operation in Russia. In February 1921, however, 'War Communism' was abandoned, and replaced by the New Economic Policy (NEP). The Dreadnought group considered that this marked a decisive turning-point in the history of post-revolutionary Russia. By September 1921, when Pankhurst first wrote about Russia's so-called 'reversion to capitalism', the major elements of the NEP had been established. In March 1921 the agricultural 'tax in kind' was introduced and private trade was legalised; in May the nationalisation of small-scale industry was revoked; in July leasing of enterprises to private individuals was begun; in August the payment of wages in cash, charges for services, and the operation of industry and trade on an explicitly commercial basis were all instituted. Thus in September 1921 Pankhurst based part of her argument that a 'reversion to capitalism' had begun on the fact that there had been a "...re-introduction of many features of Capitalism, such as school fees, rent, and charges for light, fuel, trains, trams and so on...", while A. Ironie, as has already been noted, mentioned the

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79. Workers' Dreadnought 31 May 1924.

re-establishment of payment for necessities, the restoration of rents, and the re-instatement of owners of expropriated property.<sup>80</sup> In December 1921 Pankhurst made explicit her belief in this link between the abandonment of 'War Communism' and the 'revival of capitalism' when she referred to "Russia's 'new economic policy' of reversion to capitalism..."<sup>81</sup> Even in later years, long after she had ended her involvement in the communist movement, Pankhurst stuck to this identification of the NEP as the point of degeneration of the revolution. In 1938, for example, she described the NEP as "...a 'retreat' from collectivism towards private property in Russia..."<sup>82</sup>

Whether or not the Dreadnought group was correct to believe that the introduction of the NEP marked the beginning of a 'reversion to capitalism' in Russia is an issue which will be taken up at the end of this chapter. For the time being, however, we will confine ourselves to a presentation of the group's views.

While the Dreadnought group regarded the introduction of the NEP in 1921 as the decisive turning-point in the direction of the Bolshevik regime, the next couple of years were marked by a further series of events which were interpreted by the group as confirmation of its view that Russia was travelling the road back to capitalism. The first such event was the adoption of the United Front tactic by the Executive Committee of the Communist International in December 1921. The Dreadnought regarded the United Front as the complement on the international front to the domestic NEP: the latter policy made concessions to capitalism within Russia, while the former policy advocated co-operation with capitalist political parties outside Russia. Pankhurst described the United Front theses as "a deplorable document" and argued that the tactic proved that "...the Russian Soviet Government and those under its

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80. Workers' Dreadnought 17 September 1921.

81. Ibid. 24 December 1921.

82. New Times And Ethiopia News 19 November 1938.



influence have abandoned the struggle for the International Proletarian Revolution and are devoting their attention to the capitalist development of Soviet Russia."<sup>83</sup>

Shortly after its denunciation of the United Front tactic, the Dreadnought brought to the attention of its readers news of the 'Kuzbas' project being launched in Russia. As part of its policy of offering concessions to foreign capital, the Russian Government was attempting to encourage technically qualified people to emigrate to Russia (mainly from the USA) to exploit coal and iron concessions in the Kuznets Basin region. Sylvia Pankhurst regarded this as nothing less than the re-establishment of "...some of the most ugly features of capitalist exploitation", since the scheme would regenerate capitalist social relations between owners of capital and propertiless wage labourers. This was a far cry from the early ideals of the revolution in Russia: "What is to become of the Russian workers' dream of controlling their own industry through their industrial soviets?...for the natives of Kuzbas, it seems that another Revolution will be needed to free them from the proposed yoke."<sup>84</sup>

Russia's participation in the Genoa conference in April 1922 was regarded as another step back towards the capitalist fold. The Genoa conference was convened after a meeting of Allied industrialists in December 1921, where it had been agreed that the recovery and reconstruction of the capitalist economy in Europe depended on "large-scale investment in Soviet Russia" and "the exploitation of Russian resources."<sup>85</sup> Although there was no practical outcome to the Genoa conference, the mere fact that the Russian Government had been prepared to participate in such a meeting was seen by the Dreadnought as further proof of the Bolsheviks' willingness to place Russian workers "under the yoke of the foreign capitalist", and that "the principles of Communism in Russia" were "being surrendered".<sup>86</sup>

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83. Workers' Dreadnought 4 March 1922.

84. Ibid. 18 March 1922.

85. E.H. Carr, op. cit., page 357.

86. Workers' Dreadnought 6 May 1922.

Yet another apparent indication of the Bolshevik regime's re-integration into the capitalist world economy was pointed out in 1923, at a time when the Communist Party of Germany was attempting to organise working class insurrections in various regions of Germany. Sylvia Pankhurst reported that in an interview with U.S. Senator King, Trotsky had said that Russia was interested in peace above all else, and would not intervene militarily in Germany even if events there reached the point of civil war and revolution; according to Trotsky, it was of the utmost importance that the Russian Government's actions should maintain the confidence and trust of the foreign commercial enterprises that had invested in Russia. In Pankhurst's opinion this admission made a mockery of the Bolsheviks' claims to being the 'advance guard' of the world communist revolution:

"It means that Leon Trotzki and his colleagues are prepared to put their trade with international capitalists and the agreements they have made with capitalist firms, before Communism, before the proletarian revolution and the pledges they have made to the German comrades to come to their aid in the hour of need." 87

The introduction of the NEP, the United Front tactic, foreign concessions, the Genoa conference, and so on, were all regarded by the Dreadnought group as symptoms of Russia's 'reversion to capitalism'. As might be expected, however, the group did not confine itself to merely reporting the outward signs of this 'reversion'; attempts were also made to explain its causes.

The Dreadnought group's explanation of Russia's 'reversion to capitalism' can be broken down into five distinct parts. It should be emphasised, however, that this is done for the sake of clarity of presentation, and not because it is intended to suggest that these were five mutually-exclusive explanations offered at different stages in the group's re-assessment of post-revolutionary Russia. Each of these arguments was part of a single over-all explanation. This is not to say,

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87. Workers' Dreadnought 13 October 1923.

however, that the arguments cannot be placed in order of importance; the inter-relationship of each component of the explanation is an interesting subject for examination, and one to which we will return in the final section of this chapter. Once again, however, this account will restrict itself in the meantime to a description of the Dreadnought group's arguments.

Firstly, the group appears to have adhered to the view that all societies had to pass through a series of stages of historical development, and that it was contrary to the 'laws of history' to imagine that any of these stages could be missed out. When applied to Russia, this idea was premised on the view that before 1917 Russia had been a basically feudal society; the Bolsheviks' seizure of power and attempted establishment of socialism had therefore been "...in defiance of the theory that Russia must pass through capitalism before it can reach Communism..." As it turned out, far from defying the theory of stages of development the Bolsheviks had in fact "...made themselves the slaves of that theory..."<sup>88</sup> In other words, since they could not leap straight from feudalism to communism, the Bolsheviks themselves had been forced to take on the task of initiating the era of capitalism in Russia. The 're-introduction of capitalism' through the NEP was explained by reference to this theory not only by its opponents but also, Sylvia Pankhurst noted, by its supporters.<sup>89</sup>

The theory of stages of development was bound up with some of the anti-parliamentary communists' ideas about the nature of communism. The anti-parliamentarians' descriptions of communism included the view that there would be free access to abundant communal wealth, and they argued that the potential for such abundance would be created in part by the rapid development of the forces of production during the era of capitalism. If capitalism had not fulfilled this historic role, one of the

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88. Workers' Dreadnought 9 December 1922.

89. Ibid. 31 May 1924.

essential preconditions for communism would be lacking, and any attempt to establish a communist society would founder. Thus "...the state of Russia's economic development and the material conditions with which she is faced" was seen as one of the factors which had ultimately "...rendered inevitable the failure of the Soviet Government to maintain a fighting lead in the world revolutionary struggle."<sup>90</sup>

Practically the only instance of an argument which conflicted with the theory of stages of development put forward in the anti-parliamentary press after 1917 occurred when the Spur made its very first comments about the October revolution. On that occasion, the writer, 'Narodnik', had acknowledged that the backwardness of Russia's economic development had usually been regarded as an indication that the country was not suitably prepared for a socialist revolution. 'Narodnik' did not agree with this dominant point of view, however, and argued instead that precisely because of certain anachronistic native traditions in Russia, it was in actual fact more likely that socialism could be established successfully there than in the more advanced and developed countries of Western Europe. 'Narodnik' referred to two native traditions in particular. Firstly, the communal tradition of the 'mir' (communal peasant village) was said to have produced a "...strong development of the social instinct among the Russian peasantry - one of the most important preliminaries for a Social Revolution with outspoken Socialistic tendencies." Secondly, the tradition of federative unions of free cities underpinned the political struggle against "the centralised state".<sup>91</sup>

Although 'Narodnik' was very much a lone voice, his/her arguments lead to a second of the reasons put forward by other anti-parliamentary communists to explain Russia's 'reversion to capitalism'. The views expressed by 'Narodnik' conflicted with those of other anti-parliamentary communists not only with regard to the issue of whether or not the level

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90. Workers' Dreadnought 8 October 1921.

91. Spur January-February 1918.

of Russia's economic development made the country ripe for socialism, but also with regard to the related issue of whether or not the Russian peasantry was a pro- or anti-communist force. Whereas 'Narodnik' stressed the communal aspects of traditional peasant life, Sylvia Pankhurst argued that "In Russia the ideal of the land worker was to produce for himself on his own holding and to sell his own products, not to work in co-operation with others." Socialism would find "...its most congenial soil in a society based on mutual aid and mutual dependence"; it had therefore been unable to take root and flourish in a country where an individualistic peasantry overwhelmingly outnumbered any other class.<sup>92</sup> In 1917 Sylvia Pankhurst had welcomed the redistribution of land in Russia among the peasants; by 1924, however, she was criticising the Bolsheviks for having done exactly what she herself had recommended:

"Instead of urging the peasants, and leading the peasants, to seize the land and cut it up for individual ownership, the right course was to have endeavoured to induce them to seize the land for common ownership, its products being applied to common use."

The Bolsheviks' support for individual rather than common ownership - an attempt to "...save time by refraining from bringing the land workers to a state of Communism..." - had led "directly and inevitably to reaction".<sup>93</sup>

A third explanation for the 're-establishment of capitalism' in Russia concerned working class control of production. The Dreadnought argued that

"...until the workers are organised industrially on Soviet lines, and are able to hold their own and control industry, a successful Soviet Communist revolution cannot be carried through, nor can Communism exist without that necessary condition." 94

In 1922 the Dreadnought argued that this 'necessary condition' for a successful communist revolution had not been fulfilled in Russia: "...though the Soviets were supposed to have taken power, the Soviet

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92. Workers' Dreadnought 24 December 1921.

93. Ibid. 2 February 1924.

94. Ibid. 13 July 1922.

structure had yet to be created and made to function."<sup>95</sup> One of the 'authorities' cited by the Dreadnought in support of this view was the Bolshevik Kamenev, who in his report to the seventh All-Russian Congress of Soviets in 1920 had stated that "...even where Soviets existed, their general assemblies were often rare, and when held, frequently only listened to a few speeches and dispersed without transacting any real business."<sup>96</sup>

Such evidence caused the Dreadnought to revise its earlier view that industry in Russia was controlled by the workers themselves by means of their own industrial soviets, and to argue instead that

"Administration has been largely by Government departments, working often without the active, ready co-operation, sometimes even with the hostility of groups of workers who ought to have been taking a responsible share in administration. To this cause must largely be attributed Soviet Russia's defeat on the economic front." <sup>97</sup>

The Dreadnought's reference to 'administration by Government departments' as opposed to administration by the workers themselves, leads to a fourth explanation of the 'reversion to capitalism'. In one of the first Dreadnought articles to cast doubts on the authenticity of Russia's claims to communism, A. Ironie had written that

"The realisation of Communism, i.e., not Communist Partyism, but the common-ownership and use of the means of production, and the common enjoyment of the products, still remains a problem to be solved by the creative genius of the people freely organising themselves; or not at all." <sup>98</sup>

In its context - an attack on the actions of the Bolsheviks - Ironie's counter-position of the party on the one hand, and the self-organised working class on the other, clearly implied a belief that in Russia the interests of the Bolsheviks and those of the Russian workers had conflicted. Only the conscious participation of the working class as a whole would assure the success of the communist revolution; Ironie's

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95. Workers' Dreadnought 28 January 1922.

96. Ibid. 24 December 1921.

97. Ibid. 28 January 1922.

98. Ibid. 17 September 1921.

remarks implied that this essential precondition had been lacking in Russia. Any attempt to establish communism by a small group acting 'on behalf of' the working class would result only in the dictatorial rule of a minority - not communism, but 'Communist-Partyism'.

Finally, we come to the fifth explanation suggested by the anti-parliamentary communists, which focused on the failure of working class revolution elsewhere in Europe and the consequent isolation of the Russian regime. In 1921, Sylvia Pankhurst argued that other countries' "failure to become Communist" held back "the progress of Russian Communism".<sup>99</sup> In other words, there was a limit to the progress the revolution in Russia could make, isolated as it was in a hostile capitalist world; ultimately, the Bolsheviks' fate would depend on whether or not the revolution could be extended beyond the boundaries of Russia. Thus, the introduction of the NEP, which was seen as inaugurating the 'reversion to capitalism', was attributed to "...the pressure of encircling capitalism and the revolutionary backwardness of the Western democracies."<sup>100</sup> Russia's isolation could only be overcome either through the world revolution, or else through succumbing to the 'pressure of encircling capitalism' and compromising with the capitalist powers. The Dreadnought group believed that the Bolsheviks had concluded that the first of these options was no longer viable; consequently, the second option had been forced upon them. In November 1922, for example, Sylvia Pankhurst addressed the following remarks to Lenin in an 'Open Letter' to the Bolshevik leaders:

"It seems that you have lost faith in the possibility of securing the emancipation of the workers and the establishment of world Communism in our time. You have preferred to retain office under Capitalism than to stand by Communism and fall with it if need be." <sup>101</sup>

The symptoms of the 'reversion to capitalism' - such as the United Front tactic, concessions to foreign capitalists, participation at the Genoa

99. Workers' Dreadnought 30 July 1921.

100. Ibid. 17 September 1921.

101. Ibid. 4 November 1922.

conference, and Trotsky's remarks about Germany in 1923 - were all taken as evidence of the Bolsheviks' determination to hang on to state power, even at the cost of Russia's re-integration into the world capitalist economy and the abandonment of communism. In one of his rare critical remarks about Russia during this period, Guy Aldred referred to the United Front tactic as one of the

"...stupid phrases invented in Moscow in hours of defeat and sadness, after the apathy of the world's proletariat has disheartened those who, hoping first for a World Revolution, are now driven to be content with compromising with capitalism, even in Moscow itself." 102

The anti-parliamentarians believed, therefore, that there was a direct link between Russia's isolation - a consequence of the failure of revolution elsewhere in the world - and the 'reversion to capitalism'. In October 1921 Sylvia Pankhurst had predicted that "...all attempts by Soviet Russia to conciliate and negotiate with the forces of Capitalism will turn out to have been gravely mistaken."<sup>103</sup> Less than three years later, she was able to argue that her prediction had come true: "As soon as the Soviet Government began to negotiate with capitalist governments it placed itself upon the inclined plane which leads to the surrender of principle and the abandonment of the revolutionary conquest..."<sup>104</sup>

Considering this five-part explanation as a whole, it is relatively easy to see the connections between the first and second of the Dreadnought group's arguments: both concerned the level of material development within Russia at the time of the revolution, and the implications that had for the prospects of establishing socialism. Likewise, the third and fourth points are similarly compatible, as both were related to the conflict between the Bolshevik party and the working class after the revolution. The fifth point, however, situating the Russian revolution in the context of world capitalism and the international class struggle,

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102. Worker 26 August 1922.

103. Workers' Dreadnought 8 October 1921.

104. Ibid. 31 May 1924.



must rank far above the others in order of importance. All other factors were of secondary significance in the light of the failure of the revolution to spread beyond Russia. This argument will be developed later. There was, therefore, a certain level of internal coherence among some of the five points of the Dreadnought's explanation; however, it is doubtful whether the group's arguments really unravelled all the complexities of cause and effect within the position they were intended to support. For example, while the Dreadnought argued that the failure of revolutions elsewhere in Europe had forced the Bolsheviks to break their isolation by negotiating with capitalist governments, other anti-parliamentary communists pointed out that the converse was also true; that these same negotiations acted as a brake on the emergence of revolution outside Russia. At the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921, for example, the KAPD delegate 'Sachs' (Alexander Schwab) argued that

"...agreements and treaties which contributed to Russia's economic progress also strengthened capitalism in the countries with which the treaties were concluded...Sachs referred to an interview given by Krasin to the Rote Fahne in which the British miners' strike was said to have interfered with the execution of the Anglo-Soviet Trade agreement." 105

A similar observation, drawing out the dialectical relationship between Russia's isolation and certain policies of the Third International, had been made by Guy Aldred in 1920 i.e. some time before the Dreadnought group had begun to talk of any 'reversion to capitalism' in Russia. When Aldred learned that Lenin had instructed communists in Germany to adopt the tactic of Revolutionary Parliamentarism, he was strongly critical of this policy, yet he realised why Lenin had been forced into this 'Fatal Compromise': Aldred argued that it was because "Circumstances are compelling [Lenin] to give up his dream of an immediate world revolution and to concentrate on conserving and protecting the

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105. Jane Degras, ed., The Communist International 1919-1943; Documents Volume 1 1919-1922, (London, 1956), page 225.

Russian revolution."<sup>106</sup> In other words, Aldred thought that the policy of Revolutionary Parliamentarism had been forced on Lenin because of Russia's isolation and the failure of the Western European working class to extend the revolution to 'their own' countries. Aldred considered that compromises of this sort would be "...inevitable until the world revolution makes an end of the present false position in which Lenin and his colleagues find themselves."<sup>107</sup> However, in Aldred's view Russia's isolation and the reformist policies of the Communist International were not linked by straightforward cause and effect. Instead, they were each part of a two-way relationship: the reformist policies of the Communist International could also become the cause of Russia's isolation. Although Lenin thought that the support of Parliamentary reformists in Western Europe might bring temporary protection to the Russian regime, the regime in Russia could only be saved permanently by the world revolution, and it was not the Parliamentary reformists who would inaugurate this revolution, but the anti-parliamentary communists, on whom Lenin had now turned his back. Thus Aldred argued that

"Desiring not to weaken the Russian revolution by declaring war on the political opportunists and parliamentarians, Lenin has succeeded in endangering that revolution by proclaiming war on the anti-parliamentarians and so on the world revolution itself." <sup>108</sup>

The reformist policies advocated by Lenin caused Aldred and his comrades to 'suspend' their support for the Communist International. Lenin had chosen to take whatever measures were necessary to defend the Bolshevik regime, whereas the Spur group had chosen to continue to work for the world revolution; "Lenin's task compels him to compromise with all the elect of bourgeois society whereas ours demands no compromise. And so we take different paths and are only on the most distant speaking terms."<sup>109</sup>

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106. Spur May 1920

107. Ibid. August 1920.

108. Ibid. May 1920.

109. Ibid. August 1920.

The Capitalist State And The Communist International.

Although the Spur group was strongly opposed to the policies of the Third International, to the extent of judging them to be, in effect, counter-revolutionary, at the end of 1920 Rose Witcop made it clear that this should not be taken to imply any criticism of the Bolshevik regime itself; the two were said to be quite separate.<sup>110</sup> Guy Aldred also implied that no criticism of the Bolshevik regime was intended by his criticism of the Third International, when he wrote that "We...deny that Lenin and his associates are internationally behaving as becomes genuine revolutionaries."<sup>111</sup> In other words, internationally the Bolsheviks might have been advocating reformist or counter-revolutionary measures, but this was not to say that they were doing the same thing internally.

The pages of the Spur were open to contributions from critics of the Bolshevik regime, but the paper's 'editorial' position was one of firm support for the regime. For example, in a noteworthy article published in the December 1919 issue of the Spur, the anarchist Rudolf Grossman wrote that

"...it is an absolute betrayal of true Communism to state that Bolshevism represents the transitional stage towards Communism. It is false to say that it tends to represent or to realise the principles of Communism. Bolshevism is, in fact, nothing else than state-capitalism, wage-dom, and thral-dom for the working class. A new clique of rulers have come to power by much the same luring promises as all rulers make in order to secure and to retain authority."

Unfortunately, however, Grossman undermined his argument by ending his article with the opinion that "...not Socialism or Communism is responsible for the appalling conditions prevailing in Russia, but the dictatorship which has assumed the mask of Socialism."<sup>112</sup> Since Aldred supported the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as a general principle, Grossman's opposition to the consequences of its apparent application in Russia

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110. Spur December 1920.

111. Ibid. January 1921.

112. Ibid. December 1919.

served Aldred as a pretext for dismissing the substance of Grossman's criticisms. It was not until long after this that Aldred came round to Grossman's point of view.

In their almost total lack of critical comment about the Bolshevik regime, the writings of Guy Aldred and his comrades up to 1924 stand in marked contrast to those of the Dreadnought group during the same period. All that compares with the considerable amount of criticism and analysis which appeared in the Dreadnought are a few fragmentary remarks made by Aldred during the summer of 1922, one of which was quoted earlier.<sup>113</sup> As late as November 1923, i.e. as long as two years after the Dreadnought group had first begun its attempts to dispel some of the myths about 'Communist' Russia, Guy Aldred penned the following lines, under the headline 'Hail Soviet Russia!':

"This month Soviet Russia celebrates her sixth birthday. We send our revolutionary greetings to our comrades, the Russian Workers and Peasants, who have triumphed over all forces of counter-revolution and pestilence, and made Russia the beacon light of socialist struggle and the Soviet principle the rallying point of the world's toilers."

Aldred's article also addressed the following message to the Third International:

"To the Communist International we send our greetings and declare that there can be no united front with parliamentary labourism and reform...The Communist International must be Anti-Parliamentarian in action and stand for the unity of the revolutionary left." 114

When Aldred had argued in 1920 that the different priorities chosen by Lenin and by the Spur group had forced the two of them to part company, this was tantamount to arguing that the interests of the Bolsheviks and the Russian regime no longer coincided with the interests of the world revolution. There was the potential in Aldred's argument to conclude that since the Communist International was the instrument of the Russian regime's foreign policy, if the policies of the Communist International were counter-revolutionary it could only be because the Russian regime

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113. See Worker 15 July, 12 and 26 August 1922.

114. Commune November 1923.

itself was also counter-revolutionary. Yet, partly because Aldred maintained a distinction between the Communist International and the Russian regime, and partly for other reasons which will be discussed later, this potential remained undeveloped. In the November 1923 article quoted above, Aldred expressed certain tactical disagreements with the Communist International - over Revolutionary Parliamentarism and the United Front - but still sent the organisation his greetings. The Communist International may have adopted certain mistaken policies, but it remained at heart a sound revolutionary organisation. Criticism of the International was strictly separated from the remarks about the Russian regime itself, for which there was nothing but praise.

Again, there is a striking contrast between this position and that adopted by other anti-parliamentary communists, notably the Dreadnought group in Britain and the Communist Workers' Party (KAPD) in Germany.

While the Dreadnought group, and the left communists who eventually formed the KAPD, were among the first to welcome and support the Bolshevik revolution, they were never slow to express their disagreement with the policies which the Bolsheviks urged communist organisations to adopt in Western Europe. In a pamphlet completed in 1918, for example, one of the leading theoreticians of the German 'Left', Herman Gorter, argued that the tactics of the Russian revolution could not be applied automatically in Western Europe, because "The conditions of the Western European Revolution, especially in England and Germany, are entirely unlike, and cannot be compared with, those of the Russian Revolution."<sup>115</sup> Gorter returned to this theme in 1920 after Lenin had argued in his pamphlet "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder that "...certain fundamental features of our [i.e. the Russian] revolution have a significance which is not local, not peculiarly national, not Russian only, but international."<sup>116</sup>

115. Herman Gorter, The World Revolution, 1918, (Glasgow, 1920), page 51.

116. Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder, 1920, (Peking, 1975), page 1.

In a lengthy 'Open Letter To Comrade Lenin' (first published in 1920, and later serialised in the Dreadnought during 1921), Gorter responded by arguing that

"...when you say "We acted in such and such a way in Russia ..." all this means absolutely nothing, and need not or cannot be applicable in any way. For the West-European class relations in the struggle, in the revolution, are quite different from those in Russia." 117

In Russia, Gorter argued, the working class had been able to ally with the peasantry to overthrow a weak ruling class. In Western Europe, on the other hand, the working class had no natural allies, and faced a very powerful ruling class. Unlike workers in Russia, workers in Western Europe also had to overcome long-established Parliamentary, trade unionist and Social-Democratic traditions if they were to have any hope of overthrowing capitalism. All tactics for use in the class struggle in Western Europe had to be designed to combat these traditions, and to increase the power, autonomy and class consciousness of the workers. The tactics advocated by Lenin in "Left-Wing" Communism... - such as Parliamentarism, participation in trade unions, and alliances with Social-Democratic parties - were the very opposite of what the situation in Western Europe required. According to Gorter,

"As the Third International does not believe in the fact that in Western Europe the proletariat will stand alone, it neglects the mental development of this proletariat; which in every respect is deeply entangled in the bourgeois ideology as yet; and chooses tactics which leave the slavery and subjection to bourgeois ideas unmolested, intact.

The Left Wing /In contrast/ chooses its tactics in such a way that in the first place the mind of the workers is made free." 118

Along with like-minded organisations from other countries (such as the Dreadnought group), the KAPD initially fought for their perspectives within the Communist International, in the belief that "Whoever wishes to conduct the West-European revolution according to the tactics and by the

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117. Workers' Dreadnought 19 March 1921.

118. Ibid. 11 June 1921.

road of the Russian revolution is not qualified to conduct it."<sup>119</sup>

However, they met with no success in this struggle, and following the Third Congress in 1921 they were excluded from the International.

At the Third Congress, the Bolsheviks had insisted that "Unconditional support of Soviet Russia remains as before the cardinal duty of the communists of all countries." This insistence had drastic implications for the various national communist parties belonging to the International:

"Not only must they vigorously oppose any attack on Soviet Russia but they must fight energetically to clear away all the obstacles which the capitalist states place in the way of Soviet Russian trade on the world market and with other nations." 120

Clearly, the requirements of the Russian state had taken precedence over the furtherance of the world revolution. No longer feeling itself inclined to accept the guidance of the Communist International if its policies were to be formulated under such circumstances, the KAPD initiated moves towards the setting-up of a new, Fourth International - the Communist Workers' International, or KAI. In order to justify splitting from the Third International and setting up a rival organisation, the KAPD had to demonstrate that the interests of the Russian state and the interests of the world revolution really were incompatible. Thus, when the Manifesto of the Fourth International was published towards the end of 1921, its contents consisted mainly of an analysis of the Russian revolution and its aftermath.

The author of the manifesto, Herman Gorter, argued that there had been a 'dual revolution' in Russia in 1917:

"In the large towns it was a change from capitalism to Socialism; in the country districts the change from feudalism to capitalism. In the large towns, the proletarian revolution came to pass; in the country the bourgeois revolution."

Initially, the objective antagonism between the communist workers and the capitalist peasants had been submerged in an alliance against their

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119. Workers' Dreadnought 11 June 1921.

120. 'Theses On Tactics Adopted By The Third Comintern Congress', 12 July 1921, in Degras, op. cit., pages 255-256.

common enemy, the feudal aristocracy. Once this common enemy had been overthrown and the counter-revolution defeated, however, the "absolute, insurmountable contradictions: class contradictions" between the workers and peasants burst forth. The peasants demanded the abolition of compulsory state organisation of agricultural production, and the granting of capitalist freedoms of production and commerce. The Bolsheviks gave in to these demands when the 'War Communist' system of compulsory requisitioning of agricultural produce was replaced by the NEP's tax in kind. The Bolsheviks had thus given their approval to "...capitalist production for profit for the whole of agricultural Russia...", since the peasants were now free to sell for profit whatever surplus produce remained after they had paid their tax to the state. Once production for profit had been approved for agriculture, it soon became approved for industry as well: as we have seen, one of the measures brought in under the NEP in August 1921 was the operation of trade and industry on an explicitly commercial basis.<sup>121</sup>

According to Gorter, the Bolsheviks had discovered the long-term impossibility of trying to maintain a balancing act between the antagonistic interests of the peasants and the workers. By giving in to the demands of the peasants the Bolsheviks had "...ceased to be a Soviet Government, that is to say, a Government of the proletariat."<sup>122</sup> Yet the 'proletarian-communist' aspects of the revolution had been undergoing erosion anyway, even before the introduction of the NEP. Industrial control had been taken away from the workers and placed in the hands of 'experts' and party members, who had become a bureaucracy directing the economy. The displacement of the working class from its position of industrial control had been "...the starting point of the antagonism between the Russian Soviet Government and the Russian proletariat..."; the aftermath of the revolution had been marked by "...an ever increasing

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121. Workers' Dreadnought 8 October 1921.

122. Ibid. 5 November 1921.



passing of power from the hands of the proletariat into the hands of the bureaucracy...<sup>123</sup>

As with any state, Gorter argued, Russia's foreign policy was shaped by its domestic interests. Since Russia had become a 'peasant-capitalist' state after the Bolsheviks' capitulation to the peasantry in 1921, "The desires and interests of the peasants in their capacity as capitalist owners of private property..." were now "...directing the course of the Soviet Government in foreign policy..."<sup>124</sup> And since "The Third Congress of the Third International has definitely and indissolubly linked the fate of the Third International to present Soviet Russia...", it had become obvious that the policy of the International was now being dictated by the interests of a capitalist state.<sup>125</sup> Hence the urgent need for the formation of a new Communist International whose policies would be guided by the interests of the world revolution.

One final point to note about the manifesto of the KAI is Gorter's reference to the classical marxist view that communism could only be brought into being once the historic tasks of the capitalist era had been completed. Gorter recalled that when the Bolsheviks had seized power and tried to bypass the era of capitalist development by leaping straight from feudalism to communism, it had appeared that the classical marxist view had been proved wrong. But the eventual triumph of capitalism in Russia had shown that

"This supposition was mistaken. Even the Russian Communists, the Bolsheviks, could not evade the law of history; they were compelled to bow to its hard dictates against their own inclinations. Their heroic will was wrecked on the iron facts of necessity." <sup>126</sup>

Thus, Gorter concluded,

"What happens now in Russia is, in its essence, a bourgeois revolution. And Communists carry it through.

The Bolsheviks have done their utmost, but their attempt to jump from Feudalism into Socialism failed, owing to the historically prevailing conditions in Russia." <sup>127</sup>

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123. Workers' Dreadnought 8 October 1921.

124. Ibid. 15 October 1921.

125. Ibid. 12 November 1921.

126. Ibid. 8 October 1921.

127. Ibid. 15 October 1921.

Gorter's analysis of the Russian revolution and its aftermath bears a strong resemblance to that put forward by the Dreadnought group after 1921. Both referred to the capitalist nature of agricultural production, the removal of control over industry from the workers, the strength of the Bolshevik party bureaucracy in opposition to the working class, and inescapable 'laws of history'. As the manifesto was published in the Workers' Dreadnought during October-November 1921, there can be little doubt that it had a strong influence on the Dreadnought group at a time when the British anti-parliamentarians were just beginning to formulate their own critique of the Russian regime. Since the Dreadnought affiliated to the Fourth International, its critique of Russia can be seen as the group's acceptance and elucidation of the ideas outlined in the Fourth International's manifesto.

#### Persecution Of Revolutionaries In Russia.

The impulse for the KAPD's critique of Russia came from its opposition to policies adopted by the Communist International, and the need to explain why these policies were objectively counter-revolutionary. All the elements which formed the necessary basis for a similar critique were also present in Aldred's writings. During the period discussed here, however, Aldred never took these premises as the starting-point for the pursuit of a train of thought towards the conclusions reached by the KAPD.

One of the principal reasons for Aldred's lack of criticism of the Bolshevik regime was his intense personal and political hostility towards certain people who were critical of the Bolsheviks. Aldred's view of Russia up to 1924 seems to have been governed by the maxim: 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. This was revealed clearly by Aldred's arguments with the anarchists of the London Freedom group during 1924-1925.

In September 1923, responding to criticisms of the Bolshevik regime made by W.C. Owen of the Freedom group, Aldred stated that "We are not

uncritical admirers of the Bolshevik regime and we are willing to side with left-wing criticism. But we do demand that the critics shall be free from reproach and suspicion." In Aldred's opinion, the critic in this instance, W.C. Owen, was not 'free from reproach and suspicion', because Owen had not opposed the First World War. "How can a man who has ratted to capitalist patriotism speak for Anarchism?" Aldred asked.<sup>128</sup> The terms on which Aldred would debate about Russia were thus established: the credibility of criticism would depend entirely on the revolutionary credentials of the critic; if these credentials were not impeccable then any criticisms would be automatically held to be without foundation.

In June 1924, the APCF paper, the Commune, published a letter it had received from a committee representing the Anarchist Workers' Friend Group, the Anarchist Red Cross, and the Freedom Group of Anarchists, and a manifesto it had received from the International Workers' Association (the Berlin-based anarcho-syndicalist International founded in December 1922). Both of these documents voiced complaints about the persecution of Anarchists, Syndicalists, Socialists and other revolutionaries in Russia.

On this occasion Aldred maintained a fairly open mind on the issue. On the one hand, he wrote of his reluctance to "...rush into the streets and denounce Lenin and Trotsky as enemies of the workers", since both had rendered "...immense services...to the cause of the workers' world revolution..." On the other hand, Aldred acknowledged that it was necessary

"...to deal truthfully with these jailings in Russia. If men and women, who have served faithfully the working class, are suffering in Russian dungeons, then we, who protest against workers being imprisoned in capitalist prisons, must raise our voices in solemn protest."

As the tone of these remarks suggests, Aldred remained unconvinced of the truth of the anarchists' allegations about the persecution of revolutionaries in Russia. He therefore concluded by writing:

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128. Commune September 1923.

"We now seek, from whatever quarter such information is forthcoming, details concerning the imprisonment and exile "of persecuted revolutionists in Russia". Are there social revolutionaries in exile and imprisoned in Russia? What are their names, revolutionary records, and present offences? Let us have the facts. We can judge for ourselves whether their crimes were those of revolution or counter-revolution."<sup>129</sup>

This appeal brought forth a deluge of information which practically took over the pages of the Commune for several issues afterwards. Yet Aldred remained unconvinced; in August 1924 he wrote again:

"We want the truth. The cry of "safeguarding the revolution" can be used as an excuse for tyranny. The cry of "Anarchism and Liberty" may conceal a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. We want to cut through phrases and get down to facts."<sup>130</sup>

In the September issue of the Commune Aldred justified his scepticism by referring to the dubious credentials of some of the people involved in publicising the "allegations" of persecution, and he invited the "Bolshevik comrades" to either refute these allegations or else explain and justify their actions. This invitation was extended again in the October issue of the paper.

Until this point Aldred had been careful to exempt Emma Goldman from personal criticism, having written in the Commune in September 1923 that Goldman's record as a revolutionary left her above reproach. By the end of 1924, however, this allowance became lost in the heat of the controversy. Aldred wrote that Goldman's criticisms of the Bolshevik regime were indistinguishable from White propaganda, and that opponents of anarchism and communism were gleefully seizing on her remarks to support their own reactionary causes.<sup>131</sup> The attacks on Goldman continued in the Commune in February, April and May 1925, their ferocity increasing with each issue. In the February issue, Aldred repeated that the terms in which Goldman was criticising the Bolsheviks were no different from bourgeois propaganda, and he referred pointedly to the way in which capitalist publishers - hardly renowned for their enthusiasm to see

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129. Commune June 1924.

130. Ibid. August 1924.

131. Ibid. December 1924.

anarchists' writings in print - had practically fallen over themselves in the rush to publish Goldman's denunciation of the Bolshevik regime, My Disillusionment In Russia.<sup>132</sup> By April 1925 insults such as "revolutionary scab" were being bandied about freely, along with the demand that the "ex-anarchist" Goldman should be "...boycotted and condemned by every worker for her infamous associations. She is a traitor to labour's struggle who should be "fired" with enthusiasm - from each and every proletarian assembly."<sup>133</sup>

Aldred was certainly not alone in adopting this attitude towards Goldman's criticisms of the Bolsheviks;<sup>134</sup> nevertheless, he emerges from this episode with little credit as a revolutionary. The personal animosity that Aldred felt towards certain revolutionaries, which in its origins had very little to do with the issues at stake, was severely detrimental to the clarity of his political perception and judgement. In August 1924, after Aldred had asked whether revolutionaries were really being imprisoned and exiled in Russia, Alexander Berkman replied:

"One might justly assume that these questions are asked by a gentleman just arrived from the moon. It is incomprehensible

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132. Commune February 1925.

133. Ibid. April 1925.

134. Radical newspapers refused to publish articles Goldman had written attacking the Bolsheviks. Eventually she sold seven articles to the New York World for 300 dollars each. Goldman described this decision as "the hardest life had allotted me". Her comrades Alexander Berkman and Alexander Schapiro counselled her not to let the bourgeois press publish the articles because "the workers would not credit my story if published in a capitalist paper like the New York World...Anything I might write in the capitalist press would inevitably be used by the reactionaries against Russia and I would justly be censured for it by our own comrades" (Emma Goldman, Living My Life, Volume Two, New York, 1931, pages 936-937). In November 1924 Goldman arrived in England and Rebecca West organised a reception attended by radical English intellectuals. "When Emma rose, she was greeted with loud applause. Her vehement attack on the Soviet Government and its merciless treatment of politicals, however, raised loud cries of protest. Was she going back on her past? Was she throwing in with the Tories?...A comparable lack of enthusiasm met her efforts to form a committee to aid Russian political prisoners...Labour leaders... were disturbed by the similarity between her description of events in Russia and the anti-Communist charges of the Tories..." (Richard Drinnon, Rebel In Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman, Chicago, 1961, page 248).

to me, at least, that an editor of a revolutionary publication should ask such questions - seven years later, so to speak; that is, after seven years of Communist dictatorship in Russia." 135

Even when the reasons for Aldred's doubts are understood, his actions remain no less reprehensible.

Aldred's behaviour during the 1924-1925 controversy appears all the poorer when compared to the record of the Workers' Dreadnought group. Throughout the years 1921-1924 the Dreadnought group had expressed its solidarity with communist opposition groups in Russia, and between June 1922 and May 1924 published no fewer than seven opposition manifestoes received from Russia.<sup>136</sup>

In September 1921 an article by Alexandra Kollontai, outlining the views of the Workers' Opposition, appeared in the Dreadnought,<sup>137</sup> and this was followed by the publication of Kollontai's text, 'Russian Workers V. Soviet Government', in fourteen instalments between 22 April and 19 August 1922. This text had been circulated at the time of the Tenth Congress of the Bolshevik party in March 1921, in support of the 'Theses On The Trade Union Question' submitted by the Workers' Opposition for discussion at the Congress. Kollontai entrusted the manuscript of 'Russian Workers V. Soviet Government' for safekeeping to delegates of the KAPD who were in Russia for the Third Congress of the Communist International. Later, Kollontai retracted her views and asked for the manuscript to be returned, but the KAPD delegates had already smuggled it out of Russia, where it was published first in Germany (in August 1921) and then in the Dreadnought.<sup>138</sup>

Despite the publicity it had given to the views of the Workers' Opposition, the Dreadnought group soon reached the conclusion that the "so-called" Workers' Opposition was "unprincipled and backboneless".<sup>139</sup>

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135. Commune August 1924

136. See Workers' Dreadnought 3 and 17 June, 15 and 29 July 1922, 1 December 1923, 5 January and 31 May 1924.

137. Workers' Dreadnought 3 September 1921.

138. See interview with one of the KAPD delegates, Bernhard Reichenbach, in Survey, October 1964, pages 16-22.

139. Workers' Dreadnought 29 July 1922.

- perhaps because of Kollontai's retraction - and transferred its support to a group calling itself The Group Of Revolutionary Left-Wing Communists (Communist Workers' Party) Of Russia. This group had been formed after breaking away from the Bolshevik party before the Eleventh Party Congress in March 1922. It seems to have been in contact with, and influenced by, the KAPD. The Dreadnought described the group as "The genuine Communists in Russia, who are making a stand against the United Front and state capitalism and who are upholding the standpoint of the Communist Workers' Party of Germany..."<sup>140</sup> In one of its manifestoes the Russian group criticised what it regarded as lapses into opportunism and reformism in the Bolsheviks' domestic and international policies. It argued that the Communist International was, to its own detriment, becoming increasingly "...bound up with the capitalism which is being newly introduced into Russia...", and it viewed the United Front tactic as a device aimed at promoting the "proposed reconstruction of capitalist world economy."<sup>141</sup>

In December 1923 the manifesto of another group of Russian communist oppositionists, the Workers' Group, was published in the Dreadnought. The Workers' Group had been formed in March 1923 and was apparently "a direct offshoot of the Workers' Opposition."<sup>142</sup> Its best-known members were Miasnikov and Kuznetsov. Gabriel Miasnikov was "An old worker-Bolshevik, and a party member since 1906..." who had been active "Around the outer fringe of the Workers' Opposition..."<sup>143</sup> During 1921 he had advocated "...freedom of speech for all parties without exception, as the only method of ensuring efficiency and probity in the communist party..."<sup>144</sup> Unfortunately for Miasnikov, the Tenth Party Congress in

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140. Workers' Dreadnought 29 July 1922.

141. Ibid. 17 June 1922.

142. R.V. Daniels, The Conscience Of The Revolution: Communist Opposition In Soviet Russia, (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), page 159.

143. L. Schapiro, The Origin Of The Communist Autocracy: Political Opposition In The Soviet State: First Phase 1917-1922, (London, 1955), pages 327 and 306.

144. Ibid. page 328.

March 1921 had made such freedom of criticism impossible by outlawing factions within the party; consequently, Miasnikov was expelled from the party in February 1922. Miasnikov's 'lieutenant', Kuznetsov, was expelled from the Bolshevik party a month later - he had "...allegedly tried to conceal his social background as a grocery-store proprietor."<sup>145</sup> Kuznetsov and Miasnikov were both associated with underground opposition to the Bolsheviks in Russia until the late 1920s, when Miasnikov escaped to Paris.<sup>146</sup>

In November 1925, after nearly eighteen months' vigorous refutation of allegations that genuine revolutionaries were being persecuted by the Bolsheviks, Guy Aldred's article for the Commune on the occasion of the eighth anniversary of the Russian revolution was itself filled with references to "our persecuted comrades in Russia", "our comrades rotting in the Soviet prisons", and so on.<sup>147</sup> Ironically, among the 'persecuted comrades' Aldred was referring to were communists such as Gabriel Miasnikov, whose case the Dreadnought had already been championing for a long time. In Chapter 5, we will look at the reasons for Aldred's sudden change of view, and at the way in which from 1925 onwards the APCF stepped into line with the critique of Russia formulated by the Dreadnought group since the end of 1921.

#### The 'Reversion' Argument: An Assessment.

When it comes to assessing the anti-parliamentary communists' writings about Russia from 1917 onwards, it would be hard to avoid dwelling on some of the confusions and inconsistencies which riddled many of their ideas.

By arguing that there was a 'reversion to capitalism' in Russia

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<sup>145</sup> Daniels, op. cit., page 163.

<sup>146</sup> For an excellent discussion of the politics of the various communist opposition groups which emerged from within the Bolshevik party after 1917 see C.D. Ward, 'The Communist Left in Russia 1918-1930 (Part I)', International Review 8, January 1977, pages 25-34, and Part II, International Review 9, April 1977, pages 2-8.

<sup>147</sup> Commune November 1925.



after 1921, the Dreadnought group implied that some type of society other than capitalism existed in Russia before that date. Since the group spoke of the 1917 October revolution as a socialist/communist revolution, it would seem reasonable to assume that they believed that from 1917-1921 Russian society was socialist/communist in nature. The credibility of such a view would depend on the ability of its proponents to demonstrate that there were fundamental differences between Russian society before and after 1921, and that the nature of these differences amounted to the differences between communism and capitalism. The most obvious place to demonstrate this would be in explaining the reasons why a 'reversion' had taken place - in outlining the new factors that had come into play after 1921 which had not influenced events before then. However, the Dreadnought group's explanation of the 'reversion to capitalism' fails to meet these requirements.

After 1921, the Dreadnought group argued that the Bolsheviks had been forced to introduce capitalism in Russia because their attempt to pass straight from feudalism to communism had run aground on an inescapable 'law of history': the necessity of the capitalist era. Yet if such a 'law' did exist, surely the constraints it placed on the options open to revolutionaries would have been no less strict in 1917 as they were four years later. Another of the Dreadnought group's explanations of the 'reversion' was that it had proved impossible to establish communism in a society dominated so overwhelmingly by a 'petit-bourgeois' peasantry. Again, this fails to demonstrate the emergence of any new factor after 1921 which was not also present before then, since the petit-bourgeois aspirations of the Russian peasants were surely just as strong in 1917 as they were in the following years. After 1921 the Dreadnought group also argued that Russian industry, and society in general, was controlled by the Government, rather than by soviets or workers' councils, and that there was an antagonistic relationship between the state and the working class. Once more, this fails to show that Russian society after the date

of 'reversion' was any different from Russian society beforehand; Sylvia Pankhurst herself argued that 'though the Soviets were supposed to have taken power', in actual fact 'the Soviet structure had yet to be created and made to function'.

It would appear, therefore, that the Dreadnought group's 'reversion' theory fails to withstand close examination, since the reasons put forward by the group to explain this supposed 'reversion' fail to bring to light any factors influencing events after 1921 that did not also play an important role before that date.

This is before we have even begun to examine the nature of the 'communism' which the Dreadnought group claimed existed in Russia between 1917 and 1921. Such an examination reveals more confusion and inconsistency. According to the anti-parliamentary communists' description of communism outlined in Chapter 1, communism would be a stateless, classless, moneyless, wageless society. However, in the conception of post-revolutionary society (modelled on post-revolutionary Russia) which the anti-parliamentary communists described in their writings about the 'transitional period', the state, classes, money, wages - in fact, all the features of capitalism that a communist revolution would abolish - remain in existence. The Leninist riposte to this is to argue that the 'transitional period' is neither capitalist nor communist in nature, but is in fact occupied by a third type of social formation, which is dubbed 'socialism'. However, such a distinction between 'socialism' and 'communism' was completely absent from the anti-parliamentary communists' own writings. To put it mildly, therefore, by propagating two completely incompatible versions of 'communism', one of which was indistinguishable from capitalism, the anti-parliamentarians failed to fulfil one of the vital duties they themselves had assigned to revolutionary organisations - that of attacking capitalism and putting forward a genuine alternative to it.

These are not the only inconsistencies one could point to in the

anti-parliamentary communists' views. Take, for example, the theory of 'stages of development'. This is simply a red herring so long as the theory is only applied to a single country. According to the anti-parliamentary communists' own arguments, communism could be established only at a world-wide level, or else not at all. If communism had to be established as a world-wide system, the level of development of capitalism in any particular locality of the world (e.g. Russia) would be of considerably less consequence than the level of development at a global level. Even supposing Russia in 1917 had been the most advanced capitalist country in the world, therefore, it would still have been impossible to establish a communist society there.

Essentially the same point can be raised in objection to most of the other explanations put forward by the anti-parliamentary communists. If it is accepted that the establishment of communism in a single country is an impossibility - and that was what the anti-parliamentarians argued - then so long as the revolution remained confined to Russia it was obviously bound to fail, no matter what else did or did not happen. The particular circumstances of the revolutionary attempt - such as its occurrence in a peasant-dominated society - could merely have delayed or hastened, but not altered, its inevitable outcome: failure.

There are other inconsistencies in the political arguments put forward by the Dreadnought group at various times during 1917-1924. If there was no possibility that Russia could have avoided passing through an era of capitalist development, why did the Dreadnought group pronounce itself 'deeply sympathetic' to the Bolsheviks' aim of establishing socialism 'before Russian capitalism, which is as yet in its infancy, gains power, and becomes more difficult than at present to overthrow'? If individual ownership of the land by the peasants was incompatible with communism, why did the Dreadnought group support the re-distribution of land amongst the peasants, whilst describing Russia as a communist society? If the success of communism in Russia depended on the extension

of the revolution beyond Russia's boundaries, why was this point of view put forward so infrequently by the Dreadnought group during the first few years after the revolution? If the 'reversion to capitalism' was the outcome of Russia's isolation, why did the group devote so much of its efforts to a campaign ('Hands Off Russia') which seemed to assume that Russia could have developed towards communism by itself if only it had been left in peace by the hostile capitalist powers? If the Bolshevik Government placed itself upon 'the inclined plane which leads to the abandonment of the revolutionary conquest' as soon as it began to negotiate with capitalist governments, why did the Dreadnought group support the very first such step taken by the Bolsheviks, namely the peace negotiations with representatives of the German Government at Brest-Litovsk during the winter of 1917-1918, especially when the group was aware at the time that the German ruling class's anxiety to make peace was due to its hope of "...cementing an economic friendship with Russia which will enable German capital to exploit underdeveloped Russia"?<sup>148</sup>

Some of these inconsistencies become more comprehensible if we think less about a fictitious 'reversion to capitalism' in Russia and more about the very definite progression towards communism within the Dreadnought group. In other words, Russian society undoubtedly underwent many changes between 1917 and 1924, but when it comes to understanding the apparent confusions in the Dreadnought group's views these changes are probably of relatively less importance than the changes which took place in the group's own political ideas and hence in its criteria for evaluating what was happening in Russia. Many of the inconsistencies mentioned above arose from the way in which the standpoint from which the Dreadnought group viewed events in Russia changed considerably during the years 1917-1924. The significance of Brest-Litovsk, for example, was

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148. Workers' Dreadnought 12 January 1918.

assessed at the time from the standpoint of its contribution towards world peace; had the group's major preoccupation at that time been world revolution, as it was later, then no doubt its reaction to Brest-Litovsk would have been different.

The present-day observer can view the immediate aftermath of the Russian revolution from a privileged vantage-point, resting on more than sixty years of hindsight. The Dreadnought group, on the other hand, had to form its views without the benefit of much of the knowledge that has been unearthed during the decades since 1917. To expect that any group of revolutionaries could have "Denounced the Russian Revolution as state-capitalist within hours of hearing of it" - a feat with which the Socialist Party of Great Britain is credited (without foundation) by David Widgery<sup>149</sup> - would be wildly over-optimistic. In retrospect, it is relatively easy to argue that, from a revolutionary standpoint, the Dreadnought group's view of Russian society during 1918-1921, and the policies supported by the group during those years, were mistaken; that at no time after 1917 was anything remotely resembling communism established in Russia; and, therefore, that since there had been no departure from capitalism, the notion that a 'reversion' to capitalism had taken place there was wrong. However, to expect the Dreadnought group, at the beginning of the 1920s, to have admitted all this, and to have extended their criticisms of Russia right back to 1917, is perhaps to expect the group to have shown an almost superhuman degree of mental toughness and theoretical rigour. These steps, which seem easy for us to trace today, were ones which the anti-parliamentary communists in Britain never took. When the APCF began to revise its own attitude towards Russia from the end of 1925 onwards, the view it moved towards was the one which the

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149. David Widgery, The Left in Britain 1956-68, (Hammondsworth, 1976), page 500. In fact, the SPGB's initial attitude towards the Bolsheviks was quite favourable (see Robert Barltrop, The Monument: The Story Of The Socialist Party Of Great Britain, London, 1975, pages 61-62), and "It was only in the period 1929-30 that they began to apply the term 'state capitalism' to the USSR..." (William Jerome and Adam Bulick, 'Soviet State Capitalism? The History Of An Idea', Survey, January 1967, page 59).

Dreadnought group had propagated, contradictions included.

Even so, the balance sheet of the Dreadnought group's attempts to grapple with the Russian question is far from being entirely negative. The burden of these inconsistencies weighed comparatively lightly in the critique of Russia inherited by the APCF from the Dreadnought group when set alongside that critique's many positive aspects. If in the years after 1925 the APCF had been confronted with the emergence of a regime resembling 'War Communist' Russia, it is conceivable that the negative aspects of the Dreadnought group's legacy might have led the APCF to support such a regime. Yet no circumstance of that sort ever arose during the period covered by this study. As we will see in later chapters, circumstances were such that the APCF was always able to assert the positive conclusions of the critique pioneered by the Dreadnought group: that Russia was not communist, but state capitalist, and that when the communist revolution did arrive the ruling class in Russia would have to be swept aside along with all the other capitalists. As a guide to the positions which the anti-parliamentary communists were to adopt towards the crucial issues of the day during the next twenty years, the validity and value of these conclusions drawn by the Dreadnought group turned out to be unaffected by having been reached through faulty explanations.

## CHAPTER 3

THE LABOUR PARTY

The anti-parliamentary communist groups were, first and foremost, propagandist organisations. As such, a great deal of their activity was concerned with attacking the capitalist system in a general way, and with spelling out the communist alternative to capitalism. However, it would be mistaken to think of the anti-parliamentarians as detached groups, standing apart from the reality they described and criticised. As far as their relatively tiny size permitted, the anti-parliamentary groups also attempted to involve themselves actively in the class struggle. This forced them to take up positions with regard to many of the 'day-to-day' issues confronting the working class. It involved adopting attitudes towards organisations and ideas which were dominant within the working class, and through which workers' struggles were channelled. In terms of their numerical support and of the extent of their entrenchment within the working class, the most important of these organisations were the Labour Party and the trade unions. The anti-parliamentarians' attitudes towards the Labour Party and the trade unions are, therefore, important topics to include in any comprehensive account of anti-parliamentary communism, and it is with this task that the two remaining chapters of Part One are concerned.

Guy Aldred And The Labour Party.

Guy Aldred's explanation of his 'conversion' to revolutionary politics in 1906 hints at most of the essential elements of the anti-parliamentary communist attitude towards the Labour Party: "My Anti-Parliamentarian and Socialist Revolt against Labourism dates from the elevation of John Burns to Cabinet rank, and the definite emergence of the Labour Party as

a factor in British politics."<sup>1</sup> A significant point here is the connection Aldred drew between his opposition to Parliamentaryism and his opposition to the Labour Party. As we saw in Chapter 1, part of the reason why the anti-parliamentary communists opposed participation in Parliament was because they believed that Parliamentary action would lead inevitably to reformism, careerism, and involvement in the administration of the capitalist system. Guy Aldred argued, for example, that "Parliamentarism is careerism and the betrayal of Socialism",<sup>2</sup> and that "All parliamentarism is reformism and opportunism."<sup>3</sup> In the 1906 general election, the Labour Party had indeed, as Aldred stated, 'emerged as a definite factor in British politics'. Thirty of its fifty-one candidates were elected to Parliament. According to the anti-parliamentary point of view, from that point on the Labour Party could not avoid being anything but a careerist, reformist and opportunist organisation.

All the general criticisms which the anti-parliamentary communists made of Parliamentary action could also be - and were - applied to the Labour Party in particular. When the Labour Party's candidates stood for election, like all other Parliamentary candidates they put themselves in the position of being forced to seek votes from "an electorate anxious for some immediate reform"; as a consequence, they put aside "...the need for social emancipation in order to pander to some passing bias for urgent useless amelioration."<sup>4</sup> The Labour Party's pursuit of electoral success could thus be said to be at the root of its reformism.

Aldred also argued that Parliamentarians were, first and foremost, politicians, rather than socialists. As such, their own careers were more important to them than the idea of changing society in any way:

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1. Guy Aldred, Dogmas Discarded: An Autobiography Of Thought Part II 1902-1908, (Glasgow, 1940), page 39.
  2. Guy Aldred, No Traitor's Gait!, Volume One number 5, (Glasgow, 1956), page 113.
  3. Guy Aldred, No Traitor's Gait!, Volume One number 11, (Glasgow, 1957), page 260.
  4. Guy Aldred, Socialism And Parliament, (Glasgow/London, 1923), page 3.



"...the Labour movement is regarded as carrion by the parliamentary birds of prey, who start in the gutter, risk nothing, and rise to place in class society...the emotions of the careerist belong to the moment and express only one concern: how to exploit human wrong in order to secure power.

The careerist exploits grievances. He never feels them. He never comes to grips with them. He never attempts to remove them. He uses grievances as stepping stones to office and then mocks those who have suffered." 5

Another significant point in Aldred's explanation of his conversion to revolutionary politics is, therefore, the connection he drew between his own anti-parliamentarism and the career of John Burns. Burns, born in 1858, was one of fourteen children in a working class family. He became an active member of the Social Democratic Federation and was one of the leaders of the dockers' strike in 1889. In 1892 he was elected MP for Battersea. Although he started out on the Labour ticket, he inclined towards 'Lib-Lab-ism' (favouring an alliance with 'progressive' Liberals) and did not look favourably on attempts to form an independent labour party. At the conference which established the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 he declared that he was "tired of working class boots, working class houses, working class trains and working class margarine".<sup>6</sup> By 1906 he had become President of the Local Government Board in the Liberal Government. From the anti-parliamentary point of view, Burns' career was interpreted as typical of the Parliamentarians whose progress from 'the gutter' to 'place in class society' was accompanied by a steady right-wards evolution in political outlook.

The anti-parliamentarians also believed that by participating in Parliament, a part of the capitalist state apparatus, the Labour Party upheld the class state and the capitalist system. Believing that the revolutionary interests of the working class could not be expressed through the Parliamentary system, Aldred argued that

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5. Guy Aldred, Rex V. Aldred; London Trial, 1909, Indian Sedition, Glasgow Sedition Trial, 1921, (Glasgow, 1948), page 33.

6. Quoted in Guy Aldred, Socialism And Parliament Part I Socialism Or Parliament: The Burning Question Of Today, (Glasgow, 1942), page 15.

"The Labour Party is not a class party. It does not express the interests of the working class. It is the last hope of the capitalist system, the final bulwark of class-society... The entire outlook of the Labour Party is a capitalist outlook." 7

In 1924 Aldred made explicit his belief that the Labour Party's reformism, careerism and capitalist outlook were the inevitable outcome of its Parliamentarism when, referring to Ramsay MacDonald, he wrote that "High Finance has, among its political adepts, no more devoted servant than the Labour Premier of Great Britain", and explained that

"MacDonald's record in this matter is not the peculiar record of MacDonald. It is the natural and consistent expression of parliamentarism. The remedy is not the passing of MacDonald, but the destruction of parliamentarism." 8

This brief introduction to Guy Aldred's attitude towards the Labour Party has been drawn from a variety of sources, covering a wide span of years: from 1906, the date of the nominal formation of the Labour Party, through to 1924, when the first Labour Government took office in Britain, and on to reminiscences written in the mid-1950s. As this suggests, Aldred was consistently opposed to the Labour Party throughout the period covered by this study. The same could not be said of the Dreadnought group. As was the case with the issue of Parliamentary action, this examination of the anti-parliamentary communist attitude towards the Labour Party has to describe and account for the WSF's gradual advance towards a position already held by Aldred and his comrades.

#### The WSF And The Labour Party.

The historian of the CPGB, James Klugmann, has alleged that the WSF was "...categorically opposed to any form of contact with the Labour Party."<sup>9</sup> This was certainly true by 1920, but it is not an accurate description of the WSF's position during the preceding years. Klugmann has wiped out the gradual process of evolution in the WSF's politics with a broad

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7. Commune September 1923.

8. Ibid. August 1924.

9. James Klugmann, History Of The Communist Party Of Great Britain Volume One: Foundation And Early Years 1919-1924, (London, 1968), page 20.

sweep of ahistorical generalisation.

Far from being 'categorically opposed' to any form of contact with the Labour Party, during 1917-1918 the WSF was in fact closely involved with it in a number of ways. In March 1917, for example, a meeting of the WSF Executive Committee heard that Sylvia Pankhurst had attended the recent Labour Party conference as a delegate of the Hackney Trades and Labour Council.<sup>10</sup> The Dreadnought usually carried detailed reports of the proceedings at Labour Party conferences, and members of the WSF attended these conferences in order to distribute the newspaper. At a meeting of the WSF Executive Committee in February 1918, for instance,

"Miss Pankhurst reported that the Secret Treaties issue of the Dreadnought had been distributed among the delegates to the Labour Party Conference in Nottingham and the issue had been in such request that we had had to have a reprint, an anonymous donor having ordered a large quantity. They had all been sold out." 11

In April 1918 a general meeting of the WSF heard that Sylvia Pankhurst had been elected to Poplar Trades Council and local Labour Party; Pankhurst took the view that "...it was well for the WSF to be on the local Labour Party to start with...", although she conceded that "...the time might come when we could not continue in the Party."<sup>12</sup> Following this advice, in September 1918 a WSF Finance Committee meeting agreed that the WSF should remain affiliated to the Hackney Labour Party. At the same meeting, Sylvia Pankhurst and Melvina Walker were appointed as delegates to the first conference of the Labour Party Women's Section on 15-16 October 1918; a report of the conference appeared later in the Dreadnought.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the year, a resolution on the WSF's attitude towards general election candidates stated that "...the WSF would not run candidates and would only support Socialists, but that it

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10. Minutes of WSF Executive Committee meeting 22 March 1917, Pankhurst Papers.

11. Minutes of WSF Executive Committee meeting 22 February 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

12. Minutes of WSF General Meeting 15 April 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

13. Minutes of WSF Finance Committee meeting 12 September 1918, Pankhurst Papers; Workers' Dreadnought 2 November 1918.

could not prevent members working for Labour candidates if they wished to."<sup>14</sup>

During 1919, however, the WSP's attitude towards the Labour Party gradually became less favourable, although a definitive break did not occur until the beginning of the following year. Events which took place in mid-1919 show the balance of views within the WSP tipping against involvement with the Labour Party. In May, a meeting of the Bow branch of the WSP heard that three of its members (Melvina Walker, Norah Smyth and L. Watts) had been elected to Poplar Trades Council and Central Labour Party.<sup>15</sup> Three days later, the issue of affiliation to the Poplar Labour Party arose at a meeting of the WSP Executive Committee, and "Miss Pankhurst expressed the view that Branches had free autonomy to affiliate to Local Labour Parties...It was agreed that branches should have autonomy in the matter."<sup>16</sup> At the WSP Annual Conference on 7-8 June, however, the Sheffield branch of the WSP successfully proposed a resolution requiring all WSP branches currently affiliated to the Labour party to dis-affiliate.<sup>17</sup> The conference also instructed the Executive Committee to enter into negotiations with other organisations to form a communist party in Britain. The Executive mandated WSP delegates to the unity talks to "stand fast" on the principle of "No Affiliation to the Labour Party",<sup>18</sup> and a ballot of the entire WSP membership revealed that an overwhelming majority supported the Executive Committee's position.<sup>19</sup> Despite these decisions, however, nearly two months elapsed before the WSP Executive Committee was told of the Poplar WSP's expulsion from Poplar Trades Council, Melvina Walker's removal from the Executive Committee of Poplar Labour Party, and the revocation of Walker's mandates as a delegate

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14. Minutes of WSP General Meeting 15 November 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

15. Minutes of WSP Bow branch meeting 19 May 1919, Pankhurst Papers.

16. Minutes of WSP Executive Committee meeting 22 May 1919, Pankhurst Papers.

17. Workers' Dreadnought 14 June 1919.

18. Minutes of WSP Executive Committee meeting 12 June 1919, Pankhurst Papers.

19. Workers' Dreadnought 21 February 1920.

to the Central Labour Party and the London Trades Council.<sup>20</sup> According to one account, on 20 July members of the Poplar WSF had

"...unintentionally provoked a crisis by making an un-scheduled appearance at the Labour Party's meeting against Russian intervention, commandeering a trades council lorry as a platform, and haranguing the crowds on the virtues of Sovietism. The following week Norah Smyth received a curt letter from Poplar Labour Party informing her that the WSF had been expelled." 21

The fact that Poplar WSF's rupture with the Labour Party had been the result of its expulsion, rather than of its voluntary resignation in line with the policy adopted at the 1919 Annual Conference, indicates that there may still have been some support amongst WSF members for involvement with the Labour Party. This was allowed expression through the federal structure of the WSF, which gave considerable political and organisational autonomy to local branches and individual members. This meant that a WSF member such as Melvina Walker, for example, could be a member of the Executive Committee of Poplar Labour Party and (at the same time) of the Executive Committee of the WSF, despite the fact that the WSF Executive had declared its opposition to the Labour Party.

If there was support for WSF involvement with the Labour Party after mid-1919, however, it was very much a minority view. The Annual Conference, the Executive Committee, and a ballot of the full membership, had all declared against affiliation, and in February 1920 this first unequivocal statement of opposition to the Labour Party was published in the Dreadnought, encouraging other groups to follow the WSF's example:

"We urge our Communist comrades to come out of the Labour Party and build up a strong opposition to it in order to secure the emancipation of Labour and the establishment of Communism in our time. Comrades, do not give your precious energies to building up the Labour Party which has already betrayed you, and which will shortly join the capitalists in forming a Government of the Noske type." 22

20. Minutes of WSF Executive Committee meeting 7 August 1919, Pankhurst Papers.

21. Julia Bush, Behind The Lines: East London Labour 1914-1919, (London, 1984), page 231.

22. Workers' Dreadnought 14 February 1920.

Although this final break did not actually occur until February 1920, the WSF had held a strongly critical attitude towards the Labour Party even during the period when it was working within the Party. During 1917-1918, the WSF's criticisms focused mainly on two issues.

Firstly, the WSF criticised the Labour Party's collaboration in sustaining the War effort and its participation in the War-time Coalition Government. The target for much of this criticism was Arthur Henderson. Henderson had been appointed a Privy Councillor in January 1915, and joined the Coalition Government in May of that year as President of the Board of Education. In December 1916 he became a member of the new War Cabinet. According to Sylvia Pankhurst, Henderson had been invited to join the Government "...in order to sustain in the minds of the workers the belief that this is their War as well as the War of their masters."<sup>23</sup> Along with the rest of the "old-fashioned Labour leaders" Henderson had "...sacrificed the interests of Socialism and the workers for the opportunity to co-operate with the capitalist parties in carrying on the War."<sup>24</sup> Henderson resigned from the Government in August 1917, although he still supported the War: in his letter of resignation to the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, he stated that "I continue to share your desire that the war should be carried to a successful conclusion."<sup>25</sup> Henderson's participation in the War-time Cabinet was not quickly forgotten: two years later, for example, it was still being stated in the Dreadnought that "Because of his political outlook and position in the Labour movement we regard him as a danger to Socialism and the working class."<sup>26</sup> Henderson was, in fact, a widely detested figure. His membership of the War Cabinet implicated him in the imprisonment of socialists and the suppression of socialist propaganda during the War, the execution of James Connolly, the introduction of industrial conscription under the

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23. Workers' Dreadnought 18 August 1917.

24. Ibid. 28 July 1917.

25. Quoted in Guy Aldred, Socialism And Parliament Part II: Government By Labour: A Record Of Facts, (Glasgow, 1942), page 47.

26. Workers' Dreadnought 9 August 1919.

Defence of the Realm Act, and the deportation of Clydeside labour leaders. As we will see in Chapter 5, this record made him a figure capable of arousing deeply-felt opposition long after his resignation from the War-time Government.

Henderson was not alone in coming in for criticism, however, as the WSF levelled its attacks against the entire Labour leadership. In April 1918 the Dreadnought stated:

"We...shrink from the prospect of a Labour government manned by the Labour leaders who have co-operated in the prosecution of the War and its iniquities and who have been but the echo of the capitalist politicians with whom they have associated."<sup>27</sup>

In the lead-up to the general election at the end of 1918 the WSF criticised the Labour Party for the way it had "...crawled at the heels of the capitalist Government throughout the War..."<sup>28</sup> Criticism of the Labour leadership's role in the prosecution of the War was in fact only the most prominent element in a broad attack on its alleged feebleness, absence of capacity for radical action, and unresponsiveness to the opinions of rank-and-file members. In this respect, criticism was heaped equally and simultaneously on the heads of the Labour Party leaders and of the trade union leaders.

Besides the issue of the Labour Party's support for the War, the WSF also criticised the programme and membership of the Labour Party. In December 1917 Sylvia Pankhurst complained that the agenda for the forthcoming Labour Party conference was "...loaded with palliatives, without a hint of Socialism, which alone can emancipate the workers!...The British Labour movement is, alas, non-Socialist..."<sup>29</sup> Pankhurst maintained this line of criticism in March 1918 when she argued that the Labour Party's programme for 'A New Social Order' was "...mainly a poor patchwork of feeble palliatives and envisages no new order, but the perpetuation of the present one...Nowhere in the programme is the demand for Socialism

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27. Workers' Dreadnought 13 April 1918.

28. Ibid. 30 November 1918.

29. Ibid. 15 December 1917.

expressed..."<sup>30</sup> When Pankhurst wrote to Lenin in July 1919 with an account of 'Socialism In Great Britain' she informed the Bolshevik leader that the Labour Party was "...mainly a trade-union amalgam for political purposes. It is narrow in its outlook, lacks idealism, and is not Socialist."<sup>31</sup>

If the political programme of the Labour Party did little to inspire Pankhurst's enthusiasm, the new Party constitution (published for discussion in October 1917 and adopted, after amendments, in February 1918) aroused fears concerning the Party's membership. Among the proposals in the new constitution was the enrolment of individual members who had not passed through what Pankhurst called the "narrow gate" of trade union membership or membership of organisations such as the BSP or ILP. Pankhurst argued that

"The enrolment of individual members from the non-industrial classes, who are not eligible to join a trade union and who refuse to join a Socialist organisation, might prove a drag on the proletarian elements in the Party during the critical years which are ahead."

She feared that the introduction of individual membership would attract 'self-seeking' elements into the Party: "...people of no settled or deep convictions may find membership of the Labour Party a convenient method of attaining to the management of people and affairs."<sup>32</sup> If eligibility for membership was widened it would push the rank-and-file working class members even further into the background in the organisation and conduct of the Party.<sup>33</sup>

The criticisms which the WSP made of the Labour Party during 1917-1918 were accompanied by constructive proposals for the remedy of these problems. Sylvia Pankhurst advocated that the Labour Party should withdraw from the Coalition Government and end the War-time 'political truce' (whereby candidates were not opposed in War-time by-elections),

30. Workers Dreadnought 9 March 1918.

31. Letter dated 16 July 1919, in Communist International (Petrograd edition) number 5, September 1919.

32. Workers' Dreadnought 27 October 1917.

33. Ibid. 2 March 1918.



most notably when she attended and addressed the Labour Party conference in June 1918 as a delegate of the BSP. On this occasion a resolution to end the political truce was carried by 1·7 million votes to 950 thousand. "It is a step, but only a very small step, towards Labour's independence" Pankhurst commented afterwards.<sup>34</sup> During the debate about the political truce Pankhurst attempted to move an amendment to the motion adding that Labour Party members should resign from the Coalition Government, but this was ruled 'out of order'.

The solution to the problem of the leadership of the Labour Party also appeared to be simple: change it. Pankhurst may have 'shrunk from the prospect' of 'a Labour Government manned by the Labour leaders who have co-operated in the prosecution of the War', but having said that she then asked the question, "what is the alternative?", and replied rhetorically: "Is it not to...secure International Socialist leadership in the Labour movement?"<sup>35</sup>

Finally, Pankhurst was a constant advocate of changes in the programme of the Labour Party. When the draft of the proposed new Labour Party constitution was published, including a statement ('Clause IV') committing the Party to a 'socialist' objective, Pankhurst argued that "The nation needs a genuine Socialist Labour Party...The Labour Party should set itself to draw up a strong working-class Socialist programme, and should act upon it vigorously and continuously."<sup>36</sup> Pankhurst believed that changes in the Labour Party's programme would bring four main benefits. Firstly, the adoption of an 'out-and-out' socialist programme would deter self-seeking elements. Secondly, "...all the various smaller Socialist organisations and unattached members will gradually be pooled within [the Labour Party's] ranks."<sup>37</sup> Thirdly, Pankhurst considered that both inside and outside the Labour Party

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34. Workers' Dreadnought 6 July 1918.

35. Ibid. 13 April 1918. By 'International Socialists' Pankhurst meant opponents of the War.

36. Ibid. 27 October 1917.

37. Ibid.

there were "...large masses of people who are vaguely revolutionary in their tendencies and always ready to criticise those in power, but who have never mastered any economic or political theory." In this respect British socialist organisations lagged far behind their counterparts who had just seized power in Russia:

"The educational value of a programme, which every new recruit to the party must consider and accept, and every critic must discuss, is very great, and the Russian Socialist parties have not overlooked it. They have insisted that their members shall make up their minds as to what they believe and what they want." 38

If the Labour Party followed the Russian example and insisted on acceptance of a socialist programme as a condition of membership, it would raise the political consciousness of the Party's members. Fourthly and lastly, Pankhurst believed that the adoption of a socialist programme would be a way of keeping the Labour Party leadership under control; bound closely to an uncompromising socialist programme, the leadership would be unable to engage in reformist and opportunist manoeuvres. If the Labour Party was rebuilt "...on a clearly defined basis, uncorrupted by considerations of temporary political expediency", there would be no scope for reformism or opportunism.<sup>39</sup>

As the WSF's criticisms of the Labour Party and the remedies the group proposed might suggest, during the years 1917-1918 the WSF hoped to see the Labour Party turned into a genuine socialist party. As Pankhurst wrote at the beginning of 1918:

"...if we grow impatient with the slow-thinking Labour movement and the working masses of the people, we must remember always that it is from this Labour movement, from these working masses, that the Socialist Commonwealth of the future must arise." 40

Withdrawal from the Coalition Government, the ending of the War-time political truce, replacement of the existing leadership, and the adoption of a socialist programme - these were all tactics placed firmly

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38. Workers' Dreadnought 17 November 1917.

39. Ibid. 28 July 1917.

40. Ibid. 5 January 1918.

within the context of working to change the Labour Party from within. Why was it, then, that from mid-1919 onwards the WSP began to abandon this approach and tend towards the idea of a regroupment of revolutionaries outside and against the Labour Party?

One important influence was the WSP's perception of the role played by the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) when it came to power in November 1918. At the beginning of the First World War, the SPD, in common with virtually all the Social-Democratic parties of the Second International, lined up in support of 'its own' ruling class. 'Defence of the Fatherland in its hour of need' took priority over all other issues; once 'the enemy' had been defeated, the struggle for socialism could be resumed. Or so they said. In fact, after August 1914 there was no turning back. In the midst of the revolutionary upheaval at the end of the War, the German ruling class turned to the SPD as the only organisation that retained the allegiance of large numbers of workers and that at the same time could be relied upon to preserve the capitalist order intact. The SPD proceeded to play the leading role in crushing the German revolution: as Guy Aldred put it, "It slaughtered to preserve the tottering power of Capitalism."<sup>41</sup> If the SPD's attitude in August 1914 had not been convincing enough, then its role in crushing the German revolution seems to have dispelled any lingering doubts about the fact that the Social-Democratic parties had crossed over irrevocably to the capitalist camp. As we have already seen, when the Dreadnought denounced the Labour Party openly for the first time in February 1920, it suggested that the Labour Party would soon 'join the capitalists in forming a Government of the Noske type' - Gustav Noske being the SPD leader responsible for organising an alliance with the right-wing paramilitary Freikorps in order to suppress and butcher the revolutionary German workers. This suggests that the WSP had begun to generalise about the nature of the Social-Democratic parties

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41. Guy Aldred, Socialism And Parliament, (1923), page 11.

in the post-War period on the basis of the German experience. The lesson the WSF drew from the German revolution with regard to the Labour Party was that

"When the social patriotic reformists come into power, they fight to stave off the workers' revolution with as strong a determination as that displayed by the capitalists, and more effectively, because they understand the methods and something of the idealism of the working class." 42

Other important influences on the WSF's change of attitude towards the Labour Party were the Russian revolution, and the foundation of the Third International on the Bolsheviks' initiative in March 1919. As we saw in Chapter 1, by 1919 the WSF's attraction to the system of soviets which had emerged in Russia during 1917, along with the group's growing criticisms of the Parliamentary system, had led the WSF to take up a consistently pro-soviet, anti-parliamentary position. As the WSF discovered during 1917-1918, Labour's withdrawal from the Coalition Government, the replacement of the existing leadership, and the adoption of a socialist programme, were all hard enough battles to fight. The prospect of trying to wean the Labour Party away from Parliamentary action would have offered an even smaller chance of success, to say the very least. Here we can see the connections between the views developing within the WSF and the position to which Guy Aldred and his comrades already adhered. So long as the Labour Party continued to participate in elections and Parliament, it would remain an unavoidably reformist, careerist and capitalist party. The WSF's rejection of Parliamentarism pointed to a rejection of the Labour Party.

It was the formation of the Third International, however, which seems to have exerted the greatest influence on the WSF's change of attitude concerning the Labour Party. Until the end of 1918 the WSF had looked towards a revival of the Second International. In April 1917 Pankhurst had described the decision of the Second International's

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42. Workers' Dreadnought 21 February 1920.

secretariat to convene an international conference as "a brilliant ray of hope", and wrote that

"Surely the reunion of old comrades in the International must do much to remove the fears, prejudices and misconceptions that during the war have parted the majority sections of the Socialist and Labour Parties of Europe into two hostile camps." 43

A resolution passed by a general meeting of the WSF in March 1918, calling on the Labour Party to secure an immediate meeting of an International Socialist and Labour Congress, shows that the group was still pursuing the same line a year later.<sup>44</sup>

By the end of 1918, however, the WSF had begun to have doubts about the nature and potential of a revived Second International. In an article about the Inter-Allied Labour and Socialist Conference held in London in September 1918, Sylvia Pankhurst reported that "By its resolutions the Conference has done all that the Allied Governments could have desired of it." It had assented to the counter-revolutionary invasion of Russia, rejected an Austrian Peace Note, supported the Government's idea of a 'fight to the finish', abandoned efforts to secure a full meeting of the International, spurned advances from the German Social-Democrats, adopted U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's 'Fourteen Points', and so on.<sup>45</sup> By November 1918 it had become clear that the WSF was tending to reject the Second International, even if it was as yet uncertain about what should take its place:

"The International must and will be re-created. Can the old organisation be reformed? Is the Zimmerwald nucleus ready and fitted to step into the breach? Must a new structure be created? Is the Shop Stewards' Movement the embryo of the new International? These are the questions we have to ask ourselves." 46

At the beginning of 1919, when definite moves were afoot to revive the Second International, the WSF no longer looked favourably upon such

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43. Woman's Dreadnought 28 April 1917.

44. Minutes of WSF General Meeting 18 March 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

45. Workers' Dreadnought 28 September 1918.

46. Ibid. 2 November 1918.

an initiative. Sylvia Pankhurst argued that the Second International could not be "...a genuine International, because those who are today leading the Socialist movement - the Russian Bolsheviks and the Spartacists of Germany - will be absent from its councils..."<sup>47</sup> The final stages of this episode have been described in Chapter 1: the resolutions of the conference held to re-establish the Second International in Berne at the beginning of February 1919 were criticised strongly in the Dreadnought; the Annual Conference of the WSF held on 7-8 June 1919 rejected the resurrected Second International; and the WSF Executive Committee was instructed to take steps towards linking up with the new Third International. Guy Aldred and his comrades adopted a similar attitude. The Spur stated that "The Berne Conference is an International Congress of patriot labour leaders. No Socialist can recognise this assembly of capitalist hacks",<sup>48</sup> and soon afterwards the Spur joined the WSF in declaring its allegiance to the newly-formed Third International.

The WSF's declaration of support for the Third International obviously had implications for the group's attitude towards the Labour Party. The 'Invitation To The First Congress Of The Communist International', issued by the Bolsheviks in January 1919, had stated that

"Towards the social-chauvinists, who everywhere at critical moments come out in arms against the proletarian revolution, no other attitude but unrelenting struggle is possible. As to the 'centre' - the tactics of splitting off the revolutionary elements and unsparing criticism and exposure of the leaders. Organisational separation from the centrists is at a certain stage of development absolutely essential." 49

This message was reaffirmed by a resolution 'On the Berne Conference Of The Parties Of The Second International' adopted by the First Congress of the Third International in March 1919.<sup>50</sup> Thus the attitude of the Third International towards the Social-Democratic parties was, at the outset anyway, one of 'unrelenting struggle' and 'unsparing criticism'. If a

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47. Workers' Dreadnought 18 January 1919.

48. Spur March 1919.

49. Jane Degras, ed., The Communist International 1919-1943 Documents Volume I 1919-1922, (London, 1956), page 3.

50. Ibid., pages 25-26.

group such as the WSF sought to affiliate to the new International, it would have to adopt the same stance. The WSF's support for the Third International was therefore another of the factors contributing to the group's split with the Labour Party.

The first conference of the Third International's Western European Sub-Bureau, held in Amsterdam in February 1920, seems to have been the final event which pushed the Dreadnought group towards its open and unambiguous break with the Labour Party. The conference in Amsterdam opened on 3 February and lasted for about a week. According to an account in the Pankhurst Papers, the initial participants were communists from Holland, the United States, and England (Sylvia Pankhurst for the WSF, J.T. Murphy for the shop stewards' movement, and Fred Hodgson and Fred Willis for the BSP), two delegates from a Belgian communist group, a Hungarian revolutionary, a representative from the revolutionary movement in the Dutch Indies, a Chinese comrade with no mandate, and a delegate from the left opposition within the German Communist Party. Other representatives of the KPD, and delegates from Switzerland, Spain, Mexico, Finland and Scotland arrived as the conference was drawing to a close and missed most of the proceedings.<sup>51</sup>

The main business of the conference was taken up by discussion of two resolutions: one on trade unions, and the other on 'The Communist Party And Separation Of Communists From The Social Patriotic Parties'. The tenth thesis of the resolution on trade unions stated that 'Labourism' (defined as the Parliamentary expression of trade union interests) "...becomes the final bulwark of defence of Capitalism against the oncoming proletarian revolution; accordingly, a merciless struggle against Labourism is imperative." The tone of this resolution was maintained by the content of the other. The 'social-patriots' (i.e. 'socialists' who had supported the War) and 'opportunists' were described as "...a most

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51. File 126, Pankhurst Papers. The account is in French.

dangerous enemy of the proletarian revolution"; consequently, "Rigorous separation of the Communists from the Social Patriots is absolutely necessary". Where Communist Parties existed, social-patriots and opportunists were to be excluded from them; where Communist Parties did not yet exist, they were to be formed after communists had withdrawn from the social-patriotic and opportunist parties. It was of fundamental importance that communist unity should be established on the basis of 'no compromise' with the 'agents of capitalism' in the workers' movement, affiliates of the Second International, and bourgeois and social-patriotic parties.<sup>52</sup>

During the discussion of this resolution, the two BSP delegates objected that if a communist party in Britain did not affiliate to the Labour Party it would be isolated and unable to participate in the political struggles of the working class. However, the two BSP delegates were alone in raising objections. Before the resolution was put to a vote, Wynkoop, the Dutch communist chairing the meeting, stated that if the resolution was adopted it would mean that no Communist Party affiliated to the Third International could affiliate to the British Labour Party. When the vote was taken Hodgson and Willis were the only delegates who opposed the resolution; the delegates from the United States, Germany, Holland and Belgium, along with Pankhurst and Murphy, all cast their votes in favour.

The resolutions of the Amsterdam conference set the final seal on the WSP's opposition to the Labour Party. The conference had shown the group the extent of international opposition to the Social-Democratic parties, especially among the Dutch and German 'left' communists with whom the WSP discovered it had much in common. The conference also seemed to add the weight and authority of the Third International to the WSP's views. The Dreadnought's first open statement of opposition to the Labour Party appeared almost immediately after the Amsterdam conference,

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52. See Workers' Dreadnought 20 March 1920 for the full text of both resolutions and an account of the proceedings.



and during a discussion of the issue of affiliation to the Labour Party at a British communist unity meeting on 13 March 1920 "...Pankhurst quoted the Amsterdam resolution in support of her position..."<sup>53</sup>

#### The Affiliation Debate.

If the Third International had stated that the communist attitude towards the Social-Democratic parties had to be one of 'unrelenting struggle', 'unsparing criticism' and 'organisational separation', why were communists who supported the Third International debating the question of affiliation to the Labour Party during their discussions about the formation of a communist party? The reason for this is as follows. In March 1919 the First Congress of the Third International had called for the formation of a single communist party in each country. The Annual Conference of the WSF in June 1919 had answered this call and thereafter the WSF was constantly involved in negotiations about the formation of a communist party in Britain with other groups such as the SLP and BSP. Their task was no longer seen as trying to change the Labour Party into a genuine socialist organisation (as the WSF had aimed to do during 1917-1918), but to form a separate communist party within which all revolutionary elements would be re-grouped. The WSF demonstrated its clear understanding of this strategy when it stated that "We urge our Communist comrades to come out of the Labour Party and build up a strong opposition to it...Comrades, do not give your precious time to building up the Labour Party..."<sup>54</sup> and that "We must not dissipate our energy in adding to the strength of the Labour Party...We must concentrate on making a Communist movement that will vanquish it..."<sup>55</sup> The terms of the debate concerning the Labour Party had shifted away from strategies for radicalising the Labour Party, towards strategies for winning workers, including Labour Party members,

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53. Walter Kendall, The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21, (London, 1969), page 208.

54. Workers' Dreadnought 14 February 1920.

55. Ibid. 21 February 1920.

to the side of the communist party. However, one of the tactics which was proposed to effect this strategy was that the communist party should affiliate to the Labour Party. Like the debate over Parliamentary action, this issue continued to be argued about in the unity negotiations throughout 1920, and it is to a detailed account of these arguments that we now turn.

As we have already noted, when the WSF entered the unity negotiations seriously in June 1919, the Executive Committee of the group instructed its delegates to 'stand firm' on the principle of 'No Affiliation to the Labour Party'. This remained the WSF's position throughout the negotiations. In March 1920, for example, the Executive Committee repeated the view that "With regard to the Unity Negotiations, it was decided that we should not in any event compromise on the question of Affiliation to the Labour Party..."<sup>56</sup> This decision was taken in order to instruct the WSF delegates to the unity conference of 13 March, at which Pankhurst cited the decisions of the Amsterdam conference in support of the WSF's stance.

In April 1920 the Dreadnought published an article titled 'One Communist Party', written by Herman Gorter, who had been among the Dutch delegates in Amsterdam. In this article Gorter argued strongly against affiliation. In his view, the Labour Party was not socialist, therefore it must be bourgeois, and communists had no place in the ranks of a bourgeois organisation. The trade unions had been instrumental in the defeat of the German revolution, and in all likelihood they would fulfil a similar role in Britain; since the trade unions formed the backbone of the Labour Party, this was further evidence that the Labour Party was a counter-revolutionary organisation which should be opposed by communists. Pointing to the record of the Social-Democratic parties at the outbreak of the First World War, the Mensheviks during the Russian revolution, the

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56. Minutes of WSF Executive Committee meeting 3 March 1920, Pankhurst Papers.

SPD in the German revolution, and the ill-fated alliances of Communists and Social-Democrats in the short-lived Bavarian and Hungarian Soviet Republics of 1919, Gorter argued that "Experience has proved that by compromising, either before or during the proletarian revolution for the abolition of Capitalism, the Communists work their own destruction." Pointing to the example of the Bolsheviks, on the other hand, Gorter argued that "By standing alone, they win. And is it likely that in England this will be different? We cannot believe it."<sup>57</sup>

Further support for the WSF's position came from the Third International's Western European Sub-Bureau the following month, in the form of a 'communiqué' clarifying the decisions of the Amsterdam conference. This statement compared the Labour Party to the counter-revolutionary SPD of Noske, and said categorically that a British communist party should not affiliate to the Labour Party. The principle of non-affiliation was of such importance that it should take precedence over the need for communist unity: "Much as we should like to see a united Communist Party in England, it may be better to postpone this ideal than to compromise on important issues."<sup>58</sup>

The Western European Sub-Bureau's intervention in the affiliation debate was one of its last actions. The Sub-Bureau was far too much under the control of the 'left' communists for the liking of the Executive Committee of the Communist International in Moscow. Consequently, in May 1920 the ECCI closed down the Sub-Bureau and transferred its functions to the more reliable German Communist Party (by this time the left communists in the KPD had been forced out of the party and had formed a separate organisation - the KAPD - in April 1920). The Bolsheviks now proceeded to enter the debate, on the side of affiliation, with Lenin's polemic against "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder. Lenin argued

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57. Workers' Dreadnought 3 April 1920.

58. Ibid. 8 May 1920.

that "...revolution is impossible without a change in the views of the majority of the working class, and this change is brought about by the political experience of the masses, and never by propaganda alone." The stranglehold of Social-Democratic organisations and ideas over the masses could only be broken, Lenin continued, if the Labour Party actually took office and proved its uselessness: "...if Henderson and Snowden gain the victory over Lloyd George and Churchill, the majority will in a brief space of time become disappointed in their leaders and will begin to support Communism..."<sup>59</sup> On the basis of these arguments, Lenin concluded that what was needed was an electoral alliance between the communist party and the Labour Party. It would be inadequate for revolutionaries to merely state through propaganda that the workers' interests lay with communism rather than with the Labour Party; revolutionaries had to help the Labour Party to take power, so that the workers could learn this fact through their own experience. This was the meaning behind Lenin's notorious remark about wanting to support Henderson "...in the same way as the rope supports a hanged man..."<sup>60</sup>

As we saw in Chapter 1, the WSP's opposition to affiliation, rather than its opposition to Parliamentary action, was the greatest obstacle to unity between it and the other groups in Britain. At the end of March 1920, after the fruitless unity conference held in the middle of the month, the Executive Committee of the WSP decided that "...if the BSP refuses to withdraw from the Labour Party, we get on with [the] formation of [a] Communist Party."<sup>61</sup> In June 1920 this decision came to fruition when the WSP took the initiative in the formation of the CP(BSTI). Among the 'seven cardinal principles' adopted by the CP(BSTI) at its foundation was the principle of non-affiliation to the Labour Party.<sup>62</sup> At the same

59. Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism. An Infantile Disorder, 1920, (Peking, 1975), page 85.

60. Ibid., pages 90-91.

61. Minutes of WSP Executive Committee meeting 30 March 1920, Pankhurst Papers.

62. Workers' Dreadnought 3 July 1920.

time, although Guy Aldred and his comrades were not directly involved in the unity negotiations nor in the formation of the CP(BSTI), in July 1920 the Glasgow Communist Group likewise declared that "The Group declines to identify itself with any Unity Convention willing to recognise the Labour Party..."<sup>63</sup>

At this stage the main arguments with which the Dreadnought group opposed the affiliation tactic were as follows. Firstly, Lenin had argued that the communist party had to help the Labour Party to take power. The Dreadnought retorted that the Labour Party needed no help from communists - its rise to power was "inevitable". Affiliation for the purpose of assisting Labour into office would be a waste of valuable time and effort. Instead, communists should concentrate their energies on building an organisation which would be "ready to attack" the Labour Party when it took office.<sup>64</sup> Secondly, Lenin had argued that communists had to work closely with the Labour Party in order to 'keep in touch with the masses', and to win their support for the communist party. The Dreadnought replied that revolutionary propaganda could still reach and influence Labour Party members without the communist party actually having to be inside the Labour Party. The pervasiveness of capitalist ideas among the working class showed that Labour Party members were not impervious to 'outside' influences.<sup>65</sup> Thirdly, the Dreadnought pointed to some of the illogicalities and inconsistencies of the affiliation tactic in relation to some of the other tactics advocated by the Third International. For example, Lenin had urged communists to work closely with the Labour Party, but he also hoped to bring the British shop stewards' movement and the Industrial Workers of the World under the influence of the Third International. The Dreadnought argued that these two objectives were incompatible, since the IWW and the shop stewards' movement were both more or less hostile to the

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63. Spur July 1920.

64. Workers' Dreadnought 21 February 1920.

65. Ibid.

existing trade unions, which in turn formed the backbone of the Labour Party. Another illogicality was that if the communist party worked within the Labour Party it would be harder for communists to be selected as Parliamentary candidates than if the communist party retained an independent existence; this would obstruct the application of another tactic advocated by Lenin - Revolutionary Parliamentarism.<sup>66</sup>

In "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder Lenin had reserved judgement on the specific issue of affiliation, explaining that he had "...too little material at my disposal on this question, which is a particularly complex one..."<sup>67</sup> At the beginning of June 1920, however, Quelch and MacLaine of the pro-affiliation BSP arrived in Russia as delegates to the Second Congress of the Third International (due to meet the following month); by the time the Congress opened, they had "...persuaded the Comintern leaders that the British Communist Party - when it could finally be completed - should be affiliated with the Labour Party.../[Lenin] later credited MacLaine and Quelch with removing his doubts."<sup>68</sup> Consequently, on 19 July 1920 the Second Congress adopted the following position among its 'Theses On The Basic Tasks Of The Communist International':

"...the Second Congress of the Communist International is in favour of the affiliation of communist or sympathising groups and organisations in England to the Labour Party, although the Labour Party belongs to the Second International. For as long as this party allows the organisations affiliated to it their present freedom of criticism and freedom to engage in propaganda, agitation, and organisation for the proletarian dictatorship and the soviet power, so long as this party retains the character of an association of all trade union organisations of the working class, communists must do everything they can, and even make certain organisational compromises, to have the possibility of exercising influence on the broad working masses, of exposing their opportunist leaders from a high tribune visible to the masses, of accelerating the transference of political power from the direct representatives of the bourgeoisie to the 'labour lieutenants of the capitalist class', in order to cure the masses quickly of their last illusions on this score." 69

66. Workers' Dreadnought 24 July 1920

67. Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder, page 91.

68. J.W. Hulse, The Forming Of The Communist International, (Stanford, California, 1964), page 177.

69. Degras, op. cit., page 125.

In other sessions of the Congress, Lenin himself made two speeches in favour of the affiliation tactic. In the session on 23 July, Jack Tanner (a British shop stewards' movement delegate) told Lenin that "You will get nothing but antagonism from the class-conscious workers on the question of affiliation to the Labour Party." Despite this warning, Lenin maintained that "...after having spoken with several of the comrades, I am convinced that the only proper tactics are to affiliate with the Labour Party." He explained the tactic by arguing that "...since it cannot be denied that the British Labour Party is composed of workers, it is clear that working in that party means co-operation of the vanguard of the working class with the less advanced workers..." The communist party should affiliate to the Labour Party so long as it was "...allowed to remain free to criticise that party and conduct its own propaganda. This is of the utmost importance."<sup>70</sup>

On 6 August, Lenin again spoke in favour of affiliation, despite admitting that "...the Labour Party is not a political workers' party, but a thoroughly bourgeois party..." He cited the example of the BSP to support his argument that "...a party affiliated to the Labour Party is not only able to criticise sharply, but is able openly and definitely to name the old leaders and to call them social-traitors." Finally, Lenin added that "If the British Communist Party starts out by acting in a revolutionary manner in the Labour Party and if Messrs Henderson are obliged to expel this Party, it will be a great victory for the communist and labour movement in England", because the Labour Party would have exposed its own counter-revolutionary nature to its working class supporters.<sup>71</sup>

Sylvia Pankhurst attended the Second Congress and spoke in one of the debates concerning the tactics to be adopted by the communist party

<sup>70</sup>. Publishing House of the Communist International, The Second Congress Of The Communist International: Proceedings of the Petrograd Session of July 17th and Moscow Sessions of July 19th-August 7th 1920, (U.S.A., 1921), pages 67 and 73-74.

<sup>71</sup>. Lenin, British Labour And British Imperialism: A Compilation of writings by Lenin on Britain, (London, 1969), pages 267-271.

in Britain. Alfred Rosmer has left the following account of her contribution:

"The speech she made was suitable for a public meeting rather than for a Congress; it was an agitator's speech. She spoke fierily, throwing herself about dangerously on the narrow rostrum. But she wasn't a good advocate of our viewpoint /i.e. that communists should not affiliate to the Labour Party/. Even the sentimental argument of refusing to enter a party discredited in the eyes of the workers, where one would have to meet the leaders who had betrayed during the war- after all not a negligible argument - was drowned in a flood of rhetoric. Lenin's theses won the day, but the minority kept substantial support." 72

Pankhurst herself takes up the account:

"When, afterwards, in the Kremlin, I argued with Lenin privately that the disadvantages of affiliation outweighed the advantages, he dismissed the subject as unimportant, saying that the Labour Party would probably refuse to accept the Communist Party's affiliation, and that, in any case, the decision could be altered next year."

According to Pankhurst, Lenin regarded the issue of affiliation to the Labour Party, and the issue of Parliamentary action, as "...not questions of principle at all, but of tactics, which may be employed advantageously in some phases of the changing situation and discarded with advantage in others." 73

While the Second Congress of the Third International was taking place in Russia, the concluding communist unity convention was held in London on 31 July - 1 August. It was at this conference that the Communist Party of Great Britain finally came into being. On the eve of the meeting, the CP(BSTI) published an 'Open Letter To The Delegates Of The Unity Convention' in the Workers' Dreadnought. The 'Open Letter' urged the delegates to reject any association between communists and the Labour Party; the Labour Party was described as a committee of leaders who would divert the revolutionary energies of the working class into harmless Parliamentary and reformist channels; the trade union leaders and Parliamentarians who controlled the Labour Party were said to have a bourgeois mentality which led them to support class collaboration and

72. Alfred Rosmer, Lenin's Moscow. (London, 1971), pages 76-77.

73. Sylvia Pankhurst, Soviet Russia As I Saw It, (London, 1921), pages 43-46.



oppose class struggle; and it was pointed out that whereas communists stood for the dictatorship of the workers' soviets the Labour Party based itself on bourgeois Parliamentary democracy.<sup>74</sup>

Advice of a different sort came from another source. In a message to the Unity Convention, Lenin criticised the CP(BSTI)'s point of view, and stated that "I personally am in favour of...adhesion to the Labour Party on condition of free and independent communist activity."<sup>75</sup> The arguments contained in "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder were also becoming more widely known by the time of the Convention. Somewhat incongruously, the issue of the Dreadnought in which the anti-affiliation 'Open Letter' had appeared also contained a translation of the chapter of Lenin's pamphlet dealing with '"Left" Communism In England', in which, as we have seen, Lenin advocated a Labour-Communist electoral alliance.

Two of the speakers who supported affiliation in the debate about the tactic at the Convention were the BSP members Hodgson and Willis, who had voted in favour of affiliation, against the majority, at the Amsterdam conference of the Third International's Western European Sub-Bureau. When the CPGB was formed, it was the opponents of affiliation who found themselves in the minority - although the closeness of the vote in favour of the tactic (100 votes to 85, with 20 abstentions) showed that there was substantial opposition to it.

Nine days after the Unity Convention the CPGB submitted a letter to the Labour Party applying for affiliation. A month later (11 September) the Labour Party's National Executive Committee replied with a rejection of the application, on the grounds that "...the objects of the Communist Party did not appear to accord with the constitution, principles and programme of the Labour Party."<sup>76</sup> This set the pattern for a long, drawn-out

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74. Workers' Dreadnought 31 July 1920.

75. Letter dated 8 July 1920, in Lenin, British Labour And British Imperialism, page 261.

76. L.J. MacFarlane, The British Communist Party: Its Origins And Development Until 1929, (London, 1966), page 94.

series of re-applications and refusals.<sup>77</sup> The initial rebuff of the CPGB's attempt to affiliate to the Labour Party, along with the other considerations described in Chapter 1, probably helped to ease the CP(BST1)'s entry into the CPGB at the Leeds Unity Convention in January 1921. The Dreadnought's account of the Leeds Convention certainly took some satisfaction in noting that, so far, the affiliation tactic had remained a dead letter.<sup>78</sup>

Between January and September 1921, the Workers' Dreadnought persisted in its criticisms of the affiliation tactic. In July, after the Poplar Board of Guardians (whose Labour majority included members of the Communist Party) had cut the rate of outdoor Poor Law relief, the Dreadnought asked:

"Are we to exempt from criticism the Labour Party on a particular body, because in that Labour Party are members of the Communist Party?

Or are we to criticise that Labour Party and ignore the fact that the Communists are amongst the Labourists, sharing responsibility for the actions we condemn, and even initiating them, as in the matter of cutting down relief in Poplar?

Should we ignore the existence of such Communists, be sure the workers would find them out." 79

Criticism of the affiliation tactic was voiced again in August 1921, after Bob Stewart had been chosen to stand for the CPGB against a Labour Party candidate, Morgan Jones, in a Parliamentary by-election in Caerphilly. Once more the Dreadnought's comments attempted to highlight some of the problems involved in trying to apply the affiliation tactic. What would have happened if the CPGB had been affiliated to the Labour Party and none of its members had been chosen as the candidate: would the CPGB have supported the Labour candidate, even a right-wing one, or would it have stood its own candidate, and risked expulsion? Was the presence of a CPGB candidate at Caerphilly simply a ploy designed to force the Labour Party

77. For the details see the 'Timetable Of Labour Party-Communist Party Negotiations On The Affiliation Of The Communist Party To The Labour Party, 1920-1923' in Klugmann, *op. cit.*, pages 230-234.

78. Workers' Dreadnought 5 February 1921.

79. Ibid. 30 July 1921.

to accept the CPGB's affiliation application as a lesser evil than seeing the working class vote split, or would the CPGB stand candidates come what may? In contrast to the confusions surrounding the affiliation tactic, the Dreadnought's own position was clear:

"We say: do not affiliate to the Labour Party or enter into compromising alliances within it; stand aside; let it get into power and prove its uselessness and powerlessness. Stand aside warning the workers that the Labour Party cannot emancipate them, because it is merely reformist and will not sweep away the capitalist system when it gets into power.

We say, further, that the best propaganda that Communists can do at this juncture is to let the Labour Party continue with its effort to become "his Majesty's Government", and to tell the workers that all such shams must pass; that the way to emancipation is through Communism and the Soviets." 80

As we saw in Chapter 1, the leadership of the CPGB could not tolerate such forthright condemnations of Party policy from a newspaper edited by a Party member, and in September 1921 Pankhurst was expelled from the CPGB. However, the CPGB itself persisted in its attempts to affiliate to the Labour Party, and it is important to take a brief look at these efforts in order to reach a full assessment of the affiliation debate.

#### Mistaken Assumptions.

Only once did representatives from the Labour Party and the CPGB meet face-to-face to discuss affiliation. The contributions of the various participants at this meeting - on 29 December 1921 - reveal some of the ideas behind the CPGB's adoption of the affiliation tactic, and some of the problems it encountered in trying to put it into practice.

The CPGB's declared aim of exposing the Labour Party's non-revolutionary nature in front of its working class supporters was apparent. Quoting from one of the CPGB's own documents, Arthur Henderson asked whether one of the CPGB's objectives was

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80. Workers' Dreadnought 13 August 1921.

"...to be inside the Labour Party in order to meet its enemies face to face, and to expose in front of the rank and file of the Labour movement the political trickery of (list of names) and other Labour lieutenants of the capitalist class."

Arthur MacManus replied: "Naturally, yes." Earlier in the meeting, MacManus had explained that

"...they would, if within the Labour Party, apply their Communist construction to things, as everyone else applied their construction...They would apply their Communist criticism in common with everyone else, so that their criticism and their point of view would be heard and in a position to be judged."

These remarks were entirely consistent with the aims expressed by Lenin and the Third International in 1920. Indeed, Arthur Henderson truly grasped the purpose of the affiliation tactic when he complained that the CPGB had

"...no intention of being loyal...Mr Hodgson hopes that the present crisis will show the masses the pernicious rule of the leaders of the Labour Party. It is for that reason that they will enter the Labour Party; in order to denounce the leaders."

At other moments during the meeting, however, the CPGB representatives presented very different intentions. When Henderson asked whether the CPGB's aim was, as Fred Hodgson had been reported as saying, to "...endeavour to sever the connection between the masses and the Labour Party", MacManus replied that this "...does not represent Mr Hodgson's opinion nor the Party's opinion." Putting a quite different interpretation on the purpose of affiliation, MacManus explained that it was the CPGB's "frank opinion" that

"...any political organisation that hopes to influence the mass of the working class in this country in any particular direction in dissociation or in a detached form from the existing Labour Party, would simply be futile, and that consequently the effective way to do it was to operate their opinions inside the Labour Party and gradually pursue their opinions in such a way that if it did succeed in influencing opinion, the reformation would be based upon the Labour Party itself."

Later, MacManus also stated that "We hope to make the Labour Party the

Communist Party of Great Britain..."<sup>81</sup>

MacManus's remarks support L.J. MacFarlane's argument that the tactic of affiliation to the Labour Party was never properly understood: that many CPGB members were attracted to the idea of turning the Labour Party into a revolutionary organisation, and failed to grasp that the Third International sought not to transform the Labour Party but to expose, discredit and destroy it.<sup>82</sup> When MacManus denied that the CPGB aimed to 'sever the connection between the masses and the Labour Party', he was clearly contradicting statements made by Lenin and resolutions adopted by Congresses of the Third International. MacManus's hope of effecting a 'reformation' of working class opinion 'based upon the Labour Party itself', and his desire to 'make the Labour Party the Communist Party' were similarly at odds with the Third International's strategy. Opponents of the affiliation tactic were often equally wide of the mark in their understanding of it. In its 'Open Letter To The Delegates Of The Unity Convention' at the end of July 1920, for example, the CP(BSTI) opposed affiliation on the grounds that the Labour Party was a bourgeois organisation. Yet the Third International agreed with this description - Lenin himself had used it at the Second Congress. To expose this fact was the very purpose of the affiliation tactic.

The fact that neither the supporters of affiliation nor its opponents appear to have fully grasped the aims and intentions of the tactic is perhaps not surprising when we consider how convoluted and manipulative was some of the thinking which lay behind it. As we have seen, in "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder Lenin advocated an electoral alliance between the Communist and Labour Parties; once communists had helped the Labour Party into office, workers would learn from their own experience that the Labour Party did not represent their interests,

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81. See 'Communist Party Affiliation to the Labour Party: transcript of the meeting of 29 December 1921' in Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin 29, Autumn 1974, pages 16-34.

82. MacFarlane, op. cit., page 109.

and would flock over to the Communist Party. However, Lenin failed to explain why the workers should suddenly have trusted the leadership of the Communist Party, immediately after discovering that what that Party had previously advocated (a Labour Government) had turned out to be of no worth whatsoever! (As MacFarlane says of the CPGB's attitude to the 1924 Labour Government, "There was something unreal about urging the workers to press the Labour Government to do things, not in order to get them done, but to expose their inability to do them"<sup>83</sup>).

This manipulative contempt for workers' intelligence was also evident in the separation Lenin made between the interests of the communist party and the interests of the workers. According to Lenin's argument in favour of an electoral alliance with Labour, the communist party knew that it would be of no advantage to the working class to support the Labour Party, but the working class did not know this. Therefore the communist party had to support Labour as a tactic in order to expose it in front of the masses, and to 'win over' workers to the communist party. According to this kind of argument, the working class had no interest in supporting Labour, but the communist party did. Thus Lenin blatantly contradicted the Marxist position that "Communists...have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole."<sup>84</sup>

The longer the Labour Party persisted in its refusal to accept the CPGB's advances, however, the more the whole debate over the merits or otherwise of the affiliation tactic tended to become academic. Since the affiliation tactic was never applied, few of the claims made on either side could actually be tested in practice. In fact, a definite judgement can be passed on only two of these claims. Firstly, according to MacFarlane, Lenin was pleased when the Labour Party turned down the CPGB's first application, because it would show the masses exactly where the

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83. MacFarlane, *op. cit.*, page 105.

84. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto, 1848, (Harmondsworth, 1967), page 95.

the Labour Party stood.<sup>85</sup> In fact, 'the masses' seem to have remained unmoved by the Labour Party's refusal.

Secondly, Lenin told Sylvia Pankhurst that "...in order to explode the futility of reformism and to bring Communism to pass, the Labour Party must have a trial in office."<sup>86</sup> The 'Theses On The Basic Tasks Of The Communist International' adopted at the Second Congress (quoted earlier) maintained that if the Labour Party took office it would quickly 'cure the masses' of their 'last illusions' in 'the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class', and the masses would then be won over to the leadership of the communist party.

This perspective needs to be examined closely, since it appears to have been shared by the anti-parliamentary communists. Guy Aldred's description of the Labour Party as 'the last hope of the capitalist system, the final bulwark of class-society' suggests that only the Labour Party stood between the collapse of capitalism and the victory of communism. This was also a view expressed frequently by the Dreadnought group. As we have seen, in August 1921, for example, Sylvia Pankhurst urged communists to 'let the Labour Party get into power' (but not help it to power, as Lenin proposed) so that it could 'prove its uselessness and powerlessness'. Pankhurst returned to this scenario in June 1923, when she tried to predict what would happen if a Labour Government took office:

"The workers, expecting an improvement in their conditions, will turn to the Left. The Labour Party, unable to alter the position of the workers without overthrowing capitalism, will see its popularity departing and the growth of Left influences."<sup>87</sup>

Similarly, in December 1923 Pankhurst predicted that if a Labour Government failed to satisfy the aspirations of its working class supporters, "...the ideals of the workers will speedily advance beyond the Labour Party."<sup>88</sup>

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85. MacFarlane, *op. cit.*, page 98.

86. Sylvia Pankhurst, Soviet Russia As I Saw It, page 48.

87. Workers' Dreadnought 16 June 1923.

88. Ibid. 22 December 1923.

After the announcement of the results of the general election in December 1923 (see later), Sylvia Pankhurst commented that "The increase in the Labour vote is pleasing to us, because we regard it as a sign that the popular opinion is on the move, and ere long will have left the Labour Party far behind."<sup>89</sup> The reasoning behind this point of view was that although the Labour Party was not socialist, it had been portrayed as such by the capitalist press during the election campaign; workers who had voted for the Labour Party had therefore done so in the sincere belief that they were voting for socialism. When the Labour Party did not bring about socialism, the workers would turn to other means in order to fulfil their socialist aspirations. In May 1924 Pankhurst relied on a similar line of reasoning when she wrote that

"Labour Party Government is, of course, a weariness to the Communist, but in the intention of the electors, it is an evolutionary stage beyond government by the confessedly pro-capitalist parties...The strength of the real Left movement, which does not work through Parliament, will develop as all the Parliamentary parties fail in their turn." <sup>90</sup>

The assumption which lay beneath these comments seems to have been that within the Labour Party and among its electoral supporters there existed thousands upon thousands of genuine socialists, whose allegiances were channelled towards the Labour Party through the false portrayals of the capitalist press, and whose socialist aspirations were being continually disappointed. These comments also seem to have been based on the idea that the politics of the Labour Party, and the politics of the revolutionary groups, were both part of a single continuum, along which workers would progress as events exposed the shortcomings of each station along the route. In fact, the revolutionary groups' views were not a 'more extreme' version of the Labour Party's programme, for the simple reason that the Labour Party belonged to the capitalist political spectrum. Between the beliefs of most Labour voters, and the sort of communist

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<sup>89</sup>. Workers' Dreadnought 15 December 1923.

<sup>90</sup>. Ibid. 17 May 1924.



consciousness that the anti-parliamentarians regarded as a condition of revolution, there existed a far greater gulf than seemed to be assumed in the anti-parliamentarians' views concerning the possible consequences of the 'failures' of a Labour Government.

We can, in fact, put Lenin and Pankhurst's expectations to an empirical test. Following the general election at the end of 1923, the Conservative Party held the largest number of seats in the House of Commons, but did not have an overall majority. The Liberal and Labour MPs combined in a vote of no confidence to oust the Conservative Prime Minister Baldwin, and in January 1924 the Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald, as head of the next largest party, was invited to form a Government. According to Harry Pollitt's analysis, this first Labour Government was turned out of office at the end of 1924 "...because of the disillusionment of the masses with the policy of the Labour leaders." The large majority with which the new Government took office was "...in itself evidence of the workers' disgust with their leaders' pusillanimity..."<sup>91</sup> This sounds very much like the scenario envisaged by Lenin...except that it was not to the Communist Party that the workers had turned in disgust and disillusionment with Labour; the Government which replaced Labour in office was formed by...the Conservative party! And to confound Lenin's predictions even further, the Labour Party received over a million more votes in 1924 than it had done in 1923, while the CPGB's total vote, and its average per candidate, both fell.<sup>92</sup>

Lenin and Pankhurst seem to have made the mistaken assumption that there could be only one possible interpretation of the 'failure' of a Labour Government: that the Labour Party could not fulfil the aspirations of the working class, and that only communism could. In fact, reactions to the 'failure' of a Labour Government could take any number of forms e.g.

91. Harry Pollitt, Serving My Time: An Apprenticeship To Politics, (London, 1940), pages 197 and 199.

92. See figures in Walter Kendall, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain', Survey Volume 20 number 1(90), Winter 1974, pages 118-131.

that the Labour Party had not had a Parliamentary majority, and had thus been unable to carry out its policies, that its aims had been thwarted by a truculent Civil Service, obstinate capitalists, unfavourable international political or economic circumstances, and so on.

Yet the most mistaken assumption in the whole affiliation debate, and the one that ensured that the tactic remained a dead letter or else was distorted out of all recognition from its original purpose, had nothing to do with what the CPGB could or could not do once it had affiliated, nor with the possible or inevitable consequences of the Labour Party coming to power. It was that the Labour Party would ever "...submit to being penetrated and manipulated by the Communists" in the first place.<sup>93</sup> The Labour leaders' understandable reluctance to submit themselves to denunciation, criticism and exposure was evident at the meeting between Labour and Communist Party representatives in December 1921, and perhaps accounts for the contradictory interpretations attached to the affiliation tactic by the CPGB members at the meeting. Lenin did not seem to include this factor in his calculations. According to Lazitch and Drachkovitch, the fatal weakness of the affiliation tactic was that the Labour Party did not "behave in conformity with Lenin's predictions".<sup>94</sup> In one of the most down-to-earth assessments of the affiliation debate they argue that

"The Lenin tactic, defended through thick and thin, remained a dead letter for a simple reason, which did not occur to Lenin in 1920: Communist infiltration could be real and effective only if the non-Communist "partner" consented to play the role that Lenin had written for him, that of victim and dupe. But if the partner, here the Labour Party, refused to play along, the tactic naturally failed." 95

Lenin had sought to support the Labour Party as the rope supports a hanged man; the Labour Party resolutely refused to put its head in the noose.

#### Anti-Parliamentary Opposition To The Labour Party After 1921.

Following Sylvia Pankhurst's expulsion from the CPGB, every organisation

93. Branko Lazitch and M. Drachkovitch, Lenin And The Comintern Volume One, (Stanford, California, 1972), page 263.

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid., page 364.

associated with the Workers' Dreadnought adopted opposition to affiliation as one of its principles. In February 1922 the Communist Workers' Party declared that its position was "To refuse affiliation or co-operation with the Labour Party and all Reformist organisations."<sup>96</sup> In September 1922 the All-Workers' Revolutionary Union announced that it was "...opposed to the Reformist and Counter-Revolutionary Labour Party, and rejects all affiliations and co-operation with it and other Reformist Parties."<sup>97</sup> In July 1923 the Unemployed Workers' Organisation stated in its manifesto that "We are opposed to affiliation to a counter-revolutionary party [such] as the Labour Party..."<sup>98</sup>

By this time, the Third International had adopted the 'United Front' tactic. This was put forward by the Executive Committee of the Third International in December 1921, and approved at the Fourth Congress in November-December 1922. It involved an alliance between the Communist and Social-Democratic Parties in order, so it was claimed, to organise the defence of the working class against the capitalist offensive which had been gathering force since the end of 1920. The Third International expected that in the process of this defence the mass of workers who supported the Social-Democratic Parties would be won over to the Communist Parties.

In April 1922 delegates of the Third International met representatives of the Second International and the International Union of Socialist Parties (or 'Two-And-A-Half International) in Berlin to discuss ways of arresting the capitalist offensive. The conference was hosted by the SPD, murderers of the revolutionary workers of Germany, while one of the parties affiliated to the 'Two-And-A-Half International' was the Mensheviks. In 1919 the Third International had been founded on the necessity for 'unrelenting struggle' against, and 'unsparing criticism' of, parties such as the SPD and the Mensheviks. By 1922 the Third International had

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96. Workers' Dreadnought 11 February 1922.

97. Ibid. 23 September 1922.

98. Ibid. 7 July 1923.

abandoned this position.

The Workers' Dreadnought group was completely opposed to the United Front. As we saw in Chapter 2, Sylvia Pankhurst described the United Front theses as 'a deplorable document'. This view was shared by Guy Aldred. Following his release from prison in mid-1922 (after having served 12 months' imprisonment on a charge of sedition), Aldred launched into a polemic with Alexander Ritchie about the United Front tactic. During this polemic, which took place in the pages of the Glasgow Worker,<sup>99</sup> Aldred put forward three reasons for opposing the United Front. Firstly, the Labour Party was not a working class organisation i.e. it did not represent the genuine interests of the workers. Its leaders were a collection of 'traitors' who had repeatedly betrayed the working class: for example, they had not supported the revolutionary workers of Russia after 1917. Aldred considered it outrageous to "...suggest that we can unite with the men who sabotaged and betrayed that revolution."<sup>100</sup> Secondly, Aldred opposed any United Front between communists and the Labour Party because the aims of these two groups were fundamentally incompatible. Communists stood for revolution, the Labour Party stood for reform. Communists could not "achieve their revolutionary purpose" by uniting with "Mensheviks and petty reformers".<sup>101</sup> Thirdly, Aldred argued that a United Front would obscure the irreconcilable differences between revolutionary communists and the reformist Labour Party. It would give the Labour Party an importance and credibility it did not merit. As Sidney Hanson (a London member of the APCF) argued in 1923:

"...the Communist Party, seeking affiliation to the Labour Party, proposes a united front with it, and strengthens the illusion that the Labour Party is the party of the working class, the movement towards emancipation. But the Labour Party is really the anti-working class movement, the last earthwork of reaction." <sup>102</sup>

99. See Worker 15 and 29 July, 19 and 26 August, and 9 and 16 September 1922.

100. Worker 12 August 1922.

101. Ibid.

102. Commune November 1923.

Instead of forming an alliance with the Labour Party, Aldred argued in his polemic with Ritchie, communists should be redoubling their efforts to "unite with themselves".<sup>103</sup>

### Labour In Office.

Many of the arguments that have been discussed so far in this chapter were based not so much on fact as on conjectures about what might or might not result from Communist Party affiliation, about the possible effects a Labour Government might have on working class consciousness, and so on. The anti-parliamentarians opposed tactics such as affiliation and the United Front because they regarded the Labour Party as an anti-working class organisation. As evidence to support this attitude they could point, for example, to the Labour Party's political programme - even when the WSF had been working within the Labour Party Sylvia Pankhurst had described Labour's policies as 'non-socialist'. However, the anti-parliamentarians' opposition to the Labour Party was based mainly on analogies drawn between the Labour Party and its Social-Democratic counterparts in other countries - in particular, the SPD. The acid test of the correctness of the anti-parliamentarians' views, and of the validity of these analogies, came when the Labour Party actually took power in Britain. In what remains of this chapter, therefore, we will concentrate on a discussion of the anti-parliamentary communists' attitude towards the Labour Party in office, using the examples of local government in the East London district of Poplar (1921-1923) and the first national Labour Government (1924).

In 1921 there was the beginning of an "employers' offensive" in Britain, involving a generalised attack on workers' wages, conditions and living standards (this is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4). The attack on workers' living standards was not only carried out by 'private' owners of capital; where the local or national state was an

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103. Worker 12 August 1922.

employer or de facto owner of capital, its administrators also joined the attack. In the summer of 1921, for example, the Poplar Board of Guardians (with a Labour majority of 18 out of 24 members) reduced the rate of outdoor Poor Law relief by 10% and cut the wages of municipal employees. The Dreadnought described the Labour Guardians' actions as "what is ordinarily described as a betrayal".<sup>104</sup> These actions came as "no surprise" to the group, however, since it had already pointed out that "The policy of the Labour Party is not to abolish the capitalist system, but to reform it. It is impossible to emancipate the workers within the capitalist system: the Labour Party does not recognise this fact."<sup>105</sup> As the Dreadnought stated at the time of the Labour Guardians' actions, "The Labour Party is avowedly a Reformist Party; its effort is to work towards social betterment within the capitalist system."<sup>106</sup> The problem was that any party which sought to take over the administration of the capitalist system, in order to run it in the interests of the workers, would quickly discover that the initial step ruled out the proposed objective, and would rapidly find itself having to run the capitalist system in the only way possible: against the interests of the working class.

At the beginning of the following year (on 25 January 1922), a meeting of the Poplar Board of Guardians was attended by members of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, who placed before the meeting the NUWM demand for 'work or full maintenance'. Pressurised by the presence of the NUWM members, the Board approved a scale of relief that exceeded even the NUWM's request. By the time of its next meeting, however, the Board realised that its financial resources were insufficient to pay the promised rate of relief. The imperatives of administering capitalism had reasserted themselves. When the Board cancelled its previous decision,

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104. Workers' Dreadnought 30 July 1921.

105. Ibid. 18 June 1921.

106. Ibid. 30 June 1921.

hundreds of angry unemployed workers occupied the building where the Board was meeting, and Melvina Walker, a prominent member of the Dreadnought group and "well known local activist", is reported to have told the Board: 'You appear to be hopeless and are merely the bulwark between us and the capitalist class to keep us in subjection'.<sup>107</sup>

In September 1923 Melvina Walker's remarks about the role of the Labour Party were borne out by the most spectacular of the Poplar Board's anti-working class actions. In August 1923, workers involved in an unofficial dock strike applied to the Poplar Board for relief. Their application was granted, but it precipitated another 'financial crisis'. Once again, the Board had discovered that it could not take the side of the workers and administer a part of the capitalist system. Faced with these mutually exclusive options, the Board chose the latter, and decided to reduce its rates of relief. On 26 September members of the Unemployed Workers' Organisation staged a demonstration, demanding that the Board should reverse its decision to cut the rates. When their demand was refused the demonstrators occupied the building and 'imprisoned' the Board members. The Board responded by calling on one arm of the capitalist state to defend another against the workers: the police arrived, were given permission to force their way into the occupied building, and in the ensuing mêlée the demonstrators were severely batoned (according to the Dreadnought's report there were 'Upwards Of Forty People Badly Hurt, Hundreds Of Slightly Wounded').

Some of the Dreadnought's comments about this episode have been quoted already in Chapter 1, but they are well worth repeating at greater length, now that the circumstances which provoked them have been described more fully:

"One thing stands out clearly: it is that the result of working class representatives taking part in the administration of capitalist machinery, is that the working class

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107. Noreen Branson, Poplarism 1919-1925; George Lansbury And The Councillors' Revolt, (London, 1979), page 128.

representatives become responsible for maintaining capitalist law and order and for enforcing the regulations of the capitalist system itself...We have always declared that working class representatives who become councillors and guardians assist in the maintenance of the capitalist system, and, sooner or later, must inevitably find themselves in conflict with the workers." ... "The batoning of the Unemployed in Poplar is the first instance of the Labour Party being brought into forcible conflict with the labouring population in defence of the capitalist system...As the capitalist system nears its end, the reformists who desire to prevent the catastrophic breakdown of the system will inevitably find themselves in a position of acute antagonism to the people who are striving to destroy the system which oppresses them."<sup>108</sup>

Significantly, the article ended with an echo of the Dreadnought's 1920 prediction that the Labour Party would soon be forming 'a government of the Noske type', by suggesting that the Labour Party in Britain had now begun to take on the role that the SPD had played in Germany.

The details of how the Labour Party became the national Government in January 1924 have been outlined earlier. From the very beginning of the Labour Party's first term in office, the APCF was unmistakeably hostile to it. During the previous year, in fact, the advent of the Labour Party as the largest opposition party in the House of Commons, the distinct possibility that Labour might form the next Government, and the consequent revival of hopes that Parliamentarism might have something to offer the working class, had provoked Guy Aldred to write a pamphlet (titled Socialism And Parliament) in order to re-state the anti-parliamentary argument that "...parliament was never intended to emancipate the working class from the evils of capitalism, that it never can and never will achieve this result."<sup>109</sup> In his pamphlet Aldred quoted a remark made by John S. Clarke in November 1922 - "...if anything on God's earth is calculated to prolong the capitalist system, it is surely a Labour Government" - and commented that "The facts establish the unquestionable truth of this assertion..."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108.</sup> Workers' Dreadnought 6 October 1923.

<sup>109.</sup> Guy Aldred, Socialism And Parliament, (1923), page 3.

<sup>110.</sup> Ibid., page 18.



As soon as the Labour Government had taken office the APCF changed the masthead motto of its paper (the Commune) from 'A Herald Of The Coming Storm' to 'An Organ Of His Majesty's Communist Opposition', implying opposition to His Majesty's Government i.e. the Labour Party. The same issue in which this change took place also contained an article detailing previous anti-working class statements and actions by the new Labour Government's members.<sup>111</sup>

The following month, the Commune carried an article titled 'The Two Programmes'. This described a twelve-point "Parliamentarian" programme, and opposed each of these points with the "Anti-Parliamentarian" position. The article argued that the Parliamentarian programme amounted to "the continuation of capitalism"; among its points were:

- "2. Workers' Interests subservient to capitalist expediency...
- 4. Parliament - controlled by High Finance.
- 5. Nationalisation of some industries, yielding profits to state investors and loan sharks.
- 6. ...Political administration of Capitalism by workers...
- 11. Power left to the bourgeoisie."

Side-by-side with each of these points the article described the Anti-Parliamentarian alternative:

- "2. Development of class conscious understanding. Undermining capitalist interests...
- 4. The Soviet or Industrial Council, directly controlled by the wealth-producers.
- 5. Socialisation of all industry.
- 6. ...No political administration of Capitalism...
- 11. All Power to the Workers."

This amounted to a programme for "the overthrow of capitalism".<sup>112</sup> In context, the "Parliamentarian" programme was obviously meant to describe the Labour Party's policies. The APCF was, therefore, unambiguous in its opposition to the new Labour Government.

In view of the comments it had made in October 1923 about the role of the Labour Party in the administration of the local capitalist state in Poplar, it would seem reasonable to expect that the Dreadnought group

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111. Commune February 1924.

112. Ibid. March 1924.

would have shared the APCF's attitude to the national Labour Government. In fact, this was not so.

The new Labour Government took office on 22 January 1924. A railway engineers' strike against wage cuts had begun the previous day, and lasted until 29 January. During the strike, the Dreadnought stated that "A Capitalist Government has to prove to its makers and clients - the capitalists - that it is able to ensure the best possible conditions for the business of capitalism. A Labour Government has no such duty." The Dreadnought proceeded to demand that the Labour Government should use the Emergency Powers Act against the railway owners (as previous Governments had done against strikers), and nationalise the railways (as promised in Labour's election manifesto). A headline in the Dreadnought stated that this was no more nor less than 'What The Strikers Have A Right To Demand'.<sup>113</sup> The railway strike was soon followed, from 16 to 25 February, by a dock workers' strike. Once again, the Dreadnought argued that "...impartiality should not be expected of a Labour Government, nor, indeed, tolerated from it...The duty of a Labour Government is to act as a friend of the worker in all cases."<sup>114</sup>

Comments such as these sowed dangerous illusions. In October 1923 the Dreadnought group had argued that any party which participated in the administration of the capitalist state would become responsible for maintaining the capitalist system and thus come into conflict with the interests of the working class. Three months later this clarity appears to have been lost. By drawing a distinction between what 'capitalist' Governments had done and what a Labour Government ought to do, the Dreadnought encouraged the illusions that the Labour Party was not a capitalist party and that workers should expect the Labour Party to be on their side. The Dreadnought spread another illusion when it called for the railways to be nationalised, as if state ownership would somehow change the

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113. Workers' Dreadnought 26 January 1924.

114. Ibid. 23 February 1924.

capitalist nature of the industry. In this respect the communist point of view was expressed not by the Dreadnought group but by the APCF (see above, point 5 of 'The Two Programmes'). We will return to the two groups' views on the issue of nationalisation in Chapter 5.

It did not take very long for some of these illusions to be dispelled - the actions of the Labour Government itself soon saw to that. At the time of the February dock strike, for example, the Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald revealed that the Government was preparing to use strike-breakers against the dockers: "The Government will not fail to take what steps are necessary to secure transport of necessary food supplies, and has already set up the nucleus of an organisation."<sup>115</sup> Similarly, when bus and tram drivers in London went on strike in March 1924 the Labour Government appointed a Chief Civil Commissioner to administer the Emergency Powers Act, and made active preparations for running the services with military and naval labour.

Consequently, in March-April 1924 we find the Dreadnought adopting a more critical attitude towards the Labour Government:

"The Labour Government has again shown that it cannot work Socialist miracles with capitalist elements and by capitalist methods." ... "The more the Labour Government applies itself to an honest attempt to ameliorate social conditions the more it is seen that the only hope of real all-round improvement is to attack the system at the root."<sup>116</sup>

The Labour Government was defeated in the House of Commons on 8 October 1924 and dissolved itself the next day. A general election followed and Ramsay MacDonald resigned from office on 4 November. The Workers' Dreadnought had ceased publication in June 1924, however, so we lack the the group's definitive assessment of the record of the first Labour Government. The APCF, on the other hand, continued to publish the Commune, and sniped at the Labour Government throughout its term in office. It did not produce its first full-length appraisal of the Labour Government until two

115. Quoted in Guy Aldred, Socialism And Parliament Part II Government By Labour: A Record Of Facts, (Glasgow, 1942), page 31.

116. Workers' Dreadnought 8 March and 12 April 1924.

years later, however, with the article 'Lest We Forget: The Record Of Labour Parliamentarism' published in the Commune in October 1926. This article was republished as a pamphlet titled "Labour" In Office: A Record, first in 1926, and then in revised and expanded form in 1928 and 1942. These works belong outside the 1917-1924 period, and will be discussed in Chapter 5. For the time being it will suffice to note that the essence of the APCF's considered appraisal of the 1924 Labour Government was that it had "...functioned no differently from any other Capitalist Government";<sup>117</sup> nothing Labour had done whilst in office had given the anti-parliamentarians any reason to revise the views they had held before 1924. When we come to look at the anti-parliamentarians' continued propagation of the fundamental ideas of anti-parliamentary communism during the late 1920s and early 1930s, we will see that opposition to the Labour Party, on the grounds that it was a capitalist and anti-working class organisation, remained one of the anti-parliamentarians' basic tenets. Before that, however, we need to complete this account of the anti-parliamentarians' basic principles with a discussion of their attitude towards the industrial wing of the labour movement: the trade unions.

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117. Guy Aldred, Government By Labour: A Record Of Facts, (Glasgow, 1928), page 6.

## CHAPTER 4

TRADE UNIONS AND INDUSTRIAL ORGANISATION

With this concluding chapter of Part One, we come to what can be regarded as the crux of anti-parliamentary communist thought during 1917-1924. The anti-parliamentarians' opposition to Parliamentary action was, in part, a rejection of the diversion of workers' struggles away from the point where the class's greatest potential power was considered to lie, namely, at 'the point of production'. The anti-parliamentarians' critique of the way in which workers were organised on the industrial field and their proposals for alternative forms of industrial organisation were therefore central to their strategy for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of communism. In addition to these subjects, in this chapter we will also be examining the objective circumstances in which the anti-parliamentarians put forward these ideas during 1917-1924, in order to try to reach some assessment of the viability of anti-parliamentary communism as a revolutionary strategy during this period.

The Problem And Its Remedy.

In October 1920 a headline in the Workers' Dreadnought referred to the trade unions as 'The Pimps Of Labour'.<sup>1</sup> In other words, trade unions were organisations formed for the purpose of bargaining with the capitalist class over the price and conditions of sale of labour power. As permanent negotiating bodies, the trade unions had to attempt to reach some compromise between the demands and interests of the working class and those of the capitalists. At best their aim was "...to secure palliations of the capitalist system, not to abolish it."<sup>2</sup>

As it stands, this is more a description of the role of trade unions

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1. Workers' Dreadnought 30 October 1920.

2. Ibid. 4 February 1922.

than a criticism. It only becomes a criticism when we consider the particular point of view from which the observation was made. The anti-parliamentary communists were not interested in compromises or reforms. They based their politics not on class compromise but on class war, and their every effort was devoted not to reforming the existing system but to agitating for its complete overthrow. The very things on which the trade unions' existence was based - the division of society into classes, the wages system, the market and so on - were precisely what the anti-parliamentarians sought to abolish. This is why they were antagonistic towards trade unionism: the unions organised workers within the capitalist system, as sellers of the commodity labour power, whereas the anti-parliamentarians wanted to see workers organised against the capitalist system, for the abolition of wage labour.

The anti-parliamentarians' critique of trade unionism must be considered, therefore, in the context of their desire to see the reformist trade unions replaced by revolutionary organisations which workers would use not only to struggle within capitalism, but also to overthrow the system, and thereafter to administer communist society. Furthermore, the anti-parliamentary communists' views on the precise nature of this revolutionary struggle must also be taken into account. The anti-parliamentarians envisaged the revolution in terms of the vast majority of workers organising and leading themselves. This view also shaped the criticisms which they levelled at trade unionism, and influenced the alternatives that they proposed.

One of the characteristic features of trade unionism criticised by the Dreadnought group was the opposition between the leaders and officials of the unions and the ordinary rank and file members. This was explained in part by reference to the differences in material circumstances between the officials and ordinary members of the unions. Sylvia Pankhurst described trade union officials as "respectable, moderate men in comfortable

positions".<sup>3</sup> The trade union officials' salaries, security of position and status elevated them to the 'middle class'. Thereafter, "the law of materialism working so accurately",<sup>4</sup> the interests of the officials became separate from, and antagonistic to, those of the workers they were meant to represent. Union officials could not share the views and outlook of shopfloor workers if they did not share the same material circumstances. The anti-parliamentarians also argued, it may be recalled, that a similar change in outlook could be observed among the Parliamentarians who rose from 'the gutter' to 'place in class society'. Thus E.T. Whitehead, secretary of the CP(BSTI), wrote that

"It cannot be too strongly impressed by Communists upon all workers that T.U. officials, both by their secure position and their enhanced salaries, serve the maintenance of capitalism much more than they serve the cause of the emancipation of the workers." 5

The trade union officials' privileges would last only for as long as trade unionism still existed, and this in turn depended on the continued existence of the capitalist system. This meant that the union officials had a material stake in maintaining the status quo and in opposing revolution; "material interest ranges the Trade Union officials on the side of capitalism."<sup>6</sup> This explained why the trade unions were "working their hardest to stave off conflict".<sup>7</sup>

Besides the antagonistic relationship between the union officials and the rank and file membership, the Dreadnought group also drew attention to the officials' lack of faith in the power of their members. Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that

"The apathy of the membership produces the officials' lack of faith in the capacity of the membership, and, even apart from other causes, is a source of the cynical contempt for the rank and file which so many officials display." 8

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3. Workers' Dreadnought 13 September 1919.

4. Ibid. 15 February 1919.

5. Circular concerning 'Activity On The Industrial Field' from E.T. Whitehead, CP(BSTI) secretary, to Party branches, 12 July 1920, File 124, Pankhurst Papers.

6. Workers' Dreadnought 15 February 1919.

7. Ibid. 2 August 1919.

8. Ibid. 21 April 1923.

However, the 'apathy' of the ordinary members was not a 'natural' or 'pre-ordained' condition: in fact, it suited the union officials to foster apathy deliberately, by excluding the rank and file from real participation in union affairs, since this was one way in which the officials could maintain their own positions of power and privilege. The form and structure of trade union organisation was such that

"The members...resign all their authority, all their rights and liberties, as far as the Union is concerned, to the Union officials. This is an essential feature of Trade Unionism... The Parliamentary form of the trade unions, which removes the work of the Union from the members to the officials, inevitably creates an apathetic and unenlightened membership which, for good or evil, is a mere prey to the manipulation of the officials." 9

Pankhurst's use of the term 'Parliamentary' to describe this form of organisation illustrates a point made in the Introduction: 'Parliamentarism' and 'anti-parliamentarism' were terms used to describe forms of political organisation and activity which existed beyond definitions relating to elections, the House of Commons, etc. 'Parliamentarism' described workers' subservience to leaders within organisations whose aims and ambitions did not go beyond the basic framework of the capitalist system. As such it was a term which could be applied equally to Parliamentary political parties and to trade unions. 'Anti-parliamentarism', on the other hand, described the active participation of the mass of workers in organisations and activities aiming to overthrow capitalism. It was organisations of this sort that the anti-parliamentarians sought to create as an alternative to the trade unions.

Guy Aldred also observed the antagonism between the officials and the rank and file in the unions, and the differences in power between these two groups. In contrast to the Dreadnought group, he related this not so much to the officials' privileged material position or the 'Parliamentary' structure of the trade unions, as to the role of the trade unions as permanent negotiating bodies within capitalism. In his

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9. Workers' Dreadnought 21 April 1923.



pamphlet on Trade Unionism And The Class War (first published in 1911, and re-issued in 1919), Aldred argued that union leaders could only hope to win concessions from the bosses if they had the solid backing of the entire union membership. No capitalist would be impressed by the power and position of a union leader unless it was obvious that the union leader really 'represented' the entire union membership and had complete control and authority over them. Criticisms of the union leader by the rank and file, or rank and file actions which the leader had not sanctioned, would weaken the leader's power to bargain with the capitalist. Thus the union leader was forced to urge caution on the members and to endeavour to suppress any criticisms coming from the rank and file. If the union members hoped to win any concessions from the capitalists they would have to relinquish all power and control to the leader, in order to increase the leader's bargaining power. However, the more confidence the members placed in their leader, the greater would be the scope for the leader to betray that confidence. Thus it was the trade unions' role as bargainers and negotiators which led to the growth of oligarchic leadership and to the likelihood of the rank and file being 'sold out' by their leaders.<sup>10</sup>

The anti-parliamentary communists also criticised the sectional organisation of the unions. The Dreadnought pointed out that there were approximately 1,200 different unions in Britain.<sup>11</sup> The effect of this was that "...instead of preserving the vaunted unity of the working class [the trade unions] prevent it by dividing the workers into watertight compartments."<sup>12</sup> The unions organised workers on the basis of their differences (according to trade, craft, etc) rather than on the basis of what they had in common. Since only a united working class could overthrow capitalism, organisations that divided the working class, in the way that the unions did, were clearly open to criticism from the anti-parliamentarians' revolutionary point of view. Guy Aldred argued, further, that even in a

10. Guy Aldred, Trade Unionism And The Class War, (London, 1919), page 7.

11. Workers' Dreadnought 5 January 1924.

12. Ibid. 28 July 1923.

limited reformist sense "...trade unionism has accomplished nothing so far as the well-being of the entire working class is concerned."<sup>13</sup> It would be impossible to organise the whole working class on the basis of trade unionism, since the effectiveness of unionism (and craft unionism in particular) depended on excluding other workers from its ranks e.g. through apprenticeships and the closed shop. Workers could only hope to gain a higher price for their labour power, better working conditions and so on, if they combined closely together, and this constructed a barrier between skilled and unskilled workers in order to prevent an increase in competition for jobs and thus a lowering of wages. Indeed, Aldred claimed, some craft unionists even went so far as to justify their practices by arguing that at least craft unionism ensured the relative well-being of a certain section of the working class, whereas if there was greater competition for jobs skilled workers' wages would be lowered to the level of unskilled workers' wages and no-one would be better off.<sup>14</sup> This sort of sectional and divisive mentality, Aldred argued, also saw unionised workers spending at least as much time fighting each other over issues such as demarcation disputes as they spent in struggling against their common enemy, the capitalists. According to the anti-parliamentarians, therefore, the origins, aims and practices of the trade unions were all thoroughly divisive of the working class.

A final significant criticism of the trade unions made by the Dreadnought group was that "Their branches are constructed according to the district in which the worker resides, not according to where he works."<sup>15</sup> (This was true of many unions, though by no means all of them - most of the miners' unions come to mind as important exceptions). Again, the point of this criticism, like all the others, was that since the unions did not organise workers at the source of their potential power

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13. Aldred, Trade Unionism And The Class War, Author's Note to 1919 edition.

14. Ibid., Section II: 'The Case For Trade Unionism'.

15. Workers' Dreadnought 4 February 1922.

(i.e. at the point of production) they did not measure up to the requirements of the sort of revolutionary organisations sought by the anti-parliamentarians.

During the first two or three years after 1917 the Dreadnought group proposed certain measures to overcome the problems of trade unionism identified above. Firstly, reactionary or reformist trade union officials should be replaced by revolutionaries. In July 1919 Sylvia Pankhurst argued that "...if the rank and file desire their instructions to be carried out they must either choose officials of their own way of thinking, or act through their own rank and file organisations."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, in February 1921 an article in the Workers' Dreadnought advised union members that "...the first thing you must do, if you really want to overthrow the capitalist system and to establish Communism, is to get rid of your reformist and palliative-loving leaders."<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, trade union structures had to be made more democratic, to ensure that the new revolutionary leaders did not end up behaving in the same way as the old reformist leaders. The CP(BSTI) advocated action to "...alter the structure of the Unions so as to allow the Rank and File to have complete control",<sup>18</sup> while Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that "The Soviet system within the trade union movement is an urgent need."<sup>19</sup> 'The Soviet system' would involve workshop assemblies electing and mandating delegates who could be recalled and replaced at any time. The delegates would not be full-time paid officials with independent powers. As the Dreadnought explained in 1923:

"...the rank and file of a trade union cannot control its officials, cannot even watch them efficiently. The trade union machinery does not allow of it. The workers can only control an organisation which is a workshop organisation, with, when necessary, delegates appointed for specific work, instructed, subject to recall, remaining still as fellow-workers in the shop - paid no more than loss of time and bare out-of-pocket expenses...The work and power of the

16. Workers' Dreadnought 12 July 1919.

17. Ibid. 19 February 1921.

18. Circular from E.T. Whitehead, CP(BSTI) secretary, to Party branches, 10 June 1920, File 125, Pankhurst Papers.

19. Workers' Dreadnought 12 July 1919.

organisation must not pass into the hands of even such delegates: it must be an organisation operated by the workers in the shop." 20

If the delegates remained shopfloor workers, they would continue to share the same material circumstances, and hence the same political outlook, as the workers who elected them. The system of mandates and recall would give the workers power over their own delegates (in contrast to the unions, where the leaders and officials had power over the members) and diminish the possibility of any 'sell outs'.

Thirdly, the Dreadnought group hoped to see the re-organisation of craft and trade unions into industrial unions. A resolution drafted by Sylvia Pankhurst for a Rank And File Convention in March 1920 called for efforts to be made so that "...an industrial union shall be established which shall admit all workers in the industry, regardless of sex, craft or grade..."<sup>21</sup> All workers in each industry would belong to one union, instead of being divided among several competing unions. This was intended to combat the trade unionist division of the working class into separate sections, and to promote working class unity.

In the Dreadnought's view, the best way to effect these changes would be through building a rank and file movement which would organise itself, as far as possible, within the existing unions. The rank and file movement's independence would not lie in its having a separate organisational form created in opposition to the trade unions, but instead in its militant promotion of workers' economic and political interests in defiance of 'orders from above'. This was an approach which had been expressed most succinctly by the Clyde Workers' Committee when it had declared at the time of its formation in 1915 that it would "...support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but...act independently immediately they misrepresent them."<sup>22</sup>

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20. Workers' Dreadnought 28 July 1923.

21. Resolution XI, Rank And File Convention Draft Agenda, File 32e, Pankhurst Papers.

22. Quoted in James Hinton, The First Shop Stewards' Movement. (London, 1973), page 119.

In other words, the Dreadnought group's attitude during the first two or three years after 1917 was essentially one of critical support for the trade unions, rather than outright opposition and hostility.

The Influence Of The Engineering Shop Stewards'  
And Miners' Rank-And-File Movements.

The Dreadnought group shared its approach to the trade unions with the shop stewards' movement which had emerged in Britain during the First World War. The shop stewards' movement was based mainly on the engineering industry, and had arisen through a combination of three factors. Firstly, the accelerated introduction of new technology, and the large influx of unskilled workers ('dilution') during the War had threatened the traditionally 'aristocratic' position of skilled workers in the engineering industry. Secondly, at the same time as skilled workers' traditional status was under threat, they were placed in a powerful bargaining position by the very high War-time demand for their products. Thirdly, engineering workers could not use their union - the Amalgamated Society of Engineers - to take advantage of this powerful bargaining position, nor to defend their status in the workplace; in March 1915 there had been a meeting at the Treasury between Lloyd George, Walter Runciman (President of the Board of Trade) and a number of trade union representatives (led by Arthur Henderson) at which the union leaders had agreed to renounce strike action for the duration of the War, and to accept any changes in established working practices necessary to accelerate the output of munitions. Consequently, engineering workers had been forced to develop independent workplace organisations in order to defend their interests and pursue their demands.<sup>23</sup>

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23. See Hinton, op. cit., chapters 1-2, and Branko Pribicevic, The Shop Stewards' Movement And Workers' Control 1910-1922. (Oxford, 1959). The same factors also led to the emergence of a shop stewards' movement among engineering workers in Germany, from which the British anti-parliamentary communists' German counterparts drew some of their support. See Dick Geary, European Labour Protest 1848-1939. (London, 1968).  
[continued at foot of next page]

However, the engineering shop stewards' movement was not simply a reactionary attempt by an 'aristocracy of labour' to preserve its craft status. The engineers' tradition of craft control also contained the potential for the development of aspirations to "workers' self-management of production". Skilled engineering workers had traditionally exercised a considerable degree of control over how jobs were carried out, and had tried to resist and restrict managerial interference, in the belief that supervision of their work was unnecessary if not well-nigh impossible. Leaders of the shop stewards' movement - many of whom belonged to organisations such as the BSP and SLP - often saw independent workplace organisation not only as an effective solution to such problems of trade unionism as sectionalism, oligarchy and collaborationism, but also as a means of transition to socialism and as the basic structure for workers' control of production under socialism.

The most cogent expression of the shop stewards' movement's ideas was J.T. Murphy's pamphlet, The Workers' Committee (1917). This contained a critique of the trade unions very similar to that put forward by the Dreadnought group. The ideas in Murphy's pamphlet were heir to traditions which "...saw in a reorganised trade unionism...the chief agency of transition to socialism, and the basic structure of the future workers' control of industry."<sup>24</sup> Thus Murphy and the Dreadnought group both approached their critique of trade unions from a similar starting-point: that of wanting to see the creation of organisations which workers would use to fight and overthrow capitalism and then administer communist society.

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1981), pages 137-146; Socialist Reproduction/Revolutionary Perspectives, 'On The Origins and Infancy of Proletarian Revolutionary Politics: An Introduction to Left Communism in Germany from 1914 to 1923', introduction to Otto Ruhle, From The Bourgeois To The Proletarian Revolution, 1924, (London/Glasgow, 1974), pages i-xxviii; and Sergio Bologna, 'Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origin of the Workers' Council Movement' in Conference of Socialist Economists, The Labour Process And Class Strategies, (London, 1976), pages 68-91.

24. James Hinton, Introduction to J.T. Murphy, The Workers' Committee: An Outline Of Its Principles And Structure, 1917, (London, 1972), page 6.

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In The Workers' Committee Murphy observed that "One of the most noticeable features in recent trade union history is the conflict between the rank and file of the trade unions and their officials..." He explained this by arguing that full-time trade union officials were removed from ordinary working class conditions, so that their interests, shaped by their material circumstances, were no longer the same as those of their members. Murphy also wrote that all power within the unions was exercised by the officials, and that the "constitutional procedure" of the unions "...demands that the function of the rank and file shall be simply that of obedience." Another of Murphy's criticisms of trade union structures was that branches were organised according to where members lived, irrespective of where they worked: "...there is thus no direct relationship between the branch group and the workshop group." (Here Murphy was generalising from the specific example of the ASE). Finally, Murphy also criticised the sectional character of trade unionism (quoting a figure of 1,100 for the total number of trade unions in Britain) and complained that the unions "...keep the workers divided by organising them on the basis of their differences instead of their common interests."

These were precisely the criticisms which the Dreadnought group made of the trade unions, and the remedies Murphy proposed were virtually identical too. The constructive content of The Workers' Committee was largely an elaboration of an alternative structure intended to realise "Real democratic practice" in workers' industrial organisations, so that each and every member could "...participate actively in the conduct of the business of the society [i.e. the union]." Apathy towards union affairs - "...the members do not feel a personal interest in the branch meetings..." - would be overcome by discarding organisation of branches based on place of residence and establishing instead a "direct connection between the workshop and the branch". All power would reside at the level of the workshop; committees elected to represent the workers would "not have any governing power" but would exist merely to "render service to

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the rank and file". All of these changes would be carried out, as far as possible, within the existing unions; Murphy stated that "...we would emphasise the fact that we are not antagonistic to the trade union movement. We are not out to smash but to grow, to utilise every available means whereby we can achieve a more efficient organisation of the workers..."<sup>25</sup>

Apart from the ideas circulating within the engineering shop stewards' movement, another influence on the Dreadnought group's attitude towards the trade unions came from the miners' rank-and-file movements, particularly in South Wales. In April 1918 Sylvia Pankhurst dismissed G.D.H. Cole's book on Self-Government In Industry with the comment that "workshop propagandists in South Wales and on the Clyde are producing better stuff than this",<sup>26</sup> which indicates Pankhurst's familiarity, and sympathy, with those workers' ideas.

The Dreadnought group's contacts with workers in South Wales dated back to the days of the Workers' Suffrage Federation, when it seems to have been common for the WSF to circulate South Wales Miners' Federation lodges with appeals for funds.<sup>27</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst also made several well-received speaking tours to South Wales,<sup>28</sup> and by March 1920 the WSF had branches in Cwmparc, Brynmawr and Nantyglo, and Mid Rhondda.<sup>29</sup>

Starting in 1919 regular 'South Wales Notes' were contributed to the Workers' Dreadnought by Frank Phippen of the South Wales Socialist Society. The SWSS participated in the communist unity negotiations during 1919-1920, and stood close to the WSF on issues such as Parliamentary action and affiliation to the Labour Party. The proceedings on the first day of the conference in June 1920 at which the CP(BSTI) was formed were

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25. Murphy, *op. cit.*

26. Workers' Dreadnought 27 April 1918.

27. See minutes of WSF Finance Committee meetings 31 May 1917 and 11 July 1918, Pankhurst Papers.

28. See minutes of WSF Executive Committee meeting 13 July 1917, Pankhurst Papers; and Workers' Dreadnought 25 August and 15 December 1917 and 20 July 1918.

29. See letter from Norah Smyth to WSF branches, 2 March 1920, File 55, Pankhurst Papers.



chaired by D.A. Davies, who had just resigned from the SWSS, and who soon afterwards became the secretary of a CP(BSTI) branch in Porth (Rhondda).<sup>30</sup> Other CP(BSTI) branches were set up in Merthyr Tydfil, Tre Thomas and Machen, and Swansea, and the Party had many individual sympathisers in other parts of South Wales.<sup>31</sup> In September 1920 a conference held in Cardiff decided to form a South Wales Communist Party as a Divisional Area of the CP(BSTI).<sup>32</sup> The conference at which the CP(BSTI) finally decided to accept the Third International's terms of admission was also held in Cardiff.

Militants within the South Wales Miners' Federation had addressed many of the problems of trade unionism discussed above. The most widely-known expression of some of their ideas on these issues was The Miners' Next Step, written by a group of socialist miners calling themselves the Unofficial Reform Committee, and published in 1912. This pamphlet criticised the 'conciliation' policy of the SWMF, on the grounds that "The policy of conciliation gives the real power of the men into the hands of a few leaders." The more power was concentrated in the hands of the officials, the less power the membership had in deciding union affairs. (This was the same argument that Guy Aldred had put forward a year earlier in his pamphlet, Trade Unionism And The Class War). Rank and file control over the union was said to be far too indirect, while the "social and economic prestige" of the leaders raised them to a position where "they have therefore in some things an antagonism of interests with the rank and file". Another criticism of the union was that "The sectional character of organisation in the mining industry renders concerted action almost impossible."

This critique was accompanied by constructive proposals for reform of the union. The pamphlet proposed a single organisation for all mining

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30. See Workers' Dreadnought 19 and 26 June, and 14 August 1920.

31. See 'Communist Party Notes' published in the Workers' Dreadnought from July 1920 onwards.

32. Workers' Dreadnought 25 September 1920.

and quarrying industry workers in Britain. This was intended to overcome sectional divisions and so allow for "a rapid and simultaneous stoppage of wheels throughout the mining industry." The pamphlet also outlined proposals for democratisation of the union, in order to enable the rank and file to "take supreme control of their own organisation". All policy initiative and ratification was to remain in the hands of the lodges, and the union executive was to become an unofficial, "purely administrative body; comprised of men directly elected by the men for that purpose". If these reforms were carried out, there would be a growing recognition that "the lodge meetings are the place where things are really done", and rank and file apathy towards union affairs would disappear; the lodges would become "centres of keen and pulsating life."

Towards the end of the pamphlet the authors explained that the purpose of their proposals was "to build up an organisation that will ultimately take over the mining industry, and carry it on in the interests of the workers." This aim was also extended to all other industries: the authors wanted to see "Every industry thoroughly organised, in the first place, to fight, to gain control of, and then to administer, that industry."<sup>33</sup>

There were certain differences between the mining and engineering unions, and between the unions' respective positions within their industries and their wider communities. Issues that were more or less specific to each situation had to be addressed, and this accounts for some of the differences in substance and emphasis between the ideas of militant engineers and miners. Nevertheless, a comparison between the critique presented by J.T. Murphy, and that written by the Unofficial Reform Committee, shows that, broadly speaking, there was a substantial core of problems common to both situations that both sets of workers

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33. South Wales Miners' Federation Unofficial Reform Committee, The Miners' Next Step: Being A Suggested Scheme For The Reorganisation Of The Federation, 1912, (London, 1973).

addressed, and that the solutions they proposed were, in the main, not dissimilar. Furthermore, their views were motivated by the common aim of overthrowing capitalist control over industry.

If the ideas put forward in works such as The Workers' Committee and The Miners' Next Step are compared with the Dreadnought group's views regarding the trade unions, it suggests that in the problems it identified, in the solutions it proposed, and in the objective which lay behind these proposals, the Dreadnought group's ideas were influenced strongly by its contacts with the views circulating within the engineering shop stewards' and miners' rank-and-file movements.

The Dreadnought group's adoption of these ideas, and in particular its insistence on the need to work within the trade unions, shows that some accounts of the group's attitude towards the unions have been factually mistaken. For example, it is not correct to suggest that "...Pankhurst's group...was unable to prevent the Communist Party, formed in late 1920, from pledging to work within the existing trade union structure."<sup>34</sup> "Pankhurst's group" was "unable" to prevent the CPGB from pledging to work within the existing unions for the simple reason that they fully supported such a strategy. The programme adopted by the CP(BSTI) at the time of its formation in June 1920 stated that the Party should "...stimulate the growth of rank and file organisation..." To promote this aim it advocated the formation of a CP(BSTI) branch within every workshop and trade union branch, in order to "...undermine the influence of the reactionary Trade Union leaders over the rank and file..."<sup>35</sup> A circular to CP(BSTI) branches stated that the Party's "most urgent need" was

"...the speedy addition to the ranks of the party of genuine class fighters from the ranks of the proletariat, especially of the organised industrial proletariat, so that the party may exercise increasing control and influence inside the organised Unions of Workers." <sup>36</sup>

34. Ruth Peterson, 'The General Strike: Fifty Years On', World Revolution number 6, March 1976, page 26.

35. Workers' Dreadnought 3 July 1920.

36. CP(BSTI) Suggested Circular To Branches, Number Four, n.d., File 125, Pankhurst Papers.

An Industrial Sub-Committee of the CP(BSTI) studied this objective and submitted a Report suggesting how it might be achieved. The Report stated that "Branches should make the closest distinction between work through the NON PARTY MASS ORGANISATIONS OF OUR CLASS, and through the PARTY ORGANISATIONS." It instructed CP(BSTI) members to maintain direct and unceasing opposition towards 'Party Organisations' (e.g. the ILP, Labour Party, etc.), but to exert every possible influence within the 'Non Party Mass Organisations', e.g. trade unions, shop stewards' and rank-and-file movements, unemployed workers' organisations, and so on. The Report stated that in order to exert influence within these mass organisations

"Party members will accept delegation from branches of their industrial organisations to all such bodies as Trade Union Congresses, Trade Union Executives, or to any Trades and Labour Council or similar body WHERE SUCH ACCEPTANCE OF DELEGATION DOES NOT NECESSITATE DENIAL OF THEIR COMMUNIST PRINCIPLES."

Wherever possible, CP(BSTI) members were to

"...take full and active part in building up Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movements, and in all Rank and File Movements which weaken the power of officials, and lead to Rank and File Control, Mass Action, and the development of the Class Struggle."

Agitation within trade union branches was also intended to spread the CP(BSTI)'s ideas and attract militant union members into the Party, and to expose the weaknesses and inadequacies of the trade unions as emancipatory organisations.<sup>37</sup>

All of which demonstrates the complete inaccuracy of James Klugmann's claim that the WSF "...despised...participation in the work of the trade unions."<sup>38</sup>

#### Guy Aldred And The Shop Stewards' Movement.

In the course of this chapter, several significant differences will be

37. CP(BSTI) Report of Industrial Sub-Committee. Draft For Final Revision, n.d., File 5a, Pankhurst Papers.

38. James Klugmann, History Of The Communist Party Of Great Britain Volume One Formation And Early Years 1919-1924, (London, 1968), pages 20-21.

pointed out between the Dreadnought group's views on the unions and the views of Guy Aldred and his comrades. One of these differences concerned the two groups' attitude towards the shop stewards' movement. John Caldwell has explained that in Glasgow during the First World War

"The Anarchists were the absolutists. They were absolutists in the question of military service and the question of working in industry. They were not prepared to compromise and take a job making munitions provided they were paid tuppence an hour. Those who did so were the deviants, were the ones we don't consider in the mainstream of Anarchism... Speaking of the norm, the Anarchists would have nothing to do with munitions or with the armed forces." 39

Guy Aldred shared the Glasgow Anarchists' position. He was imprisoned repeatedly during the War because he refused to be conscripted to fight in an imperialist war from which only the capitalist class would profit. Likewise, he also refused to have anything to do with manufacturing the munitions which millions of workers were using to slaughter each other. Aldred's opposition to the struggles of the shop stewards' movement was founded on his opposition to the capitalist war. He argued afterwards that the shop stewards' aim of taking advantage of the War to bargain for wage rises, reductions in working hours, and so on,

"...contained no suggestion of not erecting capitalist institutions, of not engaging in armament work, of asserting any sort of class-consciousness against the war. Indeed, the workers' committee flourished on war...The idea was merely that of improving the worker's status in the commodity struggle and not to develop his revolutionary opposition to capitalism." 40

"Having this attitude, Aldred was never involved in the Clyde munitions works agitations, from which subsequent careers were made."<sup>41</sup> He was severely critical of those who separated industrial agitation from the question of opposition to the War, and who left their 'revolutionary' politics behind when they entered the munitions factory. Willie Gallacher, for example, was criticised by Aldred as someone who had "...made munitions

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39. Transcribed from tape-recorded interview between Keith Millar and John Caldwell, in personal possession of Keith Millar, Glasgow.

40. Guy Aldred, At Grips With War. (Glasgow, 1929), page 83.

41. John Caldwell, The Red Evangelist: A Biography of Guy Aldred, (unpublished typescript), page 157.

during the war, and atoned for this conduct by delivering Socialist lectures in the dinner hour."<sup>42</sup>

Guy Aldred's attitude towards the shop stewards' movement was not widely held. In a review of one of John Caldwell's accounts of Aldred's life, Alan Campbell describes Aldred as "a character marginal to the organised labour movement on Clydeside", and adds, as if in explanation: "he condemned the munitions workers as 'assassins of their own kindred'..."<sup>43</sup> Yet although Aldred's position was uncommon, it was certainly not unique, and the dismissive attitude of Alan Campbell is not often adopted towards a less "marginal" revolutionary who shared Aldred's point of view. According to Harry McShane, John Maclean also was

"...opposed to the way the Clyde Workers' Committee and the socialists on it were behaving, and I agreed with him. John argued that the main struggle was against the war. Most of the shop stewards were socialists and anti-war, but they had submerged their politics in workshop struggles and were not even mentioning the war inside the factories...This meant that no anti-war fight developed inside the factories; the men were making guns, shells and all kinds of munitions, but the all-important question was never raised."<sup>44</sup>

David Kirkwood, leader of the shop stewards at Beardmore's Parkhead Forge in Glasgow, was an outstanding example of the shop stewards criticised by Maclean and McShane. Kirkwood claimed that he was "against the War", but in his own account of the War years there is scarcely a mention of him engaging in anti-War activity of any sort. He was more than willing to co-operate with any scheme aimed at increasing the output of munitions, so long as it was not to the detriment of the workers' wages and conditions, and seems to have relished the quips that it was really he (Kirkwood), and not the owner Sir William Beardmore, who was actually in charge of running the factory.<sup>45</sup>

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42. Word August 1939.

43. Alan Campbell, review of Ian MacDougall, ed., Essays in Scottish Labour History, in Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin number 39, Autumn 1979, page 87.

44. Harry McShane and Joan Smith, Harry McShane: No Mean Fighter, (London, 1978), pages 77-78.

45. See David Kirkwood, My Life Of Revolt, (London, 1935), Chapters VIII-X.

The attitude of shop stewards such as Kirkwood led John Maclean, in his famous speech in May 1918 from the dock of the High Court, Edinburgh, to condemn not only world-wide capitalism - "...the most infamous, bloody and evil system that mankind has ever witnessed" - but also, with equal vehemence, those workers who had sought to profit from their powerful bargaining position in the munitions industry:

"David Kirkwood...said that the Parkhead Forge workers were then prepared to give a greater output and accept dilution if they, the workers, had some control over the conditions under which the greater output would accrue. That was his contention. Since he has got into position he seems to have boasted that he has got a record output. The question was put to me: Was this consistent with the position and with the attitude of the working class? I said it was not consistent with the attitude and the position of the working class; that his business was to get back right down to the normal, to "ca'canny" so far as the general output was concerned." 46

After the War ended, the political impediment which prevented Aldred from supporting the shop stewards' movement seems to have disappeared; in August 1919 we find him taking up some of the ideas developed in practice by the shop stewards during the War: "Industrially we must repudiate all ideas of static organisation; the unwieldy, bureaucratic, highly centralised Industrial Union idea of peace-time [class] war organisation." Instead, Aldred called for the creation of "...a living unit of organisation in every workshop, and a federation of living units, mobilising, according to necessity, the real red army. This will be accomplished by developing our Workshop Committees."<sup>47</sup> In the same year, the Communist League (formed with Aldred's participation in March 1919) was arguing that communists' main activities should be

"...centred around the formation and work of the Workers' Committees and councils...As members of the working class the Communists enter the workers' committees and councils and by their agitation and education develop and extend the growing class consciousness."

In time the workers' committees would be instrumental in overthrowing the

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46. Maclean's speech is included as Appendix 1 in Guy Aldred, John Maclean, (Glasgow, 1940), pages 52-64.

47. Worker 2 August 1919.

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capitalist system and would then be used to administer communist society.<sup>48</sup>

There were few differences in principle between this approach to the question of industrial organisation, supported by Aldred in 1919, and the more detailed proposals put forward by the CP(BSTI) the following year.

#### Prospects For The Class Struggle.

So far in this chapter we have concentrated on some of the ideas about industrial organisation developed by the anti-parliamentary communists during the First World War and its immediate aftermath, up to 1920. After that date a very different picture begins to emerge. In the rest of this chapter we will be looking at the anti-parliamentarians' ideas and activities after 1920.

The years 1920-1921 marked a turning-point not only in the ideas of the anti-parliamentarians, but also in the fortunes of the shop stewards' movement, and, indeed, of the working class as a whole. If we survey the perspectives put forward in the Workers' Dreadnought during the whole period from 1917 to 1924, we can trace the group's rising and falling expectations concerning the general prospects for revolution. The years 1917-1919 were marked by a confident expectation that the world communist revolution was imminent. These hopes were inspired by the initial success of the revolution in Russia in October 1917: not long after the Bolsheviks' seizure of power, Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that "The Russian Revolution, the first working class revolution in history, is not an isolated event; it is part of the worldwide movement in which the toiling masses are pressing onward to their emancipation."<sup>49</sup> The Dreadnought group's expectations were sustained by the revolutionary upheaval which took place in Germany during and immediately after the final stages of the War: in October 1918 Pankhurst predicted that

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48. Spur March 1919.

49. Workers' Dreadnought 23 February 1918.



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"Great changes must now be looked for in Germany; we may expect to see Government succeed Government, with a tendency ever more towards that revolutionary rank and file Socialism which is now usually described as Bolshevik, and which has established the Soviets in Russia." 50

As late as April 1919, by which time the 'Spartacist Uprising' in Berlin in January 1919 had been crushed and the 'Spartacist' (i.e. KPD) leaders Luxemburg and Liebknecht had been murdered, Pankhurst felt sure that "...Spartacism is on the eve of complete success."<sup>51</sup>

During the following year the Dreadnought's belief in the imminence of the world revolution was less secure. At the Amsterdam conference of the Third International's Western European Sub-Bureau in February 1920, the period was described as one of 'comparative quiescence' in the class struggle.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, in June 1920 the CP(BSTI) was formed in the belief that "...the breakdown of the capitalist machine [was] imminent."<sup>53</sup>

By 1921, however, and during the years that followed, there was no mistaking the Dreadnought's pessimism about the immediate prospects for the revolution. In later years Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that the defeat of the Italian factory occupation movement in September 1920, which brought to a close the 'biennio rosso' ('two red years') marked "the decline of the Post-war revolutionary movement."<sup>54</sup> As we saw in Chapter 2, the introduction of the New Economic Policy in Russia in March 1921 was also interpreted as a sign of the Bolsheviks' abandonment of any hope in the imminence of the world revolution. In February 1921 the Workers' Dreadnought admitted that "...it would be folly to pretend that the hour is fully revolutionary..."<sup>55</sup> In May the paper observed that "A wave of reaction - in places open and covert elsewhere - passes over the Western proletariat in these days...There is yet in front of us here a tremendous

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50. Workers' Dreadnought 19 October 1918.

51. Ibid. 12 April 1919.

52. Ibid. 28 February 1920.

53. Ibid. 31 July 1920.

54. Draft of The Red Twilight (unpublished typescript), File 92-5, Pankhurst Papers.

55. Workers' Dreadnought 5 February 1921.

work of propaganda to be done."<sup>56</sup> At the end of the year, while the revolution was still considered to be "as inevitable as the succession of night and day", it also had to be admitted that "...its progress at present is hidden from sight; its light is shrouded in the mists of apathy and reaction."<sup>57</sup>

The Dreadnought group's comrades in other countries arrived at a similar assessment. One of the messages from the Russian Group of Revolutionary Left Wing Communists published in the Dreadnought in the summer of 1922 agreed that "...the situation of the Proletariat throughout the world is at the present an extremely difficult one..."<sup>58</sup> The following month it was reported that the Fifth Special Conference of the KAPD had also concluded that "...the revolution for the time being is at a standstill..."<sup>59</sup>

In Britain, the shop stewards', workers' committee, and rank-and-file movements, developed by workers in industries such as mining and engineering, had been regarded as forms of organisation which could be used for the overthrow of capitalism. But these movements were largely the product of certain groups of workers' militancy during the War, and during the short post-War boom. Their existence, and their potential as revolutionary organisations, depended on the maintenance of a relatively high level of class struggle. Otherwise, if the level of class struggle declined, these organisations would simply tend to disappear, along with all the revolutionary expectations that had been placed in them. In fact, this is what did happen in Britain after 1920.

The demands of the War economy kept unemployment among engineering, shipbuilding and metal union members below 1% during 1915-1918.<sup>60</sup> During the short-lived post-armistice boom unemployment among these workers

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56. Workers' Dreadnought 28 May 1921.

57. Ibid. 24 December 1921.

58. Ibid. 17 June 1922.

59. Ibid. 29 July 1922.

60. Statistics in this section are taken from Board Of Trade Statistical Department, Statistical Abstract For The United Kingdom, Sixty-Ninth Number, Cmd 2620, (London, 1926), Tables 67, 72, 76, 78 and 79.

remained low: 3.2% in both 1919 and 1920. By 1921, however, the rate had suddenly shot up: 22.1% of engineering, shipbuilding and metal union members were unemployed in 1921, and 27% in 1922.

In 1920 the wages of engineering turners and fitters (who accounted for more than half of all skilled engineering workers) had stood at 230% above their 1914 level. This gives some idea of the material advances that engineering workers had been able to make during the War years. But these gains were soon eroded. By 1921 turners' and fitters' wages had been cut to 200% above their 1914 level, and to 140% above in 1922.

Sharply rising unemployment and cuts in wages were the background to a decline in engineering workers' militancy from 1920 onwards, as the figures for disputes involving stoppages in the metal, engineering and shipbuilding industries show:

Year	Working days 'lost'	Number of workers involved
1919	12,248,000	403,000
1920	3,402,000	179,000
1921	4,420,000	63,000
1922	17,484,000	369,000
1923	5,995,000	61,000
1924	1,400,000	71,000

As the figures show, the one exception to this general downwards trend occurred in 1922, when there was a three-month-long lock-out of engineering workers. Harry McShane describes what happened:

"...the engineers were defeated; the lock out lasted 13 weeks for AEU members, and they returned to much worse working conditions. The union's defeat meant a reduction in wages, not only for them but ultimately for all trades and labourers as well. After the war I got £4 8s. a week as an engineer, but after the lock-out engineers' wages went down to £2 13s." 61

The same pattern was repeated throughout the rest of British industry after the War. Unemployment rose sharply from 1.5% in the autumn of 1920 to 18% by December 1921, and the monthly figures thereafter rarely dropped below 10%. Wages generally were cut from 170% above their

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61. Harry McShane and Joan Smith, op. cit., page 136.

1914 level in 1920 to 110% above in 1921 and then to 70% above in 1922. The cost of living was higher in 1921 than it had been in 1920, while wages had been cut, and although the cost of living fell thereafter it did so at a rate which only partially offset the cuts in wages. The total number of working days 'lost' in disputes involving stoppages in all industries fell, as did the number of workers involved in these stoppages:

Year	Working days 'lost'	Number of workers involved
1919	34,969,000	2,591,000
1920	26,568,000	1,932,000
1921	85,872,000*	1,801,000*
1922	19,850,000	552,000
1923	10,672,000	405,000
1924	8,424,000	613,000

\*(miners' lock-out - see below)

Those geographical areas and sections of the working class which had been at the forefront of the War-time and post-War class struggle were the areas and sections hit hardest by the onset of the post-War depression. In August 1922, the national rate of unemployment stood at 12.8%; on Clydeside it was 27% and in Sheffield it stood at 32%. On Clydeside, engineering and shipbuilding workers accounted for 65% of all unemployed workers, while in Sheffield, iron, steel and engineering workers made up 70% of the total. In the whole of Wales, 44% of unemployed workers were miners, and this percentage was much higher in areas such as South Wales where miners formed a larger proportion of the working population.<sup>62</sup> In his Presidential address to the South Wales Miners' Federation in July 1923, Vernon Hartshorn remarked that

"...he had never known a period when the workmen had been more demoralised than they were during 1922...Wages had been low, unemployment had been extensive and the owners had taken advantage of the general position to attack standard wages and customs which had been in existence for many years."<sup>63</sup>

62. Regional and occupational figures from J.J. Astor and others, The Third Winter Of Unemployment: The Report Of An Enquiry Undertaken In The Autumn Of 1922, (London, 1922).

63. Quoted in Hywel Francis and David Smith, The Fed: A History Of The South Wales Miners In The Twentieth Century, (London, 1980), page 32.

During this period the nature of working class militancy changed. The years before 1920 had seen a generalised class struggle involving a large number of workers from a wide variety of industries, opening up the perspective of unity between different workers' struggles and the possibility of the revolutionary mass strike. After 1920 this prospect had practically disappeared. Workers fought defensive, sectional battles, which were isolated and defeated one by one. This change was illustrated by the year 1921. In April of that year the 'Triple Alliance' of miners', railway workers' and transport workers' unions collapsed: the railway and transport workers' union leaders withdrew their promised support, leaving the miners to fight on their own. Their three-month-long struggle ended in defeat. Of the massive total of more than 85 million working days 'lost' that year, an equally massive total of nearly 80 million were accounted for by locked-out miners. In 1921 nearly two-and-a-half times more working days were 'lost' in strikes as there had been in 1919, but more than a third fewer workers were involved.

Under such circumstances a revolutionary strategy which depended on the development of working class power at the point of production and which sought to build on workers' aggressive pursuit of their demands looked to be relatively hopeless. The rank and file activity of the shop stewards' movement declined rapidly after the end of the War. As unemployment rose, known militants were frequently the first to lose their jobs, through victimisation by employers: "Soon it was a wry joke that the shop steward leaders of 1918 had become the unemployed leaders of the 1920s."<sup>64</sup> Unofficial strikes and militant shopfloor activity no longer challenged the authority of the trade union bureaucracies to the extent that they had done during and immediately after the War. The decline of rank and file activity saw power within the unions shift

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64. James Hinton and Richard Hyman, Trade Unions And Revolution: The Industrial Politics Of The Early British Communist Party, (London, 1975), page 14.

back in favour of the full-time officials. This was consolidated partly by a number of important union amalgamations which, on grounds of sheer size, created the conditions for increased bureaucratisation within the major unions, and partly by the spread of national collective bargaining. Thus in mid-1922 Sylvia Pankhurst observed that

"Undoubtedly a strong move is being made by the Union officials to secure greater power in the Unions and to thrust the rank and file still further into the background ...the Unions become more and more bureaucratic, more and more dominated by the capitalist influence upon the Trade Union leaders, still further removed from rank and file control..." 65

The victimisation of shopfloor activists during the "employers' offensive" was only one aspect of a two-pronged attack on the working class movement that also involved state repression of 'subversives': "In 1921 over 100 'communists' were arrested and jailed for variations on the theme of sedition."<sup>66</sup> Guy Aldred and Sylvia Pankhurst both served lengthy terms of imprisonment during 1921-1922. A leaflet issued by the APCF in 1921 in connection with the prosecution of the Glasgow Communist Group for its publication of the 'seditious' Red Commune spoke of the "...concerted effort on the part of the ruling class at this time to suppress ruthlessly every serious advocate of social transformation in order to preserve the present iniquitous and unjust system." 67

#### 'One Big Union'.

One of the effects of the down-turn in the level of class struggle and the decline of the shop stewards' movement was the re-opening of an old debate within the socialist movement in Britain. Before the First World War, it had been possible to divide socialists into two camps according to the ideas they proposed as solutions to the problems of trade union sectionalism, bureaucracy and reformism. Some socialists - amalgamationists - had advocated working within the existing trade unions with the

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65. Workers' Dreadnought 10 June 1922.

66. John Quail, The Slow Burning Fuse. (London, 1978), page 303.

67. Leaflet issued by John McGovern, Treasurer, APCF Defence And Maintenance Fund, Shettleston, 1921, Bundle 2, Aldred Collection.

aim of converting them into industrial unions through the amalgamation of all unions in each industry. Other socialists - dual unionists - had sought the same end (one union for each industry, or in some cases a single union for all workers) but believed that the existing unions were beyond reform and so advocated building up entirely new unions from scratch.<sup>68</sup>

The forms of organisation developed by the shop stewards' and workers' committee movement during the First World War have been seen as a supersession of the pre-War division between amalgamationists and dual unionists, and to a large extent socialists from these two camps were able to sink their differences and work together in the shop stewards' movement. When the movement declined rapidly after the War, however, the common ground upon which amalgamationists and dual unionists had been able to work together also disappeared. The result was that after 1920 a division between amalgamationists and dual unionists re-appeared.

Practically all the leading militants who had been active within the engineering shop stewards' and miners' rank-and-file movements had entered the CPGB, where they were able to pursue their previous industrial strategy of working for reform of the unions from within the existing structures. After Sylvia Pankhurst's expulsion from the CPGB in 1921 the Dreadnought group was, therefore, cut off politically from its former influences. This explains in part why from the end of 1921 onwards the Dreadnought group moved in the opposite direction and took up a 'dual unionist' position. In August 1921 Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that the working class had to "...fight as one big union of workers to abolish Capitalism".<sup>69</sup> Thereafter, 'One Big Union' became the Dreadnought group's slogan for organisation on the industrial field. The policies which the

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68. See Bob Holton, British Syndicalism 1900-1914: Myths And Realities, (London, 1976).

69. Workers' Dreadnought 27 August 1921.

group had pursued during 1917-1920, of working to build up rank and file movements within the existing unions, to replace reformist leaders with revolutionaries, to democratise trade union structures and practices, and to convert the craft and trade unions into industrial unions, was abandoned completely.

The other part of the explanation for this change of attitude was the group's view that the decline of rank and file activity and the shift of power back to the full-time union officials had rendered obsolete any prospect of hoping to reform the existing unions. In January 1922 Pankhurst argued that trade union rules and structures could not be changed "...without long and hard effort...it must take many years to change them appreciably."<sup>70</sup> In an article addressed to 'The Discontented Worker' in April 1923, Pankhurst argued that the tactic of changing the unions' leadership was mistaken. Those who pursued this policy were "...following in the footsteps of the early Socialists who put Red Flaggers into office, and saw them gradually transformed into the Social Patriots you denounce today." The central problem was not one of leadership but of the very nature of trade unionism itself: "You are dissatisfied with the Union officials - with all Union officials. Is it not time you ceased to blame particular individuals, and decided to abolish the institution itself?"<sup>71</sup> Pankhurst also argued that the conversion of craft unions into industrial unions would still not overcome all the divisions within the working class: "The working class... must break down its craft barriers and its industrial barriers..."<sup>72</sup>

The Dreadnought group's outright opposition to the existing unions, and its rejection of working within them, was included as one of the principles of the Communist Workers' Party programme (February 1922), which stated that the Party sought "To emancipate the workers from Trade Unions which are merely palliative institutions". Following on from this,

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70. Workers' Dreadnought 28 January 1922.

71. Ibid. 21 April 1923.

72. Ibid. 27 August 1921.



the next point of the CWP programme stated that the Party's aim was

"To prepare for the proletarian revolution, by setting up Soviets or workers' councils in all branches of production, distribution and administration, in order that the workers may seize and maintain control.

With this object, to organise One Revolutionary Union:

- (a) built up on the workshop basis, covering all workers, regardless of sex, craft, or grade, who pledge themselves to work for the overthrow of Capitalism and the establishment of the workers' Soviets;
- (b) organised into a department for each industry or service;
- (c) the unemployed being organised as a department of the One Revolutionary Union, so that they may have local and national representation in the workers' Soviets." 73

The Dreadnought group's aim of organising 'One Revolutionary Union' along such lines was taken a step further in September 1922, with the publication of the 'draft constitution' for an All-Workers' Revolutionary Union of Workshop Committees.

The draft constitution stated that the AWRU's aim was "To emancipate the working class in the only possible way: by the overthrow of capitalism and the private property and wage system; and the establishment of a world federation of Communist Industrial Republics..." The AWRU itself would "...serve as the machinery which will enable workers to take control of production, transport and distribution, and administer all services for the benefit of the entire community." The AWRU would support "...every form of industrial and active proletarian struggle which furthers its ultimate aim", as well as engaging in "...propaganda, agitation and action, and all sorts of educational work to promote the spread of class-consciousness and Communist ideals amongst the workers."

The constitution went on to describe the existing unions as "bulwarks of the capitalist system" which

"...by their sectionalism and craft distinctions...prevent the uniting of the workers as a class.

The AWRU rejects the policy of "Boring from within" the old Trade Unions; its object is to supersede them; it fights openly against them."

The conditions of membership proposed in the draft constitution

included prohibitions on taking office in any union except the AWRU, on participating in any trade union-promoted workshop committee, on taking office in any political party unless its object was the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of communism, and on standing for election to Parliament or any local governing body.

Finally, the constitution set out the structure of the AWRU, consisting of tiers of workshop, factory, district, area and national councils, formed by delegates elected from the bottom upwards. The Dreadnought group's continuing concern with the issue of democracy within workers' industrial organisations was reflected in the stipulation that the delegates and 'officials' of the AWRU would be compensated only for expenses and loss of earnings, and that all delegates and 'officials' would be "...subject to recall at any time by those who appointed them. They shall be instructed by, and report to, the bodies they represent."<sup>74</sup> Organisation on a non-centralised basis was another proposal suggested as a way of guaranteeing rank and file control over their own organisations. In April 1923 Sylvia Pankhurst argued that workplace organisations

"...should not aim at being a mere tool, to be ordered about by a directing intelligence from above, nor should it give all direction and responsibility to one of its number, its members either remaining apathetic or following a plan conceived by others. The group should be a group of co-operators, co-operating with other groups for common ends, and aiding those other groups to come to common decisions where joint action is necessary, each group being responsible for its own particular activities." <sup>75</sup>

The same point of view was put forward four months later when Pankhurst wrote that

"The most advanced form of One Big Union, the only one that can be of use to the workers in destroying Capitalism and building Communism, is a union of the rank and file in the workshop committees, autonomous and self-supporting, for local purposes, co-operating freely for joint action when required." <sup>76</sup>

In "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder (1920), Lenin had

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74. Workers' Dreadnought 23 September 1922.

75. Ibid. 21 April 1923.

76. Ibid. 4 August 1923.

criticised the left communists for what he understood as their view that "...Communists cannot and should not work in reactionary trade unions... that it is necessary to leave the trade unions and to create an absolutely brand-new, immaculate "Workers' Union"..."<sup>77</sup> This criticism was not aimed directly at Pankhurst and her comrades in Britain. At the time Lenin was writing, in fact, Pankhurst did not share the left communist attitude attacked by Lenin; Pankhurst's views on the trade unions differed little, if at all, from the views of those who formed the CRGB in 1920 with Lenin's approval. The target of Lenin's criticism in 1920 was the left communists in Germany. During and immediately after the German revolution, tens of thousands of radical workers deserted the trade unions and formed revolutionary 'factory organisations'. In February 1920 these united to form the General Workers' Union of Germany (AAUD). The AAUD was allied closely to the KAPD. Given the close links between the KAPD and the Communist Workers' Party that the Dreadnought group tried to set up in February 1922, it is not implausible to interpret the formation of the AWRU as the Dreadnought group's attempt to establish a British equivalent of the AAUD. The full Programme And Rules of the AAUD (described by the Dreadnought as "One Big Revolutionary Union") were published in the Workers' Dreadnought in November 1921, and the striking resemblance between the AAUD and AWRU programmes points strongly to the conclusion that the Dreadnought group intended to model the AWRU in the image of the AAUD.<sup>78</sup>

However, if we compare more closely the relationship between the KAPD and the AAUD with the relationship between the CWP and the AWRU, we will see that there were crucial differences between the two, and that these differences demonstrate the extent of some of the changes which had taken place in the Dreadnought group's ideas after 1920.

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77. Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder, 1920, (Peking, 1975), page 40.

78. Workers' Dreadnought 5 November 1921.

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In a text on 'The Organisation Of The Proletariat's Class Struggle' (1921), Herman Gorter of the KAPD wrote that

"...it is no longer trades but factories which exercise power and enjoy strength in the new society of today. And which therefore confer strength on the proletariat when it organises itself within them." 79

Dismissing trade unions, therefore, Gorter argued that "...the factory organisation is the organisation for the revolution in Western Europe and North America."<sup>80</sup> He advocated the unification of the factory organisations in each locality, district, region, etc. As noted above, this had already begun to take place, through the formation of the AAUD.

However, Gorter did not believe that the workers could attain revolutionary consciousness and succeed in their struggle against capitalism simply by organising themselves within the factories.<sup>81</sup> He foresaw that the factory organisations might succumb to four grave dangers. Firstly, since "the class situation" of the workers meant that they "...urgently need small improvements and reforms and defence against the conditions of life deteriorating", there was a danger that the factory organisation would become 'opportunist' or 'reformist'.<sup>82</sup> Secondly, the factory organisation might fall prey to 'individualism', if a particular leader, factory or locality put its own interests before those of the working class as a whole. The third danger was 'utopianism'; again because of their class position, workers might be unable to achieve a sufficiently broad over-view of the entire political situation, and might over-estimate their power through being "insufficiently acquainted with reality".<sup>83</sup> The fourth danger to which the factory organisations might succumb, of being 'insufficiently well-informed', was related to the previous danger: the workers

79. Herman Gorter, 'The Organisation Of The Proletariat's Class Struggle', 1921, in D.A. Smart, ed., Pannekoek And Gorter's Marxism. (London, 1978), pages 155-156.

80. Ibid., page 157.

81. Some KAPD members, notably the followers of Otto Ruhle, did hold this view. They eventually dissolved their branches of the KAPD into the AAUD to form the AAUD-E ('Unitary Organisation'). The programme of the AAUD-E was published in the Workers' Dreadnought 20 October 1923.

82. Gorter, op. cit., pages 159-160.

83. Ibid., page 160.

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"...are not sufficiently acquainted with economics and politics, with national and international political and economic events, their connection with and significance for the revolution...Therefore, they do not know the right time to act. They act when they ought not to and do not act when they ought to. They will often make mistakes." 84

Gorter did not mean that all workers were 'opportunist', 'reformist', 'individualist', 'utopian' or 'insufficiently well-informed'. Gorter argued that the class-conscious minority of the working class who did have "large and profound understanding" should not remain dispersed among the various factory organisations; instead, they should unite within a single organisation, "And this organisation is the communist political party..."<sup>85</sup> Again, this was a process which had already started, with the formation of the KAPD in April 1920. The KAPD's 'Theses On The Role Of The Party' stated that the party "...groups together the most conscious and prepared proletarian fighters..."<sup>86</sup> The necessity for the party was also acknowledged in the 'Programme And Rules' of the AAUD, which stated that

"The AAU...stands for the uniting of the most advanced revolutionary proletarians in a separate political organisation of purely proletarian-Communist character. It thereby recognises the political organisations united in the Communist Workers' International as necessary to the class struggle." 87

The political platform of the factory organisations was a diluted version of the party's programme. The factory organisations were open to all revolutionary workers, including, but not only, members of the KAPD.<sup>88</sup>

As Herman Gorter explained:

"The factory organisation endows its members with the most general understanding of the revolution, e.g. the nature and significance of the workers' councils (soviets) and of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The party comprises the proletarians whose understanding is much broader and deeper." 89

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84. Gorter, op.cit., page 160.

85. Ibid., page 161.

86. KAPD, 'Theses On The Role Of The Party In The Proletarian Revolution', July 1921, in Revolutionary Perspectives 2, n.d., page 72; also published as 'The Main Questions Of Revolutionary Tactics' in Workers' Dreadnought 17 December 1921.

87. Workers' Dreadnought 5 November 1921.

88. KAPD, 'Theses On The Role Of The Party', page 73.

89. Gorter, op. cit., page 162.



who pledge themselves to work for the overthrow of Capitalism and the establishment of the workers' Soviets' (as the CWP programme proposed originally), membership of the AWRU was conditional on acceptance of all six of the above-mentioned points.

Judging from an examination of the programmes of the two organisations, there would appear to be nothing to differentiate the CWP from the AWRU. In marked contrast to the relationship between Party and Union explained in the German left communists' writings, in the Dreadnought group's scheme the AWRU simply appears to have superseded the CWP; the Party was now redundant, its role and programme taken over completely by the Union. Whereas Herman Gorter argued that, by itself, "the factory organisation is not sufficient",<sup>93</sup> and insisted on the necessity for separate political organisation, the Dreadnought group seems to have believed that the factory organisation (AWRU) would suffice on its own.

In "Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder" Lenin accused the left communists of being "anti-politicals, the opponents of a political party";<sup>94</sup> he spoke of them in the same breath as the anti-party syndicalists of the IWW.<sup>95</sup> This was a complete misrepresentation of the views of the majority of the German left communists, who, as we have seen, were firm believers in the necessity of political organisation - even if they differed from the Bolsheviks over the precise role that the party would play during the revolution. However, Lenin's remarks, written in 1920, do seem an apt description of the Dreadnought group's views after 1921. In mid-1920, the CP(BSTI) had described itself as "the spearhead of the revolution". It had been formed in the belief that "...effective action in the coming struggle must be the work of a minority of convinced Communists..."; the task of the CP(BSTI) was "...TO ORGANISE THIS REVOLUTIONARY MINORITY THAT IT MAY BE READY TO SEIZE POWER IN THE HOUR

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93. Gorter, op.cit., page 159.

94. Lenin, op. cit., page 113.

95. Ibid., page 46.

OF CRISIS."<sup>96</sup> Barely two years later, the Dreadnought group had abandoned this emphasis on the leading revolutionary role of the separate political organisation, and had adopted an 'anti-political', 'syndicalist' approach to revolution.

The Dreadnought group's downgrading of the importance of political organisation, in favour of organisation on an industrial basis, may seem surprising in view of the circumstances prevailing at the time. If the prospects for industrial activity and organisation are unpromising (as they were after 1920), there is frequently a compensatory upgrading of the importance of political organisation. However, the Dreadnought group's views should be related to the international dimensions of the down-turn in the class struggle, and in particular to the group's views on the reasons for the defeat of the revolution in Russia. As we saw in Chapter 2, in July 1922 the Dreadnought argued that 'until the workers are organised industrially on Soviet lines, and able to hold their own and control industry, a successful Soviet Communist revolution cannot be carried through'. The state capitalist system that had emerged in Russia was a warning of what would happen if power was seized by a political party, instead of by the workers' own mass organisations. The importance attached to industrial organisation through the AWRU by the Dreadnought can thus be seen as, in part, an attempt to ensure that any future revolution would not fail for the same reasons that had accounted for its defeat in Russia.

#### The AWRU: Forerunner Or Non-Starter?

The view that the organisations formed to struggle within capitalism would pre-figure the administrative institutions of communist society was an important aspect of the Dreadnought group's post-1921 proposals for 'One Big Union'. As we have seen, the CWP programme called for the

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96. Workers' Dreadnought 31 July 1920.



organisation of 'One Revolutionary Union' in preparation for the 'proletarian revolution' during which workers would 'seize and maintain control' of 'production, distribution and administration'. When the All-Workers' Revolutionary Union was formed in September 1922, it was intended to 'serve as the machinery which will enable workers to take control of production, transport and distribution'. As Sylvia Pankhurst wrote in May 1924, the AWRU's purpose was to "...create the councils in the workshops in order that they may dispossess the Capitalist and afterwards carry on under Communism."<sup>97</sup> During 1917-1920 the Dreadnought group had criticised the existing trade unions from the standpoint of revolutionaries wishing to see the emergence of organisations which workers would use to struggle against capitalism, overthrow the system, and thereafter administer communist society. The idea behind the formation of the AWRU was no different. In the later period the Dreadnought group had the same long-term aim as before but sought to effect this aim by different means.

Articles in the Workers' Dreadnought used a great number of terms to describe the administrative organisations of communist society: soviets, industrial soviets, industrial parliaments, workers' councils, councils of workers' delegates, national assemblies of local workers' committees, a world federation of workers' industrial republics, a world-wide federation of communist republics administered by occupational soviets, and so on. Despite the variety of linguistic garb, the ideas which these terms expressed were all essentially similar. They reveal the Dreadnought group's view of the fundamental features of communist administration; it would be industrially-based, with the basic unit being the workshop; only workers would be allowed to participate in administration; representatives would be mandated delegates. In other words, the institutions of communist society would share the same basic features as the workers'

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97. Workers' Dreadnought 10 May 1924.

organisations formed to overthrow capitalism. In February 1922 Pankhurst wrote that

"...the Soviets, or workers' occupational councils, will form the administrative machinery for supplying the needs of the people in Communist society; they will also make the revolution by seizing control of all the industries and services of the community." 98

The 'One Big Union' was an embryonic Soviet; the Soviet was a fully-developed 'One Big Union'. This is what the Dreadnought meant in 1923 when it stated that "Communism and the All-Workers' Revolutionary Union are synonymous."<sup>99</sup>

However, if we look at the historical experiences upon which the Dreadnought group could have drawn - the revolutions in Russia in 1905 and 1917, and in Germany in 1919 - we can see that there were no historical precedents to support the idea that soviets or workers' councils would emerge through the development of 'One Big Union'.

The first soviets of the 1905 Russian revolution were not pre-figured by any industrial organisations like the AWRU. In his study of the soviets, Oskar Anweiler argues that the mass strike movements from which the 1905 soviets emerged "did not rely on trade-union or political organisations."<sup>100</sup> In fact, Anweiler argues that the absence of unions of any sort was one of the main reasons for the soviets' emergence: "Lack of a strong class organisation fostered spontaneous self-help in the form of soviets and the absence of semiproletarian organisations (unions, parties) enabled the soviets to become associations of the entire proletariat."<sup>101</sup> The emergence of the soviets in Russia during the February revolution of 1917 presents a similar picture:

"It was as important for the 1917 soviets as for the 1905 soviets that the Russian working class had no other strong organisations. Neither political parties...nor trade unions...were then in a position to organise and lead large masses of people. The soviets, therefore, were in many respects substitutes for absent or feeble unions and parties." 102

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98. Workers' Dreadnought 4 February 1922.

99. Ibid. 8 September 1923.

100. Oskar Anweiler, The Soviets: The Russian Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Councils 1905-1921, (New York, 1974), page 37.

101. Ibid. page 51.

102. Ibid., page 111.

The example of the workers' councils thrown up during the German revolution of 1918 is similarly lacking in any precedents for the Dreadnought group's scheme. The factory organisations of the AAUD - upon which the AWRU was modelled - did not precede the revolution and the formation of the workers' councils; the factory organisations were themselves thrown up during and after the revolution. By the time the AAUD was formed (February 1920) the workers' councils had been incorporated into the fabric of the new Republic as advisory councils in the running of industry and the economy. The AAUD's attempts to revive councils as revolutionary bodies met with scant success.

Although the fact that events have occurred in one way in the past does not rule out the possibility that they might occur differently in the future, the fact that in these three instances soviets emerged without the prior existence of 'One Big Union' suggests that, at the very least, a union such as the AWRU was not an essential pre-condition for the formation of soviets. The point is, however, that the situation in Britain after 1921 was in no way comparable to the situations which had existed in Russia in 1905 and 1917 and in Germany in 1918.

In Russia and Germany the soviets had been a spontaneous product of mass struggle. Before 1921, it had been from mass strike movements that the Dreadnought group had expected soviets to emerge. In May 1919, for example, Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that "...what will actually achieve our goal is the general strike and the setting up of Soviets or Councils by large bodies of workers, soldiers and sailors."<sup>103</sup> In October 1920 the Dreadnought's advice to miners about to vote in a strike ballot was that they should "Work to bring about the strike. Work to extend the strike to all industries. Work to enlarge the objects of the strike to the overthrow of Capitalism, and the establishment of Soviets."<sup>104</sup> The necessity of any pre-existing revolutionary workers' union, such as the

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103. Workers' Dreadnought 10 May 1919.

104. Ibid. 16 October 1920.

AWRU, was not mentioned during this period.

After 1921, however, circumstances were very different. A demoralised working class faced high unemployment, rank and file activity had declined drastically, and trade union amalgamations were strengthening the union bureaucracies. This was hardly the most favourable climate for the construction of brand-new industrial organisations of any sort, let alone revolutionary ones. Yet it was in exactly these circumstances that the Dreadnought group attempted to launch the AWRU. The declining number of strikes that did take place focused mainly on defensive, 'economistic' issues, and took place among the working class section by section, rather than generally and simultaneously. In circumstances such as these, the idea that the AWRU might develop into a soviet-type organisation, uniting and extending strikes, developing them politically, and challenging the power of the capitalist state, bore little relation to the actual level of class struggle and the preoccupations of most workers.

This was a situation quite unlike the one in Russia in 1905 or 1917 or in Germany in 1918. There was little chance of soviets emerging 'spontaneously' as the product of mass struggle - for the simple reason that there was no mass struggle going on. However, if workers' councils were unlikely to emerge spontaneously, perhaps an alternative strategy would be to 'force' their emergence 'artificially', by preparing the way for their development through an organisation such as the AWRU? Yet even this strategy would appear to have been over-ambitious on the context of the post-1921 period. It is difficult to see what activities the AWRU could have actually involved itself in after 1921. Its draft constitution stated that it would not take on the role of bargaining and negotiating within capitalism (e.g. over wages, hours, working conditions, etc.), but there was little prospect of the class struggle having any other content at this time. Apart from 'converting' individual workers to socialism, one by one, through its propaganda, the most the AWRU could have done

would have been to wait, until the next upsurge in class struggle and class consciousness. Yet such an upsurge would have provided exactly the sort of circumstances in which, as the Russian and German examples had shown, soviets might have arisen, but in which the existence of the AWRU would have made little difference to whether they did or not.

The unpromising circumstances prevailing in Britain after 1920 were not the only factors stacked against the AWRU's chances of success. Longer-term historical conditions were also against it. To return to the pre-War division between 'amalgamationists' and 'dual unionists' mentioned earlier, these groups could be separated further into 'political' and 'anti-political' camps.<sup>105</sup> 'Political' in this context could range from retention of individual party membership to an attachment to electoral politics more or less subordinated to the direct action of industrial struggle. 'Anti-political' implied a rejection of political parties and electoral politics and was frequently linked in some way to the anarchist movement. Of the four possible permutations, the 'political-amalgamationist' quarter had been the most thickly populated before the First World War. 'Political-dual unionism' also had an important advocate, namely, the Socialist Labour Party. The most barren quarter, however, had been 'anti-political-dual unionism' - the position adopted by the Dreadnought group after 1921.

Dual unionism had been the least fruitful area in which to work because the idea of building completely new unions from scratch appeared to be unsuited to Britain. Dual unionism seemed to make its greatest progress in the United States, through the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The working class in the USA was relatively mobile in geographical and occupational terms. The archetypal 'wobblies' (IWW members) were the 'bums' who travelled the length and breadth of the country on the tramp or by the railroad, taking work wherever they could

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105. See Holton, op. cit.

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find it. Many workers had no attachment to any particular factory or occupation; they could regard themselves as part of 'one big class' and thus recognise the need for 'one big union'. Moreover, a rejection of 'political' activity in favour of organisation 'on the job' came naturally to the many immigrant workers within the IWW who were not entitled to vote. However, the level of unionisation outside of craft workers was relatively low in the United States; the IWW recruited its members predominantly from the large numbers of previously unorganised workers. Where it existed, in fact, the IWW was more often than not the only union, rather than the 'dual unionist' model of a revolutionary organisation formed in direct opposition to an already-existing reformist craft union. None of the factors that led to the growth of the IWW in the first decade of the 1900s pertained in Britain during the same period. Compared to its American comrades, the British working class was relatively immobile in geographical and occupational terms, and trade union organisation was at a sufficiently high level to be able to recruit unorganised workers into the existing unions. Attempts to set up new unions necessarily had to be in opposition to the existing unions and could be portrayed as divisive of the working class unity which the existing unions were said to have achieved.

The actual fate of the AWRU was, in fact, far more eloquent testimony to the shortcomings of its founders' ideas than all the criticisms which have been raised so far. In reality, the AWRU does not seem to have had any sort of existence other than in the pages of the Workers' Dreadnought.

The draft constitution of the AWRU was published on 23 September 1922, and in the Dreadnought of 7 October 1922 workers were urged to set up AWRU branches. A fortnight later the paper carried the news that a branch had been established in Grantham, but that seems to have marked the fullest extent of the organisation's 'growth'.

In July 1923 an article addressed 'To The Miners Of Great Britain',

and signed by 'A.O.S.D.M.', was published in the Dreadnought. This announced that the AWRU was contemplating an intensive propaganda campaign to promote the idea of building 'One Big Union' to seize control of industry and administer society. The author admitted, however, that "There are no funds...We are few. The revolutionary truth has few spokesmen."<sup>106</sup>

In September 1923 the Dreadnought published another article by the same author, which stated that "From replies to the recent article, 'To The Miners Of Great Britain', it is obvious that revolutionary sentiment, and the will to propagate and accomplish its end, is not dead." This second article was titled 'Where Is The AWRU?', and in reply to this question 'A.O.S.D.M.' wrote that "Seemingly its half-developed, swaddled form is nurtured in the minds of hundreds, aye thousands of comrades."<sup>107</sup> Despite the evident optimism of these remarks, however, the AWRU seems to have disappeared without trace.

#### The Unemployed Workers' Organisation.

Given the objective conditions of the period after 1920, and in particular the high rate of unemployment in Britain, it is hardly surprising that the AWRU made rather less progress than another Dreadnought-sponsored body, the Unemployed Workers' Organisation.

The Manifesto of the UWO was published in the Dreadnought on 7 July 1923, and its Rules and Constitution a fortnight later. The UWO was formed in opposition to the CPGB-dominated National Unemployed Workers' Movement by unemployed workers who were opposed to the NUWM's "reformist" demand for 'work or full maintenance', and to the NUWM's intention of affiliating to the Labour Party and the TUC.<sup>108</sup> The secretary of the UWO was G.E. Soderberg, who had been in the NUWM and

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106. Workers' Dreadnought 14 July 1923.

107. Ibid. 8 September 1923.

108. Ibid. 1 September 1923.

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who had tried to persuade Harry McShane to stand against Wal Hannington in the elections for the post of national organiser at the third national conference of the NUWM in April 1923.<sup>109</sup>

The Dreadnought group was not instrumental in setting up the UWO, but an editorial in the paper stated that

"Having read its declaration of principles, and believing these were tending towards our own direction, and an improvement on those of the older organisation of the unemployed, we agreed to allow the new organisation to ventilate its views in this paper so far as considerations of space and policy may permit." 110

The Manifesto of the UWO was modelled virtually word-for-word on the 1908 Preamble of the Chicago IWW (the Chicago IWW was the 'anti-political' wing of the IWW, as opposed to the practically non-existent 'political' Detroit wing). The UWO Manifesto declared, in the words of the IWW Preamble, and in similar vein to the constitution of the AWRU, that "By organising industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old."<sup>111</sup> The Dreadnought's editorial endorsement of this Manifesto is an indication of the group's movement in the direction of syndicalism after 1921.

Compared to the AWRU, the UWO's rise was positively meteoric. The first reports of its progress were given in the Dreadnought at the beginning of August 1923. The entire Edmonton NUWM branch (600 members) had resigned and joined the UWO. In East London, UWO branches in Poplar, Bow, Bromley and Millwall were "going strong". In South London many NUWM branches were practically "dead": the Lambeth branch had disaffiliated, and after mass resignations the Camberwell NUWM branch had been left with only four members. "Branch after branch is dropping away from the old Movement and joining the new. As fast as the members are dropping out of the NUWM they are coming into the UWO."<sup>112</sup> A fortnight later it was

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109. Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *op. cit.*, page 150.

110. Workers' Dreadnought 4 August 1923.

111. Ibid. 7 July 1923.

112. Ibid. 4 August 1923.



reported that "...the Unemployed Workers' Organisation has progressed with remarkable rapidity"; the South West Ham NUWM branch, for example, had resigned from the NUWM and applied to affiliate to the UWO.<sup>113</sup> Membership of the Bow UWO branch was said to have reached 500 in September 1923 and 600 in October. The branches in Poplar and Millwall were also growing in size.<sup>114</sup> At the end of September the UWO organised the violently-attacked demonstration against the Poplar Board of Guardians (see Chapter 3). In January 1924 a branch was being formed in Leeds, and the total membership of the London branches had reached "well over 3000". The UWO was "...still going strong and the membership is increasing by leaps and bounds."<sup>115</sup>

No doubt the growth of the UWO was encouraging to the Dreadnought group, but its significance should not be overestimated. The Manifesto of the organisation stated that the working class had to

"...take possession of the earth and machinery of production, and abolish the wage system. The army of production must be organised not only for the everyday struggle with Capitalism, but also to carry on production when Capitalism shall have been overthrown."<sup>116</sup>

However, the UWO did not organise the 'army of production'. It organised an army out of production. Precisely because the UWO was an organisation of the unemployed, there was no way that it could have fulfilled the aims stated in its own Manifesto. As unemployed workers the UWO's members were in no position, strategically, to wield the sort of power which would have enabled them to 'take over the means of production'. The faster the UWO grew, the more this basic flaw in its strategy was exposed. And the faster the unemployed workers' organisation grew, the more it pointed to the lack of viability of any workplace organisations such as the AWRU.

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113. Workers' Dreadnought 18 August 1923.

114. Ibid. 1 September and 20 October 1923.

115. Ibid. 19 January 1924.

116. Ibid. 7 July 1923.

### Revolutionary Organisation: Two Views.

A simple lesson can be drawn from the episode of the stillborn AWRU. Mass organisations with revolutionary aspirations are the product of periods of upsurge in the class struggle when large numbers of workers are drawn into conflict with the existing order and with established ideas. They cannot be set up successfully in the absence of such conditions. The Dreadnought group's attempt to establish a mass revolutionary organisation in a distinctly non-revolutionary period may have been a tribute to its optimism and to its perceptiveness concerning some of the shortcomings of trade unionism, but it was also a condemnation of the group's sense of reality and timing.

In contrast to the Dreadnought group, Guy Aldred seems to have had a far greater awareness of the close link between the level of class struggle and the possibilities for organisation. By 1920, Aldred had recognised that with the quickening decline of the post-War revolutionary wave the prospect of the shop stewards' and workers' committee movement functioning as a revolutionary movement infused with communist content was receding. Replying to John S. Clarke's assertion that the workers' committees "which are gradually arising throughout the country" were the "only legitimate British equivalent to the Russian soviets", Aldred argued that "It is possible he is exaggerating the part played by the Workers' Committees. Our own opinion is that the actual Industrial Committee arises out of the commodity struggle, and tends to function as the organ of that struggle."<sup>117</sup> If nothing except 'commodity struggles' (i.e. struggles contained wholly within the framework of capitalism) were on the agenda of the day, then the workers' committees faced one or other of two fates. Either they would 'function as the organ' of the 'commodity struggle', playing a reformist role and lapsing into a form of radical trade unionism, or, if they did not take on trade unionist

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117. Spur March 1920.

functions of bargaining and negotiation but instead tried to preserve their revolutionary aims, they would end up as "...small associations for propaganda...unable to enter into the direct proletarian struggle for emancipation." This was the prognosis put forward by the Glasgow Communist Group in October 1920 and repeated by Guy Aldred two years later.<sup>118</sup>

In his study of the Spanish civil war, Vernon Richards makes the following pertinent remarks about two different approaches to the question of organisation:

"To be consistent, the anarcho-syndicalist must, we believe, hold the view that the reason why the workers are not revolutionary is that the trade unions are reformist and reactionary; and that their structure prevents control from below and openly encourages the emergence of a bureaucracy which takes over all initiative into its own hands, etc. This seems to us a mistaken view. It assumes that the worker, by definition, must be revolutionary instead of recognising that he is as much the product (and the victim) of the society he lives in...In other words, the trade unions are what they are because the workers are what they are, and not vice versa. And for this reason, those anarchists who are less interested in the revolutionary workers' organisation, consider the problem of the organisation as secondary to that of the individual;...we have no fears that when sufficient workers have become revolutionaries they will, if they think it necessary, build up their own organisations. This is quite different from creating the revolutionary organisation first and then looking for the revolutionaries (in the reformist trade unions in which most workers are to be found) afterwards."<sup>119</sup>

Richards' remarks have been quoted at length because they illustrate so accurately the differences between the Dreadnought group on the one hand and Aldred and his comrades on the other. In January 1924 an article

118. Spur October 1920; Worker 26 August 1922. According to J.T. Murphy, a similar view was held by English shop stewards around 1919: "The leaders of the English Movement held the view that soviets can be created by the masses only when the historical situation is such that the masses are involved in their creation in the midst of a revolutionary situation. Any attempt by a revolutionary minority to form them under other conditions would result only in the formation of propaganda groups favourable to soviets, but not the actual organisation of soviets." J.T. Murphy, Preparing For Power: A Critical Study of the History of the British Working Class Movement, 1934, (London, 1972), page 189.

119. Vernon Richards, Lessons Of The Spanish Revolution (1936-1939), (London, 1983), page 198.

in the Workers' Dreadnought stated that "...during 1921-1922, when the wages of workers were being ruthlessly attacked, the men were prepared to fight but were held back, and consequently let down, by the men they trusted - their officials."<sup>120</sup> This was a common image in the Dreadnought's accounts of industrial struggles: a combative and militant rank and file restrained and betrayed by cautious and conservative union bureaucrats. The attempt to set up the AWRU in 1922 was founded on exactly the attitude criticised by Richards: that a new organisation had to be created in which the workers' revolutionary spirit could be allowed untrammelled expression rather than meeting with suppression as it did within the trade unions.

Guy Aldred's attitude to the question of organisation, on the other hand, was far closer to the position supported by Richards. Part of the reason for this may have been that Aldred himself had already passed through, and later come to repudiate, a period of supporting dual unionism.

In 1907, after resigning from the Social Democratic Federation, Aldred had collaborated with John Turner to set up the Industrial Union of Direct Actionists (IUDA), with the Voice Of Labour newspaper as the organisation's journal. The IUDA's aim was "...to organise the workers on a revolutionary economic basis...", opposing palliation, all political parties, and the existing trade unions. Its weapons were to be "Direct Action and the Social General Strike".<sup>121</sup> Aldred's view at this time was that "...the workers had to build their own social organisation and evolve their political expression of organisation within the womb of the old society."<sup>122</sup> The IUDA would fill this need. John Caldwell explains that the IUDA's "target" was "...the decentralised organisation

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120. Workers' Dreadnought 5 January 1924.

121. Guy Aldred, No Traitor's Gait! Volume Two number 3, (Glasgow, 1958), page 359.

122. Guy Aldred, No Traitor's Gait! Volume One number 5, (Glasgow, 1956), page 113.

of the workers in a pattern which would emerge on the advent of the revolution as a federation of Communes."<sup>123</sup> Clearly, therefore, in 1907 Guy Aldred supported the sort of pre-figurative organisation which the Dreadnought group proposed fifteen years later when the AWRU was formed.

Aldred soon realised, however, that the IUDA could not fulfil the revolutionary role assigned to it so long as its members held non-revolutionary ideas. What was needed was an educational, propagandist organisation to work alongside the IUDA in order to spread revolutionary communist ideas among the workers. Not long after the IUDA was formed, therefore, Aldred began to set up Communist Propaganda Groups around the country, in order to infuse the IUDA with communist principles. As it turned out, the Communist Propaganda Groups long out-lived the IUDA. Thereafter Aldred consistently put the need for propaganda before the need for organisation, and abandoned his support for dual unionism.

In 1913 Aldred opposed John Muir of the SLP in a public debate about whether or not industrial unionism could 'emancipate the working class'. Aldred "...insisted that it was only possible to work for Industrial Unionism by postponing Socialism and side-tracking Socialist propaganda."<sup>124</sup> Six years later, in April 1919, Aldred debated the same question with T.L. Smith of the Workers' International Industrial Union. Aldred argued that "The workers functioned under capitalist society as so much commodities...and though they had an industrial union, their position remained the same." Industrial unions could have just as much of a "palliative purpose" as trade unions.<sup>125</sup> Aldred's view was that it was pointless to propagandise for the type of organisation which would bring about socialism, because even if the working class was equipped with such an organisation, it would still require communist

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123. John Caldwell, The Red Evangel, page 89.

124. Commune September 1923.

125. Spur August 1919.

consciousness; without this revolutionary consciousness the industrial union would function only as a reformist organisation. The most direct route to revolution would be through propaganda aimed at developing communist ideas among the working class. This was why, in Aldred's opinion, propaganda with any other aim, such as the establishment of industrial unions, would be merely 'postponing' or 'side-tracking' socialism. In Dogmas Discarded Aldred summed up his attitude towards industrial unionism: "Industrial unionism was a question of machinery and method. It was never one of principle or philosophy...It ignored the reality of Socialism, the need for Idealism, and so promoted confusion."<sup>126</sup> In other words, there was no such thing as an inherently revolutionary form of organisation. 'Machinery', i.e. the organisation, could only function in a revolutionary manner if those who operated the machinery (the organisation's members) were themselves revolutionaries.

Aldred's comrades shared this point of view. In 1917 the Spur published an account, written by Jim Griffiths, of a series of lectures held at the Communist Club in Ammanford, South Wales. The Communist Club or 'White House' in Ammanford had been funded by the Kodak director George Davison, who was also one of the benefactors of the original Glasgow Anarchist Group. "From its classes and gatherings emerged a team of young men and women who became leaders in the industrial and political life of the valleys in the post-war years and their influence lasted beyond the time of the closing of the White House."<sup>127</sup> Jim Griffiths became President of the South Wales Miners' Federation (1934-1936), Labour MP for Llanelli in 1936, and held various Ministerial posts in Labour Governments after the Second World War. In 1917, however, his view was that

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126. Guy Aldred, Dogmas Discarded: An Autobiography Of Thought Part II 1902-1908, (Glasgow, 1940), pages 58-59.

127. James Griffiths, Pages From Memory, (London, 1969), pages 20-21. See also Hywel Francis, Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War, (London, 1984), page 204, and Guy Aldred, Dogmas Discarded: An Autobiography Of Thought Part II 1902-1908, page 71.

"...the great mass of the workers...at present are an easy prey to the wiles of the Capitalist Class, and what is worse, to the ineptitude of their self-appointed leaders. We must aim at securing an intelligent class-conscious rank and file. In order to achieve this the paramount need is knowledge. Educate! Educate! Educate! must be our first work. Then we can discuss the question of organisation..." 128

Rose Witcop agreed with these priorities. Replying to a letter from a reader complaining that "I have not seen any constructive details in the Spur", Witcop wrote that

"The complaint of lacking constructiveness which is levelled against the Spur is a common one, among those who are young in the movement. We believe that it is enough at present to point out the many evils from which we suffer today; whilst in discussing freely first principles we are helping along a mental reconstruction which is preparing us for the social change." 129

Aldred and his comrades believed that socialism could be established only by a socialist working class; the only worthwhile activity for revolutionaries to engage in before the revolution was that of 'making socialists', and this could not be done except through undiluted propaganda for socialism. The account of the 1919 debate between Aldred and T.L. Smith reported that "...[Aldred's] method was to make Socialists first in order to bring about Socialism. But industrial unionism aimed at organising the workers without making them Socialists."<sup>130</sup> Aldred believed that when the workers were aware of the need for communism they would create whatever form of organisation they needed in the course of the revolution itself. The recent history of the working class's struggles, and in particular the 1917 Russian revolution, suggested that these organisations would take the form of the soviets or workers' councils, but these organisations could not be established in embryo before their hour of need. Thus Aldred did not share the Dreadnought group's attachment to the formation of a pre-figurative organisation. In June 1923, when Aldred and Pankhurst opposed each other in a public

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128. Spur March 1917.

129. Ibid. July 1917.

130. Ibid. August 1919.

debate about the question 'Is industrial organisation necessary before the social revolution?', Pankhurst affirmed this necessity and Aldred denied it.<sup>131</sup>

In contrast to the Dreadnought group, Aldred advocated "Spontaneous Social Revolution".<sup>132</sup> This was a phrase used frequently by Aldred. Rose Witcop explained its meaning by reference to the Russian revolution. The organisations that had carried out the October revolution had not been set up in advance by any small group of leaders, nor had they developed out of any previously-established organisations; the soviets had been thrown up by the revolutionary struggle itself, that is, 'spontaneously'.<sup>133</sup> The soviets, Aldred and his comrades argued, would not emerge until the hour of the revolution had arrived. Thus in October 1920 the Glasgow Communist Group stated that while it disagreed "emphatically" with "...the idea of supporting or working for workers' committees as at present existing...", it "heartily" supported "...the Soviet or Revolutionary Workers' Council System as it will be developed during the transition stage and after the Revolution..."<sup>134</sup> Likewise, Guy Aldred wrote that in his view the idea of Industrial Unionism only made sense if it was taken to mean "...nothing more than the industrial organisation created not before but after the establishment of the Soviet Republic. It will be part of the new machinery of production."<sup>135</sup>

After 1920, there seems to have been little common ground between the Dreadnought group on the one hand, and Guy Aldred and his comrades

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131. Workers' Dreadnought 23 June and 7 July 1923. The APCF also disagreed with the KAPD's view that workers should desert the existing trade unions and form revolutionary factory organisations, as had happened to some extent during the German revolution. A footnote to a KAPD text published in the Commune in 1925 stated that "...the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation does not believe in, and cannot understand either the need for or the possibility of factory organisation. On this point the APCF differs from the KAPD." Commune November 1925.

132. Commune March 1924.

133. Spur October 1918.

134. Ibid. October 1920.

135. Worker 2 August 1919.



on the other, with regard to the issue of industrial organisation. While both groups shared more or less the same critique of the existing trade unions, they disagreed over what, if anything, should take their place.

There are things to be said in support of both sides in the argument. Aldred's group were right to point out that mass revolutionary organisations could not be expected to emerge except during the heat of the revolutionary battle itself. They were perceptive in seeing that attempts to sustain or set up such organisations in a period of declining class struggle could not succeed. During such periods mass organisations could exist only on the basis of reformism; revolutionary organisations could maintain their communist principles but not hope to preserve or attract mass support.

While it was one of the basic tenets of anti-parliamentarism that certain forms of organisation were inherently reactionary, in the sense that they prevented the active participation of the mass of workers in the struggle, this did not necessarily mean that there could be forms of organisation which were inherently revolutionary. Thus Aldred and his comrades were right to stress the importance of propaganda for communism - the goal which the 'revolutionary' organisations were intended to achieve. But here the argument becomes more complex. Trade unionism could be said to be a hindrance to workers' struggles in two senses. Firstly, trade unionism embodies a particular set of notions which condition the way workers think they should set about organising and conducting their struggles, and the aims to which they think they can aspire. In this sense revolutionaries had to oppose the ideology of trade unionism with another set of ideas: the socialist critique of capitalism, and propaganda for the communist alternative.

However, revolutions do not break out overnight when workers are suddenly converted to a new vision of society. Revolutions develop out of the most mundane of struggles. And it is here that workers confront

trade unionism in its material form: its rule books, its divisiveness, its bureaucracy and its oligarchy. Now the argument shifts in favour of the Dreadnought group. On its own, a rejection of the trade unions, and the development of new forms of organisation - constructed where the potential power of the working class lay, and designed to facilitate the active participation of all workers in their own struggles - would not have been a sufficient condition for the success of the revolution. But what is equally certain is that capitalism could not have been overthrown without the self-organisation and mass activity which the forms of organisation proposed by the Dreadnought group were intended to foster.

In one sense the ideas of the two groups after 1920 can be seen as polar opposites. But perhaps this appearance is deceptive. In another, more fruitful sense, they can be seen as representing two sides to a dilemma that was impossible to resolve in the circumstances of the time. Revolutionaries can be torn between two impulses: on the one hand their commitment to the struggles of the working class and their desire to do something now, and on the other hand their commitment to the final goal of communism. In periods of radical class struggle the conflict or tension between these two impulses disappears: immediate actions appear to have an obvious and direct bearing on whether or not the final goal is achieved. In non-revolutionary periods, however, it is far more difficult to integrate these two impulses in any effective way: it appears as if one can only be pursued at the expense of the other.

The Dreadnought group's setting-up of the AWRU was an attempt to intervene in order to precipitate events; by opting to concentrate on propaganda for communism Aldred's group took a longer-term view. Neither group was wholly mistaken, nor was either group wholly correct. Each group's actions lacked the dimensions of the other. Not until the period of the Spanish civil war, but more so the period of the Second

World War, would the anti-parliamentary communists once again be able to relate their day-to-day interventions in the class struggle to their basic principles and final goal. In the meantime, they faced the dilemma of being revolutionaries in a non-revolutionary period. Part Two, covering the years 1925-1935, looks at how the anti-parliamentary communists faced up to the problems this posed.