

Atcher

Chapter One: Preparing for Politics

My father and mother were both born and brought up in Leeds. I was born at Walthamstow, a suburb of London, when my father was working for the Inland Revenue nearby, on October 25, 1900.

His father seems to have been the son of a farm worker near Huntingdon, and managed to get trained as a teacher (presumably at a Church of England college) early in the expansion of schools which followed the Education Acts of 1870 - 1880. He got a headship very young and was employed all his working life in Church of England schools in Leeds.

My father, his eldest child, went to Leeds Modern School, a secondary school with the Education Authority founded to supplement the elitist local Grammar School, and by all accounts was a brilliant scholar. He left at sixteen to go into the Civil Service as a boy clerk, and managed thanks to evening study to become a "Tax Surveyor" and later an "Inspector of Taxes".

My mother's father was a younger son from a small farm near Ripon. He was soundly educated in the "three R's" at the choir school attached to Ripon Cathedral, and then went into Leeds as an apprentice to the grocery trade. In his twenties he managed to open his own shop in Armley. Then, foreseeing after a few years the growth of the competition from the Co-operative Society, he turned to speculative house-building, having grasped the social fact that better-paid workers, such as foremen or policemen could afford to rent soundly-built small houses and would be reliable payers. He got the initial finance from a local building society on the strength of his good name.

I knew him only as an irascible old man, but in youth he had the outlook of a Gladstonian Liberal. One of my mother's early memories was being taken by him to hear Gladstone speak in the open air in Town Hall Square, and being lifted up to see the great man. Like many other Liberals, he was to go over to the Conservatives as he grew older. He hated the brewers who financed the Conservative Party from the profits of what, as a teetotaler, he saw as fuddling the workers, but he still preferred them to the Independent Labour Party, of whom he spoke as "they low-lived Socialists", who undermined individual enterprise.

My mother was the youngest of her parents' three surviving children. Their first child, a boy, died at birth. He was followed (to her father's disappointment, I was told) by no more sons, but by "only" three daughters. My mother told me, in her old age, that her mother had known about contraception, though she doubted whether her father ever guessed!

James Prest wanted these daughters to be self-supporting, and the eldest, Irene, was trained as a teacher at the Church of England college at Ripon. She put up a tough and successful struggle against her father's Victorian authoritarianism. Genetically my elder so, Peter, took after her; both were small in size and impossible to put down.

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She never married. About the time of the Great War she became a follower of Annie Besant and Theosophy. As Marx said, "the criticism of religion is the beginning of criticism", and her rejection of Anglican orthodoxy was not without its effect on me. She took early retirement and went to spend the rest of her life in Theosophical Communities in India and later in Australia. As a child I loved her dearly.

The second daughter, Estelle, was intended by her father to stay at home and look after her parents in their old age. However, she died young in the influenza epidemic at the end of the Great War. The third daughter, my mother, was permitted to take advantage of a scheme devised by the Education Authority to improve the quality of their teachers, which enabled promising pupil teachers to get grants and graduate at Leeds University, where she was among the first women graduates.

She resented her father's restrictions on her personal freedom - such as not being allowed to go to the theatre in the evening - but never openly revolted, even to the point of joining the movement for women's suffrage. However, her thinking was liberalised to some extent by a colleague in her first year of teaching, the radical A. B. Orage, who later edited the weekly "New Age" and became a minor figure in the cultural history of the 1900's.

Both of my parents appear to have been brought up to accept the general outlook of many of the lower middle class in their time, and to regard formal education as the high road to upward social mobility but also to culture. Their outlook was not unlike that of the widowed mother and maiden aunt who brought up my future wife and her two younger sisters, where they both were teachers. The attitude of these families towards their "social superiors" was an ambivalent one. They admired intellectual achievement and social advancement, while, at the same time, they prided themselves on "independence" and "plain speaking".

From an early age, I, the elder of their two children, was put under pressure to learn, and I obliged by mastering reading, writing and doing "sums", as well as learning my bible and a little Latin. However, my parents were not happy together, even though both lots of parents had approved their marriage. Early in the 1920's my father, apparently in despair of finding sexual response or understanding at home while he pursued his successful career, formed an attachment with one of his office staff, herself unhappily married, with a young daughter. He seems to have been an able, restless, dissatisfied man. I admired him, especially when he was in a good mood to teach and interest me, and at times he could be un-expectedly generous. But at other times his uncertain temper and violence were frightening.

Faily early in the Great War he had become deeply involved in the movement among civil servants to negotiate a "cost of living bonus" from the Treasury, to meet rising prices. With colleagues who, like him, had little formal training in economics, he worked out the new concept of a "middle class cost of living index". At that time the only index of retail prices had been prepared by Bowley just before the war, and this was based on

on the pattern of expenditure of a sample of wage-earning families, and was dominated by expenditure on food. It did not appear, however, to represent adequately the impact of rising prices on salary earners, whose incomes were higher than those of week wage-earners. My mother's account books, I remember, helped to provide the "weights" on which average changes in expenditure by this group of salary earners could be computed. Later in life, my father was for many years President of the Association of Inspectors of Taxes and a Principal Inspector in charge of one of the districts in the City of London, until he died in 1936 at the age of 51.

I experience queues and rationing, then, as a schoolboy. Relatives and friends of the family were wounded or gassed in Flanders. I saw Zeppelins come down in flames and remember the patriotic songs with which Clara Butt won her DBE. But the collapse of the Central Powers at the end of 1918 left an indelible impression that the mighty could be set down from their seat. I had also heard a lot about Home Rule for Ireland. My mother went to vote with great pride in the General Election of 1918 when she had the vote for the first time, and voted for a Conservative candidate.

I was hardly old enough, however, to take in much that was said about the Russian Revolution of 1917, with my parents welcomed. It was only later that I grasped that they had liked it better than that of October or the Peace of Brest-Litovsk which followed it, because they feared the Russia was making a gift to the Kaiser, as many other people thought at the time.

At the beginning of 1919 I entered Merchant Taylor's School, a "public" day-school in London, for which my mother had coached me to win a scholarship. Shortly afterwards my parents ceased to live together and were divorced. I continued to live in London with my father.

I did not shine quite as brightly at school as my parents seem to have hoped, though not so dimly by any less exacting standard. I was never comfortable there. There always seemed to be some tension between the provincial elements in my parents' home and the comfortable homes of the sons of the professional families around me. I cannot recall ever having heard of any of my school-fellows, let alone seeking news of them, after I left in 1927.

The divorce was to bear more heavily on my brother. He was bandied about between his parents' separate households and a boarding school, and labelled as "stupid" (quite unfairly), to which he responded by resisting every effort to interest him in middle class education. He went off as early as he could to enter the profession of pharmacy, in which he made a successful career despite never having qualified by examination. It seems hardly surprising that politically he should be a life-long supporter of the populist end of the Conservative Party.

After the divorce and under the challenges of adolescence, I found myself socially immature in comparison with my class-mates and tended to accept the role of an "outsider

Then in the early spring of 1928, with a General Election only a year away, a fellow-student (a former Welsh miner) and I began holding open-air meetings on the new-closed Irving Statue site by the National Portrait Gallery just off Trafalgar Square. We also worked with the LSE Labour Club which supported the (extremely right wing) Labour candidate in North Southwark just across the river. But I also heard the attacks of the Communist Party on the Labour Party and could begin to form some general conclusions. I had to educate myself so as to earn a living and to understand the world. Like millions of others, I asked myself, "what is going to become of me?". Secondly, I realised that petty bourgeois society rests largely on hypocrisy and that one day I would learn to be a revolutionary. But who would teach me?

In summer 1929 I chanced to meet a Labour Member of Parliament, a comfortably-off man, and asked him what was to be done about the people who, as we knew, were starving in the collapse of the cotton textile industry in Lancashire. With what seemed to be a certain complacency, he explained that there was very little to be done, that the Government was doing what it could and that agitation would not help. For me, this was simply not good enough. The Communist Party at LSE made no attempt to recruit me as the "Third Period" rose to its height. I might have welcomed a less domatic basis for discussion than they had to offer, and at the same time I feared being unable to match up to the responsibilities of being a Communist.

Relations with my father got worse and worse. His second wife did her best to keep the peace. She was a very kindly woman and must have been sorely bothered by the emotional stresses into which she had married in the hope of some peace after her earlier disastrous marriage. She dearly loved my father and I cannot forget how bitterly she wept over his grave when we buried him in 1936.

In the summer of 1929 I passed the hardest part of my finals and then left my father's house to stay for a while with my mother and her second husband in Reading. An international tobacco firm gave me a job, but their training for work in the Far East was a lot too much like being back at a public school. They soon "requested" me to "resign". I moved back again to live with my father. The Wall Street Crash of autumn 1929 set off the world economic depression, a catastrophe which seemed to me to be quite consistent with the nature of things.

However, it was an encouragement to earn decent money selling in Harrods at Christmas. Perhaps after all I might find a niche in the bourgeois economic system. I also talked a lot with other young men trapped in the underworld of hand-to-mouth jobs. Then began a two-year stretch with the "John Lewis Partnership" selling furniture in the basement at Peter Jones' in Sloane Square.

Among the junior "partners" there was some social life. I was induced to play the lead in an amateur production of some comedy. We had "current affairs" debates, intended to foster trust in the League of Nations. They failed to convince me. I had come to the conclusion that the October Revolution in Russia, despite its terrible

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social cost, had been a historically progressive event. It seemed to have been one of the effective forces which brought the Great War to an end. I had already seen the human consequences of the Great War in the cemeteries of Northern France. The same imperialist rivalries as had given rise to the Great War would inevitably lead to another and even more destructive imperialist war, if they were not tackled at the source, I thought. The working class, therefore, needed such a party as had led the October Revolution to victory and enabled Russian society to be thoroughly changed. But how was such a party to be had?

Meanwhile I went on studying on my own at week-ends for the second part of my finals, and got a pass degree in summer 1931, just in time for Ramsey MacDonald's second Labour Government to collapse. He and a handful of cronies departed to join in a "National Coalition" with the Conservatives and some Liberals, and the representation of the Labour Party was heavily reduced in the General Election of October 1931.

The Fabians offered an explanation that the failure of the Labour Party was inevitable in the circumstances and was due to the "personal inadequacy" of MacDonald. It seemed to me rather to result from the inadequacies in the reformist philosophy of the Webbs and the ex-Liberals, trade union leaders and pacifists who dominated the party and had for years been "purging" it of Communists. Many of us were wondering whether the Labour Party could ever recover the ground it had lost and whether the workers' movement could ever be reconstructed at all or, at any rate, round a new axis. The Communist Party seemed to offer no practical solution. It denounced the Labour Party as "the third party of capitalism", had no strategy for re-building the workers' movement to advance and isolated itself.

Let us recognise that very few people indeed at this time in Britain had any inkling of the gigantic, dual task lying ahead, of formulating a programme on the basis of which the working class could be mobilised, and, as an integral part of that process, finding and organising the human, social, material force needed to fight for that programme.

For the time being no other road opened, so I devoted some time to reading up on the background of the Japanese aggression against Manchuria. There was, of course, also the pressing pre-occupation with the problem of sex, and a long road to be trod away from primitive, idealistic notions about that unknown quantity, woman. After a couple of disappointments, it seemed reasonable to decide that romance was a trap. Bernard Shaw's foolish view that this most intimate of human relations reduces to "war between the sexes" could sound very radical with its inversion of Victorian sentimentality. Only later was it possible to recognise that Shaw did no more than stress the nastier side of the individualism inseparable from bourgeois society and that here he was perhaps taking a subjective view of his own somewhat unsatisfactory experience.

As the world crisis deepened, I became "redundant", and began a highly educational

period learning how to live on my wits. Then, early in 1933, the luck turned. My mother had come into a slice of her late father's money, and came to my rescue with an allowance of £3 a week to live on, while I completed my studies for the Civil Serv examinations. I sat them in summer 1933 and passed well in the written papers. However they decisively turned me down on the interview. Then my mother gave me the money for a walking holiday in Switzerland and Austria, in which I saw the world, including a number of young Nazis. Back in London I soon got a clerk's job in a quango of the Ministry of Agriculture called the Wheat Commission. This paid £4 a week, a princely sum, and at last put some ground under my feet while in spare time I tried to read and to write about politics. I also taught myself to swim and developed a relation with Mary, my wife to be, which we both knew to be a serious one.

Working class opposition to the "National Coalition" Government was now being clearly expressed in by-election results. But there was a new shadow over the political scene. Hitler had come to power in Germany in spring 1933 and the Nazis had destroyed every vestige of working-class or liberal institutions. No one could have any illusion about how serious the consequences could be for working people alike in Western and Eastern Europe. All the reactionary forces in the world were taking heart.

Yet something peculiar had been going on. Neither the bourgeois press nor that of the Stalinists had warned us. Like nearly everyone else, I was caught by surprise, not having read any of what Trotsky had been writing. It seemed urgently necessary to find out how the most powerfully organised working class in the world, with all its experience of class struggle, could have gone down almost without a fight. An unwise search for enlightenment from the wrong quarter brought back word from inside the Communist Party that "people who can't keep their big mouths shut can have them shut for them". Nothing could convey more clearly that something was being hushed up here.

Already both Stuart Kirby, whom I had known well at LSE, as well as Denzil Harber, both of whom knew Russia and had spent some time in the Soviet Union, were breaking down my reluctance to accept that all was not as well in "the land of building socialism" as we could hope or were led to believe. But which way could one go without falling into the camp of anti-Soviet reaction?

In autumn 1934 I moved into the job in the Ministry of Agriculture which provided my living for the next seventeen years. At just about the same time there was in London a Canadian intellectual, then a Trotskyist, who shared a flat with Kirby while working on his doctorate in the British Museum Library. These two quickly recruited me to their group, the "Marxist Group in the ILP" and to the inner, Trotskyist group which was organising it. I agreed that the Second and Third International had both revealed themselves in action to be bankrupt and that a new, Fourth International was needed, while they assured me that Trotskyism would teach me what I did not yet know about Marxist political work.

These two soon got after me to take an active part in the work of the group and to study. "How do you think you will ever be any good", they demanded, "if you haven't learned what Trotsky is trying to tell you?" Reading such pamphlets as "The Only Road" and "Germany: What Next?" in the Pioneer Publishers editions from New York, printed (let it not be forgotten) by the labours of the much-reviled Max Shachtman, I did get some slight idea of the obstacles which had prevented the German proletariat from defeating Nazism, and was led on to Trotsky's "History of the Russian Revolution". Now there could seem to be a road forward, if only I could learn how to follow it.

Chapter Two: The First Steps

The international political current which claimed to represent the ideas of the Communist International in its early years and of the Russian Opposition and was identified with the name of Trotsky appeared in Britain only in early 1931, rather later than in many other countries. This delay was not accidental. Throughout the 1920's the political movement of the working class in Britain was principally devoted to testing the possibilities offered by Parliamentary reformism and the performance of a future majority Labour Government. The Labour Party itself had appeared as a challenge to the bourgeois parties on a national scale only in the early 1920's, more than twenty years later than the Social-Democratic Party in Germany. Anglo-Saxon empiricism strove strongly persisted in political thinking in Britain and Marxism was not well understood in the working class movement; the ideas of Kautsky and De Leon were commonly ascribed to Marx himself. Some of the writings of Lenin and of Trotsky had been published in English in the first half of the 1920's, but the Communist Party had not had time to develop a mature or experienced cadre when it was overtaken by the anti-Trotskyism of Stalin and Zinoviev in 1924 and with the so-called Bolshevisation which subjected it to the control of an apparatus paid and selected from the Kremlin, and which it accepted almost without resistance. In 1925 - 26 it accepted the "line" of Stalin and Bukhari which subordinated the party politically during the General Strike to the "Lefts" in the TUC General Council, through the mechanism of the Anglo-Russian Joint Trade Union Committee, when many of its militants were fighting heroically to win the strike. Its youth section hailed the international "turn" in 1928 to the "Third Period" under the mistaken impression that it was a return to Leninism from opportunism, only to find by experience that the party continued to lose ground in the conditions of mass unemployment and crisis, to which its policies made it seem irrelevant.

The struggles of Trotsky, Rosmer and Sedov in 1929 - 30 to put together a centre for the International Left Opposition, culminating in the founding meeting in April 1930, passed, like the struggles of the German "Left", almost without an echo in Britain. Whatever interest was raised here by Trotsky's exile centred round the un-successful efforts of Fenner Brockway and Ivor Montagu to persuade the Labour Home Secretary, J.R. Clynes, to grant him asylum on medical grounds. However, in 1931 - 32 Trotsky's idea found a response in the Communist Party, thanks to the link between the Communist

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League of America and the group led by Groves, Wicks and Dewar. Groves has well described how experience taught him that the "line" of the "Third Period" frustrated all his efforts as a full-timer to build the party. However, the low theoretical level of the Communist Party and the restricted range of its activity and political life were a major influence holding back acceptance of the ideas of the International Left Opposition in this country.

The original "Balham Group" had hardly begun to work out how to mobilise forces to work for the reform of the Communist International and of its British section, at first from within and then from outside, when they had to adjust their minds to the new reality of spring 1933. Their political programme continued to be based on the work of the First Four Congresses of the Communist International in 1919 - 1922 and on that of the Russian and International Left Opposition. But the collapse of the German Communist Party in the face of Nazism, followed by the success of the Stalinist apparatus in suppressing all discussion or analysis of the course which led to the defeat, clearly indicated that the perspective of reforming the Comintern was no longer realistic.

No one claiming to be a Communist had since 1914 raised the possibility that the Second International could be reformed. Now it had to be recognised that the Communist International also could not be reformed or become the instrument which the working class needs to seize power and instal the dictatorship of the proletariat. The whole orientation of real Communists had to be changed. Now they must find the means to build new Communist Parties and a new International.

Accordingly, after a long discussion in which Trotsky himself and a number of European Trotskyists took part, it was proposed towards the end of summer 1933 to seek the human material primarily by testing the possibility of winning groups and tendencies number of centrist organisations, which had already broken organisationally from the Second or the Third International. Such organisations were the Independent Labour Party in Britain, the German Socialist Workers Party (now largely in exile) and two groups in the Netherlands, among others.

In Britain the ILP had broken its organisational ties with the Labour Party in 1932 on the question of the freedom of its Parliamentary fraction to oppose the right-wing Labour Ministers on such matters as how they treated the unemployed and the struggle of the people of India. Trotsky was quite explicit; he regarded this break on such an issue at that time to have been correct. But immediately after the break the ILP faced a problem for which past experience had prepared few of its members: what were they to do and where were they to go next? A lively struggle broke out within it. There were reformist-pacifist elements under the influence of Maxton and Brockway, who had placed themselves somewhat reluctantly at the head of the movement to leave the Labour Party; they fed the illusion that the ILP could replace the Labour Party as the Labour Party had earlier replaced the Liberal Party, but do better. Then there were

direct agents of Stalinism, alongside elements critical of "Third Period" ultra-leftism, who proposed that the ILP should negotiate entry into the Communist International in order to correct its errors. There were also militants influenced by contact with Groves' paper, "Red Flag".

In 1933 the Groves group adopted the name "Communist League" to accord with the new orientation. However, it could not resolve its internal difference on the proposal of the international centre that its members should all or nearly all join the ILP. My understanding of the documents of the discussion, which went on through autumn 1933 is that it was the younger and less experienced comrades who went off in December to join the ILP and that the older cadre of the Group feared the loss of their "political independence". In January 1934 Trotsky wrote to both the "majority" and the "minority" that the "split" was un-necessary and that the way to heal the wound would be for both tendencies to test their conceptions side by side.

The "minority" entered the ILP a little later and spent the summer of 1934 getting used to their new field of work. At the same time, the "majority" went on producing the "Red Flag", in which two of Groves' contributions seem to me to have been of great political value; one, entitled "Vienna and the London Elections", presented the success of the Labour Party in winning control for the first time of the London County Council as, in a sense, the working class taking revenge for the defeat of the Social-Democrats in Berlin at the hands of Nazism, and their defeat in Vienna at the hands of the clerical-fascist reaction in Austria. The other was an attempt to assess the political role of Palme Dutt, theoretician of the Communist Party.

By November 1934 the "Marxist Group in the ILP" came into existence as an open fraction in the ILP, without the right to disseminate its material outside the party. At the beginning the Trotskyists regarded the "Marxist Group in the ILP" as a structure within which they could organise their periphery round their "inner group", but it was not long before, as I recall, the letters from the International Secretariat could be generally known to all the members and the separate existence of the "inner group" lost its original point. Originally the "Marxist Group in the ILP" had been formed primarily on the basis that members of the ILP should be won to recognise that the struggle inside the Labour Party had a highly progressive content, and that the ILP should turn towards the Labour Party rank and file and co-operate with it in testing how far Labour could go on winning elections and how far the rank and file could get in their efforts to control the leadership. Already the conception was forming that, in that period, the struggle in the Labour Party could form the ^{principal} axis round which the human material for the new Communist Party of the future would gather.

It was the struggle against Stalinist ultra-leftism and its particular feature, putting up "independent" candidates who got derisory support, and denouncing the Labour Party as a "social-fascist" party, which the Trotskyists could use as a basis from which to explain the necessity for the Fourth International. From this point, with the help

Trotsky's articles, we could test in practice the possibility of winning whatever revolutionary elements existed in the ILP to demand that the leadership end, at one and the same time, its ridiculous intrigues with the Communist International and its support for the heterogeneous and unprincipled group of centrist parties known as the "London Bureau", which Brockway had put together in a vain hope of uniting the Left and the main function of which was to spread confusion and obstruct the work for the Fourth International. It was to disappear from the scene for ever early in World War II.

In the event the reformist-pacifist leadership of the ILP proved itself unable to convince any serious body of workers that there was any need for it to exist or even to hold together the forces it had led out of the Labour Party. Politically bankrupt, it already had begun to disintegrate. Already numerous militants were going back into the Labour Party, or giving up activity or even joining the Communist Party. Inside the Labour Party the Socialist League represented a serious development to the Left. It rejected the "official" perspective of supporting British imperialism in a future war even if it was presented as "defending democracy", as well as the conception that the League of Nations could be a means to preserve world peace.

At this same time, however, the Communist Party was assimilating the new "line" from the Kremlin and winding up the "Third Period", as a first step towards what later developed into agitation for a Popular Front to include Liberals. In this "turn" the allegations, following the Kirov assassination, that Trotsky was in league with Hitler, were already being widely used to discredit the Trotskyists and anyone associated with them.

In autumn 1934, even before the Trotskyists had organised their periphery in the ILP, the foreign policy of the Kremlin and, therefore, the "line" of the Stalinist parties, had begun this profound re-orientation which could be understood only within the general strategy of "Socialism in a Single Country". During the "Third Period", the Kremlin generally presented British and French imperialism as the most dangerous and immediate enemies of the USSR. Even after Hitler had come to power, Stalin spent some months in efforts to woo him, and a period of diplomatic hesitation followed when these efforts could be seen to have failed. The Kremlin had to face the fact that the USSR, in an internal crisis, could not face an attack from German imperialism single-handed. The German working class, atomised and deprived of its class organisations, could now no longer come actively to its aid. If the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927 had weakened the international position of the USSR, the victory of Hitler had weakened it further.

At the same time, the policies of the "Third Period" in France had reduced the membership of the French Communist Party from 80,000 to 30,000. The Kremlin and the Stalinist Parties alike needed a new "line". Following the strong reaction of their own supporters against the division of the working-class forces in the action against the fascists

during the week of February 6 - 12 1934 in Paris, the French Communist Party opened negotiations with the Socialists, in the course of which they found that they could reach agreement on a certain conception of "defending democracy", which was found to open the possibility of co-operating with sections of the Radicals, an outright party of big capital, to "organise pressure" with a view to counter-acting German expansion, which incidentally threatened the frontiers of the USSR as well as the colonies of French imperialism.

It seems clear from what went on at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in ~~summer~~ 1935 that the initiative in France had been a kind of experiment. In the short run, its various applications in different countries proved to be very attractive to working people, raising great expectations in the possible benefits to be gained from replacing governments of the "Right" with governments of the "Left". In France this meant a government of the Popular Front, which got office in April 1936. In Britain it could only mean a Labour Government based on a majority in Parliament.

In Britain we had grasped, at any rate, one practical expression of Trotsky's writings. The Communist League produced an English translation of his "Letter to a Social-Democratic Worker" of February 1933, in which he suggested that they say to their Communist fellow-workers:

"If the fascists come tonight to wreck your organisations hall, we will come running arms in hand, to help you. Will you promise that, if our organisation is threatened, you will rush to our aid?"

In appropriate conditions, this was always well received. But it was not enough. Already by November 1933 Trotsky was warning us that Hitler's victory had strengthened, not communist, but democratic tendencies in other countries. By the end of 1934 the arguments against the ultra-left aspects of "Third Period" Stalinism, about which we were well informed, were losing their former relevance. We now had to learn how to combat the opportunism which had always underlain the ultra-left-ism.

There was another adjustment we also had to make. Up till 1934 Trotskyists at any rate in Western Europe had tended to regard the Stalinists as, in a certain sense, erring brothers, with whom at any rate we had more in common than with reformists. Our "turn" to the new International, on the one hand, and the "turn" of the Kremlin towards the "democratic imperialists" and the League of Nations, which the Soviet Union entered in September 1934, turned the apparatchiks of Stalinism into vicious enemies. Now something more that calls for unity were needed to expose the fraudulent campaigns of the Stalinists and Social-Democrats to present the rulers of France and Britain as "progressive" imperialists.

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Neither Groves' Communist League, nor the "Marxist Group in the ILP", nor their successors, the "Militant Group" and CLR James' "Fight" Group can claim more than limited success in this pre-war period. Some writers have made possibly exaggerated claims on th

on the privilege of hindsight when they jeer at our limitations, which they ascribe to the origin from the London School of Economics of some of our active members. It needs to be said that, when Margaret Johns, Denzil Harber, Stuart Kirby, Mary Archer and I were about the LSE in the late 1920's and early 1930's, the academic atmosphere was not friendly to us. Liberals like Harold Laski were allowed to have their jousts with Hayek and Robbins, but Marxist criticism of Fabians and Stalinists had few friends anywhere. Not even the best of the examination performers was allowed to get anywhere near an academic job. Apart from Mary and, later, myself, most of them had real trouble finding work at all. Anyway, who else was there to pioneer for Trotskyism? No one.

Mary had decided while in her teens in South Shields that she wanted to be a revolutionary. Against many obstacles she made her way to LSE under the illusion that she could get there the education which someone needs who wants to change society. To be sure, as was explained at her memorial meeting, this illusions did not persist after her first few weeks there.

When I first went to work for the Ministry of Agriculture, my job was in a team to promote the sale and control the quality of certain home-produced foodstuffs such as eggs, cheese, fruit and vegetables bearing the "National Mark guarantee. That scheme is now long since forgotten, but it lives on in the standard grades in which all eggs are now marketed. It was devised in the hope of helping home-grown produce to stand up to the competition of better graded, better packed imports, protective tariffs being politically unacceptable.

The team was, however, soon switched to a new scheme, which had to administer subsidies to encourage farmers to apply lime and basic slag to lands the fertility of which it had not been possible to maintain during the loss-making years of depression since 1920. This was aimed more directly on decreasing dependence on imports of food in case of war.

The work could usually be organised more or less at my discretion. The way of earning a living did not bother my conscience, any more than our comrades in engineering chose whether to make armaments. The job gave me far more freedom of movement than almost any other could.

From that time, mid - 1935, onwards politics have been inextricably interwoven with my personal life. This is by no means, of course, to claim that all the following years have been filled with un-interrupted political activity. On the contrary, the essential element of a memoir is truth, and truth is necessary, because periods of inactivity and of resumed participation have to be explained.

My employers posted me to the North of England and offered the choice between Leeds and Liverpool as a base. All I knew then was that my family had connections in Leeds; my choice of Leeds was largely an accidental, though a lucky one. Mary and I had no means yet of knowing what good experience that city could provide.

Leeds had been a large, populous industrial city for many decades already, but no so large that its political life was dispersed. Its numerous working class was made up from Jewish and Irish immigrants as well as people of local origins. One of its major industries, clothing manufacture, had recently completed the revolution which replaced the old multitude of small small sewing shops with a few large and medium-sized factories. The city claimed "a hundred trades" and had weathered the worst years of the depression with less suffering than elsewhere. It was in a certain way a regional capital. Many large and small trade unions located their regional offices there. Their full-time officers came to Labour Party meetings, to re-inforce the contingent of Fabians from the University and that thick layer of cultured petty bourgeois which supported the Workers' Educational Association. The City of Leeds Labour Party was a great provincial bastion of the right wing of the Labour Party.

These specific local conditions may perhaps explain to some extent why the issues in internal struggles have always tended to be sharply defined in the Leeds Labour Party and why the "soft left", which has occupied so much space elsewhere, appears to have found less space to occupy there. For the right-wing has always confronted a strong working class below. Just before we arrived the City of Leeds Labour Party had appointed its first full-time secretary and editor of its weekly newspaper, "The Leeds Weekly Citizen". This was "Len" Williams, a former member of the YCL and reader of Groves' "Red Flag", a well-known Labour College lecturer - who ended his career as head of the Labour Party's national apparatus and then as Governor-General of Mauritius. But shortly after our arrival, Hugh Gaitskell became the prospective Labour candidate for one of the safer Labour seats. The Leeds Labour "establishment" prided itself on spotting talent: in the early 1950's, after a tremendous struggle, they secured the selection for another of the safe seats of Denis Healy!

We settled in Leeds only in 1936. Before that Mary was employed as a social worker by the Durham Rural Communist Council, which was an outcome of the response to the large unemployed demonstrations early in 1934. Her job was to help the wives of the unemployed miners in the derelict villages of the Durham coal-field to organise community centres and to ensure that they got some of the means for mutual help. She could respect these workers, their independence and their trade union tradition, without condescension or patronising, and was highly successful.

Shortly before we were re-united in the North of England in May 1935, Mary had read in French the recently published novel, "La Maternelle" ("The Children's Home") Trotsky read this book about the same time, and noted in his "Diary in Exile" how the author "courageously shows the darkest corner of French civilisation... through the frightened eyes of hungry, maltreated children". Mary had debated whether to seek work in such an institution in France, but she finally rejected what might have been a self-destructive course (like that of Simone Weil), with the conscious political decision that, for all the ambulance work which the workers wring out of bourgeois society by struggle or the threat of it, bourgeois society itself constantly and necessarily created fresh

misery.

We began to try to learn how to work politically in 1935, though at this first stage there was little structure to our efforts. We tracked down such elements as survived of ILP branches in the North and tried to gather the militants, if there were any, behind the aims of the "Marxist Group in the ILP". The first contact I can remember was with worker-members of the ILP was on a foggy night at a meeting of its Armley branch in Leeds. They met in a large wooden structure, a working mens' club, which was still the property of the ILP and had been built largely on the contributions of railwaymen in an important junction nearby who lived round about. They were struggling with the task of keeping it going after the break with the Labour Party, and I found myself on the following Saturday evening in the chair at a big "social evening" and judging a singing competition, another insight into working class life. These workers were led by Walter Mallory, an experienced trade unionist and an unshakeable follower of Jimmy Maxton's Parliamentarism.

We met the most dogged conservative-reformist-pacifist opposition to Marxism in the Bradford ILP. Proud of their past and of being among the founders in 1893, full of the illusion that they could "replace" the Labour Party and that the Labour Party had only failed because of "bad people at the top", they were led by that dignified figure from the past, Fred Jowett.

On Tyneside, we turned up two branches of quite different kinds. That at Rowlands Hill was an outpost of Stalinism. How it came to be there I did not know how to find out. The other, at Gateshead, was 100% pacifist. These two branches had no problem in uniting in hatred of Trotskyists. Had we but known, there was still a branch of the Socialist League in the Labour Party in Gateshead.

We did have some successes. We won Willie Wilson, a revolutionary driven out of the textile trade to work on a hill farm above Keighley. There was John Gregg, the son of a railwayman, who was a lecturer in physics at the University of Hull. We resumed an old contact with Harry Cund, the ex-seaman, who ran a little clubroom for the unemployed in Liverpool. In Lancashire we met the younger workers who had put up the fight in the Lancashire Division against the old left reformists, Abbott and Sandham. These workers were proud of their victory, which had inevitably brought them under Stalinist influence. Here too we met Bob Edwards.

We formed a branch of the ILP in Durham. It did not last long, partly because it ran into the perennial conflict between the traditional pacifism of the ILP and the revolutionary conceptions of Marxism. We got a peripheral contact with the Socialist League in the North-East, where the antagonisms inside that organisation were coming to a head (had we but known it), but we did not know then how to take advantage of it. (I found the evidence of what was going on many years later: it is dealt with in the typescript on the Socialist League.) Anyway, the Durham branch sent Mary as its delegate to the Annual Conference of the ILP at Easter, where she was one of the thirty-four who voted

foe CLR James' motion, against the pacifists and for workers' sanctions to stop war supplies going to aid the Italian imperialist aggression on Abyssinia - as well as against the motion to "ban" organised fractions in the ILP, aimed at the "Marxist Group".

By the latter part of 1935 it became clear that the "Marxist Group" had reached the highest influence it could hope to win at Easter and that, as the ILP was disintegrating, so was the "Marxist Group". A difficult debate opened about what to do next. A small group, led by Harber, left the ILP to enter the Labour Party and the Socialist League; they wrote placing their problem before the International Secretariat, which to all appearances thought that here was a problem which the English comrades had to learn by experience to solve for themselves., and upon which, whatever its own views, it should not adjudicate.

At the decisive conference of Easter 1936 the ILP passively accepted Maxton's ultimatum that he would leave the party if it did not reverse its decision to seek the method of the class struggle in defence of the semi-colonial country under attack by imperialism. The opinion which I formed later, a purely personal one, is that Maxton and the other ILP MPs from Glasgow had easy enough day-to-day relations with their Labour colleagues at Westminster: the Labour Party has never hidden the fact that it does not mind pacifists, but objects strongly to Trotskyists, because pacifists do not effectively attack reformism, while those trained in the school of Lenin and Trotsky know how to do so. It was Brockway who devised the "plebiscite" (used not for the first time to reverse a decision by an ILP national conference) in which inactive as well as active members could vote, as the means to frustrate the conference decision. But in the outside world of the working class no one cared anyway; the ILP ceased to have much relevance except as an obstacle, until its slight revival in the late 1930's as a possible centre through which to avoid conscription.

A practical problem at once faced those, among whom I was one, who hesitated to leave the ILP at this point. We knew that we could find and work with people who were leaving the Communist Party because they rejected the "turn" to the Popular Front. These people often were ready for Trotsky's explanation of Stalinism. But that did not mean that they could also make his political connection with going into the Labour Party to battle there against the Stalinists in the arena which it provided. Indeed, to many such people the very idea of joining the Labour Party was unacceptable. As a result, by summer 1936 the difference about joining the Labour Party, which superficially was only a tactical one, raised much more fundamental differences about how the party of the future was going to be built.

The so-called "Geneva" Conference, the "First International Conference for the Fourth International", at the end of July 1936, endorsed the recommendation of a commission consisting of James, Harber and Klement that, in the light of the conditions in the Labour Party, we should terminate the experiment in the ILP and all devote ourselves to

sinking roots among the ranks of the Labour Party. But this resolution by no means resolved the problem in Britain.

More detail, with a later view of the political conditions in which these problems developed, may be found in my thesis and in the typescript about the Socialist League which was written at the same time, though Chapter Three in the latter needs re-handling. There are also the article "Entrism and the Labour Party", in "Cahiers Leon Trotsky, No. 16, of December 1983, as well as the record in Martin Upham's thesis.

Chapter Three: Widening Experience

Mary and I settled down to systematic work in the Labour Movement in Leeds only after we married in June 1936 and went to live there. We would have preferred to dispense with formally accepting the bourgeois convention, but we judged that a "free union" would erect a barrier against us among workers in the North of England which could be used by our enemies. I believe that, back at that time over fifty years ago, we were right. Nor do I seek to hide the fact that, to avoid distressing her mother, we were married in church!

We joined the Harehills branch of the East Leeds Labour Party separately in autumn 1936. Mary went to the "Conference of All the British Bolshevik-Leninists" in October, the report of which is so valuable a source for anyone who cares to read it, and heard the "Geneva" resolution debated there. But she stayed in the ILP a little longer than I in the hope of influencing one or two comrades still there, and left only after she had persuaded them to work for the Labour Party in the municipal elections and been encouraged by her reception on the workers' doorsteps.

We had indeed been slow to recognise how early the ILP entry had reached the limit of its usefulness. The Communist Party had already won valuable positions among the Labour Left in Leeds and the local branch of the Socialist League was collapsing.

Our most immediate internationalist duty was to denounce the Stalinist slanders that Trotsky was "an agent of Hitler". It is hard today, with every bourgeois hack jeering at the Soviet Union, to describe the effects of the first "Moscow Trial". It formed a central component of Stalin's policy of seeking alliances with the "democratic imperialists at the price of betraying the independence of the revolutionary forces in Spain, but this was far from clear at the time. One of our first initiatives was to hire the hall of the Tailors and Garment Workers Union for a public meeting, which we called on our own responsibility, to defend Trotsky. We drew about 200 people. The Stalinists sat quiet or stayed away, and from the platform I tried to present Trotsky's case against the slanders, drawing on Shachtman's "Behind the Moscow Trial" and such of Trotsky's writings as had reached us.

The experience taught me that I had not approached the meeting correctly and brought home the political obstacles we had to overcome. The audience were mostly workers and generally supported the Labour Party. They were not greatly interested in my jur

dical, argumentative refutation of the confessions and exposure of the contradictions in them. They really could not see from the way I argued what it had to do with them. They regarded Trotsky and Stalin alike as two "revolutionaries" who had fallen out on largely personal questions, the differences between whom were of no great importance to them. This was a lesson, but it could not be drawn immediately.

At about this time, we joined the Harber-Jackson "Bolshevik-Leninist Group in the Labour Party", along with a handful of supporters out of the ILP, because we were in political agreement with them. During the winter of 1936 - 37 the leaders of the group of whom Charlie van Gelderen was one, thanks to his work in the Labour Party League of Youth round "Youth Militant", had discussions with a representative of the International Secretariat, Erwin Wolf, who was subsequently to be murdered by the Stalinists in pain. In January 1937 the group produced the first issue of "Militant" and adopted the title of "Militant Group in the Labour Party".

At this time we worked enthusiastically to build up the Labour Party and the Labour Party League of Youth where we could, and to recruit to them the best militants we could find with whom to form there an organised opposition to the reformists and the Stalinists. We worked for Labour candidates in elections and hoped as a result to locate ourselves in a general current in the working class. I think today that we were right and make no apology for this.

We soon began to attract militant workers around us. My mid-1938 we had built a ranch of the "Militant Group" of about sixteen comrades, all of whom were "blue-collar workers but Mary, two other women comrades and myself. Mary was usually more effective than I at making personal contact with workers, but I had the job of discussing politically with them politically what we were about.

What line were we putting forward? Let me again quote from Trotsky's article of November 1933 entitled "Our Present Tasks":

"Thanks to the ten-year criminal policy of the Stalinised Comintern, the political problem presents itself to the consciousness of the many millioned working class masses, not in the form of the decisive alternative, the dictatorship of fascism or the dictatorship of the proletariat, but in the form of a more primitive alternative, fascism or democracy... Democratic slogans and illusions cannot be abolished by decree. It is necessary that the masses outlive them in the experience of battles... We Bolsheviks consider that the real salvation from fascism and war lies in the revolutionary conquest of power... You socialist workers do not agree to this road. You hope not only to save what has been gained but also to move forward along the road of democracy... But we demand that you carry on the struggle for democracy not in words but in deeds... Make your party open up a real struggle for a strong democratic government...

That reformism is the worst brake on historical development and that the Social Democracy is doomed to failure - this is ABC to us... The candle burns most

brightly before it burns out. The destructive policy of the Comintern... has not only compromised revolutionary methods but has also given to the Social-Democracy the opportunity of raising up again over the working class the banner of democracy as the banner of salvation...

We Bolsheviks would retain to right to explain to the workers the insufficiency of democratic slogans; we could not take upon ourselves the responsibility for the Social-Democratic Government, but we would honestly help you in the struggle for such a government. Together with you we would repel all attacks of bourgeois reaction... To follow attentively all the changes in the situation and all shifts in the consciousness of the masses, and to put forward at every new stage slogans flowing from the whole situation - in this consist the task of revolutionary leadership."

I cannot pretend that we had thoroughly digested what all this meant. But where did we begin? We were revolutionary optimists. Were we "catastrophists"? That depends on what the word is taken to mean. We accepted that since 1914 the world was in the period of the death-agony of capitalism, the period of wars and revolutions, that, in the long run, humanity faced the inevitable alternatives of Socialism or of a general relapse into barbarism or even self-destruction, and that it made sense in that period to contemplate the possibility of international proletarian revolution.

While we did not believe that reformism had any serious or lasting future, we knew that world capitalism had already managed to arrive a partial stabilisation and a modest recovery after the failure of the German Revolution in 1923, with US imperialism asserting the financial domination of the world. The Wall Street Crash in 1929 seemed to us, especially when the collapse of the German banking system followed in 1931, to be quite in keeping with the nature of late capitalist society. We regarded capitalism as being in a permanent crisis, in which the rate of profit could be raised only by higher exploitation of workers and colonial peoples, by re-arming and ultimately by a continuation in World War II of the struggle between the victors and the defeated in World War I.

We rejected, of course, the full-blooded catastrophism of those who refused to recognise that, thanks to these causes, Britain was enjoying a small recovery in the middle 1930's. We rejected the position of certain Stalinists and other ultra-lefts, powerfully argued in the writing of the theoretician Palme Dutt, that the economic crisis continually worsens, that the reformist leaders at all times are moving to the right, that Social-Democracy is nothing more than a form of fascism, that the proletarian masses, always moving to the left, are on the verge of revolution and need only our denunciation of the leaders of their mass-organisations to be loud enough.

We spoke, rather, of world capitalism being subject to "fluctuations in a continuous decline". We did not fear an economic improvement in case it undermined the workers' willingness to fight. The recovery in Britain in the middle years of the decade, due to a favourable shift in the terms of trade, to re-armament and to a relatively peace:

shift of young "green" labour into new industries (motors, aircraft, chemicals, electrical machinery) and of Irish immigrants into the building industry, enabled us to fore-
that workers in Britain would sooner or later follow those of France and Spain into
mass struggles. We were over-optimistic, but none the less the workers went into the
war with the trade unions and the rule-books generally recognised.

But we have also to recognise that the ultra-left aspects of the Comintern had not failed
to influence us. We had to rid ourselves of an undue contempt for that freedom of
action within bourgeois democracy which the working class enjoyed. We had to learn to
be patient with workers' opinions. But let us not forget today that it was only a few
years earlier that Social-Democrats had shot down workers in the streets in Germany
under the Weimar Constitution - then the most democratic constitution ever known
Under it judges in Germany could let fascists go free under it, while they gave long
jail sentences to Communists guilty of lesser offences. Under Article 48, Chancellor
Bruning had dispensed with the elected Reichstag and ruled by decree, and Hitler had
been made Chancellor by Hindenburg in complete conformity with it.

We had already had to fight in the ILP for what we called "critical support" for Labour
in elections. Towards the end of 1935 the Labour Party leadership were presenting us
with a new problem. "Official" Labour candidates were advocating the notion that the
League of Nations and "sanctions" applied by the Great Powers could "deter" Italian
imperialism from attacking Abyssinia. This meant that they were preparing the ground
for supporting a possible war between imperialist Britain and imperialist Italy, which
would be about British imperial interests in East Africa and the Mediterranean: under
the pretence of seeking peace, Labour was "officially" war-mongering.

Since it was obvious that, if a war really broke out and the Labour Party supported
the Government, we should have the duty of denouncing the social-patriots. How then
could we support Labour candidates at all in this situation of probable war? The ILP
was standing a handful of candidates. In a few seats in Glasgow the ILP was well
established and, in any case, the Labour Party apparatus seemed only to oppose them
half-heartedly. But the ILP MPs were all pacifists; they refused to mobilise workers
on the side of Abyssinia. Nor were there more than one or two Labour candidates who
rejected the "official" line, and they were only pacifists anyway.

The "Marxist Group in the ILP" was sharply divided. Some members (like me) worked
for a local ILP candidate (in my case for Fred Jowett in Bradford). Others worked for
their local Labour candidates. Some did nothing. The Conservatives retained their
majority and only lost a few seats to Labour, largely because the voters believed that
Bladwin's promises to fight for peace through the League of Nations offered the most
reliable solution, in the absence of any convincing attack on the Conservatives from
the Labour Party.

Since the Communist Party at this time was leading the chorus of support for the League
of Nations, its fraction in the Communist Party could no longer even pretend any more
that it was a loyal opposition. The dreams of those who hoped to "reform" the Com-

intern had been dissipated long before. Among the Trotskyists, one tendency began to congeal round the proposal to test how far an open fraction could be built in the Labour Party. The other proposed to test how far an "open" Trotskyist group in which work in the Labour Party would play a small part, if any, could be built. Both tendencies were reluctant to make the break with the ILP because they feared that it might be a pole of attraction for workers' opposition to war.

Furthermore, the experience of our French comrades' operation in the French Socialist Party had been not unsuccessful; it had not been long-drawn-out and fed our hope that the great battles in which the reformists would be tested could not be far off. But a final question was posed by sheer practical experience.

Having "turned" to the Labour Party, how were we to work there? On the one hand, would we be able to avoid an opportunist adaptation to the reformist prejudices and practices of the people with whom we would be seeking to work? Would we, on the other hand, avoid an undue "ultimatism" which would repel militants? No one claiming to be a Communist had made such a "turn" in Britain for a decade; nearly every memory of the construction of the National Left-Wing Movement in the Labour Party had been wiped out.

We had no other way to learn than by trial and error. In our Labour Party work we could sell the "Militant" openly, presenting our full programme with the exclusion of a specific call for the Fourth International, though we did from time to time give news of it. We sold many copies of a little pamphlet printed by Pioneer Publishers and written by James Burnham, entitled "Are You Ready for War?" We contributed to the Leeds Weekly Citizen. When civil war broke out in Spain, the Labour Party in Leeds organised a broad committee to raise funds for medical aid to the Republic, and Mary was its secretary. It raised a lot of money, despite sniping from the Stalinists, and has been a source of great difficulty to Stalinist historians trying to face the fact that, contrary to all their mythology, the Trotskyists wanted the Republic to win and stood well in the Labour Party.

We held a number of open-air meetings on a piece of open ground outside the Harehills Labour Club in North-East Leeds. These meetings drew crowds of tailoring workers from Burtons' huge factory nearby as well as others on their way home from work. Young workers from the local branch of the Labour Party League of Youth "dissuaded" the black-shirts from interrupting. Our speakers called for working class unity, because in Leeds attempts were constantly being made to foster hostility between workers of Irish, Jewish and English origins. We called for political independence from the employing class and for hostility to the bourgeois parties. The bureaucrats of the Labour Party then intervened. They threatened to exclude us, because we were "provoking the fascists" and "giving them publicity", and we had to accept, because we still had the job for which we were in the Labour Party to finish. Their line was that expressed in the Sedition Act and the Public Order Act, which they had worked out in conjunction with the Tories to divert the hostility of the workers to fascism and to defend the bourgeois

state.

Mary soon found work, as the forewoman of the cleaners at Burtons', and began by putting a stop to the system by which cleaning women had been paying a "back-hander" to the forewoman for their jobs. Soon afterwards, however, the Leeds District Committee of the Communist Party issued a bulletin which put the finger on Mary by name, said where she worked and alleged that as a Trotskyist she supported the Nazis. Her employers were prominent in the Jewish community and took very seriously the idea that they might be employing an anti-semite, when someone saw to it that they got one of these publications. They realised that there was a Stalinist slander behind the bulletin, and ingenuously ~~proposed to Mary~~ that, to get her own back, she should pass information to them about the CP cell in the factory. She explained that, deep as her differences with the Communist Party might be, they were of a different order from her opposition to capitalism - and immediately found herself outside the factory without a job.

The members of the Labour Party in Leeds were united in a bitter struggle at this time to win a majority in the City Council from the Conservatives, who were very well organised. But in relation to world affairs, they were confused and the Communist Party was actively exploiting their desire for unity in the workers' movement to agitate for a Popular Front to include Liberals. Unlike their counterparts in France, the Labour leadership in this country stubbornly refused to co-operate with the Communist Party, refusing, in my view, to share the function and the fruits of class collaboration.

The minutes of the Annual Conference of the "Militant Group" in August 1937 show how we were meeting under the shadow of the demise of the Socialist League some eleven weeks earlier. This body could without doubt have been a useful vehicle for us, which is one reason why the Communist Party put great pressure on its leadership to win it up, "in the interests of unity".

However, all this activity was bringing us a little closer to the organised working class at its day to day struggle, but we now drew down upon ourselves the full fury of the Stalinist lie-machine. We spent some time arguing that a Popular Front and a pact by British imperialism with the Soviet Union would not defend peace, but would prepare for war, and that these proposals gave rise to a poisonous misconception of internationalism. Consequently we had to spend a great deal of energy and time refuting the slanders of the Stalinists. We could not possibly have done so if we had not had Marxism and some of Trotsky's writings and those of Sedov and Shachtman to base ourselves on. Furthermore, all this gave an undoubted propagandist emphasis to our work. In any case our inexperience would have inclined us in that direction, but it helped to blunt the real cutting edge of our work against the Labour right wing. Our attitude to the working class in struggle needed to mature, for us to place ourselves where we could most effectively offer a way forward in class struggle to militants and thereby block off the Stalinist influence.

Our contacts in the Leeds working class soon led us to Fred Shaw, then the full-time organiser in Yorkshire for the National Council of Labour Colleges. He had served his time as a millwright in the early 1900's and was now already on the verge of middle-age. We valued him because during the Great War as a member of the British Socialist Party he had opposed the social-patriotism of Hyndman, and had later been elected to the leading body of the Communist Party at its foundation in 1921. He helped us to improve our grasp of the history and traditions of the workers' movement in Britain and to drive idealism out of our thinking. These were positive gains.

His employers, the National Council of Labour Colleges is now almost forgotten. It was absorbed into the Education Department of the TUC in 1964. It was founded, over forty years before, in 1922, soon after the end of the Great War, arising from the widespread movement for independent working-class education. During the 1900's in many places as far apart as Lerwick in Shetland and Plymouth representatives of local trade union branches and of the nascent workers' political parties had been coming together in committees to provide themselves with the education which they felt they needed to get the best results for their organisations.

This movement became especially strong in the South Wales coalfield and in the industrial areas of Central and West Scotland.

Workers were to be drawn into this process of mutual self-education for many reasons. Many felt consciously the need of guidance about how to advance the interests of working people, strengthen their organisations and answer the attacks of the bourgeoisie and its press. At the same time, they wanted to overcome the deprivation of having had to leave school just when intellectual curiosity about the whole of existence was beginning to awaken. Others hoped to find a way out of the mine or the factory, or just to find out more about what really went on in the world besides what the popular press told them.

The leading spirits in this movement, mostly male, usually had to study after the day's work, with few books and the best guidance they could find. A strong influence in their practical trade union work was syndicalism. In the South Wales tin-plate industry, to quote just one example, they saw as their primary aim the amalgamation of small, local unions, in order to confront the growing integration of the employers and to get round the obstacles of sectionalism and the rivalries of leaderships of competing unions.

No one yet could possibly have had any experience - apart from the Paris Commune - of a government based on the working class. This prospect seemed remote; the mass strike seemed to offer a quicker as well as a more effective alternative to Parliamentarism, in the first decade of the 20th century, particularly in view of the disappointing performance of the Labour Party.

There could be no suggestion, in the eyes of those active in this movement, that in a class-based society education can be "objective" or "impartial". Education had to be "democratic"; that meant that it had to be accessible to all, and that its provision had to be governed by the workers' own independent organisations, in opposition to what the universities or the bourgeois state would offer in the hope of blunting the thrust of the trade unions and workers' political parties.

In this milieu certain specific attitudes developed. First, the idea that, if workers were told "the facts", they would then make up their own minds and reach correct conclusions. From this false objectivity there flowed a conception that the workers create their own leadership and therefore get the leadership they deserve, and that "the movement" is everything. There would, in that case, be no need for the ideological and factional struggle within the mass organisations, nor recognition of the opposing roles of bureaucracy and vanguard. In the second place, the illusion could arise that "The Great Day" would ultimately dawn, when the workers would unite in a General Strike and the socialist era would begin.

For the immediate future, however, the conception developed that, just as workers need industrial organisation on the job and political organisation of some kind, they also need an organisation, financed by the unions, to provide "independent working-class

education". This had the positive value that it opposed the Fabian influences which wanted to subordinate the workers' movement to the ideological influences of the state and the universities and the preachers of class peace. But it also served to foster a certain philistinism which became positively reactionary after the experience of the Russian Revolution and lessons.

One important element in this movement in the 1900's was the construction of a Central Labour College. Local classes lacked the resources to produce the educators and future leaders of the rising workers' movement. Fund had to be raised, and text-books written. The idea was not completely novel; "lads of parts" from working class homes were already going to denominational colleges to be trained as Nonconformist ministers. But the necessary structures were built in bitter struggle against the Workers' Educational Association, the arm of the state and the universities, with its foothold in the unions among those who feared the threat from the rebels in the Labour Colleges.

The outbreak of the Great War divided the movement for independent working class education for a time, but its activity expanded considerably in the later years of the war and after it, when John MacLean lectured on economic in Glasgow to large audiences and its teachers included such distinguished intellectuals as Maurice Dobb, Gordon Childe and Lancelot Hogben.

After long discussions, the National Council of Labour Colleges came into existence in 1922, in the hope that it would serve as an "umbrella" organisation for the various individual initiatives in the field, would administer the trade union contributions, publish the monthly journal, "Plebs", produce suitable text-books and link up the local endeavours of the Labour Colleges up and down the country.

The Central Labour College was financed largely by the National Union of Railwaymen and the South Wales Miners' Federation, both of which unions were having a hard fight against obdurate employers. The early part of the 1920's saw a number of important trade union amalgamations, in some of which former Labour College students became prominent. Under the pressure of the employers in the decline of British capitalism following the end of the Great War, a certain "left" developed in the Trades Union Congress, one expression of which was to be its participation in the Anglo-Russian Joint Trade Union Committee in the mid-decade. This leadership, which was by no means Communist, but which had something to gain from a reputation for militancy and some sympathy for Marxism, made possible the great turning point in the Labour College movement by an agreement to stabilise the income of the National Council of Labour Colleges. This provided that they would pay a small annual capitation fee for every member, in return for which their members would have free access to classes and to postal courses. (I write in general terms about this because I do not know of any thorough study of it)

With control of its funds at the centre, the NCLC was tightly administered. In the conditions of unemployment in the 1920's, former Labour College students could look to

to it for a job. What went on in the regions could depend largely on the interests of the organiser: Charlie Gibbons (about whom Bob Pitt has written an interesting article in "Labour History Review" used to lecture on Phrenology. But they had to keep out of involvement in struggles against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

Certain intellectuals, who had left the Communist Party in 1924, calling into question the necessity for its existence, such as Frank Horrabin and Raymond Postgate, found a refuge and a certain contact with the workers' movement through the NCLC. They had a relation with Max Eastman when he was in Europe in the mid-1920's, and Postgate had contact with the French syndicalists round "La Revolution Proletarienne". From time to time, while they took part in 1925 onwards in the movement round "The Sunday Worker", they could produce from time to time disturbing reports about what was "really" going in the Soviet Union under the developing regime of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Some later writers have seen in this current a sympathy for the Left Opposition and an anticipation of Trotskyism in Britain. I know of no evidence, however, which links them with Trotsky at the time or with the political work of the Opposition. They were, however, of some service to those, such as the "Left" trade union leaders and the small apparatus of NCLC full-timers who could take advantage of such "revelations" to resist pressure from the Communist Party and distance themselves a little from it. Not only Aneurin Bevan but others were trained in this period to think that there is some other Marxism, more akin to that of Kautsky than to Lenin, with which to relate to Stalinism. Fred Shaw in the mid-1930's epitomised the contradictions in the NCLC. We admired his orientation to his class, without detecting at first that it tended to express his own place in its skilled, literate layer. In those days his support for the Trotsky Defence Committee was no small thing. He despised the Stalinists and vigorously opposed the Popular Front, though not from our viewpoint. Perhaps his most positive contribution was his stress on the role in history of the real movements of the class.

We soon discovered, however, that he rejected the entire Bolshevik conception of the party and of programmatic demarcation. The political basis on which he held his job despite the mutual dislike between him and Jimmy Millar - was the amalgamation of Kautskyian, determinist Marxism and De Leonist revolutionary syndicalism which he had learned before the Russian Revolution. He opposed the Popular Front as an attempt to "dilute the workers' movement" from outside. He could therefore brush aside the arguments about the struggle for a new International as "ideology": the workers would get round to it in their own good time when they saw the need. In practice he had a "live and let live" attitude to the Labour and Trade Union establishments which made him in the end at best a commentator and at worst a purveyor of cynicism.

At the time, however, he could still provide Trotskyists with one of the few public platforms from which they could voice "heretical" opinions without being howled down or threatened, with the Stalinist apparatus identifying Leninism with Stalinism and the Labour Party apparatus, with its eye on the prospect of government office, at

pains to underline its loyalty to the nation and the constitution.

Fred Shaw was something of a "character", but by no means a clown. His lectures, like his conversation, were lit up with homely illustrations and the way jokes which make bearable the evryday anxieties and hardships of working class life. He told me one da that he came originally from Burnley, and that emancipation began for him when he could afford to buy a modern bicycle and ride over the Pennines to meet the young radicals and socialists in the Colne Valley in Yorkshire. Despite our differences, of which he may at first have been better aware than we were, he welcomed our co-operation, provide us with experience of facing many working-class audiences and did not try to stop us saying what we thought should be said. Here was a contact, within the framework of ou perspective of "entrism" and of "Labour to Power", which we could take seriously, and I do not think we lost by it.

At about this time I read the English translation of Franz Mehring's "Karl Marx: The Story of His Life" which appeared in 1936, and have been greatly influenced by his overall presentation of the conditions in which they had to do their political work (though Mary and I found that our knowledge of 19th century European history was lamentably deficient), and to his recognition that even Marx and Engels could sometimes appreciate a situation incorrectly! I was also very interested in a book of reproductic of the murals of Diego Rivera, about whose connection with Trotskyism I knew very littl About this time the comrades in London got me to send press cutting to Trotsky in Mexico; those who today study his archives at Harvard can see these piles of clippings: filed, no doubt, by the meticulous Joe Hansen, with the dates and sources noted in my handwriting.

In N vember 1937 I took myself as a visitor to the national congress of the POI in Paris. There I bought, among other treasures, a copy of the edition by "Librairie du Travail" of "Thes^S et Resolutions des Quatre Premiers Congres de l'International Communiste". We had been saying for years that we based ourselves on the work and experient of the first four congresses, followed by that of the Left Opposition, and we did not really knw much about either. Margaret Johns had one copy besides mine, but I did no settle down to mastering any of the contents until the second year of the war, when we had to spend nights "fire-watching" in work-places and thus got some un interrupted leisure.

Two more incidents to conclude this chapter. During 1937 Mary and I wrote to both Harold Laski and to John Strachey, to try to warn them that they might well come to regret their current support for Stalinism. We did not get anywhere, of course, did we fare better when we tried to involve A. J. P. Taylor, then a young academic, in publicly denouncing the Moscow Trials, about which he has expressed private doubts. We spent to week end of May Day 1937 in Edinburgh, and marched in the demonstration under a banner which read, to the horror of some, "Long Live Trotsky: Long Live the

Fourth International". At the same time we made the first physical contact of the Trotskyists with the Revolutionary Socialist Party, We found its premises by chance, because they had on the door a brass plate with some such formula as "BritishSection: International Socialist Labour Party": the details escape me. Mary and I conferred and agreed that here might be something in our line, though we had never heard of them. So we knocked on the door, to be greeted by Nessie Laurie. We told her who we were and she replied: "Och! Ye've been quick. We only wrote to Trotsky the other day". In the 1930's the material conditions had hardly yet developed for a serious independent women's movement among petty bourgeois and working class women. The movement for Votes for Women had run its course. In the light of my upbringing and typically of the period, I was hardly aware of the revolutionary significance of the revolt of women against the specific disabilities of their sex in bourgeois society. Some notable women played leading roles in our movement: it is enough to mention by name Millie Lee, May Matlow, Dulcie Yelland and Mary Archer; the two last-named certainly left me in no doubt about the problem.

Who knows today what opportunities we missed as we face the approach to war? But you alone does not explain why, un-prepared as we were, we were optimistic. Communism seemed to offer to us a resolution of that dilemma which faced humanity from Adam to Faustus and Galileo, that self-fulfillment in the search for knowledge can lead the seeker into sin. Marxism seemed then, and seems to me today, to point to an answer. Reading Aeschylus' "Agam. mnon" at school taught that people can learn what the divine law is, and can avoid otherwise ineluctable disasters, only through suffering. So far so good. But, in our time, all this suffering would be useless until the working class found the road to become the ruling class.

Many people during the 1930's, inspired by such an ideal, put their trust in Stalinism. They must not be written off as all fools or hirelings. Why had Stalinism repelled us. In the first place, we had already experienced it in the "Third Period". But, in addition, we had had the altogether unusual opportunity of hearing at first hand from Kirby and Harber that conditions in the Soviet Union were very different from the glowing accounts in the Stalinist press or brought back by such admirers of Stalinism as Sidney and Beatrice Webb. It was only in the work of Trotsky that we found the means to assimilate that truth without being drawn into the camp of the counter-revolution.

Chapter Four: The Split in the "Militant Group" in December 1937

We had the help of Trotsky and we worked hard. Why were the results of our efforts so modest in Britain in the 1930's? This question has not been well handled by historians in recent years.

We were, of course, late in seeing the chances in the Labour Party and organising our forces there. We let the Communist Party have time to establish strong positions

among left-ward moving workers there; another indication of our inexperience. Nor did we realise at first how great were the hopes which the workers were placing in future Labour majorities in Parliament and local authorities. The reformist apparatus moreover, had the help of the Stalinists - despite their constant sniping at each other - in frustrating what might have been a large-scale movement linking the economic demands of workers in Britain in Britain to preventing the enemy at home from going to war and thereby presenting them to the German working people as allies in a joint struggle. Now, in the face of the seemingly irresistible approach of war, the futility of the politics of reformism and Stalinism, which had earlier held out the prospect of an easy road to peace, now produced a certain discouragement, a downturn which I illustrated statistically in the introduction to my thesis.

It cannot be denied that, if we had had worked more cleverly, had more experience and had stronger links with Bolshevism, we might have salvaged more. But Stalinism had destroyed nearly all the cadres which carried the October Revolution to victory and with them the political continuity of Bolshevism. The thread had to be re-tied.

There can be no question here of blaming the workers. They did not get the leadership they deserved.

We did not know it, but the discussions among the Trotskyists about how to work in Britain were reproducing on a smaller scale the same lines of division as in other countries at other times. By the early part of 1937 there were in Britain two tendencies besides the "Militant Group", working alongside it and trying to apply different tactics. The conditions did not enable them to decide either by argument or experience which was right. Perhaps a certain frustration and irritation with each other could not be thought un-natural? One of these tendencies was the "majority" of the old Communist League which had opposed entry into the ILP in 1933. Still led by Groves, Wicks and Dewar, it now called itself the "Marxist League". After the end of the Socialist League they were going on working in their own way in the Labour Party and tried to organise their periphery in a new "left" group which they called the Socialist Left Federation, in which the "Militant Group" tried to co-operate with them for a short time in late summer 1937.

30? I have tried to demonstrate, in my study of the Socialist League, that this group adapted to some extent to the left reformists in the hope of avoiding having to tackle the Stalinists head-on, and that they suffered a severe defeat for their pains. However, I know also that they got a serious foothold in the Labour League of Youth in South-West London, because I met their people at the National Conference of the Labour Party League of Youth in Battersea Town Hall, and, after I had spoken, they agreed that at that stage they could see no reason why we were not in the same organisation.

None the less, it is my opinion that the differences between the Marxist League and the Militant Group in 1936 - 37 can^{not} be reduced just to the hard feelings going back to the now out-dated dispute about the ILP going back to the end of 1933. The Marxist League also agreed with CLR James that Trotsky was excessively critical of the POUM, though, unlike James, they did not try to co-operate with the International Secretariat, taking no part in the "Geneva" Conference despite Trotsky's personal invitation to them to do so. After it Klement wrote to Trotsky in harsh terms to the effect that they published his articles in order to obscure their real differences with him.

But, in any case, by the end of 1937, both those who had been the standard-bearers of "independence" in 1933 and were now in the Labour Party and those who were still the standard-bearers of "independence", James' "Marxist Group", had run into such difficulties that both had to stop publishing their papers. Early in 1938 the remnants of both got together in a new group which for the first time carried the name, "Revolutionary Socialist League", the members of which appear to have tried to combine individual efforts inside the Labour Party with producing an "independent" paper outside.

James' group, the "Marxist Group" had been the standard bearer of "independence", after having been driven out of the ILP in November 1936. Its leaders had some dim awareness that they were expressing a conception of how the revolutionary movement was to be built different from that of the "Militant Group", the International Secretariat and Trotsky himself, ~~because~~ though they continued to talk as if they had a perspective of influencing the situation in the Labour Party indirectly through trade union work. For, though the "Geneva" resolution had (correctly in my view) been careful not to venture to lay down in detail how work to gather forces from the Labour Left should be carried out, left in ~~the~~ no doubt its opinion that the forces for Trotskyism in Britain should all be concentrated in the Labour Party and that quickly. We must not overlook, however, that in December 1936 the International Secretariat refused to come down on the side of the "Militant Group" in its debate against James to the extent to withdrawing its recognition from those who in practice did not apply the spirit of the "Geneva" Resolution.

But from where, in James' opinion, would the human material for the "new" revolutionary group be drawn in the immediate future? As far as I can tell, it would be drawn largely as a result of propagandist work, speeches, lectures and articles, on which basis it would attract people who had developed politically without ever passing through a "reformist stage" and who would come looking for a revolutionary leadership of which they had not previously heard which would be ready-made for them. I do not think, and never did, that revolutionary parties have ever been built that way.

The "Militant Group" and the International Secretariat did not, I think, dispute that individual

al militants could be won by personal contact and propaganda. They expected, however, that within the mass-organisations, there would arise tendencies seeking the means to solve their problems in struggle against the leaderships. They believed that Marxists could win influence over such tendencies only if they could locate themselves where they could actually take part in their struggles. In Britain this meant, as elsewhere, taking part in the life of the trade unions, but in this country the peculiar relations of the trade unions with the Labour Party meant that every important struggle in the trade unions found its political expression in struggle within the Labour Party, in which representatives of the interests of the workers came up against the agents of the bourgeoisie in the workers' movement. Consequently, in British conditions, the Trotskyists could only mature politically themselves if they oriented their work in the direction of such movements in the Labour Party.

This meant systematically raising the demand that the Labour Party fight so as to win a majority in Parliament. But that was not all. It also meant developing the means to carry out campaigns popularising those transitional demands which, from time to time having regards to current conditions and the workers' current state of consciousness, could mobilise workers in struggle, in the course of which they would test out by experience how far their "official" reformist leaders would go.

Contained in every large-scale struggle within the workers' mass organisations is the prospect that the reformist apparatus will be thrown into crisis and break apart, as happened in Germany, for example, in 1917, in 1920 and in 1931. Without the direct participation of Marxists, such disruption could produce nothing better than centrist obstacles to further development. It could be hoped, however, that Marxists could win positions of influence in such new groupings. Their task would be to work, in the first place, for them to adopt international perspectives, with a view to recognising the need to prepare the ground for the Fourth International. They would also try to pose to the workers who still accepted the leadership of the old reformist guard the need, by insistent campaigns, for unity and for them to demand that their leaders break with the bourgeoisie, take power and adopt the necessary measures to meet the needs of the whole working class.

Through all this process there would be dangers facing the "entrists", because it was a subtle and complicated test of political skill. We ran the risk of adapting our theory to the politically immature elements in left-ward moving tendencies. On the other hand we could lose chances of common work with them by an undue exclusiveness and a haughty, pedagogic attitude. (Harber used to speak of "the narrow knife-edge" of Bolshevism) We had to test to what extent the whole group could be won for the Fourth International and what alliances could be made. Later experience showed that this could not be a rigid, but a flexible tactic. Under the guidance of Harber and Jackson, our work in Leeds began to develop this conception of how to work in the Labour Party to lay the basis for the future British Section of the Fourth International.

We believed that neither the "Marxist League" nor the "Marxist Group" could apply such

a tactic jointly with us. The "Militant Group" did not wholly exclude "open work" in certain circumstances, provided that it did not cut across the above perspective. For instance, it might be possible, on an outbreak of war, to denounce publicly the Labour leaders who supported "their own" bourgeoisie. It might be possible to mobilise public opinion against the "Moscow Trials".

However, as we shall see, in the event the "Militant Group" expected a wave of social-patriotism such that individual protests would be futile. Moreover, Harber was once heard to declare his opinion that "anything you have to do can be done just as well from inside the Labour Party as outside it". He may have been irritated at the difficulty of getting co-operation from comrades whom he had come to regard as futile opportunist or no less futile sectarians.

At that time I accepted his opinion, but have come to think in later years that, while it may have had some value at the time, it cannot be generally accepted. It is, of course, always difficult for a large group, and impossible for a small group, to hold "open workers" together with "entrists" in joint work unless there is general agreement (which we certainly did not have in 1937) which protects the work of the "entrists" from being prematurely interrupted. It is, moreover, fair to point out that when Cannon, in the hope of negotiating a fusion of the groups, came to Britain in summer 1938, these considerations were only beginning to emerge.

It is clear in retrospect, also, that there were contradictions in the work of the "Militant Group", which is the only one of the groups which I knew from the inside. My opinion, at which I arrived, of course, only long after the events and in the light of the archives, is that we made three principal mistakes. I have recently tried to raise discussion in public on them, so far without great success.

First, our perspective of work in the Labour Party League of Youth was based on an excessively optimistic expectation of early polarisation. As a result the Stalinists were able to isolate us. However, Groves' people, who produced "Socialist Youth", a somewhat anodyne periodical, for the young comrades in the Socialist League, hardly did better.

Secondly, our response when the leaders of the Socialist League wound it up in May 1937 was wrong. We correctly understood that Cripps, Mellor and the others wanted to extricate themselves from the defeatist position that had earlier taken in the event of imperialist war, and that they wanted to join with the right wing and the Stalinists in favour of a pact with Soviet Russia and support for "our own government" in the event of imperialist war. Cripps and Mellor had taken a leading role in the so-called "Unity Campaign" of the Socialist League, the Communist Party and the ILP. In June 1937 the "Militant" carried the head-line, "Unity Mongers Surrender!", and, with the support of John Robinson, Harber and Jackson took the view that we must mercilessly denounce Cripps. Charlie van Gelderen and I independently drew from our experience of trying to sell the paper that this head-line was badly received. It was construed

as lumping together with the treacherous leadership that rank and file of the Socialist League which we could hope to win. I spoke to this effect at the August 1937 Conference of the League, without convincing the comrades.

Thirdly, it was a mistake, when we were trying to rally the survivors of the Socialist League into some new peripheral "left" structure, to announce that we had formed a ready-made, new organisation, the "Militant Labour League". Could we have had more success if we had called discussion meetings first? At that time Groves tried to form the "Socialist Left Federation", which was oriented rather in the direction of pacifism in the Labour Party, but it too was never more than shadowy.

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This appears to me to have been the setting in which the "split" took place in the "Militant Group" at the end of 1937. The facts of the split, such as they are, are amply documented; my thesis presents what is in the archives. It is the problem of explaining the split which remains to be resolved. Why did it happen?

It appears to have come upon us like lightning out of a clear sky. There may have been prior consultations between those who led it, Haston, Ralph Lee etc., but the record offers hardly a hint of political differences. We know that they thought that the Executive of the Group lacked energy. We know that there was a discussion there was a discussion, the nature of which is not recorded, about how we should have intervened in anti-fascist activity, in particular in a fight in Long Lane in South-East London. There is evidence that the Liverpool branch of the group disagreed with the M.L.L. initiative. What needs to be explained is whether any attempts were made to identify what underlay these problems and to solve them collectively.

The principal argument by which the split was justified at the time - and has been justified in later accounts - is the claim that the majority on the Executive Committee of the Group had exhausted whatever political possibilities they may ever have possessed and (perhaps because some of them were products of LSE) had degenerated into a worn-out clique, clinging to "power" by deceiving Trotsky and the International Secretariat about the true state of affairs in Britain. They had to be written off because it would have been a waste of time to argue with them.

It is, of course, true that the comrades of longer standing round Harber and Jackson had been working together for several years and had achieved a certain measure of mutual confidence. But the documentary record of the "Militant" Group and the "Marxist Group" alike do not support the view that the leadership in either group was held together by "clique" personal relations. On the contrary, they were held together, in both groups, by political agreement on a tactic, with the aid of which they were exploring the frontiers of knowledge. It is true that such comrades as headed the split were all comparative newcomers; Ralph Lee, Jock Haston, Ted Grant or Betty Hamilton, for all their revolutionary qualities, had taken no part in the experiences or the discussions which formed the leaderships of the "Militant Group" or the "Marxist

Group". At the time there was no stabilising force in the form of a mass basis, nor do those who led the break-away appear to have reflected that the overhead cost of political progress by discussion cannot be evaded.

Down the following years the "Militant Group" has hardly had a fair hearing. To this day one can often meet comrades who confidently repeat the justifications for the split which Grant or Healy put into circulation in 1938 and during the war. Here is an interesting paradox - the great majority of those who today are the harshest critics of Healy and Grant on all other matters usually agree in uncritically accepting their highly partisan accounts of the split. Argument for a contrary view has been well silenced or ignored.

The International Secretariat censured the leading comrades of the "Militant Group" for their handling of the dispute, but it put the split down to "purely personal grievances". However, a comparison of the press of the W.I.L. in 1938 - 39 with that of the (fused) RSL in which the old "Militant Group" leadership was influential suggests that there may have been somewhat divergent conceptions of how to work in the Labour Party and in particular how to relate to dissident militants in the Communist Party. But this can be no more than a hypothesis.

My thesis judged split to have been disastrous for Trotskyism in Britain. I formed that opinion in 1938 and have seen no reason to revise it since. One immediate result was to undermine our work in the YCL in the East End of London, where we know from other sources that there was disaffection among workers with the Communist Party. Another result was that the WIL wrote off in advance the fusion of the groups which produced the Revolutionary Socialist League in summer 1938, a decision which I believe has been destructive to the development of theory. The W.I.L. took no part in the efforts of the RSL to work out how to combine "open" with "entry" work, a problem which remains un-resolved to this day. Moreover, when we all entered the unfamiliar territory of war, discussions about how to proceed and to relate to the new conditions went on side by side in two isolated, hostile groups, walled off from each other, when, as later research on the documents shows, they were wrestling with the same problems!

I do not claim that the leading comrades on either side could foresee the longer-term consequences. However, the "Militant Group", as I remember well, was soon to experience Healy's specific contribution to the advancement of knowledge. He based himself on the simple falsehood that the "Militant Group" no longer existed, or was on the point of ceasing to exist, and that the WIL had destroyed it. The WIL appears soon to have got a source of information inside the "Militant Group", with the result that, wherever I made a contact in the six Northern counties I soon found Healy on the doorstep full of slanders, which won him few members but destroyed the chance of any of us to work with these contacts. He told me so much during the 1950's. In Leeds itself, however, the split had little effect; the WIL appeared there only in the war.

It may well be argued today that a political basis did exist for a split in the "Milit-

Group" in 1937. However, if that is argued, it would follow that the split was in any case necessary. But even so, was it not premature? No time was taken to consider why differences and suspicions had developed. Long-term political damage was inflicted on our movement. In the 1950's, in my opinion (which is based on experience), the "Club" was never able to be quite clear about what it was doing in the Labour Party, because to discuss the question could have raised the experience of the 1930's, which Healy had to deny.

Moreover, there have been many groups in later years who have tried to operate some sort of "entrism" without knowing anything about the specific solutions to which the "Militant Group" was working. There have been all kinds of "bogus" entry operations, doomed in advance to fail.

Like all the other documents of the 1930's, those with which the WIL justified itself in 1938 remained hidden in the archives for many years after. They show that the authors had not assimilated the essence of the earlier disputes in which none of them had taken part. The arguments for "entry" were such that they could be quickly dropped when, during the war, there could seem to be quick gains to be made by recruiting to an "open" organisation, within which a strong anti-entrism majority formed and which failed to prepare for the big swing to the Labour Party in 1945. For the WIL, the split closed the door to our earlier experiences.

The destructive hostility of the WIL leadership to the RSL, while the WIL leadership was without doubt motivated by the best of intentions, was fed, no doubt, by the bad experiences in which some of them had been trained in the Communist Party. Harber, on the other hand, under-estimated them when in 1938 he simply dismissed the WIL as "led by lars" and therefore without hope of any serious political future.

The extraordinary document which the WIL leadership produced in 1942 or 1943 is a memorial to the political price which history has exacted from us all. It is entitled, "To Acquaint Our Membership..." and purports to present an account of Trotskyism in Britain up to the end of 1937, before the WIL "came to the rescue". It does not provide any evidence of facts or documents, secure in the knowledge, perhaps, that its members then had no means to check them. Like others since, it portrays its authors as "Good People" and their targets as "Bad People", a perfect formula for confusion and ensuring that everything before them is written out of history. A method to which we have become painfully accustomed in later years!

In the end, both lines of development encountered defeat. It was not pre-destined that (for reasons which I outline later) the cadre of the RSL was in disarray and its members divided on our attitude to the war. Then after the war, the cadre of the RCP, based on that of the WIL, collapsed in the face of fundamental political problems, to cope with which its preceding experience had not equipped it.

Chapter Five: Under the Shadow of World War II

Amid disastrous defeats for the working class in Europe, the Fourth International was founded and its foundation proclaimed at the international conference of thirty delegates from eleven countries held near Paris early in September 1930.

At the same time, the heads of the British, French, German and Italian Governments were negotiating a deal, which, they hoped, might provide for a time a compromise between their conflicting needs. They announced on September 30 the so-called "Munich Pact", on the basis of which Germany was to partition Czecho-Slovakia, in order to recover the German population of the highly industrialised Sudetenland, which had been under Czecho-Slovak rule since the end of 1918.

This agreement was another blow to the "settlement" of Europe by the victorious powers at the end of World War I, the so-called "Versailles" settlement. It had wide international implications.

It revealed the real weakness of the diplomatic position of Stalin's regime in Russia. The Powers enabled German armies to penetrate deep into Eastern Europe. They saw no need to consult the wishes of Stalin or, apparently, to fear that the Red Army, which had recently been "purged", might intervene to defend the integrity of Czecho-Slovakia the government of which accepted the deal only under duress.

The Pact came also as a demoralising blow to the hopes of the masses of working people. Reformists, pacifist and Stalinist propaganda had led them to believe that somehow the presence of the Soviet Union in the League of Nations and the Stalinists' concessions to the "Western democracies" could erect a "Peace Front" to protect small nations and check the expansion of Nazism. These hopes now crumbled. It seemed hardly likely that this concession would "buy off" the need of the German bourgeoisie to expand. Some of those who had joined in the agitation for a "Peace Front" accepted what seemed to them to be the inevitable and turned to supporting the war-preparations of "their own" governments. Some young workers, influenced by Stalinism, joined the Territorial Army, and found themselves called up in 1939 to fight in what the Communist Party then was denouncing as an "imperialist" war! After all, had "we" not been reasonable at Munich? "we" really would have to "stand up to Hitler" when his demands went any further.

Others, who may have hoped within the "Peace Front", like the League of Nations, might in some sense be seen as an expression of internationalism, fell into apathy. A few worker-militants found their way out of the Communist Party in the direction of Trotskyism. The Stalinist faithful, which did not know in what direction Soviet policy would go, continued to attack us who opposed re-armament and conscription in Britain on either moral or class grounds. These consisted of the followers of Groves, the RSL and a number of Labour pacifists and "Lefts". In Leeds we took part in anti-war demonstrations organised in the name of the "Socialist Anti-war Front"; this was a colla

Chapter Five: Under the Shadow of World War Two

"Fight", the journal of the "James" group, and "Red Flag", that of the Groves-Wicks group, had both ceased to appear before the end of 1937. In February 1938 the two groups convened a meeting in London to discuss the possibility of unification. They invited the "Militant Group", whose organ, "Militant", was still appearing monthly, and the "Militant Group" took part in the conference, of which we have a full record. It is clear that serious obstacles prevented the "Militant Group" from uniting in one organisation with the "anti-entrists", as well as from uniting with the Groves-Wicks people, who claimed to be working in the Labour Party but were prepared to form a unified group with James' people. Regrettably, the meeting did not further illuminate or analyse the divergences, and merely repeated past arguments, but at least it observed the courtesies of debate.

Consequently, the groups did not yet have the possibility of testing their conflicting orientations side by side under a common leadership. In any case the general level of movement in the class was declining. In particular, this meant that there was a certain abstraction in the attacks which we all were making on the Labour right-wing and the Stalinists, on the ground that their "line" was clearing the way for social-patriotism; it might have been easier for us to win support for our opposition to war preparations if we had had the means to relate our position to the immediate demands which the working class was raising in actual experience of struggle. Many workers saw us as working purely on the level of ideology and as propagandists of ideas.

But among some of the "anti-entrists" there was a conviction that any "entry", or even any call for a "Third Labour Government" must lead inevitably to opportunism and capitulation. These comrades were, in my opinion, by no means "centrists" or "bad people". They were inexperienced people, inclining to ultra-left-ism, struggling like the rest of us in the fringe of knowledge to solve problems which no one had solved before them. The "Militant Group" continued to battle for "all in the Labour Party", and this roused the usual opposition, but no new thought about the political prerequisites for "entrists" and "non-entrists" to be able to co-operate on an agreed basis and no alleviation of the mutual suspicion of the leaders of the "Militant Group and the Groves-Wicks Group.

After this meeting, the "James" group and the "Wicks" group fused. The new group took the name "Revolutionary Socialist League" and began to produce a monthly journal entitled "Workers' Fight".

In June 1938, at Trotsky's suggestion, with the prospect of war imminent, the SWP in USA sent to Europe a three-man team, consisting of Cannon, Shachtman and Gould. Its task was to try to negotiate unifications of the contending groups in Britain and in France, to visit contacts in Ireland, to attend the forthcoming Founding Conference of the Fourth International and to prepare the transfer of the International Secretariat to New York if war actually broke out in Europe. We have a quantity of documents, including some divergent accounts, about what Cannon did in Britain. He convinced

the leaders of the "Militant Group" and of the "James" - "Wicks" fusion that they could try to work out the problems of combining "entry" with "open work" and deepen their understanding within a common framework; they agreed to fuse and to adopt the name "Revolutionary Socialist League" (RSL) for the fused organisation. Wicks and some of his supporters also came in, but Groves held back.

Cannon's negotiations also strengthened our contact with the leadership of the Revolutionary Socialist Party, a group of militant young workers in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Yorkshire, which had developed through a long struggle of its own from revolutionary syndicalism in the direction of Leninism and the Fourth International.

The basis for the fusion, which, it was expected, the RSP would join, was set out in the so-called "Peace and Unity Agreement"; this provided that "entry" and "outside" work should go on side by side, that emphasis should be placed on "entry" work, that differences on the question should not be raised for a period of six months, and that the fused group should then have a national conference to discuss the experience and decide on its orientation in that light.

The Founding Conference of the Fourth International was held shortly afterwards. It was attended by thirty delegates from eleven countries, who met near Paris early in September 1938. Among other things, it decided to recognise the "fused" RSL as the British Section of the Fourth International; it condemned the refusal of the W.I.L. to join the fusion and invited it to re-consider its position. The delegation from the SWP reported to the Political Committee in optimistic tones:

"The fusion of our English groups into one united British section of the Fourth International is one of the most encouraging successes that our movement has scored for some time in Europe... Objective conditions, the expectation of a strike wave and growing political activity of the Labour Party, the expected entry of the ILP into the Labour Party, all make the situation of our movement in England far more favourable than it has been."

The report also criticised the attitude of the W.I.L. However, the French-language organ of the International Secretariat, "Quatrieme Internationale", in its September - October 1938 issue, reported, with slightly more percipience:

"The Conference stressed that not all the difficulties had been overcome, in particular that the questions relative to work in the ranks of the Labour Party have not received a definite answer."

The conference met against the background of defeats in China and in Germany, as well as of impending defeats in Spain and in France, but it could take heart from the massive development of the workers' movement in USA expressed in the rise of the CIO.

At the same time, the Governments of Britain, France, Italy and Germany were negotiating a deal which, they hoped, might for a time provide a compromise between their conflicting needs. On September 30 they announced the "Munich Agreement"; this provided

Britain, France and Italy would not oppose the partition of Czecho-Slovakia, to restore to Germany the highly industrialised region of Sudetenland with its German population, which had been under Czecho-Slovak rule since the end of the Great War. This "revision" of the post-1918 frontiers was a further blow to the "settlement" of Europe by the victorious powers, the so-called "Versailles" settlement, at the end of the first world war. It also had wide international repercussions.

The powers had seen no necessity to consult the wishes of the Kremlin about this concession to Germany permitting the post-1918 frontiers to be altered. This revealed cruelly the real weakness of Stalin's diplomatic position. No one feared that the Red Army might intervene to defend the integrity of the frontiers of Czecho-Slovakia against the penetration of the Wehrmacht deep into Eastern Europe; after all, there had been shortly beforehand a "purge" of the senior staff of the Red Army which seriously called its fighting capacity into question. Moreover, the arrangement was imposed on the government of Czecho-Slovakia against its protests.

But the Agreement was especially a demoralising blow to the hopes of masses of working people, as well as of sections of the bourgeoisie, that somehow the presence of the Soviet Union in the League of Nations and the concessions of the Communist Parties to the Western bourgeoisie could erect a "Peace Front", the existence of which would protect small nations and check the expansion of Nazism without war. These hopes now crumbled.

It seemed hardly credible that Hitler would be "bought off" by the gift of the Sudetenland for very long. Consequently some of those in the West who had earlier joined in the agitation in favour of a "Peace Front" now accepted what seemed to them to be the inevitable and turned to supporting the war preparations of "their own" governments, often complaining that these preparations were still not whole-hearted enough. After all, had "we" not been reasonable at Munich? "We" really would have now to "stand up to Hitler when he made his next demand.

In Britain some young workers, under Stalinist influence, went so far as to join the Territorial army; in 1939 they were to find themselves called to the colours to fight in Flanders what the Communist Party by them was denouncing as an "imperialist" war!

As early as a week before the "Munich Agreement" was announced, Trotsky had written: "None of these gentlemen want a war. All are afraid of its consequences. But fight they must. War they cannot avoid".

Three days later, he forecast:

"We may now expect with certainty Soviet diplomacy to attempt a rapprochement with Hitler, at the cost of new retreats and capitulations, which in their turn can only bring nearer the collapse of the Soviet oligarchy".

Soon the Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union announced that Stalin

was ready to negotiate a deal with Nazi Germany.

The prospects for peace and democracy were deteriorating. The International Brigades in Spain were fighting their last campaigns before the fascists led by Franco completed their victory. When the paper of the Spanish Anarchists, "Solidaridad Obrera", blamed the world proletariat for not giving enough help to the Spanish workers, Trotsky bitterly pointed out that it was the leaders of the Spanish Anarchists who had not only refused to support the revolution in Spain but had indirectly taken part in repressing it.

In France, by December 1938, the government of the Popular Front, led by the Radical-Socialist Daladier, who had replaced the Socialist Premier, Leon Blum, crushed the General Strike with which the working class put up its last desperate effort before war broke out.

The bourgeois statesmen in Britain were beginning to consider what changes they needed in the leadership of the Conservative Party, in order to ensure "national unity", and the claims of the "outsider", Winston Churchill, were being canvassed.

While some of those who had hoped that the "Peace Front" might represent somehow a trace of internationalism were falling into apathy or turning to direct war-preparations, the Stalinist faithful, who could not anticipate in what direction Stalin would decide in the end to turn, went on threatening to withhold support for conscription and re-armament in the hope of "putting prsssure" on it to guarantee to defend by force the frontiers in Eastern Europe. The natural accompaniment of this line was still more vicious attacks on those who explained how the Stalinist bureaucracy had weakened the capacity of the USSR to defend itself and assisted the French and the British bourgeoisie to present themselves to the people as "friends of peace". In these attacks the Trotskyists were presented as "un-patriotic", "sympathisers of Chamberlain" and "Hitler Hitler's agents". Even more ludicrous was their attack on the Labour right wing, attempting to tar it with the "Trotskyist" brush.

Munich did not lead to a flood of militant workers to Trotskyism, but there were some who found their way out of the Communist Party in our direction, especially comrades who had fought in Spain and returned disillusioned. Later legends, moreover, that we were "inactive", incompetent or abandoning Trotskyism seem to me to be without any foundation, though this does not mean that we did not have serious disagreements about how to proceed.

The working class was, however, by no means completely demoralised. In 1937 and 1938 Labour candidates were performing better in by-elections than in the General Election of November 1935. This may have had something to do with the effects of the Communist Party's campaign for a "Popular Front". Along with a number of prominent bourgeois and petty bourgeois figures, the Communist Party did its best to ensure that Labour did not stand candidates, in the hope that Liberal supporters of a "Peace Front" could have a clear run against Conservative candidates.

On the one hand, there appears to have been considerable resistance among traditional Labour voters to what seemed to them to be the backward step of voting Liberal. On the other hand, the Labour leadership, with the prospect of ministerial office one day, had no intention of letting the Stalinists or the Liberals dictate to them or weaken their grip on the Labour electoral machinery. Unlike their counterparts in France and Spain, they were in a position in Britain to hold their ground. In a few by-elections the constituency Labour Parties could be induced by Stalinist pressure not to fight, but in these contests the "Peace Front" candidates usually did not do well in a straight fight with the Government, perhaps because the traditional Liberal voters whom they were courting (at the risk of alienating Labour voters) supported the Conservative candidates.

The Labour leadership, to be sure, had to draw on past traditions of class struggle and socialist idealism to justify taking the risk of opposing the workers' sentiment for "unity" against the Tories and rejecting what Herbert Morrison called "a multi-party bloc of irreconcilables threatening to create confusion by coming apart at any time".

The strongest card that the Communist Party had was the possibility that war might come before the next General Election. In that case Labour would have no chance to go for a majority. The Government, more immediately, they argued, need to be re-constituted to exclude "the men of Munich" and to include Churchill and supporters of "collective action against new aggression and threats of aggression", now that the policy of Chamberlain and the Labour Party has now increased the danger to the lives and livelihood of the British people".

While all this was going on in the political superstructure, and the general level of trade union activity was lower than in the two preceding years, there was a certain revival in the workers' youth organisations, in the Labour League of Youth (reduced since 1937 when its Stalinist leadership had capitulated to the Labour right-wing and agreed to a constitution fixing its maximum age-limit at 21), and the Guild of Youth of the ILP. There was also another crisis in the ILP itself, when Maxton and McGovern, two of the ILP's Members of Parliament, hailed Chamberlain's return from Munich in pacifist fashion as that of a "bearer of peace".

Incidentally, this recrudescence of crisis in the ILP in 1938 may suggest that our earlier operation in relations to it had been a failure, or that it should not have been wound up in 1935-37. I do not think so. We would have been wasting time in the ILP - as indeed we did after 1935. By 1938 the ILP attracted a number of young men intending to plead conscientious objection to conscription, and these recruits came under the influence of revolutionary language, especially in the London Division, and were infuriated by Maxton's praise for Chamberlain.

One element in this crisis was the debate in the ILP about its relation with the Labour Party. The Parliamentarians and the reformists, naturally, would have liked to get back into the Labour Party, but their freedom of movement was restricted. The Labour

Party leadership would not take them back unless they agreed that members of Parliament sponsored by the ILP would accept the discipline of the Labour Party's Parliamentary Group, while the members of the ILP refused to let them go back without some special dispensation; otherwise why had they left the Labour Party in 1932?

The Trotskyists hoped, in 1938, that if and when the ILP did go back to the Labour, it would be a rallying point there for militants and a favourable milieu within which they could work. In 1938 and 1939, however, the discussions did not lead anywhere. In July 1939 the secretary of the Labour Party wrote to Fenner Brockway telling him that there would be no special treatment for the ILP and that the ILP could take it or leave it. Only in 1946, after the huge electoral victory of the Labour Party, could Brockway and the pacifist-reformists go back on the Labour Party leaders' own terms, at the same time as the Commonwealth Party people were doing the same. It is interesting to note that Jimmy Maxton, close to the end of his life, wrote a personal letter to Brockway, friendly enough in its wording, but strongly critical of his course.

It may be that, in 1938, some of those who, in the newly-fused RSL, were working outside the Labour Party may have tried to intervene in the crisis in the ILP, but I know nothing of this. No one seems, either, to have thought of campaigning inside the Labour Party on behalf of the ILP, and, apart from one reference in "Militant", the "entrists" seem to have ignored the question.

This did not mean, however, that we had no contact at rank-and-file level with the ILP. In autumn 1938 the "Socialist Anti-War Front" was formed. This provided the means for joint campaigning against the war danger. It was supported by the RSL and its periphery, by Groves and his periphery, by certain "Left" Labour Members of Parliament, some with pacifist inclinations, and by the ILP. As might be expected, this collaboration was condemned by some in the RSL and others claiming to be Trotskyists as a capitulation to pacifism and left-centrism.

The "Socialist Anti-War Front" organised a number of conferences and produced some issues of a paper, "The Call", in which Groves appears to have played a large part. In Leeds the RSL marched with the ILP under the banner of the Socialist Anti-War Front. I think that anyone who cares to take the trouble to read the press of the RSL and of the WIL at this time, their internal documents and the letters which passed between them and with the International Secretariat, can form a fair idea about how the Trotskyists faced up to the "Munich" agreement and the reaction against it. I am not in a position to write about the internal life of the WIL, for lack of information, but it is clear that there was harmonious collaboration during the first months in the leading body of the RSL between former leading members of the "Marxist Group", the "Militant Group" and Harry Wicks. Funds were allocated for the "open" paper, "Workers' Fight", and James saw to its production until he went to USA in October.

But it is also clear that the methods of work of the RSL and the WIL were already beginning to diverge. Both devoted attention to the workers' youth organisations. The

WIL won a foothold in the Labour League of Youth on Merseyside as well as intervening in the ILP Guild of Youth, where it won one or two useful future cadres. At the same time, the RSL revived "Youth Militant", which had been the axis of its youth work until the victory of the Stalinists and the Right Wing at the Easter Conference in 1937 after which the paper was dropped.

The WIL acquired a small printing press and produced quite a number of short pamphlets, mainly reprints of writings by Trotsky, as well as "Workers' International News" and "Youth for Socialism". This material was sold openly in a circle much wider than that of their members. This suggests that the WIL leadership may have felt less concerned than that of the RSL about defending such toe-holds as it had in the Labour Party; or, it may be, they simply took opportunities which the RSL overlooked. There was, in any case, a political point at stake here. Starkey Jackson and I had discussion about this time with dissident members of the Communist Party, who agreed to meet us in conditions of extreme secrecy, in Blackpool. These worker comrades had come into sharp opposition to the party's "Peace Front" line, which they correctly saw as clearing the way for support for the bourgeoisie in imperialist war. But our discussion, patient and comradely as it was, led neither to recruitment nor to joint work. These comrades had been trained in the thinking of the "Third Period"; the political gulf between us was too wide. They simply could not grasp the reasoning behind our orientation to the conflicts inside the Labour Party. What they wanted was a better Stalinist Party of 1933, that slammed away at the Labour Party, leaders and members and electors all alike, from an "independent" standpoint.

Between the general positions in relation to the coming war of the RSL and the WIL there were no differences of significance. Both groups, not having deep roots in the workers' movement and its current pre-occupations, tended abstractly to pose the question of mass resistance to the plans of the bourgeoisie in which the Labour leaders were colluding and the Communist Party was involved. Neither, I repeat, made the smallest concession to pacifism. On that basis Margaret Johns could successfully move the anti-war resolution at the conference of the Shop Assistants' Union at Easter 1940 and Mary Archer could do the same at the conference of the Yorkshire Regional Council of the Labour Party.

In the first week of October 1938, as soon as Chamberlain returned from Munich promising "Peace for Our Time", there were many demonstrations of public opposition. The RSL "centre" in London responded with two leaflets, one in the name of the RSL and the other in that of the MLL. Apart from the call in the former for the Fourth International in the former, their content does not differ. The "centre" also issued to the members a warning against exposing themselves and the organisation to repression or to the un-necessary loss of positions in the mass movement by adventurism. It advised that local meetings, leaflet distribution and demonstrations be organised under the protection of recognised mass organisations of the working class.

The fuller political response of the RSL can be read on the front page of "Militant" for November 1938:

"Capitalising on the panic created by the crisis, the National Government is pushing forward its war preparations more than ever... Industrial conscription is to be introduced by a back door... The entire capitalist class, whatever the differences on the merits of the Munich agreement, is completely united on the necessity of mobilising the nation for defence... The workers in the armament and ancillary industries must resist all attempts at speed-up and dilution... the trades councils must organise the unemployed to defeat any attempt to coerce them into a Labour Corps, every attack on our democratic rights must meet the organised resistance of the Labour Movement...

In all our propaganda we must warn that the Munich agreement is merely a breathing space to permit British capitalism to collect its resources for the coming conflict. We must take full advantage of this brief interval to drive out the National Government of imperialism and war and replace it with a Labour Government. But we are compelled to realise that the present programme and leadership of the Labour Movement commits it to the support of imperialist war... Our first job is therefore to conduct an energetic struggle inside the working class movement for a militant socialist policy against imperialist war. This can be done on the industrial field by the building of factory committees, and on the political field by strengthening the MLL as the revolutionary left of the Labour Party. By bringing together in actual struggle the workers willing to fight against imperialist war, we can fling down a challenge to the policies of class collaboration and surrender to capitalism being pursued by the Labour and Communist leaders."

The article ends with the demand that a special conference of the Labour Party be called to organise the workers against imperialist war.

"Workers' International News" produced a special supplement, head-lined "War Crisis": it stated "Only by civil war, workers against bosses, class against class, can imperialist wars be abolished", and ended with the slogans "No Support for Imperialist War! Long Live the World Revolution!", without mention of the Fourth International.

The October 1938 issue of "Youth for Socialism" deserves a special mention. It carried a well-aimed attack on the "Peace Councils" in which the Stalinists had organised the supporters of the "Peace Front" up and down the country. It put the question: why had "the dreary old 'British Honour - Collective Security - League of Nations' platitudes" proved at the time of the crisis to be unable to provide any means by which workers could oppose the Munich deal and, on that ground, stop the approach of imperialist war? Wherever the "Peace Councils" issued any statements at all, they had (under the tutelage of the Communist Party, come out in favour of a war against Germany - and been unable to mount any convincing opposition even in order to defend the frontiers of the Soviet Union.

Another piece in the same issue, unusually for that time but evidently expressing a real contact with young workers, was entitled "Woman' Way Out": it described how, with the approach of war, women and girls were being put into jobs previously done by men: they were being paid less for doing the same work, and needed to be recruited into the trade union movement.

Early in November 1938 the first conference of the MLL took place. The November "Militant" carried an article head-lined "Munich 'Peace' means anti-Soviet Line-up". The same issue carries a report on the work of the Socialist Anti-War Front, particularly in the London area, where it was not negligible. It also called on those in the ILP, such as the leadership in the London Division, who criticised the speeches with which Maxton and McGovern hailed the Munich agreement in Parliament, "to dissociate themselves organisationally with their opportunistic Parliamentary leadership".

However, the Munich crisis brought to light a serious problem for the RSL. This related to the Edinburgh RSP. The members of the RSP appear to have voted unanimously in the late summer to discontinue their group and join the RSL. However, they had behind them a long tradition of "open", propagandist activity; in such a crisis as that of early October 1938 they would expect to "hit the streets" with material, and were dissatisfied with the modesty of what the RSL "centre" supplied. In any event, their leaders, Willie Tait and Frank Maitland, expressed themselves as being greatly disappointed.

In the municipal elections in Edinburgh in October, however, they did take the step, on the advice of the RSL, to withdraw the candidate whom they usually put up. This was Tommy Tait, a well-known propagandist from the open-air platform. In the name of the RSL they distributed a leaflet calling for votes for the Labour candidates, in order to keep out what they called "the fake religionists", right wing candidates associated with the Protestant and Catholic religions.

They sent to London, however, a sharp criticism of what they saw as the "inactivity" of the RSL leadership, which they tended to attribute to their being "entrists", and demanded that the "open work" of the RSL be controlled, not by its Executive Committee, in common with its other activities, but by the "open workers" themselves.

It is possible that they had some contact with members of the Islington branch of the RSL in London, where sharp critics of the Executive Committee of the League were located. In any case, these comrades were quick to take up the cause of the RSP. It was by no means enough to appease them that, in December 1938, "Militant" carried a front page article head-lined "Fourth International founded" and hailed the event:

"The MLL hails the foundation of the Fourth International as a great step forward for the revolutionary movement".

By February 1939 the six months' moratorium on discussion of perspective and tactics, provided in the "Peace and Unity Agreement", was over. On February 11 and 12, 1939,

the RSL held its first national conference, with the former Comintern cadre, George Weston, in the chair. A substantial dossier of documents connected with this conference have survived, and I venture the view that anyone who studies them will better grasp the problems of Trotskyists at this rather difficult time.

In one important respect the conference achieved a forward step; the Political Statement of the Executive Committee, which was approved, contained the following declaration:

"Emphasis on work in the LP as the main task of the RSL does not mean that no work shall be done outside the LP or that the RSL should not appeal directly to the workers as a Fourth Internationalist organisation. Our League is numerically too weak to be considered a revolutionary party. It is merely the embryo from which such a party can grow. Consequently, there can be no principled objection to the entry of all our members into the reformist party for a period, as took place in France, USA, Belgium etc., and in fact it may at some time be necessary for this to take place. But, on the other hand, it is just as little a question of principle that all our members should at once enter the LP. The whole question is one of tactics and must be decided at any given time in relation to the concrete conditions then existing.

Moreover, even the comrades working inside the LP must carry out work outside that party, by means of selling literature, holding meetings and study classes in the name of the MLL, trade union work, etc. And in the immediate future, when the work in the LP is mainly of preparatin for the left swing, a certain amount of work should be done outside the LP by the RSL in its own name. But, with regard to such work, the following considerations must be clearly realised:

- (a) Such work is subordinate in importance to LP work. The workers, with a few individual exceptions, will not turn to a tiny, unknown organisation, no matter how revolutionary its programme may be, until they have exhausted the possibilities of fighting for their demands in the mass party which they still feel to be basically their own.
- (b) Open work should not be considered as opposed to LP work, but as supplementing it. It should concentrate, for instance, upon getting contact with those workers who have left politics through disillusionment, re-educating them and sending them in to help the comrades in the LP. LP work, on the other hand, should not be considered as opposed to "RSL" work, but as the most important part of it.

In all cases, the organisation as a whole, through the EC, will decide in what sphere a given comrade's work is likely to be most profitable."

Some time had also to be devoted at the February 1939 conference of the RSL to internal problems with the "Islington Opposition" linked to that of the Edinburgh RSP; it may be that a study of W. Tait's papers, now in the library at Stirling University, may add to what we can learn from the minutes and statements by the RSP at the time. In the end a small group of members walked out of the conference, Hilda Lane, Bill Duncan, Hilda Pratt, Abe Elsbury (the former cadre of the CP) and CP Stanton. Hilda Pratt is recorded as saying, in the debate which preceded their departure:

"We are not opposed to Labour Party work, but to the method, of work through the M.L.L...."

What a pity that there is nothing in the record to show what she was getting at. With the advantage of five decades' hindsight, I think that these comrades wanted the RSL to concern itself less with its position in the Labour Party and to conduct more open propaganda for the Fourth International, having regard to the downturn in the mass organisations and the disillusion which was developing around Stalinism. Hilda Pratt said: "We have pressed for an internal discussion" and that every single point of difference had arisen from the refusal of the EC. Neither the RSL majority nor the Islington people seem to have had any means of defining in any concrete way the practical work in the course of which real "open" work could be combined with real "entry" work, in mutual alliance and not in mutual rivalry. These problems were certainly not clear to me at this time; I thought that we had here no more than a tendency towards ultra-leftism.

In the same discussion at the conference, the Islington comrades also attacked Starkey Jackson on the ground that in the section on the fight against unemployment in the draft programmatic document he "repudiated the Transitional Programme"; he had raised the old Communist Party demand for "Work or Full Maintenance". Jackson knew this demand of old, because he had been a cadre of the Unemployed Workers' Movement in the early 1930's. His critic made much of his failure to quote the formulations of the "Transitional Programme" about the Sliding Scale of Wages and the Sliding Scale of Hours. Obviously here too we had a legitimate basis for a deepened discussion about the nature of Transitional Demands and about avoiding the notion that the Programme is a sacred text or a recipe book, but none of us seems to have been in a position to open it, and the minority left us in a mood of frustrated exasperation. They soon declared themselves to be "the real" RSL, and produced their own small journal, "Workers' Fight"; they attracted the attention of a group of members of the Communist Party led by Bob Armstrong, who had fought in Spain, been wounded, and became disillusioned after his return with the line of the CP. Their presence at the open-air forum in Hyde Park also gave them contact with Isaac Deutscher, who had recently sought asylum in this country.

They also soon made an independent political evolution away from the ideas which Trotsky was expressing at the time. A little pamphlet, evidently produced very soon after the 1939 solit, opposed the slogan "Arms for Spain" as a "specious, lying formula" and argued that Trotskyists should no longer accept responsibility for the call for victory to the Spanish Republic. The pamphlet was written by Abe Elsbury. The "Militant" disowned responsibility for it and dissociated itself from its political line.

The RSL majority was not inactive in this period. Towards the end of February 1939 it wrote to every Labour and trade union organisation it could reach enclosing a copy

of "Militant" and presenting itself as an alternative to class-collaboration "whether it is of the Transport House or the Popular Front variety". There seems to have been very little response. However, the archives of the Labour Party contain a letter from the City of Leeds Labour Party (A.L. Williams) reporting the activities of the M.L.L. locally, as well as a reply together with indications that the Labour Party full-timers in London were unable to find out anything about it! Ken Weller has told me that his thorough study of the local press in North London led him to the information that Starkey Jackson actually spoke at a public meeting in Spring 1939 called in the name of the M.L.L. to denounce support for the coming war.

While I have no information about the internal life of the W.I.L. in 1938 - 39, we have an indication of the pressures on our movement in a controversy which John Robins opened in the R.S.L.: he questioned Trotsky's general line of support for a victory of China, an oppressed semi-colonial nation, against the aggression by Japanese imperialism. He can hardly have picked this idea up from the Jorge-Salemme people in USA and seems more likely to have thought of it for himself. The general membership took little notice of this. Our intellectual dependence on Trotsky was perhaps a certain modest recognition of our own political immaturity; it also indicates that as a group we were not able to take much part in the life of Trotskyism at an international level. But it was an alarm signal of difficulties to come.

Martin Upham pointed out in his thesis the report in "Daily Worker", April 26, 1939 how the Communist Party at this time appeared to have developed closer contact with Liberals than with the Labour Movement. A meeting of the Left Book Club was addressed by Lloyd George, Norman Angell, Richard Ackland, Wilfrid Roberts and the Dean of Canterbury, as well as by John Strachey. Reports claimed that 500,000 copies had been sold of Strachey's pamphlet, "Why You Should be a Socialist" and altogether some 2,000,000 copies had been sold of Left Book Club publications. There is an interesting paragraph on the relationship of the Communist Party with the Liberals at this time in Trotsky's "What Lies behind Stalin's Bid for Agreement with Hitler?":

"In Great Britain the Comintern is nowadays conducting agitation in favour of creating a 'People's Front' with the participation of the liberals. At first glance such a policy appears to be absolutely incomprehensible. The Labour Party represents a mighty organisation. One could easily understand an urge on the part of the social-patriotic Comintern to draw closer to it. But the liberals represent an utterly compromised and politically second-rate force. Moreover they are split into several groups. In the struggle to maintain their influence the Labourites naturally reject any idea of a bloc with the liberals, so as not to infect themselves with a gangrenous poison. They are defending themselves rather energetically - by means of expulsions - against the idea of a 'People's Front'.

Why then doesn't the Comintern confine itself to fighting for a collaboration with the Labour-ites? Why does it instead invariably demand the inclusion of the liberal shadows of the past into the united front? The crux of the matter lies in this, that the policy of the Labour Party is far too radical for the Kremlin. An alliance

between the Communists and the Labourites might assume some shade of anti-imperialism and would thereby render more difficult a rapprochement between Moscow and London. The presence of liberals in the 'People's Front' signifies a direct and immediate censorship exercised by imperialism over the actions of the Labour Party. Under the cover of such a censorship Stalin would be able to render all the necessary services to British imperialism."

About this time, the journals of all the three representatives of Trotskyism in Britain (to their credit be it said) were carrying information about the work of an Irish group in London, the "Friends of the Irish Republic". In June 1939 "Youth for Socialism", one of the journals of the W.I.L., repeated the position of the group at that time:

"To the slogan of the Popular Front, we counter-pose the slogan: 'For a Majority Labour Government': this slogan, backed by a militant rank and file, can compel the leadership to conduct a real struggle against the National Government and can rouse the masses to action, for the final struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism".

An interesting illustration of the thinking of the W.I.L. leadership at the time! They also issued a special leaflet, "An Open Letter to Communist Party Supporters", appealing to them to leave the CP and to join the WIL. Internal evidence shows that it appeared in late August 1939 on the eve of the outbreak of the war. They were, I do not doubt, correct to orient themselves towards dissident elements from the Communist Party at this time, but I cannot avoid reflecting that they and the working class in general were to pay a bitter price in the late 1940's for their inability to correct the ultra-left attitudes in which these elements had been educated in the CP, which had the effect that in 1945 the Trotskyist organisation led by the elements formed in the W.I.L., the Revolutionary Communist Party, was caught by surprise by the mass turn to the Labour Party, was beached in isolation in the later 1940's.

However, it was about this time that Starkey Jackson and I had a long discussion with a group of Lancashire workers who were dissatisfied with the line of the Communist Party. The contact had been made in the course of work with the comrades on Merseyside, as I recall, and they agreed to meet us, but only in deep clandestinity. We met in someone's house in Blackpool. One of them had known Starkey, I think, in his years in the CP, and the discussion was a very serious one. They were looking for a ready-made replacement for the CP, to lead the opposition of the workers to the coming war, which they correctly regarded as an imperialist war. However, their whole past training meant that they simply could not see any sense in our orientation towards what we regarded as the inevitable crisis in the Labour Party - which in the event did not reveal itself until 1948! One of them made the usual speech denouncing Social-Democracy and proclaiming the independence of the Party, and Starkey simply replied: "I have made that speech many times: but where has it got us?" However, we simply could

not reach any common ground on which to go further with these comrades.

At this point we may take up another dispute, echoes of which still rumble. Did the International Secretariat "really exist" in 1938 - 39 and was it and Trotsky himself "mis-informed" about what was going on in the movement in Britain? Fortunately the opening of the "closed archives" at Harvard has revealed an almost complete set of minutes of the I.S. from its establishment in April 1930 through to summer 1939, when it was moved out of Europe to New York. Despite its extreme material difficulties the International Secretariat is revealed in these documents as having been an actively functioning body. It was always overburdened with tasks and from time to time lost members who, like Witte, deserted our movement or like Klement, Wolf and Sedov, were murdered by the Stalinists.

The minutes show that the I.S. did really discuss British affairs not infrequently, and was informed not only by having representatives of British groups at some of its meetings but by visits of its members to this country. Its members were by no means lacking in practical experience and there is no reason to think that either they or Trotsky could be easily deceived, though the W.I.L. was by no means the only one, or the last, among those who disagreed with it to make this claim.

But it never regarded itself as being in a position to regulate internal tactical differences between groups both of which it could accept as being Trotskyist, as we see clearly from its refusal of Harber's appeal for organisational support against James' Marxist Group at the end of 1936.

Many years later, however, in the early 1960's, Healy was to repeat what he had said in 1943: the refusal of the W.I.L. to join the 1938 fusion was a serious mistake which certainly had its roots in a rejection of international responsibilities in favour of a national approach. It is, of course, true, that the W.I.L. leadership had had little contact with the I.S. before 1938; Grant and Frost had met Sedov when they arrived in Europe in 1935 and Lee had been in touch with the I.S. about a proposed theoretical journal.

On June 27, 1938, the W.I.L. wrote to the I.S. objecting to its presentation of the circumstances of the split; their resolution alleged that they had accepted exclusion from the "Militant Group" because "the national membership", to which they might have appealed, "was fictitious". It declared that its experience "re-inforced the conclusion we formed before the expulsion that both the leadership and the remaining membership were irresponsible".

Yet another legend of later years is that in 1939 the RSL had a "pacifist" line or made concessions to pacifism. Since the evidence of what it said and did appears not to have been studied, we must concentrate here on the positions of the RSL - not that the published and internal documents of the W.I.L. are scanty or devoid of interest, far from it. We have, for example, the pamphlet "Peace Alliance: the Road to War",

nineteen pages long, published in the name of the M.L.L. in Spring 1939. He also wrote "Workers Against the War", which the Socialist Anti-War Front published in autumn 1939. In neither pamphlet is the slightest concession to pacifism to be found. In the former, we read:

"The main emphasis of the workers' struggle must be placed on the war danger. The revolutionary left cannot afford to be satisfied with the abstract formula that war is inseparable from capitalism, but must endeavour consciously to direct the struggle of the workers to the overthrow of capitalism. Nor does this imply that war cannot be postponed. On the contrary, the working class struggle can force capitalism to hold its hand."

"Workers Against the War" drew out even more positively the fundamental difference between pacifism and Marxism:

"We are not, of course, opposed to united action with the pacifists on certain issues. For instance, the pacifists are naturally interested in the maintenance of free speech and the press. On such issues we can fight together, but political collaboration means political capitulation to pacifism and the abandonment of the real revolutionary struggle. The pacifist policy not only does not assert the struggle of the workers against the causes of war, but paralyses it by forbidding them to prepare for revolutionary struggle."

It should be enough to record that it was a condition of membership of the RSL that no member should appeal against military service on conscientious grounds. In line with the policy of the RSL not to endanger its positions in the Labour Party (precarious enough, as 1940 was to show) before its periphery could be thought to have appreciated what the call for the Fourth International meant, Starkey Jackson's pamphlets were an attempt to present in a pedagogic way, the revolutionary position, without openly mentioning the Fourth International. If they can be criticised, in my opinion, it would be, not that they were "pacifist", but that they were abstract and dogmatic; they could issue calls for struggle only in the most general terms. One consequence of the general wnturn of the workers' movement was that our attacks on those who had pledged their support for the coming war could not be related to great immediate aims of the class and, consequently, our attacks on reformism and Stalinism seemed to be on the level of ideology and on "bad people". But this is not at all the same as the claim, advanced much later, that the RSL had "exhausted itself".

On Sunday morning, September 3, 1939, the radio announced that Britain had declared war on Germany. I had spent a couple of hours sorting out papers that did not seem indispensable and making a bonfire of them on an un-used allotment nearby, wondering what would hit us next, bombs or repression, as well as whether anyone in the future would see any reason to be interested in the record of our efforts. For it is from this period that I recall, with deep regret today, that I did not trust myself enough to respond positively to an appeal from a group of factory workers in Leeds, who came to me in the hope that I could help them to organise a wage-movement inside their union.