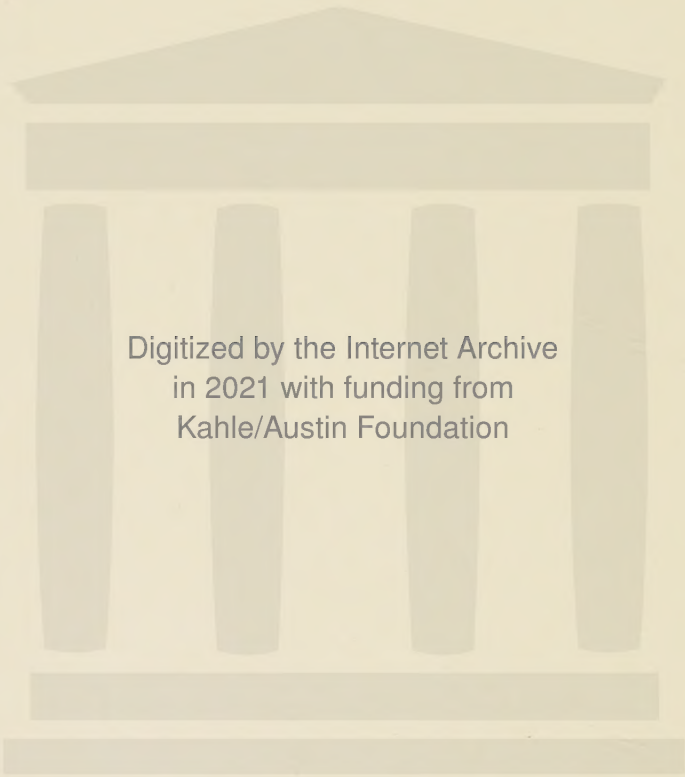
COMMUNISM AND THE BRITISH TRADE UNIONS

1924—1933



COMMUNISM AND THE BRITISH TRADE UNIONS 1924–1933

A STUDY OF THE NATIONAL MINORITY MOVEMENT

BY

RODERICK MARTIN

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PREFACE

THE threat posed by the 'Red Machine' to the British trade union movement has been a permanent theme in both academic and popular discussion of British labour history. Yet the discussion has been stronger on invective than analysis: there has been no adequate impartial investigation into Communist activity within the trade unions. The present book is an attempt to remedy part of this deficiency by analysing the first and most ambitious Communist attempt to establish a foothold in the trade union movement, the National Minority Movement: at one time it constituted itself a militant rival to the Trades Union Congress. Set up in 1924, the Movement was a Communist front organization, designed to provide a temporary resting place for union members dissatisfied with orthodox trade unionism but unready to join the Communist Party. The Party hoped to build a 'United Workers' Front' against capitalism by converting shop floor discontent, progressive sentiment, and vague sympathy for the Soviet Union into support for the Minority Movement, and ultimately to end its own 'isolation from the masses'.

Yet the Minority Movement was more than a premature united front exercise, whose eventual failure signified the ultimate sanity of British trade unionists, the fundamental antagonism between reformism and revolution. For the Movement was an uneasy alliance between Communists, radical rank and file trade unionists who regarded full-time trade union officials as at best remote from working class interests and at worst class traitors, and ordinary trade unionists who joined as a protest against economic change. Like the 'country' party in the Namierite House of Commons, the Movement comprised an illegitimate ideological nucleus, very roughly analogous to the Tory Jacobites, legitimate but traditional opponents of the administration, analogous to the backwoods Tory gentry, hostile to all taints of 'court' corruption, discontented indifferents, and careerists who saw nuisance value as the best guarantee of promotion into the higher ranks of the 'court' party.

The history of the Minority Movement is the story of the ambiguities, the tensions, the conflicts of loyalty and aspiration which stemmed from this fundamental dualism. For the Movement's Communist leadership specific policies were important as a means to an end, the expansion of Communist influence; for the majority of the rank and file they were important as ends in themselves. As long as the major thrust of the Communist International's policy was towards a 'United Workers' Front', and ideological and tactical differences were submerged in a common hostility to capitalism, this duality was disguised. However, the Movement's survival was clearly contingent upon Communist optimism, and when Socialist hostility and internal Communist changes frustrated Communist hopes for proletarian unity the Movement's disintegration was inevitable. As the Movement's history clearly demonstrates, even where both sides agree upon proximate aims co-operation between revolutionaries and reformists is problematic.

Historians conventionally doff their intellectual caps to the problem of objectivity, and pass on. Such formal acknowledgement is inadequate for students of Communist history, for any public discussion of Communist policies and practices inevitably provides fuel for ideological polemics. I have attempted to maintain a balance of partialities rather than impartiality, between respect for individual Communists and distaste for general Communist practices. Many members of the Minority Movement were devoted to the interests of the working class as they saw them, and were neither dogmatists nor careerists; at the same time they were also prepared to manipulate other union members unscrupulously. I hope this mixture of respect and disagreement is apparent throughout the study.

My major debt is to the former members of the Minority Movement who discussed their activities with me, and in some cases loaned me valuable documents. I am especially grateful to the late Mr. George Renshaw for a number of helpful letters and interviews, to the late Mr. and Mrs. W. C. Loeber, to the late Mr. Jack Tanner for the loan of a great deal of important material, and to the late Mr. J. T. Murphy. Mr. James Roche also discussed his union work

in the clothing industry with me, and loaned me the correspondence of the Leeds branch of the United Clothing Workers' Union. Without their help it would have been impossible to reconstruct the story of the Minority Movement, for documentation from conventional library sources is impossible.

My major academic debts are to Professor Hugh Clegg, now of the University of Warwick, and to Mr. Philip Williams, who acted as my supervisors during my years as a Research Student at Nuffield College, Oxford. Their interest and aid greatly improved the quality of the original D.Phil. thesis upon which the present work is based. I would also like to acknowledge formally my gratitude to the Warden and Fellows of Nuffield College for electing me to a Studentship, and providing unrivalled facilities and a congenial intellectual climate for research into the labour movement. My examiners, Mr. Allan Flanders and Mr. A. F. Thompson, also made helpful suggestions for improving the original manuscript before submission for publication.

RODERICK MARTIN

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.E.U.	= Amalgamated Engineering Union
A.R.J.A.C.	= Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Committee
A.S.L.E.F.	= Amalgamated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
B.I.S.A.K.T.A.	= British Iron, Steel and Kindred Trades Association
C.G.T.	= Confédération Generale du Travail
C.G.T.U.	= Confédération Generale du Travail Unitaire
Comintern	= Communist International
C.P.G.B.	= Communist Party of Great Britain
E.&.A.E.N.F.	= Engineering and Allied Employers National Federation
E.C.C.I.	= Executive Committee of Communist International
E.T.U.	= Electrical Trades Union
I.F.T.U.	= International Federation of Trade Unions
I.W.W.	= Industrial Workers of the World
K.P.D.	= Kommunist Partei Deutschland
M.F.G.B.	= Miners Federation of Great Britain
M.M.	= (National) Minority Movement
M.W.M.M.	= Metal Workers Minority Movement
N.A.F.T.A.	= National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association
N.U.G.M.W.	= National Union of General and Municipal Workers
N.U.M.	= National Union of Mineworkers
N.U.R.	= National Union of Railwaymen
N.U.S.M.W.	= National Union of Scottish Mine Workers
N.U.T.G.W.	= National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers
N.U.W.C.M.	= National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement
N.W.C.M.	= National Workers Committee Movement
P.O.U.M.	=Partido Obrero de Unificatión Marxista—Trotskyist
R.I.L.U.	= Red International of Labour Unions

S.S.&.W.C.M. = Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement
S.W.M.F. = South Wales Miners Federation
T.&.G.W.U. = Transport and General Workers Union
U.M.S. = United Mineworkers of Scotland
U.C.W.U. = United Clothing Workers Union

I

THE ORIGINS OF THE NATIONAL MINORITY MOVEMENT

The National Minority Movement was an uneasy alliance between the Communist International and the extreme left wing of the British trade union movement. Without Russian interest in stimulating world revolution there would have been no National Minority Movement; without an inherited foundation of rank and file militancy the Movement would not have survived. The trade union arm of the Communist International (Comintern), the Red International of Labour Unions (R.I.L.U.), provided resources, organization, and strategy; the Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee Movement and other extreme left wing groups provided experienced personnel. The full time Secretariat, the weekly newspapers, the complex administrative structure leading down from the Executive Bureau, through the Executive Committees of the Industrial Sections, to the branch groups, were sustained by Russian money and run on Bolshevik principles. But without the support of experienced trade unionists like Wal Hannington, Jack Tanner, and J. T. Murphy the money would have been wasted and the organization irrelevant. This chapter shows how the Communist International and the Shop Stewards Movement came together, and how the alliance evolved into the National Minority Movement.

The Development of the Comintern's Trade Union Policy

Bolshevik interest in a 'proletarian International purged of opportunism' dated from the outbreak of the First World War, when the majority of Socialist parties in the Second International violated their pledge to resist international war and supported the war efforts of their governments.[1]

[1] Lenin, quoted in J. W. Hulse, *The Forming of the Communist International*, (Stanford U.P., Stanford, 1964), 2.

Action was impossible during the war, but the success of the November Revolution and the collapse of the European social order which followed the Armistice lent urgency to Russian plans. Accordingly, on 24 January 1919 the Soviet government radio station invited revolutionary groups throughout the world to send delegates to a congress to form a new International. The new organization was to form a 'common fighting organ for the purpose of maintaining permanent co-ordination and systematic leadership . . . subordinating the interests of the movement in each country to the common interest of the international revolution'.[1] The new International was to play a key role in organizing the imminent proletarian revolution in the West.

In 1919–20 many Marxists, European and Russian, believed that international revolution was imminent. Sporadic outbreaks of violence occurred throughout 1919 in Germany, France, Italy, the United States, and even Britain: the capitalist order seemed precarious. For many Russians, including Trotsky, subjective desire complemented objective appraisal: only a successful revolution in the advanced industrial nations of the West could fulfil Marx's diagnosis, and ensure the stability of the Bolshevik régime. The formation of European Communist parties on Bolshevik lines, and their incorporation into a world revolutionary movement, therefore became an urgent priority. Between 1919 and 1921 Communist parties were formed in Germany (December 1918), France (December 1920), Italy (January 1921), the United States (September 1919), as well as in a number of smaller countries. In Britain, after two abortive unity conferences, the British Socialist Party and the Communist Unity Group of the Socialist Labour Party finally came together in August 1920; unity was completed when Sylvia Pankhurst's Communist Party (British Section of the Third International) joined with other fragments the following year. As the first chairman of the C.P.G.B., Arthur Macmanus, hopefully declared in January 1921, 'the Communist Parties are dead; long live the Communist Party'.

Unlike the German and French parties, the C.P.G.B.

[1] J. Degras, *The Communist International, 1919–43: Documents* (Oxford U.P., 1956–60), 1–5.

adopted, albeit reluctantly, 'permeation' tactics from the very beginning. As Lenin argued authoritatively in *Left Wing Communism—An Infantile Disorder*, first published in June 1920, the British party should adopt a 'parliamentarian' strategy, attempting to work within the Labour Party and the trade unions, at the same time maintaining the right of independent action.[1] Communist attempts to operate within the Labour Party failed. Between 1920 and 1924 the Party made repeated applications for affiliation to the Labour Party, without success. As Arthur Henderson wrote in his reply to the first application, 'the basis of affiliation to the Labour Party is acceptance of its constitution, principles, and programme, with which the objects of the Communist Party do not appear to be in accord'.[2] In 1924 the Labour Party moved onto the offensive, and decided to exclude Communists from individual membership; the following year the Labour Party Executive declared that in its view 'affiliated Trade Unions can only act consistently with the decisions of the Annual Conference in its relation to the Communists by appealing to their members, when electing delegates to national or local Labour Party conferences or meetings, to refrain from nominating or electing known members of non-affiliated political parties, including the Communists'.[3] Frank Hodges angrily expressed the feelings of right wing labour leaders when he denounced British Communists as 'the intellectual slaves of Moscow, unthinking, unheeding, accepting decrees and decisions without criticism or comment, taking orders from the Asiatic mind, taking the judgement of middle-class Russia—the residue of the old régime—not even the judgement of the plain Russian people, but the dictates and decrees of the same type of intellectuals despised in this country'.[4] Although many local Labour Parties and affiliated trade unions resented the Executive's attitude, and hesitated to apply the Executive's interpretation of the Party constitution, the

[1] V. I. Lenin, 'Left Wing Communism—An Infantile Disorder', *Selected Works, Two Volume Edition* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1947), vol. 2, 615–24; *Communist Unity Convention, Official Report* (C.P.G.B., 1920), 30–59.

[2] *Labour Party Annual Conference Report*, 1921, 18.

[3] Ibid., 1925, 181–9. [4] Ibid., 1922, 198.

Executive's hostility set very narrow limits to Communist permeation of the Labour Party.

Notwithstanding Social Democratic hostility to an independent Communist Party, there was substantial support for the Bolsheviks throughout the British labour movement. Many sectors of left wing opinion found their own aspirations symbolized in the Bolshevik takeover: initially, all agreed that the Bolshevik revolution represented 'a moral gain to the cause of democracy and freedom'—disagreement came later.[1] The whole labour movement protested when the British government retained troops in Murmansk, Siberia, and Baku after the end of the European war. In June 1919 the Labour Party conference instructed the National Executive to consult the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C. on possible measures to end British intervention, including 'the unreserved use of their political and industrial power', and a 'Hands off Russia' Committee was formed in September.[2] No further action was required, for the British government was already losing interest in the Whites, and the troops were withdrawn by the end of 1919. Concern revived the following year, when the Polish invasion of Russia seemed to present an even more serious threat to the Revolution. In May dockers at the East India dock in London refused to coal the *Jolly George*, believing that it was carrying munitions to Poland; although they were responding to local Communist pressure, their action was endorsed by the Dockers' Union.[3] The Revolution was saved by the Russian counter-offensive later in the spring, which carried the Red Army to the outskirts of Warsaw and averted the need for British working class action. When the Polish government appealed for British help, the 'Hands off Russia' Committee organized demonstrations against answering the appeal. The Labour Party and the T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee established a National Council of Action to

[1] H. N. Brailsford, quoted in S. Graubard, *British Labour and the Russian Revolution* (Harvard U.P., Cambridge, 1956), 59.

[2] Ibid., 74; L. J. Macfarlane, 'Hands Off Russia: British Labour & the Russo-Polish War 1920', *Past & Present*, December 1967, 126 ff.

[3] C. L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars 1918–40* (Methuen, 1955), 41; W. Gallacher, *The Rolling of the Thunder* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1947), 39; A. Bullock, *The Life & Times of Ernest Bevin*, vol. 1 (Heinemann, 1960), 134.

mobilize 'the whole industrial power of the workers' against war, and sent a delegation to the Prime Minister, Lloyd George. Lloyd George refused to commit himself, and Ernest Bevin declared to a conference of the Council of Action: 'Our great work in life until now has been mainly wages, but I say in all sincerity that this question you are called upon to decide today—the willingness to take action to win world peace—transcends any claim in connection with wages or hours of labour'.[1] Perhaps because the government never intended to take action, perhaps through fear of labour opposition, or perhaps because labour's protest represented majority feeling in the country, no aid was sent to Poland.

The Russians believed that a trade union International would help to transform this vague pro-Soviet sentiment into genuine revolutionary feeling. As early as January 1918 the First All Russian Congress of Trade Unions had determined to 'assist by all means the rebirth of the international trade union movement'.[2] However, the chaos of the civil war intervened, and it was spring 1920 before the question could be raised again. In March 1920 Zinoviev proposed to the Russian Communist Party Congress that the Communist International should establish a new revolutionary trade union international to counteract the influence of the recently formed Social-Democratic International Federation of Trade Unions (the 'Amsterdam International'). Accordingly, the Executive Committee of the Communist International (E.C.C.I.) suggested that 'not only the Communist Parties should attend the Congress of the Communist International but also those trade unions which have a revolutionary programme'.[3]

The Second Congress of the Comintern, to which revolutionary trade unionists were invited, met in the summer of 1920 in 'a mood of all-conquering faith and hope'.[4] The previous year had seen Socialist Republics (admittedly short-lived) in Hungary and Bavaria, Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets in Hamburg, and mass strikes in France, Italy and

[1] Bullock, 135–40.
[2] E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917–23* (Macmillan, 1953), iii, 204.
[3] Degras, i, 87–90.
[4] Carr, iii, 177.

Britain. In Bolshevik terms, the Germans were already halfway through the Kerensky period, and the British were in the February period of 'dual power', with Workers' Soviets (the 'Hands Off Russia' Councils of Action) existing alongside the bourgeois state. With the Red Army advancing on Warsaw, and 'the bulwark of world capitalist reaction' Poland in a state of collapse, it looked as if the European proletarian revolution was about to reach its climax. The task of the Congress was to create a disciplined international Party to accomplish the task, and to elaborate revolutionary tactics. The famous '21 conditions' were accepted, the united front was adopted as the necessary temporary tactic to wean the proletariat from the Social Democratic political parties and trade unions, and the formation of the new trade union international discussed.

Among the trade unionists who made the dangerous journey to Moscow and took part in the trade union discussions was a heterogeneous delegation from Britain, including Robert Williams, A. A. Purcell, J. T. Murphy, Jack Tanner, the 'Wobbly' Dick Beech, Tom Quelch (London Society of Compositors), Willie Gallacher and William McLaine.[1] Ranging from the syndicalist Tanner to parliamentarians like McLaine it represented the diverse elements then trying to form a united Communist Party in Britain; respect for the Bolsheviks and vague revolutionary sentiment were the only unifying bonds. Despite long and acrimonious discussions no agreement was reached on the form of the projected revolutionary trade union international, and the final decision was postponed until the inaugural Congress to be held the following year. But the discussions were highly important for the later history of Communist trade union activity in the West, particularly Britain, for many of the problems which were later to bedevil the history of the Minority Movement were raised in the long negotiations in Moscow during the summer of 1920. The tensions revealed were to remain unresolved throughout the 1920s and were to break out into the open again in 1928 and 1929.

[1] Although the controversy with the syndicalists had universal application the following account concentrates heavily upon the role of the British delegation, for it is not intended to be a complete account of the discussions.

Discussion centred upon three basic questions. First, what was the proper relation between political and industrial action? Secondly, how strictly was international discipline to be enforced? And thirdly, were revolutionary trade unionists to leave their unions and form independent revolutionary unions, or were they to attempt to conquer the existing ones from within? The Bolshevik answer to all three questions was pressed assiduously. They believed in the overthrow of capitalism by political not industrial means:

> The Communist International emphatically rejects the opinion that the workers could carry out a revolution without having an independent political party of their own . . . power cannot be acquired, organized and directed otherwise than by means of a political party . . . The revolutionary syndicalists and industrialists desire to fight against the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, but they do not know how to do it. They do not see that the working class without a political party is like a body without a head. Revolutionary syndicalism and industrialism are a step forward only in comparison with the old, musty, counter revolutionary ideology of the Second International. But in comparison with the revolutionary Marxian doctrine, i.e. with Communism, Syndicalism and Industrialism are a step backward.[1]

Communist belief in international discipline had already been revealed by the promulgation of the '21 conditions', and Lenin himself underlined the lesson when he asked rhetorically: 'What kind of an International would it be, if a small part of it should be allowed to come and declare, "Some of us are for and some against; let us decide the question ourselves". What need would there then be for an International; for what would we want a Congress, and carry on discussion?'.[2] The Bolsheviks also urged the need to work within the existing Social Democratic trade unions, and to win over their rank and file by practical militant action. Zinoviev stated this view with characteristic flamboyance:

> In the old 'free yellow' unions millions of workers are organized at present. These millions have thousands of prejudices, in some cases they are completely under the influence of the businessmen who . . .

[1] *Theses and Statutes of the Third International: Adopted by the Second Congress, July 17th–August 7th, 1920* (Moscow, 1920), 34–5.

[2] *The Second Congress of the Communist International*, 73; see also J. W. Hulse, 198.

trade with them, like gypsies trade with horses. But these millions in the labour unions will sooner or later inevitably turn from such leaders and tread the way of the proletarian revolution. This is as inevitable as the victory of Socialism over Capitalism. One is impossible without the other. Socialism cannot conquer unless it weans away from the influence of the bourgeoisie the millions of workers who are at present organized in these unions. Such a liberation of the workers from the influence of the bourgeoisie shall occur the sooner, the less we follow such mottoes as 'Away from the Unions' and the more insistently we work *within* such unions.[1]

Only the Bulgarians fully agreed with the Russians. Every other delegation, Communist or Syndicalist, objected to some aspect of the Russian proposals. For example, Robert Williams and A. A. Purcell, as well as some of the Italians, refused to accept the unrestrained Russian hostility to the International Federation of Trade Unions, to which their unions were affiliated. But the main opposition to the Russian proposals came from the syndicalists, particularly Tanner. He objected strongly both to the Russian preference for political rather than industrial action and to their insistence upon international discipline. He argued that many British trade unionists were disillusioned with political action:

> For us in the Shop Stewards' Movement the dictatorship of the proletariat means something entirely different from the meaning conveyed by Comrade Zinoviev. We understand and realize that the dictatorship of the proletariat must be wielded by a minority—the revolutionary minority of the proletariat in England as expressed through the Shop Stewards' Committee movement . . . A number of those who are active in the Shop Stewards' movement are not greatly concerned about the formation of the party, because they have been convinced from their experience in other parties that it was a loss of time to share in the work of such parties, especially of the British Socialist Party.[2]

He was supported by the French and Italian delegations, as well as by the majority of English delegates, when he objected to the Russian insistence upon international discipline.

[1] G. Zinoviev, *Pressing Questions of the International Labour Movement* (Petrograd, 1920), 57–8; see also *Theses and Statutes . . . Second Congress* 53–4.
[2] *Second Congress Proceedings*, 65–6.

Although the Second International had collapsed because it was formless,

> . . . the Third International should not go to the other extreme and become too dogmatic. We must provide that every organization has sufficient freedom of movement within its respective country to deal with and adjust itself to any special conditions. The Third International must be founded upon such a basis that the different parties could find common ground on the most important principles and methods. Everything else must be left to the various parties themselves.[1]

The syndicalists even suggested that the organizing committee for the forthcoming Congress should include only one Russian, and that the Congress should be held outside Russia; neither suggestion was accepted.[2]

The Russians were prepared to compromise, for they had not yet dismissed the syndicalists as 'left sectarians' and 'pseudo-revolutionaries'; they were particularly eager to avoid antagonizing the French and to conciliate the English syndicalists Tanner and Beech, for they believed their support was necessary to win over the Shop Stewards' Movement, which possessed the contacts with organized labour the British Socialist Party lacked. Zinoviev referred to the 'Industrialists' as 'friends and brothers who have taken an erroneous stand', and Lenin argued that there was no real difference between Tanner and himself.

> When Comrade Tanner asserts that he is opposed to a Party organization, but admits, at the same time, that the proletariat, as a whole, should be under the leadership of the most resolute and class conscious part of it, then I must declare that there is in reality no difference between us. The minority can be nothing but what we call a party . . . If Comrade Tanner and all the other comrades of the Shop Steward Movement and the I.W.W. recognize—and in conversation with them every day we see that they do recognize it—that the class conscious minority of the working class alone can lead the proletariat. They should then, perforce, admit that this is the essence of our theses.

[1] A. Losovsky, *The International Council of Trade and Industrial Unions* (Christiana, 1920), 37–8; *Second Congress Proceedings*, 65–7.

[2] 'Basis for the Calling of an International Conference of Industrial Organisations', drawn up by Tanner, Beech, *et al.*

The only difference between us is the question of avoiding the word 'Party' because of the prejudice against a political party prevailing in the minds of Englishmen.[1]

Russian moderation payed off. In September, after further negotiations and blandishments, all the Shop Stewards' delegates 'finally accepted the point of view which the Russian delegates urged'.[2] A Provisional International Council of Trade and Industrial Unions was set up to organize a Congress of revolutionary trade unionists: the Congress was to decide the final form of the new international when it convened the following year. In the meantime, the contentious problem of the relation of the new organization to the Communist International was to be resolved by the compromise principle of 'interrepresentation', whereby one member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International was to sit on the new Committee, and one member of the new committee was to sit on the E.C.C.I.

In the months between the preliminary discussions on the new trade union international and the inaugural conference of the new movement the following spring, the situation and prospects of the world Communist movement were transformed. In 1920 the evident fragility of the European social order, the fear that Soviet Russia would be unable to survive isolated in a capitalist world, and continued belief in the theory of international revolution convinced the Russians that a European revolution was imminent, and that their own survival depended upon its success. The Internationals were established to chivvy history by helping to wean the working classes away from the Socialists and the reformist trade unions—they were to provide a 'point of crystallization' for the revolutionary masses. A year later it was obvious that the Bolsheviks had miscalculated; the European revolution was years, possibly even decades, not months away. The strike wave of 1919–20 receded with the partial stabilization of the European economy, the 'March rising' in Germany failed disastrously, the French, Italian, and British Communist parties failed to win mass support, and Soviet survival was assured by the withdrawal of foreign

[1] *Second Congress*, 53, 72–3. [2] Losovsky, 64.

troops from Russian soil, the defeat of the Whites, the Treaty of Riga, and Western Europe's preoccupation with its own immediate problems. The R.I.L.U. was conceived in a period of international revolutionary optimism, Russian modesty, and Marxist ideology—but optimism gave way to pessimism, Russian modesty to arrogance, and ideology to tactics. As Zinoviev commented sadly in 1924:

> The R.I.L.U. was founded at a moment in time when it seemed that we should break through the enemy front in a frontal attack and quickly conquer the trade unions . . . It was the moment when we thought that we should quickly win the majority of the workers. You know, comrades, that the movement later ebbed, that the whole problem, all the tactical difficulties, of Comintern in these five years arose from the fact that the development had gone on much more slowly than we expected. Social democracy has in part consolidated itself—even in the trade union sphere. Now we must fight it in roundabout ways which are slower and harder.[1]

This consolidation of European Social Democracy and Russian Communism was the source of a constant, debilitating contradiction in Soviet foreign policy. On the one hand, the Russians were committed to international revolution, to the support of foreign revolutionary movements: the Comintern and the R.I.L.U. were charged with responsibility for organizing revolutionary movements abroad, including subversive revolutionary movements. On the other, Russian national interests required participation in a basically capitalist international order; the Treaty of Rapallo with Germany in 1922 and the Anglo-Soviet Trade Treaty of 1924 indicated the Russian need for foreign military and economic aid. This 'constant and ineradicable duality of purpose' in Soviet foreign policy—the sponsorship of foreign revolution and the defence of Russian national interests—has permanently bedevilled Communist parties in Western Europe.[2] The international revolutionary movement has been sacrificed repeatedly to Russian national interests. Yet Russian overtures to capitalist powers, Socialist parties and trade unions have been rejected because of

[1] Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, iii, 557.
[2] Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, iii, 125.

Russian support for subversive revolutionary movements. The ramifications of this basic contradiction were to be evident in Communist attempts to build a united front in the British trade union movement.

Despite these fundamental ambiguities, the Congress to establish the new trade union international opened in Moscow on 3 July 1921. The Russians prepared the ground thoroughly, as they had done for the Second Comintern Congress the previous year.[1] The national delegations were carefully chosen; the British delegation, led by Tom Mann, included Communist Party members like J. T. Murphy and Nat Watkins, but not the syndicalist Tanner; the American delegation included three Communists and only one member of the I.W.W., although the I.W.W. was a far larger and more important organization.[2] The Russians controlled the Credentials Committee, and credentials and votes were given to delegates from the miniscule revolutionary trade union movements of Korea, Georgia and Palestine; Communist revolutionary minorities were given votes proportional to the size of their parent organizations not to their actual strength. The Russian Alexei Losovsky was inevitably chosen as permanent chairman of the Congress.[3]

The crucial question to be decided was the relationship between the new International and the Comintern; once that had been established organization and tactics fell into place. If subordination to the Comintern was accepted, Russian control was assured; 'proletarian discipline' and commitment to the Communist political strategy followed automatically. The Russians were dissatisfied with the previous year's compromise on the principle of 'inter-representation', for it encouraged syndicalist hopes for an independent trade union international; as Losovsky said

[1] Hulse, 193–4.

[2] J. T. Murphy, *New Horizons* (The Bodley Head, 1941), 17; J. T. Murphy, *The Reds in Congress: Preliminary Report of the First World Congress of the Red International of Trade and Industrial Unions* (British Bureau of the RILU, 1921); George Williams, *The First Congress of the Red Trade Union International: A Report of the Proceedings by . . . the Delegate from the I.W.W.* (I.W.W. Chicago, 1921–2), 4–6.

[3] Gordon Cascaden, *Shall Unionism Die?: Report on Red International Congress* (Industrial Union League of Canada, Windsor, Ontario, 1921), *passim* esp. 45–6; Williams, 9, 16–7.

in September 1920, 'such a division of organization may lead to the alienation of the trade unions from the centre of the world Communist movement.'[1] Consequently, the Russians persuaded the Third Comintern Congress, meeting in Moscow at the same time as the First Trade Union Congress, to denounce the idea of a politically independent trade union International.

> If we are to succeed in carrying out the new revolutionary tasks of the trade unions, the Red trade unions will have to work hand in hand and in close contact with the Communist Party and the International Council of Red Trade Unions will have to bring each step of its work into agreement with the work of the Communist International. The prejudices of neutrality, of 'independence', of non-Party and non-political tactics . . . are objectively nothing more than a tribute paid to bourgeois ideas.[2]

Zinoviev bluntly pronounced: 'Neutrality of the trade union movement in the political struggle is a phantasy'.[3]

This attitude prevailed at the trade union Congress, although only after a long and bitter debate. By 285 votes to 35 the Congress endorsed a Russian proposal that the new International should

> . . . establish the closest possible contact with the Third (Communist) International, as the vanguard of the Revolutionary Labour Movement in all parts of the world, on the basis of joint representation at both executive committees, joint conferences, etc. . . . The above connection should have an organic and business character, and be expressed in the joint preparation of revolutionary actions and in the concerted manner of their realization both on a national and international scale . . . It is imperative for every country to strive . . . for the establishment of close everyday contact between the Red Trade Unions and the Communist Party . . .[4]

Tom Mann and J. T. Murphy both spoke for the Russian proposal, Tom Mann surprising his former syndicalist colleagues by a limited defence of parliamentary action.

[1] Losovsky, 43.

[2] *Decisions of the Third Congress of the Communist International, held at Moscow, July, 1921* (C.P.G.B., 1921), 68–9.

[3] *Third Congress of the Communist International: Report of Meetings held at Moscow, June 22nd–July 12th 1921* (C.P.G.B., 1921), 127.

[4] Murphy, *Report*, 14–19.

Russian success on the crucial issue of the relation between the trade union International and the Comintern ensured acceptance of their views on tactics and discipline. The need to work within the existing trade unions, and the need for strict international discipline, were both accepted without demur. National sections of the new International were to obey Congress decisions. 'The experience of international organizations before, and especially during the war, shows that many organizations do not consider the decisions adopted by international congresses as binding on the national organizations. But the Red International cannot endorse their standpoint and therefore establishes the necessity of international proletarian discipline, i.e. that separate national organizations must abide by the decisions of the International Congresses and conferences.'[1]

By 1923 the organization and chain of command of the new trade union International were firmly established. The supreme governing body was the annual R.I.L.U. Congress, whilst between Congresses an Executive Bureau, consisting of representatives of the various national sections, was to decide policy. However, the R.I.L.U. failed to organize annual congresses, the Third Congress taking place in 1924, the Fourth in 1928, and the Fifth in 1930. The Executive Bureau was soon transformed from an executive into a deliberative assembly, and met only occasionally. All its members, representatives from the R.I.L.U.'s constituent sections, had political interests outside the R.I.L.U., and the Bureau itself only discussed 'questions of principle', the full time secretariat deciding what constituted a question of principle.[2] The driving force of the organization was the full time Secretariat, which consisted initially of the Spanish Trotskyite Andrés Nin, who was to be murdered as part of the Communist campaign against the P.O.U.M. in 1937, the right wing head of the Russian trade unions, Tomsky (who committed suicide after his arrest by the G.P.U. in 1937) and the R.I.L.U.'s effective head, the General Secretary Losovsky. Alexei Losovsky, whose real name was

[1] Quoted in *Williams*, 45.

[2] Report of the Executive Bureau to the Third Congress, July 1924, cap. xiii (typescript in T.U.C. Library).

Solomon Abramovitch Drizdo, was an energetic, able intellectual, 'with the air of a slightly fastidious schoolmaster'. Disciplined into orthodoxy by a Menshevik past he rarely deviated from the official Leninist or Stalinist line, and under his discerning leadership the R.I.L.U. provided an accurate reflection of the balance of power in the Russian Communist Party.[1] He survived to die a natural death.

In addition to a head office in Moscow the R.I.L.U. possessed four semi-clandestine offices abroad; the Central European Bureau in Berlin, the Latin Bureau in Paris, the Balkan Bureau in Bulgaria, and the immediate ancestor of the Minority Movement, the British Bureau. The most important was the Central European Bureau, whose main tasks were liaison with the German Communist Party trade union department and the publication of a mass of German language trade union periodicals. The Latin Bureau did the same for France, Italy, Belgium, Spain and Latin America, the Balkan for that area until it was absorbed into the Bulgarian C.P., and the British Bureau for Britain.

Democratic centralism, and the domination of Moscow over the R.I.L.U.'s national sections, were firmly established; as the Third Congress in 1924 declared, 'discipline, based upon the decisions adopted, is the most important condition for success in any struggle'.[2] The British Bureau was a small cog in the R.I.L.U. machine. Most of its resources, many of its orders, came from Moscow through the R.I.L.U. But the Movement was not simply a Russian agency in Britain; it was an uneasy alliance between the R.I.L.U. and the extreme left of the British trade union movement. How did this alliance develop in Britain? How did the main militant rank and file organizations—particularly the Shop Stewards' Movement—come to accept Russian assistance and discipline?

[1] Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (O.U.P., Oxford, 1963), 146; Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (Viking Press, New York, 1957), 319; E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–23*, ii 62, 105. Losovsky had the reputation of a trimmer even amongst his colleagues. During a discussion at the Tenth Plenum of the E.C.C.I. in 1929 Smolianski commented: 'If [Losovsky] wants to find a vague formulation which offers a way out in any direction, he would do best to look for it in his own collected works' (*Inprecorr*, 1929, 1230).

[2] *Resolutions and Decisions of the Third World Congress of the R.I.L.U., July, 1924*, 20.

The Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement after the First World War

The Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement had prospered in the boom conditions of the First World War, particularly in the engineering industry. The main spokesman for workshop grievances, and an industrial focus for anti-war feeling, the movement wielded considerable influence on Clydeside, and in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Coventry, Barrow in Furness, and other centres. However, peace, the consequent contraction of the engineering industry, the victimisation of the most prominent militant leaders in 1918, union resumption of the initiative in dealing with shop floor grievances, and official union recognition of the role of the shop steward, all undermined the unofficial movement's support. By the end of 1920 'there was very little activity going on in the Shop Stewards' Movement. Apart from one or two active groups in the provinces in such districts as Coventry, Sheffield, and Hull, and the groups associated with *Solidarity* in London and *The Worker* in Glasgow, there was very little evidence of any movement in the engineering industry'.[1]

The post-war decline in membership reinforced two developments which had been taking place within the movement since 1917; the consolidation of the central National Administrative Council's (N.A.C.) authority, and an increasing interest in revolutionary politics. The first Shop Stewards' groups had been militantly democratic, all decisions being taken by mass meetings of local members. However, the movement first established a national organisation at a conference in Manchester in 1917; the supreme policy making body was to be a national conference, whilst between conferences the N.A.C. was to act as an administrative, but not executive, body. The Council was given no power, and its duties were limited to publishing propaganda and issuing shop stewards' cards; it met only two or three times in the first year of its existence. After the war, the crumbling of the local committees led to a shift in the balance of power between the local committees and the N.A.C.; the initiative

[1] *The Communist International*, vol. 3, No. 16–17, 1118; see also R. Palme Dutt, *The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control* (Basil Blackwell, 1922), 34.

passed to the centre. The N.A.C. began to meet more frequently, and to take policy decisions. When the National Workers' Committee Movement's constitution was framed in 1921 it contained none of the early Shop Steward prohibitions on executive committees.[1]

Simultaneously, the movement's interest in revolutionary politics increased. As we have seen, the Russian revolution aroused enormous enthusiasm throughout the whole British trade union movement, particularly of course on the extreme left. One South Wales miner declared at a Shop Stewards' conference in 1920 that their 'main responsibility was to bring about a similar state of affairs in this country as in Russia'.[2] Russian example and influence led to a change in the movement's attitude towards political action. As the N.A.C. explained in 1920:

> The function of the S.S. and W.C.M. is to provide the machinery necessary to enable the workers to effectively wage the class struggle; to provide the necessary organization whereby the final overthrow of the capitalist system can be accomplished: to take its share in the task of maintaining the revolution throughout the transition period from Capitalism to complete Communism; and to be capable of adaptation for the purpose of administering the industrial affairs of the Communist society.
>
> In the past the relationship of the S.S. and W.C. Movement to the political parties had been vague and indefinite to the extent that the political parties themselves were vague and indefinite in their ideals, platform and policy. The success of the Russian revolution compelled all sections of the class conscious organized proletariat to reconsider their positions in the light of practical, immediate revolutionary activities necessitated by the desire to consolidate the victories of the proletariat and hasten the complete downfall of capitalism throughout the world.[3]

The decline in workshop activity, enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution, and belief in the need for a revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalism in the immediate future,

[1] Cf. B. Pribicevic, *Demand for Workers' Control in the Railway, Mining, and Engineering Industries, 1910–22* (Oxford, D.Phil. Thesis 1957), 548–51.

[2] Report of the National Conference of Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee, held on 10 and 11 January 1920 at the International Socialist Club Hall, London, 5.

[3] Thesis on the Relationship of the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committees to the Communist Party, approved by the N.A.C. on 28 September 1920.

inevitably led the movement to contact the newly formed Communist International. In January 1920 a national conference accepted an N.A.C. resolution proposing affiliation to the Third International, and a motion by Tanner empowering the N.A.C. to appoint delegates to the forthcoming Comintern Congress.[1] J. T. Murphy, Dave Ramsay, Willie Gallacher, and Jack Tanner were sent to Moscow in the summer of 1920 for extensive conversations with the Russians on the future trade union international, and on the situation in Britain.[2] In September Tanner and Ramsay returned to Britain to report to a 'representative meeting of the N.A.C.' The N.A.C. endorsed an undertaking already given by their delegates to affiliate provisionally to the new trade union international and to 'assist in the furthering of Communist unity in this country'. The same meeting discussed the relationship between the Shop Stewards' Movement and the Communist Party, but delayed publishing a statement because of disagreement; Tanner favoured individual but not collective support of the Party, whilst others favoured closer ties. A compromise statement was finally agreed upon:

> That the N.A.C. of the Shop Stewards and Workers Committees recognize the necessity for acting in close contact with the Communist Party and to assist in furthering the interests of the revolutionary movement as a whole. It will stress the need of its active members joining the Communist Party and reciprocally will expect all industrial workers who are members of the Communist Party to actively participate in the work of the Shop Stewards Movement.
>
> The Shop Stewards and Workers Committees and the Communist Party should devise some convenient arrangement to ensure perfect harmony in the activities of the two organizations.[3]

In January 1921 a N.A.C. sub-committee consisting of Tanner, Murphy, J. R. Campbell, and T. Kime was appointed and met C.P. representatives at King Street the

[1] Report . . . 10 and 11 January, 5.

[2] See above.

[3] Report of N.A.C. of Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committees Meeting, September 25th–28th, 1920; Thesis on 'Relationship of the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committees to the Communist Party, as defined at a meeting of the N.A.C., September 26th, 1920'; Pribicevic, *The Shop Stewards' Movement*, 107. Pribicevic incorrectly asserts that 'the N.A.C. did not produce a statement'.

following month. Differences were ironed out, and complete agreement reached on the need for close co-operation between the two organizations. The resolution unanimously accepted declared:

> This joint meeting agrees that the need for a national unofficial industrial movement is urgent and that every effort should be made to secure that the control of this movement should be in the hands of members of the Communist Party of Gt. B.
>
> It holds that the Communist Party of Great Britain must control directly the activities of all members of the Party taking part in this national movement, and that it is the duty of all members of the Party to work within this movement . . .
>
> It maintains that it is the duty of the unofficial industrial movement (a) to work within the existing trade union movement with the object of recreating that movement on industrial lines; (b) to take part in all mass movements in industry and to seize such opportunities as arise that tend toward Revolution; (c) to work for the allegiance of the trade union movement being transferred from the Amsterdam to the Red International.
>
> It is the business of the Communist Party to secure that all key positions are held by Communists, and for all Communists working within the industrial movement to endeavour to secure the conversion of the Rank and File to Communism and the complete subordination of the industrial movement to the Communist Party of Great Britain.

The N.A.C. agreed to submit the theses prepared for the impending national conference of the Shop Stewards to the Communist Party executive, whilst the Party delegates promised to raise with their executive the question of financial help for the N.A.C. Regular consultation was to take place between the N.A.C. and the Party executive.[1]

A national conference of all unofficial trade union organizations—Shop Stewards' groups, Workers' Committees, Miners' Reform Committees, Railway Vigilance Committees, etc., was convened in Sheffield in March-April, 1921, to confirm this alliance between the trade union left and the Communist Party. The conference renamed the S.S. and W.C.M. the National Workers' Committee Movement, and committed the new movement to the C.P. A resolution on

[1] Addendum to Thesis, note p. 38; Report of the Meeting, 23 February 1921.

'British Trade Unionism and the Revolution' explained the left wing trade unionist's attitude towards the newly formed Communist Party:

> The development of a strike, lock-out, or unemployed crisis from a passive to an active basis, lifts the struggle from the industrial field and makes it a struggle carried out on all plaines (sic) of social activity, a struggle aiming at the destruction of the state power of the employing class and the substitution of a workers state . . .
>
> The fact that the industrial struggle develops into the politic (sic) struggle demands that the workers organizations shall be under the guidance of a centralized disciplined party of picked revolutionaries, the Communist Party. Such a party must establish its party groups in the union branches and in the workshops with a view to capturing the organizations there for Communism. Without the establishment of these groups in the workshops and branches and the establishment of the moral authority over large masses of the workers, the control of the industrial organisations by the Party is an impossibility.
>
> Great care must be exercised that the securing of such control within the workers organizations does not lead to union or committee splits along party lines. Such splits would be dangerous at a time when the need for industrial consolidation is so pressing. The communist factions must be prepared to work within the larger bodies and accept their decision so long as they are allowed freedom of propaganda.
>
> . . . It is the work of the Communist Party to secure through its workshop and branch groups the effective control of all official industrial organisations.[1]

The Party was to secure this control directly through its own Industrial Department, and indirectly through the National Workers' Committee Movement and the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions.

The Provisional International Council of Trade and Industrial Unions had already established a British Bureau as its own national centre for revolutionary trade unionists, set up with Russian money by J. T. Murphy when he returned from Moscow in December, 1920. By February 1921 a national organization had been created, with Tom Mann as chairman, Ted Lismer as organizing secretary, and a network of local organizers including Frank Jackson

[1] National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement, invitation to a conference; 'British Trade Unionism and the Revolution', typescript Thesis; see Pribicevic, *The Shop Stewards' Movement*, 142–3.

(Lancashire), Nat Watkins (South Wales), and Will Brain (Birmingham).[1] Prominent labour figures, like Robert Williams, Ellen Wilkinson, and Emile Burns lent their names in support. By April a London District Committee had also been established, with Pollitt as Secretary and including the London organizer of the Tailors and Garment Workers, Sam Elsbury, and Joe Vaughan, later head of the M.M.'s. E.T.U. section.[2] Its main immediate task was to rally support for the First Congress of the new trade union International, scheduled for Moscow in May; the Bureau's first manifesto, published in January, called upon all trade unionists to choose between the Social-Democratic I.F.T.U., 'the Amsterdam International', and Moscow:

> The world is now divided into two great divisions, and WE MUST MAKE OUR CHOICE as to which camp we belong. On the one side is the capitalist class with its . . . 'yellow' Amsterdam International . . . On the other side is the Communist International and all that is loyal and true to the working class . . . All our minor issues . . . are being thrust into the background as the mightier questions rise up demanding that we conquer capitalism.[3]

The Bureau soon mobilized support in London; on 7 May, for example, 217 union branches were represented at a London conference which called upon the T.U.C. 'to sever its connection with the Amsterdam International' and send delegates to the forthcoming Congress of the R.I.L.U. The largest number of branches represented came from the A.E.U.—78; other unions with substantial representation included the E.T.U. (24 branches), the Woodworkers' Society (22), National Union of General Workers (19), Union of Vehicle Workers (15), and N.A.F.T.A. (11). Murphy later claimed that 460 union branches, 6 district

[1] J. T. Murphy, *New Horizons*, 161, 167–8. Lismer was a prominent member of the S.S. and W.C.M. in Sheffield; Watkins was to become Secretary of the Miners' Minority Movement, and a member of the Movement's Secretariat; Brain was Midlands organizer of the Communist Party, and a prominent member of the Birmingham Trades Council.

[2] *The Communist*, 19 February, 1921, Provisional International Council of Trade and Industrial Unions, British Bureau, London Divisional Council, invitation to a Conference, April 1921; for Elsbury see below p. 137.

[3] *Manifesto of the Provisional International Council . . . to the Organised Workers of Great Britain* (January, 1921).

committees and 10 trades councils supported the R.I.L.U. Congress in July 1921.[1]

Thus, by January 1922 three interlocking organizations, each with its own press and propaganda, were trying to 'stop the retreat' of the British trade union movement: the Communist Party itself, with *The Communist*, the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U., with *All Power* (which first appeared in January, 1922), and the National Workers' Committee Movement, with *The Worker* in Glasgow and Tanner's *Solidarity* in London.[2] All believed in the class struggle, the dictatorship of the proletariat, international revolutionary co-operation through the Comintern and the R.I.L.U., and the conversion of the existing trade unions to a programme of immediate revolution. The leading members of the N.W.C.M., as well as of the British Bureau, were all members of the Communist Party—men like J. T. Murphy, A. Macmanus, Ted Lismer, W. Gallacher, Tom Mann, Harry Pollitt, Nat Watkins, and many others. The existence of three organizations, with the same policy, the same leadership, and the same hope of converting the rank and file to militant action, simply created confusion. Accordingly, the N.W.C.M. finally merged with the British Bureau in June 1922; or, as one hostile witness put it, 'The Shop Stewards' Movement has been liquidated into the Communist Party of England'.[3]

Their union led directly to the emergence of the National Minority Movement.

The Emergence of the National Minority Movement

Although the R.I.L.U. had urged its members to work within the Social-Democratic trade union movement from the very beginning, this was initially regarded as a temporary expedient. The working classes would soon realize the fragility of the capitalist order, the irrelevance of reformism, and the need for proletarian revolution. The failures of 1920–21

[1] Report of the Conference called by London District Council of British Bureau of the R.I.L.U., 7 May 1921; Murphy, *New Horizons*, 172.

[2] 'Stop the Retreat' was the title of a pamphlet by J. T. Murphy published by the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. early in 1922.

[3] George Williams, 25–6.

transformed a temporary expedient into a long-term strategy. The third Comintern Congress of August 1921, and the Fourth in November 1922, confessed that the working classes were in retreat and that 'the conquest of power as an immediate task of the day is not on the agenda'. Even the 'strongest and best organized' European party, the German, was 'not in a position to attempt what the Bolsheviks did in 1917'.[1]

The British working class shared this defeatism. It gave little support to the Communist Party or the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. 'In England, a most important country for the development of our organization, we are growing very slowly. In no other country, perhaps, does the Communist movement make such slow progress.'[2] With the collapse of the post-war boom at the end of 1920 and unemployment rocketing to 15·6 per cent in 1921 there was little scope for militant union activity.[3] As J. T. Murphy said the following year: 'In England we have had a powerful Shop Stewards' movement. But it can and only does exist in given objective conditions. These necessary conditions at the moment in England do not exist . . . You cannot build factory organizations in empty and depleted workshops, while you have a great reservoir of unemployed workers'.[4] Moreover, the British Bureau was too obviously an offshoot of the international Communist movement, too obviously an attempt to win support for a foreign organization; its very name immediately alienated potential support. Despite a substantial minority vote for affiliation to the R.I.L.U. at the Annual Conference of the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers in 1921 (17,038), the only union organizations to support affiliation were the South Wales Miners' Federation and the National Union of Packing Case Makers, a local East End union.[5]

Working class defeatism, and the continued strength of

[1] E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, iii, 444; *Report of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, 16–17.

[2] *Fourth Congress of the Communist International; Abridged Report of Meetings held at Petrograd and Moscow, November 7th to December 3rd 1922.* (C.P.G.B. 1923), 25.

[3] A. J. Youngson, *The British Economy 1920–57*, (Allen & Unwin, 1960), 269.

[4] *Fourth Congress*, 62.

[5] *All Power*, February 1922, 7; ibid., May 1922, 12.

Social Democracy, led to the need for a more conciliatory Comintern policy: capitalism would have to be undermined slowly not overcome suddenly. The united front tactics first presented to the Third Comintern Congress in August 1921 and elaborated the following December, were designed to wean the workers away from the Socialists by stealth. Since the working class had 'not yet lost their belief in the reformists' the Communists could only build a mass party by proving their superior devotion to working class interests as they were conceived by the workers themselves. Communists were to attempt to obtain the widest possible support for 'concrete transitional demands', and to form a 'united front' with the Socialists against the 'capitalist offensive' wherever possible.[1] Unity was not, however, to be purchased at the cost of Communist freedom of action. If the Socialists accepted Communist help they came under immediate Communist influence; if they rejected it they demonstrated their lack of genuine concern for working class interests.

The united front policy demonstrated clearly the ambiguity of the R.I.L.U.'s position. Many non-Communists, especially trade unionists, found it difficult to reconcile the talk of unity with the fact of splitting to form new organizations. To the Bolsheviks there was a simple dialectical solution. As Zinoviev argued in December 1921:

> This is a dialectical question which every Communist must understand. Precisely because it is an epoch of splits, and because we have now become a force, we can, on certain conditions work together with the Second and Two and a Half Internationals . . . But if we had not made the split, we would not be the factor which we now are . . . It is possible that we shall have to carry out many more splits, and we shall still go to the socialists and say, 'Yes, we want unity; unity on this platform'.

But Marxist controversies and trade union politics were very different worlds, and few trade unionists understood this dialectic. Solidarity and loyalty formed the basis of trade union strength, and splitting, even if only to establish a base from which to appeal for unity, destroyed this basis.

The first requirement for success in the delicate negotia-

[1] Degras, i, 309–16.

tions the united front involved was flexibility.[1] The way to gain maximum working class support varied according to local circumstances, including the attitude of the respective Socialist groups, and tactics which succeeded in one country would fail in another. Unfortunately, the Bolshevization of the Comintern and the organization of the R.I.L.U. in the Comintern image ensured Russian domination, and united front difficulties. A constant theme in the history of Communist trade union policy in Western Europe in the united front period is the tension between Russian rigidity, often based upon Russian national interests, and local flexibility, based upon peculiar local conditions. It recurs in German, French, and British trade union history.

The German Communist Party's (K.P.D.) failure to work for a united front with the Socialists in the trade union movement was a constant source of friction between Moscow and Berlin. Historically, German political movements have founded their own trade union arm: the liberals established the Hirsch-Duncker unions in the 1850s, the Socialists their own unions in the 1870s, the Catholics their own in the 1890s.[2] At its inaugural congress in 1919 the K.P.D. decided to boycott the existing trade unions, and only decided against forming a new trade union movement after lengthy discussion. The Comintern's directive in 1921 to work within the Socialist trade unions was ill received: historical tradition, suspicion of purely economic organizations, German sensitivity to orders from Moscow, and Socialist anti-Communism undermined K.P.D. enthusiasm for a united front. The tactics were formally accepted, but effectively ignored.[3] The confusion this difference of opinion created was increased by intense factional conflict within the K.P.D., especially between Brandler, the right wing Secretary of the party between 1921 and 1923, and the left wing Ruth Fischer. Brandler supported the united front, Fischer

[1] W. T. Angress, *Stillborn Revolution: The Communist bid for power in Germany, 1921–3* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1963), 226.

[2] A. Sturmthal, *Unity and Diversity in European Labour* (The Free Press, Glencoe, 1953), pp. 45–53; E. Anderson, *Hammer or Anvil: The Story of the German Working Class movement*, (Gollancz, 1945).

[3] For one of the several arguments between Moscow and Berlin on this theme see Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, iii, 105, 113–5.

opposed it. To confound confusion, Brandler was discredited for his vacillating role in the abortive German revolution of November 1923 at the very moment when Comintern enthusiasm for the united front was at its height. The inevitable result of this confusion was the neglect of serious trade union work. Under pressure from the Comintern the K.P.D. repeatedly professed its adherence to the united front, repeatedly ordered its members to join the Socialist trade unions, and repeatedly announced its intention of restricting party membership to trade unionists. Repetition testified to hollowness, not conviction. The number of party fractions in the Socialist trade unions dropped from 6,000 in 1923 to 300 in 1924, and the following year there were only 3 Communists at the Congress of the A.D.G.B., the Socialist T.U.C.[1] The Party failed to organize effective opposition to the expulsion of left oppositionists from the Socialist trade unions in 1923 for attending a conference to discuss the formation of a left opposition trade union movement. The Communists effectively prevented the formation of an independent trade union movement, whilst the Socialists effectively prevented the Communists from working within the Socialist trade unions; left wing disenchantment was inevitable. The K.P.D. thus achieved little progress amongst German trade unionists in the 1920's; it was obliged to apply tactics which external circumstances and its own hesitation rendered irrelevant.

Political conditions rendered the united front equally difficult in the French trade union movement. Neither the Communists nor the Socialists were enthusiastic about trade union unity. The strength of the revolutionary tradition and of working class alienation from the Socialists resulted in a strong French Communist party, the power of the employers resulted in a weak trade union movement. The C.P.F. was thus stronger politically than industrially. The French Communist party was founded in December 1920 when the majority of the Tours Congress of the Socialist Party voted to accept the Comintern's 'Twenty-one Conditions', and expelled the hostile minority. Despite repeated

[1] Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, iii, 98–100, 330.

purges, which helped to reduce party membership from 121,000 in 1921 to 52,000 in 1928, the Party constituted a substantial electoral force: it received 875,815 votes in 1924, 1,063,943 in 1928.[1] Parallel splits took place in the trade union movement. The Socialist Confédération generale du travail (C.G.T.) split when the syndicalist left was expelled for forming factions (Revolutionary Syndicalist Committees) to agitate for affiliation to the R.I.L.U. The left opposition thereupon established its own organization, the Confédération general du travail unitaire, (C.G.T.U.). The Communists took over the new organization, transforming it from a loose federation of left wing groups into the trade union branch of the C.P. Many syndicalists and anarchists were expelled in 1921, the 'naturalized Moscovite' Monmousseau was elected General Secretary in 1922, affiliation to the R.I.L.U. was endorsed in 1923, and—the final stage in Bolshevization—the surviving syndicalist minority broke away to form its own trade union organization in 1924. Although the Communists attempted to build up the C.G.T.U., it remained weaker than its Socialist parent, with approximately 400,000 members compared to the C.G.T.'s 750,000. Although it had substantial support in the metal trades, textiles, and on the railways, it was dominant only in badly organized industries like the building industry, and in poorly organized areas like the South. To toe the Moscow line, and to counteract the C.G.T.U.'s inherited syndicalist weakness, Communists were ordered to work within the C.G.T. As the E.C.C.I. declared in June 1923, 'where two parallel trade union organizations exist, individual members and groups . . . must struggle for their readmission to the reformist unions, in so far as this is practicable, in the interests of the International Workers Movement'.[2] To this end, a 'friends of unity' group was established in the C.G.T., on the lines of the Minority Movement. But the group failed to establish a secure position and the limits of united front activity were a number of local protest meetings; as in Britain, the Party excelled in organizing demonstrations. In

[1] T. J. Saposs, *The Labour Movement In Post War France* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1931), 452.

[2] Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, iii, 538.

practice Communist interest and Socialist hostility rendered the united front irrelevant in France as well as in Germany.

Desire and necessity limited German and French Communist interest in a trade union united front. In both countries the Communists won substantial electoral support, and could cherish delusions of imminent revolution. Spectacular work upon the political platform, or relaxing work within the penumbra of the Communist world, was more attractive than the hard grind of fraction work within basically hostile organizations. Socialist anti-Communism reinforced Communist preference. No such alternatives were open in Britain: the united front offered the only hope of Communist success. After their initial hesitation the British Communist Party became enthusiastic converts to the united front, the show-piece of the Comintern. Politically, the united front involved a continuation of the policy of working within the Labour Party, and attempting to secure Communist Party affiliation. Industrially, the tactics called for the formation of 'minority movements' of Communists and non-Communist trade unionists to deal with shop floor grievances. As Losovsky explained to the Fourth Comintern Congress in November 1922:

> As far as Britain is concerned, we see clearly that it would be disastrous if the party were content to organize its forces only within its little Party nuclei. The aim here must be to create a more numerous opposition trade union movement. Our aim must be that our Communist groups should act as a point of crystallisation round which the opposition elements will concentrate. The aim must be to create, to marshall, to integrate the opposition forces, and the Communist Party will itself grow concurrently with the growth of the opposition. There must be established a relationship between the Party organization and the opposition, which by its very nature is heterogeneous—in such a manner that the Communists could not be charged with striving to mechanically dominate the entire opposition movement. This goal—i.e. the goal of winning the working masses for Communism—we must work for under these circumstances with the utmost care, definiteness, and staying power'.[1]

Early in 1923 the R.I.L.U. sent the ubiquitous English speaking Comintern agent Michael Borodin to England to

[1] *Fourth Congress*, 226–7.

investigate the British Party's failure to win trade union support.[1] On his return to Moscow a special commission, consisting of Losovsky, Borodin, and a Comintern representative was set up to investigate the Party's trade union work, and especially relations between the Party and the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U.[2] Simultaneously, the Comintern invited the British Central Committee to an enlarged session of the E.C.C.I. to discuss the progress made towards implementing the 1922 Party Commission's report on Bolshevization. Two sets of overlapping conferences on the British question were held in the spring of 1923. In the first, the British Party's 'Bolshevization' programme was assessed critically, and the Political Bureau re-organized to reduce the power of the 'old guard' of ex-Socialist Labour Party leaders like Arthur Macmanus and Tom Bell; Harry Pollitt, R. Palme Dutt, and Willie Gallacher joined Macmanus and Bell as full time Politbureau members, and Arthur Horner and Wal Hannington were made part time members.[3] In the second British conference the Party's trade union work was criticized severely, especially the failure to build up revolutionary minority movements. To remedy this failure Pollitt was made a national organizer, with special responsibility for trade union work, and Gallacher and Campbell were made joint secretaries of the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. Gallacher was given the task of arranging a national conference to launch the new trade union 'ginger group' but was warned (in the usual united front paradox) against 'splitting'[4]: 'The essential aim of the British bureau is not to organize independent revolutionary trade unions, or to split revolutionary elements away from the existing organizations affiliated to the T.U.C. . . . but to convert the revolutionary minority within each industry into a revolutionary majority'.

[1] J. T. Murphy, *New Horizons*, 183–4; interview with Mr. Murphy, 1963. Borodin had emigrated to the United States in 1905, returning to Russia in 1917. As a fluent English speaker he was the obvious Communist emissary. He was to be the Comintern's representative to the Kuomintang between 1923–7.

[2] For an account of the political changes within the Communist Party see L. J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929* (Macgibbon and Kee, 1966), 77–84; Carr, iii, 120–3.

[3] Macfarlane, 83; *Speeches and Documents: Sixth Conference of the Communist Party of Great Britain, May 17th to 19th 1924* (C.P.B.G., 1924), 51.

[4] Gallacher, 39–40.

Despite pressure from Moscow progress was slow, and it was over a year before the planned national conference took place. The British Bureau failed to expand, and the British Party dragged its feet, doubtful of the value of a new organization. The left sectarianism which had been revealed by initial hostility to the united front persisted even after the first 'Bolshevization' of the Party in 1922. As the secretary of the revolutionary breakaway United Mineworkers of Scotland William Allan wrote later:

> . . . at the beginning of the National Minority Movement, considerable time and energy had to be expended to fight down the belief that there was no room for a movement dealing with immediate and 'narrow' economic issues, that it was a reformist conception, and that such an organization would stand in front of and hide the face of the Party from the workers. Sneering descriptions of the N.M.M. were given in the Party as being an 'attempt to dress a red man in a pink cloak'.[1]

Others thought that the new organization should aim to attract Labour Party members as well as trade unionists.[2]

The 1923 General Election campaign provided the Party with a convenient pretext to delay facing the issue. But by early 1924 the R.I.L.U. was extremely annoyed with its British section; the Executive Bureau reported in June 1924:

> During the whole period under consideration the E.B. was repeatedly forced to note that the work of the British Bureau does not keep pace with the requirements and possibilities of the present labour movement of Great Britain. In spite of numerous requests of the E.B., the British Bureau and the C.P. had much friction over technical questions, adversely affecting the practical activity of the Bureau . . . At the Plymouth Congress (of the T.U.C.) the opposition showed itself unprepared and without a clear programme . . . These tendencies of the non-Party revolutionary workers to keep their organizations independent of Communist influence, were not actively combated by the British Bureau . . . .

The Bureau also commented unfavourably on the failure to call a national conference to launch the projected move-

[1] W. Allan, The Party and the Minority Movement, *The Communist Review* (*3rd series*), vol. 4 (1932), 472.

[2] Thomas Bell, *The British Communist Party: A Short History* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1937), 85.

ment.[1] Gallacher later defended himself rather feebly: 'it was a slow business, as all kinds of contacts had to be made and all kinds of propaganda material produced and distributed throughout the movement'.[2]

Despite the delay in calling a national conference, considerable progress was made towards launching the new 'minority movements', especially in the mining and engineering industries. Greatest success was achieved in the Miners' Federation, where economic difficulties and a long-established if inchoate left wing provided a favourable setting. As the largest staple exporting industry, coal mining suffered severely from the competition of cheap Polish and German coal in the European export markets; and even at home the increased use of oil and the expansion of road transport at the expense of rail reduced demand. The disruptive effects of this secular decline were reinforced by the cycle of boom, slump, and slow recovery between 1918 and 1922, and found their reflection in the long drawn out dispute which followed the return of industry to private ownership in 1921. During the years of government control, from 1917 to 1921, the flat rate advances which had been granted were paid out of a national wages pool, made up of levies upon excess profits in the more prosperous districts. On decontrol the owners proposed to abolish the pool and to make wages payable in each district dependent upon the district financial position. The Miners rejected the proposals, a lock out began immediately on decontrol, and the Miners, left stranded by the collapse of the Triple Alliance on 'Black Friday', were heavily defeated in a war of attrition. Wage-reductions and the replacement of the national pool followed; the new wage rates were between 10 and 40 per cent below the pre-strike levels, except in Yorkshire, where the new rates afforded a slight increase. Wide disparities between districts emerged; districts which catered primarily for the domestic market, like Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, remained well paid, whilst rates in districts catering for the export trade dropped sharply. South Wales became the

[1] Report of the Executive Bureau to the Third Congress of the R.I.L.U. June 1924, cap. xii.

[2] Gallacher, 47–8.

worst paid district, although before the strike it had been the best paid.[1]

Economic changes reinforced the position of the left wing, particularly in South Wales and Scotland. Even before the First World War South Wales had been the centre of left wing influence in the Miners' Federation; large scale immigration in the early 1900s had disrupted the tight social structure of the mining valleys, and undermined the influence of the 'Lib-lab' Nonconformist chapels—the conservatism of Mabon in the 1890s gave way to the syndicalism of *The Miner's Next Step* in the years immediately before the First World War. Although the main radical movement of the pre-war years, the Unofficial Reform Committee Movement, scarcely survived the beginning of the war, a basic network of Marxist study groups centred around the Rhondda survived to form left wing nuclei.[2] Their strength was revealed in 1921 when the S.W.M.F. rejected the June settlement, and sponsored a resolution at the M.F.G.B. Annual Conference in favour of affiliation to the R.I.L.U.[3] In Scotland the left wing was strongest in Fife and Lanark. In 1921 the Fife Unofficial Reform Committees persuaded the local executive to defy the M.F.G.B.'s orders and withdraw the safety-men, and captured the Fife seats on the Executive of the Scottish Federation. When their election was declared void because of a low poll they organized a conference to consider forming a breakaway union in Fife, but rejected the idea. However, when the pattern was repeated the following year the Fife left wing disregarded the Communist Party's prohibition on dual unionism and set up the Fife, Kinross, and Clackmannan Miners' Reform Union as a breakaway from the official district association.[4]

Until the advent of the Minority Movement attempts to unite these disparate district movements into a unified

[1] G. D. H. Cole, *Labour in the Coal Mining Industry*, cap. ix.

[2] There is no adequate explanation for the changes in the politics of the S.W.M.F. between 1890 and 1912. However, there are some interesting suggestions in K. O. Morgan, *Wales and British Politics, 1868–1922* (University of Wales Press 1963); also R. G. Gregory, *The Miners and British Politics, 1906–14* (Oxford U.P., 1968), 57–61.

[3] R. P. Arnot, *The Miners' Years of Struggle* (Allen & Unwin, 1953), 327.

[4] Macfarlane, 129–30; P. Hodge, *The Fife, Kinross & Clackmannan Miners Union Dispute* (Fife, Kinross & Clackmannan Miners Association, 1929).

national organization foundered. Under Communist influence the Unofficial Reform Committees in South Wales, Fife and Lanark, Yorkshire and the North of England, agreed to combine to form a Mining Section of the National Workers' Committee Movement in March 1921.[1] But district separatism, based upon the varied backgrounds and interests of the leaders involved, survived. From June 1921 onwards left wing members of the Miners' Federation mounted a rear-guard action to halt the decline in union membership which followed the failure of the 1921 strike; '100 per cent trade unionism' campaigns were launched in South Wales, the Forest of Dean, the Midlands, and Scotland. To co-ordinate these efforts and to prepare the ground for the launching of the National Minority Movement, the Communist Party and the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. organized a series of district conferences in South Wales, Yorkshire, Durham, and Scotland towards the end of 1923. The district conferences culminated in a national conference at Sheffield in January 1924, which formally launched the Miners' M.M. and elected an executive committee. A few days later the executive committee met in London and appointed Nat Watkins, a former South Wales miner then employed by the R.I.L.U. ,as national organizer.[2] (His first job was to draft a resolution to send to Ramsay Macdonald urging the Labour Government to implement the Sankey Commission's report.)[3] District committees were set up in South Wales, Durham, Lancashire and Cheshire, Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Scotland. The first issue of the Movement's own newspaper, *The Mineworker*, appeared on 16 February 1924. The Miners' M.M. immediately began its campaign for the transformation of the Miners Federation into a United Mineworkers' Union, affiliated to the R.I.L.U., a weekly wage at least equal to the real weekly wage in 1914 plus the Sankey Commission's 2*s*. per shift, and a six-hour day.[4]

The Miners' M.M. achieved its greatest success before

[1] See above, 19–20.

[2] Report of the R.I.L.U. Executive Bureau . . . cap. xiii, xiv; *The Worker*, 2 February 1924.

[3] *The Workers Weekly*, 1 February 1924.

[4] *Final Agenda of the Annual Conference of the N.M.M.*, 1925, 11–15.

the national movement was launched. In January 1924 Frank Hodges was obliged to resign from the Secretaryship of the Miners' Federation on his appointment as Civil Lord of the Admiralty in the Labour Government. To avoid splitting the left wing vote the South Wales District Committee of the Miners' Minority Movement met in Cardiff, and decided to throw its weight behind Arthur Cook, the Miners' Agent in the central Rhondda, on the casting vote of Arthur Horner, allegedly acting on instructions from the Communist Party.[1] Cook went on to win the official S.W.M.F. nomination for the post by 50,123 votes to 49,617, and to win the actual election from the Yorkshire candidate, J. Jones, by 217,664 votes to 202,297.[2] Cook was to be by far the most consistent prominent supporter of the Movement throughout its existence. Although a member of the I.L.P. (resigning from the Communist Party in 1921 when criticized for his support of the June settlement), he co-operated closely with the C.P. and the M.M. throughout 1924–29 because, as he said, he agreed with 'nine-tenths' of its policy.[3] The son of a soldier, born in the small Somerset mining village of Wookey in 1885, Cook had migrated to Merthyr Tydfil in the boom years of the early 1900s.[4] An active member of both the I.L.P. and the Baptist Church, he first achieved prominence in the Cambrian Combine Strike of 1910. With Noah Ablett he was to the fore in organizing the Reform Committee Movement, and was associated with the notorious syndicalist pamphlet *The Miner's Next Step*, published in 1912. His radical views and revivalist manner made him popular in the Rhondda, and in 1919 he was elected as Miners' Agent for Rhondda No. 1 district. A brilliant demagogue, he had a 'winning simplicity and dynamic energy'. However, he was 'basically a weak man . . . without consistency of conviction'; as Beatrice Webb rather severely said, 'he had no intellect and not much intelligence—he is a quivering mass of emotions—a mediumistic magnetic sort of creature—not without per-

[1] L. J. Macfarlane, 131.
[2] *Proceedings of the Miners Federation of Great Britain,1924*, 226.
[3] *Workers Weekly*, 20 February 1926.
[4] *Sunday Worker*, 7 June 1925; *D.N.B. 1930–39*.

sonal attractiveness—an inspired idiot, drunk with his own words, dominated by his own slogans'.[1] The history of the M.M.M. was to be inextricably bound up with this generous, unstable agitator.

Progress was slower elsewhere, for example in the engineering industry. Although the R.I.L.U. claimed that the pressure for the £1 per week claim which the A.E.U. submitted in April 1924 was 'synonymous with' its own agitation, there is no evidence to support this claim.[2] At the end of May two local conferences of engineering workers were organized, the first in Manchester, the second in Edinburgh. The Manchester conference launched the Metal Workers M.M. when it declared:

> This conference believes that the time is now opportune for the formulation of a progressive policy to be operated through the existing unions with a view to the return of their former militancy and agreed that as a means to this end the active union branches and individual workers should be rallied together by the election of an Executive Committee of the M.W.M.M. covering the Manchester area. We further place on record our decision to render wholehearted support for the R.I.L.U. in their efforts to organise a National Conference of the left wing organizations . . . .[3]

Although other district conferences were planned they did not take place until after the national conference in August; as the R.I.L.U. noted, 'progress was seriously retarded' by the trade depression.[4]

The Sixth Communist Party Congress in May 1924 summed up the situation and pointed to the future.

> The bankruptcy of the bureaucracy has brought into existence fighting groups of workers in all parts of the country, all battling for a fighting policy for the Trade Union Movement. These groups are gradually being co-ordinated into what has become known as 'The Minority Movement'—the new and encouraging sign of the spirit that will one day overcome all obstacles in the path of working class emancipation . . . The Communist Party has on all occasions assisted in the development of this movement, and will continue to do so, but

[1] E. Wertheimer, *Portrait of the Labour Party* (G. Putnam's, 1929), 153. B. Webb, *Diaries 1924–32* (Longmans, 1956), 116.

[2] *The International Metal Workers' Bulletin*, vol. 1, No. 3 (June 1924), 3.

[3] Ibid., 5.

[4] *International Metal Workers' Bulletins*, vol. 1, nos. 1–3.

at the same time warns those active workers who participate in it, that only a revolutionary Communist struggle can serve to achieve the object they have in view.

In the immediate future, until the time for the revolutionary struggle arrived, the 'minority movements' were to band together 'in one powerful mass movement, only so will the partial and sectional struggles around which the minority movements are grouped today find their realization as their struggle unfolds itself'.[1]

After further prodding from Moscow in June the national conference to unite the various minority movements took place in the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, on 23 and 24 August 1924. Slightly over 270 delegates, representing 'at least 200,000 workers', gathered together to launch the new national left wing centre.[2] The conference united the individual minority movements into a national organization, formulated a National Programme of Action, and made arrangements for the election of an executive committee and General Secretary.

[1] *Sixth Conference of the C.P.G.B.*, pp. 14.

[2] *Report of the National Minority Conference held August 1924* and back cover, p.

II

THE FOUNDATION OF THE NATIONAL MINORITY MOVEMENT: AIMS, ORGANIZATION, AND PERSONALITIES

THE Minority Movement's overall aim was to hasten the proletarian revolution by mobilizing trade union support behind a militant, radical programme. The inaugural conference resolved that the Movement's 'aims and objects' were:

> . . . to organize the working masses of Great Britain for the overthrow of capitalism, the emancipation of the workers from oppressors and exploiters, and the establishment of a Socialist Commonwealth; to carry on a wide agitation and propaganda for the principles of the revolutionary class struggle . . . and against the present tendency towards social peace and class collaboration and the delusion of the peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism; to unite the workers in their everyday struggles against the exploiters; to maintain the closest relations with the R.I.L.U. . . .

By leading the workers in 'their everyday struggles against capitalism' the Movement hoped to accelerate its collapse; bourgeois surrender to the Movement's demands revealed the fundamental strength of the working class; bourgeois rejection revealed their basic hostility.[1]

Although the Communist Party was primarily interested in the Socialist Commonwealth, it recognized that the majority of trade unionists had more limited aspirations. 'While aiming ultimately at the complete overthrow of capitalism the attention of [the] movement must necessarily be concentrated upon the immediate struggles of the workers against their exploiters . . .' 'Bread and butter problems first, high politics later, is the method to adopt.' The Movement's solutions to 'bread and butter' problems were also presented to the inaugural conference in August 1924. They included a wage increase of £1 per week, with a minimum

[1] *Report of the National Minority Conference, 1924*, 20.

wage of £4; a 44-hour week, and no overtime; Workshop and Factory Committees, with members guaranteed against victimization; Workers' Control of Industry; a stronger General Council, with control over the Labour Party; industrial unionism; the affiliation of the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement and the trades councils to the T.U.C.; and the repudiation of the Dawes Plan, whereby German reparations were readjusted to a sliding scale based upon the earnings of the German economy. In addition to this national platform there were a number of specific demands for particular industries: the Metal Workers' M.M. demanded union control of apprentices, and the amalgamation of all engineering unions into one Metal Workers' Union; the Rail Section demanded a guaranteed minimum wage of £3. 10*s*. 0*d*., a 42-hour week, and the lowering of the adult age from 21 to 18.[1]

The multiple interests of the Movement's sponsors and supporters were reflected in this heterogeneous set of aims, objects, and demands. R.I.L.U. sponsorship was obvious from the central importance attached to international questions. As the discussion at the Third R.I.L.U. Congress revealed, the R.I.L.U.'s central interest in 1924 was in securing a rapprochement with the Amsterdam International—if possible through the fusion of the two Internationals, or as a second best through Russian entry into the I.F.T.U. This was regarded as the goal of the united front. To aid this project the Minority Movement was to spread the word amongst the British rank and file, as far as possible without embarrassing General Council protagonists of unity. Interest in the Dawes Plan likewise reflected Comintern interests, especially Russian anxiety lest it should lead to a rapprochement between Germany and the West, undermining the value of its own German entente. As always, Russia preferred a divided Western Europe. Communist tactical interests, as well as a general belief in working class unity, informed the M.M.'s desire for the affiliation of the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement and the trades councils to the T.U.C., for both were under Communist

[1] *The Miners Fight* (N.M.M., 1925), 4; *Orders from Moscow?* (C.P.G.B., 1926), 49; *Report of the National Minority Conference, 1924, passim.*

influence. Syndicalist ideas, carried on by former members of the Shop Stewards' Movement like J. T. Murphy, formed the basis for the demands for Shop and Factory Committees, for industrial unionism, and (possibly) for improving the status of the trades councils.[1] The Labour movement as a whole had long been united behind demands for higher wages and shorter hours, but the Minority Movement added a distinctive Marxist twist by explicitly emphasizing that 'the workers' first loyalty is to their class'—not to their union or their political party. This view informed their plan for the transformation of the General Council into a 'General Staff' 'to mobilize and concentrate all the forces of the working class movement for the purpose of opposing a united class front to the united capitalist enemy . . . sectional fighting is doomed, only conscious *class* fighting can be of use'[2]. Communists, Syndicalists, members of the Labour Party, and even non-political trade unionists could all find something to satisfy them in the Minority Movement's platform.

Uniting the diverse left wing groups behind a single programme was a difficult organizational task, for their common interests were slight. The Movement solved this 'problem of leadership' by establishing a complex federal structure, held together by a strong central body; the Movement was a mixture of constitutional federalism and autocracy. The Movement's formal organization was set out in two documents, the *Report* of the inaugural conference in August 1924, and a small booklet entitled *Constitution and Structure*, published in 1927.[3] The supreme authority was the Annual Conference, which met the last week in August and consisted of delegates elected by affiliated union branches, unemployed committees, trades councils, and M.M. groups. Each delegate had a single vote, there being no card vote or proportional representation (in practice nearly all decisions were unanimous). The Annual Conference

[1] J. T. Murphy, *The Workers' Committee: An Outline of the Principles and Structure* (Sheffield Workers' Committee, 1918).

[2] *Final Agenda of the Third Annual Conference of the M.M., August, 1926*, 46; *What the Minority Movement Stands for* (N.M.M., 1925), 20–21.

[3] *Report . . .*, 21; National Minority Movement, *Constitution and Structure* (N.M.M., 1927).

elected two sets of Executives. The conference as a whole elected a National Executive to act as directing authority between conferences, containing at least three members each from the Mining, Metal, and Transport sections, whilst the members of individual industrial sections elected their own national executives. The executive committee does not appear to have functioned effectively, for the 1927 *Constitution* made provision for the election by the N.E.C. of a national Working Bureau, consisting of 'national officials, secretaries of national industrial sections working at headquarters, and such executive members living adjacent to headquarters as may be appointed by the N.E.C.', and similar Working Bureaux by the individual sections. The Working Bureaux were to meet at least weekly, and to be responsible for the day-to-day work of the Movement. A complex network of national and sectional committees ran down from national to district level, and from district to local level.

In practice, this complex and highly democratic structure was largely a façade. As a Communist united front organization the Movement was organized on the basis of democratic centralism, whose 'chief principle is the election of the upper party units by those immediately below, the unconditional subordination of subordinate units to the decisions of those above them, and a strong party centre'.[1] Formally, the Working Bureaux were responsible to the N.E.C., the N.E.C. to the Annual Conference, and the Annual Conference to the membership. In practice the roles were reversed. The most important group was the secretariat, consisting of full time Communist officials working at the Movement's headquarters at 38 Great Ormond Street. The officials operated through the Working Bureaux, which met fortnightly but which by 1929 had been transformed into largely formal bodies. The N.E.C. rarely met, and merely provided an opportunity for M.M. leaders to explain changes in policy, to pass on information for dissemination in the provinces, and to secure endorsement for decisions

[1] *The Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution* (Thesis adopted by the Second Congress of the Communist International, August 1920) (C.P.G.B. 1920), 8.

already taken by the Working Bureaux; in 1928–9 its 30 members included many who knew little of the Movement's national policy. The Annual Conference was largely a rubber-stamp; it never rejected any suggestion brought forward by the Executive, and never provoked disagreement.[1] Like the Conservative Party Conference, it merely provided a platform for the leadership to announce changes in policy, to stimulate rank and file enthusiasm, and to sound out rank and file opinion.

Yet the Minority Movement was neither as complex an organization as the formal structure suggests, nor as dominated by the centre as this Leninist blue-print suggests. The Movement was too weak to sustain a comprehensive local and district organization. Some district councils were set up, for example in London and Glasgow; some District Industrial Committees were formed, like the Plymouth and London District Committees of the Metal Workers' M.M., the South Wales District Committee of the Railwaymen's M.M., and several District Committees of the Miners' M.M. But the basic units of the structure, the local branch groups, were too thinly scattered, with an irregular existence and a fluctuating membership, to support an integrated, hierarchical structure. It would be equally erroneous to depict the Movement as simply the passive tool of a revolutionary elite, for the hierarchy depended upon the membership for information about the opinions of union members and the political complexion of union election candidates. Thus, the Working Bureau circulated its draft programme for the heavy iron and steel industry to M.M. groups within the industry, and acted upon the information received. Similarly, the leadership relied upon local members for guidance during election campaigns; Wal Hannington wrote to members about the impending A.E.U. elections in 1927, saying: 'You will notice there are some divisions where we have not stated who the M.M. candidate is. This is due to the fact that comrades in these divisions have not

[1] Only one resolution appears to have been brought from the floor (in 1924), and only trivial amendments were moved (Report of the National Minority Conference 1924, 6; *Report of the Third Annual Conference of the National Minority Movement, 1926*, 55).

informed Head Office, otherwise we would have given out a lead on their behalf.'[1] Both the Communist image of the Minority Movement as a constitutional democracy and the Social-Democratic image of the Movement as a passive, pliant tool of Moscow, were caricatures.

More important than the M.M.'s internal organization was its intimate association with the British Communist Party and organic tie with the R.I.L.U. Although the C.P. Industrial Department continued to exist, causing a certain amount of confusion, the main thrust of Communist trade union activity in the 1920s was through the Minority Movement; the M.M. complemented the Industrial Department, providing an organizational home for left wingers unwilling to commit themselves to the Party. Yet the driving force within the Movement was the Communist Party, and the most active members were Communists. Although there is no evidence that rivalry between the Industrial Department and the M.M. disrupted Communist activities (at least none for the period between 1923 and 1929), Party preoccupations and obligations inevitably distracted Communist members. The Minority Movement was only one of a host of organizations and causes Communist trade unionists were obliged to support: others included the Friends of Soviet Russia, the International Class War Prisoners Aid, the Movement for Colonial Freedom, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. In addition, Party members were expected to participate in the Party local, to keep abreast of union and Party politics, to educate themselves in the principles of Marxism-Leninism, to assist in special campaigns like the campaign for the release of Sacco and Vanzetti, as well as to be active in trade union affairs. Trade union work inevitably suffered from these innumerable distractions.

The M.M.'s organic tie with the R.I.L.U. had more direct consequences. As an integral part of the Red International the Movement had to accept central discipline—it was the British branch of a world movement, not an autonomous body. Ultimate authority rested with the R.I.L.U. Bureau in Moscow, guided by a permanent British representative. Information flowed upwards to Moscow, decisions

[1] Hannington to Associate Members M.W.M.M., 2 March 1927.

flowed downwards. Discipline was enforced by 'Russian methods'; as William Allan complained in 1932, 'there were very many instances . . . where members of the M.M. have been ignored completely, or treated as inferior beings and made to swallow "the line" without discussion'.[1] Although Russian ignorance of English conditions and the inevitable time-lag in communications prevented effective Russian control over the day-to-day work of the Movement, the Russian presence was constantly felt. Moscow laid down the broad lines of M.M. policy in accordance with prevailing revolutionary ideology, and even on small matters was prepared, when urged by strategically placed individuals, to exert its control. Margaret McCarthy's picture of the beautiful Polish Jewess Barishnik attempting to run the United Mineworkers of Scotland on the basis of press reports seems comic to outsiders, but was a real problem for active trade unionists unwilling to defy Moscow's authority. The Movement's enforced conversion to the new line of independent leadership, and its emergence as 'the alternative leading national centre for the industrial movement of the British workers', indicates the strength of Comintern pressure on major issues.[2] But this authority could be exerted on comparatively minor matters. When the General Council prohibited trades councils affiliated to the M.M. from attending official conferences in 1927, the M.M. ordered affiliated councils to obey the General Council's edict and disaffiliate themselves. As Pollit explained, 'If we had advised these trades councils affiliated to us to retain their affiliation . . . it would have meant that the fighting element inside the trades councils best fitted to carry on the struggle against the General Council would have been excluded from the National Conference . . .'[3] When the impending National Conference failed to repudiate the General Council circular, Moscow drafted a stiff protest against the original decision. 'All attempts at expulsion . . . must be resisted to the very last, and there must be no political capitulation to

[1] William Allan, 'The Party and the Minority Movement', *The Communist Review*, vol. 4, no. 10 (October 1932), 473.

[2] M. McCarthy, *Generation in Revolt* (Heinemann, 1953), 169; *On Strike—A Word to All Workers in Dispute*, 6.

[3] Pollit to M.M. Executive Committee, 4 April 1927.

avoid the struggle. It must be recognized that the Minority Movement made a serious mistake when it advised the 22 affiliated councils to withdraw on the instructions of the General Council.'[1] A few months later the Movement publicly confessed its mistake: 'It has become increasingly clear that we made a grave mistake last year in recommending the trades councils to withdraw their affiliation to the Minority Movement.'[2]

Democratic centralism was reinforced by financial dependence upon the Communist Party and the R.I.L.U. Although orthodox union leaders like J. H. Thomas were unjustified in depicting the Movement's leaders as the well paid 'servants' of a foreign power, the Movement was forced to rely upon 'Moscow Gold', for its income from individual subscriptions and affiliation fees was negligible.[3] Unfortunately it is impossible to say how much money the Movement received from the Soviet Union. According to one estimate, 'expenditure in the first three or four years would be £70,000 a year, not 5 per cent of which came from affiliation fees or membership payments'. Even allowing for inflation this is probably an over-estimate—the Communist Party itself only received £15,000 in 1924.[4] A more likely figure is between £6–10,000, estimated from the known salaries of the leading officials (£4. 0*s*. 0*d*. per week for Pollitt, £3. 10*s*. 0*d*. per week for speakers, and £3. 0*s*. 0*d*. per week for organizers) and the likely expenditure on running costs.[5] Despite this aid, the Movement was continually beset by financial stringency; frequent public appeals were launched, and its officials were hardly over-paid.

With a carefully constructed programme and an effective organization the Minority Movement was well prepared to play its role in accelerating the Communist revolution. But programmes and formal structures are only passive instruments, as effective as the men who wield them. Ultimately, success depended upon the quality, energy, and intelligence of the Movement's leadership. Fortunately the Movement

[1] *Report of the Fourth R.I.L.U. Congress 1928*, 101.
[2] *Report of the Fifth Annual Conference of the N.M.M., 1928*, 17.
[3] *T.U.C. Report 1927*, 328.
[4] Private Information; *Parliamentary Papers 1926*, xxiii (H.M.S.O. 1926), 665–6.
[5] Ibid., 662.

possessed leaders of the requisite calibre. In the 1920s the prestige of the Russian Revolution had not yet been tarnished by the Stalinist purges, and the Comintern still represented more than a passive tool of Russian foreign policy. The bureaucratic bullies like William Rust who were to gain control of the Party during 1929–31 were not yet in command, and conformity had not finally replaced revolutionary ardour in the Communist calendar of virtues. Syndicalists like Tanner and individualists like J. T. Murphy and Arthur Horner could still play a central role in Party activity. Lower down, the Party offered a refuge to the alienated and the isolated. Margaret McCarthy movingly recounts—in tones familiar to readers of Doris Lessing—her feelings on joining a Communist group in Lancashire:

> The matter that most blinded me to our true isolation and ineffectiveness was the fact that I myself was no longer isolated, a lonely, unhappy individual, but instead had become submerged in a body, a group . . . Before, I had been a completely futile, purposeless, untrained and useless young factory girl, unimportant to anyone in the world except my mother. Suddenly I had become a personage, a very insignificant one certainly, but still someone. More than that I had become a symbol! I was a young worker![1]

By far the most important member of the Minority Movement was its General Secretary until 1929, Harry Pollitt. Although only a comparatively young man—he was thirty-four in 1924—he was a good organizer, an experienced trade unionist, and a likeable personality; had he not been a Communist, he might, as he claimed in 1928, have got onto the General Council.[2] Like most leading members of the Movement he belonged to the working class aristocracy, having served his time as a boilermaker. Although he had been a member of the British Socialist Party, and later of Sylvia Pankhurst's Workers' Socialist Federation, he was

[1] McCarthy, 93.

[2] H. Pollitt, *Pollitt's Reply to Citrine* (N.M.M., 1928), 4. Even Walter Citrine admitted that Pollitt was an 'inherently decent fellow' (Lord Citrine, *Men and Work* (Hutchinsons, 1964), 257). A biography of Pollitt would be extremely valuable.

primarily interested in trade union affairs until he joined the Communist Party in 1920.[1] In 1919 he was an organizer for the 'Hands Off Russia' Committee, and in 1921 he was invited to become London organizer for the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. Thereafter he became increasingly involved in Communist Party activities, primarily on the trade union side but also occasionally on more directly political matters—he was a member of the Party Commission which reported on the 'Bolshevization' of the Party in 1922. He was promoted to the Party Political Bureau in 1923. On his removal from the Secretaryship of the M.M. in 1929 he became a member of the Party Secretariat, largely through the influence of his friend Rajani Palme Dutt.[2] Pollitt and Dutt maintained their dominant role in the Party until the former's death in 1959, surviving even his support for Britain's entry into the war in September 1939.

Tom Mann was a more prominent but less important member of the Secretariat; he was selected as President because of his widespread popularity throughout the trade union movement and his considerable gift for publicity. The son of a Warwickshire colliery clerk, he had already had a brilliantly chequered career. He had been a Socialist propagandist in the 1880s, a leader in the 1889 Dock Strike, President of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers' Union from 1889–92, General Secretary of the Independent Labour Party 1893–5, an international Socialist missionary, a syndicalist propagandist, Secretary of the A.S.E. from 1919–21, and President of the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. His exertions, and frequent imprisonment, never impaired his sense of humour, his powerful emotional oratory, or his exuberant energy. But by the 1920s he had lost whatever ability he may ever have had for detailed administration, committee work, and political in-fighting. Although he acted as chairman at all the main conferences organized by the M.M. he played little part in day to day

[1] In his autobiography he commented: 'I am afraid I was looked upon more as a militant trade unionist than as a Communist. There was a great deal of truth in this. All my activity had necessarily been in the workshops and trade unions, and naturally had influenced my outlook and way of looking at things.' (H. Pollitt, *Serving My Time* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1940), 126.

[2] See below, p. 123.

administration and only a minor role in formulating detailed policies.[1]

The third major figure in the Secretariat was J. T. Murphy, recognized by the Comintern as the soundest English 'theoretical' writer in the early 1920s, particularly on trade union matters. The son of an Irish immigrant father and a Baptist mother he grew up in a small village near Sheffield as a Primitive Methodist; he originally intended to go into the Civil Service, but this proved impossible once his father had lost his job as a blacksmith's striker.[2] Under the influence of adult life and Spencer's *First Principles* he lost his faith, and became a syndicalist. A member of the A.S.E., he was struck by the wastefulness of inter-union rivalry on the shop floor, and played a prominent part in the Amalgamation Committee Movement in Sheffield; in 1916 he led the Sheffield Committee into the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement.[3] As mainspring of the Sheffield Workers' Committee and author of the movement's most popular pamphlet he became the leading English Shop Steward. In 1916 he joined the Socialist Labour Party, and in 1918 lost his deposit when he stood for Parliament for the Gorton constituency of Manchester. In 1920 the Shop Stewards elected him as a delegate to the Second Congress of the Communist International. Like many other left wing Socialists he was overwhelmed by the achievements and prestige of the Russian revolutionary leaders, particularly Lenin, and stayed on in Moscow as a member of the Provisional International Committee of Trade and Industrial Unions, returning to England in December 1920 with money to found a British Bureau.[4] From 1922 until his expulsion from the Party in 1932 he was a member of the Central Committee, and when

[1] H. A. Clegg, A. Fox and A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889, vol. 1, 1889–1910* (O.U.P., 1964), 58; Dona Torr, *Tom Mann and His Times, vol. 1, 1856–90* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1956).

[2] J. T. Murphy, *New Horizons, passim.*

[3] B. Pribicevic, *The Shop Stewards' Movement*, 86.

[4] See above. He commented on Moscow's impact in his autobiography: 'My own experiences in the two Communist Congresses in Moscow had so interested me in the wider fields of political activity that I could no longer confine myself to work in the trade unions. Now that I had new ideas as to the role of a political party, they became almost an obsession with me' (p. 181).

not in Moscow editor of *The Communist Review* as well as an active member of the Party's Industrial Department. Although not a public official of the National Minority Movement, he was a member of its Executive Bureau, where his standing with the Comintern lent particular weight to his views.

In addition to the national leadership the Movement's headquarters staff included the full time organizing secretaries of the Mining, Transport, and Metal Workers' M.M.s, Nat Watkins, George Hardy, and Wal Hannington. Watkins was a South Wales miner, whose early political experience was gained in the Unofficial Reform Committee Movement. In 1920 he went to Moscow, and at the end of the year became a member of the Provisional Committee of Industrial and Trade Unions, responsible for organizing the R.I.L.U. In 1921 he returned to England, and was appointed Secretary of the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. In 1923 he was put in charge of organizing the Miners' M.M., which he continued to do until his apparent disappearance from Communist history in 1929. According to J. T. Murphy he was 'a fellow of sterling character, warm-hearted, and a good comrade to work with'.[1] George Hardy was a merchant seaman, who had spent most of his life abroad. A former member of the I.W.W. he was appointed secretary of the Transport Workers' M.M. in 1924 because of his contacts in the merchant shipping industry. However, he appears to have been a rather blustery character, who never succeeded in getting the Transport Workers' M.M. off the ground. His autobiography, *Those Stormy Years*, is even less informative than most Communist autobiographies (which read like ghost-written sporting autobiographies), and says little about his work for the Minority Movement.[2] The Secretary of the Metal Workers M.M., Wal Hannington, is better known for his work in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. He was a toolmaker from North London who had been an active shop steward and member of the British Socialist Party during the First World War, joining the Communist Party on its foundation in 1920. He

[1] J. T. Murphy, *New Horizons*, 169.
[2] G. Hardy, *Those Stormy Years* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1956).

was mainly responsible for the formation of the London District Committee of the Unemployed in late 1920, and was the dominant figure in the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement. As he wrote in his autobiography in 1936, from 1920 'to the present my political life and activity have centred around the economic problem of unemployment'.[1] He was appointed national organizer of the M.W.M.M. in 1924 mainly because he was a trusted Party member with wide influence among London engineering workers, and could combine work for the unemployed with building up the M.M. Despite spending most of the inter-war years as a political agitator he retained his union membership, and in 1942 he was elected a national organizer of the A.E.U. For the remainder of his active life he was a minor official in the union's North London office. Although he was a member of the Party Secretariat Hannington was more than an organization man. As one of his friends commented, 'he was a true Cockney with the common touch that made him one of the best Party propagandists', with a mind of his own. The N.U.W.C.M. deviated from the Party line in 1930–31, and in 1931 Hannington made his sympathy for Horner clear in the Party discussion over Horner's expulsion. The same friend tells the story of how 'on one occasion, at a Party Congress, an attempt was made to remove him from the Party Central Committee by the simple expedient of not including his name on the panel of recommended candidates. Hannington challenged the existing leadership to "go out and do some work among the masses" —and was re-elected despite their opposition'.[2]

The Secretariat provided the main thrust for the Minority Movement's activities. But their energies would have been wasted without the work of younger men who remained active within their unions—men like Arthur Horner in the Miners' Federation, W. C. Loeber in the N.U.R., and Jack Tanner in the A.E.U. These men provided the contacts, distributed the propaganda, and mobilized support for the Movement's proposals. Without their expert help and advice

[1] W. Hannington, *Unemployed Struggles 1919–36* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1936), I, 11.

[2] The late Mr. George Renshaw to the writer, 1963.

the Minority Movement would have been little more than an enlarged Party Industrial Department, suffering from the same 'isolation from the masses'.

Arthur Horner's career epitomized the development of Welsh radicalism between 1890 and 1930; he moved from the Baptist Church to the Communist Party via the Independent Labour Party and the Unofficial Reform Committee Movement. He was born the son of a railway supervisor in Merthyr Tydfil in 1894, and educated at local elementary schools and a Baptist College in Birmingham. However, he left the Baptist College following a disturbance at one of Horatio Bottomley's meetings, and returned to South Wales. In addition to his work and union activities he became Secretary of the local Unofficial Reform Committee, as well as being a prominent Baptist laypreacher. Opposition to the war led to unpopularity with the coal owners, and ultimately dismissal and blacklisting, and to a slackening of interest in the Baptist Church. In 1919 he was elected checkweighman at Mardy, and began his career as a union official. The following year he joined the Communist Party, and three years later was co-opted onto the Political Bureau. The same year he played a leading role in launching the Miners' M.M. in South Wales, alongside Arthur Cook, Noah Ablett, and S. O. Davies. After a chequered career in the Party and the Minority Movement in the 1920s he moved on to high union office, becoming President of the S.W.M.F. in 1936, and General Secretary of the N.U.M. in 1946, an office he held until retirement in 1959. Although he leaned towards syndicalism—'my political philosophy has always been based on the power of the organized workers at the point of production'—and proved unamenable to Party discipline, he was one of the most valuable members of the Minority Movement. He combined energy, ability, and realism with an obvious loyalty to the Miners' cause.[1]

Jack Tanner went on to become President of his union, the A.E.U.; but, unlike Horner, he repudiated his left wing past and by the late 1940s was a leading anti-Communist. Tanner joined the union in 1912, and was a prominent member of the A.S.E. London Reform Committee and of

[1] A. Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel* (Macgibbon & Kee, 1960), esp. 44.

the Engineering and Shipbuilding Amalgamation Committee. Although he had been a member of the Social Democratic Federation he became a syndicalist in 1912, and was chairman of the First International Syndicalist Congress held in London in 1913. After a brief period working as an engineer in France in 1915–17 he returned to work in London and soon became chairman of the West London Workers' Committee.[1] From 1919–21 he was editor of *Solidarity*, one of the two official journals of the S.S. & W.C.M. He attended the Second Congress of the Comintern, playing an important role in the negotiations leading up to the formation of the R.I.L.U. in 1920–21; unlike J. T. Murphy he was not over-awed by the occasion and Lenin, and openly crossed swords with him on the need for a Communist Party in Britain. He maintained that the Shop Stewards were the 'revolutionary minority of the proletariat' and that the dictatorship of the proletariat was not synonymous with the dictatorship of the C.P.[2] Despite his syndicalist doubts about the role of the Communist Party he was a member of the Executive Bureaux of the N.M.M. and of the M.W.M.M., representing the Movement at numerous international gatherings throughout the 1920s. He contested a number of A.E.U. elections on the M.M. platform, progressing from the London District Committee to the Presidency, for which he first stood in 1928. He first became a full time union official in 1931, when he was elected Organizing Delegate for one of the London districts; he became a member of the Executive Council in 1935, and President in 1939. Although Tanner was the most prominent M.M. member in the A.E.U., his power was advisory rather than executive; ultimate authority lay with the C.P., which he refused to join.

W. C. Loeber, the mainspring of the M.M. on the railways, was a carriage cleaner from Hornsey. He joined the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants in 1912, and by 1924 he was chairman of the important Wood Green and Hornsey branch of the N.U.R. He was a member of the London District Council (Carriage and Wagon Grades), a

[1] A.E.U., 'Election of President 1929: list of candidates with Addresses', 1929.
[2] See above, pp. 8–10.

frequent delegate to the N.U.R. Annual General Meeting, and an N.U.R. delegate to the T.U.C. in 1926, 1927, and 1928. In 1933 he ran against J. Marchbanks for the union's General Secretaryship, but received only 7,025 votes against Marchbank's 82,283—although even this was a creditable performance for a low status rank and file member running against the Head Office candidate. (The grade of candidates is entered on the ballot paper in the N.U.R., and grade loyalty frequently determined the vote where the candidate was not known personally.) Like his close friend Harry Pollitt he was a member of the C.P., and of its Industrial Committee, but unlike Pollitt he refused to be drawn into full time Party work. Although sceptical of 'class against class' he remained a member of the Party until 1940, when he resigned over a non-industrial issue. He was a member of the N.U.R. Executive from 1938–40, and of the Finance Committee from 1941 until his resignation in 1956 on reaching the age of 65. An energetic, capable, and devoted trade unionist he saw the Minority Movement as the only way to prevent a decline in working class conditions, and the Communist Party as the only way to bring Socialism nearer.[1]

As in most trade union organizations, the core of full time officials working at Head Office dominated the Movement. Power and prestige gravitated to the centre. Tension between the centre and the provinces was never far below the surface. Leninist ideology, sparse and scattered resources, and individual political ambitions, strengthened the position of King Street as the centre of the Communist world, and its near neighbour Gt. Ormond Street as the centre of the M.M. world. As Arthur Horner complained in 1929: 'We are faced at headquarters with a conception among the leaders that work in the districts is a degradation if you have once occupied a position in the Central Committee. That is something we are having to contest. We believe that this has had the effect of completely isolating some of our leadership.' (The District Office was obviously regarded as the British

[1] *The Railway Vigilant*, September 1932, January 1934; P. S. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen* (Allen & Unwin, 1963), 540–1; interview with Mr. W. C. Loeber. For 'Class against Class' see below, Chapter VI.

Party's equivalent to the power station in the Urals.) 'Bureaucratic degeneration' was apparent even at district level. The Glasgow District Office was 'bureaucratic, chaotic, and irresponsible'; the organization was held together by 'the untiring, loyal, self-sacrificing devotion of the members who worked at innumerable unpleasant, exhausting, and time devouring jobs, submitting to the petty bullying and domination of the Party bosses, whose inefficiency and muddling they resented but concealed, maintaining the leadership through a real, if grumbling, sense of duty to the Party'.[1]

Harry Pollitt was thus the lynch-pin of the Movement, with Nat Watkins and Wal Hannington as his most consistent and active aides; they formulated the Movement's strategy within the broad lines laid down by the R.I.L.U., and supervized day-to-day operations. They relied for advice about local conditions upon a number of able younger men, like Arthur Horner, Jack Tanner, and W. C. Leober, who remained primarily concerned with their own unions. Although prominent supporters like Arthur Cook, Alex Gossip (President of N.A.F.T.A.), and Sam Elsbury were important in winning union support, they played only a marginal role in the internal development of the Movement.[2]

To the Comintern leadership in 1924 the British Party was—for a brief period—a model Party. The united front, as operated in the trade unions through the Minority Movement, seemed more likely to pay dividends in the long run than the precipitant 'putschism' which led the K.P.D. to disaster in 1921. Zinoviev contrasted the German Party, which was 'passing through an acute crisis of leadership and [had been] losing influence among the masses', with the British Party, 'advancing, leading the masses behind it, and rising on the crest of the wave'.[3] Both the Labour Party and the trade unions seemed to offer a favourable opening. Unlike the rigid Socialist parties of Germany and France, the Labour Party was a Federation of Workers' Organizations,

[1] *Inprecorr*, 1929, 1016; McCarthy, 159.

[2] For Gossip see Stanley Harrison, *Alex Gossip* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1962); for Elsbury see below, p. 137.

[3] Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, iii, 330.

and therefore open to Communist applications for affiliation. The Labour Government's recognition of the Soviet Union and willingness to negotiate a commercial treaty seemed to justify this optimism. It was soon to be destroyed. The Labour Party's annual conference later that year once more rejected the C.P.'s application for affiliation, and even refused Communists the right to become individual members of the party. Ramsay Macdonald was only a bourgeois tool after all. But Communist hopes were not to be completely disappointed, for the trade union movement did not share the intensity of the Labour Party's hostility towards the Communists. Partly because of a genuine reluctance to apply political tests for union membership, paralleling an earlier reluctance to apply religious tests, and partly because Communist policies in the international and industrial field were often merely an extension of their own, many important trade union leaders were prepared to countenance Communist overtures. And even anti-Communist Socialist trade unionists tended to regard the M.M.'s role as essentially industrial. They were prepared to accept the Minority Movements repeated disingenuous declarations that it was a non-political organization, and were slow to realize that the Movement was making political capital for the Communist Party by agitating for a militant industrial policy.

In short, the new Movement was well equipped for its task. It appealed to the heterogeneous trade union left wing, from 'centrists' simply concerned with higher wages to syndicalists interested in transforming the trade unions into instruments for the overthrow of capitalism. Its organization combined effective centralization with adequate information channels from the rank and file to the centre. Its leaders were dedicated, experienced, and with extensive trade union contacts. The Movement required only a modicum of good fortune to begin the long haul towards the Socialist Commonwealth. With the whole trade union movement eager to recoup the losses of 1921–3, and with labour sympathy for the Soviet Union re-awakened by the current negotiations for an Anglo-Russian Trade Treaty, the Movement offered a real chance for the Communist Party to 'get the masses moving'.

III

INITIAL SUCCESS: 1924–6

THE years 1923 and 1924 were years of partial recovery from the slump of 1921–2. Exports rose from £719 m. in 1922 to £767 m. in 1923 and £801 m. in 1924; unemployment declined from 14·1 per cent in 1921 to 11·5 per cent in 1923 and 9·7 per cent in 1924.[1] Even major casualties of the depression, like coal mining and engineering, witnessed a revival. Employment in the coal mining industry rose from 1,175,280 in 1922 to 1,246,135 in 1924, whilst the level of unemployment dropped from 4·6 per cent in December 1922 to 2·1 per cent in March 1923, mainly because of a rise in exports following the closure of the Ruhr mines by French occupation in 1923. Although unemployment remained high in the engineering industry it declined from a peak of 27·9 per cent in December 1921 to 14·3 per cent in December 1924.[2] Economic recovery led the trade union movement to attempt to recoup the losses of 1921–2. In the spring of 1924 the Miners successfully sought a revision of the 1921 agreement, whilst the following winter the Railwaymen, the Engineers, the Shipbuilders, the Postal Workers, and the Dockers all submitted wage claims.[3]

Simultaneously, working class enthusiasm for the Soviet Union reached a new height with the Labour Government's negotiations for an Anglo-Russian trade treaty, and the highly successful T.U.C. visit to Russia in the winter of 1924. The Labour Government granted the Soviet Union diplomatic recognition immediately on assuming office, and, after considerable delay and in the face of violent Conservative and Liberal opposition, signed a commercial treaty granting Russia most favoured nation status, and guaranteed a loan to the Soviet Union. Although there was little

[1] *Statistical Abstract of the United Kingdom* (H.M.S.O., 1927), 129; A. J. Youngson, 269.

[2] *Eighteenth Abstract of Labour Statistics* (H.M.S.O., 1927), 56, 62–3.

[3] For the Miners, Engineers, and Railwaymen see below, 58–61.

enthusiasm for the Bolsheviks on the Labour front bench, back bench pressure and rank and file opinion forced the measure through.[1] Pro-Russian sentiment was manifest at the 1924 T.U.C., where the Russians were welcomed as allies in the class struggle and their invitation to send a delegation to the Soviet Union was accepted enthusiastically. A top-level delegation, consisting of A. A. Purcell, Herbert Smith, Ben Tillett, John Turner, A. A. H. Finley, and Fred Bramley, was favourably impressed by the Soviet experiment, and concluded a strongly pro-Soviet report with the judgement that 'not only is [the Soviet Government] in every way better than anything that Russia had ever yet had, but that it has done and is doing work in which other older State systems have failed and are still failing . . .'.[2]

The trade revival, the resurgence of pro-Soviet sentiment, and the absence of right wing union leaders like J. H. Thomas, Harry Gosling, and Margaret Bondfield in the Labour Government all helped to thrust left wingers like Alonzo Swales, A. A. Purcell, and George Hicks into the centre of the General Council stage.[3] All three believed in the need to transform the trade union movement into 'an instrument of solidarity capable of changing the existing structure of capitalism and bringing into being a Workers' State', were committed to bringing the Russians into a united trade union international, and were sympathetic to the Minority Movement.[4] Their influence reflected and reinforced a leftward trend.

The M.M. encouraged and profited from this trend, slowly building up support, securing affiliations and enrolling individual members. It achieved substantial success. The number of organizations represented at the Movement's Annual Conference rose from 271 in 1924 to 443 in August 1925, reaching a peak in March 1926, when the 547 organizations represented included five—admittedly marginal—National Executives (N.A.F.T.A., the Fife Miners

[1] For a brief account of the negotiations see Mowat, 181–3; for a fuller account see R. W. Lyman, *The First Labour Government 1924* (Chapman and Hall, 1957), 184–209.

[2] *Russia: The Official Report of the British Trade Union Delegation, 1924*, 171.

[3] Cf. Bullock, 261.

[4] Purcell's Presidential address to the 1924 T.U.C. (*T.U.C. Report 1924*, 73).

Reform Union, the National Union of Packing Case Makers, the French Polishers Union, and the National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement) and nine District Committees. The number of trade unionists represented rose, according to the Movement's own figures, from 200,000 in 1924 to 957,000 in March 1926.[1] However, these figures are probably grossly exaggerated. The same trade unionist was counted three times if his branch, district committee, and national executive all sent delegates, trades councils were held to represent the total membership of affiliated unions, despite their lack of authority, and it was generally admitted that 'in many cases it was only a small minority of the militants in a given locality that attended the local conferences which decided to send delegates to the national congress'.[2] Despite these reservations, the growth of support was impressive.

This support was unevenly distributed. As the heir to the Unofficial Reform Committee Movement, the Shop Stewards Movement, and the Railway Vigilance Committees, the Movement was strongest in the coal mining, engineering, and—to a considerably smaller degree—transport industries. The Miners' Federation provided the largest body of support; by August 1925 over 200 M.M. groups had been formed, and 16 lodges had actually affiliated.[3] Despite the distance and expense involved the Miners always sent a substantial delegation to M.M. conferences. The second largest group was in the engineering industry, which sent 126 delegates to the M.M. Annual Conference in 1925, 153 in March 1926, and 143 in August 1926. The transport workers section, which covered both the N.U.R. and the T. & G.W.U., was the third largest section, sending 76 delegates in 1925, 126 in March 1926, and 96 in August 1926.[4] Apart from substantial membership in smaller

[1] *Report of National Minority Conference, 1924,* 3; Ibid., *1925,* 31; Ibid., *March 1926,* 34.

[2] Private information; T. Bell, *British Communist Party: A Short History* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1937), 100.

[3] Final Agenda of the Second Annual Conference of the National Minority Movement, 1925, 14.

[4] Report of the National Minority Conference, 1925, 31; Ibid., *March 1926,* 34; Ibid., *August 1926,* 73.

unions like N.A.F.T.A. and the Tailors' and Garment Workers' Union—largely reflecting Communist strength amongst the Jewish community in East London—the Movement's support elsewhere seems to have been sparse.

The geographical distribution of M.M. support reflected this industrial spread. The Movement was strongest in London, where full time Party officials provided a constant stimulus, where Party strength amongst minority nationality groups in the East End provided a nucleus of support, and where individual energy combined with particular industrial circumstances to produce extensive support in the Engineering, Railway, Dock and Bus industries.[1] Outside London the Movement was strongest on the Celtic fringe, reflecting the radical traditions and current problems of the South Wales coal mining industry, the Scottish Miners, and the Clydeside engineers. In England, the Movement gained most support amongst the Durham miners, although important Miners M.M. groups existed in Lancashire, Yorkshire and the Forest of Dean.[2] Amongst engineers the Movement was strongest in London, Glasgow, and Sheffield, the old Shop Stewards' Movement centres; elsewhere support was limited.[3] A report on the situation in the engineering industry prepared at the end of 1926 noted that there were no groups in Bradford or Birmingham and only a small group in Coventry; in Bedford 'the whole trade union movement seems to be inanimate'.[4]

This support was effectively mobilized to push the trade unions towards a left wing policy. The most spectacular 'forward movement' was in the Miners' Federation, where the M.M. candidate A. J. Cook was elected General Secretary, the M.M. clearly influenced wage negotiations, and the propaganda for united 'class' action produced concrete

[1] The Movement's inaugural conference was transferred from Sheffield to London because of 'the greater concentration of forces' there (*International Metal Workers' Bulletin*, vol. 1, no. 3 (June 1924), 2).

[2] Over 30 lodges of Durham Miners' Association were reputed to favour the M.M. policy in 1927 (*The Worker*, 11 March 1927); for Lancashire see *The Worker*, 27 May 1927, 6 June 1928; for Yorkshire see *The Workers' Weekly*, 2 January 1926.

[3] Over 50 union branches, including 30 A.E.U. branches, sent delegates to a conference of the Movement organised for London engineers in April 1925. (Report of the London M.W.M.M. Conference, 5 April 1925.)

[4] Report on the M.M. Position in the Districts (November 1926).

results.[1] The full programme of the Miners' M.M. including even the affiliation of the T.U.C. to the R.I.L.U. was endorsed by the South Wales Miners' Federation, the largest district in the Federation.[2]

The Movement's influence on wage negotiations in 1924 was clear. With the trade revival in 1924 the Miners opened negotiations for a new wages structure, incorporating full allowances for increases in the cost of living since 1914 plus the Sankey Commission's 2*s*. When the owners rejected the demand, instead offering to increase the minimum percentage on the standard wage from 20 to $33\frac{1}{3}$ per cent the Miners' Executive recommended acceptance, the Miners' M.M. recommended rejection. Although the Executive recommendation was endorsed, South Wales, Scotland, and Lancashire all voted as the M.M. recommended.[3] The M.M.'s agitation for the revival of the ill-fated Triple Alliance also bore fruit, securing acceptance in principle by the M.F.G.B. Annual Conference in 1924. In March 1925 the Miners invited the T. and G.W.U., the railway unions and the unions in the Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Unions to a conference to discuss united action. The conference appointed a committee to investigate the question, and a further conference of the Executives concerned agreed to establish the Industrial Alliance. To prevent a repetition of the earlier disaster of 'Black Friday', when the Miners felt they had been betrayed by the railwaymen, individual members were to secure the agreement of the full alliance before calling a national stoppage. As it happened, the alliance was overtaken by the events which culminated in the General Strike, and lapsed after 12 May.[4]

Although the M.M. made greatest progress in the Miners' Federation, less spectacular but significant successes were achieved in other unions, particularly the A.E.U. and the N.U.R. In April 1924, before the foundation of the M.M., the A.E.U. presented a claim for £1 per week

[1] For Cook's election see above, p. 34.

[2] See above, p. 32.

[3] *Proceedings of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, 1924*, passim; *Final Agenda of the Second Annual Conference of the M.M., 1925*, 12–15; R. P. Arnot, *The Miners': Years of Struggle*, 343–8.

[4] *Final Agenda . . . 1925*, 6, 38–9; Bullock, 270–2.

increase, arguing that this was necessary to restore the real wage levels of 1914. The Engineering and Allied Employers' National Federation (E. & A.E.N.F.) initially prevaricated, claiming that it needed to consult the local federations, and then rejected the demand. Simultaneously, the M.M. incorporated it into its programme for the engineering industry. Negotiations between the E. & A.E.N.F. and the A.E.U. dragged on for several years, the employers offering unacceptable compromises in March 1925 and April 1926.[1] According to the M.M. the A.E.U. Executive was not pursuing the claim energetically enough, resting content with a policy of 'dilly, dally and slop'.[2] Consequently, in June 1925 the Movement urged a district go-slow in its area of greatest strength, London, but without success.[3] More seriously, in March 1926 the Movement attempted to transform an unofficial dispute at the Hoe and Company Printing Works, London, into a national engineering stoppage. The dispute arose when the Hoe management attempted to quell long-standing discontent by replacing trade unionists with non-union members in January 1926, sparking off a stay-in strike. The management thereupon locked out 900 men, referring the dispute to the E. & A.E.N.F. The national federation threatened a national lockout unless the men returned by 15 March.[4] The M.M.'s view was that the A.E.U. should secure the support of other unions in the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions and accept the challenge—'we are prepared to accept the challenge now rather than at a later date'.[5] The executive disagreed, urging a return to work, and prevailed over a strong pro-strike minority at a special meeting of the A.E.U. National Committee early in March. When the National Committee accepted the Executive recom-

[1] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, June 1924, 9–11; July 1924, 7–8; August 1924, 12; March 1925, 13–19; May 1926, 9–17; May 1927, 8–10; June 1927, 7–9; August 1927, 8.

[2] *The Worker*, 30 January 1926, 'The attitude of the executives during the four years negotiations has been, to say the least of it, disgraceful throughout' (*Report of the Fourth Annual Conference of the National Minority Movement*, 42).

[3] Minutes of the London District Committee of the M.W.M.M., 18 June 1925.

[4] J. B. Jeffreys, *The Story of the Engineers: 1800–1945* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1945), 231–2; A.E.U. *Monthly Journal*, April 1926, 9–13.

[5] Resolution before the National Committee Meeting, 13 and 14 March 1926.

mendation Pollitt recognized that a national strike was out of the question, and urged a return to work; 'the weakness and lack of preparation of the leadership of the engineering unions would have meant defeat for the workers if the national lock-out had materialized, thus finishing completely the £1 per week wage application.'[1] Jack Tanner was among the union leaders who urged this view at a meeting of the strikers in the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, on 17 March. After an initial delay the strikers returned to work just before the lock-out was due to begin. As it turned out, the £1 per week claim was finished in any case.

The Movement was less successful in the N.U.R. than in the Miners' Federation or the A.E.U. There was no substantial left wing tradition to provide a radical base, for the Vigilance Committees of the First World War had been emasculated by official recognition,[2] and the economic problems of the railways were more tractable than those of the coal mining or engineering industry. The level of unemployment was comparatively low—in December 1925 it was only 6·4 per cent compared with 11·3 per cent in coal mining—whilst wages were relatively higher than before the First World War.[3] Despite these difficulties the M.M. mounted an energetic campaign for better pay and conditions, including a minimum wage of £3. 10*s*. 0*d*. per week, a 42-hour week, two weeks paid holiday a year, and the lowering of the age for the adult rate from 21 to 18.[4] This pressure combined with that of uncommitted left wingers like A. E. Rochester, the leader of the abortive breakaway Union of Railway Signalmen in 1924, to persuade the N.U.R. Executive to formulate an 'All-Grades' programme. The programme incorporated many demands sponsored by the M.M., although few M.M. supporters were elected to the 'All-Grades' district Committees responsible for its formulation.[5]

Although work within individual unions was indispensable, individual union conditions narrowly circumscribed

[1] *Report of the Eighth Congress of the C.P.G.B., October 1926*, 41.
[2] Bagwell, 353 *seq.*
[3] *Ministry of Labour Gazette*, June 1926, 219; January 1926, 23.
[4] *Report of the Third Annual Conference of the National Minority Movement, 1926*, 42.
[5] *Orders from Moscow?*, 22.

M.M. initiative. Equally, the M.M. realized that the best place to raise international questions, especially Russian entry into the I.F.T.U., was the T.U.C. Accordingly, considerable effort was devoted to securing the election of left wing delegates to the Annual T.U.C., and to exerting pressure there. Careful organization resulted in the election of substantial Party and M.M. factions to the 1924 and 1925 Congresses. Pollitt, the London dock leader Fred Thompson, and the miners Noah Ablett, S. O. Davies, and Will Lawther were among M.M. members at the 1924 Congress; the 1925 Congress included in addition E. Joseph and Sam Elsbury from the Tailors and Garment Workers' Union, J. B. Figgins from the N.U.R., J. D. Lawrence and W. Ward from the A.E.U., A. G. Tompkins from N.A.F.T.A., and Frank Rowlands from the Operative House and Ship Painters. Members acted as a united group at the Congress. As Pollitt wrote, they aimed to build up 'a really effective challenging voice inside the Congress' 'by paying close attention to the business of the Congress, by refusing to take part in the side-shows arranged by Lord Mayors, etc., by gleaning information from other delegates, by telling other delegates that there is a little group in the Congress who are working together, and inviting them to participate in the work . . . by generally working like a team anxious to leave a definite stamp on the Congress . . .'.[1] The Party thoughtfully provided comprehensive 'Speakers' Notes' for M.M. members. Such intensive work paid dividends, as events at the 1924 and 1925 Congresses clearly demonstrated.

The Movement's main concern at the T.U.C. was to urge the General Council to use British influence to persuade the Amsterdam International to work together with the R.I.L.U., or at least to come to an understanding with the Russians. Their efforts were successful, and for a brief period the General Council strove to secure Russian affiliation to the I.F.T.U. At the Third Congress of the I.F.T.U. in Vienna in 1924 continental delegates, hostile to the R.I.L.U.'s attempt to split national trade union organizations and offended by the bitter tone of Russian attacks on

[1] H. Pollitt, 'Lessons of the Plymouth Conference', *The Communist Review*, vol. 4, no. 6 (October 1923), 264.

the 'yellow' International, proposed to reject outright Russian proposals for unity. However, the British delegation felt that it was absurd for the I.F.T.U. to refuse to recognize the Russian trade union movement when the British government was negotiating with the Soviet government, and persuaded the I.F.T.U. to 'continue consultations in so far as this is possible without prejudicing the dignity of the I.F.T.U. with the object of securing the inclusion of Russia in the international trade union movement through the acceptance of Federation rules and conditions'. The delegation's action was endorsed by the 1924 T.U.C., despite criticism of Russian abuse by Will Thorne and James Sexton; the majority of delegates agreed with the speaker who pledged his support 'to anyone who said "let us continue to struggle for a united front" whether he were blue, yellow, or red'.[1] The I.F.T.U. remained unconvinced; at the crucial meeting of the General Council in February 1925 a British request for 'an unconditional conference for informal discussion purposes' with the Russians was turned down. British pressure was sustained through 1926, but the I.F.T.U. never admitted the Russians.

In place of admission to the I.F.T.U., the Russians had to rest content with the formation of a bi-lateral Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Committee, set up in the spring of 1925. Tomsky, head of the All Russian Central Council of Trade Unions, had suggested to the T.U.C. delegation visiting Russia the previous winter that a joint committee should be established to promote international unity.[2] The General Council hesitated before endorsing the delegation's favourable response. The M.M. thereupon organized a national conference on international unity; 630 delegates, mainly from the London area, attended the Battersea Town Hall on 26 January to demonstrate solidarity with the Russians. Whether because of the demonstration, or because they were intending to do so in any case, the General Council endorsed the delegation's response at its February meeting. An Anglo-Russian conference met in London in April and issued what the M.M. described as 'a magnificent class war

[1] *T.U.C. Report 1924*, 246–7, 311–19; Ibid., *1925*, 294-7.
[2] Ibid., *1925*, 297–303.

declaration' expressing their joint determination to 'maintain and weld closer the friendly relations of the British and Russian trade union movements'.[1] A permanent Joint Advisory Council was set up, but only two meetings were held before the General Strike, both reaching agreement in principle but neither producing any practicable proposals.

Although affiliation to the R.I.L.U. made international questions a primary focus of interest for the M.M., they were only of peripheral interest to the majority of British trade unionists. More indicative of the strength of the 'forward movement' was the progress made towards industrial unionism, generally referred to by contemporaries as 'organization by industry'. At the 1924 Congress the Miners' Federation, under pressure from the M.M. working through the South Wales Miners' Federation, brought forward a resolution instructing the General Council to 'draw up a scheme of organization by industry; and a scheme which may secure unity of action without the definite merging of existing unions, by the scientific linking up of same to present a united front'. Despite the inevitable opposition of general unions like the National Union of General Workers the motion was accepted.[2] After lengthy discussions, the General Council presented a long, unenthusiastic report to the 1925 Congress. Drafted by the then Assistant Secretary to the T.U.C., Walter Citrine, it 'especially stressed that application of the resolution must be very cautious, and that Congress has no power to force its will upon the unions'.[3] The left was naturally irritated by Citrine's pessimism, feeling that the General Council was unwilling to make any real effort. A Communist delegate declared in 1925:

> While he was quite prepared to pay a compliment to the literary abilities of Mr. Citrine, he had to express dissatisfaction with the result . . . delegates' confusion was made worse confounded by the General Council not giving any lead whatever. He suggested that the General Council might have done something to resuscitate the enthusiasm which had been engendered in the workshops in connection with the Shop Stewards.

[1] *Report of the Seventh Congress of C.P.G.B., 1925*, 136–7; *Final Agenda of the National Minority Movement Conference 1925*, 6.

[2] *T.U.C. Report 1924*, 439.

[3] Ibid., *1925*, 226.

Arthur Horner later asked why the General Council had restricted its negotiations to union officials, instead of consulting the rank and file and creating inter-union rank and file Factory Committees, as the M.M. had proposed.[1] Discussions were still in progress when the General Strike broke out in May 1926.

The Movement also achieved considerable success in its campaign for a stronger General Council. It believed that only a strong General Council could reorganize the unions on industrial union lines, purge the Labour Party of its dominant 'middle class Liberals' and act as a 'general staff' capable of leading a militant working class to victory over the capitalists.[2] In 1922 and 1923 the demand for a stronger General Council had been opposed by left wing unions like the Miners' Federation.[3] However, by 1924 economic conditions were improving, 'Black Friday' and the collapse of the Triple Alliance in 1921 seemed a more distant memory, and left wingers were coming under the influence of the Minority Movement. Congress accepted by 3,608,000 votes to a mere 259,000 a resolution empowering the General Council to 'take steps to organize on behalf of the unions . . . all such moral and material support as the circumstances of the dispute may appear to justify' when strikes or lockouts occurred despite General Council attempts at mediation. The resolution carefully avoided the contentious issue of finance, and could mean a lot or a little. George Hicks, who originally moved the motion, suggested that it meant a lot:

> The battle on the industrial field is becoming fiercer, and we must have greater power in order to be able to deal with it. I ask you not to deny to our trade union movement, big as it is, the development and strength, the solidarity and cohesion, necessary to wage the bitter fight against capitalism.[4]

But the Communists were not satisfied, claiming that it only provided for intervention after the dispute had gone too far. In the rosy afterglow of the Miners victory over the mineowners on 'Red Friday', July 1925, they proposed that the

[1] *T.U.C. Report 1925*, 422; Ibid., *1926*, 326.
[2] *What the Minority Movement Stands For*, 19–20; *Report . . . 1925*, 25.
[3] *T.U.C. Report 1923*, 278–83.
[4] Ibid., *1924*, 347–50.

General Council should have power to levy affiliated unions and 'to call for a stoppage of work by an affiliated organization or part thereof, in order to assist unions defending a vital trade union principle'. Despite the support of the Miners' Federation the resolution was rejected, and in the midst of general confusion was referred to the General Council for further consideration. As J. H. Thomas pointed out, the General Council itself had not asked for further powers—'they are content, and rightly and wisely content, to rely upon the power they already possess'.[1] Individual unions, and particularly union executives, were extremely jealous of their independence, refusing to limit their autonomy in the cause of class unity as the Communists advocated; the left had to be satisfied with the vague and ineffective powers granted by the 1924 Congress.

The M.M'.s orderly progress, gradually building up support and exerting pressure, was disturbed and undermined by the industrial convulsions which, spreading out from the coal mining industry, culminated in the General Strike in May 1926. Although the story of the Miners' dispute and the General Strike is well known and has been told elsewhere—most successfully in W. H. Crook's *The General Strike*—a brief account is necessary to understand the M.M.'s reactions.[2] The agreement between the Miners and the owners in May 1924, revising the 1921 settlement, was out of date as soon as it was signed; exports slumped from 42 m. tons in the first half of 1924 to 35 m. tons in the first half of 1925, following the withdrawal of the French from the Ruhr and the implementation of the Dawes Plan providing for reparations in kind. By the spring of 1925 the industry was in severe difficulties, difficulties made insurmountable by the return to the Gold Standard in April 1925. The mine-owners gave notice to terminate the agreement at the end of July, proposing to abolish completely the surviving national element in the miners wage, the national minimum addition to the standard wage, but hinting that better terms might be offered if the Miners agreed to a

[1] *T.U.C. Report 1925*, 380–93, 395.

[2] W. H. Crook, *The General Strike* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1931). The following account is based upon Crook, and Mowat, 284–335.

return to the 8-hour day. The Miners naturally rejected the proposals, alleging that they would involve reductions of between 13 and 47 per cent on basic rates, and appealed to the General Council under the new standing orders providing for mutual assistance. The General Council responded to the initiative, the threat of a general strike forced the Government to intervene, and a Government subsidy enabled the mineowners to maintain existing wage levels pending the Report of a Royal Commission. The nine months proved to be only a truce, the Royal Commission on the Coal Mining Industry (the Samuel Commission) recommending reorganization and wage reductions. Accordingly, despite widespread uncertainty the General Strike broke out on 3 May, only to collapse nine days later, leaving the Miners to sustain the struggle alone until the beginning of November.

The conflict in the coal mining industry threw into prominence the Minority Movement's plea for 'united working class action'. As the M.M. said in an alarmist 'Open Letter on the Capitalist Offensive' to the General Council and union executives in February 1925:

> We realise that the workers are facing a similar situation to that which they faced in 1921, and unless speedy action is taken by the General Council to put an end to this sectionalism nothing but a similar defeat and disaster to that experienced after Black Friday faces the Movement again. We therefore call upon the General Council to immediately convene a meeting of all the unions in the industries that have made wage demands in 1924 in order to form a Committee of Action. . . . .[1]

Although the Miners' Federation had responded to a similar proposal earlier, the General Council rejected the plea and refused to advance beyond its mandate from the 1924 T.U.C.[2] Despite this rebuff, even after the victory of 'Red Friday' the Movement continued to urge the General Council and union executives to 'prepare for the coming fight'. As Tom Mann declared to the M.M.'s Annual Conference in August 1925:

> . . . we have to ask ourselves, ARE WE PREPARED TO MEET THE OPPOSING FORCES WHEN THE NEXT ROUND BEGINS? We must be frank

[1] *Final Agenda . . . 1925*, 38–9.

[2] See above, p. 65.

about it and admit that at present we are not ready. The engineers feel keenly the absence of fully disciplined forces capable of national and international action, and the miners will require a much more highly disciplined regimentation of the organized forces of the workers when the next battle begins.[1]

Propaganda continued throughout the winter, the Communist Party issuing at least 22 circulars dealing with the conflict anticipated in May 1926. A special meeting of the Party Executive on 9 and 10 January 1926 prepared an elaborate plan of campaign, which provided the basis for discussion at a Special National Conference of Action organized by the M.M. in Battersea Town Hall on 21 March.[2] The plan included the extension of the Industrial Alliance, 'with instructions given the General Council to take over the leadership of the alliance on behalf of the whole working class movement', the creation of local Councils of Action to campaign for Workshop Committees, the formation of a Workers' Defence Corps, and the preparation of plans for the carrying on of essential services in the event of a General Strike. The General Council was to call a National Congress of Action, and to draw up plans for co-operation with the Co-operative Movement, the National and Parliamentary Labour Parties, and the International Trade Union Movement.[3]

The campaign made little impact on the union leadership. The General Council was not prepared 'to make the fight a class fight', nor was it prepared to call a National Congress of Action. Except for a memorandum by Walter Citrine and inconclusive talks between the General Council's Industrial Committee, the Miners, and the Co-operative Wholesale Society, no preparations for the anticipated conflict were made on the trade union side until three days before the lock out was due to begin.[4] The Movement, with the wisdom of hindsight, later claimed that the General Council 'would have openly betrayed the workers before ever the General Strike commenced' but for the 'constant work of the Minority

[1] *Report of the Second Conference of the National Minority Movement 1925*, 3.
[2] *Report of the Eighth Congress of the C.P.G.B. 1926*, 2, 5–6.
[3] *Report of the Special National Conference of Action, 21st March 1926*, 24–5.
[4] Citrine, 145–53; Bullock, 300.

Movement members in the branches, District Committees, and Trades and Labour Councils'.[1] But there is no evidence for this negative triumph; the more influential union leaders like Bevin did not need the M.M.'s vociferous prodding to stiffen their backs against a repetition of Black Friday.

Although the M.M. made little impact on the national union leadership, its campaign for Councils of Action met with more success at local level. The trades councils were more inspired by the M.M.'s vision of their role as local co-ordinating agencies than the T.U.C.'s vision of them as passive dogsbodies, and many answered the Movement's call to organize Unity of Action Conferences and establish Local Councils of Action. Councils of Action were set up in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Barrow, Liverpool, Doncaster, Sheffield, Birmingham, and elsewhere, and 52 trades councils (including the London Trades Council) sent delegates to the March National Conference of Action.[2] In the period leading up to the General Strike the Councils were instrumental in persuading local officials of the strength of rank and file opinion; as J. R. Campbell commented, 'the average trade union official is a follower rather than a leader and will not take any steps off the beaten track unless he is convinced that there is an overwhelming weight of rank and file opinion in favour of those steps'.[3]

The Minority Movement thus played a modest but useful role in the period preceding the General Strike. What of its role during the strike itself?

The Communist Party and the Minority Movement During the General Strike

The Communist Party leadership was below strength during the General Strike, with five leading members of the Political Bureau, including Harry Pollitt, in prison.

[1] *Report of the Third Annual Conference of the National Minority Movement (1926)*, 29.

[2] Ibid.

[3] J. R. Campbell, 'The Employers Offensive and How to Meet it', *The Communist Review*, vol. 5, no. 11 (March 1925), 429. The Minutes of the Birmingham Trades Council (vol. 21) contain many illustrations of the role of the M.M. in pushing local officials forward.

Although British Communists did not usually suffer the Government repression and right wing violence of their continental comrades, especially the Germans, the police kept constant watch upon prominent Party members, and occasionally raided Party headquarters in King Street. The shadowing was normally little more than an irritating inconvenience, and one member recalled how he once invited his police shadow to sit beside him on a London bus, and they swopped jokes together.[1] In 1925, however, this cat and mouse game became more serious. King Street was raided, and all the Party Central Committee except for Andrew Rothstein were arrested and charged with conspiring 'to utter and publish seditious libels and invite diverse persons to commit breaches of the Incitement to Mutiny Act 1797'. After a largely political trial, which the defendants attempted to transform into a trial of capitalism, all twelve were sentenced to imprisonment—Inkpin, Gallacher, Pollitt, Rust, and Hannington to twelve months because of previous convictions, the remaining seven, Arthur Macmanus, Tom Bell, J. T. Murphy, J. R. Campbell, Robin Page Arnot, Tom Wintringham (assistant editor of *Workers' Weekly*), and Ernie Cant (London organizer) to six months. The arrests aroused widespread sympathy for the Party amongst all sections of the labour movement, and Ramsay Macdonald moved a resolution in the House of Commons criticizing the arrests as 'a violation of the traditional British right of freedom of speech and publication of opinion'. Little could be done, and all twelve had to serve their time. The arrests had the important consequence of badly weakening Communist leadership during the General Strike period; although the seven were released just before the strike, Gallacher, Inkpin, Rust, Pollitt and Hannington were in jail for the whole period. The former Wobbly George Hardy took over Pollitt's position as General Secretary of the M.M., but he lacked Pollitt's ability or experience.[2]

When the strike broke out an emergency Party leadership, consisting of Andrew Rothstein, Aitken Ferguson, Bob

[1] J. T. Murphy, interview with the writer, 1964.

[2] *The Communist Party on Trial*, 3 vols. (C.P.G.B. London 1925); L. J. Macfarlane, 137–9.

Stewart, Emile Burns, and George Hardy was set up in King Street; but police pressure forced it underground and limited its effectiveness. The Party established a skeleton courier system, 'but, during the short time that the General Strike lasted, the system had not the opportunity to advance very far beyond the rudimentary stage, and there is no doubt that some districts were almost entirely cut off after the first Party lead'. On 5 May the reduced Political Bureau decided to issue a new slogan—'wages for time lost'—but 'owing to temporary dislocation caused by police repression' it was not sent out until the 9th, four days later. The Minority Movement's office in Great Ormond Street was also raided by the police and badly damaged early in the strike; the staff were dispersed, and the attempt to co-ordinate M.M. activities given up. 'Owing to lack of transport we were cut off from the districts.' With much difficulty and frequent changes of address Harry Pollitt's wife, Marjorie, and Bob Stewart succeeded in publishing a 'Workers' Bulletin' throughout the strike, with an irregular distribution in the provinces. But constant police harassing prevented the Communist central leadership from exercising any real influence on the disposition of Communist forces during the strike. The Party, no less than the General Council, had failed 'to prepare for the coming struggle'; 'it became clear that we had not sufficiently mobilized the very scanty resources at our disposal'.[1]

But lack of communications did not completely prevent the Party and the Minority Movement from influencing the conduct of the Strike. Immediately the lock-out began several members of the Party Central Committee were sent into the provinces, and, as one Communist writer noted at the time, 'the moment a movement of the extent of a mass strike is launched, its effective direction passes out of the hands of a central leadership and into the hands of local strike organizations'.[2] Although Communists were singled out for arrest—about 1,000 Party members were taken into custody throughout the strike (in Castleford, for example, the only

[1] *8th Congress of the C.P.G.B.*, 6–11; *Report Third Annual Conference National Minority Movement, 1926*, 29–31.

[2] 'C.B.', *The Reds and the General Strike* (C.P.G.B., 1926), 14.

two persons arrested were both Communists)—they played an important role on local Councils of Action.[1] In Scotland, Party fractions were active on the Glasgow, Blantyre, Airdrie, Coatbridge, Irvine, Kilmarnock, Crosshouse, Motherwell, Paisley, Methill, Shotts, and Edinburgh Councils. In Sheffield, the C.P. and the M.M. set up an unofficial strike committee, which functioned alongside the Central Dispute Committee, and published a mimeographed strike bulletin. In Lancashire, there were six Communists on the Council of Action at St. Helens, two at Garston, one at Bootle, and three at Barrow in Furness. In South Wales there was a Party faction on every important Council. In London Party members were active on the Poplar, Stepney, Bethnal Green, West Ham and Battersea Councils of Action.[2]

'From a struggle against the reduction of the miners' wages the general strike grew into a gigantic political struggle . . . The little C.P. was strong enough to mobilize the workers, during the General Strike, under the slogan of irreconcilable class war.'[3] The Comintern's revolutionary claim misrepresented not only the facts of 1926, but also the British Party's attitude towards the strike. Despite the large number of Party members arrested, the Communists maintained a strictly 'constitutional' attitude throughout—there was no talk of a Revolutionary Workers' Government, as there was to be in 1929. The Central Committee's Political Report on the Strike in October 1926 was shamefaced:

The Party entered the General Strike with political and organizational slogans that were inevitably defensive in character; 'Every man behind the Miners', 'Not a Penny off the Pay, not a Second on

[1] *The Eighth Congress of the C.P.G.B.*, 13; E. Burns, *The General Strike, May 1926: Trades Councils in Action* (Labour Research Department, 1926), 110.

[2] *The Workers' Weekly*, 21 and 28 May, 1926; Nellie Connole, *Leaven of Life: The Story of George Henry Fletcher* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1961), 147–8; J. T. Murphy in his report in the *Workers' Weekly*, 21 May 1926 does not mention the rival Sheffield committee, although he does say that the Central Dispute Committee initially refused to accept Communist help, only to ask for it later. Connole's version is more likely to be true, since Murphy would have been eager to avoid any charge of splitting the trade union movement, and the later version is based on interviews with Mr. Youle and Mr. Fletcher, as well as non-Communist local newspapers.

[3] Theses of the Agit-Prop of the E.C.C.I. on 'Ten Years of the Communist International' (*Inprecorr*, 1929, 273).

the day', 'Councils of Action', etc. Once the masses were on the streets, the business of the Central Committee was to extend these slogans, at the same time making them more aggressive in character. The struggle was complicated by the fact that even before the strike began the Party had to fight against the tendencies to surrender which were already making themselves felt amongst the leaders, i.e. to stress the need of maintaining even the defensive fight unbroken.

In a manifesto on 'The Political Meaning of the General Strike', published on 5 May, the Party attached most importance to the Miners' demands; additional demands included 'Nationalization without compensation and under workers' control', the resignation of the Tory government, and the election of a Labour government 'if victory is to be clinched'. There was no sign of an independent Communist initiative; when the Political Bureau considered urging claims on behalf of workers other than the miners, it decided to act through the unions concerned 'so as to get the endorsement of the rank and file in the first place to a national campaign'.[1]

The General Strike proved to be a major turning point in the history of the Minority Movement: it was presented with its 'revolutionary opportunity' before it had had time to consolidate its position. Between August 1924 and May 1926 it had built up a considerable body of support, both in individual unions and at the T.U.C. The Miners Federation, the A.E.U., and the N.U.R. all endorsed programmes incorporating proposals put forward by the M.M., the T.U.C. voted in favour of left wing resolutions on industrial unionism and increasing the powers of the General Council, and the General Council risked some of its prestige on improving Anglo-Russian trade union relations. One Communist speaker enthusiastically told the E.C.C.I. in February-March 1926:

> . . . the biggest thing the Communist Party has done in Britain has been to inspire the creation of the Minority Movement. We are able in Britain for the first time, through the Minority Movement, actually to move the workers, not only to get contacts, not only to dig into the organization itself, but to get them moving . . . it was the Communist Party and the Minority Movement, more than anybody else or any

[1] *Eighth Congress Report*, 6–9.

other organization, who were responsible for preparing the ground which made possible and inevitable what is now known in British Labour History as 'Red Friday'.[1]

Pleased with the British efforts with the I.F.T.U. and with the prospects for an Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee, the Russians echoed this optimism. 'The whining of class collaborationist policy' seemed over.[2]

Yet it is easy to exaggerate the distance the unions travelled in 1924–6. When the unions failed to secure the wage advances demanded they were unable to do anything; neither the Miners, the A.E.U., nor the N.U.R., were able to force the issue with the employers. Furthermore, the T.U.C.'s commitment to class warfare, and even international trade union unity, was far from unconditional. The resolutions on industrial unionism and the powers of the General Council proved ineffective; the former produced much information, but no plan, whilst the latter meant all or nothing, depending upon circumstances—and the circumstances proved to be unsatisfactory. Communist sponsored resolutions requiring immediate action, like the affiliation of the N.U.W.C.M. and the trades councils to the T.U.C., were rejected outright. Robin Page Arnot and J. T. Murphy sceptically commented on the 1925 T.U.C. in the autumn of 1926:

> The Scarborough Trades Union Congress showed a ready disposition to pass resolutions of a militant nature, but showed a great disinclination to pass resolutions, or even to deal with questions, that necessitated immediate action. The more urgent and practical the question, the less was it discussed at the Scarborough Congress.[3]

They were right.

It would be equally easy to exaggerate the M.M.'s contribution to the 'forward movement'; the Movement could produce more noise than votes. Support for left wing policies extended well beyond the limits of the M.M.'s direct influence. This was clearly evident both at the T.U.C. and on

[1] *Orders from Moscow?* 25–26; Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, iii 576.

[2] *The Workers' Weekly*, 19 September, 1925.

[3] J. T. Murphy and R. Page Arnot, 'The British Trades Union Congress at Bournemouth', *The Communist International* (October 1926), 10.

the General Council. At the Annual Congress the M.M. could usually rely upon the Miners' Federation—by far the largest affiliated union, with 750,000 votes in 1924 and 800,000 in 1925 and 1926—the Tailors and Garment Workers' Union (50,000), the National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association (22,000), and usually the A.E.U. (150,000 in 1924, 250,000 in 1925 and 1926). The source of the further 900,000 votes required for a majority on any resolution varied from issue to issue, and was clearly contingent. On industrial unionism, for example, the largest union in each industry supported the M.M.'s policy in the hope of gaining new members, although many supporters were horrified at the company they were keeping. Unions like the N.U.R., the T. & G.W.U., the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers, and the Insurance Workers found themselves alongside the usual left wing unions. Similar heterogeneity was evident on the General Council, as the composition of the support for international trade union unity indicated. Anglo-Russian trade union unity was supported by union leaders as diverse as Ben Turner (Textile Workers), Ben Tillett (T. & G.W.U.), Alan Finlay (Patternmakers), Bob Smillie (Miners), A. Conley (Tailors and Garment Workers), John Bromley (A.S.L.E.F.), and Kropotkin's friend John Turner (Shop Assistants). The Minority Movement obviously could not count upon this group as 'supporters'.

Indeed, relations between the M.M. and most union leaders were already strained. Naturally, most union leaders regarded the Movement as an interfering nuisance, 'fooling with politics and sane industrial action', a functionally convenient view given ideological sanction by the Labour Party's anti-Communist policy. Many rank and file trade unionists agreed. The *A.E.U. Monthly Journal* published a fierce denunciation of the Movement in its correspondence columns in November 1924:

> . . . Will I be right in saying that the movement is composed of those who are dissatisfied with present progress, and who pay no regard to the majority rule, but rather carry on a guerrilla warfare? If that is their policy, and these are my conclusions (for when you read the abusing and insulting attacks made by these influentials of the Minority

Movement . . . one can only think so) then I say at once the sooner the sane trade unionists of this country put their foot down the better.

It is through the constant interference of these blood thirsty rebels of society that we find ourselves unorganized and divided.[1]

Even sympathetic leaders like Ben Turner had reservations about the Movement's indulgence in personal attacks:

I know many of the men and women who support the M.M. They are earnest, honest, self-sacrificing, determined, high-principled. Their very earnestness may make them at times intolerant, but I ask them when advocating the forward movement to show us more clearly what they mean, what they want to do, how to do it, and to leave personalities alone.[2]

For their part, many Communist supporters of the Movement suspected the motives of their more eminent allies. As Thomas Bell wrote in November 1924:

. . . we find the left wing in the main representative of the smaller unions, e.g. Purcell, Bromley, Hicks. In previous years such unions played a very small part. But the increased activity of the masses has made it possible for them to gain prominence and ultimately position (in the General Council) by expressing 'Left' sentiments on a number of popular subjects . . . Although they are in a minority on the General Council, the Right-wing have had to give way to them because of the popular character of their watchwords. At the same time the 'Leftists' are released from the necessity of carrying out all their promises in practice by the very fact that, in the main, they are the representatives of the smaller unions. This type of Left winger falls roughly into two sections, one of genuine Left wingers in a state of political confusion, such as Purcell, Hicks, and Cook, and the other of skilful opportunists like Williams, Bromley, and Tillett. . . .[3]

With the failure of the General Strike Bell's attitude became dominant in Communist circles.

The division between the orthodox left and the M.M. was to grow wider in the period following the collapse of the General Strike on 12 May. Support for left wing policies disappeared; hostility to the M.M. as an organization increased. Partly in response to this new hostility, and partly

[1] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, November 1924, 61.

[2] *Yorkshire Factory Times*, 7 May 1925.

[3] 'The Editorial View', *The Communist Review*, vol. 5, no. 7 (November 1924), 313–4.

because it had seen its aspirations shattered by the General Strike, the M.M. transformed itself from an amorphous, catholic propaganda campaign into a more coherent, disciplined movement. The inevitable result was further isolation. The following chapter traces this cycle of hostility and consolidation, leading to further hostility and consolidation.

IV

CONSOLIDATION—AND STAGNATION: 1926–8

THE months immediately following the General Strike were months of division, recrimination, and retreat for the trade union movement, and especially the General Council. The unabashed victimization which followed the collapse of the General Strike, the continuation of the Miners' dispute until November, the accusations of betrayal levelled by the Miners (and others) against the General Council, and the delay in calling a conference of union executives to conduct a post mortem, created a poisoned atmosphere. Demoralization was increased by the failure to organize effective resistance to the Conservative Government's Trades Disputes and Trade Union Act the following year. The Act declared illegal any attempt to coerce the government, or to extend strikes beyond 'the trade or industry in which the strikers are engaged', or to intimidate black-legs, prohibited civil servants from joining any trade union affiliated to the T.U.C., and provided for contracting in instead of contracting out. The formation of a joint Labour Party–trade union 'Trade Union Defence Committee' and 'the most vigorous possible campaign against the Bill' proved futile.[1]

Demoralization—and realism—awakened new interest among trade unionists in industrial co-operation. Early in 1927 Lord Weir, a leading contractor, informally suggested joint meetings between employers and union leaders to discuss the general economic situation, and especially the possibility of greater co-operation between the two sides of industry. Although initial union interest was dampened by the Trades Disputes and Trade Union Act, the idea was taken up by George Hicks at the 1927 T.U.C. In his Presidential Address he suggested 'a direct exchange of practical views' between employers and union leaders. The

[1] Bullock, 378; *T.U.C. Report, 1927*, 248–56.

chairman of I.C.I., the Liberal Sir Alfred Mond, responded to Hicks' suggestion, and the first Mond–Turner discussion on industrial co-operation opened in the appropriate splendour of Burlington House on 28 January 1928. A committee was established, which brought forward plans for a joint National Industrial Council, charged with responsibility for appointing joint conciliation boards to settle unresolved disputes. But the proposals came to nothing, disappearing in a cloud of generalities and the institutionalized ritual of formal consultations between the T.U.C., the Federation of British Industries, and the National Confederation of Employers.[1]

Although the Mond–Turner talks failed to achieve any concrete results, the attempt indicated the transformation which had taken place in the trade union movement since 1925. The 'class warriors' of 1925 were in the process of becoming the 'class collaborators' of 1928. George Hicks revealed a new scepticism about the usefulness of passing resolutions at the T.U.C.; 'there was no difficulty in advocating [industrial unionism] and no difficulty, or very little difficulty, in getting a resolution carried at the Congress . . . the real job was for members to convert their own organizations in order to implement the general desire'.[2] Bevin echoed his sentiments in a characteristically dismissive tone: 'You cannot solve the problems of the labour movement by sitting down in Great Ormond Street and framing resolutions'.[3] Even sympathetic union leaders thought the Movement ought to disband in view of the need for unity in defeat. As Andrew Conley said in 1927:

> It may be that the Minority Movement served a useful purpose in the early days, but with my reading of the papers from week to week I am convinced that the vilification of the leaders of our movement that we see there is doing our movement a lot of harm, and if Pollitt and his friends want to play the part of team men they should get back into the movement and work against the common enemy instead of splitting our forces as they have been doing.[4]

[1] Bullock, 392–404; *T.U.C. Report 1928*, 209–230; Ibid., *1929*, 186–209; Ibid., *1930*, 160–2.
[2] *T.U.C. Report 1926*, 326.
[3] Ibid., *1927*, 298.
[4] Ibid., 330.

The General Strike had the opposite effect upon the Minority Movement, heralding a swing to the left. In the months immediately following the General Strike the Movement hoped to continue its pre-strike policy of co-operation with the General Council left wing. The M.M.'s Annual Conference in August 1926 suggested that the General Council left might still break away from the right wing majority, and the Executive Committee asked members to restrain their criticism where it was likely to 'militate against the possibilities of bringing the Miners' strike to a successful conclusion or operate against the future welfare of Anglo-Russian unity'.[1] This conciliatory attitude proved unacceptable to Moscow. The Comintern denied that justifiable criticism could ever harm Anglo-Russian unity, denounced Purcell for 'hidden capitulating opportunism which thanks to its petit-bourgeois political lack of character and cowardice was with the right flank of opportunism at the critical moment', and accused the M.M. of 'unconsciously [aiding] the General Council to blur over the question of responsibility for the defeat of the General Strike'.[2] The Movement gave way to Russian pressure, withdrew its August statement, and declared:

> [the resolution] is mistaken in so far as it affirms that withholding criticism of trade union leaders can possibly help the miners in their struggle . . . merciless criticism and exposure of the manoeuvres of the now consolidated trade union bureaucracy is one of the foremost tasks in the struggle for the revolutionising of the British trade union movement.[3]

The Worker took the Hicks group to task: 'The Biggest Bubble that has been pricked was the Leftness of Messrs. Purcell, Hicks, Bromley, and co. The moment that they

[1] *Report of the Third Annual Conference of the N.M.M., 1926*, 48; *The Worker*, 19 November, 1926.

[2] 'Theses on the Lessons of the British General Strike, Adopted on the 8 June 1926', *The Communist Review*, vol. 7, no. 3 (July 1926), 126; 'In this bankruptcy (of reformist leadership) is revealed the bankruptcy of both wings of opportunism; of Right wing opportunism, brazen, openly treacherous, consciously serving the demands of the bourgeoisie; and of the hidden, capitulating opportunism (Purcell) which, thanks to its petit-bourgeois political lack of character was with the Right flank of opportunism at the critical moment' (Page Arnot and Murphy, art. cit., iii).

[3] *The Worker*, 19 November 1926.

were required to put their Left phrases into operation that moment saw them scurrying behind Mr. J. H. Thomas' skirts for safety'.[1] By January 1927 the left had become even more responsible than the right for the failure of the Strike, for 'they had tried to make the workers believe that even if the Thomases, Bevins, and Pughs let them down the Hicks and Purcells would lead the struggle'.[2]

The trend towards industrial co-operation represented by the Mond–Turner talks confirmed the M.M.'s belief in the 'bankruptcy of reformist leadership'. The Mond–Turner talks—or 'Mond Moonshine' as A. J. Cook preferred to call them—were naturally criticized by the M.M.; three pamphlets, characteristically entitled *Monds Manacles—The Destruction of Trade Unionism*, *Peace—But Not with Capitalism*, and *Mond Moonshine*, were published, and a series of special conferences were organized.[3] Five hundred and eleven delegates, representing 550,000 trade unionists, attended conferences in London, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, Liverpool, Llanelly, Newcastle, Glasgow, and Fife.[4]

> The policy of the M.M. is to expose the Industrial Peace Union and talk of industrial peace . . . we must show the workers that this industrial peace talk is a smokescreen, on one side of which the capitalists are preparing further attacks on the workers and on the other side trade union leaders fumble in their impotence to face the facts of an increased class struggle. The task of the workers is not to lend their strength to the building up of negotiating machinery with the boss class, but to the building up of organized working class power, under a competent and determined leadership, to obtain the best possible conditions at the present moment whilst gathering strength for the abolition of the capitalist system altogether.[5]

Or, in Cook's more expressive language, '[the National Industrial Council] is merely a fig leaf upon the naked capitalist autocracy in industry'.[6]

[1] *The Worker*, 1 October 1926.

[2] *The Crisis of Trade Unionism* (N.M.M. 1927), 4–5.

[3] A. J. Cook, *Mond Moonshine* (N.M.M., 1928); A. J. Cook, *Mond's Menacles—The Destruction of Trade Unionism* (N.M.M., 1928); *Peace (But not with Capitalism); the Policy of the Minority Movement versus the Policy of the General Council* (N.M.M., 1927).

[4] Letter from Mr. George Renshaw, 18 April 1963.

[5] Stencilled 'Information Letter on the Industrial Peace Union', November 1927.

[6] A. J. Cook, *Mond's Manacles*, 8.

The degeneration of the General Council left into the 'pseudo-left' led the Minority Movement to transform itself from a comparatively unstructured propaganda campaign into an organized electoral pressure group. Initially, the Movement had been 'rather a mixed combination of sympathetic elements . . . [representing] in the main a sentiment rather than an organized force'.[1] The political realignment on the General Council, and the diminished prospect for international trade union unity and a revolutionary trade union movement in Britain, created a new situation, with fewer opportunities—and fewer restraints. As George Hardy declared in August 1926:

> . . . the Minority Movement is entering upon a new phase in its work. The initial period, when the dominant characteristic of the work was mass propaganda and the widest possible dissemination of ideological influence, has now given way to the second period, or organizational crystallization of the wide influence won among the masses, and the exerting of this influence in determining the official leadership and policies of the Trade Unions . . . Before the working masses of Britain is now placed the development of history, the slogan of 'Change your Leaders'. It is the function of the Minority Movement to transform this slogan from an aspiration to a reality.[2]

The new approach involved a more self conscious approach to organization, and a more systematic attempt to secure the election of sympathetic union officials. The Movement's organization was tightened up and expanded, membership was put on a uniform basis (including a new emphasis upon individual membership as well as group affiliation), its weekly newspaper *The Worker* was transferred from Glasgow to London, and a comprehensive series of policy statements on individual industries was issued.[3] A new vigour in electioneering was evident, especially in the A.E.U. In 1925–6 the Movement openly supported only three candidates for union office; in 1927 it supported eight candidates for the T.U.C. delegation (of whom three were successful), and seven candidates for the

[1] T. Bell, 100.

[2] *Report of the Third Annual Conference, 1926*, 56–7.

[3] For example *Towards One Building Workers' Union—A Constitution* (Building Workers' M.M.); *The A.E.U.—A Review and a Policy* (Metal Workers M.M.).

Labour Party conference (of whom none were successful, largely because of the Labour Party's recommendation against electing Communist delegates).[1] The Movement's electioneering methods were set out in a 'Memo on A.E.U. Elections', which found its way into the hands of union officials and was published in the union journal as evidence of 'disruptive activity'. Personal discussion—'talking to the man in the shop, regular attendance in the branch room, and regular discussion with as many individuals as possible'—was the essence of the approach. Local committees were to be set up to direct the campaign, to form writing groups (for type-written letters were classed as circulars and prohibited as canvassing!), and to draw up 'speakers notes'. Dogmatic extremism was to be avoided:

> . . . when speakers are visiting a branch they should have in mind the make-up of a branch—whether left, right, or centre, and speeches must be adapted to such peculiarities. Our policy is the same in all instances. Only, it should be recognized that in putting forward the same policy, the method of putting it forward in order to get conviction differs in accordance with the point of view already held in the branch.

In sum, M.M. members 'should not stand on sentiment'.[2]

The gap between the Minority Movement and the rest of the trade union movement was further widened by the accidental demonstration of the M.M.'s dependence on the Communist Party and the R.I.L.U. Instructions from the C.P. to union members of the M.M. to support particular conference resolutions, and correspondence over arrangements for fraction meetings, fell into the hands of the right wing at the 1926 Annual General Meeting of the N.U.R., at the 1926 T.U.C., at the March 1927 meeting of the London Trades Council, at the 1927 Annual Conference of the Miners' Federation, and during the 1927 election campaign in the A.E.U.[3] Inevitably, fierce denunciations of 'outside interference' were bandied about. At the N.U.R.

[1] Hannington to M.W.M.M. members, 2 March, 1927.

[2] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, April 1929, 15–16.

[3] Verbatim Report of the A.G.M. discussion on the General Strike, 44–6; *T.U.C. Report 1926*, 465; W. M. Citrine, *Democracy or Disruption?* (T.U.C. 1928), 18; *Proceedings of the M.F.G.B., 1927–8*, 336–9; *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, April 1929, 15–16.

A.G.M., for example, J. H. Thomas brandished a directive from the C.P. to M.M. members in the union, and proclaimed:

> These were the instructions issued by an outside organisation . . . Can our union hope to maintain a position when an outside body without hearing any of the merits of the case [tells us] 'Never mind what is said from the platform that is the policy you must pursue'? . . . These are the methods of a coward. These methods are the methods of underhand people. These methods stamp you as unworthy of calling yourself representatives of decent, honest, railwaymen.[1]

Walter Citrine made the same point with less emotion but more force at the 1927 T.U.C.:

> The Minority Movement was formed as the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U.—it was not a spontaneous growth of the British trade union movement. The principle on which the Red International works is that the Minority Movement here has to accept what they call proletarian discipline, which means that the resolutions passed in the various sections of the Red International are sent to the M.M. here and passed on by them to the delegates to Congress, and are presented here as a free and voluntary expression from the unions . . . Our friends . . . dare not alter a line or a comma or a dot in the resolutions they receive to be presented here. . . .[2]

The General Council's swing to the right and the M.M.'s attempt to consolidate itself into an electoral machine finished progress towards implementing the left wing programme. British interest in securing Russian entry into the I.F.T.U. was dissipated, the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee collapsed. Although Russian criticism of the General Council's conduct of the General Strike reduced British enthusiasm for their entry into the I.F.T.U., the issue was kept alive by A. A. Purcell's personal interest during his tenure of the I.F.T.U. Presidency between 1924 and 1927. However, Purcell overstepped the mark in his Presidential address to the 1927 Congress when he unequivocally declared that 'international trade union unity must take precedence over everything'. The continental delegates thereupon kept Purcell off the I.F.T.U. Executive, for which he was automatically nominated at the end of his term of office as President, electing Hicks as British

[1] 'Verbatim Report', 44, 47. [2] *T.U.C. Report, 1927*, 324.

representative against his own wish. The deadlock was finally broken in April 1928, when Purcell withdrew his acceptance of the nomination; but the problem which had provoked the dispute had long since disappeared in the personal squabble. The A.R.J.A.C. similarly failed to withstand British sensitivity to Russian criticism. Following the first round of Russian criticism the A.R.J.A.C.'s constitution was amended to incorporate 'the universal principle of autonomy for each national trade union centre'. Despite this, Anglo-Russian trade union relations continued to grow cooler. The British failure to influence the I.F.T.U. removed the original *raison d'être* for the A.R.J.A.C.'s existence, and Soviet suspicion of the West increased with the C.I.D. raid on Arcos, the Russian trading company in Britain, early in 1927, and Baldwin's subsequent breaking off of diplomatic relations. Simultaneously, British interest dwindled with the continued Russian insistence upon their 'proletarian duty' to interfere. The Council finally collapsed in the spring of 1927 when the Russians published correspondence between the General Council and themselves on the former's refusal to call a full meeting. The General Council's exasperation was apparent in their reply to the Russian threat: 'We have found it difficult to understand the attitude of mind which calls for co-operation between the representatives of the two organizations, one of which publicly stigmatizes the other as traitors, renegades, and capitalist lackeys'. Only 620,000 votes were cast at the 1927 T.U.C. against the General Council view that 'no useful purpose could be served by continuing negotiations through the A.R.J.A.C.'. The General Council and the British trade union movement in general plainly did not understand the role of constructive self-criticism amongst proletarian allies.[1]

Hopes of progress on the home front proved similarly abortive; despite their initial impetus, the proposals for industrial unionism and a stronger General Council came to nothing. In 1926 the T.U.C. passed a Communist sponsored resolution regretting the slow pace of the General Council's investigation into organization by industry, and suggesting that conferences of the T.U.C. trade groups

[1] *T.U.C. Report, 1927*, 200–207, 358, 493–501.

should be organized. Despite this pressure the General Council reported pessimistically the following year:

> The General Council considers that in passing the Hull resolution [1924] Congress placed upon it an impossible task on account of the following facts:
>
> (a) The resolution, which is composite in character, was based upon resolutions and amendments containing opposing principles, and was merely a compromise in wording which left a wide divergence in policy. (b) The varying structure and method of working of unions, the differing circumstances in the varying trades and industries, and the impossibility of defining boundaries made the general application of the scheme impractical.

Although the 1924 motion had received overwhelming support, the General Council's attitude was endorsed in 1927 by 2,062,000 votes to 1,809,000.[1] Caution similarly triumphed over the question of increasing the powers of the General Council. In September 1926 a Communist proposal that the General Council should have the power to levy affiliated unions for united action received only 848,000 votes—including 800,000 from the Miners, then eager to obtain all the aid they could. Even a resolution simply asking for further investigation into the possibility of extending the powers of the General Council was defeated.[2]

A similar detente occurred in the majority of individual unions, including the A.E.U. and the N.U.R. Although the A.E.U. Executive had originally asked for £1 per week increase, they withdrew from their stand in 1926—by 1927 the Executive was only demanding 2*s.* 6*d.* per week on plain time rates. The M.M., however, continued to press for the full £1. When the employers offered 2*s.*, the Executive agreed to ballot the membership, and the offer was accepted by 81,575 votes to 41,527. Although the large minority represented a substantial achievement for the M.M., the Executive's victory constituted a major set-back on the wages front.[3] Despite this reverse the Movement won a

[1] *T.U.C. Report, 1926*, 329, 337; Ibid., *1927*, 112, 304.

[2] Ibid., *1926*, 376–87.

[3] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, May 1927, 8–10; June 1927, 7–9; August 1927; 8. 'We can definitely claim, as the only left wing force in the trade unions, that the 41,527 votes cast against the employers' proposals were due to our agitation and propaganda' (*Report of the Fourth Annual Conference of the M.M.*, *1927*, 42).

considerable victory on the 'political' front when it successfully organized resistance to Executive plans to prevent the use of the Branch Local Purpose Fund for affiliation to the M.M. As early as January 1925 the Executive warned branches against using the Local Purposes Levy for affiliation to the M.M.[1] The Movement accused the Executive of acting unconstitutionally, for the union Rules explicitly allowed branches to levy their members to support 'any general movement instituted to further or promote the interests of the labour movement in general . . .'.[2] The final authority in the union, the Final Court of Appeal, upheld their objection, and the 1926 Rules Revision conference rejected an Executive proposal to limit the use of the fund to purposes approved by the Labour Party and the T.U.C. Instead, a clause was inserted excluding the use of the levy for political purposes—which did not exclude affiliation to the industrial M.M. Despite Executive attempts to interpret the new rule in their favour, the M.M. survived in the A.E.U. By appealing to the Engineers' traditional suspicion of Head Office the Movement successfully asserted its right to operate within the union.[3]

The Movement's limited success as a pressure group in the N.U.R. declined sharply following the General Strike, and J. H. Thomas' spectacular denunciation of the Movement at the 1926 Annual General Meeting. The 1926 and 1927 A.G.M.s were personal triumphs for J. H. Thomas. At the 1927 conference, for example, Thomas demanded a personal vote of confidence following the publication of an article headed 'End of Thomas is the beginning of hope' in *The Worker* during the conference.[4] Although ten delegates abstained, only five voted against. As *The Worker* acidly commented, 'the virtuous indignation sob stuff is always a good card to play in a tight corner; and it is always safer to raise a racket about something else if you wish to avoid the

[1] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, January 1925, 7.

[2] *A.E.U. Rules (Part 1) Adopted by the National Committee, London, 17th October–22nd November, 1922* (A.E.U., 1923), 10–11.

[3] *A.E.U. Rules (Part 1) Adopted by the Quadrennial Meeting, Manchester, May 10th to June 5th 1926* (A.E.U., 1926), 10; *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, January 1927, 10–11; September 1927, 8.

[4] *The Worker*, 8 July 1927; 'Report of the N.U.R. A.G.M., 4–9 July 1927', 55.

real issue raised'.[1] More serious than the inevitable hostility of J. H. Thomas was the dissociation of the non-Communist left from the M.M. The South Wales Railway Workers' Joint Committee, for example, which was as energetic as the M.M. in pressing for unity between the railway unions, refused to come to an understanding with the M.M., and its candidate replaced an M.M. member as delegate for one of the South Wales areas at the 1927 A.G.M.[2] Support dwindled: there were only 13 N.U.R. branches represented at the M.M.'s Annual Conference in 1927, and in September it was reported that there were over 20 branches in London with only one member, and even more with none—despite 'keen criticism and discussion around the weakness of the Movement in the London area, there was no immediate improvement'.[3]

The Miners' experiences during the long dispute of 1926 naturally made them into exceptions to this general trend. Under the leadership of Arthur Cook they remained 'the advanced detachment of the working class'. The Miners M.M., as the militant vanguard of the Federation, performed a major role in preserving this situation. Throughout the dispute the M.M. urged the rejection of all compromise and the intensification of the struggle. The Movement was to the fore in the campaign against the Bishops' Proposals—which would have settled the strike by returning to the *status quo ante*, with the guarantee of a permanent settlement in four months—and secured their rejection by 786,000 votes to 333,000 on a national ballot. Instead of negotiating a compromise agreement, the M.M. urged that the conflict should be intensified by the withdrawal of the safety men, the prevention of outcropping, and an embargo on foreign coal. Their policy provided the basis for the South Wales proposals, which were endorsed by a national conference at the beginning of October. Despite this vote the resolution came too late. By the end of October it was a question of attempting to stave off the worst consequences of

[1] *The Worker*, 15 July 1927.

[2] 'Railway Workers Joint Council South Wales Committee Constitution' (1926); list of delegates to 1927 A.G.M.

[3] *Report of the Fourth Annual Conference M.M., 1927*, 56; *The Worker*, 30 September, 1927.

defeat, not of victory through offensive action, and at the beginning of November a national conference urged the districts to make the best settlement they could. The Miners lost on all counts; although the precise terms varied between districts, in general they included a return to the 8-hour day, and a return to the 1921 minimum percentage addition to the standard wage.[1] The M.M. described this as 'unconditional surrender at the very moment the economic stranglehold of the lock out has placed the miners in a more favourable position for winning than at any period since the collapse of the General strike'.[2] A more accurate judgement would have been 'unconditional defeat'.

The lesson the Miners M.M. drew from the gradual disintegration of the Federation front, and the ultimate collapse of the Strike, was the inadequacy of the Federation's structure. According to the M.M.'s analysis, a united national union would have prevented the emergence of district breakaways, like G. A. Spencer's Miners Industrial Union in Nottinghamshire, and thus ensured ultimate victory.[3] *The Worker* accordingly launched a campaign for miners unity, and the M.M. organized district 'unity' conferences. This pressure was reflected at the 1927 Annual conference of the Federation, when J. Williams (Forest of Dean) proposed a resolution calling for the transformation of the M.F.G.B. into 'a British Mine Workers Union catering for all persons engaged in or about the mines, accepting uniform contributions, and providing common benefits'. However, only the Forest of Dean voted against a more moderate resolution simply calling for a 'review' of the existing structure. When a plan for reorganization was brought forward at the Llandudno conference the following year, it was rejected by 465 votes to 163, only South Wales and small districts like Kent, Derby, Nottingham, Northumberland, and the Forest of Dean supporting it.[4]

Despite the undoubted merits of the M.M.'s policy, it failed to secure a majority—the Miners had to wait for the

[1] *Proceedings of the M.F.G.B. 1926, passim*; Arnot, 470–506; *Report of the Eighth Congress of the C.P.G.B., 1926*, 95–139; Mowat, 334.

[2] Pollitt to Associate Members, 15 November 1926.

[3] A. Horner, *One Mineworkers Union* (N.M.M., 1927).

[4] *Proceedings of the M.F.G.B. 1927–8*, 328–31, 963–4.

spur of war and national negotiations before agreeing to form a united national union. The Movement predictably had less success with its specifically Communist proposals. On international questions the Movement's policy met with a mixed reception. At the 1927 conference a resolution from the Forest of Dean calling upon the M.F.G.B. to 'take the necessary steps for securing a world wide miners' international embracing the miners' organizations of all countries on equal terms' was taken together with a Scottish resolution instructing the Executive to take immediate steps to form an Anglo-Russian Miners' Committee. The first part of the resolution was passed, but the previous question was moved before a vote could be taken on the second part; many delegates felt that the first part was unexceptionable, whilst the second was 'likely to cause friction' —particularly as Arthur Horner had just trailed his coat tails by attributing the imminent break up of the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee to the General Council's resentment of Russian support for the Miners in 1926.[1]

This increased opposition to the Miners M.M. stemmed in part from natural right wing hostility and in part from a genuine belief that the Miners M.M.'s 'disruption' was the major cause of the non-unionism in the industry. Several delegates complained in 1927 that the Miners were weakest where the C.P. was strongest; W. P. Richardson (Durham) alleged, 'where Spencerism exists it is where the other extremes are given a chance, where encouragement has been given to weaken our ranks'. According to Herbert Smith in 1928, 80 per cent of non-unionism was the result of internal dissension caused by the Miners M.M.[2] Although this was not true generally—the Forest of Dean's membership had actually risen—this was the case in Scotland, where the divisions in Fife continued in spite of the reunification of the warring factions in 1927.

From its foundation at the end of 1922 the left wing breakaway Fife, Kinross, and Clackmannan Miners' Reform Union was under pressure from the Communist Party to reunite with the official union: it was a permanent barrier to

[1] *Proceedings of the M.F.G.B. 1927–8*, 332–50.
[2] Ibid., 225, 952.

the united front in the Miners.[1] Despite the hostility of the extreme right wing leader of the Fife Association, the former leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party W. C. Adamson, serious negotiations for reunification began in 1925. In view of the problems facing the Miners disunity was fatal. A ballot of the membership of the rival unions early in 1926 resulted in a majority for amalgamation, and a new joint board was appointed. New elections were held at the end of the year. The result was an overwhelming victory for the left: Adamson and the right wing were routed. However, the Scottish Executive refused to sanction the election of the two left wing agents, David Proudfoot and John McArthur, and refused admission to the newly elected Fife members of the N.U.S.M.W. on the grounds that the Fife union had failed to pay its arrears to the N.U.S.M.W. When the Fife miners refused to budge, and paid the new agents out of their own funds, the N.U.S.M.W. gave way. At the same time the Scottish Executive postponed the annual conference of the Scottish miners, when the newly elected Executive members would take their seats, because of 'the subversive actions of the Communist and Minority Movements' in the recent campaigns, and referred the whole matter to the M.F.G.B. Executive. The M.F.G.B. supported the N.U.S.M.W. and condemned the M.M.'s activities. Despite this the dispute continued. In August 1928 the Fife Executive decided by 25 votes to 24 to suspend Adamson from his post as General Secretary, and install the non-Communist left winger Philip Hodge pending the result of the forthcoming election. Adamson finally settled the issue by resigning before the results of the poll were announced, and set up a breakaway union, the Fife, Kinross, and Clackmannan Miners' Association (Fife Association). The M.M. dominated Fife union thereupon appealed to the M.F.G.B., but the M.F.G.B. upheld Adamson's view that the activities of the C.P. and the M.M. justified his action in forming a new union, and in February 1929 a special conference of the N.U.S.M.W. recognized the Fife Association, the Fife union remaining excluded for the non-payment of arrears.[2]

[1] See above, p. 32. [2] Ibid., 185–95; Macfarlane, 265, 269–71; P. Hodge, 30–51.

The disturbances in Fife were paralleled in Lanark. Although the M.M. was in a minority on the Executive, M.M. members held the posts of President and Secretary, and 6 of the 11 seats allocated to Lanark on the N.U.S.M.W. Executive. In June 1928 the right wing on the Lanark Executive, encouraged by the M.F.G.B.'s condemnation of the M.M. and the C.P. the previous month, proposed to exclude M.M. and C.P. members from eligibility to run for office. When the President of the Lanark Association, Andrew McAnulty, refused to accept this motion, he was voted out of the Chair; whereupon he refused to move and the meeting broke up in disorder. A similar pattern repeated itself at the next meeting of the Executive, and it proved impossible to agree on arrangements for the forthcoming election. Despite this disunity McAnulty and William Allan decided to go ahead with the elections, causing the right wing majority on the Executive to order branches in the area to refuse to co-operate. Predictably, the C.P. and the M.M. won 8 out of the 12 seats on the Executive. Thereupon the right wing majority on the Executive secured a court injunction against the new Executive members, prohibiting them from 'representing themselves' as the Lanarkshire committee, thus leaving the old committee legally in command.[1]

By the end of 1928 there were thus two unions in Fife, and one completely disorganized union in Lanark. Neither the right wing, supported by the N.U.S.M.W. and the M.F.G.B., nor the left wing, supported by the C.P. and the M.M., could make headway. In these circumstances the C.P. decided to launch a 'Save the Union' campaign, and called a national conference for Falkirk in October, 1928.[2] Forty-nine Scottish lodges sent delegates, including 16 in Lanarkshire, 12 in Fife, 11 in Ayr, and 8 in the Lothians. The conference passed a resolution calling for the long overdue N.U.S.M.W. annual conference, and appealed once more for a united Scottish Mine Workers' Union.[3] To raise

[1] R. P. Arnot, 184; L. J. Macfarlane, 267–9.

[2] Unless otherwise stated this account is based upon R. P. Arnot, 213–222; L. J. Macfarlane, 269–74.

[3] *The Worker*, 19 October 1928. The main organizer of the conference, William Allan, denied that the C.P. was planning to launch a breakaway union. However,

support for 'unity' the left wing sponsored the organization of 'Save the Union' committees throughout the country.

Attacks upon the Minority Movement

The increasing prominence of the M.M.'s pressure group activities on behalf of the Communist Party, and the collapse of the tenuous united front bridge between the M.M. and the orthodox left, inevitably led to increased hostility to the Movement. As we have seen, many union leaders were hostile to the Movement from the very beginning, and as early as 1925 the T.U.C. warned trades councils against associating with the Movement, the N.U.R. warned branches against receiving unofficial circulars, and the A.E.U. warned branches against sending delegates to M.M. conferences.[1] But little effort was made to act upon these warnings until after the General Strike. A new era opened with the N.U.G.M.W. Executive's declaration that membership of the C.P. and the M.M. was 'inconsistent with loyal attachment to the union'. Although no potential member was to be debarred for political reasons, no member accepting the policies of the M.M. could 'honestly represent the union or express views on its behalf' at conferences.[2] In the following two years the Boilermakers, the Boot and Shoe Operatives, B.I.S.A.K.T.A., the Distributive Workers, the Painters, the Shop Assistants, the Tailors and Garment Workers, the A.E.U., and even the Miners took action to limit the M.M.'s influence. In the A.E.U., for example, branch secretaries were directed to disregard all circulars from the M.M., 'as the adoption of such methods and the interference by outside bodies with respect to the affairs of the union . . . should not be countenanced', and troublesome branch secretaries were threatened with suspension.[3] Typical

J. R. Campbell stated that it had become 'perfectly clear' as early as August that 'we had gone as far as we could within the reformist apparatus', and that the 'Save the Union' committees were 'to function as a parallel apparatus preparing the ground for the formation of a new union' (*Inprecorr*, 25, ix, 1929, 1228–9).

[1] *T.U.C. Report, 1927*, 151–2.

[2] H. A. Clegg, *General Union: A Study of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers* (Basil Blackwell, 1954), 118.

[3] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, March 1928, 708; *Report of the Fourth Annual Conference of the M.M.*, 1927, 43.

of many other unions was the story of the conflict in the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives.

The Leather Workers M.M., centred upon the London Metro branch, first appeared in 1927. Its demands for a £3. 10*s*. 0*d*. minimum adult wage, a 44-hour week, the establishment of factory shop committees, the abolition of arbitration, the adjustment of the wage for union officials to the average shoe worker's wage, and the ultimate acquisition of the shoe factories by the workers, were disseminated through a duplicated sheet called *The London Shoe Worker* (re-named *The Boot and Shoe Worker*). By 1928 M.M. groups were active in Leicester, Northampton, Leeds, Kettering, Stafford, and Kilmarnock, as well as London, and an M.M. slate was put forward for national office. E. L. Poulton, the union President, initially instructed the President of the London Metro branch to charge the M.M. leader, G. W. Chandler, with acting contrary to the interests of the union. When the branch president, dependent for his job upon keeping the support of his branch, proved unable to discipline Chandler, Poulton asked the 1928 Annual Conference to grant the Executive power to discipline branch members, if necessary over the heads of the branch officials. The powers were granted, the E.C. fined Chandler £1, and expelled him from the union on his refusal to pay. Simultaneously, the Executive urged members to prevent 'the movement [from entrenching] itself in our midst by giving opportunity for members to hold official positions who are supporters of the Minority Movement . . .'. When this failed, and M.M. members began to win branch office, the Executive sent a circular to all branches prohibiting members of the C.P. or the M.M., or their associates, from standing for office at local or national level. Office-holders were obliged to sign a declaration stating: 'I am not a member of the Communist Party or of the National Minority Movement or of any of their subsidiary bodies, and am opposed to the methods adopted by them in connection with this Union, and agree that my appointment is made on this understanding'. Despite general qualms about the Executive's authoritarianism, the majority of union

members accepted this, and the Leather Workers M.M. folded up.[1]

Similar conflicts occurred in nearly all major trade unions. Even in the Miners the Movement lost ground, and eventually became subject to Executive proscriptions. At the 1927 Miners' Annual Conference one delegate complained of prejudice against his proposal because it was supported by two notoriously 'Red' districts, the Forest of Dean and South Wales, and one Forest of Dean delegate was accused of acting as the mouthpiece for Moscow via King Street via Great Ormond Street via the Forest of Dean. More damagingly, Jack Jones read from an M.M. circular a list of resolutions which delegates were to support, to which Arthur Horner could only reply: 'until I am satisfied for myself I shall assume that [the documents] are manufactured'. The following year the Executive, after a long discussion, 'placed on record its strong condemnation of the Communists and the Minority Movement and the tactics which they have adopted'. Although the matter was raised at the Annual Federation conference in July, after a long, confused, and bitter debate only the Forest of Dean and Derbyshire voted against the Executive.[2]

Attacks upon the M.M. in particular unions were paralleled at the T.U.C. A new antagonism towards the Movement was apparent at the 1927 and 1928 Congresses, culminating in the launching of a special inquiry into 'the proceedings and methods of disruptive elements within the trade union movement'. At the 1927 Congress an attempt by the M.M. to reverse the General Council's proscription on trades councils which associated with the Movement received only 148,000 votes, and the following year an attempt to refer back the section prohibiting M.M. members from attending trades council conferences even if they had been legitimately elected was defeated on a show of hands.[3] As the resolution establishing the committee of inquiry stated, the majority believed 'that the best interests of the workers

[1] A. Fox, *A History of National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives* (Basil Blackwell, 1958), 466–70.

[2] *Proceedings of the M.F.G.B. 1927–8*, 329, 336–9, 341, 666, 952–6.

[3] *T.U.C. Report 1927*, 336; Ibid., *1928*, 352–3.

[could] only be served by solidarity and unity of purpose, policy and action'.[1] The inquiry produced disappointingly (or perhaps encouragingly) thin results: 124 unions returned a questionnaire asking for details of 'disruptive elements working within or against the organization, and likely to damage the prestige or the efficient working of the organization'; but only 32 reported disruption, of whom 16 reported that the effect had been bad, and only 8 that it had been serious. The Report merely documented the general tactics of the M.M. from the Communist press—a source likely to produce an alarmist impression. Instead of making specific recommendations—a course the General Council has always been reluctant to follow—the Council merely commented: 'we feel that with this definite evidence before us all affiliated unions will be fully equal to the task of dealing with this disruptive activity in their own way, and will co-operate with each other to this end'.[2] Although the M.M. naturally attempted to secure the rejection of the report, there was very little support for their move; few delegates seemed to agree with one non-M.M. delegate who believed 'that this great movement of ours has been built up wholly and solely upon the large amounts and high standard of criticism that has been levelled against the platform party throughout its history'.[3]

More serious than the General Council's general condemnation were the practical steps it took to stop the M.M.'s activities in the trades councils. In the early 1920's the C.P. and the M.M. had taken advantage of the General Council's neglect of the trades councils, their relegation to the role of occasional mouth-pieces for General Council propaganda and inter-union talking shops.[4] The M.M. claimed to be 'the first organized movement . . . to draw attention to the importance and real role of the trades councils in the Labour

[1] *T.U.C. Report 1928*, 354.

[2] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, April 1929, 8; *T.U.C. Report 1929*, 168–82.

[3] Ibid., 395–6.

[4] '. . . local Trades Councils should act through their secretaries as Labour correspondents for the T.U.C. General Council, and forward to the same regular reports of their local proceedings, together with such general information regarding movements among the organized workers as may be of value to the Council' (*T.U.C. Report 1925*, 215).

Movement', urging their transformation into local 'councils of the working class', and the C.P. set up a National Federation of Trades Councils in 1923.[1] Appealing mainly to 'the more talkative and less level-headed trade unionists' (in the Webbs' seigneurial phrase), and lacking a national organization to discipline deviants, the councils provided an easy opening for Communist permeation.[2] Over 50 trades councils, including important ones like Manchester, Coventry, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, and London, sent delegates to M.M. conferences in 1924–6, and there was considerable support for transforming the councils into Councils of Action in 1925–6.[3] To counteract this left wing influence the T.U.C. called a conference of representatives of the most important councils as early as 1923, and set up a joint consultative committee. In 1926 a system of regional Federations was created, and a set of model rules published. Although the T.U.C. successfully undercut the Communist Federation—by 1926 the Communist Midlands organizer Will Brain confessed that the N.F.T.C. had virtually ceased to exist—it did not destroy the M.M.'s influence in the trades councils: councils continued to elect M.M. members to representative T.U.C. conferences, and onto the Joint Consultative Committees.[4] More direct measures were required. The General Council's original warning to trades councils against associating with the Minority Movement was disregarded, causing the Council to reinforce its proscription early in 1927 by refusing to recognize trades councils which associated with the movement in any way, and by obliging recognized councils to sign a form declaring 'that this trades council is not affiliated to the National

[1] *Report of the Fifth Annual Conference of the N.M.M., 1928*, 17; T. Quelch, *The Militant Trades Council: a Model Constitution* (N.M.M., 1925).

[2] S. and B. Webb, *A History of Trade Unionism* (Longmans, 1894), 440. 'The Trades Councils . . . thus provided a natural platform for radical and militant criticism of official union policy, and one from which would-be rivals to established leaders could advertise themselves. While for organized oppositionist fractions . . . [they] could be seen as offering the basis of an alternative system of labour organization to that of the national unions, cutting across the latters' structure and particularly adapted to mobilize class, rather than sectional, labour sentiment' (H. A. Turner, *Trade Union Growth Structure & Policy: A Comparative Study of the Cotton Unions* (Allen and Unwin, 1962), 316–7).

[3] *Report of the Special National Conference of Action, March 1926*, 34.

[4] *Birmingham Trades Council Minutes*, vol. 21.

Minority Movement, nor does it receive affiliations from any branch of that organization and that, as a body it is not associated in any way with the National Minority Movement'. 'The decision arose from the conviction of the General Council that, as the supervisory and co-ordinating body of the Trade Union Movement, action must be taken to dissociate itself and Trades Councils, as bodies which it recognizes, from a movement which organizes as a separate entity for the purpose of formulating policy sometimes hostile and entirely contrary to that of the established movement'. Characteristically, the General Council did not consult the Trades Councils Joint Consultative Committee, and sent out the circular a month before the Annual Conference of the Trades Councils.[1] Despite an energetic campaign by the M.M. against both the circular and the General Council's dictatorial attitude, the Annual Conference endorsed the former whilst condemning the latter.[2]

The importance of the General Council's action was clearly revealed in the transformation of the London Trades Council.[3] Between 1924 and 1926 the L.T.C. had been dominated by the left wing, spear-headed by the M.M. and the C.P. The twelve member Executive included the M.M. supporters Joe Vaughan, head of the M.M. section in the Electrical Trades Union, Ernest Pountney (Shop Assistants), later secretary of the Communist breakaway United Clothing Workers Union, Frank Smith, temporary secretary of the Metal Workers M.M., Tom Quelch, a prominent Communist in the London Society of Compositors, and Wal Hannington, and the delegate Meeting included at least 47 members of the M.M. The Council formally affiliated to the M.M. in June 1925, and Communist policy provided the inspiration for its hostility to the 1924 Labour Government, fervent anti-imperialism, and support for Factory Committees. Although affiliation to the M.M. was reversed by 74 votes to 72 five months later, the militancy

[1] *T.U.C. Report 1927*, 151–2; copy of General Council's circular in T.U.C. library (n.d.).

[2] *The Worker*, 15 April 1927.

[3] The following account is based upon: 'A Delegate', *A Short History of the London Trades Council* (L.T.C. 1937), 90–2; Anon. (George Tate), *London Trades Council 1860–1950*), 123–134.

continued until the end of 1926, despite a decline in membership, the neglect of industrial activities, and bitterness at Delegate Meetings. The tide began to turn with the failure of Wal Hannington's campaign for the full time Secretaryship of the Council in the autumn of 1926, and the election of the right winger A. M. Wall. The new regime was strengthened by the General Council's attack on the Minority Movement in the spring of 1927, and the discovery of an M.M. directive 'to all fraction members' at the March Delegate Meeting. At a 'specially requisitioned meeting' in April the card vote was introduced, ensuring the predominance of large unions like the N.U.G.M.W., the London Society of Compositors, and the T. & G.W.U., whose delegates were elected at District level and thus less susceptible to pressure from well organized but concentrated minorities. The following month the Delegate Meeting voted in favour of excluding Communists from office, which meant excluding the majority of Executive members. Since no executive could meet until new elections had been held, Wall took the initiative and organized elections from which Communists were debarred. Local trades councils which continued to elect Communist delegates were disaffiliated.

The new executive immediately reversed its predecessor's militant policy. In November 1927 the Council withdrew from the Reception Committee for the South Wales Hunger Marchers; in February 1928 it rejected a motion expressing 'anger and disgust' at Industrial Peace. It disaffiliated from the National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement, withdrew from the First of May Committee, and failed to send delegates to the M.M.'s Annual Conference in August 1928. By February 1929 it had become, in the M.M.'s eyes, merely 'an appendage of the T.U.C. General Council . . . worse than useless to the London workers since behind the screen of a Workers' Council its activities are beneficial only to the employing class'.[1]

Between the collapse of the General Strike on 12 May and the end of 1928 the Minority Movement changed from

[1] Provisional Committee, London Industrial Council, 'Preliminary Notes on the Need for a London Industrial Council', 14 March 1929.

a catholic propaganda campaign into an organized ideological pressure group. Initially, the Movement 'was rather a mixed combination of sympathetic elements. Branches of trade unions would agree to send delegates. Groups of Minority Movement members would be successful in getting local trades councils to send delegates, but they represented in the main a sentiment rather than organized force'.[1] Only by concentrating upon immediate issues could it avoid antagonizing trade union members of the Labour Party, and perform its role as a half-way house for left wing trade unionists who did not yet see the need to transfer the struggle to the 'higher plane' of revolutionary politics, and who were unready to commit themselves to the Communist Party. Eclectism and moderation were reinforced by the real possibility of achieving some of the Movement's aims, particularly on international questions; and 1924 saw 'a marked revival of the working class movement on a higher plane'.[2] The M.M.'s achievements provided some basis for the Comintern's optimism about the possibility of a real united front in the British trade union movement.

The collapse of the General Strike on 12 May transformed this situation. The latent division between the orthodox left and the Minority Movement came into the open with the orthodox left wing's move to the right. 'There now exists an alliance between Thomas and Purcell, none the less definite in that they are probably not fully conscious of it themselves. It is not intentions but actions that matter . . . Purcell may still measure the inches that separate him from Thomas but . . . [they are] both miles away from the workers' struggle.'[3] The Movement was thrust back upon its Communist resources: 'we are organizing the shock troops for the struggle to conquer the unions for the class war'.[4] Mutual antagonism between the M.M. and the orthodox left inevitably led to the fizzling out of General Council interest in securing Russian entry into the I.F.T.U., the collapse of the A.R.J.A.C., and the disappointment of

[1] T. Bell, 100.
[2] Report of the Executive Bureau to the Third R.I.L.U. Congress, cap. xii.
[3] R. Page Arnot and J. T. Murphy, art. cit., iii.
[4] *Report of Third Annual Conference of M.M., 1926, 56–7.*

the hopes for a reform of trade union structure. The 'political culture' of the trade union movement became increasingly anti-Communist, and anti-M.M.

The Movement's hopes of 1924 were dashed. But 'organizational crystallization' produced its own rewards. The permeation of individual unions became more highly organized, and achieved considerable success in the A.E.U. and parts of the Miners' Federation, rather less in the N.U.R. The A.E.U. took a left wing stand on international unity at the 1927 and 1928 T.U.C.s, and in 1928 voted against setting up a commission to inquire into 'disruptive activities'. Similarly, there were nearly as many delegates to the Movement's Annual Conferences in 1927 and 1928 as there had been in 1925. By maintaining an unyielding front on the shop floor, by creating a network of M.M. groups around Communist cells, and by carefully organizing support for sympathetic candidates in union elections, the Movement seemed set for a long period of cautious, contentious, but steady advance.

But before this process had advanced very far the Movement's attention was distracted by internal conflict over the new line of independent leadership; the Movement never recovered from the British attempts to implement the Comintern's new policy, and the dual unionism which it involved.

V

THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW LINE: THE BEGINNING OF THE END

THROUGHOUT the first four years of its history the M.M.'s role as the British arm of the R.I.L.U. was played down. Although the Movement's organic tie with the R.I.L.U. was reflected in its enthusiasm for international trade union unity, and provided material for right wing attacks on the machinations of international Communism, day-to-day work progressed smoothly. Shop-floor activity was safely within the guidelines laid down by Moscow. Yet the conflict between international discipline and the need for local flexibility which Tanner and the syndicalists had foreseen in 1920 had never been resolved. Embracing non-Communist elements, the M.M. was subject to even greater tensions than the Communist Party. This latent conflict became manifest with the emergence of the new line in 1928. The result was a victory for international discipline and the 'political' struggle over local flexibility and 'industrialism'. After a long and disruptive dispute, when M.M. leaders were obliged to devote their energies to arguing with Moscow and disentangling the intricacies of Stalin's Marxism-Leninism instead of winning union support, proletarian discipline prevailed; acceptance of the new line concluded the process of Bolshevization within the C.P.G.B. which had begun in 1922. But the R.I.L.U. paid heavily for the enforced unanimity. The M.M. was distracted, demoralized, and finally destroyed. The Communist Party was completely cut off from the bulk of the trade union movement for three years, and a legacy of sectarianism and dual unionism was donated to its right wing opponents.

There were sound political reasons for the Comintern to repudiate the united front and adopt a more left wing policy at the end of 1927. The repeated rejection of Communist approaches by European and Asian Social-Democrats even-

tually convinced even the Russians that they were beating upon a locked door. At first, the united front had seemed to promise results, especially in Britain and—in completely different circumstances—in China. But it became clear that the Social-Democrats were reluctant to entangle themselves in Communist toils, and the Communists were too weak to force the gift of unity upon unwilling beneficiaries. The failure of the General Strike, the disintegration of the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee, the intensified persecution of the Minority Movement, and the 'class-collaboration' of the Mond-Turner talks, dashed the hopes of a real united front in the British trade unions.

Even more serious for the Comintern was the disastrous failure of their support for the Kuomintang, the spear-head of the 'bourgeois-nationalist' revolution in China.[1] From 1923 on the Russians and the Chinese C.P. supported the Kuomintang; the Comintern elected the Kuomintang an Associate Member, the Russians sent military aid and a host of advisers, including Michael Borodin, and many Communists became individual members of the movement. Marxist theory and Soviet military needs both indicated support for the nationalists. According to Marxist-Leninist theory, a bourgeois social-democratic revolution, or in underdeveloped countries the peasant variant thereof, must precede the Socialist revolution; otherwise, objective historical conditions and political events would be out of step. Soviet interests required a stabilization of the Sino-Soviet frontier, which a K.M.T. victory, especially with Soviet support, would make possible.

However, the Chinese situation was even more complex than the European. Neither the K.M.T. nor the Chinese C.P. were enthusiastic about a united front, and from the death of Sun-Yat-Sen in 1925 there was a continuous struggle within the K.M.T. for the succession, between General Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the anti-Communist faction, and a pro-united front left wing faction. The conflict was given a further twist by the Shanghai General Strike (1926), which strengthened the Communists and the K.M.T. amongst the workers, but by the same token

[1] Degras, ii, *passim*.

strengthened Chiang's position with his natural allies, the Shanghai merchants. The success of Chiang's Northern expedition against the war-lords further strengthened his hand, and he irretrievably broke with the Communists when he massacred the Communist sponsors of the Shanghai rising of March 1927, which had overthrown the foreign-dominated city administration and opened the way for his capture of the city. A month later the left wing faction of the K.M.T., which had retained control of the Southern province of Wuhan, began to suppress the trade unions, quell the peasants, and hound down the Communists. The one-sided united front between the K.M.T. and the Communists collapsed violently.

Despite frequent protests to Moscow against allowing Chiang's anti-Communist behaviour to go unchallenged the Chinese C.P. was ordered to continue supporting the Kuomintang right up to the spring of 1927. When Chiang barred Communists from all posts at K.M.T. headquarters as early as March 1926 the Chinese Party was ordered to acquiesce, and the event was simply ignored by the Russian press. When the Chinese Party asked for Russian military assistance against Chiang's impending onslaught the request was turned down flatly. The united front was not repudiated until the Shanghai massacre of April 1927, which finally convinced the Russians that their sacrifice of revolutionary potential to Russian strategic interests was in vain. Comintern policy switched dramatically, and at the very moment when the revolutionary tide was ebbing the Communists organized peasant risings and a putsch in Canton. But the Cantonese workers had suffered enough, refused to support the Communists with a general strike, and allowed Chiang to destroy the Commune of Canton in less than three days. A further massacre of the Communists followed.

The Chinese debâcle and the new revolutionary policy symbolized by the Commune of Canton heralded a change in the Comintern's global strategy. But the translation of the new left policy into the international plane had less to do with the failure of the united front in Europe and in China than with Russian domestic politics. After defeating Trotsky, Stalin was preparing the ground for his anti-kulak

collectivization policy, and consolidating his own position *vis à vis* his erstwhile ally in the fight against Trotsky, Bukharin. 'The right danger' replaced 'the left menace' as the chief threat to Stalin and to Bolshevik purity. The new left wing policy of independent leadership was elaborated by Stalin to justify his attack upon the 'rights' who were entrenched around Bukharin in the Comintern. According to Stalin, the second period of post-war capitalist development, when capitalism and the Soviet Union had been able to coexist in 'unstable equilibrium', was giving way to the 'Third Period', when increasingly severe economic crises would drive the capitalist West into war upon the Soviet Union. This capitalist crisis would clear the mist from the domestic class battle-field, revealing the bourgeoisie and the proletariat ranged against each other, 'class against class'. The reformists were unmasked as the tools of the bourgeoisie. As the reformists moved to the right, the working class was moving leftwards, demanding revolutionary leadership (although even the R.I.L.U. confessed that this was 'a zigzag process'). This analysis applied universally to Eastern Europe, Germany, and France as well as to Britain.[1]

This new ideological analysis had obvious implications for Communist activity in Britain. Since the Labour Party and the trade union leadership had deserted to the capitalists, dragging their organizations in their wake, the old united front tactics were useless. The Labour Party and the trade unions had become integrated into the capitalist state; they could never be transformed into agents for its overthrow. In this new situation the Communist Party's prime duty was to expose the 'Social Fascist' character of the Labour Party by sponsoring independent candidates in local and Parliamentary elections, while the M.M. was to throw off the shackles of trade union 'legalism', expose the Social Fascist treachery of reformist union leaders, and assume the independent leadership of the emergent revolutionary masses. In concrete tactical terms, when strikes occurred the

[1] *Report of the Fourth Congress of the R.I.L.U., 1928* (N.M.M., 1928), 13; *The New Line: Documents of the Tenth Congress of the C.P.G.B., January 1929* (C.P.G.B., 1929); J. V. Stalin, *Leninism* (Allen & Unwin, 1940), 228–40.

M.M. was to set up non-union strike committees, which were to be transformed into permanent Factory Committees when the strike ended. These committees, in effect shop floor rivals to the existing union machinery, were ultimately to be amalgamated into a new national organization, forming the nucleus for a new revolutionary trade union movement. This new 'strike strategy' was to be a means of transforming the M.M. from a pressure group within the existing unions into a revolutionary union movement in its own right.

The Emergence of the New Line

The failure of the united front in Britain and in China, and the changes in Russian domestic politics associated with Stalin's rise, led directly to the new left policy. But Stalin was primarily interested in Russian politics, not in stimulating revolution in Western Europe, and it was some time before the details of the new trade union policy were worked out. The political implications of the new line were obvious: Communist parties were to cease supporting non-Communist candidates in national and local elections, and to sponsor their own revolutionary candidates. The Ninth Plenum of the E.C.C.I. in February 1928 was devoted to enforcing these new electoral tactics upon recalcitrant groups, particularly Renaud-Jean and Doriot in France, who wished to continue the *bloc des gauches*, and the majority of the British Central Committee, who wished to continue supporting the Labour Party. Unity was achieved: the French and British parties agreed to drop the united front.

German opposition to the new line proved less amenable than the French and British. To the trade unionist Brandler, still confined to Moscow for his failure during the German revolution of 1923, and his German followers the new line was a revival of the ultra-left heresy which had been responsible for two abortive risings, and which was even more irrelevant in the relative prosperity of 1928. To Brandler's followers attacking the Socialists was less important than building a united front on the shop floor. Even worse, the new line was a clear example of Moscow dictatorship and disregard for national conditions. Accordingly, they launched an inner-party campaign against the new line, and

for a radical reform of the Comintern: right wing factions were organized, especially in the Offenbach and Breslau districts. To the Comintern this was 'right opportunism' of the worst kind: the faction would lead to 'the formation of a new opportunist party within the communist party, the splitting of the communist party, the alliance of this right wing with the left Social Democrats, and a bloc between this opportunist concentration and the Social Democratic party . . .'. After the usual character assassinations Brandler and over a hundred followers were expelled from the Communist movement.[1]

It proved difficult to formulate, much less enforce, a new trade union policy, whether because national conditions were so complex (as Losovsky suggested), or because the disadvantages of the new line in the trade unions were more obvious.[2] The Commission on the trade union question at the Ninth Plenum discussed the question at length, but finally left the task of giving 'more concrete form' to the trade union struggle to the impending Fourth Congress of the R.I.L.U.[3] The Fourth Congress similarly failed to clarify the issue. Social-Democratic trade union leaders were denounced roundly, the masses were exulted, and the slogan of 'Unity From Below' was proclaimed. But the united front was not repudiated: 'the tactics of the united front and unity which have justified themselves during the last few years must be continued'.[4] Although Communists were to mobilize all workers, regardless of whether they were trade unionists or not, the time was not yet ripe for independent leadership. In Britain, the Minority Movement was to continue its trade union work, including its campaign against the expulsion of Communists from the trade unions, until the 'ideological crystallization' of the revolutionary masses was matched by their 'organizational consolidation'.

Confusion on trade union policy persisted throughout 1928; the old and the new lines coexisted. Clarification awaited Stalin's final victory over Bukharin. The Sixth

[1] Degras, ii, 564–71.
[2] *Report of the Fourth Congress of the R.I.L.U.* (*N.M.M. 1928*), 69.
[3] Degras, ii, 432; *Inprecorr*, vol. 8, 314 (1.3.28).
[4] *Report of the Fourth Congress*, 9–29, esp., 28.

Comintern Congress theses of August 1928 on the trade union question, reflecting Bukharin's influence, were extremely ambiguous:

> . . . where a united front exists between the bourgeois state, the employers' organizations, and the reformist trade union bureaucracy, jointly striving to suppress the strike movement . . . the fundamental task is to stimulate the energy and the initiative of the masses and, if circumstances are favourable, to conduct the strike struggle even in opposition to the will of the reformist bureaucracy.

His reluctance to elaborate the consequences of the new line for trade union tactics was obvious, and in reply to criticism he was forced to declare: 'To make a theoretical comparison between the trade unions and the state is theoretically unsound'.[1] While Bukharin appeared supreme, dominating the forty-five dreary sessions spent elaborating a new constitution and programme, Stalin was digging his grave.[2] As many delegates realized, the proceedings were largely a sham; the longer Bukharin talked the more his influence waned.[3] By the autumn it was clear that Stalin had won, Bukharin was squashed, the right and left 'menaces' were defeated, collectivization was under way, and the final restrictions on independent leadership removed. Losovsky fell into line. The R.I.L.U. launched a propaganda campaign to publicize the decisions of its own Fourth Congress, simultaneously emphasizing their radicalism.

The new trade union tactics were elaborated by Losovsky in an article 'On Carrying Out the Decisions of the R.I.L.U. Congress', which appeared in the first English edition of the central R.I.L.U. journal, *The Red International of Labour Unions*, in October. According to Losovsky, the Fourth

[1] *Inprecorr*, 1928, 1573, 1870.

[2] Deutscher recounts a meeting between Kamenev and Bukharin at this time, based upon Kamenev's own account. '[Bukharin] arrived at Kamenev's home stealthily, terrified, pale, trembling, looking over his shoulders, and talking in whispers. He began by begging Kamenev to tell no one of their meeting and to make no mention of it in writing or over the telephone because they were both spied upon by the G.P.U. Panic made his speech partly incoherent. Without pronouncing Stalin's name he repeated obsessively: '*He* will slay us', '*He* is the new Genghiz Kahn', '*He* will strangle us' (I. Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed* (Oxford U.P., 1959), 441. At the time Bukharin was presiding over the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International.

[3] Degras, ii, 452.

Congress had initiated a trend towards independent leadership 'of the economic struggles and opposition to the reformist trade union apparatus if the latter sabotages the will of the masses to action', and towards the destruction of 'defeatist tendencies and the tactics of unity at any price'. Instead of 'attempting to turn these bad reformists into staunch fighters for the proletarian cause', instead of using the slogan 'compel the leaders to fight', revolutionary trade unionists were to 'oust the reformists, to lead the strikes that arise spontaneously, and direct them against the bourgeoisie and against the trade union apparatus'. He concluded: 'The masses must be organized and led, if necessary *without* the trade union apparatus and *against* it; no fetish must be made of the trade unions; the reformist organizations must not be transformed into objects of worship; while it must always be kept in mind that the reformist organizations are tools in the hands of the bourgeois state and the employers' organizations to crush the revolutionary wing of the Labour movement and to enslave the broad proletarian masses'. Despite this, he denied that the R.I.L.U. was encouraging splitting: 'when accusations are made that the Fourth R.I.L.U. congress is about to bring about a split then we cannot help thinking we are literally in a mad house'.[1]

Apparently he was! For describing the trade unions as 'the main organs for suppressing the economic fights of the workers' obviously implied the need to consider 'the question of strengthening our trade unions and of setting up new unions'.[2] By December 1928 the fear of splitting had become a right wing deviation. 'Surely it is common knowledge that the right wingers always shriek about splitting the movement whenever a real fight has to be put up against the reformists . . . the question of the need for undertaking independent leadership in spite of and against the will of the existing unions is only raised by those elements with a conciliatory attitude towards the bureaucracy'.[3]

[1] A. Losovsky, 'On carrying Out the Decisions of the Fourth Congress', *The Red International of Labour Unions*, vol. 1, no. 1 (October 1928), 5–11.

[2] A. Losovsky, 'The New Strike Wave', *The Red International of Labour Unions*, vol. 1, no. 2 (November 1928), 52.

[3] A. Losovsky, 'Strike Tactics of the R.I.L.U., *The Red International of Labour Unions*, vol. 1, no. 3, 103–4.

The new policy rationalized the C.P.F.'s trade union tactics, and was welcomed by the left wing in the K.P.D. Although both parties contained groups which denounced the repudiation of electoral understandings with the Socialists, less noise was made about the application of the new line in the trade union movement, perhaps because the battle had already been fought and lost, perhaps because the new policy made life easier. The French had long been primarily concerned with building up the C.G.T.U., and had paid little attention to permeating the C.G.T. The Germans saw the new policy as a confirmation of the viewpoint they had long advanced. The first conference of the German Red Trade Union Opposition was organized in November, 1929, and attended by over a thousand delegates. A year later the first independent Communist union, the Metal Workers, was established, followed by a further one for the miners in January 1931. By early 1931 the R.T.U.O. had 150,000 members, 50,000 in the independent Communist Unions, 30,000 unemployed, and 70,000 organized into factory groups.[1] Despite the popularity of the new policy in Communist circles little headway was made towards building a revolutionary trade union movement in either France or Germany. In both countries the irresponsible encouragement to strike action, often among totally unorganized workers, simply gave the employers the opportunity to dismiss left wing 'troublemakers'—the communists were in danger of becoming 'the Party of the unemployed'.[2]

Despite the crushing of the majority of the C.P.G.B. Central Committee in Moscow in February 1928, when their refusal to run candidates against the Labour Party was squashed, and the French and German support for the new policy, the leaders of the M.M. opposed the new line, regarding it as a threat to their previous work. Pollitt realized that the Minority Movement was too weak to organize more than a few scattered Factory Committees, and that the encouragement to irresponsible splitting would arouse the anger of otherwise sympathetic left wingers.[3] The Minority

[1] Degras, iii, 103, 153.
[2] Anderson, 130.
[3] Statement on Strike Strategy, January 1929.

Movement had repeatedly emphasized its opposition to splitting. In February 1928 the Movement declared: 'We do not aim at bringing into being any new organizations as rivals to those now existing; on the contrary, we are actively opposed to any attempts to split the trade unions or establish new organizations.' In June it announced that it would not admit into membership anyone who did not hold a union card; and as late as August Pollitt repeated: '[the M.M.] is not a competitive trade union. It is an attempt by common effort and leadership to get the Minority Movement policy adopted by all the organizations to which its members belong. It consists of trade unionists who are also Communists, co-operators, etc. . . .'[1] The M.M.'s Fifth Annual Conference the same month avoided the issue by endorsing a deliberately vague and ambiguous resolution on strike strategy, condemning 'the strike breaking activities of the reformist leaders', prophesying a new 'awakening of the workers', and calling for intensive shop floor activity. In proposing the resolution Tanner avoided the crucial question of the transformation of temporary strike committees into permanent Factory Committees.[2]

Uncertainty within the Comintern, and the R.I.L.U.'s prime concern with developments in Germany, France, and the United States, delayed attempts to discipline the M.M. However, the victory of Stalin in the autumn of 1928 and the tightening up which followed led to a new emphasis on 'the crushing of the opportunistic waverings in our own ranks'.[3] The M.M.'s 'superconstitutionalism' was castigated in a long critique in *The Worker* at the end of November:

> Today the Minority Movement is operating under circumstances which demand rapid changes in tactics and flexibility in organizational principles. The failure to recognize this has resulted in many mistakes being committed. Comrades are showing a tendency to worship effete slogans, and employ mechanically the same tactics in changing conditions. At the present moment the aim of the M.M. is to work inside the unions and to struggle against the reactionary policies of Mondism and Reformism. In answer to the splitting policy of the

[1] *What is this Minority Movement?* (N.M.M., London 1928), 13; *The Worker*, 2 June 1928; *Pollitt's Reply to Citrine*, 3–4.

[2] *Report of the Fifth Annual Conference of the N.M.M., 1928*, 44–7.

[3] Losovsky, December, 106.

reformists, and their treacherous aim of integrating the union machinery into the capitalist state machine, we have sent out the slogan of 'Save the Unions'. Many of the comrades (in view of the fact that the Minority Movement has declared against the policy of leaving the unions) have made a false interpretation of the above slogan. They have interpreted it as meaning the complete subordination of all their activities to working in and through official channels. Comrades in carrying out the slogan of 'Save the Unions' have failed to realize it is only a means toward an end, namely to strengthen our contact with the masses, and to lead them against their combined enemies, the capitalists and the reformists . . . In the present period, when the reformists are . . . endeavouring to isolate us from the masses, we must counter these tactics by coming to the forefront of the struggle as an independent force, and giving that kind of leadership which will win the masses' confidence. The prosecution of unofficial strikes is part of the 'Save the Unions' campaign because this is one of the means of proving to the workers the need for wiping out the old reformist leadership and replacing it by the new leadership of the Minority Movement. This policy will enable us to effectively combat the isolationist tactics of the bureaucrats.[1]

Like the German Brandlerites, they were 'legalists and constitutionalists because they want to be a legal opposition to the reformist trade union bureaucracy, a sort of His Majesty's Opposition on a smaller scale, which is in opposition merely because it is considered necessary to rectify the minor defects of the machine . . . without hounding the agents of the bosses out of the working class organizations . . .'.[2]

The differences between the R.I.L.U. and the English leadership were thrashed out at a special conference on 'the problem of countering the machinery of the reformist trade unions with the forms of organization arising spontaneously in the process of the revolutionary class struggle' (or strike strategy), organized in Berlin or Strasbourg by the Central European Bureau of the R.I.L.U.[3] It was not a success. The official R.I.L.U. communiqué was unusually hesitant:

[1] *The Worker*, 30 November 1928.

[2] Losovsky, December, 104.

[3] Based mainly upon Tanner's notes of the conference. According to *The Red International of Labour Unions*, vol. 1, no. 5 (February 1929), 229, the conference took place in Strasbourg; according to *The Worker* 5 April 1929 it took place in Berlin.

'*The great majority* of those attending came to the firm conviction that the policy of the Fourth R.I.L.U. Congress on strike tactics was perfectly sound. The tentative instructions of the R.I.L.U. Executive bureau were adopted as the basis of the conference's decisions' (my italics).[1] Moscow was extremely dissatisfied with the M.M.; as one R.I.L.U. official made clear later,

> the defect of the Minority Movement is that it has taken no measures to bring into its ranks the progressive element who are not members of the trade unions. Most of our British comrades consider that there are very few active workers outside the ranks of the trade union movement and that it would be dangerous for the M.M. to accept into its ranks all those workers who belong as yet to no trade union. The fallacy of this is proved by the case of France, Germany, Poland and Czeckoslovakia.[2]

The M.M. was warned that independent leadership was to be applied in England as elsewhere.

Despite the weight of R.I.L.U. authority M.M. leaders attempted to drag their heels. In a statement circulated privately in January Tanner and Pollitt argued that it was necessary 'to recognize the need for a flexible policy of strike strategy without falling into the error of overlooking national circumstances and traditions'. Moreover, British trade unionists were violently prejudiced against non-union members, and non-unionists should be encouraged to join their union to avoid the reformists playing off the organized against the unorganized. Finally, instead of denying the possibility of unions supporting strike action, they argued that 'attempts should be made to split the bureaucracy by getting some or all of the unions to make the strike official'—although in a published article four months later Tanner enigmatically included an exclamation mark after this statement, clumsily attempting to fob off the R.I.L.U. by suggesting that he was discussing the impossible.[3]

The British Party was notoriously uninterested in the dialectics which formed the basis of Comintern political argument, and was regarded by many German and Russian

[1] *The Red International of Labour Unions*, February 1929, 229.
[2] Ibid., 200–2, 205.
[3] Statement on Strike Strategy, January 1929; *The Worker*, 12 April 1929.

Communists as ideologically backward. It did not take the new line seriously enough. As the Russian Manuilsky said at the Tenth Plenum of the E.C.C.I. in 1929:

> [In the British Party] 'one does not feel any profound organic connection with all the problems of the world labour movement. All these problems have the appearance of being injected into the activities of the British C.P. In late years we have seen everywhere extensive political discussions . . . Yet in the British Communist Party there is a sort of special system which may be characterized thus: The Party is a society of great friends'.

But even friends argue, and it would be a mistake to assume that the British Party and the Minority Movement were united, either for or against the new line. As in the Communist Party itself, the younger generation proved more sympathetic to the new line than the 'old guard', the conflict reflecting the difference between members who had grown up in the pre-Communist trade union movement and those who had grown up within the Party.[1] John A. Mahon, the son of the old Socialist League leader John L. Mahon, emerged as the main protagonist of independent leadership. At the 1928 Annual Conference of the M.M. he stressed the need for international discipline, and when Tanner attempted to prevaricate in *The Worker* the following April he countered by an elaborate statement of the new doctrine:

> There is nothing [the reformist trade union officials] will not do to smash the workers. Their open alliance with the employers is less to be feared than their tactic of getting controlling position in the strike, of negotiating compromises for the strikers, of pulling the thousand and one strings at their disposal to weaken the determination of the strikers. Our members must say to the workers, 'under no circumstances whatever, in no place or time, put the slightest trust in the Mondist trade union official. Distrust them most when they appear to be on the workers' side'.[2]

The concrete meaning of this ideological dispute was clearly revealed in the discussions within the Movement on the important strike at Austins in Birmingham at the end of March 1929. The strike started when the management

[1] *Inprecorr, 1929,* 1140. See Pelling, *C.P.,* 50.
[2] *The Worker, 19* April 1929.

introduced a new grading scheme for piece-work rates, lasted ten days, and resulted in the rejection of the new grading structure. But the M.M. completely failed to profit from the situation; only one member of the Strike Committee belonged to the Movement, and the nearest the Movement came to influencing the strike was when a mass meeting towards the end of the strike rejected an M.M. offer of help. According to local M.M. leaders the M.M. failed because of the lack of Communist resources in the area and the inexperience of the strike committee—'while a part of the Strike Committee favoured the leadership of the Minority Movement, another section was against all outside leadership, whether from the reformist union or from the Minority Movement'.[1] But according to the protagonists of the new line the failure was due to an inadequate appreciation of the need for independent action; 'the lead to the workers to join the reformist trade unions, and the emphasis laid upon this, together with the use of phraseology indistinguishable from that used in the *Daily Herald* . . . indicate that the comrades concerned had failed to realize that the duty of the M.M. was to secure the direct leadership of the strike and to have maintained and strengthened the shop organization of the workers'.[2]

Acceptance of the New Line

The jockeying behind the scenes between the adherents of the new line and the 'old guard' continued until the spring of 1929, the new liners greatly assisted by Pollitt's absence on a special mission to the United States in February and March.[3] Eventually, utopian optimism and proletarian discipline prevailed, and the new line was accepted. This was symbolized by the public rejection of the M.M.'s earlier political neutrality with the publication of a General Election manifesto supporting Communist candidates in the 1929

[1] The Austin Dispute: Report drawn up by the M.M. Secretariat, April 1929; *Report of the Fifth International Conference of Revolutionary Metal Workers*, 1–6 September 1930, 48.

[2] Preliminary draft of the Executive Bureau's statement on the work of the M.M. in the Austin Dispute, 16 April 1929.

[3] T. Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (The Viking Press, 1960), 398.

election. As recently as December 1928 *The Worker* had told readers that

> the blank posters issued by *The Worker* are not to be used for electioneering purposes. During the local government elections cases of this sort occurred, with the result that the M.M. is in danger of losing trade union support among certain sections who object to the political use made of these posters. The M.M. includes Communists, members of the I.L.P. and the Labour Party, Co-operators, organized unemployed, etc., who are united in trade union tactics only.[1]

By May 1929 'the essential political character of the struggle' had become clear to the Minority Movement leadership, and Communist Parliamentary candidates were supported openly.[2]

Pollitt expounded the new tactics at length in an ultra left pamphlet, *On Strike—An Appeal to All Workers in Dispute*, which he published at the end of May.

> The Minority Movement is now the alternative leading national centre for the industrial movement of the British workers. Those who want Mondism, class collaboration, company unionism, can get it from the General Council of the T.U.C. Those who want a policy based solely on the interests of the working class, a policy of militant trade unionism, look to the M.M. for their leadership.[3]

The theme was re-iterated in *The Worker*:

> . . . the independent role and leadership of the M.M. is the most important thing that needs to be understood in the present period. The old fetishism of 'constitutional action', of 'trade union legalism' needs to be destroyed . . . The issue therefore of fighting independently the daily struggle of the working class . . . means a complete break with all the old conceptions of continuing our activities within the constitutional framework of trade union branches, District Committees, etc. New forces have to be won, new forms of organization found.[4]

The message was brought home to the local membership by a series of special conferences in Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Newcastle, Cardiff, Glasgow, and London.[5]

[1] *The Worker*, 14 December 1928.
[2] 'Manifesto to All Workers', May 1929 (loaned by Mr. J. Roche).
[3] H. Pollitt, *On Strike—a Word to All Workers in Dispute* (N.M.M., 1929), 6.
[4] *The Worker*, 19 July 1929.
[5] Ibid., 5 July 1929.

The events leading up to the Sixth—and last—Annual Conference of the Movement in August 1929 provide a revealing postscript to the story of the dispute. The Final Agenda for the conference asserted that once mass support had been won on the shop floor 'we can then organize the unorganized into the trade unions as new forces coming to the support of the revolutionary workers already fighting under one leadership in the trade unions', and failed to criticize previous vacillations.[1] The agenda proved unacceptable to Moscow. According to Losovsky 'the resolution [on "The Tasks of the Minority Movement"] lacks certain points which would help to strengthen it . . .'. He suggested ten additional clauses, including demands for 'intensifying the fight against Mondism and class collaboration', and for 'the organizational crystallization' of the United Mineworkers of Scotland and the United Clothing Workers' Union.[2] More importantly, the conference was enjoined to 'put an end once and for all to the vacillations in the M.M. and give up its old tactics which were turned down by the Fourth Congress'; its mistaken policy—'a policy of indecision, traditionalism, legalism, and constitutionalism'—'must be frankly and openly criticized by the conference in order to draw the proper lessons for the future'.[3] Accordingly, the conference resolution contained a long section on 'Our Mistakes' which had not been included in the Preliminary Agenda.

> Since the last conference the M.M. has given many evidences of vacillations and mistakes, which indicate that the resolutions of the Fourth Congress of the R.I.L.U. have not been clearly understood and applied . . . This Conference sharply condemns these errors, and realizes that in order to prepare a concrete programme of action for the coming period, it is necessary that the conference should subject to open, frank and thorough self-criticism the errors committed by the M.M. since the Fourth Congress of the R.I.L.U. The conference unreservedly accepts the decisions of the Fourth R.I.L.U. Congress

[1] Final Agenda of the Sixth Annual Conference of the Minority Movement, August 1929.

[2] See below, pp. 127–30, 136–42.

[3] A. Losovsky to Executive Committee of National Minority Movement, 15 August 1929.

and pledges itself to carry them out loyally and base its future policy on those decisions.[1]

The Sixth Annual Conference of the Minority Movement marked the end of the confused phase in the history of Communist industrial tactics in Britain which had opened at the Fourth Congress of the R.I.L.U. seventeen months earlier. The Movement was forced to accept a policy which its most experienced leaders knew to be mistaken; the 'politicians' won out over the 'economists', political purity over industrial opportunism. At first sight the Movement's acceptance of independent leadership seems, at best, a wrong headed sacrifice of industrial opportunities for ideological logic—the result of mechanically drawing tactical conclusions from ideological premises and twisting reality to fit the results—and, at worst, the craven submission to Russian authority. Dual unionism seems alien to the whole tradition of British trade unionism—if not the French. But this view is inadequate. To many Communists international working class unity and respect for the Bolshevik achievements were more important than short run industrial advantage. More importantly, the new line seemed to follow logically from the current Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist analysis of capitalist development, and therefore would succeed in the long run despite short run difficulties. As many non-Communists admitted, capitalism was in decline; therefore the condition of the working class was deteriorating; emiseration inevitably made the working classes more radical. Since the orthodox leaders of the labour movement were failing to respond to the 'radicalization of the masses' independent leadership by the Communist Party and the Minority Movement was an historical necessity. The proponents of the new line were neither fools, careerists, nor time-serving apparatniki.

Although ideological, organizational, and emotional pressures were enough to enforce Communist conformity to the new Comintern policy, they had relatively little effect upon M.M. members who were trade unionists first, revo-

[1] *Now for Action: Report of the Sixth Annual Conference of the N.M.M., August 1929*, 12.

lutionaries second. For them independent leadership brought out into the open a dilemma which had been artificially obscured during the united front period: the difficulty of reconciling short term economic interests with long term revolutionary aims, of trade unionism with Communism. During the united front period the crucial importance of winning mass support by defending short term economic interests caused a soft-pedalling of revolutionary aspirations. Independent leadership brought these aspirations out into the open once more; in the third period industrial action was expected to bring capitalism down. The dilemma was particularly acute for front rank union leaders like Arthur Cook and Arthur Horner, who had to take public responsibility for deciding upon industrial action. Arthur Cook finally decided to break with the Communist Party, Arthur Horner that he would stay—conditionally.

Cook never submitted easily to discipline; ebullient rebelliousness and obedience to rank and file opinion were the hall-marks of his personality and politics. In July 1926, for example, he made an abortive attempt to negotiate a compromise settlement to the Miners' dispute on his own initiative, and later the same month he disregarded M.M. policy and accepted the Bishops' Proposals; he was naturally heavily criticized by the Party and the Movement.[1] The continued dissension in Scotland placed him in an even more difficult position. On the one hand, as Secretary of the Federation, he would not countenance continued internal strife. On the other, he retained his belief in M.M. policy, and his lone opposition on the General Council to the Mond-Turner talks drew him even closer to the Movement. A characteristically confusing situation arose over his signature of a pamphlet published during the Miners' 1928 Annual Conference denouncing the proscription of the N.M.M. as an infringement of individual political rights. Under pressure from the Executive he was forced to withdraw his signature and to accept an assurance that no such infringement was intended.[2] His final break with the M.M. came in 1929,

[1] *Proceedings of the M.F.G.B., 1929–30*, 85–102, 327–5; A. R. Griffin, 166–7.
[2] *Proceedings of the M.F.G.B., 1927–8*, 1143, 1157

when he signed the Federation's interim report on the situation in Fife, denouncing the M.M. and calling upon all trade unionists to 'resist this interference and the abuse of individuals which goes with it'.[1] 'Whatever Cook may say to the contrary he has very definitely aligned himself with the bureaucracy . . . the Cook of the left wing no longer exists.' His treachery was considered complete when he opposed the Communist Party's plan to contest the 1929 General Election. Old friends like S. O. Davies and Arthur Horner continued to regard him as 'temperamentally and ideologically a splendid product of working class life'. But Pollitt more accurately reflected Communist opinion when he accused Cook of 'heading the fight at a certain period in order effectively to betray it when the decisive moment came'.[2]

Arthur Horner was equally committed to 'trade union legalism'. As he argued early in 1929, 'we must issue a strong warning against indiscriminate advocacy of the formation of new unions', for the revolutionary movement was 'handicapped by not having the necessary personnel and resources for such a task'. For his pessimistic opposition to the new line he was removed from the Party Central Committee and from active participation in the Minority Movement at the end of 1929. Although he was prevailed upon to confess his errors the following year, and accepted the chairmanship of the South Wales Central Strike Committee in January 1931, he remained sceptical. During the South Wales Miners' strike of 1931 he opposed the election of an independent strike committee at Glyn Neath, and resigned from the Central Strike Committee. When the Party failed to prolong the dispute after 15 January Horner was blamed, and accused of 'lack of faith in the masses' and 'opportunist' flouting of Communist discipline. After unsuccessfully pleading his case before the M.M. Executive Committee, the Party Central Committee, the Party Congress, and finally the Comintern, he was convicted of 'opportunism' and publicly censured. However, he was acquitted of the major charge of 'deviationism' and allowed to remain within

[1] *Proceedings of the M.F.G.B., 1929–30*, 51.
[2] *The Worker*, 22 March 1929; *The Sunday Worker*, 5 May 1929.

the Party; his disagreement was 'tactical', not 'philosophical'.[1]

Independent leadership proved to be the beginning of the end for the M.M. The new line brought with it a period of vacillation, uncertainty, and increasingly tortured and tortuous self-criticism; widespread demoralization resulted from a phase of 'vigorous self-criticism', when left wing sectarianism and right wing opportunism meant the same thing 'in practice'. Moreover, the new tactic played into the hands of union officials by allowing them to accuse the Movement of the cardinal sin in union politics, splitting the union. No conscientious trade unionist could agree to the formation of new unions, just as no left winger sympathetic to the Communist Party could accept the splitting of the left wing vote caused by the Party's decision to sponsor its own candidates in the 1929 General Election. Most militants joined the M.M. to help give backbone to the trade union movement, not to destroy it. As the 'old guard' realized, the new line was alien to the whole tradition of British trade unionism, had no hope of success and could only lead to Communist isolation from the rest of the working class movement. Events proved them right. The Communist Party and the Minority Movement were led into the arid isolation of introverted sectarianism. The Minority Movement's structure, previously soundly based upon constitutional union agitation, was destroyed by the imposition of utopian revolutionary tasks unsuited to the scope of trade union militancy and to the Movement's own strength.

[1] Pelling, *C.P.* 60–1; *Inprecorr, 1929*, 98–9; 'The Political Bureau Statement re Arthur Horner', *The Communist Review*, vol. 3, no. 4 (April 1931), 121–9.

VI

'CLASS AGAINST CLASS'

Liquidation?

THIRD Period ideology and the new tactic of independent leadership inevitably fostered doubts about the usefulness of the Minority Movement, and suggestions for its liquidation; 'there exists . . . a tendency in favour of the liquidation of the Minority Movement on the grounds that it prevents the Party from reaching the masses directly'.[1] Until 1929 the Movement had acted on the assumption that the trade unions could be captured by revolutionary workers; its *raison d'être* was to accomplish precisely this task. But the new left analysis contradicted this assumption. The tactic of independent leadership presupposed that the trade unions could not be captured because of the strength of the 'Social Fascist' leadership, and that a united front was therefore impossible. Furthermore, the incorporation of the trade unions into the machinery of the bourgeois state rendered purely 'industrial' or trade union activity useless; the separation of political and industrial activity which the parallel existence of the Communist Party and the Minority Movement symbolized was outdated. What could the Minority Movement do that the Communist Party could not do better? Could the M.M., so obviously a product of the 'Second Period', be adapted to meet the new conditions of the Third?

Ideological logic was reinforced by organizational rivalry.

> Our Party is still cursed with a sectarianism which has prevented it, during the past two years, from developing the National Minority Movement . . . There has been a deadly fear that the Minority Movement was a competitor with the Party. There has been, in many districts, not only a fear, but an undisguised hostility to developing the Minority Movement on the ground that it hampered the

[1] W. Rust, 'The Minority Movement, *The Communist International*, vol. 6, no. 26 (December 1929), 1086.

growth of the Party. These false ideas need to be dispelled . . . The duty of the Party is *no longer* to place any obstacles in the way of the development of the Minority Movement (my italics).[1]

As early as May 1929 the Tyneside District Party Committee had opposed the issue of the first strike bulletin in the Dawdon dispute by the M.M. on the grounds that this was 'a right wing tendency'.[2]

Some members of the Minority Movement raised similar doubts for completely different reasons. In October 1929 the Railwaymen's M.M. felt that their name was an unnecessary hindrance to their trade union work, particularly after the attack upon the Movement in the General Council's report to the Trades Union Congress in Setpember 1929. They suggested that the name should be changed to 'Railwaymen's Militant Movement'.[3] The M.M. Executive Bureau rejected the proposals, arguing that a change by one section before the national movement was undesirable; instead, they suggested that a discussion of alternative names should be opened in *The Worker*. Although there was some feeling that the word 'minority' no longer adequately expressed the Movement's aims, it was decided to retain the name, and the Movement.[4]

Disarray at headquarters reinforced the logic of 'liquidation'. Although Pollitt loyally accepted the new line in the spring of 1929, and attempted to apply it, his initial opposition revealed that he was potentially dangerous (or at least difficult) if permitted to build up an independent power base. He was therefore promoted to full time party work where, as some of his friends warned, he would no longer be able to afford the luxury of tactical independence. His departure removed the Movement's administrative lynch-pin; with his considerable administrative ability, his firm grasp of trade union affairs, and his strong position in the Boilermakers Society he was the only Communist trade unionist capable of retaining trade union respect and R.I.L.U.

[1] *The Daily Worker*, 20 March 1930.

[2] J.N.', 'The Fight for the New Line', *The Communist International*, vol. 6, no. 25 (November 1929), 1013.

[3] M.M. Executive Bureau Minutes, 4 October, 1929. For the General Council's report on the Movement's 'disruptive activities', see above, pp. 95–6.

[4] *The Worker*, 18 and 25 October 1929.

support. He was succeeded by a makeshift leadership. Arthur Horner became the nominal General Secretary, but he was under a cloud for his unenthusiastic reception of the new line; he was little more than a figurehead, and rarely appeared at the office in Great Ormond Street. The Movement's effective leaders in 1930–31 were George Allison, who became acting General Secretary when Horner went to Moscow for the Sixth Session of the Central Council of the R.I.L.U. in December 1929, and John Mahon. Others frequently involved at headquarters included William Allan, Secretary of the United Mineworkers of Scotland, George Renshaw, a young left wing member of the Shop Assistants Union then primarily concerned with developments among London busmen, and the Dockers' leader Fred Thompson. No experienced trade unionist remained to provide a focus for the Minority Movement's leadership; Allison and Mahon were both primarily Party politicians, not trade unionists.

Despite these difficulties the Minority Movement survived. At its Eleventh Party Congress in November-December 1929 the C.P.G.B. 'condemned unreservedly all tendencies to liquidate the Minority Movement or to merge it with the Party . . . The M.M. has special functions to perform in the economic field, and in no case should the Party put itself in the place of the M.M.'.[1] The tactical problem posed by the new situation was, who was to lead the industrial wing of the revolutionary working class movement? Was it 'the function of the Party to lead the industrial struggles, or to leave that to the Minority Movement and itself engage in the general political struggle'? 'Should the Party lead the whole movement or share the leadership with the Minority Movement'?[2] The Comintern explained its solution to this problem in an 'open letter' to the Eleventh Congress:

> In the factories the Party must independently organize factory committees, stimulate the independent struggles of the workers and guide them through strike committees, etc. The Minority Movement is an

[1] *Resolutions of the Eleventh Congress of the C.P.G.B., Leeds, November 30th to 3rd December 1929*, 24.

[2] 'J.N.' art. cit., 1014.

instrument through which the Party can perform this task; through which the various struggles can be co-ordinated, the independent organs of struggle can be combined, and the united front from below can be achieved. But the M.M. must be transformed from a mere propagandist body leading the opposition in the trade unions into the leader of the economic struggles of the workers, mobilizing the masses around a programme of immediate demands and linking the demands with the struggle on the fundamental political issues of the British labour movement. The M.M. must not be a mere duplicate of the Party; it must be a broader organization than the Party, embracing the opposition in the old trade unions, the struggles of the factory committees, the unorganized, the new unions, the unemployed, etc. The Party must be the driving force in, and the inspirer of the M.M.; the latter must be the medium through which the Party maintains contact with and exercises leadership of the masses of the working class. The Party must lead the Minority Movement. The Communist factions in the M.M. must unquestionably carry out the Party Line, and be directly subordinated to the Party.[1]

The Comintern's re-statement of the Minority Movement's traditional role, one of providing a broadly based left wing movement led by the Communist Party, provided a blueprint for the Movement's future. But it did not provide detailed guidance for practical action, nor did it clarify the position regarding left wing minorities in reformist unions in industries where a revolutionary union existed, as in the clothing industry. In new line theory, the M.M. would disappear into the new revolutionary union; in practice it continued to provide a half-way house for left-wingers unwilling to split. This gap between theory and practice created confusion, for example in the clothing industry. Many members of the Leeds section of the Tailors and Garment Workers Union were dissatisfied with their executive's moderate policy, but were unwilling to transfer to the new revolutionary union. The General Secretary of the United Clothing Workers Union therefore advised the formation of an M.M. group within the N.U.T. & G.W., 'so as to get a united effort'.[2] Under a month later the United Clothing Workers Union Executive, with the agreement of the M.M. Secretariat, changed its mind: '[the] suggestion of a

[1] *Resolutions, 11th Congress*, 41.
[2] Pountney to Bloom, 16 June 1930, see below, pp. 136–42.

Clothing Minority Group and nothing more should be a mistake and not merely a step backwards now but actually help to keep the workers harnessed to the T. & G.W.U. in the hope that a militant group can succeed in changing its policy'.[1]

Despite these 'local' difficulties, it was generally agreed that the C.P.'s future industrial success lay with the Minority Movement. 'The question of a mass party in Britain is at the same time a question of the Minority Movement, its transformation and development into a mass organisation'.[2]

In the heartsearchings of late 1929 the Party was repeatedly reminded of its isolation from the mass of the industrial working class; there had been no improvement since 1923. The Communist International claimed, and the British Party eventually agreed, that this was due to 'right opportunist mistakes', a failure to apply the new line of independent leadership correctly. 'The failure of the Party to become the mass leader of the workers and the failure of the M.M. to become a mass independent workers' movement are due primarily to the Right wing mistakes committed by the Party and its leadership'.[3] Following the 10th Party Congress, the Communist Party and the M.M. pushed forward more energetically with the new line on the industrial front, despite the warning of its political failure in the May 1929 General Election.

The M.M. was thus saved from liquidation to implement the new tactics. But, hamstrung by a lack of resources and poor relations with the C.P.'s Industrial Department, there was little likelihood that the Movement would break its own and thus the Party's isolation. The M.M. was incapable of taking an independent stand against the reformist trade unions; by 1930 it had been reduced to about 700 active members, and its influence within major unions broken.[4] All

[1] Pountney to Bloom, 8 July 1930.

[2] Rust, art. cit., 1085.

[3] *Letter from the Communist International to the 10th Congress of the C.P.G.B., Resolutions . . . 10th C.P.G.B. Congress*, 40.

[4] *Inprecorr*, quoted in Pelling, *C.P.*, 67. 'To its credit, the movement is not merely resigned to the "purification" defence of its declining numbers—Maxton in *The Worker*, 11 January 1930: "Our decline in numerical strength, is not a weakening but is a purification and consequently the basis for a strengthening of our ranks."'

union members were hostile to splitting tactics in any form, and neither the unemployed nor the unorganized offered a fruitful field for permanent recruitment. Further, the changes in personnel, the tactical confusion, and the organizational disruption had undermined the morale of the Movement's trade union leaders, and discredited it in the eyes of rank and file militants. The M.M. had been saved, but in its weakened state its existence was very insecure, dependent upon its ability to bring the Communist Party into contact with the mass of industrial workers. It had been rescued to do a job which its orders prevented it from doing adequately; it was reprieved, not saved.

Independent Leadership and the Reformist Trade Unions

The difficulty of reconciling independent leadership with the maintenance of mass trade union support rendered the Movement's reprieve highly conditional. It soon became clear, as the 'old guard' had predicted, that independent leadership involved the destruction of the Minority Movement's work in the trade union movement. The 'splitting' tactics in Scotland, and the attempt to unite trade unionists and 'nons' into the same Factory Committees, had a uniformly disastrous effect upon the Movement's work in the Miners' Federation, the N.U.R., and the A.E.U.[1]

As we have seen, the situation in the Scottish Miners' Federation at the end of 1928 was extremely confusing. The right wing controlled the Scottish Executive, which had endorsed a satellite breakaway union in Fife, whilst in Lanark the right wing old guard refused to allow the newly elected left wing Executive to take up office. Thwarted by the Scottish Executive, the Communists and the M.M. attempted to force the issue by launching a 'Save the Union' campaign, designed to push the right wing into handing over office. But the 'Save the Union' campaign failed to break the stalemate; the right wing retained control in Lanark, and the new Fife Union was recognized by the M.F.G.B. in

[1] One supporter commented in April 1929: 'Is it likely that the union members will agree to representatives of the nons being on the strike committee? I am afraid there will be trouble about this, although I am aware that many nons are as good fighters as those who are in the unions. Still, there is the fact that nons are not liked in places where the unions are strong' (*The Worker*, 12 April 1929).

February 1929. Right wing recalcitrance therefore made dual unionism a possible solution to M.M. difficulties in Scotland. Pressure from the Comintern and the R.I.L.U. upon the C.P. and the M.M. to implement the new line transformed possibility into certainty; local circumstances and party doctrine led Scottish M.M. members in the same direction, towards a new Scottish Mine Workers' Union.[1] Accordingly, a meeting of the Scottish 'Save the Union' Executive in February decided to call a conference to set up a new Scottish Mine Workers' Union. This conference, attended by 132 delegates (the vast majority from Lanark and Fife), elected a national Executive, with William Allan as Secretary, to organize the new United Mineworkers of Scotland—disregarding the anti-splitting protests of Philip Hodge. From the beginning the new union was completely dominated by the C.P. and the M.M.; its successive General Secretaries—William Allan, David Proudfoot and Abe Moffat—were all members of the Movement. As the N.M.M. repeatedly emphasized the new union was a union of 'revolutionary struggle'—although even William Allan recognized that this often meant 'a resolutionary not a revolutionary fight'. In July 1931 the union organized a strike against the 8-hour day and proposed wage cuts, and in May the following year it led a further strike against proposed wage reductions. Naturally, the U.M.S. was fiercely opposed by both the National Union of Scottish Mineworkers and the national Miners' Federation; the strikes in 1931 and 1932 were not supported by the N.U.S.M.W., whilst the M.F.G.B. Annual Conference in 1930 condemned 'all those who have sought to weaken the power and prestige of the Miners' Federation by the establishment of anti-Federation and anti-Labour organizations in Scotland and other districts of the Miners' Federation, and urges all workmen employed in and about the mines to stamp out these black-leg organizations, which have been brought into existence by members of the Communist and Minority Movement'.[2]

[1] See above, pp. 92–3, esp footnote 3.

[2] *Proceedings of M.F.G.B. 1929–30*, 1253; L. J. Macfarlane, 172–4; *Inprecorr*, 1929, 99.

The U.M.S. could make little real headway because of the opposition of orthodox trade unionists to any splitting, the sectarian militancy forced on the new union by the 'new line', and the general effect of the depression upon union membership. Although the new union claimed 14,000 members in August 1929—mainly in Fife and Lanark—there were only 64 delegates at the First Annual Conference of the union the following month, half the number at the Inaugural Conference. One delegate justifiably claimed at the M.F.G.B. Conference in 1930 that the U.M.S. consisted of 'loud speakers and very few listeners in . . . in connection with the Communists, they are practically wiped out'.[1] By 1932 the union was confined to Fife and a few branches in Lanarkshire. This lack of success, together with simultaneous changes in the C.P. line, led the new union to ask the N.U.S.M.W. for a joint conference as early as April 1933. However, this and two later requests went unanswered by the N.U.S.M.W. Accordingly, the U.M.S. dwindled into insignificance, and in January 1935 it dissolved itself and advised its members to reapply for membership of the N.U.S.M.W. and the reformist Fife and Lanark Miners' Associations. The attempt to build a revolutionary Mine Workers' Union in Scotland had collapsed.

The United Mineworkers of Scotland was to be transformed into a national Revolutionary Mineworkers Union by the alliance of unofficial pit Committees of Action, which were to emerge spontaneously as a result of the 'radicalization of the masses'. But the unofficial strikes which were to initiate this process were few, and the pit committees failed to materialize. The most important incident occurred at the Dawdon colliery in Durham early in March 1929, when an unofficial strike broke out against reductions in piece work rates. The C.P. and the M.M. attempted to apply the new line, sending a flock of representatives to the area and urging the exclusion from the strike committee of officials of the Durham Miners Association. Despite the mushroom growth of a local branch of the C.P., the majority of Dawdon miners refused to follow the Party's advice, remained loyal to their original leaders, and accused the C.P. and the M.M. of

[1] *Proceedings . . . 1929-30*, 1253.

stirring up trouble. Although a temporary 'Dawdon Miners Vigilance Committee' was formed, no permanent pit Committee of Action emerged, and neither the C.P. nor the M.M. made any permanent gains in the area.[1] The whole exercise demonstrated 'the futility of the approach from the outside'.[2]

The Party and the Movement met with similar lack of success when they attempted to wrest control from the official leadership in the South Wales Miners' strike in January 1931. When the S.W.M.F. was faced with a lock out on 1 January the C.P. and the M.M. urged the exclusion of S.W.M.F. officials from local strike committees. A special conference was called by the M.M. in Cardiff, and an unofficial central strike committee set up under the chairmanship of Arthur Horner. Fourteen similar local strike committees were set up. But the committees were 'without mass content', and resulted only in the Movement's isolation from the mass of the Miners. When the Movement attempted to prolong the strike after the S.W.M.F. called it off on 15 January the result was a fiasco; only an insignificant minority refused to return to work.[3]

Although there was no railway equivalent to the U.M.S., independent leadership had a similarly disastrous effect upon M.M. work in the N.U.R. The summer of 1928 seemed propitious for M.M. activists in the N.U.R. In July the railway companies proposed a wage reduction of 5 per cent, the temporary suspension of the guaranteed day and week, the withdrawal of the remaining war bonus, and the cancellation of all increased payments for overtime, night, and Sunday duty. Instead, each worker was to be guaranteed earnings from all sources at least equal to the standard week's wage. The N.U.R. rejected the proposals, met with the Railway Clerks Association and A.S.L.E.F., and offered a compromise $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent reduction. The companies agreed, and the agreement was made to last for a year, until 13 August 1929.[4] Many railwaymen naturally resented their

[1] L. J. Macfarlane, 262–4; *T.U.C. Report 1929*, 180; *The Worker*, 19 April 1929.
[2] Fred Thompson, M.M. Executive Bureau Minutes, 22 November 1929.
[3] Pelling, *C.P.*, 60. For Horner's attitude see above, pp. 120–1.
[4] N.U.R., E.C. 27 July 1928; Bagwell, 510–11.

Executive's attitude; 'the members of the Wallasey branch are of the opinion that a trade union is an organization with which the workers hope to better their standard of living and not to aid the capitalists to maintain or increase their profits'.[1] The Minority Movement naturally stepped up its activity in the union, stimulating the appearance of a number of depot news-sheets, with titles like *The Hornsey Star*, *The Signal*, *The Kings Cross Star*, *The L.M.S. Rebel*, combining syndicated M.M. news and local complaints.[2] Hostility to the 2½ per cent reduction mounted, and the July 1929 A.G.M. rejected the Executive's plans and voted by the overwhelming majority of 76 votes to 3 to attempt to restore the cut. When the companies refused to restore the cuts until 13 May 1930 a special General Meeting agreed by only 45 votes to 35, despite the lack of any alternative policy.[3]

This discontent and agitation inevitably brimmed over into support for the M.M. Although branch secretaries were prohibited from conveying invitations to their members, and the M.M. could not pay travelling expenses, 12 N.U.R. branches and 16 M.M. groups sent delegates to the Inaugural Conference of the Railwaymen's M.M. in January 1929. Delegates came from as far afield as Perth, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Derby, Keighley, Birmingham and Exeter.[4] There were 69 railwaymen at the Sixth Annual Conference of the National M.M. in August 1929, and 55 at the Second Conference of the Railwaymen's M.M. the following November.[5] Prominent members of the Movement were elected to branch offices at Birmingham, Nottingham, Derby, and Leytonstone.[6]

In accordance with the new line the Movement hoped to mobilize the discontent behind independent All Grade

[1] Published in *The Worker*, 17 August 1928.

[2] Copies of *The Hornsey Star*, *The Signal*, *The Headlight*, *The King's Cross Star*, *The Northern Star*, *The L.M.S. Rebel*, and other depot sheets loaned by the late Mr. George Renshaw.

[3] Bagwell, 512–3.

[4] Report of Conference of Railway Workers M.M., 5 and 6 January 1929; *The Worker*, 11 January 1929.

[5] *Now for Action*, 38; Andrew Rothstein, 'The Crisis on British Railways, *The Communist International*, vol. 8, no. 1 (January 1931), 21–7.

[6] *The Worker*, 1 February 1929; interview with the late Mr. W. C. Loeber.

Depot Committees of Action. As the *Kings Cross Star* declared:

> The present union leadership will never seriously challenge the companies to secure the return of the 2½ per cent. Only rank and file action, led in the depots, stations and sidings by Committees of Action elected by the rank and file for this specific purpose, irrespective of all crafts, grade or union distinctions, and linked up nationally to the Minority Movement, will be successful.[1]

The M.M. unequivocally declared 'never mind about union membership'.[2] Although it is impossible to estimate how many Depot Committees were formed, groups of Communist railwaymen supported publications in London, Derby, Bradford, and Manchester; there were M.M. Rail groups in Birmingham, Birkenhead, Nottingham, Glasgow, and at the Kings Cross and Hornsey Depots in London; and there were definite Depot Committees at Bishopsgate and Stratford (London). The most important Committee was at Stratford, one of the largest cleaning and repair shops in London. There, in March 1929, two carriage cleaners 'decided to put up a fight against the conditions and give the lead to set up an elected rank and file committee to tackle everyday grievances. Communists were elected to the committee and in spite of sabotage by some ex-branch officials . . . The Depot committee had the leadership'. The Committee survived at least until 1930, helping to secure fairer working for Sunday duty as well as the reinstatement of a victimized worker.[3]

Despite this activity the support for the M.M. proved ephemeral. As early as November 1930 references were being made to 'the almost total absence of M.M. organization in the shops and depots', and in January 1933 the Railwaymen's M.M. was scathingly dismissed as 'a tiny group of railwaymen completely isolated from the mass of the workers, being even unknown to scores of thousands of

[1] *The King's Cross Star*, no. 38. Mimeographed depot sheet loaned by Mr. George Renshaw.

[2] Undated broadsheet loaned by Mr. Renshaw.

[3] Open letter to the Railway Workers from Stratford Depot Committee (March 1930); various broadsheets loaned by Mr. Renshaw.

railwaymen'.[1] It was generally agreed that 'there were not many real militants' at the 1931 Railwaymen's A.G.M.[2] The reason for this failure, according to Andrew Rothstein, was 'the lack of a general perspective of an offensive against the whole working class in which the railway offensive is the opening attack, and of the political and tactical conclusions which follow'; '[the] fundamental weakness [of the Railwaymen's M.M.] arises from a failure to appreciate the present period, the role of the trade union bureaucracy, and the growing radicalization of the workers'.[3] But there was little support amongst railwaymen for this view:

> there is a lack of conviction as to the correctness of the policy of independent leadership. This explains to a large extent the mistakes committed by leading comrades of the R.M.M. . . . [and] the failure of the M.M. to establish itself as the only force capable of leading and organizing the struggle of the railwaymen in the daily fight against the attacks of the owners. . . .[4]

Union members, on the railways as elsewhere, had no enthusiasm for working with 'nons'; the leaders of the R.M.M. were merely trying to maintain their influence by playing down this aspect of their policy. But their reluctance inevitably provoked the opposition of the Communist leadership, the accusations of 'many serious mistakes and weaknesses'. The disagreements which followed merely reinforced the demoralization which the policy itself created.

As early as 1928 the M.M. was in considerable difficulty in the A.E.U., due to the unpopularity of the C.P.'s anti-Labour political activities; in October the right claimed that the Movement had been 'cuffed into whimpering impotence'.[5] This judgement was endorsed by the M.M. itself. The A.E.U. Advisory Committee presented a bleak report to the Sixth Annual Conference of the M.M. in August 1929. There was no sign of the employers giving the Movement

[1] 'Resolution on the Economic Situation of the Railways and the Tasks of the Railway Workers' Minority Movement, November 1930'; 'Rail Statement, 11 January 1933'; stencilled statements loaned by Mr. Renshaw.

[2] *The Signal* ('Organ of the Action Group at Ducie Street, Manchester'), no. 7 (31 July 1931).

[3] A. Rothstein, 'The Crisis on British Railways', 24–7.

[4] 'Resolution on the Economic Situation.'

[5] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, October 1928, 57.

an opening by attempting to reduce wages; the Movement failed to reap any benefit from the Austin strike, the circulation of the monthly news sheet *The Working Engineer* was declining. In short, 'it [is] recognized that the situation inside the union machine is of a more difficult character than previously prevailed'.[1] Jack Tanner's vote in the Presidential election which followed J. T. Brownlie's death in 1929 was over 5,000 less than it had been in 1928, and he dropped from second to third place; the same year he was defeated by the fanatically anti-Communist ex-Communist J. D. Lawrence for both the T.U.C. and the Final Appeal Court 'owing to a certain amount of indifference on our part'.[2] As one member confessed, 'the Metal Workers M.M. cannot boast of any achievements, and we are therefore obliged in the first place to speak of our mistakes, in order to bring them out and prevent their repetition in the future'.[3] But the M.W.M.M. could not unilaterally remedy its main mistake, the acceptance of independent leadership.

The effect of independent leadership upon the M.M.'s work in the A.E.U. was twofold; it provided the main basis for right wing accusations of 'splitting', and it provoked the Executive into suspending the main M.M. activists. Resentment against Communist attempts to split the working class was apparent as early as May 1928, when the National Committee, meeting at Southport, passed the following resolution by 41 votes to 11:

> We denounce the attempts of the Communist Party and its chief subsidiary body the National Minority Movement to form rival bodies to the Labour Party and the T.U.C., and to seek to render futile every effort made to ameliorate the condition of the workers of this country by opposing Labour Party candidates in Parliamentary and local elections, and by constant endeavour to obstruct and frustrate the administration of Congress policy by the General Council . . . Finally, we authorize the E.C. to take such steps as may be appropriate within the meaning of the union's rules to the terms of this resolution.[4]

[1] 'Report of A.E.U. Advisory Committee to the Sixth Annual Conference, 1929'.
[2] M.W.M.M., 'A.E.U. Final Appeal Court and T.U.C. Delegations', 5 March, 1930.
[3] *Report of the 5th International Conference of Revolutionary Metal Workers*, 1–6 September 1930, 48.
[4] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, June 1928, 9–10.

Even more important was the opportunity the new line presented to the A.E.U. Executive to expel the majority of leading M.M. militants in the summer of 1931.

In June 1931 the Engineering and Allied Employers National Federation called the unions in the Engineering Joint Trades Movement to a conference, explained the industry's difficulties during the depression, and proposed to increase working hours from 47 to 48, to reduce over-time and night-shift rates, and to lower piece-work prices. After discussions the Federation eventually agreed to keep the 47 hour week, but insisted on the other changes. The A.E.U. and the other unions accepted the agreement without consulting the membership.[1] Led by the M.W.M.M. the rank and file naturally objected. Protest meetings were organized, and the following notice appeared in the *Daily Worker* on 20 June:

> The active worker must try to get Committees of Action elected in the factories that will represent all the workers, skilled, unskilled, men, women, and youths, organized and unorganized, that will carry the campaign into the union branches and engineering districts, and will take steps to prepare for rank and file resistance of the workers if any settlement is made for worsened conditions of employment. That will repudiate the action of the union leaders and that will form the organizations and the leadership that will enable the workers to carry on the fight against the employers and the union leaders united front.[2]

Signed by all the major leaders of the M.W.M.M., the advertisement gave the Executive a chance to get rid of the M.W.M.M.; by advocating Committees of Action, including members and non-members, they were threatening to split the union. The signatories had

> advocated a form of organization . . . with the object of creating an organization and leadership fundamentally opposed to that provided in the constitution of the A.E.U. . . . your action is calculated to injure the union; your conduct has been inconsistent with your duties as a member of the union; it is designed to bring the union into discredit; and is an attempt to break up the union.[3]

The Executive first suspended and then expelled all the signatories except Tanner, who publicly confessed his

[1] J. B. Jeffreys, 240. [2] *Daily Worker*, 20 June, 1931.
[3] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, August 1931, 4–15.

error in signing the notice and undertook to 'abide by the policy as decided upon by the bodies responsible in accordance with rule' in future. Already weakened by the Executive's attacks, and split by sectarian controversy, the Movement was unable to withstand the expulsions and the final desertion of its leading union politician, and by the end of 1931 it had completely disappeared from the union.

In one sense the collapse of the Minority Movement in the Miners, the N.U.R. and the A.E.U. seemed to confirm the correctness of the 'Third Period' analysis. The reformist unions were merely carrying out their duties as an arm of the machinery of bourgeois capitalism. Hence the need for the M.M. to cease being a 'trade union opposition', and to 'take the field as an independent organizer of the economic battles of the working class under the leadership of the Communist Party'. 'From which it follows that the basis of the Minority Movement must be not in the trade unions but in the factories'.[1] The most important attempts to carry the conflict into the factories, and to apply the new tactic of independent leadership in practice, were in the clothing industry and the woollen textile industry.

The United Clothing Workers' Union

Throughout the 1920s the London clothing workers were suffering under the dual impact of rationalization and declining status.[2] The increased use of the conveyor-belt was associated with the rationalization of hand-cutting, and the spread of female labour. Although rationalization did not raise productivity, it was generally believed that it did, and resentment was felt against the failure of earnings to increase. These genuine grounds for discontent were exacerbated by the feeling that their union, the Tailors and Garment Workers' Union, was failing to defend their interests. The N.U.T. & G.W. was based on Leeds, most of its funds were

[1] W. Rust, 'The Minority Movement', *The Communist International*, vol. 6, no. 26, 1085–7.

[2] Unless otherwise stated the following section is based upon S. Lerner, 'The United Clothing Workers' Union', in *Breakaway Unions and the Small Trade Union* (Allen & Unwin, 1961), 85–143.

channelled through Leeds, and most full time officials originated in Leeds; the London membership felt cut off from the centre of union power. Moreover, the mainly Jewish and Protestant London membership resented the dominance of a Catholic minority in Leeds; the National Secretary (Andrew Conley), the National Organizer (Anne Loughlin), and the London District Secretary (Bernard Sullivan), were all Catholics.[1]

This real conflict between London and Leeds was intensified by a clash of personalities between the main protagonists on either side. Andrew Conley was an Irish Catholic, with many of the qualities and defects allegedly characteristic of his race. Like many Irish-American politicians, he combined a lively sense of humour with a talent for organization. A candidate for the priesthood until forced to give up his education by the death of his father, he transferred his loyalties to his union. He regarded the London organizer's loyalty to the Minority Movement as treachery to the union, and continued adherence to the left wing views he had once held himself as wrong-headed. The London Organizer of the union, Sam Elsbury, shared Conley's combativeness; he was at his best when starting a strike, not when negotiating its settlement. But where Conley was a loyal Labour Party supporter, Elsbury was a founder member of the Communist Party and a frequent delegate to Communist trade union conferences. Conley and Elsbury were sufficiently alike to enjoy fighting each other, and sufficiently far apart politically for a fight to be likely.

The Rego dispute in October 1928 was the proximate cause of the break between London and Leeds which led to the emergence of the U.C.W.U. The London District's campaign for a closed shop in the industry encountered difficulties at Rego Clothiers Ltd., Edmonton, when a female worker refused to pay her dues. Union members refused to work alongside her until she paid up, and the London District threatened strike action unless the Rego management agreed to enforce a closed shop. The management refused,

[1] For a useful, although not historical, discussion of Catholic trade union activity, see R. Butterworth, *The Structure and Organization of some Catholic lay organizations in Australia & Great Britain* (Unpub. D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1959), chapters 8, 9.

and an unofficial strike began. The N.U.T. & G.W. Executive refused to sanction the dispute, as it would have prejudiced the negotiations for a new national agreement then under way. Despite this hostility, the London District decided to stay out. After two and a half months of bickering the dispute ended with the Rego management agreeing to recognize the union, but not to enforce the closed shop, and to reinstate as many strikers as possible.

However, the return to work was not the end of the story. By supporting the strikers the London membership had raised the question of their relations with the Leeds Executive, whilst by refusing to argue the Executive's case with his membership Elsbury had failed to carry out his obligations as a full time official, and was thus liable for dismissal. After a summary trial Elsbury was dismissed from his post and the National Organizers forcibly took over the keys to his London office. The London membership asked the Leeds Executive to reinstate Elsbury, and when this was refused decided to form a new union. The breakaway United Clothing Workers Union thus came into existence on 7 March 1929.

The new union grew rapidly. Although it is impossible to estimate its size accurately, the new union soon won over a majority of N.U.T. & G.W. members in London, and substantial minorities in Leeds—especially among Jewish workers—and Glasgow. But the new union met with immediate resistance from the T.U.C. and the employers. This came to a head in the Polikoff dispute less than two months after the formation of the union. When the U.C.W.U. was formed the majority of members at the Polikoff works in North London transferred to the new union, and the management granted recognition. When members of the N.U.T. & G.W. applied for jobs at Polikoff they were informed they could only work if they joined the U.C.W.U. The N.U.T. & G.W. naturally protested against Polikoff's breaking the national agreement, and secured the support of the Wholesale Clothiers Federation. Wishing to avoid a strike before strike funds had been accumulated Elsbury declared that members of his union would work alongside any trade unionist. Nonetheless, the Polikoff management

refused to allow the collection of dues by the U.C.W.U. Accordingly, after securing the promise of funds from the Industrial Committee of the Communist Party, Elsbury called his Polikoff members out on strike.

From the beginning the strikers were in difficulties, for the N.U.T. & G.W. naturally refused support and sought to secure more jobs for its own members. They were considerably helped by the comparatively good conditions which had always prevailed at Polikoffs, preventing the dispute about recognition from developing into a dispute about wages and conditions. As a large poster which Polikoffs placed outside their factory proclaimed: 'No Question of Wages and Conditions is Involved in This Strike. It is a Communist Attempt to Destroy the Recognized Trade Union which is the Only Trade Union the Firm can Recognize'. Although Polikoff was willing to recognize both unions, pressure from the Wholesale Clothiers' Federation and a threat by the Transport and General Workers Union to black goods from his factory forced him to take his stand with the N.U.T. & G.W. Unwilling to see his firm lose money whilst the unions fought between themselves, Polikoff obtained summonses against 67 strikers under the Employers and Workmen Act (1875), alleging breach of contract for failing to give a week's notice. In a test case at the end of May judgement (with costs) was given against a striker. The strike collapsed when the strike pay which the C.P. had promised failed to materialize, the strikers returning to work after giving a signed undertaking not to join any union not affiliated to the T.U.C.

Elsbury was naturally furious with the Communist Party, since he had only agreed to call his members out on condition that funds were provided. Accordingly, he demanded an inquiry into what had happened to the strike funds. The C.P. took a different view, regarding this attitude as 'defeatism', a right wing deviation; strike pay was only a marginal consideration weighed against the advantages of any strike action.[1] Elsbury was called before a Party Committee, questioned on his views regarding strike policy, and told to resign from his post as General Secretary. When he refused he

[1] *Inprecorr*, 1929, 1198.

was expelled from the Party. Elsbury attempted to continue his trade union work, but he was forcibly removed from his office in Norton Folgate, Bishopsgate, 'by hooligans'; he was hounded out of the union as a 'Social Fascist' and 'pretended militant'.[1] After a month attempting to organize support within his union without office, books, or funds, he gave up, and asked to rejoin the N.U.T. & G.W. The union refused his application for membership; he spent the early 1930s looking for work. His story is a sad comment on the rewards of militant union activity.

The Party succeeded in asserting control of the U.C.W.U.; its candidate, E. R. Pountney, was elected General Secretary, the inaugural National Conference of the union affiliated to the Minority Movement and endorsed the new line. But Elsbury's expulsion and the dictatorial attitude adopted by the Communist Party towards the union had a disastrous effect upon the U.C.W.U. The Secretary of the Leeds branch was justifiably angry at the lack of consultation: 'My opinion is that this action is going to retard the progress of the Leeds organization, and the opinion of the constituent parts of the organization should have been taken before such a statement was issued'. He asked for the minutes of the meeting which decided to remove Elsbury from his post; one month and several letters later he received them.[2] Demoralization was further increased by the Party's failure to provide funds. The Leeds branch was in a parlous condition by the spring of 1930, with 'no organizer,

[1] Lerner, 132–3, quotes the official Elsbury and Communist versions of this meeting on Sunday, 22 December 1929 which ended in uproar and the clearing of the premises by the police. A third version, contained in a letter from the London organizer Dave Gershon to the Secretary of the Leeds branch, is more detailed than the *Daily Herald* version and more plausible than the *Daily Worker* one. 'At the meeting held by Elsbury on Sunday he actually brought along a group of non-members of the union whom we were informed were paid for the purpose to eject any of our members who asked questions or tried to make statements. [A member] got up to ask a question and six of the hired thugs made a dive for him and knocked him down kicking him on the head. That was how the trouble began and naturally the meeting ended in a scrimmage during which Elsbury cleared off and went for the police, three of whom appeared and cleared the hall' (Gershon to Bloom, 21 January 1930). Elsbury probably took a few friends along to the meeting just in case of trouble, and they pounced unnecessarily.

[2] Bloom to General Secretary, U.C.W.U., 19 December 1929, 31 December 1929, 18 January 1930, 21 January 1930; E. R. Pountney to G. Bloom, 20 January 1930 (loaned by Mr. J. Roche, Leeds).

no money, no members, no rooms'. Leeds continually urged the appointment of a full-time organizer, to prevent total collapse, but none was forthcoming. 'There is no finance to pay a full time official and the branch must not look to having one until it gets into a position to contribute towards having one . . . I wish to repeat to Leeds what I have been obliged to tell Glasgow that there is no fairy-godmother with a pocket full of money here in London to look to'.[1] The union retained only a fraction of its original membership; as one report of November 1931 stated, 'after the betrayal of the renegade Elsbury . . . of a number of strikers, the Union practically fell apart, having lost nine-tenths of its membership. The absence of a strong consolidated leadership, petty quarrels, personal squabbles, craft tactics, etc., kept on corrupting the organization'. By 1933 the U.C.W.U. had 'dwindled into another small East End union', with only a minority of workers in any organized shop, confined to the smaller workshops, and kept alive only by the devotion of about two hundred enthusiasts. In 1935 the union finally closed down, and individual members rejoined the N.U.T. & G.W.

The roots of the U.C.W.U. lay in the inadequacy of the measures taken to integrate the London clothing workers into the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers. But the latent conflict would not have erupted without the leadership of Sam Elsbury and his commitment to Third Period ideology. The new line removed Elsbury's inhibitions against splitting the N.U.T. & G.W. by providing ideological justification for a course of action unjustifiable in purely industrial terms. Similarly, the new line explains the C.P.'s readiness to sponsor industrial action, and to promise resources. But the gap between Communist and trade union reality was revealed by the discussion at the Party committee meeting which expelled Elsbury. When Elsbury raised doubts about the wisdom of indiscriminate strike action, about the need to consider finance, and about the reluctance of non-Communists to strike without financial backing he was accused of right wing deviationism and expelled from the Party.

[1] Bloom, 7 April 1930; Pountney to Bloom, 24 June 1930.

A similar gap between ideology and reality was revealed in the second major test of the new tactic of independent leadership, the Bradford woollen textile strike in April 1930.

The Bradford Woollen Textile Strike

Neither the Communist Party nor the M.M. had ever been very strong in Lancashire or Yorkshire. 'In Lancashire the Party had never secured more than a few adherents outside of Liverpool and Manchester; and the Manchester membership tended to be dominated by a young Jewish group which had few contacts with the workers in the cotton and mining districts'.[1] Despite the work of Felix Walsh in the Bradford district, probably the largest Party membership there was in April 1930 at the time of the strike, when it reached twenty-four.[2] There were only nine Party members and nine non-Party members of the M.M. in Burnley in September 1932.[3] At the 1929 Annual Conference of the M.M. there were only six textile delegates representing one trade union branch and four workers' meetings. Nor were small numbers compensated for by high quality; the Communists of North East Lancashire were, according to Margaret McCarthy, of poor quality, the few energetic ones losing hope and eventually ending up in Mosley's New Party.[4] Partly because of the large number of women workers in the cotton and woollen textile industries, partly because of the strength of the Non-Conformist and Catholic Churches among the working class aristocracy from whom the M.M. usually gained its best recruits, partly because of the close contact between textile union leaders and their membership in Lancashire, and partly perhaps because Lancashire and Yorkshire working men were reluctant to listen to what non-Lancashire or non-Yorkshire men had to say about their problems, the Movement failed to make any headway in either county.[5] A good outdoor meeting could be obtained on a fine day outside the misnamed Employment Exchange, but no more. An older radicalism was too

[1] Pelling, *C.P.*, 61–2.
[2] *The Communist International* vol. 7 (15 July 1930), 19.
[3] Ibid., vol. 9, no. 19 (15 October 1932), 675.
[4] *Now for Action*, 39; McCarthy, 156.
[5] See also H. A. Turner, 28–9, 316–20.

well established, particularly in Bradford; the two leading labour papers in Yorkshire, the *Leeds Citizen* and the *Yorkshire Factory Times*, were both highly critical of the Party and the Movement throughout the 1920s.

Yet, with declining exports and rising unemployment, Yorkshire offered one of the most favourable openings for the M.M. in late 1929. Ever since 1925 the employers had been attempting to secure wage reductions in the woollen textile industry; but in 1925 a Court of Inquiry decided that wage rates should remain the same until 1927. In 1927 the employers terminated the agreement, and from 1927 until 1930 abortive negotiations periodically took place between the employers and the unions. Meanwhile, some employers attempted to enforce local reductions, causing local disputes like those around Bradford at the end of 1929. The situation deteriorated, and early in 1930 the Labour Government appointed a Court of Inquiry, headed by Lord Macmillan. The Macmillan Committee decided that timeworkers' wages should be reduced by $9\frac{1}{4}$ per cent, pieceworkers' by $8\frac{3}{4}$ per cent. Neither the employers nor the unions accepted the settlement, the employers insisting upon greater reductions in some cases. The unions offered compromise reductions of 5·8 and 5·34 per cent respectively, an offer which the employers refused to consider. General Council attempts at mediation failed, and on 8 April the woollen textile unions, already under pressure from local guerrilla strikes, called a stoppage.[1]

The M.M. took a serious interest in developments in Bradford long before the crisis blew up following the publication of the Macmillan Committee's proposals in February 1930. As early as 6 September 1929 the Movement considered diverting Fred Thompson from a recruiting campaign for the Seamen's M.M. in the North East to Bradford —'in view of the seriousness of the situation and the lack of local organization'—but decided against it. The Movement

[1] *T.U.C. Report, 1930*, 90–1. The strike began on 8 April when the night shift at Firth's Hill, Spen Valley—largely a non-union mill—stopped work. It spread through Bradford and Shipley on the 10th, and by the 13th Bradford and Shipley were closed down. For a biased account of the origins and history of the strike up to the 12 April see E. H. Brown's (chairman of the Central Strike Committee) article in *The Daily Worker*, 14 April 1930.

could not afford to appoint a full time organizer for Bradford.[1] Despite this interest and occasional visits to the area by the popular district organizer for the Party, Ernest Woolley, M.M. support in the area had not increased by March; the Executive Bureau mordantly noted on 14 March: 'although this situation had been so favourable for us, the M.M. had not a single member in the area'. However, a Conference of Action was organized for 23 March to protest against the Macmillan Committee's proposals, with Will Gallacher as the main speaker. It was moderately successful; 150 delegates attended, and a Committee of Action was elected. But, significantly, there were no representatives from trade union branches or specific factory organizations; as usual in 1930, the Movement depended upon the transitory support of unorganized workers.[2]

Throughout the next two months the Yorkshire area was flooded with Communist speakers, pamphlets, strike bulletins and factory papers. Most, like the *Cardigan Mills Bulletin* issued by the Leeds local of the C.P., were double paged mimeographed sheets calling for 'strike action now'. The Bradford Rank and File Strike Committee, for example, appealed to Leeds woollen workers to 'strike now . . . we have the most important positions in our hands—we are winning'. The help of sympathetic—mainly united front—organizations was called upon; the Leeds Branch of the United Clothing Workers Union was asked to organize a sympathetic demonstration for the release of 'class war prisoner' Ernest Woolley from prison. The International Class War Prisoners Aid was brought in. But the most important supporting campaign was the M.M.'s Textile Aid Campaign; since many of the strikers were not members of any trade union a bare minimum of strike pay had to be raised from voluntary contributions.[3]

The Textile Aid Campaign, initially organized by the Workers International Relief (British Section), was taken

[1] Executive Bureau Minutes 6 September, 18 October, 22 November 1929.

[2] Executive Bureau Minutes 14 March 1930; *The Daily Worker*, 12 March 1930; *The Daily Worker* 25 March 1930 pp. 1 & 12; Executive Bureau Minutes, 28 March 1930.

[3] *Cardigan Mills Bulletin*, 10 May 1930, lent by Mr. Jim Roche of Leeds. John A. Mahon to the Leeds Branch of the U.C.W.U., 21 May 1930.

over by the M.M. in April. The M.M. Executive Bureau agreed on the 11th that 'the most urgent need was textile aid' (a surprising conclusion in view of the M.M.'s leadership of the workers' counter-offensive against capitalism). On Monday the 14th a meeting of all London contacts was held, and the London Textile Aid Committee set up. Tom Mann was, as always, chairman, and John Mahon the secretary, although George Renshaw seems to have done most of the work. By the 16th all members had been circularized for contributions, a three page 'Speakers Notes' on 'The Issues in the Textile Strike' published for the use of 'all trade union branches and working class organizations', and a speaker made available. On the 19th six woollen workers from Bradford addressed a meeting in the Clothing Workers Hall, Aldgate. Within a week the campaign had been set on its feet.[1]

It proved more difficult to extend the campaign onto the local level. According to J. R. Campbell in the July issue of *The Communist International* the campaign had failed to catch on except in London, Scotland and Yorkshire. The London Textile Aid Committee had collected 'just over' £100 by 9 May. In Yorkshire there was a Bradford District Organizer, working from the Socialist Hall in Shipley, and E. R. Pountney, in Leeds for a month on United Clothing Workers Union business, acted as Leeds District Organizer from the office of the Leeds Branch of the union in New York Street. The difficulties in collecting a large sum are sharply illustrated by one collecting sheet which has accidentally survived from Leeds. The sheet showed a total of 12*s.* 7*d.* including a generous 2*s.* from Sam Elsbury and a sad 'all I have got' 2*d.*; the most popular contribution was 3*d.*[2]

[1] See Bradford Rank and File Strike Committee's appeal for contributions to 'Workers' International Relief Textile Aid Fund', in *The Daily Worker*, 12 April 1930; Minutes of Executive Bureau Meeting, 11 April 1930; Executive Committee, National Minority Movement, 'To all M.M. Executive Committee members, all M.M. contacts', 12 April 1930; London Textile Aid Committee, 'The Issues in the Textile Strike', 15 April 1930; George Allison 'To all London Groups', 16 April 1930.

[2] J. R. Campbell, 'The Workers' Counter Offensive in the Woollen Textile Industry', in *Communist International*, vol. 7, no. 7 (15 July 1930), 24; collecting sheet kept by Mr. J. Roche.

The Bradford woollen textile strike of April-May 1930, or as J. R. Campbell preferred to call it 'the workers' counter offensive in the woollen textile industry' was highly important in the history of the M.M. For the tactic of attempting to lead a strike independently of the trade unions and translating discontent over wage reductions into 'the struggle for power' was seen to fail miserably. Despite Communist success in securing the election of Ernest Brown as chairman of the Central Strike Committee set up by the unorganized strikers, the strike collapsed after three weeks as strikers began returning to work against the orders of the Strike Committee. The failure could not be blamed upon a lack of resources; virtually the whole of the Politbureau had decamped to Bradford. It revealed an inability to profit from a highly favourable situation. The reason for this failure was partly organizational—the failure to co-ordinate C.P. and M.M. effort—and partly strategic—the slogan of the 'struggle for power' was inappropriate and by June even Communists recognized that it was premature.[1] According to one writer, 'the M.M., the more natural leader of such a struggle, was deliberately kept out of the picture, whereas the entire Political Bureau of the Communist Party took up residence in Bradford to exert Communist Party leadership over the struggle'.[2] No trade unionist would have committed the elementary mistake of forming strike pickets from strikers who had never worked at the mill being picketed.[3]

Relations between the Movement and the Party during the Bradford dispute were very confused. Ostensibly, the M.M. was leading the strike on behalf of the Communist Party. To take one random public example, the *Daily Worker* on 5 April contained a long article on the strike headed 'National Minority Movement takes the lead in Bradford'. However, apart from Felix Walsh, who was a local member of both the C.P. and the M.M., and Ernest Woolley, a member of the M.M. Executive Bureau who had only been prominent in the Movement for a short time, all the political workers described by the *Daily Worker* as

[1] See below, p. 149.
[2] Mr. George Renshaw, letter to the writer, 18 April 1963.
[3] Example quoted in Campbell, 20.

active in Yorkshire on behalf of the M.M. were more prominent as Party leaders—if indeed they were members of the M.M. at all. Pollitt, Gallacher, Mahon, and Rose Smith were addressing meetings at the end of March, not Allison or even Thompson or Horner. Even Palme Dutt and the left wing leader of the Young Communist League Walter Tapsall were in Bradford at the end of April. E. H. Brown, the chairman and driving force of the Committee of Action, which later became the Central Strike Committee, had never had any close contact with the M.M. It was the Central Committee of the Communist Party, on the advice of the Political Bureau, which decided on 5 or 6 April to 'throw all available resources into the Bradford area in order that the Party can lead, through the Minority Movement, the big economic conflicts that are taking place'. Despite the M.M.'s nominal leadership of the Central Strike Committee, the position assigned by the Party to the M.M. was a very subordinate one.[1]

Communist tactics during the strike followed new line orthodoxy closely. The Party pressed for the formation of independent strike committees composed of union members and 'nons', and the immediate transformation of the economic dispute to the higher plane of class conscious, political conflict. Mahon reported to the M.M. Executive Bureau on this need to transform the struggle: '[we must] politicise the struggle . . . [so that] . . . the woollen workers come through this stage of the battle with the clearest understanding before them, and confidence in the revolutionary movement . . . At each stage in the struggle we must issue the slogan which will lift it higher'. Demands such as the 6-hour day for young workers, the 7-hour day for all workers, and the end of arbitration, were to elevate the economic struggle to the political plane. The organizational embodiment of this 'struggle for power' was the strike committee, which later became the mill committee.[2]

In accordance with the principles of the united front from

[1] *The Daily Worker*, 5 April 1930; *The Daily Worker*, 26 April 1930; Executive Bureau Minutes, 11 April 1930; *The Daily Worker*, 9 April 1930; Executive Bureau Minutes, 16 May 1930.

[2] Executive Bureau Minutes, 9 May 1930.

below, the Mill Committees were to embody permanently the revolutionary consciousness developed during the strike. 'A strong revolutionary Mill Committee Movement must be developed as a section of the M.M.'—partly because of the line and partly to salvage something for the Party from the collapse of the strike. The M.M. Executive Bureau explained its plans for the Mill Committee Movement in a letter to the Central Strike Committee on 14 June 1930. After urging the Strike Committee to stand firm despite the drift back to work, the Bureau asked them to initiate a drive for the election of permanent mill committees at mass meetings. The Mill Committees were to be organized into districts, each with a Delegate Council consisting of delegates from the Mill Committees and representatives of the N.U.W.M. The Central Strike Committee, transformed into the Central Council of the Mill Committee Movement, was to retain control of the 'day to day struggle'. The new Central Council was to be affiliated to the M.M., and thus maintain an 'organic connection' with the R.I.L.U. However, the plans proved abortive; the Mill Committee Movement never got off the ground. There was no later reference to the Mill Committee Movement in the Communist press.[1]

Neither the demands which were to make the revolutionary cause popular nor the committees which were to translate this popularity into organized pressure proved effective. The demands were wildly optimistic and unrelated to the real issues of the strike, whatever their objective merit may have been in the slump conditions of early 1930. Although the Central Strike Committee was influential in the early days of the strike, with the failure to organize factory and mill strike committees at an early stage it soon became isolated. Further, as J. R. Campbell maintained, the Party had failed during the strike to break the mass of trade unionists away from the 'trade union bureaucrats'.[2] When

[1] Minority Movement Executive Bureau to the Bradford Central Strike Committee, 14 June 1930, copy lent by Mr. James Roche. The R.I.L.U. decided that the attempt to form Mill Committees was premature, a means of avoiding building up the M.M.; W. Rust, 'The Situation in the C.P.G.B.', in *Communist International*, vol. 7, no. 11 (15 September 1930) 199.

[2] J. R. Campbell, 23.

the union executives had agreed upon compromise reductions with the employers there was no organized opposition among trade unionists; and once union members had returned to work the others inevitably trickled back.

The tactic of independent leadership had failed, even in the very favourable circumstances of Yorkshire in 1929–30. The failure was partly due to incidental factors, the lack of knowledge of local conditions, the lack of solid rank and file support in the area, the organizational confusion between the Party and the M.M. However, in the history of the Party and the M.M. the defeat was more significant; the Bradford woollen strike was more than just another dispute which the Communists had helped to foment, but which the unions really controlled and finally settled. Within the framework of the new left policy the strike was not an ordinary economic struggle, it was a 'struggle for power'. The unofficial strikes of late 1929 supposedly showed the workers' hostility to the reactionary union bureaucracy, and their readiness for revolutionary struggle; the Party believed its time had come. But the strike collapsed, 'the workers went back with their ranks broken and not under our leadership, we have since failed to register any organizational development'.[1] The workers returned to the unions. Mahon was forced to admit in his first obituary on the strike that 'the whole conception of the struggle for power, which had been held by some of the leading M.M. and Party comrades', had been mistaken.[2] However, if the 'struggle for power' was mistaken in Bradford, what had become of the 'radicalization of the masses', the desertion of the 'Social Fascist' trade unions, the whole concept of independent leadership.

Mahon could repudiate the struggle for power only because a shift away from independent leadership had already begun in the international Communist movement.

[1] *The Worker*, 3 January 1931.
[2] M.M. Executive Bureau Minutes, 6 June 1930.

VII

THE MOVE AWAY FROM THE NEW LINE: THE END OF THE NATIONAL MINORITY MOVEMENT

AMBIGUITY about the appropriate attitude towards activity within the reformist trade unions persisted throughout the whole period of independent leadership. On the one hand it was regarded as 'incorrect', 'a remnant of reformist ideology'. On the other, it was recognized as a necessary technique for garnering support. Accordingly, Comintern and M. M. statements of the new line also contained directives on the need to continue work within the reformist trade unions.[1] Even the Movement's Sixth Annual Conference resolution, 'On the Tasks of the National Minority Movement,' which signalized acceptance of the new line, contained a passage on the need 'to wage, on the basis of the struggle for the day-to-day demands of the workers, a more determined struggle to secure the official positions in the union branches and districts'.[2]

Ambiguity, and the coexistence of conflicting views, served a positive ideological and bureaucratic function; authority existed for any future changes, and dissidents could be accused of having failed to understand the line correctly. As early as the winter of 1929–30 there were signs that the R.I.L.U. was beginning to recognize the limitations of independent leadership. This clouded recognition brought with it a new emphasis on the positive role of the M.M., and strong criticism of the C.P. for neglecting the Movement, for only 'formally' accepting its role. The development was not, strictly speaking, new; it was merely an emphasis upon different parts of existing statements. Instead of isolating the need for work on the factory floor,

[1] Letter from the C.I. to the Party Congress (*Resolutions of the 11th Congress of the C.P.G.B.*, 39).

[2] *Now for Action*, 15.

and contrasting it with work in the trade union branch, new pronouncements emphasized the need to base the Party's programme on the day-to-day demands of the workers and the good effect this would have in creating 'revolutionary unity'. This eventually led to renewed emphasis on work within the existing trade unions, and a playing down of the need to create new unions. By the time of the Fifth R.I.L.U. Congress, in August 1930, the C.P.G.B. was being criticized for its 'formal' application of the new line. The change was centred upon the development of the 'united front from below'.

One interpretation of the united front from below is that it was merely another name for independent leadership, a way of expressing independent leadership in united front terms, a way of keeping old bottles for the new wine.[1] This was true, but only half of the truth. As applied to England, the united front from below represented a compromise between two extreme strategies, the united front from above and independent leadership, using the language of both. It represented the political equivalent of the 'heads I win, tails you lose' form of argument; for if the united front from below, meaning independent leadership, proved to be unsuccessful, the united front from below, meaning infiltration of the lower levels of the reformist trade unions could be returned to without any apparent contradiction. The meaning of the slogan was defined by its context.

Whilst members of the M.M. were preparing for the major trial of independent leadership in the early spring of 1930, they were sharply reminded of their duty to continue work within the existing trade unions. On 31 March the *Daily Worker* published a long article headed 'Communist Party activity—work in the Trade Unions . . . the danger of neglect'.[2] The new line had already patently failed to end the isolation of the Movement and the Party from the mass of industrial workers—membership still continued to decline. It was soon to fail as an industrial tactic. The *Daily Worker* article foreshadowed the path the Party and the

[1] S. Lerner, 'The United Clothing Workers Union' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1956), 21–22.

[2] *The Daily Worker*, 31 March 1930.

Movement were to take out of the impasse of industrial isolation. The aim of the article was to show that independent leadership did not involve any relaxation of work within the reformist trade unions. 'Since the Tenth Plenum of the E.C.C.I. (July 1929) there has been a decided falling off in the trade union work of our Party, and a feeling that there are no further opportunities for work inside the reformist trade unions. *This false theory is the essence of opportunism in practice, for it means the acceptance of the Tenth Plenum decisions but a refusal to carry them out.*' The writer went on:

> Today there is a clear understanding of the supreme need of the factory being the basis from which all our work should be carried out, but a non-recognition of the necessity of also carrying that same work forward into the trade unions. The idea that every worker who is in the trade unions is a reactionary is a false one, and needs to be combated. The idea that we can no longer win victories, particularly in the branches and in the winning of posts . . . is incorrect . . . The Industrial Department at the Party Centre has been reorganized; a drive is to be made to get this work of winning the masses who are in the unions started again.

The platform for the new drive was to be the programme of the Minority Movement, the method the expansion of M.M. groups around Party factory cells.

Whilst the tactics of the Fourth R.I.L.U. Congress were being followed in Bradford preparations were being made for their revision. The Fifth Congress of the R.I.L.U., at which the main M.M. representatives were George Allison, Tom Mann, William Allan and Wal Hannington, was less revolutionary than the Fourth Congress.[1] The main tactical task of the Congress was to 'make concrete' the new line of independent leadership. In the English context this involved a confirmation of the progressive dilution of the new line which had already begun to take place. The Congress, in a mood of 'Leninist-Bolshevist self criticism', examined the work of the M.M. since the Fourth Congress, and concluded that 'whilst noting certain achievements . . . the Minority Movement is practically isolated from the masses'.

[1] Quotations taken from *Resolutions of the Fifth World Congress of the R.I.L.U. held in Moscow, August 1930* (N.M.M., 1931), *passim*, and the excerpts published in *The Worker*, 19 December 1930.

Will Rust put the same conclusion more bluntly in September: 'the present situation of the Minority Movement is the most glaring example of the disastrous results of 'Left' sectarianism'.[1] Individual and collective affiliations to the M.M. had declined, the circulation of *The Worker* had dropped, and many M.M. sympathizers had lost office within the trade unions. The Congress' resolution on the M.M. examined in detail the reasons for this isolation. As a statement of the R.I.L.U.'s interpretation of the M.M.'s parlous condition the resolution is worth quoting at length:

> The weakness of the M.M. is mainly due to its failure to energetically and effectively carry out the policy of the independent leadership of economic struggles, and further, the right and left mistakes made in practice. The line of independent leadership . . . as laid down by the Fourth Congress of the R.I.L.U. was not carried out by the M.M. until its Sixth Conference in August 1929, and then only formally. The former leadership of the M.M. opposed the new line, and hence retarded an understanding of the new line in the ranks of the M.M. Attempts to apply the line have revealed open resistance in some sections of the M.M. Events, however, proved the correctness of the policy. The defects in the practical application of the policy have been characterized by the following:
>
> (A) Open opportunist mistakes: the strongly entrenched trade union legalism existing in the ranks of the Minority Movement; failure to understand and expose the social-fascist development of the bureaucracy and the treacherous role of the pseudo-left; denial of the willingness of the masses of workers to struggle or of their readiness to break through the restriction imposed by the bureaucracy; underestimation of the fighting capacities of the unorganized, and in some places the continuation of the policy of 'force the reformist leaders to fight'. This right opportunist attitude found expression in the lack of preparation for the cotton and wool workers' struggles, the attempt to make the reformist leaders fight (Burnley), the underestimation of the Coal Mines Bill, the underestimation and lack of serious efforts to establish mill committees in Bradford, and of crass examples of trade union legalism in South Wales.
>
> (B) Sectarian mistakes. 'Left' sectarian mistakes; the line of independent leadership . . . and of class against class has been wrongly interpreted as meaning the abandonment of work within the reformist

[1] W. Rust, 'The Situation in the C.P.G.B.', *The Communist International*, vol. 7, no. 11 (September 1930), 199.

unions as seen in failure to conduct a fight around our programme in the unions; non-attendance of M.M. members at trade union meetings; the giving up of the fight for posts in the trade union branches; serious neglect of the struggle against the trade union bureaucrats (South Wales-Mardy, Bradford strike); the calling of strikes without preparation ('Strike now' slogan in woollens); premature raising of demands for new unions (miners and textiles); slogans not conforming to the actual situations (raising the slogan of 'the struggle for power' in Bradford); the mechanical enforcement of programmes of action and demands from the top; the general indulgence of abstract appeals and phrasemongering as a substitute for day-to-day systematic practical activities; failure to select and popularize simple, practical economic and political demands.[1]

Whereas right opportunism had accompanied the formal acceptance of the new line in 1928–9, in 1929–30 left wing sectarianism had become the bugbear. According to John Mahon the resolutions of the Sixth Annual Conference of the M.M. had treated the question of independent leadership 'in a formal manner'; its vision of a reconstructed M.M. had been unrealistic.[2] George Allison summarized the weaknesses of the movement in 1930 most succinctly when he pronounced 'passivity and phrasemongering are no substitutes for hard practical work'.[3]

Although it re-asserted the correctness of the Fourth Congress' decisions, the Fifth Congress also realized that the only way to revive the M.M. involved a watering down of independent leadership. The Movement's isolation could be broken only by concentrated effort on the shop floor and in the union branch. 'At present the majority of our sections are completely disorganized, systematic group and fraction work is almost entirely lacking.' The solution to the problem of the M.M.'s isolation lay in the formation of a genuine united front from below, with a programme based upon the immediate demands of the working class. In this connection 'it cannot be too strongly emphasized that the Minority Movement must make a real turn to systematic activity in

[1] *Fifth Congress*, 108–9. The catalogue was only slightly less alarming than the 'abridged' list of 94 mistakes Losovsky read to the Tenth Plenum of the E.C.C.I. (*Inprecorr*, 1929, 1200–1).

[2] *The Worker*, 15 August 1930.

[3] *The Worker*, 26 September 1930.

the trade unions . . . this work is an essential part of the independent leadership of economic struggles'. The earlier renunciation of work within the trade unions had been incorrect, due to 'a marked tendency to regard the Minority Movement not as a united front organization but as a duplicate of the Party and the tendency not to differentiate between the leaders and the rank and file'. The watchword for the future was to be unity of the rank and file. Slogans such as 'Fight for Trade Union Democracy' were to be 'popularized and not discarded'.[1] To ensure that more effort was put into the day-to-day struggle greater attention was to be paid to the R.I.L.U.'s regular directives.

In September 1930 Rust published what was virtually an obituary on the M.M.'s flirtation with independent leadership. It was a comprehensive and thorough analysis of the left sectarian mistakes which the M.M. had made since the Sixth Annual Conference. The Movement had lost its basis in the trade unions without obtaining the leadership of the rank and file.

Attempts have been made to politicize the Minority Movement overnight by mechanically tacking on general political slogans ('Down with the Labour Government', 'Fight for the Revolutionary Workers' Government') to all its statements and treating it as a shadow Communist Party. During the woollen strike it issued a membership card containing only political slogans and not a word about the immediate demands of the strikers, or such immediate political demands as 'Repeal the Trade Union Act', 'Down with Arbitration', which would have been a means of developing the political character of the strike. The Political Bureau sharply criticized the mistake, but the leadership of the Party shared with the M.M. such mistakes as the indiscriminate use of the 'Strike Now' slogan, the description of the woollen strike as a revolutionary offensive against the Labour Government, and the estimation that in this period all economic struggles automatically became political. After the wool strike the Party set itself the task of forming a Mill Committee Movement, affiliated to the R.I.L.U., and thus tried to jump over the immediate task of building up the Minority Movement with a mass individual membership, organized in groups in the Mills and reformist trade unions.[2]

[1] *Fifth Congress*, 107–114, *passim*; Rust, 'The Situation in the C.P.G.B.', 202.
[2] Rust, 199.

Everything except the terminology of independent leadership was thus discarded. The M.M. was to retain its former structure, paying very close attention to developments within other working class organizations. Once more it was to attempt to permeate existing trade unions, paying particular court to shop stewards' groups. Once more members were to be encouraged to stand for office within the reformist trade unions. Once more the programme was to be based upon the immediate demands of workers in particular industries, not the 'struggle for power'. The only difference between M.M. tactics in late 1930 and a year earlier lay in a greater emphasis upon local initiative and upon factory, rather than trade union activity. Both modifications seemed to indicate that the Movement had a clearer grasp of the problems of organizing trade union militancy.

The M.M. had essentially returned, after a short and unsuccessful flirtation with independent leadership, to the position it had occupied at the beginning of 1929. Mahon, who had been instrumental in removing the old leadership in order to help the R.I.L.U. impose independent leadership upon the Movement, was now in favour of concentrating upon activity in the reformist trade unions. Allison and Rust followed the same path. But the flirtation undermined the authority of the M.M.'s central leadership. The old leadership, particularly Pollitt, had possessed a solid union base. In 1928–9 they saw that reality was being distorted to fit an imposed ideological framework and rebelliously, and for a time successfully, resisted the imposition of the utopian strategy of independent leadership. The new leadership lacked the support, understanding, and independence of the old; its main qualification for office was a ready perception of ideological shifts. It was incapable of organizing the detailed work on the shop floor and in the trade union branch which the new strategy demanded.

However, before the M.M. Secretariat could concentrate upon reviving activity within the reformist trade unions their energies were diverted to a further campaign, the campaign for the Workers' Charter. The Charter Campaign proved to be the M.M.'s last fling at attempting to organize trade union militancy nationally.

The Workers' Charter

Throughout the winter of 1930, the Movement's main energies were devoted to the campaign for the Workers' Charter; the direct approach was neglected. The campaign, explicitly modelled on the Chartist agitation of the nineteenth century, was intended to revive the M.M. by providing a spectacular new gambit. Its failure to get off the ground, despite much hard work and extensive publicity, marked the Movement's final failure to organize rank and file trade union militancy on a comprehensive, national basis. The failure of the Campaign for the Workers' Charter reinforced the logic of the united front from below; the liquidation of the M.M., or at the very least its emasculation, became inevitable.

The Workers' Charter consisted of a 'programme of immediate demands' drawn up to meet the needs of particular industrial sections. Each industrial section was to have its own programme, the Charter summarizing and generalizing the most important demands. Although the precise proposals varied over the months, the Executive Bureau's original draft included the following demands: universal non-contributory insurance; unemployment benefit for each day of unemployment; removal of disqualifying clauses; abolition of all overtime and spreadover; the 7-hour day without wage reductions; the guaranteed week, unemployment benefit of 20*s*. per week per adult, with a wife's allowance of 10*s*. and a children's allowance of 5*s*. per child; non-payment of rent by unemployed; abolition of task work and labour transfer schemes.[1]

The campaign opened in August 1930 with the publication of Harry Pollitt's pamphlet, *The Workers' Charter*.[2] Simultaneously, *The Worker* and *The Daily Worker* began extensive publicity, and attempts were made to get the Charter raised at the Labour Party conference. However, almost before the Campaign had begun it was disrupted by self criticism. As early as 2 September George Allison wrote that although there were very good prospects for the cam-

[1] George Allison to All Groups and Affiliated Organizations, 11 August 1930.
[2] Harry Pollitt, *The Workers' Charter* (N.M.M. August 1930).

paign 'there is already being shown the very serious incorrect tendency of treating the Charter as something which is already formulated and something which we place before the workers in a mechanical manner . . . there must be no attempt to speak of the Charter as having already been drawn up or launched'.[1] The danger of a 'mechanical approach' was underlined by the Executive Bureau:

> It is necessary to combat the dangerous tendencies to sectarian and mechanical approach which have already shown themselves. The sectarian approach is that of presenting the proposals as 'our own' programme and the mechanical approach is that of presenting the proposals for the formal acceptance of the workers, by vote or resolution, without generating a movement in support.[2]

Despite these dangers the M.M. pushed ahead vigorously. In November *The Worker* claimed that the first 100,000 copies had been sold; a good sale for a M.M. pamphlet was 20,000, 8–10,000 was more usual.[3] It was sold outside cinemas and large stores, by barrel organists and Red Clarion cyclists, as well as on the shop floor and in the union branch. Local conferences were organized, for example in St. Pancras on 13 October; in Dawdon on the 18th; in North London, Burnley, Bolton, Blackburn, St. Helens, Rochdale, and Manchester on the 25th; in Middlesborough and Newcastle on the 26th. District conferences were called, for example on 28 September for Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, when 71 delegates elected a Charter Campaign Committee. Charter candidates were put up in municipal elections, for example in Bury, Rochdale, Oldham and Preston.[4]

However, the campaign did not catch on as the M.M. had hoped. 'The campaign up to the present shows several weaknesses and shortcomings.'[5] A meeting of Bermondsey

[1] George Allison to All Groups and Affiliated Organizations, 'The Development of the Campaign for the Workers' Charter', 2 September 1930.

[2] Executive Bureau 'Plan of Organization for Charter Campaign' September, 1930.

[3] *The Worker*, 7 November 1930.

[4] Information Report on Charter Campaign, weeks ending 9, 23, and 30 October 1930. Executive Bureau Minutes, 3 October 1930.

[5] Resolution on the Charter Campaign and the Next Steps, adopted by the Executive Bureau, 31 October 1930.

sympathizers called for October 8 produced only four people. The Tyneside District Party Committee reported 'activities in Newcastle have been limited . . . efforts have not been sustained due to weakness of forces'.[1] The Midlands Bureau of the M.M. reported that a meeting arranged in Coventry had been a failure because of lack of preparation; a conference called in Newcastle had been postponed for the same reason.[2] Particularly noticeable was a tendency to limit work to the unemployed, as they offered the easiest opportunities. Trade union branches did not respond to the Charter as sympathetically as the M.M. initially hoped; by mid-November only a few branches had declared their support.[3]

Despite the discouraging results of the hard work in the autumn and the bitter doubts of the effectiveness of the campaign revealed by the October discussions, the Movement pressed on with preparations for a National Charter Convention, postponed from January to Easter. Six weeks before the Convention was due to meet there were grave doubts about its usefulness; George Renshaw frankly admitted that the response to the campaign had been 'extremely disappointing'. Only 45 delegates had been elected by 6 March and very few of these had been elected by trade union branches.[4] The only M.M. industrial sections which made a real effort, according to the Executive Bureau, were the Furnishing and Building sections; railways, mining, and cotton textiles had been particularly backward.[5] When the Convention finally met in Bermondsey Town Hall on 12 April the surprisingly large total of 788 delegates, elected by 'trade union branches, Co-op Guilds, I.L.P., Communist Party, and the N.U.W.M.' endorsed the nine points of the

[1] Information Report on the Charter Campaign, week ending 9 October 1930.

[2] Ibid., also week ending 23 October, 1930.

[3] *The Worker* published the following list of supporters on 14 November: Paddington A.E.U.; Shepherd's Bush A.E.U.; Manchester 13 A.E.U.; Ferndale Lodge S.W.M.F.; United Mineworkers of Scotland Annual Conference; North London N.U.V.B.; London Furnishing Trades Shop Stewards Council; London No. 11 Boilermakers Society; Mardy Lodge S.W.M.F.; Durham Lodge D.M.A.; Central No. 1 E.U.T.; Fulham E.T.U.; Greenock No. 4 Boilermakers; Coventry District Committee Workers Union; Eltham E.T.U.; Woolwich A.U.B.T.W.; and the Southall Co-operative Political Council.

[4] Executive Bureau Minutes, 6 March 1931.

[5] Executive Bureau Minutes, 13 March 1931; 8 May 1931.

Charter and a subsidiary resolution on the 'defence of the U.S.S.R.'. However, this large figure was misleading; only 67 trade union branches, and 22 Factory Groups, elected delegates. Charter campaign committees had sent 118 delegates, the N.U.W.M. 142, and the M.M. 77. The vast majority of the delegates came from London, only 213 attending from the provinces. Although the number of delegates to the National Charter Convention seemed to indicate that it had been a success, few came from outside the circle of direct Communist influence.[1]

The Charter Campaign petered out after the Convention on 12 April.[2] According to William Allan at the Eighth Session of the R.I.L.U. Central Council, 'after the conclusion of the Campaign all the names and addresses of workers which we had collected during its progress were pushed into a drawer in a desk and nothing was done with them for several months'.[3] It was proposed to organize a National Women's Conference in the summer, but no conference took place; the remoteness of the proposal from the original conception of the campaign was symptomatic of its failure.[4]

The M.M. leadership attributed the campaign's failure partly to a deliberate concentration upon work among the unemployed, where support was easily won and lost, and partly to 'a lack of understanding of the significance of the Charter as the mobilizing medium for the counter-offensive of the workers'.[5] This lack of understanding resulted, on the one hand, in an inadequate appreciation of the relevance of local issues to the campaign.[6] A leaflet issued by the Mardy N.U.W.M. was 'bad' because it was 'merely a duplicated

[1] Executive Bureau, 'Outlines for Report on Charter Convention', 20 April 1931; H. Pollitt, 'The Charter Convention', *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, New Series, No. 11 (July 1931).

[2] One writer commented later: 'The National Charter Conference . . . was not the milestone in the history of the revolutionary movement which it should have been . . .' (Jack Gordon, 'The British Minority Movement on the Eve of the Central Council of the R.I.L.U. in *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, nos. 17–18 (N.S.) 15 October 1931, 5.

[3] *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, vol. 2, nos. 1 and 2 (N.S.), February 1932, 57.

[4] George Allison to District Organizers, E.C. Members, and Charter Committees, 14 May 1931.

[5] Information Report on Charter Campaign, week ending 9 October 1930.

[6] For importance of local demands see Executive Bureau 'Plan of Campaign', September 1930, 3.

form of material in the national press'; a Mrs. Nelson of Blackburn was praised for reporting that the chief local demands included free food and footwear for school children.[1] On the other hand, it was necessary to maintain 'a clear political perspective'.[2]

The effect of ideological confusion was re-inforced by organizational muddle. Many were uncertain of the role of the M.M. in the campaign. Some felt that there was a danger of the Charter Campaign displacing the M.M.; others believed that the M.M. could only regain its strength by pressing forward with the Charter Campaign.[3] The problem of whether energies should be concentrated upon ordinary M.M. activities or upon the Charter Campaign was a very real one for the Party activist. In order to clear up the confusion the M.M. was forced to circulate a letter explaining that the Charter Campaign was 'to widen the organization and influence of the Minority Movement by means of the broadest united front activity embracing all sections of workers irrespective of occupation, craft, age, political and religious associations and influence, etc.'.[4] The Charter Campaign was to transform the M.M. into a mass united front organization, united only by the Charter; 'the Charter movement must be kept on the broadest basis, on the simple issue of support for the charter, and no attempt must be made to impose compulsory discipline or dues on its supporters'.[5] The Charter Campaign was to provide a recruiting ground for the Communist Party. Since the leadership itself had not decided whether the M.M. was really necessary under the scheme the rank and file member was understandably confused.

But perhaps the main reason for the campaign's failure was simply the M.M.'s weakness, its 'isolation from the masses'. The Newcastle District Party Committee reported

[1] Information Report on Charter Campaign, week ending 2 October 1930.

[2] Joe Scott, Executive Bureau Minutes, 24 October 1930.

[3] *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, vol. 2, nos. 1–2 (n.d.), 57.

[4] M.M. Working Bureau to all members, 'The Minority Movement and the Workers' Charter', 24 April 1931. The quotation here was contained originally in an open letter from the R.I.L.U. to the Charter Convention, 7 April 1931.

[5] Executive Committee meeting, 20–21 December, 1930, 'Draft Resolution on Organization'.

difficulties in securing the direction of the Charter Campaign by the M.M. 'owing to no district M.M. organization existing'. It was similarly reported that the Lancashire Bureau of the M.M. did not appear to exist, and was thus unable to co-ordinate the campaign.[1] Designed to transform the M.M. into a mass organization, the Charter Campaign only gained mass support where the M.M. was already strong, particularly in London.

The Charter Campaign has been examined at length for two reasons. In the short run it marked the effective repudiation of the united front from below, meaning independent leadership. The Charter Campaign was an attempt to break the M.M.'s isolation by resuming united front activity—mainly at the local level, but higher up if possible. As independent leadership evolved into the united front from below, slogans of the earlier period, such as 'Towards a Revolutionary Workers' Government', were discarded as sectarian and unsuccessful; bread and butter slogans adapted to the circumstances of particular industries replaced them. Pollitt himself emphasized the need to win the support of the trade union branches; Will Rust spoke of the need to cultivate shop stewards' groups like the London Painters' Shop Stewards Council. The only requirement was support for the Workers' Charter.

In a longer perspective the Charter Campaign marked the final failure of the M.M. as a comprehensive trade union movement. Although there were desultory discussions in 1932 on, for example, the Textile Minority Movement, the Movement was plainly dying. The sparse resources of the M.M. had been concentrated upon the campaign, to the neglect of orthodox M.M. activity, but to no avail. The history of the Charter Campaign is a record of weakness, frustration and defeat, of ill-attended meetings and rebuffs from non-Communist organizations. In the abstract, the campaign seemed an obvious development following the success of the campaign for the Unemployed Workers' Charter. In practice, the Charter was only important where it supple-

[1] Information Report on Charter Campaign, weeks ending 2 and 9 October, 1930.

mented other forms of M.M. activity. Elsewhere it could not avoid becoming 'some magic shibboleth that is to immediately open the eyes of the workers and cause them to flock to the Party'.[1] Unlike the unemployed, whose grievances were universally the same, the employed had only one common overriding desire, the desire to retain their jobs.

The Burial

The Workers' Charter Campaign had been developed to widen the sphere of Communist influence by steering the M.M. on to a new tack and hauling a new flag to the masthead. The new tack was the united front from below, meaning intensive work on the factory floor and in the trade union branch; the new flag, the Workers' Charter. The attempt failed; the united front was too narrow. As the C.P.G.B. recognized, 'the greatest weakness of the Charter Campaign lies in the fact that we have not yet made it into a wide united front campaign'.[2] The only union branches who came out in support of the Charter were the old faithfuls, who could always be relied upon.[3] If in some ways the campaign was a success, it was only a very limited success; in Losovsky's words, 'the achievements are to be measured in millimetres, whilst the mass movement strides forward, if one may so express it, in kilometres'.[4]

The Movement similarly failed to break its isolation by directly applying the Fifth R.I.L.U. Congress' directives on intensive work on the shop floor and in the union branch. For example, it failed to take advantage of an apparently favourable situation in Lancashire, where the industrial situation was permanently on the boil, but where the Movement failed to 'crystallize organizationally'. Discontent over

[1] Fineburg, 'Tendencies towards Fascism in Great Britain', *Communist International*, vol. 8, no. 3–4, 1 February, 1931, 6.

[2] 'Resolution of the Central Committee of the C.P.G.B. on the 11th Plenum of the E.C.C.I. (28 May, 1931), published in the *Communist Review*, July 1931, 284.

[3] For list see above p. 159; for the opinion see the Political Bureau statement on 'Our Party and the Workers' Charter Campaign', *The Communist Review*, November 1930, 28.

[4] Losovsky's speech to the 11th Plenum of the E.C.C.I. on 'The Economic Struggle and Tasks of the R.I.L.U. Affiliated Sections . . .', *The Communist Review*, September 1931, 354.

rationalization came to a head over the proposed introduction of the eight loom system in late 1930, although the situation had been brewing for some years.[1] When the Manufacturers' Association and the Weavers' Amalgamation failed to reach agreement on increasing the number of looms per weaver, the Manufacturers' Association recommended its members to go ahead individually if they wished. The consequent attempt to introduce the new system in Burnley caused an immediate stoppage in nine mills. The employers retaliated with a county lockout, which was extended to a total lockout five days later. The Weavers' Amalgamation refused to give way, its General Council refusing to allow its Executive to negotiate. Accordingly, a month later the employers gave way, and withdrew their plans for increasing the number of looms per weaver. After initial difficulties caused by the lack of any M.M. organization in the area and the 'bad revolutionary tradition' of towns like Burnley, the M.M. succeeded in forming six strike committees, for example at mills in Todmorden, Burnley and Blackburn. However, the Textile M.M. 'made no organizational progress':

> . . . the Textile M.M. acted as a kind of flying squad of very active comrades who dashed from one scene of struggle to another, without ever establishing serious roots among the workers in the mills. After every struggle, instead of there being a consolidation of forces, recruiting of new members and development of organization in the mills, there was a retirement of the Textile M.M. to base, so to speak.[2]

> During 1931 the work of the Cotton Bureau of the M.M., which at one time called numerous conferences and regularly co-ordinated the work in the various towns, declined until it became almost non-existent.[3]

With the failure of both the direct and the indirect approach to widen the M.M.'s basis of support in 1931, its total isolation became apparent. Both Russian and British Communists slowly and uncertainly moved towards the

[1] *Ministry of Labour Gazette, 1931*, 89–90.

[2] M.M. Executive Bureau Mins. 2 and 30 January, 13 February, 1931; John A. Mahon, 'Cotton Textile Struggles in England', *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 11, 514–20, esp. 517.

[3] G. Bark, 'The Strike Movement in Great Britain', *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 7 (1932), 366.

view that the only solution lay in the liquidation of the M.M. Whenever the M.M. was discussed its liquidation was in the background—it could do no right. There seemed no way forward for the Movement. It was a complex, top-heavy organization, with few resources, little support, and no credit. The logic of the united front from below reinforced the Communist desire to cut their losses. If the prime need was for intensive local factory and branch work, a complex national organization was a nuisance. Members of the M.M. were very much on the defensive in international Communist circles in late 1931; tactically and organizationally the M.M. was more of a hindrance than a help to its Communist sponsors.

The R.I.L.U., from the General Secretary downwards, lamented the weak condition of the M.M. 'We must state determinedly, however distasteful it may be for us and our English comrades: THE MINORITY MOVEMENT IS THE WEAKEST LINK OF THE R.I.L.U. It would be to the highest degree thoughtless to close our eyes to this.'[1] According to one critic,

> The M.M. is a small self-absorbed organization of leaders who have nothing to do with the real struggle of the workers and who, instead of going to the workers, working among them and fighting against the reformist leaders in the trade unions, simply approach the workers with the invitation to take part in a highly 'elaborate' organizational structure.[2]

The second Russian member of the R.I.L.U.'s dominant troika, Stalin's friend Kostanyan, contemptuously dismissed the C.P.G.B.'s factory work at the Eighth R.I.L.U. Central Council:

> I had practically forgotten about England. Evidently this is because there have been practically no factory groups, and so there is nothing to talk about. . . . the position beggars description. If I am not mistaken there are 11 M.M. members in Sheffield, and I believe 5 of them are members of the M.M. Executive Committee. However, neither the rank and file members, nor even the members of the Executive

[1] (Emphasis in the original) Losovsky, 'The Economic Struggle and Tasks of the R.I.L.U. Affiliated Sections . . .', *The Communist Review* (September, 1931), 354.
[2] Gerhard, *The Communist International*, vol. 9, nos. 4–5 (March 1932), 156.

Committee, pay membership dues. No meetings are called, and there is no factory organization. I think there can be no talk of reorganization of work in England after having quoted this instance.[1]

Although it was universally agreed that the M.M. had fallen into disrepute and that 'an end must be put to all the sectarian methods of the M.M. in order that it may be enabled to create a mass basis for a wide revolutionary trade union opposition', the R.I.L.U. was unable to decide what to do with the Movement.[2] They realized that the question of liquidating the M.M. was not a simple one; it was still, in 1931, the main Communist bulwark in the trade unions, and to destroy it prematurely would be to repudiate uselessly a whole decade of union activity. The R.I.L.U. accepted, for the time being, the view of the Central Committee of the C.P.G.B. that the M.M. ought to be retained. 'At the session of the English Central Committee all tendencies towards liquidating the M.M. were rightly rejected. It is not a question of liquidating the M.M. but of ruthlessly sweeping away all sectarian methods which prevent the M.M. from developing a really broad trade union opposition in the reformist trade unions and factories'.[3] On the other hand, the German head of the Anglo-American section of the R.I.L.U. Secretariat Fritz Emmerich spoke at the Eighth Session of the Central Council of the R.I.L.U. as if it had already been decided to drop at least the name 'Minority Movement'. 'It is true, of course, that we should give up the name 'Minority Movement'. A whole phase is linked up with the name during which we were incapable of developing any work.' He personally believed that 'in the present correlation of forces between ourselves and the reformists, the present organizational form of the M.M. is a barrier which hinders our approach to the British proletariat'.[4]

[1] Kostanyan's speech on 'The State of our Factory Work' to the 8th session of the R.I.L.U. Central Council, published in *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 3, 151.

[2] 'Resolution of the Eighth Session of the R.I.L.U. Central Council', quoted by John Mahon in 'The Problem of Building a Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition in Great Britain', *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 9, 439.

[3] Gerhard, *The Communist International*, vol. 9, nos. 4–5, 156.

[4] Emmerich's speech to 8th Session, *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, vol. 2, nos. 1–2, 64–8 esp. 64 and 67.

The problem was, how could the Party liquidate the M.M. without seeming to repudiate eight years of trade union activity? If the Charter Campaign had been successful the problem would have been solved. A resolution on 'The Charter Campaign and the Economic Struggles', passed at the December 1930 meeting of the M.M. Executive Committee, stated: 'Out of this campaign would come a National Charter Committee which would replace the present National Bureau of the Minority Movement. This means the actual transformation of the Minority Movement from its conception of a Minority fighting within the unions to a real mass mobilization.' The M.M. would have been transformed, and liquidated. The National Bureau would have become the Charter Committee, and the individual Industrial sections would have dropped the prefix 'Minority Movement'. However, the Charter Campaign did not succeed; the R.I.L.U. was left with the problem.[1]

The eventual solution to the R.I.L.U.'s problem lay in the 'correct' application of the united front from below. Ever since the spring of 1930 the R.I.L.U. and the M.M. had been moving away from the united front from below, meaning independent leadership, at different speeds and with occasional reverses. The resolutions of the Fifth R.I.L.U. Congress were contradictory. On the one hand, the resolution on the M.M. contained detailed directives on the need for intensive shop and branch activity, on the primary importance of the struggle for immediate demands, and underlined the need for activity in the reformist trade unions.[2] The British Party leadership was confused; some Communists, like Mahon and Rust, saw the new meaning of the united front from below; others were not so sure that independent leadership had passed. The resolution on the M.M. was not published in *The Worker* until December, after three telegrams from the R.I.L.U. ordering its publication.[3] The confusion was laid bare by a dispute between Horner and the British Political Bureau. During the

[1] M.M. Executive Committee resolution, 'The Charter and the Economic Struggles', passed at the Executive Committee meeting on 21 December 1930.

[2] *Resolutions of the Fifth World Congress*, 5–39; cf. above, 152–5.

[3] Losovsky, *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 3 [1932], 250.

South Wales miners' strike in January 1931, Horner refused to follow the Political Bureau's interpretation of the new line, to set up independent strike committees, and to insist on the continuance of the strike after the union had called it off.[1] Naturally he was hauled over the coals and removed from the M.M. Secretariat, partly for misinterpreting the new line and partly for insubordination.[2] Yet the issue of *The Communist Review* which contained the Political Bureau's statement on Horner also contained a Central Committee resolution on 'The Turn to Mass Work' endorsing many of his arguments.[3]

> In all our propaganda material we are continually declaring that 'only the M.M.' or 'only the Communist Party can lead the workers', combining these statements with exhortations and many 'musts', as if the repetition of formulas and the persistent assuring of the workers that our leadership is correct will win them to our standard. These expressions and generalities are used to replace the mass agitation for the workers' demands, the working out of each step in the struggle . . . We continue to throw out general leads and calls to action ('All Out') without concrete leadership and closeness to the given stage of the workers . . . A manifesto issued on 11 February by the M.M. calling for solidarity strikes in other industries in support of the Lancashire Weavers. [sic] It was in effect a general strike call, wrong in itself and in no way followed up, giving merely an impression of irresponsibility.

Parallel with this ideological shift was the emergence of new left wing rank and file movements outside M.M. influence. Amongst London busmen, for example, A. C. Papworth organized rank and file resistance to an agreement involving wage reductions under negotiation by the T. & G.W.U. in August and September 1932. Although Papworth failed to prevent the signature of a new agreement, a conference in October decided to maintain the movement on a permanent basis. Garage committees were to be set up,

[1] Pelling, *C.P.*, 60; see above, pp. 120–1.

[2] Political Bureau statement published in *Communist Review*, vol. 3, no. 4, 145–157 (April 1931).

[3] Ibid., 121–9, esp. 122–3. The Political Bureau's statement was drawn up on 27 February, 1931; on 23 March 1931, the R.I.L.U. Executive Bureau discussed the situation in Britain (Losovsky, 250).

each sending six representatives to a central Rank and File Committee; the *Busmens' Punch*, a paper run by a Communist group at Holloway Garage, was taken over as a mouthpiece. 'The policy of the committee was not to form a 'breakaway' union but to organize within the union to oppose attacks on wages and conditions.'[1] Similar developments occurred in the A.E.U. and the N.U.R. In the A.E.U. a Members' Rights Movement emerged in 1931 to protest against the expulsion of the M.M. signatories to the call for Factory Committees. According to *The Monkey Wrench*, the new movement's official organ:

> Never in the history of engineering has such a movement so rapidly grown. Starting from two London branches in August, the movement by October could proudly declare that over 50 branches in London alone were associated with it. The movement has gone from success to success, for in addition to London flourishing sections of our movement exist in Glasgow, Manchester, and Sheffield . . . The Members' Rights Movement has come to stay. Not a disruptive movement, as some would have you believe, but as a co-ordinating movement, a movement concerned only with the rank and file, *who are in the union*' (my italics).[2]

A similar left wing breakthrough occurred on the railways, where the Railwaymen's Vigilance Movement, named after the unofficial grade Vigilance Committees which had been active during the First World War, emerged in the autumn of 1932. The first issue of *The Railway Vigilant* appeared in November, and an inaugural conference was held at Marylebone on 3 December. Thirty-five N.U.R. branches, 31 A.S.L.E.F. branches, and 18 Local Depot Vigilance Committees expressed their conviction that 'as in the case of the London busmen . . . a movement, organized in the local depots and branches, and embracing all workers irrespective of Grade or Union division, can be a most powerful means of defeating . . . the wage cuts demands of the companies . . .'.[3]

[1] H. A. Clegg, *Labour Relations in London Transport* (Basil Blackwell, 1950), 31.
[2] *The Monkey Wrench*, vol. 1, no. 1 (July 1932),
[3] *The Railway Vigilant*, no. 2 (December 1932).

The British Party's confusion, the M.M.'s continued isolation from the mass of industrial workers, and the development of grass roots militant movements largely outside Communist influence, underlined the need for Moscow to clarify its attitude towards trade union work. In doing so, the problem of what to do with the M.M. solved itself. The new method of building up a revolutionary trade union opposition was by encouraging autonomous militant movements, like the Busmen's Rank and File Movement, already embedded in the discontents of particular industries. The M.M. was to fade away, section by section. This approach, outlined at the Eighth Session of the R.I.L.U. Central Council, was confirmed in the 'January' Resolution of the C.P.G.B. Central Committee, and endorsed by the Twelfth Party Congress in the same year (1932).

The discussions at the Eighth Central Council on the M.M. were depressing and bad tempered. The British delegation was fiercely criticized for the terrible state of the Party's trade union work. Pollitt attempted to defend the British Party by passing some of the blame onto the R.I.L.U. Executive Bureau, but Losovsky sarcastically described his speech as 'not the most successful in Comrade Pollitt's life'.[1] Although no one accepted responsibility for failure, both sides agreed that the British Party's first task was to improve its trade union work. The British Party eventually accepted the blame, the R.I.L.U. the British Party's proposals. Pollitt outlined the C.P.G.B.'s future industrial tactics and in so doing pointed directly to the M.M.'s super session:

> In order to carry this campaign ['the organizing of the mass movement of the workers through all forms of mass action'] through, we must definitely encourage every manifestation of revolt or agitation inside the factory or the union, whether it expresses itself in such an organization as the Members' Rights of the Engineers, the Builders' Forward Movement, certain vigilance committees amongst the railway personnel, to the existing councils of action, weak as they may be. Why do we make this point? Because there is a theory held in the ranks of the R.I.L.U. that such organizations as the Members' Rights Committee, the Builders' Forward Movement, are themselves

[1] *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 1–2, 69; Ibid., 250.

barriers to the advance of the Minority Movement, and that the work that they undertake should be undertaken by the respective industrial sections of the Minority Movement, that this has led to a hiding of the face of the Minority Movement and that we have been making a mistake in giving encouragement to such forms of organization. This point of view is wrong.

The development of these movements of the militant workers not yet associated with us . . . far from stifling these movements, is to encourage and stimulate them so that with the development of their work and with our organizations leading this work, at a later stage it will be possible to get political and organizational consolidation through the creation of a mass centre of the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition.[1]

The Party's attempts to secure control of any militant agitation, however trivial, whether inside a union or on a shop floor, involved disregarding the M.M.; its organization and history could only hinder a new beginning.

The plan elaborated in Moscow in December 1931 was published as the resolution of the Central Committee of the C.P.G.B. on 'The immediate Tasks before the Party and the Working Class' in January 1932.[2] The resolution marked the end of independent leadership, the enthronement of the united front from below. It marked a final return to work within the trade unions.

THE GREATEST DEFECT OF THE PARTY'S WORK DURING THE PAST FEW YEARS IS THAT IT HAD NOT CARRIED ON ANY SYSTEMATIC REVOLUTIONARY MASS WORK IN THE REFORMIST TRADE UNIONS. In spite of International resolutions (Fifth R.I.L.U. Congress, XIth Plenum of the Communist International) not a single step has been taken so far to make the M.M. a really widespread trade union opposition. The M.M. is a small organization, boxed up in itself and thereby isolated from the masses in the factories and trade unions . . . There must be a decisive break with all the methods of work adopted by the M.M. up to now . . . the stand we take must be based on questions vital to every single trade union branch . . . The selection and formulation of these questions must in each case depend on the particular situation in a given factory. . . .

[1] *R.I.L.U. Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 1-2, 68–9.

[2] *Immediate Tasks before the Party and the Working Class: Resolution of the Central Committee of the C.P.G.B.—January, 1932. passim*, esp. 7–9 (C.P.G.B. 1932).

Communist resources were to be diverted into militant rank and file movements not then under Communist control; George Renshaw for example, was to concentrate upon his work among the busmen. This further reorganization of the Movement amounted to its liquidation. It was plainly pointless to support both a Members' Rights Committee and a Metal Workers' M.M. in the A.E.U., particularly when the latter had lost credit. The revolutionary trade union opposition which it was to organize was not yet mature enough for national co-ordination. In the meantime there was no place in Communist strategy for the M.M. Its obsolescence was not proclaimed; but it was an underlying assumption of the January resolution.

The new policy caused great confusion; one article appeared entitled 'Have We Liquidated the Minority Movement?'.[1] Some believed that the 'January Resolution' meant the immediate destruction of the M.M.:

> Reports, correspondence, discussion, and actions show from all parts of the country a commonly held opinion that the Central Committee resolution means that the M.M. had received its 'knock-out'; that it was closing down; and that Party cells, plus various nameless and almost formless oppositional elements, were to take its place.[2]

Others maintained that the rank and file movements were too limited and too transient to replace the M.M. The M.M. was a 'permanent opposition movement, continuing and developing as the class struggle develops'; the rank and file movements were 'limited in policy and in most cases federations of branches liable to be broken up and scattered on deeper questions of policy'.[3] Further, 'we need a M.M. because we stand as much chance of capturing the trade union machine and using it for our own ends as we do the capitalist State'.[4]

The 'liquidators' were proved correct. Throughout 1932 there were few favourable mentions of the M.M.; the Busmen's Rank and File movement came to be the model for

[1] Maurice Ferguson, 'Have we Liquidated the Minority Movement?' *The Communist Review*, vol. 4, no. 10 (October 1932), 480 *seq.*

[2] William Allan, 'The present struggles and the Building of the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition', *The Communist Review*, vol. 4, no. 6 (June 1932), 269.

[3] Ferguson, 482; Allan, 'The Party and the M.M.', 476.

[4] Ferguson, 481.

Communist militants. The concrete significance of this for the M.M. was clearly revealed when the Communists moved into the Railwaymen's Vigilance Movement at the end of the year. At first, the relation between the M.M. and the new movement was obscure. The M.M. considered itself the true revolutionary movement for railwaymen; 'The Rail M.M. must continue in its role of leading the struggles of the railwaymen. It must recruit ever increasing numbers to its ranks . . . The Vigilance Movement must be recognized as the link between the revolutionary forces (M.M.) and the masses'. After some discussion between the Rail M.M. and the C.P., culminating in a meeting at the 'Pindar of Wakefield' in the Grays Inn Road, this analysis was repudiated.[1] The R.M.M. was liquidated, and its membership transferred into the wider Railwaymen's Vigilance Movement.

. . . The Vigilance Movement is not a mere link between the Rail M.M. and the masses; not a body which the 'revolutionary' M.M. can cleverly exploit, but the actual alternative leadership of the railwaymen in the process of development.

Of course the Rail M.M. 'continues to lead the struggle', in the sense that its individual members tirelessly work in the depths and in the branches for the strengthening of the Vigilance Movement. The more politically conscious Rail M.M. members share the task of guiding the Vigilance Movement *from the inside*, giving deeper revolutionary content to the work of the Vigilance Movement, not as 'superior' political advisers, but as active supporters and members of the Vigilance Movement.

We recruit to the M.M. only in the sense that we aim to win the best and most active elements in the Vigilance Movement to a fuller understanding of the revolutionary political character of the struggle, welding those more conscious workers into a strong core to give leadership and stability to the Vigilance Movement.

At no stage do we draw workers out of the Vigilance Movement into the Rail M.M. *On the contrary the field work of the Rail M.M. is itself inside the Vigilance Movement*, strengthening and consolidating this movement both politically and organizationally, developing it into the revolutionary trade union opposition on the railways.[2]

Pollitt explained the significance of the concept of the 'new revolutionary trade union opposition' for the development of

[1] Letter from Mr. W. C. Loeber, 11 November 1963.
[2] 'Rail Statement', 11 January 1933.

Communist industrial policy and by implication for the Minority Movement, to the Twelfth Party Congress at Battersea in November 1932:

> The workers are breaking through; precisely because we have not been able to fulfil what the workers demand, the workers have been forming their unofficial movements, which are embracing an influence and area and a power that none of our Minority Movement sections possess. Therefore, what shall we do to get established in this country a mass movement firmly established in the factories and in the unions? We must, I think, begin to develop and initiate in every industry broad mass movements similar to the Tinplate Workers Unofficial Movement, the Busmen's Rank and File Movement, the Port Workers Unity Movement, the Members Rights Movement which take up the issues, etc. But, comrades we cannot say that the Tinplate Workers Unofficial Movement, the Busmen's Rank and File Movement, represents a 100 per cent what we understand to be the basic line and platform of the R.I.L.U. It does not represent a 100 per cent the basis of the platform and principles of the British section of the R.I.L.U., namely the M.M. But they do represent the first beginnings towards that, and therefore inside these movements our Communist fractions have got to try and deepen the political understanding of those who are associated with them, have got to try and broaden them out. But what is the perspective? We cannot have the perspective that year after year these movements can go on without being coordinated, without being unified. We must have the perspective of the mass revolutionary trade union opposition . . . The R.T.U.O. becomes a fighting movement as a result of the content of its work, of the organizational form it develops and throws up, and we are putting the suggestion to this Congress that in this country we can have the perspective say in six months from now of mobilizing the resources of our Party for a series of well prepared district conferences, initiating unofficial movements of this broad character, and at the end of this six months the perspective of a national conference at which as a result of our revolutionary work inside the broad movements in which we have already gained the conviction and adherence of the masses, that they shall be unified under such a name as the Trade Union Militant League, which would be for Britain the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition. That is the perspective we want to put before this Congress . . . .[1]

There was no place for the Minority Movement in this analysis. For the immediate future the M.M. was to be

[1] H. Pollitt, *The Road to Victory* (C.P.G.B., 1932), 47–8.

superseded by the rank and file movements. Its resources, personnel, and ideology were in the process of being transferred to other movements. If the Communists within the new movements succeeded in converting their membership to the full R.I.L.U. doctrine the separate industrial movements were to be co-ordinated into a national trade union movement, the Trade Union Militant League. But for the present, the attempt to build a national revolutionary movement was given up as premature.

The Minority Movement was buried.

By November 1932 the M.M. had virtually disappeared. Thereafter the R.I.L.U. occasionally sent money through the M.M. for individual projects, the spare time M.M. Secretariat occasionally sent out directives, and some union leaders continued to refer to 'unauthorized and irresponsible persons not connected with the industry at all but with the Minority Movement and the Communist Party'. But by the time Bevin was accusing the M.M. of disrupting the Green Line country bus services in 1935 the Movement had disappeared.[1] Of course trade union militancy continued, and the Communists continued to attempt to lead it. But the phase of Communist Party industrial activity which began with the foundation of the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. in December 1920 ended in 1932 with the recognition that, for the time being, it was impossible to build a national centre for revolutionary trade unionism in Britain. Whether such a centre could have been established if the British movement had been autonomous it is impossible to say. Probably not; the movement would not have had the resources Russian money provided, and would still have suffered from the union executives' 'expulsion tactics'. However, the irrelevance of the new line, and the demoralization, division, and confusion which followed its imposition, prevented the M.M. from taking full advantage of the slump and the failure of the Labour Government in 1929–31.

The final acceptance of the new line by the C.P. and the

[1] Interview with Mr. George Renshaw, 1963; Mrs. Shirley Lerner, *The United Clothing Workers Union*, 405–6; H. A. Clegg, *Labour Relations in London Transport*, 106, quoting *The Times*, 27 July 1935.

M.M. in the summer of 1929 gave added point to discussions which were already taking place on the possibility of liquidating the M.M. On the one hand, some Communists saw the movement as an unnecessary duplication of the Party's Industrial Department. As the capitalist crisis deepened, and the masses, swinging left, demanded independent revolutionary leadership against the reformist 'Social Fascists', there seemed room for neither a militant pressure group in the reformist trade unions nor an independent trade union centre. On the other hand, some trade union militants were beginning to find the name 'Minority Movement' a hindrance to their work, particularly after the General Council's attack upon the movement as a 'disruptive element' at the 1929 T.U.C.

However, the Movement was reprieved. The R.I.L.U. was not totally committed to the new line; if independent leadership failed the M.M. offered a way out. The Communist Party was to push forward as the independent revolutionary force, whilst the M.M. was to attempt both to create new revolutionary unions and to act as a 'united front from below' bridge for union members attracted by the M.M.'s militant trade union policies. Independent leadership did fail; party membership dropped from 3,000 in December 1929, to 2,555 in November 1930; the impossibility of forming new revolutionary unions became obvious even to the R.I.L.U.[1] The Party's failure in the Bradford woollen strike in the spring of 1930 underlined the lesson; independent leadership would have to be watered down if the British Party was to retain any influence with industrial workers.

The united front aspect of the united front from below became increasingly important. But the change was not immediate and straightforward. The R.I.L.U. equivocated at its Fifth Congress in August 1930. On the one hand, Losovsky presented the full 'independent leadership' line. On the other, the resolution on the Minority Movement indicated that the united front from below was being redefined; more attention was to be paid to the workers'

[1] J. Tsirul, 'The C.P.G.B. at the Crossroads', in *The Communist International*, vol. 9, nos. 4–5 (April 1932), 168.

immediate demands, more resources devoted to work within the reformist trade unions. The Charter Campaign, which the M.M. first announced the same month, marked an important stage in this return to a modified united front; the only qualification for participation in the campaign was acceptance of the nine points of the Charter. By the spring of 1931, when the Charter Campaign had finally failed, the Party had redefined the united front from below to mean 'concentration' work on the shop floor and in the union branch on the basis of the immediate discontents of the particular industry. The period of the 'Revolutionary Workers' Government' had passed.

The new tactics pointed to a revival of the M.M. The desire for a way out, together with a reluctance to repudiate almost a decade of industrial activity, largely accounted for the refusal to liquidate the M.M. in late 1929. However, starved of resources, burdened with irrelevant and confusing directives, and generally messed about, the Movement was demoralized, discredited, and isolated from the mass of industrial workers. It had little contact with the new militant rank and file movements springing up in London transport, on the railways and docks, and among builders and engineers. Thus, when the C.P. set out to capture the new movements following the R.I.L.U.'s acceptance of Pollitt's plan in December 1931, it did not use the M.M. There was little place for the M.M. in the January Resolution; no place at all in Pollitt's report to the Twelfth Party Congress in November, 1932. As the new rank and file movements came under Communist influence the M.M. faded away, section by section; the Metal Workers' Minority Movement folded up early in 1932; the Railway Workers' late in 1932. Militants who had belonged to the M.M. transferred to the new movements.

The united front from below, meaning independent leadership, had given way to the united front from below, meaning 'concentration' work on the shop floor and in the union branch. More initiative was to be granted to the local Party organs; the complicated central Industrial Department was to be dismantled, to be rebuilt only when parallel organizations existed in the localities. The new scheme

required the successful consolidation of Communist influence among the rank and file militants before a national centre for the revolutionary trade union opposition could be set up. The Trade Union Militant League was never formed.

The R.I.L.U. had returned back beyond the policy accepted at its Fourth Congress; independent leadership had been left behind, its monument the destruction of the Minority Movement.

VIII

CONCLUSION: BORING FROM WITHIN

THE history of the National Minority Movement is a classic illustration of the difficulties involved in applying Communist united front tactics to trade union work. The very existence of the Movement represented two dialectical contradictions: the contradiction between forming new organizations whilst appealing for unity, and the contradiction between revolutionary goals and reformist means. The Minority Movement's main plea was for working class unity against capitalism: yet the very existence of the Movement posed a threat to that unity, a threat which materialized with the new line of independent leadership in 1929. Moreover, the Movement simultaneously denied that the working class could improve its situation under capitalism, and sought to win support by agitating for immediate improvements in wages and working conditions.

Both contradictions stemmed from the inevitably ambiguous nature of any united front organization. The Movement's Communist sponsors had one view of the purpose of the organization, its non-Communist membership another. For the Communists the M.M. was a 'transitional' organization, a means of broadening the political consciousness of discontented trade unionists pending the time when they realized that the Communist Party offered the only road to Socialism; success was measured in terms of the number of trade unionists brought into the Communist Party. Short term platforms and policies were subordinate to that end. For the non-Communists the M.M. represented a means of strengthening the trade union movement in its task of securing improvements—or at least preventing a decline—in wages and working conditions. The Communist view naturally predominated.

In one sense 'dualism' is a polite term for 'Communist manipulation'. But such a judgement would be unfair to the

M.M. leadership, especially in the years before 1929. For many Communist trade unionists were genuinely committed to securing immediate improvements in wages and working conditions, and felt acutely any conflict between their political and trade union obligations. Although Pollitt was acting disingenuously when he attempted to deny that there was a close link between the M.M. and the Communist Party, the M.M.'s limited, transitional role lent some theoretical plausibility to his views. In one sense the M.M. was a non-political organization, not a duplicate Communist Party; but in another sense it was merely a Communist instrument. Despite this, what appears as dialectical necessity to the Communist can only seem manipulative to the outside observer.

The M.M.'s dual nature posed external as well as internal problems. For the majority of union members were hostile to attempts to introduce ideological concerns into trade union politics. Despite the financial link with the Labour Party, the predominant union view was that the trade union movement was interested in national politics only insofar as they directly effected wages and working conditions: the discussions on the Labour Government at the 1924 T.U.C. revealed a lack of political concern as well as pride in working class achievement. Communists in the Minority Movement naturally denied this separation: the conception of trade unions as purely economic organizations was a reformist relic. It is thus hardly surprising that the M.M.'s ideological aspirations, as well as its organizational affiliations, generated accusations of 'outside interference' and 'dual loyalty'.[1]

Neither internal instability nor external questioning prevented the Movement from making rapid initial progress. During the first phase of the Movement's development, from August 1924 until the General Strike in May 1926, Communist optimism about the future and genuine progress

[1] The extent of union hostility to the importation of non-industrial considerations into industrial behaviour is clearly illustrated by Catholic hesitancy over union activity. As the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists declared: 'It is undesirable that any outside body should be interested in the internal elections of a trade union. Under normal conditions such a question would never be discussed in the A.C.T.U. Unfortunately, we are not living in normal times and it is abundantly clear that the C.P. has for a long time organized its trade union activity' (Butterworth, 523).

on short term issues led the Communists to play down their revolutionary role, holding the Movement's fissiparous tendencies in check. This optimistic phase ended with the General Strike and its clear demonstration of the futility of a half-hearted commitment to 'class' action: the moderate left moved to the right, the Communist left to the left. The attempt to create a broad united front gave place to a more Leninist strategy, involving a more systematic attempt to remove all non-M.M. members from union office, bringing the question of legitimacy to the forefront. Although union executives denied the legitimacy of this 'outside interference', and many left wing leaders shed their M.M. sympathies, the apparent 'collaborationist' policy represented by the Mond-Turner talks, the inability of the official leadership to prevent economic decline in the coal mining industry or to achieve economic gains in the engineering industry, and the Movement's own political acumen, enabled the Movement to win a substantial number of official positions. This second period gave way to a third phase of uncertainty and then disorder in 1928, when the Comintern rejected the united front in favour of independent leadership; the M.M. was obliged to adopt a disastrous policy of dual unionism. Such 'splitting tactics' held little attraction for the committed trade unionists who formed the M.M.'s major non-Communist field of recruitment, and the Movement's non-Communist membership deserted. The Movement itself disintegrated.

The British Communist Party was a small marginal element in the trade union movement in 1922. Party membership totalled a mere 5,116, including many non-trade unionists, and the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. was even smaller.[1] Outside London, where Party headquarters provided extra resources and extra stimulus, and the traditional militant areas of South Wales and Clydeside, it was a dismal picture of organizational weakness. The Comintern and the British Party both realized that a new strategy and a new sense of purpose were required to transform the British Party into a 'virile, mass Party', firmly rooted in the trade

[1] Pelling, *C.P.*, 192.

union movement. Accordingly, following consultations in Moscow, the British Party's trade union work was reorganized. Harry Pollitt, Will Gallacher, Wal Hannington, and Arthur Horner were promoted to the Party Political Bureau, the Party's Industrial Department was reconstituted, and plans were drawn up for transforming the British Bureau of the R.I.L.U. into the National Minority Movement.

The new Movement was to provide 'a broad field in which our Party can fight shoulder to shoulder with the increasing numbers of active Socialist workers in the trade unions, for the common aim of combating capitalism and capitalist influence, pending the time when their own experience shall have proved to them that they can fight most effectively of all as members of the Communist Party'.[1] By agitating for industrial unionism, increased powers for the General Council, co-operation between the Social Democratic and Communist trade union Internationals (or at least the Russians), and a militant wages policy, the Movement hoped to push the trade unions leftwards, win sympathy from progressive trade unionists, and thereby form a recruiting ground for the Communist Party.

Formally launched at a national conference in August 1924, the National Minority Movement met with considerable initial success. The number of organizations represented at the Annual Conference rose from 271 in August 1924 to 443 in August 1925, reaching a peak of 547 in March 1926: the number of trade unionists represented rose, according to the Movement's own figures, from 200,000 to 957,000. This rise in membership partially caused and partially reflected the more militant policies followed by many unions in 1924 and 1925. The trade revival of 1923–5, resulting in a decline in unemployment from 14·1 per cent in 1921 to 9·7 per cent in 1924, encouraged many unions to attempt to recoup the losses sustained during the depression of 1921–2: hence the bout of wage claims from the Miners, Engineers, Railwaymen, Shipbuilders, and the Docks section of the Transport and General Workers Union. At the same time, the absence from the General Council of the right wing leaders J. H. Thomas, Harry

[1] *The Eighth Congress of the C.P.G.B., 1926*, 33.

Gosling, and Margaret Bondfield, who could not return to the General Council following their spell in the Labour Government until September 1925, enabled the left wing group headed by George Hicks, Alonzo Swales, and A. A. Purcell to exercise a disproportionate influence. Reflecting these pressures, in September 1924 the T.U.C. gave qualified assent to left wing proposals for 'organization by industry', and passed by an overwhelming majority a resolution empowering the General Council to 'take steps to organize on behalf of the unions . . . all such moral and material support as the circumstances of the dispute may appear to justify'—in Communist eyes the first step towards class organization. The General Council was also charged to use its influence within the I.F.T.U. in favour of a conciliatory attitude towards a rapprochement with the Russians and the R.I.L.U., and to accept a Russian invitation to send a delegation to the Soviet Union over the winter of 1924–5. The following year the General Council agreed to the formation of an Anglo-Russian Trade Union Joint Advisory Committee, a step enthusiastically endorsed by the 1925 Congress. With this progress towards class organization and international proletarian solidarity the Communists believed that 'the whining of class collaborationist policy' was over.[1]

The new Movement's rapid initial growth was partially the result of these changes in the global trade union environment, and partially the result of developments within particular industries and particular unions. Like any opposition group, the Minority Movement appealed to the discontented, to groups suffering from relative economic decline: hence its appeal to the most vulnerable sections of the Miners' Federation and the A.E.U., and its lack of appeal, at least in the early years, to the Railwaymen. Predictably, the Movement achieved most success in unions covering industries experiencing a relatively high level of unemployment and a secular decline in earnings. The level of unemployment in the coal mining industry fluctuated between 2·4 and 19·7 per cent, in general engineering between 9·4 and 24·7 per cent, whereas on the railways it fluctuated

[1] *The Workers Weekly*, 19 September 1925.

between a mere 2·0 and 10 per cent. Although statistics on changes in the level of earnings are difficult to evaluate, they point in the same direction.[1] The Movement self-consciously tapped this discontent. In the engineering industry, for example, the Movement explicitly appealed to the declining craft groups. The Movement looked back to a time when 'the basis of production . . . depended on the knowledge of the individual worker', and the engineer had 'been very truly termed the aristocrat of labour'.[2] (In an authentic echo of nineteenth-century respectability *The Worker* recalled the time when 'to be an engineer was to go to work—not overmindful of the morning buzzer—dressed for the part in collar and tie, smart suit, with overalls tucked away in a decent bag'.) Alas, mass production techniques and the spread of semi-skilled work had undermined this status, and 'one time aristocrats are now treated as less than robots'.

The Minority Movement's task of transforming these general grumbles into focused political demands was facilitated by the organizational structure of the Miners and the Engineers, just as it was frustrated by the structure of the N.U.R. Both the Miners and the Engineers had grown by amalgamation rather than evangelism, and their structures necessarily incorporated sectional and local separatisms; both possessed a weak central executive and a high degree of decentralization. The Miners' national executive met only monthly, and contained only two full-time national officials, the President and the General Secretary (throughout the 1920s the M.M. leader A. J. Cook). Authority was divided between the national and the district executives, rendering the removal of Communists from Communist dominated district executives—like South Wales—extremely difficult, and the frequent recourse to referenda further increased the influence of carefully organized grass-

[1] The railwaymen succeeded in hanging on to the very favourable settlement they had obtained in 1919 until 1928. The Miners' earnings collapsed in 1921, recovered and rose slowly until 1924, when a gradual decline set in which lasted the whole decade. Engineering earnings fell below railwaymen's; in 1927, taking average engineering earnings as 100, the earnings level of signalmen was 108.1, of guards 115.6, and of engine and motor men 161.2 (G. Routh, *Occupation and Pay in Great Britain, 1906–60*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1965; R.S. Spicer, *British Engineering Wages*, Edward Arnold, 1928, 31).

[2] *The Worker*, 20 and 27 January 1928.

roots opposition movements. (Indeed, executive weakness led one member to complain against excessive reliance upon 'what is called the rank and file').[1] Internal and external constraints operated in a similar direction in the A.E.U., preventing the executive from rooting out opposition. In the 1920s power within the union was still largely in the hands of skilled groups, spread over a wide range of industries; occupational solidarity, compounded of occupational interests, tradition, and consciousness of difference from industrial workmates, provided a basic consensus, industrial differences a basis for cleavage. The Minority Movement could thus manipulate industrial and regional differences without threatening the basic union structure. There was little external pressure on the union for a strong centralized bureaucracy. Ownership within the engineering industry was widely dispersed, there was comparatively little co-operation at national level between employers, and national agreements were supplemented by district and by workshop agreements. The diversity of products and shop conditions rendered insignificant the external regulation of plant conditions. The industrial conditions within which the union operated thus maximized the workshop power of the rank and file, and reduced the influence of the executive; internal pressures, reflecting external circumstances, membership traditions, and the functional needs of the organization, worked in the same direction. Commitment to craft 'custom and practice' was combined with 'an almost fanatical attachment to local autonomy'.[2] The shop steward system encouraged the formation of independent power bases—and the M.M. pointed the way for later Communist policy by attempting to organize shop stewards into a self-conscious national movement—whilst the district committees provide the means for active rank and file members to learn political skills and to publicize their own name. Consequently, the A.E.U.'s political system was almost excessively democratic. All national officials, including the president and the secretary, were up for re-election every three years, increasing the importance of careful electoral organization. A high degree

[1] *Proceedings of the M.F.G.B., 1927*, 330.
[2] Webbs, S. and B., *Industrial Democracy*, 97.

of branch and district autonomy was accompanied by effective provision for lay oversight over full time officials; the lay National Committee did not hesitate to override executive decisions.

In contrast, the N.U.R.'s highly centralized organizational structure made the M.M.'s task extremely difficult. There were six full time national officials elected for life at headquarters, together with auxiliary staff. Moreover, the very fact of its being an industrial union sharpened internal tensions, based upon inter-grade rivalry, increasing the need for a bureaucracy to 'hold the ring' between the groups, and allowing the executive to play economic interest groups off against each other. The union's industrial environment and membership spread created further pressure for a high degree of centralization. There was little sub-structural autonomy, and little effective provision for lay oversight of full time officials. Branches were subject to dissolution by the executive whenever they were considered 'unnecessary or undesirable or prejudicial to the interests of the union or its members', and could only combine to form district councils with the consent of the Executive. The district councils were themselves weak; 'the powers of the district councils shall be consultative and propagandist and such other work as may be delegated to them by the annual or special General Meetings or the Executive Committee . . . (they) shall have no governing or controlling power over any member, branch, or official'.[1] There was no provision for the re-election of the General Secretary, or his assistant, no lay member could be elected to the executive for more than three years in succession (and in any one year a third of the executive were newly elected), and the General Secretary, especially when endowed with J. H. Thomas' charismatic personality, could dominate the Annual General Meeting.

Economic and political pressures combined to assist the Minority Movement's progress in 1924 and 1925. Yet, despite this considerable if patchy success, some of the attitudes which were to limit progress later were already apparent. Many trade unionists were beginning to see the Movement as an illegitimate pressure group, an instrument

[1] *N.U.R. Rules, passim.*

of 'outside interference'. As early as November 1925 the General Council, under the influence of the recently returned right wing stalwarts, passed a resolution criticizing the Movement: 'affiliation to the National Minority Movement in the opinion of the Council was not consistent with the policy of the Congress and the General Council'. Even left wing sympathizers expressed their distaste for the Movement's indulgence in personal abuse.

At first sight the successive crises in the coal mining industry which culminated in the General Strike seemed to give the Movement added relevance; its campaign for 'class' unity at national and (especially) local level seemed to provide the only answer to the 'capitalist offensive'. Its campaign for local Councils of Action was well received, particularly by trades councils, who saw it as a means of bolstering up their own authority. But the euphoria of Red Friday gave way to the depression of 12 May. The moderate left was disillusioned by the failure of the General Strike to help the miners, the extreme left by the failure of the Communist Party to transform the strike into a revolutionary situation.

The General Strike proved to be the first major turning point in the history of the Minority Movement. Sympathy for its aims amongst the moderate left gave way to disinterest, then to hostility. A sharp decline in union membership forcibly reminded the General Council of the limitations of 'class' action, leading to a fizzling out of the reforming impulse behind plans for a stronger General Council and industrial unionism. Simultaneously, Russian attacks upon the General Council for their 'betrayal' of the Miners led to a decline in interest in Anglo-Russian trade union unity. The negotiations culminating in the Mond-Turner talks on industrial co-operation and the formation of the Industrial Peace Union reflected and reinforced this trend; Arthur Cook remained the only member of the General Council prepared to associate himself with the views of the Minority Movement. By 1927 the 'class warriors' of 1925 had become, in Communist eyes, 'class collaborators'.

The new trade union situation and its own disillusion with the 'united front from above' led the Minority Movement to attempt to transform itself from a diffuse propaganda

campaign into a 'disciplined, fighting organization', pledged to destroy the reformist trade union leadership. 'Before the working masses of Britain is now placed the development of history, the slogan of 'change your leaders'. It is the function of the Minority Movement to transform this slogan from an aspiration to a reality'.[1] In 1924 and 1925 the Movement had concentrated upon mobilizing support for moderately progressive policies, acceptable to a broad range of left wing opinion. In 1926 the Movement's organization was tightened up, its propaganda expanded, its policies sharpened. These Leninist tactics proved successful. The Movement dominated the A.E.U. delegation to the T.U.C. in 1927 and 1928, throwing the union's weight against the Mond-Turner discussions; one critic complained that the A.E.U. was being 'dragged at the tail of the Communist Party and the Minority Movement'.[2] Elsewhere, the Movement established secure footholds in the Miners' Federation, N.A.F.T.A., and N.U.T. & G.W., whilst isolated nuclei were active in numerous other unions, ranging from the Boilermakers to the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives.

Such organized opposition seemed disloyal and 'disruptive' to an official leadership already demoralized by the failure of the General Strike and of its campaign against the Trades Disputes and Trades Union Bill. As Walter Citrine proclaimed to the 1927 T.U.C., 'I conceive it my duty to fight against anything which implies a duality of loyalty to the Trade Union Movement'.[3] Executive hostility to the Movement was universal: the Boilermakers' Society, N.U.B.S.O., B.I.S. & K.T.A., the Distributive Workers, E.T.U., N.U.G.M.W., N.U.T. & G.W., T. & G.W.U., A.E.U., and even the Miners' Federation, all denounced the Movement. In 1927 the General Council prohibited trades councils from associating with the Movement, and the following year instituted an investigation into 'disruptive activities'.

Despite fears to the contrary the Movement survived the attacks of the union executives. But it proved incapable of

[1] *Report of the Third Annual Conference of the National Minority Movement, 1926*, 57.
[2] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, November 1928, 50. [3] *T.U.C. Report 1927*, 324.

surviving the dogmatic utopianism, the internal dissensions, and the 'splitting tactics' which resulted from the Comintern's swing to the left in 1928. According to the new line of 'class against class', which became official Comintern policy in 1928, the Labour Party and the trade unions were bourgeois tools, objectively Social Fascist. A united front between the Communists and the Social-Democrats was thus impossible, a relic of reformist 'constitutionalism'. The Party and the M.M. were to assume 'the independent leadership of the working masses'; the Party was to sponsor anti-Labour candidates in Parliamentary and municipal elections, the M.M. was to stimulate unofficial strike action and the formation of new revolutionary trade unions where possible. Despite opposition from Pollitt and Tanner this sectarian policy became the basis of M.M. policy in the spring of 1929.

This new line of independent leadership revealed the inherent instability of the Movement, which had been obscured during its early years. The problem of conflicting purposes and conflicting loyalties which stemmed from the Movement's dual nature had been obscured by Communist reticence, but not resolved. So long as the Movement concentrated upon immediate issues, and the Movement's Communist leadership played down their revolutionary aspirations, the conflicts implicit in the Movement's ambiguous nature remained latent. The new revolutionary policy revealed the conditional basis of the united front by forcing M.M. members to choose between their political and their revolutionary roles. The majority of M.M. members inevitably remained loyal to their union.

Although ideological, organizational and emotional pressures were strong enough to enforce Communist conformity to the Comintern policy, they had relatively little effect upon non-Communist trade union militants. Political and industrial solidarity was the touchstone of labour sentiment. Politically, the new line was a disaster; it won few victories, and caused one trade union opponent to claim that 'the greatest error the Communist Party has yet committed in this country' was to run candidates for the Labour Party.[1] Industrially, 'splitting' tactics posed a direct threat to union

[1] *A.E.U. Monthly Journal*, October 1928, 58.

solidarity, and thus success. The majority of left wing trade unionists joined the Minority Movement to give backbone to the trade union movement, not to destroy it, and therefore voted with their feet when the Movement threatened solidarity. By 1932 the Minority Movement's membership had dropped to a mere 700, the total number of Communist trade unionists had dwindled to a mere 1,300. The surviving Communist nucleus was demoralized by this exodus, and by the inevitable squabbles which failure caused. 'Left wing sectarianism which is right wing opportunism in practice', 'right opportunist mistakes', 'left sectarian mistakes', became the common currency of M.M. discourse. Attempts to implement the new line proved as disastrous industrially as they had done politically: the United Clothing Workers Union and the United Mineworkers of Scotland withered, the attempts to take over the Dawdon Miners strike (1929), the Austin strike (1929), and the Bradford woollen textile strike failed to get off the ground.

As the Minority Movement wandered further into the thickets of ideological confusion new 'rank and file' movements were coming into existence. The busmen's Rank and File Movement, the Members' Rights Movement in the A.E.U., the Railwaymen's Vigilance Committee Movement in the N.U.R., the Building Workers' Rank and File Movement, all emerged in 1931–2 outside the sphere of Communist influence. Accordingly, to break the deadlock of 'class against class' and to bring these new spontaneous movements under Communist influence, M.M. members were to transfer their efforts to this new setting; their primary task was 'to try and deepen the political understanding of those who are associated with [the Rank and File movements] . . . to try and broaden them out'.[1] The united front from below, meaning independent leadership, gave way to the united front from below, meaning proletarian unity at the shop floor level. As Minority Movement members began to concentrate upon their new task the Minority Movement faded away, section by section. By 1933 the Movement had virtually disappeared, surviving until 1935 only as a right wing bogey.

[1] H. Pollitt, *The Road to Victory*, 48.

The Communist Party's attempt to establish a revolutionary trade union centre, or even to consolidate unofficial left wing activity under a national umbrella, was given up as premature. The Party has never again attempted to launch an independent national movement for trade unionists.

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