
The Original British ‘Ultra-Left’, 1917–1924

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It must have been some time in the mid to late 1960s that I first heard the term ‘ultra-left’. It seemed to be used, derogatively, to characterise those they deemed to be carrying things to absurd lengths, above all to Trotskyists, by others on the left, particularly by people in the CP. Like most pejorative political terms its meaning was less than precise. It could mean an unreasonable concern for doctrinal purity or an unwillingness to countenance the least compromise or retreat in any combination. Its use tells one at least as much about those employing the term as the objects of their disdain. But when did its use begin?

Prior to the Great War and the Russian Revolution the term used to dismiss similar elements was usually ‘impossibilist’. This was how members of the SDF characterised those former members who split off to form the SLP and the SPGB.

Decades after first coming across ‘ultra left’, I stumbled on what was probably its British debut on the printed page, though its use seems not to have become widespread for many years. Yet it had appeared soon after the foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) years before the advent of Trotskyism.

The first appearance in print of the term ‘ultra-left’ from a Communist source seems to be the one to be found in a report of the Second World Congress of the Third International in 1920. The report was in the party’s weekly paper, *The Communist*, which had replaced *The Call*, the organ of the CPGB’s main constituent, the British Socialist Party, (BSP) a few weeks earlier. W. McLaine, a shop steward from Manchester and Tom Quelch, son of the Harry Quelch a veteran of the Social-Democratic Federation (SDF) and soon to be a prominent member of the CPGB, had represented the BSP in Moscow. They were very conscious that the founding conference of the CPGB was about to take place at the beginning of August and, reported McLaine, ‘as it drew nearer August 1 we felt so confident that we were truly

representative of what the new Communist Party would become that we let it be known that we represented the Party'. They supported parliamentary action and Labour Party affiliation.

All the Shop Stewards and ultra-left delegates from Britain opposed us, but the Congress as a whole agreed with us. Lenin declared that when he wrote his recent booklet he was not sure about the Labour Party question, but had since spoken to many English—and Scotch—comrades and was now convinced that the Communist Party should certainly affiliate.¹

So, who were these ultra-leftists, and what did they stand for?

The Shop Stewards' Movement

The 'booklet' was, of course, Lenin's *'Left-Wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder*. But who were these 'ultra-left' delegates? It is not clear from the sentence quoted above whether—given the 'and'—the shop stewards were to be included in this category or not. Certainly, neither the English nor the Scottish shop stewards' movements had favoured parliamentary action. William Gallacher, one of the Clydeside delegates at the World Congress, had been one of those deemed by Lenin to be suffering from an 'infantile disorder'. Jack Tanner, who edited *Solidarity*, the main shop-stewards' movement paper in England, had been clear earlier in the year that 'We say that no good can be got from Parliamentarism. The energy, time and money expended in it is absolutely wasted.' There was no point in trying 'to function in what is acknowledged to be an effete and rotten institution, and which has to be abolished before real changes can be brought about' The real struggle would be, Tanner maintained, in 'the industrial field'.²

When the CPGB was formed in August 1920, *Solidarity*, with its syndicalist hostility to 'politics', rejected the idea that the work of the party was to be 'done inside the workshops, factories, mines etc. because as a political party it is outside the realm of industrial activity in the workshops and factories'.³ But the following year, 1921, saw a complete reversal. The English and Scottish movements united and the new body allied itself to the CPGB and accepted a constitution which 'subordinated it to the political control of the party' as Ralph Darlington puts it in his study of the changing politics of another prominent shop-steward, J.T. Murphy.⁴

The 'Sudden Death' of *Solidarity* was soon announced in the final editorial of the paper on 13 May 1921. It explained that the movement's National Administrative Council, effectively its executive, had resolved to 'concentrate all their resource' on the Scottish-based *The Worker*. An intended successor to *Solidarity*, to be called 'The LIBERATOR', which would be 'unhampered

by any official or unofficial connection with any party or organisation' failed to materialise—no doubt because *Solidarity's* appeal for 'HARD CASH' to launch it failed to bring forth sufficient funding.⁵

Sylvia Pankhurst and the CP (BSTI)

Returning to the 1920 World Congress, the clearest contender for McLaine's title of 'ultra-left' was clearly Sylvia Pankhurst, there to speak for her newly formed Communist Party (British Section of the Third International). The CP (BSTI) was the second 'communist party' Pankhurst and her colleagues had formed. In June 1919 it had proclaimed itself the 'Communist Party', only to drop the new title for the time being in the interests of promoting wider unity. No one in Britain had been an earlier or more enthusiastic supporter of the Bolsheviks than Pankhurst. Her small but very active grouping had originated as the East London Federation of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). When its socialist policies and working-class membership fell foul of Pankhurst's mother and her sister Christabel and led to it being expelled from the WSPU at the beginning of 1914, it reconstituted itself as the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS). During the war years the ELFS was transformed first into the Workers' Suffrage Federation, then the Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF) which then, with some other small groupings, adopted the ambitious and not altogether accurate title of Communist Party (British Section of the Third International) just a few weeks before the foundation of the CPGB. The section on Britain in Lenin's *'Left Wing' Communism* is focussed on a single issue of Pankhurst's weekly, the *Workers' Dreadnought*.⁶

The Socialist Labour Party (SLP) participated in the early rounds of attempting to achieve the unification of far-left parties and groupings in a communist party—only to drop out at the end of 1919. Earlier, when it had put up three candidates, including Arthur Macmanus, the future first chair of the CPGB, in the 'Khaki election' following the end of the war in December 1918, this was criticised in the WSF's *Workers' Dreadnought*. Pankhurst wrote:

MacManus and the S.L.P. stand for a Workers' Industrial Socialist Republic. So does THE DREADNOUGHT and the W.S.F. But whilst we wish MacManus success in his parliamentary fight since he has entered on it, we think he somewhat sacrifices his consistency in seeking a seat in Parliament, and we know that, if he is elected, he will find Parliament a waste of time.

Her WSF colleague W.F. Watson in the following week's edition was clear that:

the revolutionary industrialists will sooner or later have to repudiate the Parliamentary machine entirely and build up, through the Workers' Committees a National Administrative Council outside of any Capitalist structure, and supersede the functions of the Parliamentary machine.⁷

Pankhurst and the WSF were convinced that the road to the 'Socialist Commonwealth' would lead—as it had in Russia—through workers' councils or soviets. Soviet democracy would be infinitely more truly democratic than the best examples of 'bourgeois' representative government. As Pankhurst put it towards the end of 1918:

We are waiting for the Soviets, as they are called in Russia, the councils of delegates appointed by the workers in every kind of industry, by the workers on the land, and workers in the home. Through the medium of these workers' councils the machinery of the coming of the Socialist Commonwealth will be evolved, here, as in Russia.⁸

The spread of soviets to Hungary, Bavaria and, in the shape of the *camere del lavoro*, to Italy during the following year, 1919, would prove very short-lived, but at the time it seemed to show that soviet democracy was on the march throughout Europe—potentially throughout the world. The WSF and later CP (BSTI) opposition to participation in parliamentary politics followed from this. If the goal of revolutionaries was to bring about soviet democracy—real democracy—how could they participate in—*phoney*—bourgeois democracy and retain any credibility? Would not doing so inevitably confuse and disenchant the workers?

Preparing the workers for soviet democracy was, therefore, the major task of revolutionaries and something the WSF took very seriously. In March 1920 Pankhurst appealed to working women to create 'Soviets of the Streets'.⁹ And in June the *Dreadnought* published 'A Constitution for British Soviets'; a complex structure built on 'household soviets' of about 250 people meeting weekly, with district, regional and national bodies into which would feed workshop and factory committees of delegates elected by workers. There would also be 'Public Health Soviets' and 'Educational Soviets' based on 'teachers' and pupils' soviets' at each school with parents' representation for under 16s. 'The army, so long as it remains, will have its Soviets organised according to military grouping. As the present forces

are disbanded and the Red Army takes their place, Red Army Soviets will be formed.' There were also to be Sailors' and Seamen's Soviets, and Agricultural Soviets.¹⁰

The WSF was by no means isolated internationally. Pankhurst herself visited Italy, Switzerland and Germany, involving illegal border crossings and a clandestine Comintern meeting in Frankfurt, before going on to Amsterdam where the short-lived—and anti-parliamentary—Comintern Sub-Bureau was being formed, in 1919.¹¹ Prominent in the movement in the Netherlands were well-known intellectuals and anti-parliamentary communists Herman Gorter and Anton Pannekoek, respectively a celebrated poet and one of the founders of astrophysics. In spite of Lenin's failure to support her at the start of 1920, it must have seemed to Pankhurst that she and the WSF represented the 'real' international Communist movement rather than the 'Right Wing Communists' of the BSP.¹²

In the summer and autumn of 1920, in the early days of both versions of communist party, Britain seemed about to side actively with. Poland in its war with Russia, and virtually the entire Labour movement was united in setting up Councils of Action at national and local levels and threatening a general strike to forestall this.¹³ Edgar Whitehead, previously secretary-treasurer of the tiny Abstentionist Labour Party and now secretary of the newly formed CP (BSTI) was keen to differentiate his own organisation's approach from that of the CPGB. The latter asked for representation on the national Council of Action. This was a grave error according to Whitehead.

Such a course can only confuse class-conscious industrialists and bring discredit on Communism by the advocacy of false principles of delegation of power. For consider. The 'action' contemplated is industrial action, and the people who are going to act are industrial workers. And what right or mandate has the Communist Party to decide on such action? And if they do not know, I am sure the Workshop Movement of this country will very quickly give them the information.

CP (BSTI) members were urged to get elected to the Councils of Action as delegates from 'industrial bodies, able to take part from an unfettered Communist standpoint' with a mission, spelled out in upper-case letters, to 'SOVIETISE THE COUNCILS OF ACTION'. They should insist that local councils admit only delegates 'from such bodies as are to be called upon to act: Trade Union branches, Shop Committees, and organised industrialists.' Councils should 'knock out all political representation' and delegates at all levels should be subject to 'instant recall'.¹⁴

The life of the CP (BSTI) was very short. After considerable debate, soul-searching and defections, it merged into the CPGB at the end of January 1920. Its problem had been the tension between its uncompromising view of soviet democracy and its equally strong desire to be part of the International. The very name of the party demonstrated this and, indeed, it insisted that it was already part of Third International. But the latter had made it clear that there could be only one communist party in each country.

At the time Pankhurst was serving what would be her final sixth month prison sentence under the draconian Defence of the Realm Act—a wartime measure then still in force—for publishing an article on ‘Discontent on the Lower Deck’ on 16 October 1920. The following edition of the *Dreadnought* reported the arrest its editor by ‘Scotland Yard sleuths’.¹⁵ From Holloway, Pankhurst was able to get a message to the final CP (BSTI) conference. Were she free to attend she would, she said, support the creation of a united party but on a basis that:

the Left Wing elements keep together and form a strong, compact, block within the Party. Lenin advised this when I discussed the question with him in Moscow, and I think the advice is sound. The Left block should have its own convenors, and its own special sittings, prior to Party conferences, to decide its policy.¹⁶

Following the merger the *Dreadnought* took it for granted that ‘the new Party’ was going to be very different from ‘the ex-CP of Great Britain’. It ‘should be resonant to the demands and the views of the rank and file, and it should avoid the pitfall of organisations where leaders only have a voice, to the detriment of full expression of opinion by even the humblest member.’¹⁷ For Pankhurst, her stay in the ‘new party’ would be a very short one.

The Socialist Labour Party

On the face of things it should have been harder for the CP (BSTI) to merge with the CPGB—as it did at the beginning of 1921—than for the SLP to do this. After all, while the SLP objected only to Labour Party affiliation, which already by 1920 seemed an objective unlikely ever to be achieved, the CP (BSTI) rejected *any* involvement at all in parliamentary politics while the SLP regarded this as an essential, if strictly limited, part of the path to socialist revolution.

The SLP was not represented at the Second World Congress but had it been there is little doubt that it would have been included as part of the

'ultra left' of McLaine's report, though perhaps it was a shade less ultra than the CP (BSTI) given its, very qualified, belief in parliamentary participation. It would certainly have rejected any possibility of Labour Party affiliation. The following year, in March 1921, it insisted, 'We belong to the Third International, and we are Bolsheviks'.¹⁸ It sent James Clunie to the Third Congress that summer to state the case of his party against Labour Party affiliation—only to find that the credentials committee rejected him and he was able to attend only as a guest.¹⁹

While some prominent SLP members formed the Communist Unity Group (CUG) in 1920 and subsequently played important roles in the CPGB and that some members and even branches changed their allegiance to the Communist Party, as an organisation, albeit a very small one, the SLP remained obdurate in its refusal to unify with the CPGB. It is tempting to attribute this entirely to the dogmatic sectarianism which meant that SLPers gave the impression that it regarded its small size as a sign of political virtue and theoretical correctness—a familiar feature of 'ultra left' groups in the view of their detractors. The BSP's *The Call*, referred to the SLP on one occasion as 'The Calvinists of the Socialist movement' a description many would have felt was only too apt.²⁰

Yet there is more to it than simple self-righteous intransigence. The key lies in the origins and theoretical heritage of the SLP which had begun as a 'split' from the BSP's forerunner, the Social-Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1903. The inspiration of the 'Impossibilists,' as the SDF was quick to label them, was the American socialist theorist Daniel De Leon who until his death just before the war led the SLP's US namesake and the 'Detroit' Industrial Workers of the World. De Leonists, unlike 'pure' syndicalists, pursued their goal of a 'Workers' Industrial Republic' largely through workplace organisation and militancy but with a definite, though subordinate, role for a revolutionary party.

Members of the SLP were at least as enthusiastic as any other supporters of the Bolsheviks in the early stages of the October Revolution. But they saw the events in Russia primarily as a vindication of their own De Leonist approach. In March 1918 their Glasgow-based weekly, *The Socialist*, headlined the 'Triumph of SLP Tactics in Russia.'

In Russia our friends have destroyed the political state—the constituent assembly—and are now organising industrial administrative Councils. Let every non-S.L.P-er read 'Principles of Industrial Unionism' (2d) (written years ago) and see whether, in the light now coming from Russia the S.L.P. is not the party of *the* workers.²¹ [original emphasis]

Soon after this the chair of the SLP, Thomas Bell, who would two years later be one of the creators of the CUG and go on to play a leading role in the Communist Party, hailed the Bolsheviks as the 'Russian wing of the SLP'.²²

In principle the SLP was, at this stage, keen to secure a united communist party. The sticking point, as already noted, was Labour Party affiliation. It was insistent that, as *The Socialist* put it in 1921, 'The Labour Party reflects the interests of the auctioneers of the Working Class, whose economic domain is the Trade Union Movement.'²³ Earlier that year it had poured scorn on the attitude of the CP towards Labour.

Yet the vain, self-important Communists talk about helping the Labour Party into power in order to prove its uselessness, and then the masses will swing over to them! To them indeed. To whom, may we ask? To men, who have not the courage of their own convictions?²⁴

Even before this some SLPers were beginning to detect signs of an incipient creation of an alternative officialdom by the CPGB. At the time of the January 1921 unity conference a Leicester SLPer, who signed himself FLR, described, with more humour than was often found in *The Socialist*, how he had gone to the Victoria hotel—probably, he said, the largest in Leeds—in the hope of being able to report the proceedings for the SLP's paper. 'A London comrade—one of the 'solidarity' lot, and of Sylvia's party tried to get me in, but no go.' So he hung about outside the conference. Some delegates came out, all seemingly BSP members wearing BSP badges. 'Most of them looked like minor Trade Union officials,' but he did see 'one genuine member of the working class', who had been 'sent off to find a duplicator'.

I felt sorry for him, just a humble cog in this magnificent machine, this inversion of the Soviet principle, when, instead of the power springing from the organised workers in the field, mine, factory and workshop upwards to the central administrative body, a triumphant band of omnipotents stand on the apex and give out their instructions.

FLR also queried the cost of the venue—where did the money come from? In the experience of the Leicester SLP, pub landlords—never mind hoteliers—would not let them book rooms because of the clash with their 'class interests'.²⁵

By this time, 1921, enthusiasm for the Bolshevik revolution had waned in

the SLP. Some had left for the CP but those remaining were increasingly and consciously reasserting their De Leonism. The SLP remained supportive of the Bolsheviks but it rejected Russia as any sort of model for more economically advanced countries and thought the brave Bolshevik attempt to bring about socialism was doomed to failure. John Henderson, at various times national secretary of the SLP and editor of *The Socialist*, as well as secretary of the Industrial Unionist Groups in the Engineers' Union (AEU), was dismissive of those on the left with their 'feet in Great Britain, but their heads in Russia.'²⁶ At the end of 1921 he wrote:

Unity at the top can only proceed from unity at the bottom. In this country the proletariat constitutes a majority of the population. When they assume power it is the rule of the majority. Dictatorship of the Proletariat is a nonsensical term in relation to conditions here.²⁷

In the meantime, after his return from the frustrating visit to the third congress of the Comintern, Clunie produced a lengthy report which was published in *The Socialist* in instalments over a period of more than two months and then as a 6d. pamphlet, *The Third Communist International. Its Aims and Methods*.²⁸ For him the 'New Economic Policy' (NEP) was the beginning of a return to capitalism; the real revolution still lay ahead.

In Russia there is no Communism and the people are not Communists and for many reasons the political dictatorship, necessary as it may have been up to now, has been undermined because of the poverised condition of economic resources and means of production. With the growth of Capitalism in Russia, the proletariat will be drawn more and more to study revolutionary progress from the industrial side. These things point to the absurdity of the Third International imposing its psychological outlook upon the rest of the countries whose conditions dictate otherwise.²⁹

The following year, 1922, the SLP's weekly dismissed any idea that the Russian revolution could be any sort of model for Britain. It rejected the 'Civil War stunt' advocated by the Communists. The dictatorship of the proletariat was, in Britain and similar countries, 'a historical and social impossibility in these days'. The capitalist system continued and the capitalist class ruled 'by the consent of the vast majority which is the Proletariat'.³⁰ The dictatorship of the proletariat might be 'correct in a country like Roumania or Russia' but it was 'out of date' in countries such as Britain, Germany and the U.S.A. 'In civilised society (capitalist variety especially) the methods of settling quarrels by an appeal to force (violence) is out of date. Today we recognise the peaceful method; by public speeches, by free press, by balloting, by the gaining of majorities'. How could SLP propaganda reach workers if it was to 'advocate violence which would get us crushed?'³¹

The SLP rejected conspiratorial methods. ‘The establishment of Socialism is not possible with hush-hush-here-comes-the-policeman-hide-the-plans methods’. *The Socialist* continued, in a response to an article by the CP’s J R Campbell in *The Worker*:

We would like to impress on Campbell that Marx nowhere, to our knowledge, gives any reason to believe that he believed in dictatorship, physical force, and political revolution, in Great Britain, as those ideas find expression in his article, or as presently expressed by certain persons who insult the memory of Marx by calling themselves Marxists.³²

The SLP was insistent on the openness and transparency of its activities. It was ‘no hole-and-corner band of conspirators but an organisation of Class Conscious Working Men and Women.’ All information about it was readily available from the national secretary at 50 Renfrew Street, Glasgow. ‘When applying state whether Mr, Mrs, Lieutenant, Sergeant or just plain “Bobby” trying to “get on”’.³³

The SLP saw itself as a revolutionary party—the revolutionary party. But it was not a revolutionary party after the Bolshevik model. At the beginning of 1923 the ‘Platform of the S.L.P’ ended with the following appeal.

We, therefore, call upon he wage-workers to organise themselves into a revolutionary party under the banner of the S.L.P., and to organise themselves likewise upon the industrial field into a Socialist Industrial Union...and we call upon all other intelligent citizens to place themselves squarely upon the ground of working class interest and join us in this mighty and noble work.³⁴

The SLP vision of how the revolution would be accomplished had been laid down long before by Daniel De Leon in *The Social Reconstruction of Society* which the party had published in Glasgow in 1905.

The party, by achieving victory at the ballot box would legitimise the conquest of power by the working class. The industrial union, which included the whole of the working class within its ranks...would back up the party’s victory at the polls by the threat of a general strike or the ‘General Lockout of the Capitalist Class.’ On election to office in all the supreme positions of state and municipality, the representatives would ‘*adjourn themselves on the spot sine die*’. Their work would be done by disbanding, for ‘the political organisation of Labour intended to capture

a Congressional District is wholly unfit to 'take and hold' the plants of industry.³⁵ [original emphasis]

So, the revolution had to be the work of the workers themselves. The SLP's role was to show the way by preserving the correct, De Leonist, version of Marxism, propagating the classics of the faith, educating the working class, and encouraging it to organise itself in one big industrial union 'The organised workers must make the Revolution while the individual, and even parties, can only function more or less as units of the mass.'³⁶ The SLP certainly saw itself as a vanguard, but it was an ideological rather than a politically directive vanguard. As a *Socialist* leader put it in June 1922, 'Our work is to Agitate, Educate and Organise for Socialism—nothing else.'³⁷

Pankhurst, the Communist Workers' Party and the (original) Fourth International.

We left Sylvia Pankhurst serving her sentence for sedition in Holloway while her CP (BSTI)—with many misgivings—merged itself with the CPGB at the end of January 1921. The *Dreadnought*, though it had acted as the organ of the CP (BSTI) was under Pankhurst's own control. Just before the merger she announced that, whatever the result of the unity conference, it would 'become an independent organ giving independent support to the Communist Party from a Left Wing standpoint'.³⁸

Pankhurst did not last long with CPGB. Released from prison in May, having refused its demands that she hand over control of the paper, she was expelled by its executive on 10 September.³⁹

One cause of conflict in the interim arose from the *Dreadnought's* publication in July of a letter criticising *Communists* who were Poplar Poor Law Guardians in Bow which led to protests by the local CPGB branch. Pankhurst's response was that the party's best interests could not be promoted by 'a policy of "Hush! Hush!"' but only 'by constant vigilant criticism and discussion'. In the same issue she queried Zinoviev's claim to Comintern that the 'tactics of creating Communist nuclei within the Trade Unions' had been successful in Britain; 'it would,' she wrote, 'do our heart good if they really are advanced enough to be called Communist, and really powerful enough to achieve results. Let us hear from you, O Communist nuclei.' [original emphasis]⁴⁰

What seem to have been the final straws from the standpoint of the CPGB executive soon followed. A *Dreadnought* headline announced 'A New International. Left Wing Communism's Anti-Parliamentarians Consolidate.'

The impetus had come, Pankhurst explained, from the German Communist Workers Party (Kommunistische Arbeiters-Partei Deutschlands, KAPD) and the Netherlands where Pannekoek and Gorter were the 'leading theorists of a similar party that was in process of formation.' This was soon followed by extracts from Alexandra Kollontai's *The Workers' Opposition* which, Pankhurst reported, had been 'printed illegally' and its distribution obstructed. Kollontai complained that in Russia the unions had 'become depopulated' with only 'little groups that did not take part in the race for a career in the Soviet bureaucracy' still 'intimately bound up...with the workers'.⁴¹

In her own account of the meeting with the CPGB executive, Pankhurst claimed that the Kollontai article demonstrated 'the growing cleavage between Right and Left in the Russian Communist Party' and 'the tendency to slip to the Right' in Russia and charged that questions of this sort were not discussed in *The Communist*, 'a Party organ under the control of the Right Wing of the British Communist Party, and of the Executive in Moscow, which is at present dominated by the Right Wing policy'.⁴²

At this stage she seems really to have still believed Lenin to have been sympathetic to the formation of a 'Left-wing block' and at least hoped that he was already siding with the Workers' Opposition.⁴³

By October 1921, the *Dreadnought* was leading on 'The New Communist Workers' International'. The Third International had become 'the defender of Soviet Russia rather than the champion of world revolution'. Affiliated parties were controlled by a 'Moscow Executive wholly dominated by Russian Policy' and a new Fourth International had become inevitable. 'The Workers' Dreadnought was the first British paper to welcome the Third International; it now has the honour to be the first to welcome the Fourth International.' Like-minded individuals and groups were invited to send in their names for enrolment in a new Communist Workers' Party soon to be formed.⁴⁴

The Communist Workers' International would have to 'be created from down below'.⁴⁵ The objects and methods of the Communist Workers' Party (CWP) were set out in February 1922. It aimed 'To overthrow Capitalism, the wages system, and the machinery of the Capitalist State, and to establish a world-wide Federation of Communist Republics administered by occupational Soviets.'

The new party would to take no part in elections and expose 'the futility of Communist participation therein'. It would refuse affiliation to the 'reformist' Labour Party, and seek to 'emancipate' workers from the 'merely palliative' trade unions. Instead, it would 'spread the knowledge of Communist principles', set up workers' councils 'in all branches of produc-

tion, distribution and administration, in order that the workers may seize and maintain control' and create 'one Revolutionary Union' built on a workshop basis 'regardless of sex, craft or grade' and including the unemployed, to work for the establishment of the workers' soviets and the overthrow of capitalism.⁴⁶

The activities of the Communist Workers' Party now featured in the *Dreadnought*. Membership cards could be obtained for one shilling.⁴⁷ Meetings, usually featuring Pankhurst, or sometimes her friend and colleague Norah Smyth, as the main speaker, took place mainly in the London area, although a meeting in Tatton organised by the Portsmouth Communist Workers' Party, a breakaway from the CPGB, was also featured.⁴⁸ Later in 1922 addresses of the secretaries of the Willesden, Portsmouth and Sheffield branches were published in the same edition that contained the agenda for the 2nd Congress of the Fourth International in Berlin on 1 October.⁴⁹ Great emphasis was placed on the creation of workers' councils or soviets that would both prefigure the coming communist society and act as the instrument for achieving it. Sooner or later, Pankhurst believed, a crisis would precipitate the formation of soviets in Britain. In September 1922 the *Dreadnought* called for a general strike against the war with Turkey that Lloyd George seemed intent on. An 'Open conference for the General Strike against the war' was addressed by a number of Communist Workers' Party speakers including Norah Smyth and Pankhurst herself. 'Now the Soviets of the streets should appear in every district', Pankhurst proclaimed.⁵⁰

Pankhurst and the CWP remained sternly anti-parliamentary. Admiration for the murdered Rosa Luxemburg, whose *Russian Revolution* (and later her letters) were serialised in the *Dreadnought*, did not deter Pankhurst from adding dissenting footnotes at the point where Luxemburg criticised Lenin and Trotsky for not introducing another Constituent Assembly at a later stage. 'In our view, the soviets, not the Constituent Assembly, form the essential administrative machinery of the Revolution', declared one footnote. In another, Pankhurst asserted 'The substitution of the Soviets for a Parliament would have meant not a setting aside, but a development of democracy had they functioned adequately.'⁵¹

Perceptions of Bolshevik Russia began to change. Pankhurst's *Soviet Russia As I Saw it in 1920*, serialised in the *Dreadnought* for many weeks in 1921 while its author was in prison, presented a predominantly positive view. The book was still being advertised the following year but now carried the warning, 'Written before the Policy of Reversion to Capitalism was Instituted'.⁵² Unlike the SLP, which presented what it saw as the degeneration of the revolution as the inevitable consequence of the 'backwardness'

of Russia compounded by the failure of the working class of the West to come to its aid, the *Dreadnought* maintained that there had been a series of avoidable wrongs committed by the Bolsheviks.

There was, for example, 'a decree lately given out by the Soviet Government, in accordance with which all who oppose the new economic policy are to be treated as enemies of the state'. White Guards and other counter-revolutionaries, who had 'fought, weapon in hand, against Soviet Russia', the *Dreadnought* claimed, were being amnestied 'to make room in the prisons for our comrades of the Workers' Opposition and the Left Social Revolutionaries'.⁵³

The NEP had been met with a 'chorus of praise' from bourgeois politicians. An article, translated from the anarchist journal *Le Libertaire*, by a 'Russian comrade' asserted that from the beginning 'the roles of the Communist Party and of the proletariat in the revolution were rigidly defined; on the one side the material, the herd, the proletariat; on the other, the Communist Party, which organises, administers and directs all. "The Communist State" in its essence is the dictatorship of the Central Committee'. A second article from the same source attacked the Terror. The Cheka had become a 'hideous sore for the whole country'. The Bolsheviks had taken over the revolutionary movement and 'under cover of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat' they had turned on 'all who understood the social revolution as the self-organisation of the labouring masses'.⁵⁴

While much of Russian land was privately worked by the peasants, 'vast tracts of it are being offered for private capitalist exploitation, and that the industries are fast passing away from the State into private hands'.⁵⁵ The Bolsheviks were descending 'from depth to depth' as was shown by a *Daily Herald* report that there would be no workers' participation or compulsory trade union membership for the employees of foreign 'concessionaries'. The *Dreadnought* hoped that the fact that 'the Soviet Government expressly permits the capitalist to employ non-unionist labour will open the eyes of the proletariat of the Western world'.⁵⁶ Lenin was 'hauling down the flag of Communism and abandoning the cause of the emancipation of the workers'. He preferred 'to retain office under Capitalism than to stand by Communism and fall with it if need be'.⁵⁷ By May 1924 Herman Gorter, writing in the *Dreadnought*, concluded 'that Russia and the Third International are the greatest enemies of the world revolution'.⁵⁸

In the meantime, closer to home, every piece of working class self-activity was seen as potentially leading to the establishment of soviets while the notion of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was now highly suspect. In July 1923 Pankhurst wrote:

This in its original use meant the rigid suppression of the middle and upper classes in so far as they may endeavour to resist the coming of socialism and to combat the popular will.

Latterly, under the inspiration of Russian bureaucrats, the term...has been used to justify the dictatorship of a party clique of officials over their own party members and over the people at large. So far the dictatorship has been carried that the parties submitting to it have become utterly sterile as instruments of education and action. In Russia the dictatorship has robbed the revolution of all it fought for; it has banished Communism and workers' control.

Liberty is an essential part of the Communist revolution. We must not sacrifice it to the ambitions of would-be dictators.⁵⁹

Later, commenting, supportively, on the manifesto of the Russian Communist Workers' Group in February 1924, which touched on the question of 'dictatorship of the industrial proletariat' or that dictatorship plus the peasants. Pankhurst wrote:

In spite of the time-honoured character, we must affirm that, in our view, the use of the term 'dictatorship' is responsible for much confusion and misunderstanding...

No reasonable person believes that what was required in Russia was that the relatively small number of industrial workers in Russia should act as the dictators—in the sense that the Czar and Napoleon were dictators—over the peasant masses of Russia.⁶⁰

Though Pankhurst never referred to herself as an anarchist, the libertarian emphasis in the later *Dreadnought* was strong. Considering the nature of 'free Communism' in 1923 she wrote that 'There shall be no State, Government or Parliament.' The economy would be organised on a 'voluntary autonomous workshop basis'.⁶¹

Sylvia Pankhurst figures prominently in Mark Shipway's 1988 study of *Anti-Parliamentary Communism*, which traces the story of the—mainly libertarian or anarchist—advocates of 'soviet democracy' in Britain up to the end of the Second World War.⁶²

The First 'Ultra Left': Common Features, Differences and Decline

There were other, still smaller, organisations that can be said to have made

up the 'ultra left' as seen from the perspective of the CPGB in the first years of the 1920s in Britain. But Pankhurst's CP (BSTI) and CWP together with the SLP were the most prominent. All concerned saw themselves as the real, authentic communists, in contrast to those who Pankhurst always referred to as the 'Right Wing'. There were differences, some of them dictated by the SLP's De Leonist heritage with its goal of the 'Workers' Industrial Republic' But in both cases the vision was always of a society controlled from its base by all on equal terms— with, in Pankhurst's case—workplace-based representation being augmented by 'soviets of the streets' or 'housewives' soviets'.

The SLP saw a limited, secondary, role for conventional electoral activity while Pankhurst's organisations rejected it as something that could only mislead and confuse the workers. Both rejected any dealings with the Labour Party. Both also came to reject the idea that the Bolshevik Revolution could provide a model applicable to Britain, though the SLP was more sparing in its criticism, attributing what it perceived as the failure of the Bolsheviks to the economically backward nature of Russia and to the shortcomings of the western left in failing to come to its aid to anything like the degree required. There was more common ground as regards the nature of the new society they were striving for.

Apart from the issue of those left out—or excluded—from the new society both envisaged, for it to operate in accord with the demanding criteria of 'workers' democracy.' That would involve an unprecedented and sustained degree of participation for all individuals and an equally exemplary standard of self-restraint on the part of all those acting as delegates at every level. The assumption was that, in the classless society ushered in by the revolution, conflicts of interest—the product of capitalism—would have almost entirely disappeared, thus simplifying the entire process of running not only the economy but the whole of society, even on the international level. As the *Dreadnought* put it early in 1923 'Dictation from the so-called "higher councils" will neither be needed, nor could it be accepted. There will be no conflict of class interest: all will be working towards a common end.' Therefore, under Communism 'the arguments which will arise in the Soviets will be as to the efficacy of this or that technical process, as to whether this or that proposed innovation will increase or improve production—an end desired by all'.⁶³ This essentially apolitical society would be very like that of William Morris's 'utopian romance', *News From Nowhere* in which, famously, the shortest chapter had Morris's guide in the future post-revolutionary world explain to him that 'we are very well off as to politics—because we have none'.⁶⁴ Indeed, near the end of its life the *Dreadnought* told its readers that for the best way to create a 'vision of Communism' in the mind of the

average person no better books could be found than Kropotkin's *Conquest of Bread* and Morris's *News from Nowhere*.⁶⁵

There were notable desertions from the 'ultra-left.' The SLP had expelled William Paul, Thomas Bell, and Arthur Macmanus after they had formed the breakaway CUG and J T Murphy, prominent in the shop stewards movement would join them in the CPGB. For Pankhurst the change of heart closest to home was that of Gallacher, who had been her 'co-defendant' charged with an 'infantile disorder' by Lenin. At the end of 1921 she described, in the *Dreadnought*, how, 'honestly impressed with Lenin's appeal for Communist unity' he had thrown in his lot with the CPGB. But participation in it seemed to her 'completely to have changed William Gallacher; a revolution has taken place in his mind'. Having quoted from a *Communist* article by Gallacher and Campbell defending the policy of Labour Party affiliation she commented:

We prefer the Gallacher of 1920, who said he did not like the Parliamentary—Labour Party —Trade Union—policy of Moscow, but would bow to it for the sake of unity as long as it remained the majority policy, and in the meantime would strive to change it for the 'Left Wing' policy he now decries.

Lenin advised us to form a Left Block with Gallacher in 1920. Where is Gallacher now?⁶⁶

Being able to maintain a regular publication, preferably a weekly paper, has long been an essential goal of every small-scale political grouping. It keeps members and sympathisers in touch with what should be of concern at international and national levels and in other localities, provides an outlet for their own views and, in selling, or attempting to sell, the paper a regular activity in which all can participate. In the years between the Bolsheviks taking power in Russia and the formation of the CPGB several left-wing publications were given funding in the shape of 'Moscow Gold.'

For many on the Left at the time there was nothing wrong with accepting such financial assistance regarded as timely help from comrades abroad rather than cash from a foreign government. For example, when in the issue of 10 September 1920 the *Daily Herald* asked its readers 'Shall We Take £75,000 of Russian Money?' it described the offer as 'a magnificent demonstration of real working-class solidarity,' and many readers wrote in to urge acceptance though the directors decided to refuse the offer a few days later.⁶⁷ But soon, whatever funding there was became confined to the now 'official' Communist Party, and, as was noted earlier in the case of *Solidarity*

far left publications found survival difficult in the economic downturn of the time.

The SLP's *The Socialist* had gone from monthly to weekly publication at the beginning of 1919 and been extended from 6 to 8 pages from April 1919. It still claimed to be 'the largest Socialist paper in the country' in the summer of 1921.⁶⁸ But by October the following year the paper returned to monthly publication.⁶⁹ It survived for the remainder of 1922 and 1923. Its last issue in February 1924 carried no hint that it was closing down. It devoted its front page to the death of Lenin and rather appropriately reprinted an editorial by De Leon from the *Daily People* of 1900 which ended 'The Political Government must go. The Industrial Government must come.'⁷⁰

The other main organ of 'independent Communism', and the final one to succumb, was *The Workers' Dreadnought*. Like *The Socialist*, it did so after a long and desperate struggle to survive with fund-raising events such as a 'Grand Carnival. Jazz Band, Streamers, Hats, Balloons'.⁷¹ Around this time, the *Daily Mail* had noted that in Hyde Park 'Communism was represented by a little woman wearing a bright green coat and a red tie, who was speaking on behalf of the Workers' Communist Movement.' This, said the *Dreadnought*, was 'Comrade Norah Smyth'—and she needed some help.⁷² So did that paper itself. But it ceased publication with a similar abruptness to *The Socialist*, on 16 June 1924. By this time, it seems fair to say that the first phase of British 'ultra-leftism' had, substantially, run its course.

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