THE INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY AND THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL
A Crucial Test for Belief in Soviet Democracy

Which International?

willingness to accept the claims made for the soviet system as a “higher” form of democracy, or at least a willingness to give these claims the benefit of the doubt, goes a long way towards explaining the degree of support the Bolsheviks enjoyed and the eagerness evident among the members of small groups who were already seeking to achieve “Communist Unity” to join with them in the Third International. But for the ILP, and especially for its official organ, Labour Leader, the affiliation issue and that of the Bolshevik revolution in general were extremely divisive. The conflict generated would help bring about the paper’s demise. Arguably, it also set a pattern that was to endure within the Labour Party for decades.

Still a major component of the Labour Party at the time, the ILP’s
membership fluctuated between about thirty thousand and perhaps twice that number in the immediate post-war years. This was a very modest figure, but it was very large in comparison to the membership of rival groups on the British Left. Labour Leader’s circulation rose from 51,000 in the summer of 1917 to about 62,000 by the time of the October Revolution. The paper had been edited since 1916 by Katharine Bruce Glasier, who had taken over from her ailing husband, although Philip Snowden — the ILP Chairman from 1917 to 1920 and an MP until his defeat in the post-war “khaki” election of 1918 — was billed as the “Supervising Editor.” A regular contributor to the paper throughout 1915 and 1916, his role now encompassed a weekly “page of comments on political events,” to which his name was attached, as well as “leading articles.”

As already noted, the immediate response of the editors of Labour Leader to the Bolshevik revolution and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly was at least of the “benefit of the doubt” type, while much more positive reactions were found in its letter columns and in the articles of some contributors such as Emile Burns. Even Snowden, as we have seen, took a surprisingly optimistic view until sometime after the end of the war. Subsequently, Allied intervention in Russia muted criticism. An editorial in May 1919 summed up a common ILP view: “We are not Bolsheviks, if by Bolshevism is meant a permanent system of Government in which any section of the community is denied its proportionate share of representation in a democratically elected assembly.” All the same, the Bolsheviks had to be defended against the “vile . . . and in large measure unfounded charge of barbarism and terrorism,” and intervention in Russian affairs had to be opposed in accordance with the “the right of self-determination.”

By summer 1919, the crucial issue had become whether to remain affiliated to the Socialist (or Second) International or to seek to join the Communist (or Third) International founded in Moscow in March. “The whole Socialist International,” wrote Ramsay MacDonald, “is anti-Bolshevist. It is indeed the only real bulwark against Bolshevism.” Fred Longden, president of the Aston branch of the ILP
in Birmingham, denied MacDonald’s claim and expressed “great dissatisfaction” that Labour Leader “did not contain severe criticism” of the offending article. The Bolsheviks should be defended, he insisted:

A proletarian dictatorship in the hands of Lenin and Trotsky and their like, on behalf of the masses of 85 per cent of the people, is far more decent and far preferable to either despotism by a Tzar and Black Hundred or so-called “constitutional” rule at the behest of a few nobles and upper middle class tyrants like Lloyd George. . . . The Soviet Democracy is at least as admirable as the best in Western Europe.5

For MacDonald, Longden’s letter revealed a “movement which is being assiduously worked in the I.L.P.” In response, Longden insisted he was not “a member of any disruptive group” and continued to challenge MacDonald, describing as “monstrous” his presentation of the Socialist International as a “bulwark against Bolshevism.”6

MacDonald’s Parliament and Revolution was greeted with a fanfare. “No socialist writer,” wrote J. Bruce Glasier, “not even Kautsky, has more thoroughly digged down to the roots of political institutions, or searched out the implications of Socialist dogmas.” But he went on to comment: “Perhaps the most surprising thing in the book is his proposal for a sort of Soviet Second Chamber of Parliament. Coming from one . . . who has implacably opposed all devices calculated to lessen the responsibility of the popularly elected House of Commons, this is a piquant innovation.”7

David Marquand, in his biography of MacDonald, describes Parliament and Revolution as “in many ways the most effective polemic he ever wrote.”8 The part that so surprised Glasier defended “territorial” constituencies representing “citizens” rather than “constituencies of narrow influences — whether of trades or profession.” But MacDonald conceded that Parliament was “moved by class interests and class assumptions just as much as if it were elected by a stockbrokers’ guild, a guild of city merchants, a guild of landowners, a guild of lawyers” and urged that reform was urgently needed to bring the country’s “industrial life . . . into more direct contact with its political life.” This
might be accomplished through replacing the House of Lords. However its members were elected, a reformed second chamber based on citizenship would demand equality with the Commons, whereas “a nominated Second Chamber, though from the point of view of practical politics the most convenient form of such a body, is so contrary to democratic assumptions that it will not be adopted.” So what was MacDonald’s solution?

Let us, then, have a Second Chamber on a Soviet franchise. . . . Guilds or unions, professions and trades, classes and sections could elect . . . their representatives, just as Scottish peers do now. It would enjoy the power of free and authoritative debate (no mean power); it could initiate legislation, and it could amend the Bills of the other Chamber; it could conduct its own enquiries, and be represented on Government and Parliamentary Commissions and Committees.9

This was clever. Soviets — controlled by the workers and elected in the workplace — were central to the appeal of the Bolsheviks, which was nudging ILPers towards affiliation with the Third International. The attraction of guild socialism, which attempted to combine both “geographic” and “industrial” representation for citizen and worker, was also great at this time, especially for the younger members of the ILP such as Clifford Allen, who at this point, Marwick tells us, “hoped to bring the British Labour movement, or at least its vanguard, the I.L.P., into communion with the new Third International.”10

MacDonald’s new line therefore had much more appeal than a conventional defence of parliamentary government. And his “Open Letter,” published in Labour Leader on 1 April 1920 and addressed “To a Young Member of the I.L.P.,” deftly associated the Bolsheviks with both the (allegedly) “cataclysmic” socialism that had preceded the ILP and Fabian elitism: “At that time there was no word of ‘the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,’ but there was the corresponding Fabian idea that by clever manipulation you could capture the Government and thus give an innocent nation the benefits of the rule of an enlightened Junta.”11

There was little support in the ILP for the existing Socialist
International. Early in December 1919, a *Labour Leader* editorial lambasted it. The Socialist International will “deservedly collapse, unless it can do something to justify its existence” predicted the *Leader.* This theme was taken up by MacDonald himself. The Socialist International seemed “a gathering of compromised sections,” unable to “give a pure sounding call to the working classes,” he wrote. Yet what was the alternative? To commit to “Moscow” would mean becoming “a mere wild revolutionary minority, and throw back the movement to where it was generations ago.” If the upcoming Socialist International meeting at Geneva failed, the ILP should try to “recreate a new International” composed of “national sections which, standing firm upon Socialist ground, recognise national differences and see the necessity of keeping in touch with every manifestation of the working class spirit — even the most extreme forms born of the war and its mischiefs.”

On New Year’s Day 1920, in “A Talk with Jean Longuet,” Francis Johnson, writing in the *Leader,* quoted the prominent French socialist as calling for “a meeting of what might be termed the left wing element in the Second International” with others including, crucially, “representatives from the Russian section of the Moscow International.” It was not “essential or necessary,” Johnson urged, “that the International should be divided into Parliamentary and Soviet sections,” and G.D.H. Cole described the soviet/parliament split as “a great calamity.” It was in this conciliatory spirit that the ILP subsequently took part in the “Vienna Union” — the so-called Two-and-a-half International — which attempted to reconstruct a united socialist international.

Such a policy was never going to satisfy those members of the ILP who were demanding that the party affiliate to the Third International. But if support for this demand was growing in some sections, others who had previously taken a sympathetic view of the Bolsheviks were having second thoughts. By the beginning of 1920, R.C. Wallhead was far less enthusiastic than he had been in the summer of 1918. He accepted the “dictatorship of the proletariat” as a temporary expedient but believed that this was “totally different from exulting it into a philosophy or adopting it as an integral part of a programme.” And
yet it was precisely such an embrace of the concept that was a condition of affiliation to the Third International.

Clifford Allen joined the debate. He complained about the attitude of the ILP leadership:

We are left to pick up what we can from rather superficial controversies in the Labour Leader, and when we do publish any considerable work on Socialist policy, we choose Karl Kautsky’s attack on Russian ideas and leave our members to go to other organisations for almost all the original documents of Soviet Russia.

Our leaders blame us for offering our platforms to speakers from other sections of the Socialist movement. But is not this partially due to the fact that the N.A.C. tends to ignore important Socialist developments and by refraining from encouraging us in careful and impartial study, forces us into the hands of sectional propagandists?

Allen clearly believed that it was the failure of the ILP leadership to pursue such “impartial study” of Russian developments that had opened the way for “sectional propagandists” committed to the Bolsheviks to exercise a significant degree of influence among the ILP membership, a situation that a more intellectually vigorous approach on the part of their leaders would have avoided. Time would tell what consequences this influence would have for the ILP.

Third International Support in the ILP in Early 1920

While the issues were debated week by week in Labour Leader, the divisions of the ILP were holding regional conferences. The first to report, early in January, was the Scottish ILP conference. The Leader summed up the results succinctly. “By decisive votes” the delegates to the conference decided in favouring:

- The Labour Alliance
- The Third International
- Prohibition of Alcoholic Liqueurs
There had never been any doubt as to how the vote would go on the proposal to affiliate to the Third International, and, when it was announced that the resolution:

That the I.L.P. sever its connections with the Second and affiliate to the Third International

had been carried by 158 votes to 28 there followed a demonstration of enthusiasm such as had never been equalled at a Scottish I.L.P. Conference. Delegates jumped to their feet in one delirious frenzy, surprised and gratified that they were united in their desire to link up with the Moscow International.

It was a spontaneous outburst of cheering which astounded the Press agents, who asked what it was all about.

This enthusiasm notwithstanding, a motion to condemn those “members of the I.L.P. who are so blinded by thoughts of governmental power as to assist the enemies of the first Soviet Republic” was rejected, by a vote of 103 to 51. No “enemies” were named in the motion, but — inevitably — MacDonald was mentioned during the debate. Snowden noted that several other divisional conferences had in fact passed similar resolutions. This, he believed, was due to ignorance among the membership, including a failure to understand that the Third International had categorically declined to negotiate with a number of parties, including the I.L.P, which it deemed unfit “to enter the temple of the elect.”

Some divisions were hesitant about Third International affiliation. One frustrated delegate — presumably a Third International supporter — thought that “those who wanted more information about Russia, in view of all that had been published, should change their song from the ‘Red Flag’ to ‘Lead Kindly Light.’” Among the most hostile to affiliation was the Yorkshire conference. William Leach, of the Bradford branch, insisted that because “the Soviet system is not governed by delegates of the people but delegates of delegates etc ad infinitum, the rulers at the peak of this complicated pyramid were so far removed

*The Independent Labour Party and the Third International*
from public control that the recall was of no value.” At the Yorkshire meeting, the motion to affiliate lost by 43 votes to 10. In contrast, “a long resolution from Bradford in favour of the Committee System” to replace the cabinet government, moved as ever by Fred Jowett, was passed unanimously without discussion.\textsuperscript{20}

Meanwhile, in mid-January, MacDonald’s “Open Letter V to a Branch Secretary” — the fifth in a series that appeared in the \textit{Leader} — had criticized the practice of inviting speakers who expounded “other doctrines” to ILP meetings, a practice that both lent itself to “hostile propaganda” and obscured the ILP’s “own mission.” ILP branches should promote the party’s own ideas; they should not behave like a “Debating Society and a Dilettante Lecture Club.”\textsuperscript{21}

Somewhat ironically, in the light of its future failure to merge with the Communists, the Socialist Labour Party claimed a large share of the credit for radicalizing members of the ILP. Ramsay MacDonald’s plea to branch secretaries to exclude outside speakers was “undoubtedly” due, \textit{The Socialist} insisted, to “the growing number of invitations from numerous I.L.P. branches to ‘Left-Wing’ speakers (especially S.L.P. speakers) to address their public meetings.” Such invitations inevitably led “to odious comparisons being drawn; the weakness and reactionary character of the Labour Party being exposed and revolutionary ‘poison’ being instilled into the veins of the I.L.P. rank and file.”\textsuperscript{22}

In spite of the doubts of some divisions and the hostility of the party leadership, there was certainly a groundswell of enthusiasm within the ILP for Third International affiliation, as the Scottish conference had exemplified. So, as it had done before the war at times of internal crisis, as the party’s annual national conference approached \textit{Labour Leader} urged branches not to mandate delegates but to leave them a free hand to consider the arguments put forward.\textsuperscript{23} The most important question for delegates to the upcoming national conference at Easter was the relationship of the ILP “to the International Socialist Movement.” “It would be in the interests of the Party, and of the International,” the \textit{Leader} suggested, “if branches would refrain from
sending their delegates to the Conference definitely pledged to support certain resolutions.\textsuperscript{24} This proposal went to the heart of the debate on the “soviet system,” since its perceived democratic superiority rested not only on its “industrial” base but also on the belief that, under that system, delegates were mandated by their electors, at the equivalent of the branch level, and could be recalled and replaced, unlike the representatives — as distinct from delegates — in parliamentary systems, who enjoyed an entirely free hand between elections.

The wider implications of this were not lost on Snowden. Following the ILP’s Easter conference, he commented, in “The Tied Delegate,” on the conference of the Russian Communist Party. The chair, Kamenev, had, Snowden reported, “announced to the Conference that certain delegates had come pledged to vote in a particular way. He pointed out that by the tradition of the Party, the decision of the Conference would be binding on all members and that no tied voting was permissible. ‘Every delegate,’ he said, ‘must vote according to his own conscience, and not according to the views he and others had formed before the debates.’” This, said Snowden, “runs counter to the whole idea, as we have been given to understand it, of Soviet Government.” The pro-affiliation vote at the conference would have been smaller, he claimed, “if the delegates had followed the Russian plan of voting according to their own consciences, after hearing the debate, instead of following instructions given on the basis of very inadequate knowledge and information.”\textsuperscript{25}

Meanwhile, just before the conference, a letter from McOmish Dott, supporting a new international for “all genuine International Socialists,” insisted that it was unclear whether the Third International demanded “a forcible revolution as a necessary means of establishing Socialism” or whether the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” required “a minority governing even for a transitional period.” For him, “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” simply meant “the holding of power by the army and police to compel the people to obey the Government.” This state of affairs would end when “the capitalists agree merely to use their voting power and give up recourse to Koltchaks, Denikins and Entente Allies.”
In the same issue, Clifford Allen, rejecting “the old Parliamentarianism,” argued that the ILP should “become identified with the new industrial thought of the trade union world.” It should disaffiliate from the Socialist International and attend “the International Conference of Left Wing Socialist bodies,” that is, the meeting of the Vienna Union. But it should also announce its desire to become part of the Third International. It should set out the party’s own opinions on three points and ask for the Third’s reaction to them. In addition, Allen wrote, the ILP should reject the “Armed Revolution of the Workers,” as applied to Britain, but accept the dictatorship of the proletariat because “democracy is meaningless until economic equality is established.” The party should also refuse to accept the “soviet system” as a “general must.” But, he added, “if they say that the fundamental idea of government by Soviet is government through working class organisation then we agree.”

*The 1920 ILP Conference*

Early in April 1920, at the start of the ILP’s Easter conference, those who supported affiliation to the Third assembled for an initial meeting. According to the report in *Labour Leader*, this “Third International gathering,” chaired by C.H. Norman and addressed by Helen Crawfurd, Walton Newbold, and J.R. Wilson, drew about two hundred participants. It was agreed that they would “act together” and “hold further meetings during the Conference proceedings.”

At the conference proper, the mover of the affiliation motion, Herron, launched the crucial debate. According to the *Leader’s* report, he insisted that if members of the party sought affiliation, “the Communists would not seek to impose upon them something that was absolutely foreign to their nature.” MacDonald’s “wonderful book” had shown that “Parliament could not express the will of the people; it could not function for the working class.” If those in the ILP could not accept “the whole Soviet system, at least some modification of that system was the only thing for them.” The “dictatorship of the proletariat” was about “declaring an economic blockade against the parasites of
society.” The seconder of the motion declared that “whether the Soviets were a failure or a success,” their underlying principle — namely, “to govern from the bottom not from the top” — was sound. As regards the dictatorship of the proletariat, a dictatorship had in fact existed ever since the institution of private property, the only difference being that the wrong people had been the dictators.\(^{37}\)

MacDonald was “enthusiastically received,” despite being “constantly interrupted by a few delegates.” But he was conciliatory. Listening to Herron’s speech, he said, his “heart had gone up” as he saw at last a chance for agreement. But what with the Socialist International now almost on its last legs, the party was being asked to join another that was “bound to slap revolutionary conditions on every sentence it issues.” They could not duck the question of bloodshed: “The manifestos that have been issued calling the Moscow Conference say you must arm the proletariat and disarm the bourgeoisie.” This brought applause from the supporters of Third International affiliation.

George Benson opposed Herron’s motion, insisting that “the Third International favoured not merely the defence but the capture of the State by armed force.” There were cries of “No!” from part of the audience. John Barry, from Merthyr, denied that the Third International imposed “inflexible” conditions: “The question of force only arose as a weapon of defence.” Clifford Allen, making, as Fenner Brockway later wrote, “his first mark as a national figure in the I.L.P.,”\(^{28}\) supported the motion to postpone the affiliation decision until the ILP had made further enquiries. Those who were of two minds could rally behind his reminder that “the majorities in the branches were narrow, a thing that extremists on both sides were apt to forget.”

Three votes were taken. Delegates voted 529 to 144 to disaffiliate from the Second International, but the motion to affiliate to the Third garnered only 206 votes. A motion for further consultation and the holding of a special conference in the future was carried by 472 votes. The conference closed on a less dramatic note, with Jowett’s motion for the “abolition of the Cabinet system” carried by a large majority.\(^{29}\)
Snowden’s *Labour Leader* editorial following the decision presented the outcome as historic: “Not since the I.L.P. came into existence has it been called upon to deal with a more critical situation than at this week’s Annual Conference,” he announced. Affiliation to the Third International would have meant the I.L.P. abandoning “its anti-militarist and civic principles.” But, he said, he was left “with a feeling of relief rather than satisfaction.” Those who still supported the move to affiliate were, he said, misleading themselves: “The kind of Socialist International they approved would bear little or no resemblance to the Moscow International with which they desired the I.L.P. to affiliate.” The actual Third International would not, in other words, live up to their romanticized expectations.

**Reports from Russia**

Until this time, *Labour Leader*, like other socialist papers, had had to rely on journalists such as Arthur Ransome (of the *Daily News*) and Philips Price (of the *Manchester Guardian*) for firsthand accounts of Bolshevik Russia written from a British perspective. But, as visits became easier, this began to change. Reports broadly sympathetic to the Bolsheviks started to appear, such as those of Professor William Goode and H.G. Wells. In the spring of 1920, Snowden criticized George Lansbury’s *Daily Herald* dispatches, which were based on a relatively brief visit to Moscow and were soon to form the basis of Lansbury’s *What I Saw in Russia*. In the preface to his book, Lansbury would write: “I see the Socialists of Russia as a band of men and women striving to build the New Jerusalem.” This was not a view Snowden now shared, whatever his early optimism about the Bolshevik takeover. “The Third International stands for everything [to] which Mr Lansbury declares himself to be opposed,” Snowden argued. It aimed at “what it calls the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, which is a euphemism for the establishment, as in Russia, of an autocracy as tyrannical as that of the Tsar.” Affiliation to the Third International, he concluded, was tantamount to “being committed to a silly and futile attempt at armed revolution;
it means violence as the method of Socialism; it means autocracy and not democracy; it means dishonest and disingenuous propaganda; in short it means the complete reversal of everything the I.L.P. has preached and practised up to the present.”

For the ILP, of much more serious consequence than Snowden’s views was the joint Labour Party/TUC delegation to Russia in May and June of 1920. This expedition had its origins in the “Hands off Russia” campaign against Allied military intervention. Attached to the delegation was an unofficial ILP duo, Clifford Allen and Richard Wallhead, whose mission was to clarify the terms on which the ILP might affiliate to the Third International. Bertrand Russell also travelled with the party. One of the interim reports to Labour Leader, sent while the delegation was en route to Russia in May, claimed that “the Norwegian Party” had been allowed to affiliate, on the basis of “equal treatment of peasants and workers” and — crucially from the ILP perspective — the rejection of the “arming” of the proletariat. An editorial in the same issue seemed to confirm this report, encouraging the belief that affiliation terms were negotiable.

In mid-June, an article titled “What We Saw in Russia,” written by Ben Turner, who chaired the delegation, received front-page treatment in Labour Leader. They had seen what they wanted, he reported; there had been no “organized camouflage.” They had had free access to Mensheviks. There was no “anarchy,” and trade unions took part in “the actual government of Russia as well as in the government of their respective industries.” But, he noted, the Bolshevists did not deny that they had “used repressive measures”: “They say that, so long as a great part of the world is plotting against them, they must have exceptional powers to arrest the counter-revolutionaries, monarchists, and officers of the old White Guard who act as agents and spies for the enemies of Russia.” The Extraordinary Commission (the Cheka) was “above ordinary law, but its members assured us that they always give the prisoners a trial and provide the indictment within 24 hours. The members of the delegation were given every opportunity to see the British prisoners and the Concentration Camp.”
The fact-finding visit may have clarified the issues at stake, but it certainly did not produce a lasting consensus about the situation in Russia — although the members of the delegation did agree on the crucial and immediate issue, as was reflected in their official report, which condemned Allied intervention as “criminal folly.” But, writing in *Labour Leader* in early July, Brockway reported that the delegation had returned with “very differing views about the Soviet regime”:

A.A. Purcell and Robert Williams can find no words of praise too unbounded, Mrs Snowden . . . finds it difficult to criticise sufficiently strongly. Reading the various accounts, one gets nevertheless an intelligent picture of the whole. It is not so much the facts which are disputed as the interpretation of the facts.

He went on to note that “Bolshevism . . . is shown to involve great restrictions on personal liberty — suppression of freedom of speech, Press, and association, and industrial conscription with an almost military discipline. Apparently, too, even in the Soviet system there is little rank and file control.”

In the meanwhile, Lansbury presided over a “welcome home” for the Labour delegation, held at the Albert Hall and attended by all the members of the group except Tom Shaw, Clifford Allen (who was still in Russia, quite seriously ill), and, significantly, Ethel Snowden. As the *Leader* informed its readers, “Arthur Purcell and Robert Williams declared out and out for Bolshevism” whereas Haden Guest’s “plucky speech” criticized “the method of violence,” while Margaret Bondfield noted the “pragmatism” of the Bolsheviks in reintroducing “one-man management.”

Williams had already offered his very positive assessment in “Impressions of Soviet Russia,” a series of articles in the *Daily Herald* that had, he noted, originally been commissioned by the *Daily Mail*, which now refused to publish them without major changes. Calling Soviet Russia “an entirely new civilisation,” he admitted that “I went frankly and avowedly as a supporter of the Proletarian Dictatorship. My impressions will, therefore, be coloured by my
essentially working-class outlook.” At the Albert Hall meeting, the *Daily Herald* reported, Williams had displayed the “Soviet Military Medal” presented to him in Russia “for work on the industrial field in England to promote direct action.” The paper also reported that Haden Guest had been heckled when he was critical of the fact that “the Russian people had called in force as their ally” and expressed the wish that “all the forces of Socialism” could be “combined for constructive purposes.”

In late July, the *Leader* reported on the questions that the ILP’s Clifford Allen and Richard Wallhead had put to the Third International. But in mid-August, after his return from Russia, Allen announced that he could not recommend “unconditional affiliation to the Third International until it agrees that the policy of violence as a means of attaining power shall be an open question for the decision of each national party.” Allen’s earlier enthusiasm for affiliation to the Communist International had been based on certain assumptions about its nature and, especially, about its openness to negotiation regarding the terms of membership, which his subsequent experiences in Russia had shown to be without foundation.

The threat of British intervention against the Bolsheviks in the Polish war complicated responses, to a degree. The members of the “Labour Delegation who have just returned from Russia” appealed to every trade union branch, trades council, local Labour Party, and socialist branch for “direct action” to prevent such interference in Russian affairs. The members who did so included not only Arthur Purcell and Robert Williams but also Harold Skinner (another of the TUC’s representatives), Ben Turner, and Richard Wallhead. Yet Wallhead, at least, had come to have serious reservations about events in Russia. As noted earlier, Wallhead, now chairman of the ILP, no longer had anything like the positive attitude towards Bolshevik Russia that he had expressed two years earlier. The reality of rank-and-file democracy was now in doubt. In September 1920, he wrote:

*The Independent Labour Party and the Third International*
A short time ago, for anyone to question the immediate practicality of Workmen’s Committees controlling industry, was to run the risk of having one’s personal integrity impugned and drawing on one’s head the charge of treachery to Socialism. If one dared to suggest that this particular experiment in Russia might fail, the effect was to arouse antagonism of the most violent character.

Yet the Bolsheviks themselves were now saying that such committees were impractical and were introducing “one-man management.” For Wallhead and other ILPers who had initially been attracted by the promise of soviet democracy in Russia, that country now seemed to be heading in the opposite direction. Roughly two months earlier, the *Daily Herald* had quoted Lenin as describing freedom as “a bourgeois notion” and had reported that “the trade unions are about to be transformed into State departments.” But the paper made no further comment.

Meanwhile, at the beginning of July, Emile Burns complained in *Labour Leader* about how the *Times* and the *Morning Post* were “making great use of interviews given them in Stockholm by Dr Guest and Mrs Snowden.” This complaint was followed by further protests “against the hostile interviews on Soviet Russia being accorded to the Capitalist Press by Mrs Snowden.” There were demands that the NAC take action.

Lansbury’s *Daily Herald* also targeted Ethel Snowden, reporting that she had “given to the Capitalist Press an interview strongly critical of the Soviet regime in Russia. The Capitalist Press is delighted naturally.” According to the *Herald*, Snowden had said of the Russian Bolsheviks: “They believe in what they call the dictatorship of the proletariat, but they have not even got that. They have only got the dictatorship of the Communist Party. It does not stop there. The Communist Party is dictated to by a handful of people inside the party.” But this, said the *Herald*, was not easy to reconcile with her further statement that “the Soviet Government is quite stable and supported by the whole population, in spite of the fact that probably the majority...
do not like it.” In September, under the heading “Lenin to Mrs. Snowden,” the paper would quote from an attack by Lenin on critics of the Bolsheviks. It was natural, Lenin commented, for “bourgeois democrats,” who were “quite like our Mensheviks,” to oppose the Bolsheviks, and it was likewise “natural that revolutionary workers execute Mensheviks.”

Ethel Snowden’s book, *Through Bolshevist Russia*, further angered her critics. Reviewing it in the *Daily Herald*, George Young regretted that “her Anglo-Saxon attitude while providing Bolshie busters with valuable quotations” had “detracted from the value of her ‘impressions de voyage.’” The book, he said, abounded with “sweeping and superficial indictments.” Of the ILP reaction, Keith Laybourn says, in his biography of Philip Snowden, that it was “the party’s treatment of his wife,” which Snowden took as a “personal insult,” that drove him from “the mainstream of I.L.P. politics.” His point is well taken, although, as we shall see in the concluding chapter, Snowden’s conflict with the editor of *Labour Leader* was surely another, related, factor.

*The Left Wing of the ILP and the 1921 Conference*

Although *Labour Leader* reported on the initial meeting of Third International supporters at the party’s 1920 conference, it was only at the very end of that year that references to the “Left Wing of the I.L.P.” began to appear regularly in the paper. In a letter reproduced in the SLP’s *The Socialist* in May, however, the BSP secretary, Albert Inkpin, referred to “the unofficial Left Wing Committee that has been established in the ILP” as taking part in one of the meetings on Communist unity.

Soon after the 1920 conference rejected the motion for immediate affiliation with the Third, a letter appeared in *Labour Leader* whose author, A.T. Rogers, argued that it was now the “bounden duty” of every Third International supporter to “immediately withdraw from the I.L.P.” This alarmed leading figures of the party’s “Left Wing,” who expressed the hope that no one would take this advice. They were, they insisted, “seeking to unify the movement, not disrupt it.”

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205
Although it was plainly very active throughout the remainder of 1920, little more was heard in Labour Leader of the campaign of the Left Wing until the end of the year. In the meantime, supporters of Third International affiliation published a fortnightly paper, The Internationalist, and a pamphlet titled Moscow’s Reply to the I.L.P., which had been sent to Walton Newbold by the Comintern executive. The crucial 1921 conference, at which the final decision on affiliation would be taken, was now in sight. At the beginning of December 1920, Philip Snowden noted that the Comintern had “instructed” all the Communist groups in Britain to unite, including “the Left Wing of the I.L.P.,” while in the correspondence column H. Parker subsequently attacked “the attempt to establish and build up within the I.L.P. an undemocratic and questionable group, namely ‘The Provisional National Committee of the Left Wing of the I.L.P.’”

Others still emphasized unity. Jim Simmons, chair of the Midland divisional council, praised the “Left Wingers” in his division “who had refused to take part in any ‘wrecking movement’ inside the party.” He was to plead the following month for tolerance of “loyal Left Wingers, like Fred Longden . . . who have refused to take part in the wrecking tactics of the last twelve months.” The policy proposals of the “Provisional National Committee” had by this time already appeared in The Socialist. In the opinion of the committee, the “Object” should begin: “The I.L.P. is a Communist organisation whose aim is to destroy the capitalist system.” The dictatorship of the proletariat was to be declared a “necessary condition for Social Revolution.”

Meanwhile, Ramsay MacDonald was contesting the Woolwich parliamentary by-election, and Brockway’s eve-of-poll report in Labour Leader confidently predicted that he would win by a large majority. But, with the CPGB attacking him and recommending abstention, MacDonald was defeated. Angry letters followed in the paper a week later. The Reverend William J. Piggott blamed the Communists, who he said “torpedoed their Comrade’s work,” but supporters of the “Left Wing” were held at least partly responsible. H. Parker wrote: “The Labour Party candidate at Woolwich was an I.L.P. member and the
National Labour Party is entitled to the satisfaction of knowing that in future our nominee cannot be fought ‘relentlessly, ruthlessly and in the open’ by members (?) of the I.L.P. who have sought to purloin our title and malign our name.”

Summarizing the content of these letters, the Leader’s editor, Katharine Bruce Glasier, concluded by commenting on the opinion of yet another critic of the “Left Wing”:

Mr R Sedgwick writes with our full sympathy, that he thinks it will be agreed that the time has now arrived when Mr Walton Newbold and his like must conduct their “relentless and ruthless fight out in the open” of Mr MacDonald and our other I.L.P. leaders, outside the ranks of the I.L.P. . . . It can hardly be doubted that these men are out to smash our Party. . . . Therefore let the Party give them clear notice to quit.60

Under severe pressure from all sides, Glasier refused to publish “defamatory libels on individuals unsupported by evidence.” These included both a letter attacking Walton Newbold and one from him, written, she said, “under the kindly title ‘MacDonald Must Go.’”61

This was by no means the first time that Glasier and Newbold had clashed. Back in June 1918, under the heading “More Suppressions,” The Socialist had published an exchange between Newbold and the Labour Leader editor. The former began by explaining that he had wanted to respond to the criticisms of the Bolsheviks made by Dr. Alfred Salter (detailed in chapter 6) but that he had waited to see what MacDonald would have to say about the issue “before putting the point of view of the Bolshevik I.L.P.—that is, of himself and fellow members of the “Left Wing.” In fact, Newbold’s June letter had concentrated on Labour Leader’s failure to make enough of the publication by the Bolsheviks of the “secret treaties” between the Allies and tsarist regime, to which The Socialist had devoted most of its April issue. “We care not one fig for ‘Democracy!’” Newbold had proclaimed. “We have no wish to greet the political democrats of the Constituent Assembly. We are concerned only about Social and Industrial Democracy.” He had

The Independent Labour Party and the Third International 207
gone on to defend the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” though “no one pretends he likes the prospect of a dictatorship.” In her brief reply, Glasier merely explained that “the tone and temper left no alternative but to return the article.”

Once again, in 1921, the ILP’s annual conference at Easter was dominated by the affiliation issue. But by now it was clearly a lost cause. Reporting on the Scottish ILP conference back in January, P.J. Dollan, a dominant figure in the Glasgow ILP, noted in Labour Leader that there had been “some surprise” at the rejection by the Scottish ILP, by a vote of 93 to 57, of a motion for joining the Third International, in the light the very different vote at the Scottish conference the previous year. Far less surprised, by his own account, was the veteran Scottish socialist John Maclean. Writing in an edition of The Socialist published the same day in January, he commented: “In response to the timely and cunning appeals of Ramsay MacDonald, the Scottish I.L.P. branches have turned from the Third and will drift back to the capitalist-controlled Second International. The I.L.P. wirepullers have consequently won the day.”

This proved to be the case, though how much “wirepulling” was now required is highly debatable. According to Labour Leader’s report on the Easter conference, in his chairman’s address Richard Wallhead attacked the “criminal record” of the British government in relation to Russia and referred to “the great Socialist experiment” there. But on the issue of dictatorship he was clear:

In the end Socialism can only be effectively established upon the freedom and frank acceptance of the new order by the mass of the people. Permanent dictatorship and repression is its very negation and could only result in a hideous travesty.

Turning to the issue of the ILP’s “Left Wing,” he continued: “There cannot be permitted allegiance to an outside body whose mandates are to be carried out against the expressed will of the Party. . . . They should leave and join with an organisation to which they can honestly give their allegiance.” A request from the British Communist Party that
its president, Arthur MacManus, be invited to address the conference on the issue of the Third International was rejected.

In the light of Walton Newbold’s ILP candidacy at Motherwell, John Beckett attempted to refer back for further consideration by the NAC the section of its report dealing with prospective parliamentary candidates. “It was absurd of the Party to put up candidates who were active members of another and hostile association,” he argued. Beckett withdrew his objection after Newbold’s wife — Newbold himself was not a delegate at the 1921 conference — insisted that her husband was “never a member of the Communist organisation.” But she also explained that “he had received sanction to stand from Moscow so long as he stood on the maximum program.” She had, she said, returned from Moscow with a message to the Left Wing that “their duty was to remain in the I.L.P.”

Even-handedly, Beckett also tried to block the nomination of Ethel Snowden to represent the ILP on the Labour Party executive. Although Beckett’s motion was defeated on a card vote by a margin of 235 to 191, this led to acrimonious debate. According to the Leader’s report on the conference, Beckett “drew special attention to the article that appeared in the London Magazine. It was accompanied by pictures which had never been outdone for bestiality by the capitalist press in their propaganda against the Germans (Hear, hear). The Bolsheviks were shown dragging women half-naked from their homes.” But Mrs. Snowden had her defenders. As R.L. Outhwaite declared: “During the war Mrs Snowden played a braver part than any man or woman in the country in her championship of the liberty of the I.L.P.ers who withstood conscription (Hear, hear). When she found that Trotsky shot C.O.s she was naturally revolted.”

George Benson, moving the motion to reject the Third International’s 21 conditions for membership, argued that their acceptance would hand over the ILP, “bound hand and foot, to a foreign organisation.” This provoked loud dissent, general exception being taken to the word “foreign.” Referring to Comintern’s requirement that the ILP change its leadership, Benson asked, “Was the I.L.P. a political party or a Christmas party? Was it an organisation or a pantomime?”

*The Independent Labour Party and the Third International* 209
In contrast, the “Moscow amendment,” moved by J.R. Wilson, sought acceptance of the 21 conditions. Wilson argued that the “Communist Party was using the power of the dictatorship on behalf of the mass of the Russian working class.” Seconding his motion, Helen Crawfurd insisted that dictatorship was “a temporary institution.” But the majority of delegates were more convinced by John Paton’s argument that “in the Communist International as at present constituted there was no place at all for freedom of discussion.” *Labour Leader*’s report commented that “Paton’s analysis of the 21 points was remorseless, and uttered with high spirit.”\(^{65}\) In his autobiography, Paton, a future secretary of the ILP, gave his own account of his speech at the ILP conference. Convinced that the 21 conditions were “generally unknown” to the delegates, he had learned them by heart and found it easy “with such material to make a devastating attack” on the proposed affiliation. The climax of his speech, he thought, came when he listed the ILP leaders whom the Comintern insisted should be “flung out to the Party.” At the mention of MacDonald, someone in the public gallery shouted derisively “Twister!” Paton retorted that he’d “sooner go to hell with Ramsay MacDonald than to paradise with some of the leaders of our own Left wing.” As he spoke, he recalled, “the delegates rose to their feet and my voice was lost in a roar of cheering which continued for several minutes.”\(^{66}\)

Following a contribution from Shapurji Saklatvala, MacDonald picked up on Mrs. Newbold’s admission that the Left Wing “had been officially instructed from Moscow to remain inside the I.L.P. to disrupt it.” Charles Baker then offered yet another view of the meaning of the dictatorship of the proletariat, arguing that it referred simply to nationalization, inasmuch as that would involve “the imposition of the will of the masses upon a dissentient few.” In the end, the Moscow amendment was overwhelmingly rejected, by a vote of 97 to 521, at which point the Left Wing contingent walked out. *Labour Leader* summed up the result:
The Conference ended with many empty places owing to the secession of the Communist minority. There are many whom we shall miss, but we believe it will be better for them and for us that the two sections pursue their separate courses. The secession will probably not number more than a thousand.\textsuperscript{67}

This contrasted, as would be expected, with the view presented in \textit{The Communist}. The organ of the CPGB saw the ILP as having “voted for nothingness” and claimed that 20 percent of its members — five thousand or more — had deserted in favour of the Communist Party.\textsuperscript{68} There is no doubt that the \textit{Leader}’s assessment was the more accurate. As Walter Kendall points out, if every member of the ILP branches that voted in favour of affiliation to the Third International had joined the CP, the total number of defectors would still have been “only about 4,850.” He estimates that the actual number of CP recruits was about five hundred or, “at the absolute maximum, one thousand.”\textsuperscript{69}

Not long after the conference, in a piece titled “Communist Efforts to Disturb I.L.P. Branches,” the Reverend Gordon Lang attacked what he viewed as subversive activities in Scotland on the part of the ILP’s Left Wing. He recalled branch officials selling \textit{The Communist} rather than the \textit{Leader} and other ILP literature, as well as the heckling and bullying of chairs and speakers at meetings. The “wild men” should be careful, he cautioned: “They had better remember . . . that they cannot all sit at the desk signing the death warrants of sentimental I.L.Pers and the like. The plain truth is that they do not believe in their own vaguely defined ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’ What is desired by them is a dictatorship of the Party.”\textsuperscript{70}

In his biography of MacDonald, David Marquand sums up the significance of the ILP’s decision on the issue of Third International affiliation at this time:

In Britain, only a few tiny and unrepresentative Marxist sects, with no significant following in the working class and no hope of building a mass party, had so far made overtures to Moscow. The I.L.P. was a very different proposition. In comparison with the Italians or the German
Independents it was a small party. But its membership was booming, its morale was high and it enjoyed influence out of all proportion to its size. If the I.L.P. decided to affiliate to the Third International, there was a distinct possibility that a strong Communist party, able to speak in native accents and appeal to native traditions, might come into existence on British soil. In the turbulent climate of 1919 and 1920, such a party might have made considerable headway.\(^7\)

That this did not occur in 1921 is probably more attributable to the combined effect of growing disillusionment with the Bolsheviks, the fading of belief in the reality of democracy in Russia, as is exemplified in Wallhead’s conference address, and, above all, the intransigence of the Third International itself than to the efforts of outright opponents of affiliation. To most ILPers, the 21 conditions were outrageous. But MacDonald’s apparent espousal of something vaguely approaching guild socialism, together with the final judgment of erstwhile supporters of affiliation such as Clifford Allen, must also have contributed to the outcome. The debate in the ILP had centred, more than anything else, on the much-contested notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It had become increasingly difficult to maintain the view that this was simply a “poetic” way of describing working-class dominance through a genuinely democratic soviet system or that the ideal of soviet democracy, if not yet fully achieved in Russia, was a real possibility there in the foreseeable future.

Attitudes towards communism remained diverse within the ILP. A corollary of the fact that there were relatively few defections to the CPGB was the continued presence in the ILP of members who had voted for Third International affiliation even at the 1921 conference. The spectrum of views established by this time foreshadowed Labour Party opinion for most of the rest of the century. These views ranged from various degrees of sympathy with communism to outspoken condemnation, with, in the middle, the view summarized by P.J. Dollan in his report on the 1921 Scottish ILP conference. Referring to the Third International affiliation motion, he noted that “the
delegates were asked to give unqualified obedience and support to Moscow as dictator of policy in Britain, and the delegates rejected the proposal.” And he concluded succinctly that “the delegates did not repudiate Bolshevism for Russia, but they were not prepared to accept it for Britain.”  

Yet, as F.S. Northedge and Audrey Wells point out, neither the Labour Party’s constitutionalism nor its gradualism could entirely offset the “almost instinctive feeling that simply because the new Russia was socialist, or called itself socialist, it must be right in the basic things whatever its critics might say.”  Such a feeling was experienced by a wide range of Labour Party members and supporters, and certainly it would be characteristic of a great many members of the ILP until at least the late 1930s.