“AN INFANTILE DISORDER”
Communist Unity and the Brief Life of the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International)

The Khaki Election of 1918

By the time the ILP had finally rejected affiliation to the Third International, two versions of a British Communist Party were in existence — and about to be amalgamated. But it had been a long, hard battle to achieve this union. If doubts over the legitimacy of the dictatorship of the proletariat and its compatibility with any variety of democracy were at the root of the Left Wing’s failure to capture the ILP, it was soviet democracy itself and its apparent incompatibility with participation in “bourgeois parliamentarism” that was the sticking point for Sylvia Pankhurst and her group.

The British socialist movement had long been characterized almost equally by schisms and by unity campaigns. The Socialist League split from the SDF in the 1880s, and both the SLP and the Socialist...
Party of Great Britain left the SDF in the “impossibilist” split early in the twentieth century. Blatchford’s Clarion had campaigned for an ILP-SDF merger in the 1890s and first decade of the 1900s, and the BSP was born at the 1911 “Unity Conference,” still leaving all but a minority of dissident branches continuing with the ILP. The outcome of the campaign for Communist unity, in terms of the composition of the Communist Party of Great Britain that ultimately emerged, had some resemblance to this earlier episode.

To begin with, “the various British Revolutionary groups groped towards unity under their own initiative, and independent of any outside interventions,” as Kendall puts it, without, achieving any discernible progress. But with the founding of the Third International in March 1919, this changed. Now the pressure came from the Comintern, with all the prestige of an apparently successful revolution and resources that were huge by the standards of the small-to-tiny British groups accustomed to operating on the proverbial shoestring. Even so, the desired unity took a very long time to come to pass, and then only imperfectly, with some of the earliest and most fervent supporters of the Bolsheviks still outside the ranks of the “official” party.

The divisive issue for the WSF first emerged clearly during the post-war “khaki” general election of December 1918. The Workers’ Dreadnought was critical of members of the SLP who had chosen to run for Parliament — MacManus (a candidate in the West Yorkshire district of Halifax), J.T. Murphy (running in Gorton, Manchester), and William Paul (running in the Ince, Wigan district):

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.

As W.F. Watson put it in the following week’s edition:
Men who should be concentrating on the Shop Stewards’ movement are either Parliamentary candidates or actively working for candidates. I am more than ever convinced 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.4

The article the week before had been headlined “The S.L.P. Candidates: The British Bolsheviks and the Parliamentary Election.” For Pankhurst and company, the SLP were the only real Bolsheviks in Britain — apart from themselves. The issues of participation in parliamentary elections and of affiliation to the Labour Party were to bedevil attempts to create a united Communist movement.

Waiting for the Soviets: The “True Believers” of the Workers’ Socialist Federation

Nowhere was the notion of soviet democracy greeted with more enthusiasm and more sustained belief than in the pages of the *Dreadnought*. Just over a week before the armistice, Pankhurst wrote:

We have heard another voice, the voice of the future, now comes with great inexorable steps, bringing the elements which shall form the social structure of the 20th century. The old husks of the 19th century do not charm us. 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.5

Nor, in the pages of the *Workers’ Dreadnought*, was this degree of optimism entirely confined to Pankhurst and members of the WSF. Fred Silvester, secretary of Birmingham branch of the SLP, had never dreamed that the “Industrial Republic” would be realized in his lifetime: He had not anticipated that “the golden dream of a Morris Utopia

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would immediately follow the nightmare of Czardom but it is good to know that the Bolsheviks are, under the most adverse circumstances, putting into practice the kind of Socialism I want in this country — the administration of affairs by the workers democratically organised where they work.”

With such total belief in the inevitability of soviet democracy conquering the world, signs of its inexorable spread were quickly identified. By the end of March 1919, the Dreadnought was announcing that the Hungarian Revolution has “declared for the Soviet form of government and has at once allied itself with Soviet Russia.” Soon the soviets had reached Bavaria: “The Independent Socialist Party of Germany has now definitely declared for the Soviets and the dictatorship of the proletariat,” Pankhurst wrote in April. There could be no doubt that “Austria will shortly establish the Soviets,” and all this confirmed “the belief that the British revolution is coming and that the Soviets will shortly be established here.”

In July and August, it was Italy’s turn. According to the Dreadnought’s “special correspondent,” Hiram K. Moderwell, Italy’s seventy-four camera del lavoro had been called “the Soviet of the future.” They were “wholly of and for the proletariat.” But while “the Milan chamber is much like the Russian Soviet,” there were elements of “true soviet organisation” missing. Its executive was elected not by the general council “but by the cumbersome method of universal ballot.” He went on to point out that general council delegates are “elected for a fixed period and are not in practice recalled as they would be whenever they cease to represent the change of temper within the membership.” These defects, which meant that the cameria fell somewhat short of the Dreadnought’s ideal of soviet democracy, were, however, expected to disappear before long.

Meanwhile, the vital task was to bring soviet democracy to Britain. And, undeterred by what had followed the Leeds Convention in 1917, this was to be the task of the WSF. In March 1920, Pankhurst appealed to working women to create “Soviets of the Streets.” They should “hold their own street meetings and set up their own soviets.”
Then, in its issue of 19 June, the *Dreadnought* published “A Constitution for British Soviets,” which went into considerable detail about the structure, if not other vital details, of the proposed soviet system.

Every urban district was to be divided into household soviets of about 250 women — members of families who were mothers and housekeepers — who would meet weekly to deal with issues such as housing repairs and decoration, food and clothing, water supply and sanitation, and “co-operative housekeeping.” One correspondent, E.T. Harris, protested: “Surely comrade you would not adopt a form of organisation that restricts household management to women.”

These household soviets were to elect delegates to district household soviets, meeting fortnightly, and these would be represented both on “the District Soviet which deals with general political questions & public matters” and the regional, and, via the regional, the national household soviets, each of which would have delegates on the general soviet body at the appropriate level.

As far as industry was concerned, the constitution envisaged workshop committees and factory committees of delegates elected by all workers, with “foremen and managers . . . appointed by vote of the workers in the factory, and on the advice of the District, Town, Regional, or National Council for the industry.” How possible conflicts between workers’ preferences and the advice of these councils might be resolved was not explained. The workers in each industry would prepare schemes to be ratified by the National Council of Soviets. National, regional, and district economic councils composed of delegates from the various industries and from the general soviets would be formed “to co-ordinate the various industrial functions and overlook questions of distribution and supply.”

There would also be “Public Health Soviets” — composed of equal numbers of medical workers’ delegates and delegates of the “general local soviet” — and “Educational Soviets,” whose structure began with “teachers’ and pupils’ soviets” at each school, with children under sixteen represented by their parents. These types of soviet would be continued at the district, regional, and national levels. The constitution
also envisaged that “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. In the letter quoted above, E.T. Harris also protested that there was no need for a different kind of soviet in rural areas because in Britain there was no “a small-holding feudal peasantry”; rather, the country had a “class-conscious and dispossessed agricultural working-class.”

The timing of the appearance of this long exposition, written by Pankhurst herself, is significant. The next issue of the *Dreadnought* added “Organ of the Communist Party” to its masthead. The *WSF* had, with the adherence of some even smaller groups, proclaimed itself the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International). The “Constitution” was its vision of communism.

**“Left” and “Right” Communists**

The rather grand “subtitle” of the new party is very significant. For Pankhurst and her comrades, the urgent desire to identify themselves as part of the international revolutionary movement outweighed the commitment to Communist unity in Britain, desirable as the latter remained — in theory at least. It was not the first time the *WSF* had declared itself “the Communist Party.” A year previously, the *Workers’ Dreadnought*, describing itself as “published by the Communist Party,” reported that the *WSF* annual conference had received a recommendation from the Third International in Moscow that a Communist Party be inaugurated in this country. A resolution that the name of the organisation be changed in order to make it clear that it takes its stand with Russian Communism was already on the Agenda. The Conference decided to adopt the name *Communist Party*, and instructed the newly appointed Executive Committee to approach other organisations of like tendency with a view to the formation of a United Communist Party.

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This proved extremely short lived. A week later, the reversion to “Workers’ Socialist Federation” was announced with a note explaining that the executive committee accepted that the use of the name “Communist Party” should “be delayed during the progress of these negotiations.” The Comintern’s “recommendation” had been misinterpreted, it seemed.

Pankhurst was fully involved not only in the WSF, in the People’s Russia Information Bureau (which she and others had set up in September 1918 with some funding from the Bolsheviks via Rothstein), and in the “Hands off Russia” campaign but was also a very active participant in the emerging international Communist movement. She attended the 1919 conference of the Italian Socialist Party in Bologna, which declared for the Third International, and witnessed Bordiga’s attempt to commit it to an anti-parliamentary stance. She also made dangerous and illegal crossings first into Switzerland and then Germany, where she travelled with Klara Zetkin to Frankfurt for a clandestine Comintern meeting, and then went on to Amsterdam, where the short-lived Comintern Sub-Bureau was being formed.

The Amsterdam bureau was, like Pankhurst, firmly anti-parliamentarian. The leading figures of the Dutch movement, Herman Gorter (1864–1927) and Anton Pannekoek (1873–1960), were both people of major intellectual substance outside as well as inside the socialist movement. Gorter was well-known as a poet, while Pannekoek’s standing as one of the founders of astrophysics can be judged from the fact that to this day the Astronomical Institute of the University of Amsterdam still bears his name. Both were also serious Marxist theoreticians. They were to feature prominently in future issues of the Dreadnought. Little wonder, then, that Pankhurst entered 1920 — such a crucial year for the British Communist movement — confident that she and the WSF, rather than the “Right Wing Communists” of the BSP, represented the “real” international Communist movement.

In the meantime, at home the problem was that, whereas the SLP, the South Wales Socialist Society, the Communist League, and several other small groups might be deemed fellow Bolsheviks, the BSP’s
claim to such a status seemed dubious. Reporting on the BSP’s 1919 Easter conference, the *Dreadnought* thought it had “not quite made up its mind yet to throw in its lot with the Socialist Revolution.” The immediate reason for doubting the wholeheartedness of the BSP’s commitment was the failure of its annual conference to disaffiliate instantly from the Second International and declare for the Third. But there were other reasons to be wary. As we saw earlier, the events of the summer that followed were to show that E.C. Fairchild and H. Alexander had little support in the party for their opposition to the “soviet” policy it was adopting. But they had both been prominent in its leadership.

A year and a half after the fact, Pankhurst gave an account of relations with the BSP in the summer of 1918:

Members of the W.S.F. hearing that almost the whole of the B.S P. Executive would be affected by the raising of the conscription age, approached the B.S P. in the spirit of comradeship, with a tentative offer of fusion which was very cordially received. The W.S F., however, drew back from the negotiations, because in the course of them, E.C. Fairchild stated that he did not think the organisation should decide between Parliament and bourgeois democracy, and the Soviets and the proletarian dictatorship, as the goal towards which our propaganda should be aiming. The “Leading English Communist”

Clearly confident that he would support her own anti-parliamentary views — otherwise what was the suppression of the Constituent Assembly in favour of the soviet system all about? — Pankhurst wrote to Lenin in July 1919, giving her impressions of the various organizations of the revolutionary Left in Britain, especially in relation to their attitudes towards parliamentary participation, and inviting his response. Her letter, published anonymously as from “an English comrade; a well-known Communist,” and Lenin’s reply appeared in the fifth issue of *Communist International*, the Comintern executive’s official organ.
Quite unexpectedly, for Pankhurst, Lenin failed to support her. In January 1920, the correspondence was brought to wider left-wing attention in Britain by The Socialist, which strongly objected to Pankhurst’s claim that the SLP “had dropped its ‘anti-parliamentary position.’” The party had always recognized “the necessity of parliamentary and electoral action.”

A week later, Tom Quelch, writing in the BSP’s paper, The Call, was able to claim the Bolshevik leader’s support for his own party’s position in an article titled “Parliamentarism: Lenin and the B.S.P.” Lenin had described parliamentary elections as “one of the means to prepare the proletariat for revolution.” This, he explained, was why the BSP supported participation, not because of “any of the thousand and one reasons which some simple-minded or muddle-headed anti-Parliamentarians” had put forward. Quelch then turned to the “letter from a leading English Communist.” He quoted Lenin’s advocacy of parliamentary participation and his belief that the refusal to participate was “a mistake,” although it was “better to accept this mistake than to postpone the formation of a strong Communist Labour Party in England,” which should include “all the elements and groups . . . who sympathise with Bolshevism and are sincere advocates of a Soviet Republic.” While plainly delighted with Lenin’s endorsement of the BSP’s stance, Quelch was extremely irked by the letter that had triggered the whole business:

Perhaps it would not be too strong — as we feel that the intention was deliberately to mislead our comrade Lenin — to stigmatise the statement that the B.S.P is “too much occupied with electoral success, and after the election their representatives, elected by the workmen, usually forget the workmen and their interests” as a lie, because of the simple and apparent fact that ever since the B.S.P. expelled the social-patriots, four years ago, long before the Russian Revolution, it has had no representatives in Parliament.

Quelch ended with the claim that “to all intents and purposes the B.S.P. is the Communist Party — though there are many outside its ranks who should be inside.”

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A fortnight later, *The Call* came closer to identifying the culprit. Only *The Call* and *The Socialist* — and, by implication, not the *Dreadnought* — had published Lenin’s response: “We might have advised the ‘Leading English Communist’ beforehand that he (or should we say she?) would get small change out of Lenin’s answer; but his (or her) continued silence is none the less remarkable.” In April, Fred Willis announced in *The Call* that the “leading English Communist [is] now revealed as Miss Sylvia Pankhurst.” There had still been no reference in the *Dreadnought* to Lenin’s reply, he noted: “Presumably suppression was the better part of valour.”

Pankhurst had not been without support, however. In the February issue of *Solidarity*, Eden and Cedar Paul contested the accuracy of the present version of Pankhurst’s letter, which, they insisted, had been translated three times before it reached *The Call*. It had first been published in Britain by the *Newcastle Daily*, whose version was based on a translation into Swedish that appeared in *Folkets Dagblad Politiken*, “the organ of the Swedish Bolsheviks,” that was itself based on the Russian translation published in *Communist International*. And the Pauls were, of course, fully supportive of Pankhurst’s anti-parliamentary position.

The February 1920 issue of *Solidarity* also contained support for the anti-parliamentary position from Jack Tanner, the paper’s editor. The question needed to be settled before the Communist Party was formed. “We say that no good can be got from Parliamentarism,” he wrote. “The energy, time and money expended in it is absolutely wasted.” Aspiring “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, seems to us to show a lack of revolutionary principles.” The fight in Britain would “take place in the industrial field.”

The WSF position was similarly boosted, that same month, by a letter from William Gallacher on behalf of the Scottish Workers’ Council, a group he described as “definitely anti-Parliamentarian.” Moreover, in Scotland the “rank and file” of the ILP was becoming
“more and more disgusted with the thought of Parliament, and the Soviets or Workers’ Councils are being supported by almost every branch.” The BSP “doesn’t count at all here. I say this as one who has been a member since its inception.”

From Pankhurst’s point of view, Lenin’s failure to support the position of those she believed were the real British Bolsheviks was a blow — but not a decisive one. He seemed to be saying that the issue was less important than getting all the would-be Communist groups into a single party. In any case, Lenin was not the Pope! He and Zinoviev, who chaired the Third International, might support the BSP’s view, as Tom Quelch had claimed, but was this the view of the movement as a whole? At first it seemed not.

Early in March, The Call reported that at the Third International conference in Amsterdam it had been decided that the basis for Communist unity in Britain should be disconnection from any body affiliated to the Second International, or from any “social patriotic” organisation. The B.S.P. delegates explained fully the general position of the working class movement in this country and the loose structure and composition of the Labour Party, but failed to induce the delegates to alter the general terms of the resolution.

It was against this background, with Pankhurst and the WSF believing that they were in tune with the advance guard of the international revolutionary movement, that the efforts to create a British Communist Party continued. The SLP, which supported parliamentary participation but was quite unwilling to contemplate Labour Party affiliation, had already dropped out of the negotiations by this time, leaving a fragment of its former leadership, the Communist Unity Group, still participating in the process.

On 8 May the Dreadnought published a communication from the Amsterdam Sub-Bureau: “We strongly appeal to our English friends to unite on the basis of ‘no affiliation to the Labour Party.’” This was the policy that Pankhurst had already persuaded the “Unity Conference”
of 24 April (at which the SLP was not represented) to adopt. To have followed the advice from Amsterdam would still leave open the more fundamental question of participation or abstention in parliamentary elections. But the Sub-Bureau’s intervention must have seemed like a strong nudge in the desired direction. What the editor and readers of the Dreadnought did not know was that the Comintern had revoked the mandate of the Amsterdam group six days earlier on the grounds that it had consistently opposed the views of the Comintern central executive in Moscow.26

The Call announced this dramatic change on 20 May, but two days later the Dreadnought was still taking comfort in its own interpretation of the Third International executive’s statement on parliamentary political action:

We are glad to notice that the Executive of the Third International has declared that the “most vital part” of the workers’ struggle for Communism “must be outside Parliament.” We believe that in this country the struggle outside Parliament would entirely supersede the struggle inside, and that British Communists will discard Parliamentary action in the near future.27

By June, The Call was reporting progress towards the formation of a united Communist Party. “Hail! The Communist Party,” A.A. Watts proclaimed, and pleaded for everyone to put the cause of unity before “minor matters.” But parliamentary participation and Labour Party affiliation were anything but minor issues for the WSF. Nor was it prepared to go along with the decision that at the upcoming Unity Conference, provisionally scheduled for 1 August, all participating organizations would be pledged in advance to accept its resolutions and merge their assets. WSF participation must be “conditional upon a referendum of their membership now being taken.” But the other participants — at this point essentially just the BSP and the ex-SLP Communist Unity Group (CUG) — were determined to continue without waiting for the outcome of the WSF referendum. This, as Kendall says, “proved a turning point.”28
A week later, *The Call* was complaining about Pankhurst’s tactics after *The Socialist* published a letter from her urging the SLP to participate in the “rank and file convention” but insisting that if the results were “not satisfactory,” they would not be bound by outcome.” The response from the SLP executive had been “what was to be expected. It is rigid and doctrinaire, but quite honest. The Calvinists of the Socialist movement will have nothing to do with the proposed convention. They do not favour Miss Pankhurst’s brilliant tactic of running away from the unity proceedings in the event of not being able to stampede them.”

By this time, however, Pankhurst’s tactics had moved on. Believing that the convention was likely to commit the embryonic Communist Party to the “Right Wing” policies it feared, the WSF had called a “preliminary conference” to decide whether to participate in the BSP-CUG event. To this preliminary gathering were summoned “representatives from the various Communist Groups which have lately sprung into being, and from the Social Soviets and Workers’ Committees, which accept the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, the Third International and the Soviet System, and which are definitely non-parliamentary and opposed to affiliation to the Labour Party.” They met on Saturday, 19 June, in London and declared themselves to be the “Communist Party (British Section of the Third International).”

“A Wrecking Policy” and the Failure of the “Appeal to Caesar”

The decision was explained in the *Dreadnought* the following week. Delegates from the Aberdeen, Croydon, and Hull Communist groups, the Stepney Communist League, the Gorton Socialist Society, the Abstentionist Labour Party, and the Manchester Soviet had met together with those representing the WSF. The SLP’s withdrawal from the BSP-centred unity negotiations, along with the non-attendance of the fourth original participant in the process, the South Wales Socialist Society, had, they concluded, left “the right wing in a preponderant position,” which it was now using to insist that participants to the August convention “should be bound beforehand” to accept its decisions,
which were likely to include parliamentary participation and Labour Party affiliation. Therefore, the *Dreadnought* told its readers, “We Revolutionary Communist delegates” decided not to take part in the convention and had instead launched the CP (BST1). Mark Shipway estimates the initial membership at about six hundred.

The new party’s position was made clear. A report on its provisional program by Edgar T. Whitehead, the party’s secretary (formerly secretary-treasurer of the Abstentionist Labour Party), explained: “In our opinion it is a matter of first principle absolutely to repudiate the bourgeois instrument of class oppression, Parliament, and to get on with the work of forming the network of Soviets, which will be the corresponding proletarian instrument of political power, not only for maintaining that power, but for seizing that power.” The “proletarian ideal of economic democracy” required that the franchise be confined to workers (those fulfilling a “function of social utility”), that voters be “grouped industrially, according to industry, trade, profession or other function of social utility which they fulfil,” and that delegates be subject to “recall and control by the persons electing them.” None of these conditions were met by the rules governing elections to Parliament.

The BSP response was angrily dismissive. *The Call* published extracts from the “Theses of the Executive Committee of the Communist International” declaring that anti-parliamentarism, “in the sense of an absolute and categorical refusal to take part in elections or parliamentary revolutionary work,” was “a naïve, childish doctrine.” This was, the paper said, “a sufficient answer to the attempts of Sylvia Pankhurst and her grandiose ‘Communist Party, British Section of the Third International’ to sabotage the efforts now being made to establish a genuine Communist Party.”

It fell to A.A. Watts — whose name was always followed by “LCC” in *The Call*, to remind readers of his role as a member of the London County Council — to continue the attack on the front page of the paper two weeks later. He regretted that “one person and one party (?) thought themselves of so much importance as to set themselves above the great principle of unity”:
I refer to Miss Sylvia Pankhurst and her W.S.F. I cannot condemn too strongly her action — *her* action — in trying to jump the claim and set up a little chandler shop Communist Party of her own. This is emphatically

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I say unhesitatingly to those few whom she inveigled into attendance at “her” conference, “comrades, you are being led into a morass.”

Miss Pankhurst appealed to comrade Lenin for his views, hoping to get something from him to support her anarchist views and action; Lenin’s views appear on this page. The appeal to Caesar has recoiled upon her.

As regards Lenin’s views, Watts was referring to a “wireless message,” printed in an oblong box in the middle of the page, that contained the following message “from Lenin to the Provisional Committee of the Communist Party”:

> I consider the policy of comrade Sylvia Pankhurst and the Workers’ Socialist Federation to be wrong. I personally am in favour of participation and of adhesion to the Labour Party on condition of free and independent Communist activity.

Lenin’s view, according to *The Call*, was that the BSP and SLP were “the main potential formers of the CP.” The paper also claimed that he hoped that “the I.W.W. and Shop Stewards’ Committees” would be “brought into close touch” prior to “complete union.”

**“Left-Wing” Communism: Wary Shop Stewards Remain Aloof**

Lenin’s authority was again brought to bear the following week when *The Call* published extracts from his extended pamphlet “*Left-Wing* Communism: *An Infantile Disorder*, newly, and as yet only partially, translated. Of the ten chapters that had so far been completed, the only ones targeting “infantilism” in specific countries were the fifth, on Germany, and the ninth, on Britain. The latter was based on a report of a speech by Lloyd George, from the *Manchester Guardian*, and

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otherwise on an article by Pankhurst and the letter from William Gallacher mentioned above, both of which had appeared in a single issue of the *Workers’ Dreadnought*, that of 21 February 1920.39

Lenin’s lead was being followed even before the party was formed. The Second Comintern Congress, which members of “anti-parliamentary” British groups, including Pankhurst, attended, took place between 19 July and 7 August in Petrograd. In a September report on the congress, W. McLaine told how he and Quelch had represented the BSP at the meeting. But “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.” On its behalf they argued in favour of parliamentary action and they

also laid down that correct revolutionary tactics for Britain at the present time included application to the Labour Party. 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.40

This may have been the first time that the term *ultra-Left*, which was to become a standard part of Communist Party vocabulary, was used in a British socialist organ, and it is noticeable that the shop stewards — though equally guilty of deviating from “correct revolutionary tactics” — are subtly distinguished from the greater sinners.

*Solidarity* was certainly skeptical about the claims of the CPGB. As a monthly publication, it commented on the formation of both Communist parties in the same issue. Presenting the shop stewards’ and workers’ council movements from the perspective of “a looker on” taking an interest in “the progress of the various political parties in red hot pursuit of unity,” it expressed surprise at the “lack of originality” in the criticisms of the formation of the CP (BSTI) and its “strictly anti-parliamentary programme,” criticisms in which “Lenin
is quoted ad lib and the rest is mere abuse.” It singled out both Watts’s “Wrecking Policy” attack in *The Call* and the “facetious paragraph which culminates in an attempted analysis of Sylvia Pankhurst” in the same week’s issue of *The Socialist*, objecting that the latter had referred to her “fundamental instability and erratic character.” It was not attempting to defend the CP (BST1), *Solidarity* declared, but “we would ask for a little more intelligent argument and the use of better weapons than that of abuse.” Turning to the more recent formation of the CPGB, *Solidarity* rejected, in line with its syndicalist hostility to “politics,” the notion “that the work of the British Communist Party is 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.” And, it reported, while Hodgson had supported affiliation to the Labour Party, “lest they should fall victim to [the] ‘Infantile Sickness’ of the Left Socialists,” William Paul had opposed such affiliation, arguing that “while Lenin advocated affiliation it was not understood by Communists that Lenin had the authority of a pope and should not be subjected to criticism like any other Communist.” The prospect of the shop stewards’ movement throwing in its lot with the CPGB still seemed, at this stage, quite remote.

**Gorter Rejects Lenin’s Criticism**

In September 1920, the *Workers’ Dreadnought* published Herman Gorter’s “Open Letter to Comrade Lenin” — his response to “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder. Gorter began, somewhat sycophantically, by stressing how much he had learned from Lenin. He insisted, however, that Lenin’s views on the situation in Western Europe were based on false premises. There were virtually no peasants in Western Europe, but the issue of the reliability of leaders was very much a current preoccupation everywhere: “We still seek leaders who do not want to dominate the masses and who will not betray them,” he wrote. In the current conditions, Lenin’s stress on iron discipline and “the strictest centralisation” was playing into the hands of “the opportunist elements in the Third International,” who used his arguments

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to insulate themselves from criticism. This was very much what the CP (BSTI) wanted to hear. The anti-parliamentary and anti-Labour Party beliefs of a substantial proportion of the earliest and most committed British supporters of soviet democracy seemed, in the late summer and autumn of 1920, to have helped produce a stalemate as far as Communist unity was concerned.

Apart from more or less syndicalist shop stewards and Pankhurst’s rival Communist Party, the new CPGB had failed to keep on board the “Calvinists” of the SLP, who, unlike the CP (BSTI), were prepared to accept participation in parliamentary elections but drew a definite line at seeking affiliation to the Labour Party. Even when, a little later, under considerable pressure from the Comintern, unity negotiations were renewed, as well-informed an observer as the New Statesman remained skeptical of any reconciliation between these apparently irreconcilable groupings:

There are now three separate Communist Parties — the Communist Party of Great Britain, the (largely Scottish) Communist Labour Party, and Miss Pankhurst’s Communist Party (British Section of the Third International). In addition the old-established Socialist Labour Party sees itself as a Communist body, and the English and Scottish organisations of Workers’ Committees and the Left Wing group of the I.L.P. have also been invited to take part in the Communist Unity negotiations. All these bodies between them have only quite a small number of members, but it is very doubtful whether they will be able, even under strict orders from Moscow, to combine into a single effective organisation.

But events were speedily to demonstrate that this seriously underestimated the strength of the “strict orders from Moscow,” which produced a “Communist unity” that amounted to a surrender to the CPGB and its positions on the part of many — but, as we shall also see, by no means all — of those who saw themselves as “Left” Communists.
The Short but Eventful Life of the CP (BSTI)

On New Year’s Day 1921, on the eve of its disappearance as a separate entity, the secretary of the CP (BSTI), Edgar Whitehead, writing in the *Dreadnought*, expressed his sadness that after six months of the party’s life its membership still stood at about six hundred — a tenth of what its founders had hoped for. But its tiny size did not inhibit the party’s optimism about the imminent revolutionary prospects for Britain nor lessen its conviction that it and not the “Right Wing” Communists, with their “revolutionary parliamentarism,” were on the right track for bringing these possibilities to fruition.

In the weeks following the formation of the CPGB, anyone relying on the *Workers’ Dreadnought* to estimate the likelihood of the CP (BSTI) achieving “Communist unity” with that organization would have been as skeptical as the *New Statesman*. As one *Dreadnought* contributor, John Nicholson, put it: “With us the question of Political Action does not arise. It is a delusion.”

The summer and early autumn of 1920 was a period during which the expectations of the would-be revolutionary Left for an all-out assault on capitalism seemed, for a short while, about to be realized. With Britain apparently preparing to side actively with Poland in its war with Russia, virtually the entire Labour movement was united in setting up councils of action at national and local levels and in threatening a general strike if Lloyd George, under pressure to intervene from Churchill and the French government, went ahead with this plan.

Whitehead was keen to establish a distinctly different approach to the councils of action, one that clearly originated from the party’s commitment to soviet democracy. Members of the CPGB (the “Maiden Lane Communists,” he called them) were demanding representation of their party on the national body and presumably also on local councils of action. But, Whitehead argued:

> Such a course can only confuse class-conscious industrialists and bring discredit on Communism by the advocacy of false principles of [the] delegation of power. For consider. The “action” contemplated

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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.

Not that the CP (BST1) intended or advocated leaving the councils of action to their own devices. On the contrary, members were urged to get elected to them as delegates from “industrial bodies, able to take part from an unfettered Communist standpoint.” Their prime mission should be to “SOVIETISE THE COUNCILS OF ACTION.” To accomplish this they needed to persuade the local councils to 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.” With a national council of action organized along these lines, it would, he said, be possible not only “to stop the war on Russia, but to destroy the Capitalist System and substitute economic equality and Communism just as soon as the workers wanted to do so.”

The CPGB’s interpretation of soviet democracy was putting increasing stress on the “leading role” of the party, exercised by directly establishing as many of its members as possible in positions of power and influence. The “Left Communists” of the CP (BST1) still aspired to such a leading role, but it had to be one exercised in accordance with the principles of soviet or working-class democracy as they understood them. This meant refusing all possible shortcuts, such as getting the party represented directly on the councils of action. Rather, it would seek the support and endorsement of workers at the base — shop-floor or branch — level. Left Communists would act as delegates only for workers in “industrial” organizations, and they would accept delegation only once the workers had agreed to the “unfettered Communist standpoint.” This was, to put it mildly, setting the bar very high. As a very long-term strategy, it might have been a viable and non-manipulative approach to the problem of converting the working class to the
party’s position and advancing its cause. But the CP (BST1) was an unlikely convert to the inevitability of gradualism. It was impatient for revolution tomorrow — if not sooner.

*The Communist* published “The Conditions for Admission to the Third International,” which stressed that Communist parties were to be organized “on the principle of democratic centralisation” with Communist “nuclei” in unions and other working-class organizations “completely subordinate to the general control of the Party.” It was going to be difficult to reconcile such demands with the strategy to which the CP (BST1) was committing itself with regard to the councils of action. Yet its very name demonstrated that the party was committed to being part of the International; indeed, it insisted that it was already one of its sections.

The way the party was being pulled, and was pulling itself, in opposite directions became clear a fortnight later, when, in the same issue of the *Dreadnought* that contained Gorter’s defence of the Left Communist position, Pankhurst’s editorial “A Call from the Third International” appeared. The Comintern executive wanted to hold a conference, within four months, to form a single British Communist Party on the basis of Zinoviev’s theses that the Comintern congress had endorsed. Pankhurst regretted that the text of the theses might not be “in the hands of our members, in order that delegates might have been fully instructed” in time for the forthcoming CP (BST1) conference. But, in words that inevitably suggest religious conversion, she insisted that “our Party has been received into the Third International.” The International could only be “an International of action” if its decisions were binding on its component parts. She recognized the problems that this created for her party: “The fact that in some respects the tactical policy of the theses (though not its essential object and theory) differs from what has been our own, lends great responsibility to our Party’s discussion of the theses.”

While still clearly at odds with the “Right-Wing” Communists, Pankhurst had been persuaded during the international congress in Moscow that its demand for the unification of Communist parties

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and groups in Britain must be accepted. The National Inaugural Conference of the CP (BSTI) took place in Manchester on 18 and 19 September. The delegates agreed to participate in the unity conference that the Comintern executive had proposed but also to call “another conference of our own in December,” to which the Scottish Communist Labour Party and all other groups “with principles which correspond with our own” would be invited. The affiliation conditions of the Third International were read and adopted “with the reservation that the passages referring to discipline to be applied to Parliamentary representatives does not apply to our Party, which does not take parliamentary action.”

Just a few weeks before, Whitehead had issued branch circular No. 5: “Work Through Industrial and Non-Party Mass Organisations of Our Class.” The circular instructed members to accept delegation from union bodies only when this did not “necessitate denial of their Communist principles,” to refuse otherwise to act as delegates, and to “seek to capture the local Trades and Labour Councils” not by means of direct affiliation but “through their industrial organisations.” Once “captured,” these bodies should be transformed “into purely TRADES COUNCILS” by the exclusion of “all political parties such as I.L.P. branches and local Labour Parties.” Furthermore, “all members of the Party exercising power and influence on the industrial field should refrain from outdoor propaganda and confine themselves to the industrial field.”

At the CP (BSTI) conference Pankhurst had moved “that the Communist Party must make itself able to control the industrial policy of the workers in order that it may direct them in mass industrial action leading to revolution and the overthrow of the capitalist system. After the overthrow of capitalism the Communist Party must maintain its control in order that the industries may be administered on Communist principles.” Delegates must have been surprised, or even alarmed, at this, but they dutifully passed the motion and agreed to withdraw — “provisionally” — circular No. 5, in which Whitehead had taken his stand.
But it is clear that Pankhurst had not really been converted from her anti-parliamentary views. She did not believe that parliamentary participation would be “so rigidly enforced as to hinder us in revolutionary action,” and there was, she insisted, “a growing tendency in the Third International to reverse the policy with which we disagree.” She predicted that, what with the growing weight of “Communist abstentionists” in many countries, the next congress of the International would reverse, or at least “greatly modify,” the policy on parliamentary participation. It was already so “hedged around with conditions that it seems like a poor shrivelled chrysalis from which the butterfly has flown away, a chrysalis that is just left as a memorial to a past epoch, in order not to seem disrespectful of the honoured Socialist dead, who believed in it in the days that are gone.”

It was soon after this that the Dreadnought reported the arrest for sedition of its editor by “Scotland Yard sleuths.” The prosecution, carried out under the draconian Defence of the Realm Act, arose as a result of an article titled “Discontent on the Lower Deck,” which had appeared in the paper on 16 October. Convicted of attempting to cause disaffection in the armed services, Pankhurst, who had fallen foul of DORA before and who had served a number of prison sentences in her suffragette days, found herself sentenced to six months.

Meanwhile, the CP (BSTJ) was preparing for its own special conference in Cardiff in December as well as for the Comintern “unity” conference with the CPGB and others the following month. The task of the first of these was to accept — or reject — what Whitehead, in his “National Secretary’s Notes,” referred to as “the remaining conditions of affiliation to the Moscow International.” Embarrassingly, Whitehead himself had received no copy of the theses that the Cardiff conference was supposed to accept, and no pamphlet version was going to be available in time to be put into the hands of branches or even their delegates. But he undertook “to extract as far as possible, the contentious points and major matters for decision” and to publish them in the paper starting the following week “so that delegates, as far as possible, can be mandated by Branches how to
vote on the main points.” As for the January conference, Whitehead supported the policy of the Communist Labour Party to accept the theses, which would be followed by an effort to “get them altered by a special demand from the United British Party after the merging.” Whitehead concluded that “our Scottish friends” were urging that, without the help of the CP (BST1), they would have to “carry on the devil of a struggle to keep the British Revolutionary Movement sound and clear.”

A week later, Whitehead’s “National Secretary’s Notes” highlighted the “stupendous task” facing the CP (BST1) conference in Cardiff. The theses presented to the Communist International Congress amounted to “a thick book of one hundred and twenty pages.” The theses, statutes, and conditions that had been adopted were laid out in a similar volume of eighty-one pages. The previous conference of the CP (BST1) had resolved in favour of sixteen of the conditions — but this covered fewer than five of the pages, leaving seventy-six to be somehow dealt with at Cardiff. And how were branches to mandate their delegates when they were unable to obtain copies of the document?

To extract the most contentious parts, as he had previously undertaken to do, was very difficult, he insisted, “because the whole thing hangs together in such a way that it would be unfair to the Communist International to extract one small portion away from its context.” It was clear that the real task of the party’s conference was to decide whether to “remain affiliated to the Communist International” or to “remain untrammeled by Moscow discipline.” The first would entail accepting all the conditions and “theses” and passing “a statute which condemns anti-parliamentarism as a naïve and childish doctrine that cannot bear criticism.” Would members accept this? He was now skeptical about the possibility of carrying out “our anti-parliamentary propaganda so as to alter the theses at the next world congress” in the merged party. As he pointed out, the last of the Third International’s 21 conditions, regarding the expulsion of dissident elements, would seem to mean that “if any Comrade speaks against the thesis on ‘Revolutionary Parliamentarism’ he risks immediate expulsion.”
The Cardiff conference was poorly attended, but delegates voted by 15 to 3 to accept the theses. The “decisive factor” in the vote had, it seemed, been the plea of “Comrade Leslie” — whom Kendall describes as having “returned from a difficult and adventurous trip to Soviet Russia” — who “pictured the amazement” of the hard-pressed Russian workers at the sight of conference delegates “academically splitting hairs over dialectical discussions of Parliamentarism.” This speech, said Whitehead, “put the finishing touch on any waverers present, and every vote, with the exception of those definitely mandated ones, with strict instructions to vote against acceptance, went for a united party.” Nevertheless, there were, unsurprisingly, clear signs of discontent in the branches. At Christmas, Fred Alder of the Manchester division reported that the four local groups were “absolutely solid” in their insistence on retaining the right to oppose the Comintern theses “to the last ditch and the last man,” while Norah Smyth’s Bow branch wanted a referendum on whether members were in favour of participating in the unity conference at all.

By the new year, Whitehead was having to deny the contention of the Gorton branch that the CP (BST1) executive was proposing that “we should eat our programme in the interests of Communist Unity,” while the Sheffield and Altrincham branches joined the call for a referendum and from Manchester came the criticism that the executive had already reneged on a commitment to hold one. The Manchester branches withdrew in protest a week later, though the executive insisted that “our Party is better conducted from the point of view of rank and file control, soviet principles regarding party government, Communist principles as regards election and payment of party officers, than any other party.”

With the acting editorship of the Dreadnought alternating between Jack O’Sullivan and Norah Smyth, the following week saw an editorial from the still incarcerated editor. Pankhurst’s argument, along the lines of the view Whitehead had earlier attributed to the CLP, seemed oblivious to the secretary’s concerns about the extreme unlikelihood of any sort of “party within the party” being tolerated, even temporarily.
Were she free to attend the conference, she would, she said, support the creation of a united party, but she would do so on the 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.” With or without Lenin’s alleged advice, this was clearly not at all the sort of unity that was going to be tolerated by the Third International, any more than would Pankhurst’s further demands that the “Left elements” should be free to campaign for their policies “in the Party and in the Third International as a whole” and that the party’s executive, elected by its conference, should be “subject to recall by a special Party Conference called on the initiative of one-third of the branches.” Whether or not a “merger” was achieved, concluded Pankhurst, the *Dreadnought* would become “an independent organ giving independent support to the Communist Party from a Left Wing standpoint.”

The SLP had for years been warning other socialist groups of the importance of establishing ownership and control of their own press, as it had done in the case of *The Socialist* and the Socialist Labour Press. When the wartime split in the BSP occurred, it was evident that this party did not fall into the same category, and it had lost control of *Justice*. Now the same sort of thing seemed to be happening with the *Dreadnought*. The day after Pankhurst’s editorial appeared, a meeting of the CP (BSTI) executive declared that the paper was no longer the official organ of the party. The *Dreadnought* seemed unshaken by this decision: “This formal change in no way affects the policy or the financial position of the paper, because the Party has never made itself responsible for any part of the burden of maintaining it.”

A statement in the same issue, signed “A.T.,” defended Pankhurst’s position. To be independent had not been her choice. She had made repeated requests to form a *Dreadnought* finance committee. The editor should not, as proposed, be appointed by the executive but by the party as a whole, “subject to recall by a special conference . . .
on requisition of 1/3 of the branches.” The idea of letting “little sub-committees of the members of the Party who live in London, the most reactionary centre of the movement put a brake on the policy of officials elected by the national movement” was to be resisted. On 22 January, the Dreadnought’s masthead was changed from “Organ of the Communist Party” to “For International Communism.”

In the meantime, while the Staines branch declared itself willing to accept the whole of the theses and statutes without a referendum, others took a very different view. There were complaints that insufficient copies of these documents had been sent to branches, while the Sheffield branch favoured participating in the unity conference only if it was “not binding.” Portsmouth protested against the executive committee’s decision to send ballot papers only to branches in which half the membership had requested a referendum and insisted that ballots should have been sent for each member rather than one per branch: “Surely, if we believe in the principles of Soviet rule, we should apply it to our own Party.”

Whitehead’s well-founded doubts about whether “the Left” would be allowed to pursue its own agenda in the united party had deterred neither Pankhurst nor the most determined opponents of parliamentarism in the branches. They were supported in the supposition that they would be able to carry on advocating “Left-Wing Communism” within the united party by an article by William Leslie entitled, rather grandly, “An Appeal to Communist Comrades of Great Britain and Ireland.” He acknowledged that the “Theses and Statutes” had been put together by the hastily convened second congress of the new International. There was “nothing to hinder us,” he wrote, from the plan “to unite into one Party where we can mould a real National Programme to amend these Theses and Statutes at the coming Third Congress of the Third International.”

At last, the unity conference took place on 29 and 30 January in Leeds, and the short life of the CP (BSTI) came to an end. A leader in the edition of the Dreadnought following the conference, presumably written by Jack O’Sullivan, saw the policies of the paper justified by...
the events and took it for granted that “the new Party” was going to be very different from “the ex-CP of Great Britain.” The new party “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.”  

The “Left Communists” who had created the CP (BSTI) saw themselves as the true revolutionaries. The BSP and its successor, the CPGB, had always been highly suspect. Both remained tainted with “Hyndmanism,” according to the Dreadnought editorial quoted just above. For the “Lefts,” the dictatorship of the proletariat simply described a soviet system from which those unwilling to accept the socialist principle that all should contribute to the general good of society were excluded. Soviet democracy was so superior to the representative, parliamentary, democracy of bourgeois society that to engage at all in conventional electoral politics was both pointless and confusingly inconsistent.

The belief that the new democracy had to be more genuine, more truly egalitarian, and that, in its organization and its procedures, a Communist Party should prefigure the soviet democracy of the future by applying the norms of that democracy to itself is evident from the concerns, expressed in letters and reports from branches as well as in editorials and articles in the Dreadnought, about all aspects of the unity process. All this was accompanied by the equally strong desire to demonstrate maximum solidarity with the world revolution and to play a proper part in the Third International that was the agent of that revolution. The requirement that the anti-parliamentary stance be abandoned put these aspirations in conflict with each other. Pankhurst’s notion of the International was not one of a rigid organization ruled by the principle of “democratic centralism.” Rather, it was one in which power was not concentrated exclusively in Moscow and where radical factions could fight for their corner. The unity conference at the end of January 1921 saw the end of the CP (BSTI), but it was not the end of “Left Communism” in Britain or of the Workers’ Dreadnought
as its advocate. But before we return to that strand of the story of soviet democracy in Britain, it will be helpful to explore the attitudes of the other main left-wing organization to which the plea for Communist unity was directed — the Socialist Labour Party.