An Existential Dilemma
Reactions to the Labour Party’s 1918 Constitution

One could argue that the fate of the *ILP* was irreversibly settled early in 1918, when the Labour Party adopted its new constitution. This was the typically summary conclusion of A. J. P. Taylor almost half a century later, although it oversimplified and foreshortened a more complex trajectory. “Ultimately the I.L.P. . . . was ruined,” Taylor wrote. “Socialists could now join the Labour Party as individual members. They no longer needed the I.L.P. as an intermediary and it became a diminishing sect.” Only a few years earlier, Ralph Miliband had made a similar observation: “The Labour Party’s announcement that it was now a socialist party was to create a serious problem for the I.L.P., which that body was never able to resolve.” Until 1918, joining the *ILP* had been the main route by which committed socialists could become part of the larger Labour Party and attempt to influence its overall direction. With the introduction of the new constitution, however, socialists could now join that organization directly—and, with constituency Labour parties forming in communities all across the country, the *ILP* seemed destined for superfluity.

The Threat of Redundancy
In his classic study of British political parties, Robert McKenzie characterizes the *ILP’s* response to the Labour Party’s 1918 constitution as a “combination of petulance and optimism.” Petulance is perhaps rather harsh, and, while there was certainly optimism, much of it seems more like whistling in the dark. Even before the *ILP’s* 1918 conference opened in late March, there were signs of increasing disquiet about the new constitution—which, among other things, certainly strengthened the position of the trade unions in the Labour Party (from which many of the members of the party’s National Executive Committee were drawn). Speculating on the probable response of the *ILP’s* National Administrative Council (NAC), a well-informed article in *Labour Leader* reported that “earnest, we might say anxious, consideration was being given to the new constitution.” The NAC’s report, presented at the conference
itself, reminded those in attendance that ILP had “never considered the constitution of the Labour Party to be satisfactory from a democratic point of view,” arguing that “a democratic party dependent upon the financial support of powerful and wealthy Trade Unions can never be a democratic party in the true sense of the word.” Not long afterward, Ramsay MacDonald would put it more bluntly in the ILP’s journal, the Socialist Review: “The I.L.P. pays pence, the Trade Unions pay pounds.”

Although the NAC report acknowledged that local Labour parties were bound to compete with ILP branches, it tried to see a positive side, predicting that the existence of local Labour parties would “stimulate rather than injure the local branches of the I.L.P.” It also expressed the hope that these new constituency parties would be established not by veteran ILP members but by recent recruits to the socialist cause—“by the efforts of men and women whose new-born zest for the Labour Party may be usefully employed in this work.”

There was, in fact, an element of condescension in this cheerful response. Confronted with the threat of superfluity, the leaders of the ILP sought to justify the organization’s continuing existence by pointing to its role as, in Dowse’s words, “the intellectual spearhead of the Labour Party.” Yet they often did so in a way that put a lot of emphasis on the ILP’s past and relatively little on its possible future contributions. In 1919, for example, the Bristol branch published a leaflet that attempted to explain the difference between the two parties. Included was the following summary:

The I.L.P. supplies the driving force.
The I.L.P. was founded in 1893.
Its leaders were amongst the founders of the Labour Party in 1899.”

A similar focus on past achievements was visible in another leaflet, published the following year by the party’s national headquarters. Titled The Need for the I.L.P., the leaflet sought to face head-on the question of the apparent redundancy of the party, while also casting its new circumstances in as positive a light as possible. It began by acknowledging that, with the advent of individual membership in the potentially more powerful Labour Party, “some persons now wonder why there is a need for a strong I.L.P. as well.” It went on to point out that the Labour Party owed its existence to the ILP and that the ILP regarded the larger organization in no “spirit of antagonism.” On the home front, much of the Labour Party’s work was “concerned with industrial questions,” but there was a need for “a wider outlook” on these issues, which the ILP was, its leadership believed, able to supply. In international affairs, no party other than the ILP had “shown up in so convincing a manner the evils of secret diplomacy . . . which brought about the last war.” And when it
came to the key tasks of publishing, distributing propaganda, and organizing public meetings, the ILP was “able to work for Socialism more effectively than any other body.” While these claims were by no means untrue, they tended to look backwards, rather than forwards, and thus did little to resolve the question of the ILP’s future. One also thinks of Dowse’s comments about the “patronising posture” that the ILP tended to adopt towards the Labour Party at the time, one that combined “a nudging reminder of its past services” with hints of its “moral superiority.”

Notwithstanding the NAC’s efforts to put a brave face on the matter, among certain elements within the ILP, the Labour Party’s new constitution raised serious doubts about both the viability and the wisdom of continued affiliation to the larger organization. Some felt that the ILP’s future relationship to the Labour Party should be contingent on evidence of the latter’s genuine embrace of socialism. On the agenda of the ILP’s 1921 conference was a motion from Lancashire’s Chorley branch that sought to “instruct” the Labour Party to finalize a program to be carried out “almost immediately on taking over the reins of Government.” This program was to include a commitment to making no secret agreements; an international conference aimed at disarmament; self-determination for all parts of the British Empire; social ownership of land, mines, railways, shipping, and banking; and a new educational system. In addition, the Labour Party was to secure “the repeal of all legislation which is democratically to be considered to be in restraint of human progress,” abolish the monarchy and the House of Lords along with “all hereditary privileges,” and move quickly towards the “replacement of Capitalism by a saner system of society.” This was, to put it mildly, a very comprehensive set of demands, especially in a program to be implemented “almost immediately.” Another motion on the agenda, this one from the Glasgow-based Clyde branch, advocated outright divorce, proposing that the ILP declare “the time opportune to sever connection with the Labour Party.”

In some respects, it might appear that the ILP had little to worry about. As David Howell points out, despite Labour’s new constitution, ILP branches remained significant in many areas because “the early development of individual Labour Party membership was slow and uneven. Especially in the old ILP strongholds such as Bradford, and across much of Scotland, little changed.” Matthew Worley makes a similar point, emphasizing local trade unions as a factor: “In areas where trade unionism was weak and fractured, particularly in Scotland and parts of Yorkshire, the ILP effectively was the Labour Party to all intents and purposes.” The NAC’s Program and Policy Committee—set up in the wake of the ILP’s 1920 conference and charged in part with assessing relations with the Labour Party—reached much the same conclusion, reporting in
1921 that “in Scotland generally and in some English districts the local Labour Parties do not compete with the I.L.P.” A year earlier, the report of NAC to the party’s annual conference had listed 787 branches. But could the party rely on maintaining this number in the longer term, let alone advancing it further, now that constituency Labour parties were entering the field—however slowly in some areas?

The anxiety within the party about its role in relation to Labour is reflected in the fact that, in its report to the party’s 1921 conference, the NAC felt it “essential to supplement” the report of its Program and Policy Committee with comments of its own. As the NAC pointed out, the observations were “designed to emphasise the need for the continuation of the I.L.P. as a vigorous organisation consciously Socialist and propagandist in character in home politics and foreign affairs, and with a clear idea of its task in relation to the Trade Union and Co-operative movements.”

The question was, and would remain, What should the future of the ILP be? One possibility was simply to declare that the party had no future—that it had accomplished its goal. Keir Hardie may have died, but his “Labour Alliance” had been fully realized: socialists and trade unionists were now joined as members of a unified party that had committed itself to socialism. In these circumstances, the ILP could have claimed a victory and gradually wound itself down as the new Labour Party organizations established themselves. But this option attracted very little support among ILP members, for reasons well summed up by Ralph Miliband in his book Parliamentary Socialism:

The ILP’s raison d’être after 1900 had been to transform the Labour Party into a party committed to socialism. The Labour Party now said that it was. But, more and more in the course of the twenties, the ILP found itself compelled to carry on its diverse activities on the wholly justified assumption that the Labour Party’s conversion to socialism was as much a thing of the future as it had been before 1918. This made for acute conflict.

Perhaps the earliest manifestation of this conflict was the campaign mounted in 1920 and 1921 within the ILP to persuade the party to end its affiliation to the Labour Party altogether, in favour of joining instead with the Third (or Communist) International. While such a course of action clearly offered one possible answer to the dilemma posed by the Labour Party’s new constitution, support for the idea was driven above all by the atmosphere of excitement surrounding the revolutionary changes in soviet Russia.
The Road Not Taken

The ILP had been a member of the Socialist International, commonly known as the Second International. Founded in 1889, the organization had dissolved in 1916, its members divided over the issue of opposition to the war. There emerged from this division a group of revolutionary socialist parties—the core of the Third, or Communist, International, which convened its first conference in March 1919, in Moscow. The aftermath of the war also saw efforts to revive the Second International, which was formally reconstituted in August 1920, at a conference held in Geneva, drawing its support from groups committed to broadly reformist, rather than revolutionary, policies.

Under the influence of Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden, the Labour Party opted to join the Second International. Within the ILP itself, however, support for the Second International was limited, despite the stance of two of the party’s most prominent members. As reported in Labour Leader, delegates to the ILP’s 1920 conference voted overwhelmingly, 529 to 144, to disaffiliate from the soon-to-be-revived Second International—a decision that served to underscore the anomalous position of the ILP within the Labour Party.19

Meanwhile, earlier in 1920, the Scottish Divisional Council of the ILP had voted 158 to 28 in favour of affiliating to the Third International, which had been set up in Moscow the previous year.20 In spite of the doubts voiced by some divisions, notably Yorkshire, and the hostility of the party leadership, there was certainly a groundswell of enthusiasm in the ILP for Comintern affiliation, and it seemed very possible that, when the national conference met in Glasgow at Easter in 1920, pursuit of such affiliation would become the official policy of the party as the rejection of a revived Second International at that conference suggests.

Reporting on the conference, Labour Leader noted that, prior to the opening of the event, some two hundred participants—not all of them conference delegates—had taken part in a “Third International gathering,” chaired by C. H. Norman, at which it was agreed to “act together” and “to hold further meetings during the Conference proceedings.”21 Enthusiasm for the Bolshevik revolution was well reflected in a resolution passed unanimously at the conference itself, which resolved to send “fraternal greetings to the Russian Socialist Republic” and desired “to convey to it the sense of rejoicing at the success with which the Russian people have defended the Social Revolution.” Its mover, David Kirkwood, said that “Russia had struck such a blow that resounded right throughout the world and they of the I.L.P. had the opportunity of giving expression to that great idea, the ideal of the working class in power.”22 The “Left Wing of the ILP,” as it now designated itself, was thus disappointed when
a motion for affiliation to the Third International gained only 206 votes. The vote was not outright rejection, however, since the conference resolved that further enquiries and consultations should be undertaken before a definite decision was made. The plan to consider the idea further was approved after Clifford Allen spoke in support of this course of action.

Writing in *Labour Leader* in March 1920, just prior to the party’s conference, Allen had firmly rejected “the old Parliamentarianism” and had proposed that the ILP take part in the upcoming “International Conference of Left Wing Socialist bodies.” This conference would culminate in the founding, in February 1921, of the International Working Union of Socialist Parties—sometimes called the “2½ International,” as it was composed of parties that supported neither the parliamentary socialism of the Second International nor the communism of the Third. In the same article, however, Allen recommended that the ILP also seek affiliation with the Third International, having first set out its own position on three crucial points. The ILP, he argued, should reject violent revolution in the case of Britain. It should, however, accept the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” because democracy could be meaningful only once economic equality had been achieved. Finally, it should reject the “soviet system” as a “general must” while accepting the “fundamental” idea of “government through working class organisation.”

The months that followed found the ILP pursuing its decision to engage in further investigations and consultations on the subject of an international affiliation. The opportunity to explore the possibility of joining the Comintern came when Clifford Allen and Richard Wallhead (who had recently succeeded Snowden as chairman of the ILP) were able to attach themselves, in an “unofficial” capacity, to a group from the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress that visited Russia on a fact-finding mission in May and June 1920. In his biography of Allen, Arthur Marwick tells us that, at this stage, Allen “hoped to bring the British Labour movement, or at least its vanguard, the I.L.P., into communion with the new Third International.”

Allen’s companion, Richard Wallhead, had defended the Bolsheviks in 1918 after their suppression of the Constituent Assembly. In a *Labour Leader* article written in August of that year, he praised “the first great Socialist Republic” and asserted that “the Socialist Government of Russia has behind it 85 per cent of the people.” While British workers were “demanding the democratic control of industry,” he declared, “the Russian workers have it.” By the start of 1920, however, he had begun to take a much more cautious view of Russian developments, arguing that while the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was acceptable as a temporary expedient, he was not prepared to accept “exalting it into a philosophy or adopting it as an integral part of a programme.”
The twelve succinct questions that Wallhead and Allen had put to the Comintern on behalf of the ILP were reported in the Labour Leader in July 1920. They began by asking the Comintern’s executive committee how “rigid” was the requirement that affiliates adhere to “the methods outlined in its program.” Questions followed on how the dictatorship of the proletariat might apply in Britain, on the use of “Parliamentary methods,” on the ILP’s affiliation to the Labour Party, and on whether “the soviet system of Government” was a fundamental principle and, if so, to what extent the International recognized “the possibilities of diverse forms of Soviet Government in different countries.” Wallhead and Allen, on behalf of the ILP, went on to ask whether parties that left “open” the question of “the use of armed force” to bring about revolution could affiliate and what the International considered to be the difference between communism and other forms of socialism. The list ended with a series of questions aimed at ascertaining whether the Comintern was willing to consider moves to create a united—or more united—international. The following week, the paper announced that The I.L.P. and the Third International, the report of Allen and Wallhead, was in press.

By this time, the earlier enthusiasm for Comintern affiliation and for Russian soviet democracy had definitely faded. In a letter addressed to the NAC, Allen was critical of the structure and workings of the new international. It was still an “ad hoc body” with “no formal constitution,” he reported, and its executive was not elected by the affiliated bodies in “the normal constitutional way.” There were, he conceded, representatives of other nationalities on the executive, but it was “first and foremost Russian in character,” dominated by Russian leaders and by “the philosophy of the Russian Revolution.” As he noted, NAC members would have read the Comintern’s “long and rambling reply” to the questions that he and Wallhead had raised, a reply that in fact failed to answer many of these questions.

In his letter, Allen made it clear to the Comintern executive that, were the ILP asked to choose between the Third International and the Labour Party, the ILP would surely choose the latter. With regard to the former, there was no doubt, he stressed, that “at present it is an international of violence.” He closed by concluding, with due emphasis, that unless the Comintern were willing to agree that “the method of resorting to civil war as a means of obtaining power” could be left as “an open question,” that he would recommend to the next ILP conference that the ILP “should not affiliate to it unconditionally.”

Wallhead reported on meetings that he and Allen had had with Mensheviks. “They do not care whether the final political form is Parliament or Soviet; that is unimportant: the chief thing is that it must be democratic and not bureaucratic, as they maintain the present Bolshevik system is.” Wallhead’s own early
optimism about the soviet system had now evaporated. The conditions he observed in Russia, he wrote,

lead to a devitalising of the democratic basis on which the soviet form is supposed to rest, and makes directly for bureaucracy and autocratic control. The power of the proletariat dwindles almost to vanishing point, and passes to the party that holds power. In Russia at the present time this is the Communist Party and it is very clearly established.

The soviet form, Wallhead concluded, had been “gradually adapted into an instrument of the Communist Party and used to establish the dictatorship of a relatively small minority.”

Clearly, these were not the sort of judgments and recommendations that those in ILP’s Left Wing were eager to hear. In the interim, the group had established its own biweekly publication, The Internationalist, its first issue appearing in June 1920. In it, one of the Left Wing’s most prominent members, J. T. Walton Newbold, set out the group’s agenda in “The Task Before Us.” The Left Wing would, he wrote, have “no mercy” on those, particularly “the younger men and women,” who waited “to see how the cat was going to jump” before committing themselves one way or the other to the Comintern affiliation question. The task at hand was the creation of “a united Communist Party in Great Britain, of which the I.L.P. may be, in numbers and influence, the very core.”

It was to Newbold that the Comintern sent its “long and rambling” reply, a decision well suited both to annoy the NAC and to reinforce the belief that, from the Comintern’s point of view, the object of the exercise was to bring about a schism in the ILP rather than to encourage the party as a whole to pursue affiliation. The Left Wing might claim, in its own published analysis of the Comintern’s reply, that “our Russian comrades are deeply concerned to bridge the gulf and overcome the obstacles.” But fewer and fewer ILPers were now convinced of this.

The Left Wing had invested some hopes in Allen, who had been very ill in Russia and remained there for some time after the main Labour/TUC party returned home. The second edition of The Internationalist, published early in July 1920, noted that “Mr. Clifford Allen is credited with being one of the pioneers of the Communist movement in the I.L.P.” and expressed hope that this “augurs well for his propaganda value when he returns.” Members of the Left Wing were to be disappointed. In August, readers of the Labour Leader learned that Allen could not recommend affiliating to the Third International, unless the latter was prepared to leave the question of violent seizure of power to each affiliated party. This was not something likely to materialize within any foreseeable time span.
One notable opponent of affiliation was E. C. Fairchild, whose article “A Travesty of Communism” also appeared in the Labour Leader that August. Fairchild had, until the previous year, been a prominent member of the British Socialist Party (BSP), which formed the initial core of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) when the latter was founded in August 1920. Fairchild was also the former editor of the BSP’s weekly paper, The Call, and, during the summer of 1919, had been one of the protagonists in a heated debate in the pages of the paper that centred on whether there were any real prospects for establishing a soviet system in Britain in the near term. His chief adversary was Theodore Rothstein, who was acting as the representative of Russia’s Bolshevik government in Britain. Implicit in Fairchild’s criticisms was a muted protest against the subservience of the BSP to Rothstein and to “Moscow.” A year later, Fairchild had clearly reached a state of total disillusionment with the entire Communist venture.

The Communists are tired of the endeavour to give knowledge to the slowly moving mass. They ask us to believe they have found the royal path. The Communists propose the revival of aristocracy. It is too dangerous. It is to be an aristocracy of horny hands not of blood. But not every labourer can take part. The privilege may be reserved for those who subscribe to a particular school of opinion.

Towards the end of 1920, the ILP’s national office published a pamphlet titled The Communist International, which listed the Comintern’s famous “21 conditions,” translated from the version in the 26 August issue of the Paris-based Bulletin Communiste. In a memorandum concerning the publication, Francis Johnson reminded ILP members that “dictatorship means force.” He also issued a warning about the fundamentally divisive intentions of the Communist organization: “The tactics of the Third International are to detach from the large Socialist Parties any sections which accept the Bolshevist basis of Dictatorship, Soviet Government and Force.” The memo left little doubt as to the opinion of the national office on the subject of ILP membership in the Third International.

Undeterred by the hardening of opposition to their proposal, the Left Wing pressed on. In December 1920, The Socialist, the organ of the small Socialist Labour Party (SLP), that was still, at that time, supportive of the Bolsheviks, reported that the ILP’s Left Wing was seeking to change the party’s official platform so that it would declare the ILP to be a Communist organisation and would explicitly state that the dictatorship of the proletariat was a “necessary condition for Social Revolution.” At the same time, the editor of Labour Leader, Katharine Bruce Glasier, announced the paper’s intention to publish...
a “program proposed by the Provisional National Committee of the Left Wing of the I.L.P.” as an alternative to the program that had been drawn up by the NAC’s Program and Policy Committee. Included in the Left Wing’s program, which appeared in Labour Leader two weeks later, was an insistence on immediate affiliation to the Third International. In the same issue, a correspondent deplored “the attempt to establish and build up within the I.L.P. an undemocratic and questionable group,” namely, the Left Wing’s Provisional National Committee.42

The Left Wing came under attack again early in the new year, when Ramsay MacDonald—who, like other ILP MPs, had lost his parliamentary seat in the “khaki election” of 1918—lost the Woolwich by-election to the Coalition-Conservative candidate, Captain Robert Gee. The Woolwich seat had been held by the veteran trade unionist and Labour MP Will Crook since 1903, apart from a few months between the two elections of 1910. Ill health—he died later in 1921—led to his retirement and MacDonald then contested the seat for the Labour Party. Many in the ILP blamed MacDonald’s failure to win the seat on divisive attacks of the Left Wing and their Communist allies in the newly formed CPGB, as well as on their campaign for voter abstentions. The vicious anti-MacDonald agenda promoted by the vigorous war supporter Horatio Bottomley and his popular John Bull magazine may have played a greater part in the defeat, but since MacDonald lost by only 683 votes, it was easy for those opposed to the CPGB and the ILP Left Wing to attribute his loss to their activities. Had Gee won more decisively few would have believed that a campaign by the Communists and their Left Wing allies might have played any significant part in the outcome.43

Up to this point, the editor of the Labour Leader, Katharine Bruce Glasier, had attempted to steer a middle course between the Bolsheviks’ allies and their critics in the ILP. After the Woolwich loss, however, she concluded, with regard to the Left Wing, that the ILP should “give them clear notice to quit.”44 Significantly, MacDonald, in his article “On Woolwich” in the same issue, made no mention of the Left’s hostile activities but quoted a correspondent who, writing to commiserate with him on his defeat, commented that for MacDonald to win 13,041 votes “fighting as a ‘pacifist’ a V.C. who had killed nine Germans with his own unaided hand, and to have chosen an arsenal as a field of battle is a miracle.”45 MacDonald was too canny to risk encouraging support for the Left by attacking them on such a personal issue as their role in his by-election defeat. How much the disloyal activities of the ILP’s Left Wing at Woolwich contributed to the growing opposition to the Left Wing within the party is difficult to estimate. But by the time of the 1921 ILP conference that Easter, the writing was clearly on the wall for those advocating Comintern affiliation.
The previously supportive Scottish Divisional Council had, in January, rejected affiliation by 93 to 57, as had Yorkshire, by 64 to 16, and Lancashire, by 114 to 18. As noted earlier, Wallhead’s initial optimism about the Bolsheviks had faded, and, reporting to the 1921 ILP conference on the visit to Russia and the Comintern discussions, he took a very different view of the reality of “soviet democracy” and workers’ control than he had in 1918:

It is clear that the idea of occupation and function does not get beyond the mass meeting of the Soviet, since, in the election of the Executive Council, its members are elected for reason and qualities which do not necessarily pertain to them as workers in specific industries, and in election to the Pusidiunes [sic, presumably Presidium] the departure is even greater still.

As regards the Left Wing—which, particularly after Woolwich, many ILP members had come to see as a “wrecking movement”—Wallhead declared in his chairman’s address, “There cannot be permitted allegiance to an outside body whose mandates are to be carried out against the expressed will of the Party.” The Left Wing should therefore “leave and join with an organisation to which they can honestly give their allegiance.”

The Comintern’s “21 conditions” provided the focus for opponents of affiliation at the 1921 conference. The discussion turned on a motion moved by J. R. Wilson that the ILP accept Moscow’s conditions and thereby commit itself to Comintern affiliation. In rebuttal, George Benson, of the North Salford branch, claimed that their acceptance would “hand over the I.L.P bound hand and foot, to a foreign organisation” and turn it into “secret conspiracy body.”

John Paton, who would later become ILP general secretary, delivered a speech in which he offered what Labour Leader described as a “remorseless” analysis of the twenty-one conditions. As the paper noted, Paton also argued persuasively that “in the Communist International as at present constituted there was no place at all for freedom of discussion.” In the end, the “Moscow amendment” was unequivocally defeated, by a vote of 97 to 521. At this point, members of the Left Wing rose and walked out of the conference. Many of them would join the CPGB.

So the route out of the ILP’s dilemma that consisted, essentially, of throwing in its lot with the new Communist Party was closed—at least for the moment. But not all supporters of Comintern affiliation left in 1921, and other enthusiasts for carrying the ILP in that direction would join in later years. The Bolshevik “siege” was only temporarily lifted, though it would be more than a decade before it was seriously renewed in a form that would again threatened the continued existence of the ILP.
The rejection of the Moscow amendment was not, however, the only outcome of the 1921 conference. Over the past year, in pursuit of the resolution passed at the 1920 conference to seek an “all-inclusive international” with which to affiliate, the ILP leadership had followed through on Clifford Allen’s suggestion that the ILP join in the meeting of “Left Wing Socialist bodies.” As a result, in February 1921, the ILP had participated in the formation, in Vienna, of the “2½ International,” that is, the International Working Union of Socialist Parties (IWUSP), or the Vienna Union, as it is sometimes called. As the NAC explained in its report to the 1921 conference, an ILP delegation had attended the 1919 meeting in Berne that gave rise to the International Socialist Commission—for all practical purposes, the reconstituted version of the Second International—and had, at that time, “made it clear that they were not empowered to commit the Party” to the new body. Since then, the ILP had taken part in the Vienna meeting at which the IWUSP was founded, and the delegation had submitted a report, which was presented at the 1921 conference. The report was very frank. The IWUSP did not “represent all that the I.L.P. had in mind when it stated its demand for an All-Inclusive International.” All the same, war, revolution, and counterrevolution had led to such “sharp differences” that “the gulf between the two extremes is too wide to be bridged.” The report concluded by recommending that the ILP should join forces with the other members of the Vienna Union in seeking reconciliation between the Second International and Comintern. Following the rejection of the Moscow amendment, the delegation’s report with this recommendation was accepted by a very large majority, in a vote of 362 to 32.

As it turned out, the Vienna Union was short-lived. Its members despaired of reaching an agreement with the Comintern (which, unsurprisingly, had little interest in compromise), and, in 1923, IWUSP merged with the International Socialist Commission to form the Labour and Socialist International. In the meanwhile, another door had also been closed, at least temporarily. What would quickly have become a merger with the new Communist Party of Great Britain—even if, perhaps, the ILP formed the “very core” of the union, as Walton Newbold predicted—had been decisively rejected. But the difficult question of the ILP’s future role within the Labour Party remained.

Following the rejection of affiliation to the Comintern, a meeting of the NAC and the chairs and representatives of the divisional councils took place in Manchester towards the end of 1921. The report of the meeting, published in Labour Leader under the headline “Position of Party Defined,” revealed an ILP that was still attempting to adjust itself to the situation produced by the Labour Party’s new constitution. The continued existence of the ILP was necessary in order to maintain the socialist movement in Britain, the report insisted, and,
to that end, the ILP should maintain “the closest and most harmonious relationship” possible with the Labour Party. Its most useful contribution to that party would be “the maintenance of its own work.” This work should consist, at least initially, in the party’s embrace of an educational role, both within its ranks and beyond them, with the latter requiring the party’s central office to “systemise” propaganda to a greater degree than had thus far been the case. The report also recommended “new contact” with the trade unions, founded on “an industrial policy which gives the Trade Unions a new conception of their function in the community.” The NAC was left to “work out the details.”

Ramsay MacDonald, who had headed the poll in the election for the NAC earlier in the year, must have contributed to this report. In view of his success soon afterwards in becoming Labour Party leader and the first Labour prime minister, it is easy to overlook the extent to which MacDonald’s position in the larger party was still insecure in the years before 1922. Even though the issue of the role of the ILP within the Labour Party was unresolved, for MacDonald, the support of its members remained crucial. For the first few years following the loss of his parliamentary seat at the end of 1918, one role that the ILP did perform—if not entirely intentionally—was to provide MacDonald with a firm and substantial political base.