The 1922 Constitution and the Allen Regime

The adoption of the new ILP constitution, as the new program was often called, was the chief business of the thirtieth ILP annual conference, held in Nottingham on 16–18 April 1922. Within the context of the party’s ongoing dilemma created by the changed relationship with the Labour Party, caused by the latter’s constitutional changes of 1918, the new constitution was a central part of an attempt to find an escape route that left the ILP intact and still playing a significant political role. This is evident from both the chairman’s address that opened the conference in Nottingham and the way it was reported in the Labour Leader.

The New ILP Constitution, Debated and Passed

Richard Wallhead’s speech included a passage to which the party’s weekly gave the subheading “No liquidation of the Party.” His words seem to anticipate Ralph Miliband’s much later judgment, quoted in chapter 2, that the Labour Party’s commitment to socialism was largely lip service. Wallhead said:

More than once lately, and in somewhat unexpected quarters, the continued existence of the I.L.P. has been invoked. My answer is that there can be no question of the voluntary liquidation of our Party until the principles of Socialism become the accepted economic and political faith of the mass of the people in this country. While it is possible for some of the leaders of the Labour Party to deny the principles for which we stand, our work is far from finished.

The concern for the survival of the ILP was echoed in the editorial comment on the conference in the Labour Leader just two days after it ended. Stressing the party’s “distinctive mission,” the editor noted with satisfaction that “once again it was demonstrated beyond doubt that the I.L.P. is neither to be absorbed into the Labour Party nor intimidated by the Communist Party.”
Apart from the debate on the party program, the conference gave particular attention to two issues: opposition to any notion of a deal between the Labour Party and the Liberals and the resignation of Philip Snowden as ILP treasurer. It was the end of his long membership of the NAC. Fulsome tributes were paid, and the Labour Leader devoted a full page to reporting them, but it seems highly likely that he was at least one of the “unexpected quarters” referred to in Wallhead’s opening address, as Robert Dowse suggests. He would, however, remain an ILP member until the end of 1928.

Brockway tells us that it was on Jowett’s initiative that the Bradford branch attempted to get the ILP to adopt a simpler “human” constitution. Jowett had felt frustrated when serving as a representative of the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee on the commission on socialization at the 1920 Socialist International conference in Geneva. This experience had left him with “a feeling of irrelevance and futility.” Fenner Brockway expresses the impatience that Jowett was experiencing: “What was the value of these interminable discussions on the niceties of administration—how much control the State should have, how much the producers, how much the consumers? These were matters for technicians and for experience.” Jowett believed that both the NAC draft and the Allen-Attlee alternative repeated this error.

At the conference, the debate began with an oddly apologetic introduction by Emanuel Shinwell, who presented the NAC’s draft. Enthusiasm for a new program was, he claimed, “somewhat subdued.” He had anticipated that it might be “a damp squib,” and he seemed anxious to divert the blame away from the NAC for “having disturbed the progress of business.” It was duty bound, he reminded delegates, to respond to conference resolutions. Even less enthusiasm was shown by Patrick Dollan, the Scottish Division NAC representative, who, once again, attempted to refer the whole issue back to the NAC but was told from the chair that “it must be settled.”

The Bradford version was then debated as an amendment. Because of Jowett’s position as a member of the NAC, it was moved by Harry Wilson and William Leach. Wilson claimed that the Bradford redraft “emphasised those features of the I.L.P. which formed the very real difference between the I.L.P. and the Labour Party.” He criticized the NAC draft because it “dealt with how we should govern the country when we had the chance”; the Bradford draft, in contrast, dealt with how to get that chance. When Wilson expounded at some length on how they must “not allow the standard of life of the common people to sink until we have tried to take the last shilling from the profiteer,” John Paton intervened to ask the chairman whether the conference had not too much business to deal with “to listen to propaganda speeches.”

Taking the warning to heart, Wilson argued that the clause about setting up
“a dual authority of consumer and producer was apparently intended to attract the Guild Socialists without committing the Party to their programme.” That was not good enough. “If the Party believed in Guild Socialism it ought to say so.” Leach described G. D. H. Cole as “a very brilliant young person who writes a book about every twenty five minutes.” Cole had spoken to the NAC, said Leach, in “a new language and they fell down and worshipped. They were afraid of being called old-fashioned fogies.” John Beckett, however, claimed that although he had been “filled with joy” when Jowett had called for “a clear programme,” Bradford’s effort had degenerated into “the kind of thing they saw on a Christmas card with crossed hands and a message of love.” It was “one of the flabbiest policies he had ever seen submitted.” He defended Cole against Leach, and Bradford’s amendment was lost by 127 to 231.7

Attlee, successfully moving an amendment from his Limehouse branch calling for a central body representing producers and consumers, insisted on the importance of a central authority:

The idea of workshop control had been developed steadily; the comrades from Bradford seemed to regard the Socialist State as nothing but a glorified municipality. The whole question was one of incentive to industry, and both Mr R. H. Tawney and J. A. Hobson in their remarkable books had been dealing with it. His branch recognised the need for a central authority. They must not have a number of industrial republics fighting each other, but the great difficulty to-day was that they were overloading the political machinery with industrial matters.8

Soon after this, Ramsay MacDonald intervened in the debate to interpret the Attlee amendment as confining the role of the proposed central body to deciding “the amount and character of communal production and service necessary. That does not confer full legislative authority,” he claimed. “It would be an administrative body within the political state.” As the Labour Leader editor saw it, “MacDonald cleared up this point in the wording of the programme to the satisfaction of the Conference.”9

In the NAC elections, which took place in the middle of the debate on the program, MacDonald came out on top of the poll, with 327 votes. Only Jowett, with the next highest vote of 211, polled well enough to avoid going to a second ballot. MacDonald’s influence is plain in some other parts of the report on the conference debate. When Fred Longden, from the Aston branch, wanted to “rule out of citizenship any person deemed to be fit for work who was not willing to contribute,” MacDonald asked who was going to do the “deeming.” He accused Longden, well-known as a left-winger in the ILP, of espousing an “old-fashioned militarist idea,” and Longden’s proposal was defeated.10
The conference rejected the attempt by the Gateshead branch to add the phrase “on Industrial Union lines” to the part of the “Immediate Objects” section calling for the strengthening of trade union organization. Shinwell characterized this as “a relic of Leftism.” After the NAC accepted the amendment—from the Allen-Attlee version—for giving “the workers of the industry effective control,” MacDonald once again intervened to insist that the wording should refer to an effective share in the administration of their industry. Deferring to MacDonald’s argument, the conference then agreed to leave the matter to the NAC, and a wording in line with his view subsequently appeared in the final version.

Brockway would later claim that “the London draft which emphasised workers’ control” was adopted. This is not entirely true. When all the debating was concluded and the votes counted, the ILP was left with a mixture of the original NAC draft and the Allen-Attlee (or “London”) version. The order and titles of the subsections of the program were as in the original draft, as was the statement of the party’s mission, or “Object.” The section titled “Political and Industrial Democracy” began with the NAC version, but the detail concerning a “central body” to oversee production and internal management of industry by workers and the “representatives of organised consumers” came from the Allen-Attlee alternative. “Immediate Objects,” the section outlining the ILP’s shorter term objectives, followed the latter’s amended wording—with the first object being the dissemination of socialist principles.

The “Transition period” was as drafted by the NAC but with the words “as defined above” from Allen-Attlee were added to the clause about giving workers an “effective share” in the administration of industry. The wording of the section “Internationalism and Imperialism” came mostly from Allen-Attlee, but with the inclusion of the aim to abolish not only war but also “conscription and militarism.” With minor amendments, the Allen-Attlee rendering of the final section, “Method,” was accepted—except, significantly, for its endorsement of direct action, where the NAC’s more ambiguous wording was accepted. The Bradford version, however clearer and more succinct its supporters claimed it to be, had no direct impact on the final text.

The full 1922 constitution is given as an appendix in Dowse’s Left in the Centre. The conference was reported in the Labour Leader on 20 April, and the following week, the paper devoted much of its front page to an article by Brockway, who lauded the new program as giving a “new confidence” to the ILP while admitting that the party had previously been “a little at sea.” He defended the new emphasis on industrial democracy. “The whole trend in modern thought is away from State Socialism,” he insisted. “The public has identified nationalisation with State bureaucracy and accordingly dislikes it.”
Promoting the Program amid Continuing Doubts

It had taken considerable time and much debate to arrive at the new position, but Allen’s aim to create a distinctive program seemed to have been met. Now, the program needed promotion. After the conference, the ILP published a leaflet, *The Independent Labour Party and Its Future Work*, to introduce its new statement of aims and principles to a wider public. This was accompanied by Fred Henderson’s pamphlet *Socialism of the I.L.P.*, which sought “to amplify what is set forth in the I.L.P. Constitution,” and both of these publications were complemented by a series of pamphlets on the new program, such as F. W. Pethick Lawrence’s *Must the Workers Foot the Bill?*

Other efforts at promotion included G. Beardsworth’s motion on industrial policy at the Lancashire divisional conference at Blackpool, encouraging “every Branch to make an effort to get inside Trade Union branches” in order to promote discussion of the new constitution, “which points the way to Industrial Democracy, a greater measure of public ownership and a greater measure of public control.” The motion countered the tendency of the public to be wary of “public control,” Beardsworth argued, by making it clear that “we also stand for workers’ control.”

In March 1923, almost a year after the ILP conference, a debate began in the *Socialist Review* with an article by William Leach in which, as he had done at the conference, he objected to dividing people into producers and consumers and praised the merits of “public ownership governed by popularly elected committees.” This triggered a reply from Attlee, in May, defending the guild-socialist inspiration of the new program and rejoicing that the ILP had “become infected with this heresy.” A rejoinder from Leach followed in July.

The influence of the 1922 debates and the program that was then adopted continued in subsequent years. In 1925, ILP chairman James Maxton insisted that “public ownership must be accompanied by workers’ control.” The following year, Brockway, in setting out the ILP’s industrial policy, predicted that “the democratic struggle of the present century will be to supplement political democracy by economic democracy.” There should be a “National Industrial Authority” with union representation and with minimal interference from the “State parliament.” Internal management, he argued, should be “left entirely to those employed in it.” Declaring that, in some industries, it might be possible to “develop self-government by the formation of Guilds.”

The 1926 annual conference received the report of the ILP’s Industrial Policy Committee, one of whose members was Margaret Bondfield, the future Minister of Labour in MacDonald’s second government. The report’s detailed consideration of the issues involved was prefaced with the following statement: “The public ownership of industry, without democratic administration by the
workers therein, whilst superior to the present system of private ownership and control, would not of itself provide that intelligent co-operation in the new social order or that sense of freedom which Socialism involves.” At the end of the report, delegates were assured that though there had been some disagreement among committee members, the report represented “the greatest common measure of agreement.”

Yet it is clear that the ILP’s move towards guild socialism received nothing like a unanimous welcome. Shinwell’s presentation of the NAC’s draft at the 1922 conference had been lukewarm, at best. Seven years later, his ILP pamphlet on the nationalization of mines was still less than enthusiastic: “I do not subscribe so generously as some do to the proposal for workers’ control, because it is, as yet, somewhat in the academic stage. You must not conceal facts; taking the miners as a whole, they are more concerned about improving wages than about workers’ control.”

Recall, as well, that even at the 1922 conference, the influential Dollan had tried to refer the issue of the new program back to the NAC, several delegates had expressed impatience with the debate, and just over a third had voted for the Bradford amendment. There was clearly much argument and convincing still to be done within the ILP—let alone outside its ranks—if the new policy was to take a firm root. Time alone would test this. And the lack of enthusiasm on the one side was hardly balanced by support for the man who many saw as the true author of the new program: G. D. H. Cole’s welcome was less than hearty.

Writing in the journal of the National Guilds League (NGL) soon after the ILP’s 1922 conference, Cole declared that the new program incorporated “as much Guild Socialism as can be put in without mortally offending the old stagers.” He concluded, “Some commentators are suggesting that the I.L.P. has been converted to Guild Socialism. Perhaps; but I do not hear of any bonfires being ignited by the N.G.L.” Nonetheless, after two years of debate, the party now had a new constitution that was generally regarded as guild socialist. Nor was this the only thing that marked the 1922 conference as a watershed in the ILP’s history.

“Now for Socialism”: The Beginning of the Allen Regime

“For a time I began to doubt whether there was a future for the ILP,” wrote Fenner Brockway, looking back to the early post–First World War years from the vantage point of the 1970s. However, he declared, “Clifford Allen ended this defeatism.” But there was nothing inevitable in Clifford Allen’s election, in 1922, as party treasurer, following Snowden’s resignation. In the first ballot at the conference, his main opponent, George Benson, polled 156 votes to Allen’s 160. Allen’s four-vote lead was halved in the second ballot, which he won by
Despite this narrow margin, Clifford Allen became, as Brockway would later write, “in effect the directing head of the Party” until his resignation as chairman in September 1925. The fact that he was able to exercise this dominance, initially from his position as treasurer, is significant. Being treasurer of the ILP did not always translate into that sort of power. Allen brought, at least temporarily, a different dimension to ILP fundraising. As John Paton, who joined the headquarter staff early in Allen’s reign, put it more than a decade later: “Where previous I.L.P. treasurers had been content to think in terms of half-pence, Allen thought in hundreds of pounds. And he was able to translate his golden dreams into realities.”

Allen was amazingly energetic, especially for someone suffering from so much ill health. Within three days of his election, he was “canvassing for money” in a series of letters to Quakers and other contacts in the No Conscription Fellowship. Stressing the party’s stance against the war, he successfully attracted donations. The ambitious nature of Allen’s plans for the ILP were “given concrete form in an old Georgian building, with an Adam’s mantelpiece, in Great George Street,” which became the party’s London headquarters.

The ambitious nature of Allen’s plans for the ILP were “given concrete form in an old Georgian building, with an Adam’s mantelpiece, in Great George Street,” which became the party’s London headquarters. The week following the report of his election in the Labour Leader, a “Message from the New Treasurer” appeared in its columns. Warning members not to expect “any platform work” from him for some time while he concentrated on the party’s finances, Allen declared that the problems with the latter were serious. But since success bred success, what was needed was improvement in all aspects of the ILP’s work, including “a really first class weekly paper.”

By this time, the weekly Labour Leader had become a problem in two ways. First, the circulation had declined from its postwar peak. Dowse tells us that it had fallen to below twenty thousand and that the paper was running at a loss of about £1,200 a year. The second problem related to high-profile conflicts over what attitude to take to the Bolsheviks, which had been fuelling divisions within the ILP. This situation came to a head early in 1921, when the editor of the paper, Katharine Bruce Glasier, and Philip Snowden, who also had some editorial responsibilities, clashed very publicly over the latter’s increasingly vehement anti-Bolshevik statements. Ultimately, both resigned from the Leader—in Glasier’s case, seemingly after a nervous breakdown.

The arrangements following this conflict were not likely to be sustainable. In April 1921, Tom Johnson, the editor of Forward, took over the editorship on a temporary basis, which involved commuting between Glasgow and Manchester. His replacement five weeks later by Bundock, editor of the Leicester Pioneer, did away with the very long commute but still left the paper being edited on a “second job” basis. In early July, the NAC announced that Bertram R. Carter had been appointed and would take over the editorship.
the following month. But Carter’s skepticism about the possibility of “universal brotherhood,” noted in the previous chapter, suggests that he was hardly in tune with many ILPers, and his role as editor lasted only a little more than a year.

After becoming treasurer, Clifford Allen persuaded the NAC to transfer the Leader’s publication from Manchester to London to change its nature radically, and to give it a new name to emphasize this. In early July 1922, it was announced that the move would take place “as quickly as possible” and that a “small limited company consisting of the N.A.C. to give the party direct ownership and control of the paper” was being set up.

The desire to begin a new chapter for the ILP was not confined to Allen. In June 1922 the ILP weekly published John Beckett’s proposal titled “A Three-Fold Offensive for the I.L.P.” This offensive was urgently needed, he argued, in the face of the threat of the Labour Party becoming “another great unwieldy, machine-made, soulless electoral machine, without guiding principles.” The ILP needed to organize members to have “access to any Trade Union branch.” It also needed to address the danger of Labour being submerged both by “wealthy men . . . who come into the movement one day with a vague idea of helping the poor and become parliamentary candidates the next” and by “pensioned off Trade Union officials” who only took part in debates “when their own industry was under consideration.” Beckett said he would hate it if the ILP “became a crew of heresy hunting fanatics” but that it should “oppose the casual selection of candidates.” Third, the ILP should play a role in the “reconciliation of wholesale and manufacturing Co-operative Societies with self-government in industry.” The party needed to “permeate” the co-ops with “modern Socialist thought, especially relating to workers’ control.” A special secretary should be appointed for the formation of “industrial and Co-operative nuclei.”

In August, Labour Leader readers were alerted to a new initiative that was to take place in November and December. In “The Great I.L.P. Campaign,” Fenner Brockway declared that it was the right moment to launch such an initiative: “During the years following the war the position and future of the I.L.P. were a little uncertain, and many members were perplexed. Now our place and function is clear, and the Party is confident.” The period of adjustment, he wrote, “was completed at the last I.L.P. conference,” and it had become clear that, “despite the letter of its constitution, the Labour Party membership was still very far from Socialist and Internationalist in outlook and spirit.” There was a tremendous work of education still to be done within the trade union movement. Brockway stressed that this involved “no spirit of opposition to the Labour Party. We work loyally within it as pioneers.”
In its final weeks, the *Labour Leader* published more details of the new campaign. It was to have three objectives: to reassert the ILP’s position in the political life of the country, to renew contact with the unions, and to increase party membership. The key developments were to be the appointment of a national organizer and the launch of a new weekly paper, which would create “an expectant psychology”: people would say, “If the I.L.P. can produce a paper like this it is evidently a body to be watched.” Three methods would be used to promote the campaign: “special preparatory missions,” special conferences for trade unionists “to hear the new I.L.P. Industrial Policy,” and big demonstrations with national speakers.36

Two or three “Special Missioners” in each ILP division would be tasked to visit lapsed ILP members, to visit ILP branch meetings to consult with members, and to encourage trades councils and constituency Labour parties to appoint delegates to the conferences that were being planned as part of the campaign. Eleven missioners were listed—all with impressive histories as organizers and activists. The trade union conferences, explained Fenner Brockway, were “to advocate among Trade Unionists the new conception of the revolutionary function of industrial organization, as seen by the I.L.P. I use the word revolution in the sense of denoting a completely new social order: the I.L.P. asserts the real purpose of Trade Unions to be, not improvement of conditions under capitalism, but preparation for direct workers’ control under Socialism.”37

There were to be conferences in every major town to be held in “big halls” and it was hoped that about three hundred demonstrations would take place. “Let no member think that this is an ordinary annual campaign,” the *Labour Leader* emphasized. “It is being planned on a scale such as the Labour and Socialist movement of this country has never experienced.”38

The following week’s *Labour Leader* featured a front-page article titled “Us,” by Minnie Pallister, the ILP organizer for South Wales, who encouraged ILP members to confidently assert how right the party had been on the issues of the recent past. “We were right on the War. We were right on the Peace. We were right on Reparations. We were right on Russia. We were right on Ireland.” She concluded, “From Sinful Modesty, Good Lord, Deliver Us.” There were reports in the same issue of plans and speakers from five ILP divisions. Lancashire, Scotland, and London seemed to be most advanced with preparations. Ernest Hunter was announced as honorary director of the campaign.39

Brockway encouraged competition between the divisions to see which would contribute the most to the campaign.40 A story in the *Birmingham Evening Dispatch* claiming that local ILP members were concerned about the cost of the campaign and not at all keen on it was dismissed as a hostile press attack.41
The slogan for the campaign—“Now for Socialism”—was announced in the final issue of the Labour Leader.  

A Great Surge Forward

H. N. Brailsford was appointed editor of the New Leader, and he recruited Mrs. M. A. Hamilton as assistant editor. The first issue promised to report week by week on “the big forward movement,” for which 365 conferences and about two hundred other meetings had already been planned. Speakers included MacDonald, “whom everyone wants.” An early event in the Now for Socialism campaign was to be a weekend rally in Portsmouth, where the main speakers were to be Brockway and Beckett and the central meeting would be a conference aimed largely at union activists under the title “Democratic Control of Industry.”

Everything seemed to be going well. Early reports from missioners were “exceedingly encouraging,” and there was “a returning pride in the movement which is more valuable than election success, municipal or national, though we want that too.” They did not have long to wait. Within a week, the breakup of Lloyd George’s coalition government precipitated a general election, in which the number of ILP MPs increased from five to thirty-two. The Now for Socialism campaign was suspended until after the election on 13 January 1923.

Attention now switched to raising a Special Effort Fund for the election. Allen soon announced that the previous record for such a fund had been £2,276 and that this had been surpassed in the first week, with over £2,293 received. His aim was to raise £22,000, but it was not to be. By the end of the year, the total had reached £8,777—only a little more than a third of this ambitious target, though this was a great advance on past efforts.

At the end of 1922, largely under Allen’s energetic inspiration, what Dowse aptly calls a “tremendous élan” had been created in the ILP. Everything seemed to be surging forward at a very encouraging rate. Twenty-nine new branches had been created since the Nottingham conference, and two more were awaiting NAC approval. The election had immensely strengthened the ILP’s parliamentary representation. The New Leader gave this assessment:

Ramsay MacDonald is now at the head of a battalion of incomparable fighting efficiency. Of the Big Five of 1914, Anderson has gone from us, Tom Richardson is in Canada, but Snowden and Jowett are both there, and with them a band of men with the parliamentary experience of Ponsonby, Trevelyan, Wedgwood, Buxton, Spoor, Lees Smith. This is the reward of the hard work and unremitting, unselfish devotion that has rebuilt and extended the organisation of the Party throughout the country in the last two years, and especially since Nottingham.
The circulation of the New Leader had also made a very satisfactory start. By mid-November, it was reporting a weekly average sale of 51,292, almost three times that of its predecessor, it claimed. Brailsford explained the paper’s aims the following month. The situation had changed, he argued. It was no longer necessary to attempt to substitute for the daily newspaper; the Daily Herald was fulfilling that role very well. It was no longer enough to “spread the broad and simple message of the Socialist gospel.” While “controversy and fierce denunciation of wrong” was still needed on occasion, “our criticism must be constructive.” That, he wrote, was “the conception of our task” which inspired the political style of the paper.

When the Now for Socialism campaign was resumed in January 1923, it ran until the Easter ILP annual conference, at which it was reported that fifty-five conferences and 542 demonstrations and meetings had been held since the campaign’s launch. By the beginning of March, the New Leader was proclaiming that “the outstanding success of the Now for Socialism campaign is the success of the Trade Union Conferences,” while pouring scorn on “a lot of nonsense about the imaginary opposition between ILP ‘Intellectuals’ and Trade Unionists.” There had been a “great revival,” and Minnie Pallister was singled out as one of the heroes of the campaign.

A four-page leaflet, Now for Socialism! The Call of the I.L.P., proudly pointed out that thirty-two of the ILP’s fifty-five candidates had been returned to Parliament during the election and that “Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, one of the best known members of the I.L.P.,” had become “leader of the Official Opposition.” The leaflet advocated, as the party’s principles, a bold socialist policy, workers’ control of industry, and total disarmament. At the annual conference, Wallhead, the retiring chair, noted the deep significance of the new parliamentary situation: “Never before has the official opposition challenged the social system represented by the Government of the day.”

Conflicts and Problems Emerge

Not everyone in the ILP was happy with the new arrangements, particularly with regard to the new paper and its editor. The announcement, at the end of 1922, of a monthly I.L.P. Chronicle, for “private circulation,” to deal with the more mundane aspects of the party’s organization could be seen as tacit admission of the New Leader’s perceived deficiency in this respect, at least in the eyes of many members. Brailsford’s salary was £1,000 a year, which was extremely modest in comparison to what he had been earning previously as a journalist. Allen told the party’s 1923 conference that the new editor had taken the job “at tremendous financial sacrifice.” But the highest salary prior to this
had been £460, and Brailsford’s pay was certainly huge compared to the £3.5s a week paid to former editor Katharine Glasier.59

During Allen’s leadership, the salaries of ILP employees were indeed high.60 This seemed outrageous to many ILP members and was criticized at the 1923 conference as being, in the words of the Sheffield delegate, A. Barton, “against the whole tradition of the I.L.P.”61 John Paton mentions the attacks on high salaries, especially from David Kirkwood; he notes, however, that “while it was true that Brailsford was paid more highly than any other official it was also true that he was paid about half what he’d been earning before being persuaded to take on New Leader.” Paton goes on to give an account of one NAC meeting where, under attack by Kirkwood, Brailsford agreed that “a new and Socialist Francis-can order” would be a “more powerful propaganda agency” than anything else. He pointed out, however, that Kirkwood seemed to be excluding from consideration his own salary as an MP, the fees he received for lectures, and the financial assistance he accepted from trade unions.62 More than a decade after he left the editorship in 1926, Brailsford would tell Michael Foot, then the assistant editor at the Tribune, that as editor of the New Leader, he had had “to face a motion demanding my resignation at almost every Board Meeting.”63

As a competitor of the Nation, the New Statesman, and the Spectator, Brailsford’s enterprise was a success. It certainly had a wider and more literary feel to it than its predecessor. But, as Marwick writes, “the Party membership did not take too kindly to the new paper.”64 Dowse sees this as at least partly justified, in that critics were reacting against the “arty’ intellectualism that plagued the I.L.P.”65

Another cloud on the horizon concerned the core of the new program. G. D. H. Cole may have been dissatisfied with the ILP’s half-hearted guild socialism, but the adoption of a stance clearly influenced by it meant that the fortunes of the guild-socialist movement were bound to have some impact on the party’s morale and on its standing in the eyes of the Left generally.

In the months following the Nottingham conference, things seemed to be going well. The New Leader regularly carried articles by Cole. In October 1922, in a piece consciously titled after the famous prewar pamphlet The Miners’ Next Step, he was upbeat about the prospects of the “practical Guild move-ment” spreading beyond the building industry to other areas.66 He mentioned an Engineers’ guild in London, a national tailoring guild, and a guild being formed by Aberdeen dockers with backing from the Transport and General Workers’ Union. The following week, the paper carried an advertisement for the Guild of Clothiers.67

Cole extolled the Building Guild in a Leader article titled “What We Mean by Workers’ Control,” concluding that “if a Labour Government comes to power, its first task will be to second the efforts of the workers, through their Trade
Unions to make industrial control a reality. Its chances of success will depend on its understanding that in industrial organisation lie both the source of its power and the means of real social change.” With the Labour Party’s fortunes clearly reviving with the substantial gains in the general election, Cole urged his readers to “make the Labour M.Ps the political spokesmen of a well-planned and clearly thought-out industrial policy.”

But the following week, he had to report that the Building Guild had been forced into receivership by its main creditor, Barclays Bank. The Building Guild was “by far the largest of the experiments in working-class self-government under Trade Union auspices, and its fall,” Cole acknowledged, “would inevitably deal a very heavy blow to the whole movement for industrial control.” He argued that the episode illustrated how much control the banks had over industry. There is an air of whistling in the dark about Cole’s pronouncement the following week that “the working-class movement for industrial control should neither expect, nor desire, a smooth passage. It is challenging the whole basis of capitalist industrialism, and that is a tough job to tackle.”

It was indeed, and the task would be even harder with the collapse of not only the Building Guild in January 1923 but also the National Guilds League itself not long thereafter. The NGL annual meeting in May 1923 empowered the executive to wind the organization up without a further conference. Its main organ, the Guild Socialist, disappeared in August 1923, while its replacement, New Standards: A Journal of Workers’ Control, ran for another year. The collapse of the Building Guild and the defection of many of the NGL’s most active and prominent members to the CPGB and others to the Distributist and Social Credit movements both contributed to the debacle. This left the ILP as, in effect, the only remaining organized voice for at least a species of guild socialism. How would that very central part of the new program fare in a less encouraging climate?

The ILP leaflet Now for Socialism! The Call of the I.L.P. advocated workers’ control and made it clear that the party did “not stand for bureaucratic State Socialism.” It emphasized that industry was the concern not only of workers but of “the woman in the house and of consumers in general.” In the final part of his “Study Course on Economic History,” Attlee looked forward to a different society, speculating that another “industrial revolution” might occur in Great Britain: “When the workers, organised as citizens, producers and consumers, resolve to create a new form of economy.” But at the end of 1922, the obstacles to be overcome were starting to look even more formidable than before.

The advent of the Allen regime had certainly had a measurable effect in reviving the ILP. Apart from his ability to raise funds and his impressive energy, Allen had other useful characteristics and skills that came to the fore.
Howell tells us that “some felt that his high-mindedness was combined with, and perhaps in his view justified, utilization of the politician’s darker arts.”

Certainly, his colleagues all testified to his ability to persuade. He was, says Paton, “most skillful at getting his own way at meetings and conferences” and “a past-master in the art of manipulating men and leading them to his goal.”

But, equally, he attributed Allen’s success—which made a great, though brief, impact—to his hard work and attention to detail. He always went to meetings fully prepared, and “his look of fragility masked a determined resolution and a great capacity for sustained and careful work. He left nothing to chance.”

Allen was, clearly “somewhat autocratic,” as Dowse puts it, citing Paton’s statement that Allen promised him the job of organizing secretary to the ILP if he simply submitted an application; Brockway was appointed to the same position without even applying. It is certainly not usual for a treasurer to exercise such patronage in a democratic organization.

Most of the internal changes to the ILP advocated by Allen were intended to increase the ability of the NAC to guide and control the party, but they met with firm resistance. In 1924, having been elected chairman the previous year, Allen attempted to give the NAC greater control over the distribution of funds to the divisional councils. This included securing agreement from a meeting of divisional representatives. However, he found himself coming up against the commitment to considerable regional autonomy that had characterized the ILP since its foundation. The 1925 conference was extremely critical of Allen’s attempts to increase the NAC’s power and passed an amendment limiting the powers of the NAC by 283 to 174. Brockway attributes the “crisis” at the conference to the “growing discontent among working-class members with the middle-class elitist domination of head office.” One suspects that this may well have been a rather wider provincial resistance to what was experienced as metropolitan hegemony.

But what of Allen’s ambition that the ILP should become a socialist “nucleus” in the Labour Party? He initiated a series of policy reviews and working parties that produced policies, featured in later chapters. But the ILP’s pretensions to be the socialist conscience of Labour and that party’s “spearhead” annoyed many in the unions. They believed that their numbers and money constituted the real source of the Labour Party’s strength, and, as Paton was later to write, they “resented the I.L.P. assumption of superiority.”

Meanwhile, within the ILP, those opposed to Allen were concerned that the organization was becoming what Brockway would much later call “a Fabian society of intellectual compromisers rather than a proletarian confrontation with capitalism.” There is no doubt that Allen provided, in Dowse’s words, “leadership of genius,” but his success also masked some “deep tensions and
unresolved contradictions” in the party. Much of his success rested on his ability to persuade old No Conscription Fellowship contacts, Quakers, and affluent pacifists to make sizeable donations to the otherwise financially shaky ILP.

After his resignation, the “golden flood subsided.”

Allen’s idea of the ILP’s nucleus role might have survived in spite of these hostile pressures if the Labour Party’s leadership—and his friend MacDonald, in particular—had shown even a modest degree of appreciation of the policies the ILP was advocating. But this was not to be. Paton and Brockway concur about the irony of Allen’s position. According to the former, “the later policies which led directly to open conflict with the Labour Party had their origin in his fertile brain,” while the latter notes that “there was a contradiction in Clifford Allen. He stood for a policy rejected by Ramsay MacDonald, and yet he regarded him as the only possible leader of the Labour Party, destined to great achievement.” The result was that, by the mid-1920s, the role of the ILP as a support group for MacDonald had collapsed completely, while the problems related to carrying out Allen’s nucleus role in relation to the Labour Party had become increasingly acute.