James Maxton and Increasing Tension with Labour

Although Fenner Brockway, in his summary of events under James Maxton’s leadership, exaggerates more than a little, he is accurate enough in terms of the general direction of the ILP: “Under Maxton’s chairmanship the I.L.P. became aggressively socialist and proletarian. The middle-class experts and careerists disappeared from Head Office overnight and those who were satisfied with Labour Party policy either resigned or retained a nominal membership only.” Yet as late as the end of 1930, of the four signatories of The Living Wage—surely the most prominent “middle-class experts”—only Hobson’s “political habitation” seemed “to be a little doubtful,” as J. Allen Skinner put it in his New Leader review of the economist’s Rationalisation and Unemployment. In the same issue, Brailsford drew on Hobson’s “valuable little book” in one of his “Chaos to Order” articles. We have already seen that Wise was still active on the Living Income policy in 1928, and, after he was elected MP for Leicester East the following year, he published an article—“Banking and Finance: The Socialist Approach”—in the New Leader, in June 1930. In October, he demanded the socialization of food supplies, while Creech Jones wrote on the future of trade unionism the same month and reviewed Tawney’s Equality in the paper in May 1931. Brailsford, under pressure, especially from Kirkwood, over his relatively high salary, had resigned from the New Leader editorship in October 1926, but he was still a fairly frequent contributor to the paper in 1931. Like Creech Jones and Wise, Brailsford would remain active in the ILP until it disaffiliated from the Labour Party in 1932.

By the beginning of 1928, the very different direction of the ILP was evident to John Strachey, now editing the Socialist Review. In the February edition that year, prompted by Snowden’s resignation from the ILP, he noted how the war had brought about “a large influx of middle-class pacifists, bringing with them considerable money, ability and devotion to the cause of pacifism.” All three of these had been useful, but Strachey now welcomed what he saw as
the departure of the “Right Wing” with the always risky slogan “Better Fewer but Better.” He returned to this theme in his “Notes of the Month” in August. The pacifist entrants of the war period were, he said, now “reverting to their natural position of Left Wing Liberals.”

Maxton and Allen, both dominant figures in the ILP at different times, had much in common, for all their differences of background, temperament, and political approach. Both had exhibited the greatest determination, commitment, and courage as conscientious objectors during the war. Both had degrees of personal integrity that even their most inveterate opponents recognized. Both suffered from ill health and neither lived to anything like a ripe old age: Maxton died in his early sixties, and Allen did not even see his fiftieth birthday. But in other respects they were very different. Maxton had none of Allen’s organizing ability—or, indeed, his skill in tapping contributions to the ILP from wealthy sympathizers. But Maxton was a superb orator, and there is so much testimony, both during his lifetime and after his death, to his magnetism that it impossible to doubt his effective charisma. John Paton, a critic of Maxton as a “false prophet,” still noted “the almost hypnotic charm of a unique personality.”

Maxton’s personal popularity extended far beyond those who were inspired by him to become committed socialists. It even took in his political opponents in the House of Commons. Brockway records that “every Member spoke to him and he spoke to every Member, usually parting from them with an anecdote which left them chuckling. Yet he never compromised himself politically.” According to another colleague, David Kirkwood, he was the “most popular man in the House of Commons” and was “called ‘Jimmie’ by friend and opponent alike.”

Gilbert McAllister, writing in 1935, spoke of Maxton as “in a large sense the conscience of the British nation to-day,” adding, though, that he went wrong when he attempted “to combine his idealism with a bungling meddling in practical affairs.” Some of the same characteristics that made him inspiring to—and even loved by—his most fervent supporters also made him all too easy to caricature. As David Howell says, “James Maxton seemed the Tory cartoonist’s model of a socialist revolutionary—cadaverous features, lank dark hair, an emotional disrespect for bourgeois niceties.”

What Maxton could have done about his personal appearance was limited, but the stereotyping was reinforced by dramatic confrontations in Parliament. In the end, he was in danger of becoming what a later generation would call a “national treasure,” universally admired for his outspoken sincerity, courage, and firm principles but not able to make a breakthrough beyond the already converted when it came to the realities of politics. And in any representative
capacity, he was all too often inclined to follow his own beliefs and instincts rather than be guided by those he was representing.

The Divide Between Maxton and Allen

Maxton’s tendency towards independent action proved to be the final straw for Clifford Allen. There was also increasing tension between the two men over Maxton’s growing criticism of—and Allen’s continuing support for—MacDonald. Brockway mentions the dispute over the proposed reappointment of MacDonald as editor of the ILP’s Socialist Review as the “final issue” between them on the eve of Allen’s resignation. MacDonald’s removal was certainly opposed by Allen, and it contributed to his decision to go.11

However, as Arthur Marwick makes clear, Allen was even more concerned about Maxton’s very questionable behaviour in representing the ILP at the 1925 Labour Party conference.12 Maxton had been a member of the ILP’s Finance Policy Committee, whose majority decided in favour of paying compensation in the case of nationalization. The committee’s report, which was accepted by the ILP conference, was introduced by Hugh Dalton, who explained that the proposal of the committee was that compensation would be “paid off through the taxation of accumulated wealth.” Before this statement, Dalton had reported that there was “a dissenting minority of two, and my friend Maxton who is one of them, will be able to bring a fresh mind to bear upon this matter as he was only present at two of the twenty-four meetings of the Committee.”13 This led, Marwick tells us, to “a brisk exchange of letters” between Allen and Maxton over the latter’s attendance record.14

In October 1925, at the Labour Party conference in Liverpool, Maxton was the ILP representative on the Standing Orders Committee. In that role, he agreed to a composite motion, one that combined an ILP amendment on land nationalization with other amendments that opposed compensation. This, as Marwick says, “committed the I.L.P. to a policy which was the exact opposite of that hammered out by Allen’s committee of experts and endorsed by the Party as a whole.”15 Both Marwick and Martin Gilbert quote the whole of Allen’s letter to Maxton written a few days later. In it, significantly, Allen refers to his correspondent as “the future Chairman of the Party.”16 It had become customary for the office to be held for a period of three years, and Maxton had been a candidate for the office before. Clearly, Allen saw him as his almost inevitable successor who would take over the following year. Allen accused Maxton of “political irresponsibility, which fell not far short of political untrustworthiness.” He went on: “When I saw the future Chairman of the Party revealing that he considered himself entitled to pledge the Party to Land Nationalisation without
compensation in flagrant defiance of the recorded decision of the Annual Conference at York, I realised that the future of the Party was destroyed.”

The letter makes it clear that even more than Maxton’s own behaviour, it was the support for his actions at the subsequent NAC meeting that finally convinced Allen to resign. There is a pattern here that would be repeated on at least two occasions over the following years: Maxton would say or do something that was questionable for one holding a high-profile position in the ILP; there would be condemnations from some and misgivings among many in the party, but in the end, he would escape official criticism and have his position endorsed retrospectively.

The immediate result of what happened in Liverpool was Allen standing down, though he insisted that the “one or two incidents during that week” were decisive only because “they were the culmination of a long period of despair and unhappiness.” Two weeks after writing the letter to Maxton, Allen explained his resignation to MacDonald in similar terms. A “series of disgusting events concerned with the Liverpool Conference and the Socialist Review” had brought matters to a head and convinced him that it was “useless going on with these people.” Years later, after he too had broken with Maxton’s ILP over Labour Party affiliation, Brailsford, in a letter to Allen, would refer to “that wretched Labour Party conference” when “Maxton behaved so ill” and to Allen’s “irritation against Maxton and the Glasgow gang (for which you had very good grounds).”

Maxton’s message to the ILP on being elected as chairman was exemplary. He disclaimed any intent to “try to exert a great personal influence” and stressed that responsibility must be “distributed throughout the movement, rather than concentrated in the National Chairman.” He ended with a plea for tolerance and unity. “The temptation to quarrel with the Rights or with the Lefts,” he wrote, was great but must be resisted. It remained to be seen how far these good intentions would be reflected in the future progress of the party.

Whatever his intentions, Maxton was increasingly seen as the leader of the ILP opposition to MacDonald. Writing on the front page of the New Leader in early 1927, he claimed he was not competing for the position of leader of the movement. He also denied that he had attacked MacDonald, but this failed to divert criticism. The year ended with Maxton’s suspension on 23 November after calling the Tory chairman of a Commons committee “damned unfair.”

In the meantime, the New Leader reported on “The MacDonald Debate,” as the article was titled, at the 1927 annual conference of the ILP, which the writer described as the “outstanding” issue of the conference. The NAC’s decision not to nominate MacDonald for Labour Party treasurer had engendered a more intense version of the conflict of two years earlier over the Socialist Review
editorship, which had contributed to Allen’s resignation. This time, Brockway, who was at the centre of the conflict, tells us of the “protest signed by a formidable list of members, including MPs and leading officials throughout the country, and branches began to object in numbers which appeared disturbing.” Brockway’s “trump card,” as he referred to it, during the conference debate was to read a letter from MacDonald in which he said that it would be better for him not to be nominated by the ILP in view of his differences with the party. A motion, by Hill, to refer the issue back to the NAC for further review was rejected by a vote of 312 to 118.

The debate seems to have been rather more divisive and acrimonious than Brockway’s later account might suggest. Before moving for referral, Hill, from the Leicester branch, had tried to get the NAC simply to withdraw the proposal not to nominate MacDonald, but he abandoned the attempt after Maxton made it clear that the NAC stood by its decision. Hill claimed that MacDonald had “worked for ‘Socialism in Our Time’ like no other man,” while Crockett from Stirling “pleaded for a reversion to the old outlook” and insisted that “gradualism was the quickest and best method of getting better social conditions.” The Living Wage policy itself was long and gradual, and MacDonald should not be condemned for refusing to subscribe to a policy that he conscientiously believed would not expedite the “slow and steady development towards Socialism.”

Brockway, who spoke for nearly forty minutes, argued that it was not a matter of MacDonald disagreeing with ILP policy on “one or two occasions” but that his “whole attitude of mind is wholly different from the mind of the I.L.P.” He pointed out that MacDonald would be nominated as Labour Party treasurer by other groups within the Labour party and that the ILP would regret it if he were not elected. But Brockway triggered protests when he went on to say that those circulating the “Memorial”—that is, the document complaining about the NAC’s refusal to nominate MacDonald—were not motivated solely by loyalty to the Labour Party leader but “in some cases by definite opposition to the militant Socialism and Internationalism of the I.L.P.”

The cause of Labour Party unity was not assisted by a predominantly hostile press. Following the 1928 ILP conference, the New Leader protested that at least two Sunday papers, Reynolds News and the Sunday Times, “stated that Mr. Maxton referred to the demand of Mr. Ramsay MacDonald that the I.L.P. having finished its work should cease to exist as an impudent proposal. The facts are that Mr. Maxton did not even mention Mr. MacDonald, nor ascribe to him a proposal he has never made.” But the great issue of 1928 for the ILP, the Cook-Maxton (or Maxton-Cook) “manifesto,” could not be dismissed as misreporting by an antagonistic and mischief-making bourgeois press.
The Cook-Maxton Manifesto

As it appeared in the 22 June 1928 edition of the New Leader, the manifesto was a modest letter of five paragraphs. It announced that the signatories were intending to launch a campaign involving a series of “conferences and meetings.” Best known as the leader of the miners’ union during the General Strike, Arthur Cook was also an ILP member, though he was perceived as being close to the CPGB at this time. The unease that this campaign announcement caused in leading ILP circles was immediately apparent in the editorial note that followed: “We are authorised to state that the above letter is a purely personal communication, and in no way commits anyone but the two signatories.”

Maxton and Cook called for an “unceasing war against poverty and working class servitude” and “against Capitalism.” Only by their own efforts would be workers “obtain the full product of their labour,” since the Labour Party had abandoned the founding principles of “Hardie and the other pioneers who made the Party.” Moreover, readers of the manifesto were now being asked to believe that the ILP “is no longer a working-class Party, but a Party representing all members of the community.” At the proposed conferences, “the rank and file” would be given the opportunity to state whether they “accept the new outlook, or whether they prefer to remain true to the spirit and ideals which animated the early pioneers.”

The manifesto also appeared in Daily Herald, whose editor at the time, William Mellor, rejected the Cook-Maxton analysis under the title “Socialism and Capitalism.” The manifesto’s authors, he argued, were not at all explicit about the claimed “serious departure from the principles which animated the founders.” As might be expected from a paper owned by the TUC the Herald dismissed Maxton and Cook’s criticism of that organization’s participation in the Mond-Turner talks with employers: did not Cook participate in negotiations with the mine owners? Both Cook and Maxton had fought hard for improvements for workers within capitalism. The manifesto’s reference to militant socialism being “crushed” by the Labour Party raised the question of whether the authors were referring to the CPGB. If so, they should understand, said Mellor, that the Labour Party was “a ‘constitutional’ democratic party; the Communist Party stands for dictatorship.” While the Herald agreed that there could be “no peace with Capitalism,” the Cook-Maxton proposals would “enfeeble solidarity.” The paper quoted Dollan’s condemnation of the formation of “new wings and new cliques,” while one of its editorials rejected as unhelpful “ad hoc conferences outside the aegis of the Labour Party.”

The initial reaction in the New Leader’s letters section was not much more encouraging for the new campaign. A number of critical letters appeared under the title “Maxton-Cook Manifesto: Views of Our Readers—A Split or
a Revival?” The paper reported that of the first ten letters received, six were critical. “Fidelis” criticized the timing, believing that the manifesto would be good provender for the enemies of the Labour Party as the election approached. The ILP would be accused of the “fomenting of class war.” S. Lever of Hackney asked, “Does Maxton think that by propounding a militant programme he will enlist the support of the Communist Party?” If this was so, he would be disappointed. Jack Swan, a member of the Executive Committee of the Miners’ Federation and of the ILP, thought that if Maxton and Cook had found a “shortcut to Socialism,” they would get a hearing. But he noted that “both comrades have had the opportunity of putting forward a policy in the Councils of the Miners’ Federation and the I.L.P.” In the same issue, Brockway defended the radical approach of the manifesto authors while accepting that members of the NAC had a strong case in asserting that Maxton should not have taken this action when chairman—or at the very least, not without having consulted them.33

Brockway, writing in the 1940s, said that “the Cook-Maxton campaign was planned in a good deal of secrecy and announced to the world without any consultation with the National Council of the I.L.P. or with its Head Office officials, despite the fact that Maxton was chairman of the Party.” He believed that the “real instigator” was John Wheatley, who was widely regarded as one of the very few successes of the 1924 government. He would die suddenly in 1930, leaving Maxton without the person who many regarded as his guru.34

John Paton, political secretary of the ILP at the time of the Cook-Maxton affair, would also later explain his reaction to the manifesto in some detail in *Left Turn!* He had not, he said, had any real warning: “There had been a preliminary announcement in the Press of its coming, but since Maxton had not troubled to inform me of its contents nor seek to consult the National Council I’d concluded it was something of no special importance.” The significance of the Cook-Maxton initiative, for Paton, lay in the series of public meetings that would “create an *ad hoc* organisation which inevitably must be recruited from the I.L.P.” This meant that the campaign was indirectly an attack on the ILP. Paton had, he insisted, no quarrel with the intentions of the manifesto. Maxton and Cook were great assets to the party.

As a combination they were an immensely popular attraction everywhere; if they’d placed their dates with me I could have organised their campaign through the I.L.P. with immense effect, both for its immediate aims and for the I.L.P. as well. It was doubly galling to think that my chairman had made this move without a word to me as Party secretary and had done it in a way which would almost certainly ensure its failure.35
Paton initially believed, like Brockway, that Wheatley was behind the move, especially since Wheatley seemed to be dissatisfied with the ILP and to wish to form a new party. But Paton later came to the conclusion that the origins lay in Maxton’s “quixotic desire” to rush to the aid of Cook, whom he believed to be in danger of being expelled from the TUC General Council for refusing to treat its discussions as confidential. This, according to Paton, led to a meeting at the House of Commons involving—in addition to Cook and Maxton—the MPs Wheatley, Buchanan, Kirkwood, and Campbell Stephen; John Scanlon, a journalist closely associated with the Clyde MPs who was to help organize the campaign; and the CPGB’s William Gallacher.  

Controversy over the Cook-Maxton Campaign

Paton’s reaction was not unlike that of Allen at the time of his resignation, and the same pattern was to follow. By early July, New Leader letters were running in favour of the Cook-Maxton program by a margin of four to one. Gilbert McAllister, in his biography of Maxton, says that the NAC was “rent in two” over the manifesto. The division within the ILP is nowhere better illustrated than in the contrasting responses to the Cook-Maxton agenda of Forward and Labour’s Northern Voice, the former very critical and the latter generally supportive. The Glasgow-based Forward, edited by Tom Johnston, a close associate and supporter of Dollan, criticized Cook-Maxton under the title “Socialism or Confusionism.” The editor of the Lancashire Division’s own Labour’s Northern Voice complained of not having been sent a copy of the manifesto though it was “inserted in the dope papers” even before it appeared in Forward and the New Leader. He found the comments in Forward “not very helpful” and saw Cook-Maxton not as “an outburst of irritation” against MacDonald but as a “trumpet call” that might bring people to “perceive how they are being led up the garden.”

In the following week’s issue of Labour’s Northern Voice, Mrs. H. M. Mitchell was equivocal about “Maxton Cookery.” To older stagers of the I.L.P. who have never felt it necessary to run about with the red flag in one hand and a volume of Marx in the other, she wrote, “the manifesto seems remarkably mild.” But she believed that the “consternation” generated showed the need for it.” A week later, the paper reported that at the Lancashire divisional conference, the feeling had been “in favour generally” and the reception of Maxton, who attended the conference, was enthusiastic. He declared himself amazed at the uproar that he and Cook had caused in the party and excused himself from going into detail about the manifesto. He had, he said, already spent six hours explaining himself to the NAC and four with the Scottish Divisional Council.

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Meanwhile, in an interview in *Forward*, Maxton denied “the faintest intention” of either starting a new party or drafting a program. Asked about the claim that those who remained true to the ideals of the labour movement were being “crushed,” Maxton complained of “a steady but relentless attempt to smother and obliterate the I.L.P.” since he had become chairman. “We are told it has outlived its purpose and is no longer necessary,” he said. “Philip Snowden ostentatiously resigns from it on that ground. And all our efforts at translating our propaganda into Socialism in our time are persistently opposed and ridiculed.” The same issue of *Forward* raised doubts about the “Rank and File conference” planned in Glasgow. Could such an event really be called a conference? Those attending would represent only themselves. There were an estimated 200,000 trade unionists and cooperators in the city, and St. Andrew’s Hall had a capacity of about 4,000. If only a fraction of the “rank and file” turned up, it would be necessary to adjourn to Glasgow Green.*42*

The next edition followed this with an appeal to avoid fracturing the I.L.P and a plea that the manifesto authors’ future meetings “be arranged under the auspices of the Party of which they are both members.” While some letters commended the manifesto for sounding an alarm, Dollan attacked not the content of the manifesto but its constitutional impropriety and political folly. He had worked with Maxton longer than most, he wrote, and no one had more regard for him, but Maxton was wrong to promote “unofficial campaigns,” especially in view of the planned I.L.P Socialism in Our Time autumn campaign. Moreover, “no other Chairman of the I.L.P. found it necessary to go outside the organisation to hold conferences and meetings to consult the rank and file on questions of party policy, and Maxton had no need to break this unwritten rule.”*43*

Dollan was becoming as much a thorn in Maxton’s side as Maxton was in MacDonald’s. He had repeated his criticism of Maxton’s lack of consultation at the NAC meeting where Maxton’s calm presentation had, he said, “captivated the members of the Council even if it did not convince all of them he did right.” Seconded by John Scurr, Dollan had attempted to persuade the NAC to reject I.L.P participation in the campaign while endorsing “the spirit and aim of the document.” The vote was lost by 8 to 5, even though Scurr disclaimed any intention to censure Maxton. Frank Wise and Dorothy Jewson then moved what became the NAC’s statement. It was endorsed by 7 votes to 6 after the failure by the same narrow margin of an amendment from Shinwell and Mosley to leave out the encouragement of branches to support the Cook-Maxton campaign. *44* It was accepted that the manifesto was not “intended to disrupt” and that it expressed the “distinctive policy of the I.L.P. which rejects . . . both the inevitability of gradualness and the inevitability of violent revolution.”*45*
Somewhat cynically, Mosley maintained that differing appeals to sections of the electorate helped win elections and that “Maxton and Cook appealed to the working class as no one else could.” Jowett, who opined that the party had never experienced an internal debate conducted at “such a high level of sincerity and seriousness,” criticized the timing of the campaign. He argued that Maxton and Cook should have waited until after the publication of the Labour Party’s Labour and the Nation policy. But Brockway’s New Leader headlines “The I.L.P. Burns Its Boats” and “Maxton Endorsed” told their own story. According to Brockway, Maxton was thinking in terms of “a ‘Moody and Sankey’ campaign” by Cook and himself, which “would reach a wider circle than an I.L.P. campaign.”

As far as Forward was concerned, hostilities were only just beginning. Dollan detected “major inaccuracies” in an article by Cook criticizing the Labour and the Nation policy in the CPGB’s Sunday Worker. Dollan reported the Scottish Divisional Council’s decision not to support the “unofficial campaign,” adding that Cook had told him that the Scottish Council’s decision did not represent the branches or the members.

In the meantime, three to four thousand people attended the first of the Cook-Maxton meetings in Glasgow. The New Leader reported Maxton’s concession that “if a vote were taken of the working classes as between ‘Socialism in Our Time’ and the ‘Inevitability of Gradualism’ the latter would get a majority. That was why he and Cook were conducting their campaign.” Predictably, Forward’s account was much more negative, reporting that the most successful aspect of the meeting was the chairing by David Kirkwood, who dealt impressively with the considerable amount of heckling. The rest of the report was highly skeptical. “Was this conference the beginning of a great ‘revival’?” the writer asked. “Let us hope so. There was no attempt by anybody to outline a constructive programme.”

Once again, this contrasts sharply with the way Labour’s Northern Voice headlined the Manchester event that soon followed: “The Maxton-Cook Campaign: Huge Meeting at Free Trade Hall.” It is true that the Voice did not entirely ignore the charges of constitutional impropriety against Maxton. A small item in September reported that the Miles Platting ILP branch had protested against Maxton and dissociated itself from the support given to the “unofficial meetings” by the Lancashire Division.

Meanwhile, another front had opened in Forward’s anti-Cook-Maxton campaign. On 21 July, the paper had carried on its back page an advertisement headed, in all caps, “Socialist Revival: Cook-Maxton Campaign,” in which Kirkwood sought donations to finance further activities, with a goal of “100,000 shillings.” Reacting like a bull to this red flag, Dollan attacked Kirkwood the
following week. Here was a member of the ILP’s National Council, whose priority should have been to address the current £1,553 deficit of the party, appealing for £5,000 to finance the Cook-Maxton campaign, he complained indignantly. In the New Leader, Dollan reiterated his objection to Kirkwood’s attempt to promote a “private” socialist revival. It was, he insisted, “an even more violent breach of democratic procedure than was the issue of the manifesto.” He rejected “this individualism under a guise of Socialism.” Those who found the Labour Party too reactionary should leave. If they chose to stay, then “let us accept the difficulties of membership as honourably as we accept the privileges.” He ended with the declaration that “the special function of the I.L.P. within the Labour Party is to educate rather than to dominate.”

A very different view was to be found in the Socialist Review, where Strachey, in the August edition, declared that he saw the Cook-Maxton campaign as “undoubtedly a political event of importance.” In essence, he argued, it asked whether Labour was a socialist party, and the NAC’s support of Cook-Maxton seemed to show that the socialist elements within the ILP were “again in the saddle.” Later, in October, he concluded that its agenda implied both “combined international action, at least with the workers of the rest of Western Europe, and . . . a dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the complete scrapping of parliamentarianism for at least a transitional period.” But none of this, he concluded, was faced explicitly by Cook and Maxton.

Maintaining the Pressure: More “Maxton-Cookery”

Maxton and Cook then produced a twenty-four-page pamphlet titled Our Case for a Socialist Revival, which was summarized for New Leader readers on 9 September. It was published not by the ILP but by Workers’ Publications Ltd., and readers were asked to write to Kirkwood or Cook for copies. It was a response, its introduction said, to requests for “a more detailed account of what is wrong with the Labour Movement.” Current moves towards “capitalist rationalisation” were no more likely to succeed than previous remedies to that system. What was needed was a class struggle for emancipation and “the defeat of the capitalist class.”

Both “the Mondist policy” of the TUC and the new program of the Labour Party, the pamphlet said, reflected the “abandonment of Socialism,” as did “the measures of intimidation and suppression of those within the Labour Movement who are opposing these policies.” Acceptance of capitalist rationalization of industry meant working for “the hell of robotry” instead of for “nationalisation and workers’ control.” The alternative, as Cook and Maxton saw it, included the revival of the union militancy of 1921–22 in organizing the unemployed, the “crushing defeat of Mondism,” and the election of leaders
prepared to pursue “a conscious Socialist trade union policy.” With all of this accomplished, there should be a centralization of power in the General Council of the TUC in order to enable it to pursue “a militant class policy,” while unions should carry out studies of their industries and work out detailed schemes of nationalization and workers’ control.  

The Labour Party, too, was in need of urgent rescue. The new Labour program had completed the party leadership’s move towards the right: the program “must be regarded not as a Socialist programme but as an enlightened Liberal programme.” The authors demanded the “staffing [of] the main departments of government with consistent Socialists” and the speedy nationalization of manufacturing industries, with “proper provision for adequate participation of workers in control and management of public services and industries.” Compensation for nationalization was rejected lest this enable capitalists to “take the wealth received in compensation to other countries in the world and there develop exploitation anew.” An exception might be made for the aged or disabled, but there must be no chance of society “burdening itself with a rentier class.”

The pamphlet stressed the importance of both the cooperative movement and a “powerful Trade Union Movement prepared to support a Socialist Government in its struggles for the expropriation of the capitalist class.” A real socialist policy in relation to the cooperatives would, while drawing them closer to the trade unions in the immediate struggle to defend the wages of the working class, “put before a Socialist Government the task of expropriating the big multiple stores . . . and transferring their control to the Co-operative Movement.” A socialist government would also have to assist the co-ops “to oust the remaining capitalists from retail and wholesale distribution.”

The “struggle against Imperial domination and the menace of war” must be supported, Cook and Maxton insisted. The short section “Barriers of Capitalism” was, in the context of the rest of the pamphlet, rather restrained. Of the House of Lords and the monarchy, it confined itself to a statement supporting their abolition. But there was no restraint about urging the defeat of the new program being proposed at the coming Labour Party conference and “declaring war against capitalism.” In a final section, Cook and Maxton complained of the intolerance of dissent within the Labour Party before concluding that “the fight within the Labour movement to-day is a fight between the forces of Socialism and those who have fallen under the influence of capitalism.”

Cook-Maxton: The Fallout

There is little doubt that most ILP members saw the manifesto and the follow-up pamphlet as, in Brockway’s words, “a popular statement of the
‘Socialism in Our Time’ programme.” This underlines the point made in the previous chapter that the subtlety of The Living Wage report’s strategy had not taken as much root as it might have seemed in 1926. Aimed almost entirely at labour movement activists, the strategy of Our Case for a Socialist Revival was simply to replace the unsatisfactorily “reformist” policies and leaderships of the trade unions and Labour Party with an uncompromisingly militant alternative while simultaneously pursuing the entire spectrum of the most radical policies. At the very least, this was an extremely tall order. The response of the New Leader was lukewarm. “Notes of the Week” simply listed all the headings and demands of the pamphlet and noted that it was all covered by existing ILP policy.

The criticism from “Watchman,” a columnist for the Birmingham weekly The Town Crier, was more scathing. Watchman was skeptical about what he called Maxton’s “orgy of oratory.” Jimmy Maxton was “a lovable personality,” he said. One could not quarrel with him. “Nor can one argue with him; Jimmy doesn’t argue—he tells you.” Reference was then made to Brailsford’s response to Snowden the previous year:

Mr. Brailsford is not arguing that because great changes can come about only a step at a time we should sit down and wait for them to come of their own accord. On the contrary he urged that all good Socialists should hasten the changes by effective propaganda among the masses of the people. When Maxton rages against those who want to trust the coming of Socialism to “some mysterious force raging outside ourselves” he is raging against people who do not exist in the ranks of the Socialist movement.

Maxton and Cook did not fare much better at the hands of their more revolutionary critics either. In December’s Socialist Review, Strachey reiterated the case he had made in the summer: Cook and Maxton did not admit how little a Labour government could do without “declaring itself a revolutionary Government, establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat, abolishing the Parliamentary system and imprisoning opponents.” He went on to say that he agreed with Palme Dutt’s similar criticism in the October issue of the Communist-aligned Labour Monthly.

By early 1929, Maxton seems to have taken the advice of those critics who urged that his campaigns should be carried out from within the ILP. In February, Labour’s Northern Voice carried an advertisement for a special conference for the local labour movement, where delegates would discuss proposals regarding a living wage for all workers in an effort to win “socialism in our time.” Dollan was now disposed to be conciliatory. Reporting on the annual
Scottish divisional conference held in January, he wrote, “It would be idle to pretend that the Cook-Maxton enterprise did not disturb the I.L.P. in Scotland but none of us who know the I.L.P. believed the disturbance would be more than temporary.” It had been, he concluded, a “tolerant conference” with no “personalities,” and “Maxton was at his best.”

The Cook-Maxton campaign was not a success. Paton, as might have been anticipated, later claimed that “it left behind it nothing but sharpened resentments and fresh difficulties for the I.L.P. in its relations with the Labour Party.”

One notable result was the resignation, not only from the NAC but also from the ILP itself, of MP John Scurr. Once a prewar member of the Social-Democratic Federation, he had long been very active in the ILP. As a member of the Poplar Borough Council, he had been jailed for contempt of court in 1921, when, in hopes of mitigating the plight of the local poor, Poplar councillors took part in a protest against an increase in property taxes. He was not, in short, the sort of member that the ILP would expect—or, arguably, could afford—to lose.

Scurr’s resignation letter, dated 14 November, was included in the NAC’s report to the 1929 annual conference. It made quite clear what had triggered the severing of his relationship with the ILP: “The recent action of the Chairman, the enunciation by him of a new programme, and the endorsement of him by the majority of the N.A.C. and a considerable body of the membership, especially in my own London division, has in my judgement entirely altered the basis of the I.L.P.” He attacked the “new spirit” and “new outlook” in the party, which he believed “much more in accord with impossibilism” than with the legacy of Keir Hardie. He did not doubt the sincerity of Maxton and his supporters, but in his opinion, rather than bring about Socialism in Our Time, they would “postpone its realisation for many years.” With an election approaching and Labour “on the threshold of power,” ILP members were “being led to believe that the Labour Party will not make good. It is heart-rending. It is worse. It is the acme of foolishness.” He ended with the hope that “the temporary aberration of the I.L.P. will speedily pass away.” This was not something that Scurr, who died in 1932, would live to see.

If Scurr’s departure was evidence of the alienation felt by what was now seen as the Right of the ILP, there was little compensating support from the CPGB, which was entering its most sectarian “class against class” years of the “third period.” Palme Dutt, writing in Labour Monthly in April 1929, ridiculed the “final self-exposure of Cook and Maxton.” The “final swan-song of Maxton was sung at the Scottish I.L.P. conference,” he concluded, and the “funeral of the Clyde Brigade was solemnised at the Glasgow united meeting of Henderson, Wheatley and Kirkwood, at which the police kept order by the arrest of seventeen workers.”
The general election of 1929, which resulted in another minority Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald, followed at the end of May. Sometimes referred to as the “flapper election,” it was held under the terms of the Representation of the People Act 1928, which removed the discrimination against women under age thirty of its 1918 predecessor. The travails of both Maxton and Cook continued in this new political situation. By September 1929, the New Leader was reporting Maxton’s expulsion from the Communist-dominated League Against Imperialism. He had taken risks in trying to establish friendly relations with the Communists, the Leader noted, but his efforts had not been reciprocated: “The whole episode throws a brilliant searchlight on the almost total failure of Communist propaganda in this country. When the Third International decreed, against the advice of its most level-headed adherents, that Labour must be fought at the polls, it signed the death warrant of the British Communist Party.”

Cook was not spared either, but Forward’s critical attitude to Cook underwent a sea change after he condemned CPGB’s tactics in the Miners’ Federation. Successive headlines in March 1929 tell the story—“Communists Attack Cook,” “Another Attack on Cook,” and then an article by Cook titled “Stop Squabbling and Work for a Labour Government: Advice to Scots Miners.” On the Communist side of the dispute, the June 1929 Labour Monthly published “Cook’s Break with the Revolutionary Working Class.”

In the midst of all this, Maxton remained undeterred and continued to win support among ILP members. In early 1929, an editorial in the New Leader had commented on press reports that Maxton had decided to accept another nomination as chairman. There was nothing in the constitution that limited the term of office, although no one since Hardie, who held the position from 1893 to 1900, had served more than three years in that capacity. At the 1929 ILP annual conference, Maxton was re-elected with 284 votes; Shinwell received 39 and Dollan 38.

Maxton would remain chairman until 1931 and would again hold the position from 1934 until 1939. This final tenure was not foreseen. At the Scottish ILP conference in early 1931, Maxton announced that he was addressing them for the last time as national chairman. He said that “he would be glad to get back to his work as a Socialist agitator without the constraints of office.” After the Cook-Maxton episode, there must have been some who wondered what these constraints could possibly have been.

The frustration of active ILPers with the Labour Party went far wider than Maxton and his most fervent supporters. At least part of the responsibility lay with the larger party—and above all, with MacDonald himself, in his dismissive response to The Living Wage. Serious consideration well short of
endorsement and adoption might have been sufficient to reduce at least some of the alienation that many were coming to feel towards the “official” movement. The growing tensions are not attributable to Maxton alone. His popularity on the Left was, in large part, due to the way he articulated and dramatized the frustration already felt by so many activists. That said, the way he pursued the ILP case was bound to exacerbate rather than conciliate.

At an ILP meeting at the Brighton Dome during the 1929 Labour Party conference, Maxton declared, “I am a Socialist agitator. My function is to stir up discontent and keep it hot and strong. And it is more necessary with a Labour Government than at any other time.” A minority Labour government had then been in office since the beginning of June. It was to end with MacDonald’s formation, in 1931, of a National Government. This set in motion a train of events that led to the ILP’s ill-fated, and later often much regretted, decision to disaffiliate from the larger party that it had done so much to create.