Two crucial ILP conferences took place in 1932. The first was the party’s annual conference, held in Blackpool in April, and the second a special conference in Bradford, convened three months later. The central issue at both was, of course, the continued affiliation of the ILP to Labour. Given the essential role that the ILP had played in the creation of the Labour Party—and given the iconic status of the late Keir Hardie, invoked by advocates on both sides of the disaffiliation debate—the idea of severing ties was not one that ILP members took lightly. Opinion was divided at the Blackpool conference, and no decision was taken, but tensions deepened in the months to follow, as Labour refused to give ground on the question of standing orders. By the time Bradford conference opened at the end of July, its outcome seemed to some foreordained.

Easter in Blackpool: A Three-Way Division

The New Leader report on the Blackpool conference featured portraits of some of the most prominent speakers with labels that indicated how the delegates had divided into three camps: the photograph of Cullen was labelled “Disaffiliation,” C. G. Garton represented “Conditional Affiliation,” and Dollan, “Unconditional Affiliation.” A photo of MP George Buchanan was tagged “Urging Disaffiliation,” while one of Wise was captioned “E. F. Wise Pleads for Unconditional Affiliation.”

The paper reported that Cullen, on behalf of the Poplar branch, had argued for disaffiliation in “a cool and detached way” and had denied press reports “that the unofficial left-wing were intending to form a new party.” Dollan, by contrast, had made an “impassioned speech” that generated both laughter and anger as he ridiculed the ILP divisions and branches supporting disaffiliation. He pictured them carrying out insurrections against the cathedrals of Truro, Winchester, Norwich, and Westminster. He insisted that the standing orders issue was of “minor importance.” What mattered was policy. He argued that the
long-term work of the ILP had borne fruit at the Labour Party conference at Scarborough the previous autumn, when Labour had accepted socialist policies that the ILP ought now to help the party work out in greater detail. Garton told the conference that “if the Labour Party was wedded to gradualism then the conditional affiliationists would be ready to go outside.” He urged that after negotiations with the Labour Party had been concluded, a special conference be held to make the decision on whether to accept whatever result emerged. This proposal was later adopted by the conference.

Both Maxton, “after much mental turmoil,” and Paton supported disaffiliation. After what was called the “most intense debate ever held in the I.L.P.,” unconditional affiliation was defeated by 214 to 98 votes. Immediate disaffiliation was also rejected but a relatively large number of delegates voted in favour of it: 144 compared to 183 against. Eventually, it was agreed by a large majority to reopen negotiations with the Labour Party on the standing orders issue.

Before the debate, the tone had been set by Brockway’s speech from the chair. He was not, he would claim later, “greatly excited over the disaffiliation issue.” Instead, he had “placed emphasis on the development of a revolutionary policy and regarded the issue of the Standing Orders as important only in so far as they prevented the expression of such a policy.” At the time, the New Leader reported that in his address, Brockway had told delegates, “Decide upon your revolutionary policy, express the new Socialist spirit, in life as well as word, and the issue of affiliation and disaffiliation will settle itself.”

The most significant feature of the conference, according to the Leader, was “the practically unanimous realisation of the necessity for a revolutionary policy.” In his report, Paton emphasized that “no voice in the Conference from beginning to end uttered a word in support of the policies of ‘gradualism’ which the I.L.P. unitedly challenges and which was the real issue underlying the Standing Orders dispute.” He went on to note, “One section of those who supported disaffiliation did so, as they quite clearly stated, because they believed that the methods of political democracy had no relevance to the new situation.” Their view centred on “the world breakdown in Capitalism” and they called for a “quickening up to meet the new situation of the basic proposals of the ‘Living Income Programme’.”

Paton shared the belief, expressed by a significant number of ILPers, that the economic crisis would lead to authoritarian rule in Britain, as it had elsewhere. There were signs that the National Government was moving in this direction. “By almost its first act—the institution of legislation by Orders in Council—it struck at the roots of British constitutional and democratic practice,” wrote Paton. “It was the British equivalent of the German pseudo-fascism—of government by Presidential decree.”
The emphasis of *Forward*’s reporting of the conference was quite unlike the *Leader*’s presentation of a three-way division. It focused instead on the rejection of immediate disaffiliation and the upcoming meetings with Labour, which, it was hoped, would lead to an acceptable resolution of the standing orders issue. In his conference report the previous year, Emrys Hughes had accused those criticizing the Labour Party for “cowardice” of being inconsistent. On a critical amendment to Trevelyan’s Education Bill, the *ILP* group had decided to give itself “a free hand,” and Beckett voted with the Tories while Maxton, Stephen, and Buchanan abstained. Now, in 1932, *Forward* revived this criticism, but this time, the focus was more squarely on Maxton and the standing orders controversy. He had said that abstaining was not good enough, but was he being consistent? asked Hughes. “If Maxton takes up the attitude that he is justified in abstaining in order to conciliate Catholic opinion on questions of education he should be equally ready to take the same attitude when there is a difference with the Labour Party on other issues.” *Forward* asked what the *ILP* parliamentary group planned to do now that a motion supporting secular education had been passed by 111 to 20 at the *ILP* conference, noting that “Maxton, McGovern, Stephen and Buchanan have all pledged themselves at the last election to the ‘Catholic Observer’ to uphold the Catholic schools.”

In his chapter titled “The Split,” Gidon Cohen contends that the Blackpool conference was simply “postponing the inevitable.” But was it as inevitable as hindsight seems to suggest? Clearly, a large group among the conference delegates favoured instant disaffiliation, yet they were by no means the majority. Nearly a third of delegates were even prepared to retain unconditional affiliation, and one of the most prominent supporters of this view, Wise, had been re-elected as a national member of the *NAC* by the conference. He and other opponents of disaffiliation, notably Brailsford, must have felt they were struggling against a strong and rising tide. However, the fact that they continued to make the argument for remaining with Labour as forcefully and frequently as they did suggests they had not entirely given up hope of persuading a majority of *ILP*ers. After all, relatively swift changes of policy stance were not unknown in the party.

The most obvious example of such a turnaround is the issue of affiliation with the Third International that arose at the start of the previous decade. As we saw in chapter 2, at the beginning of 1920, a strong surge of opinion was working in favour of seeking Comintern affiliation, but, rather like the 1932 conference in Blackpool, its 1920 predecessor had postponed the decision pending further investigation or negotiation. Over the following year, the firm—and, from the *ILP* point of view, totally unreasonable—stance of the Comintern itself had played a large part in turning the tide. Had the Labour
Party leadership adopted a somewhat less intransigent approach in the summer of 1932, the balance might have been tipped in favour of those who wished to preserve the ILP’s relationship to Labour. Signs of flexibility were not forthcoming—although intransigence was by no means confined to one side in the dispute. One cannot, of course, rely uncritically on Brockway’s account of the ILP’s discussions with Labour, both before and after Blackpool, but it does offer some interesting insights.

One such insight concerns a conversation with Labour’s Arthur Henderson, whom Brockway met at the Geneva Disarmament Conference in early 1932. To Brockway’s surprise, he found that Henderson did not concentrate on the standing orders and took the view that organizational difficulties could be overcome. His concern was rather about where the ILP was going in terms of policy:

He challengingly raised the issue as to whether we had any real faith in Parliament. He had gathered that we believed that ultimately the transition from Capitalism to Socialism would be made not through Parliament but by a direct struggle for power between the working-class and the possessing class. Did this mean that we stood for Socialism by revolution?

Brockway recalled that Henderson was not satisfied with his reply that the ILP would “use Parliament as long and as fully as it could be used.” Given how much evocation of a revolutionary policy was going on in the ILP, Henderson’s concerns are not at all surprising. As we shall see in the next chapter, a good deal hung on what exactly—or even approximately—was meant by “revolution” and “revolutionary.”

As for the final talks with the Labour Party, Brockway remained convinced a decade later that “it was the obstinacy of the Labour Party Executive which closed the door to agreement.” But it is also true that, referring to earlier discussions with Labour, he commented, “I have the impression that Maxton deliberately permitted things to take their course.” This was very much in line with the view that Forward took at the time, with Dollan, as usual, setting the pace. In April, he wrote that Maxton had been “one of the chief obstacles to an agreement.”

Much water had flowed under the political bridges by the late 1930s, when both the ILP and Labour were edging towards a compromise that seemed likely to lead to reaffiliation—until the outbreak of war intervened. This movement towards agreement suggests that those who opposed disaffiliation in the early years of the decade were not facing an inevitable defeat, though the odds were against them. At Easter 1932, the final decision—whether inevitable or not—still lay ahead. The Poplar branch expressed regret that the Easter conference
had adopted a policy of leaving the door open to continued affiliation, which was not what that branch had been hoping for.¹⁴ The fate of the ILP was still to be decided. The debate continued—and would go on even after disaffiliation.

**Tensions Prior to Bradford**

Brailsford’s continuing campaign for the retention of the Labour Party affiliation sometimes took less direct routes. In April, two weeks or so after the Blackpool conference, his article “Is Keynes a Socialist?” appeared in the *New Leader*. In Keynes’s article “The Dilemma of Modern Socialism” in the *Political Quarterly*, the economist had advocated “central control of investment and the distribution of income in such a way as to provide purchasing power.” This showed, Brailsford wrote, that “Mr. Keynes marches pretty closely with our own Living Income Policy. In so far as I had a hand in drafting and defining it, it was this aspect of it which chiefly attracted me. We used to insist it was a prescription for economic health.” Brailsford then turned to the role that he wanted the ILP—and Keynes—to play: “It is our job (and his) to indoctrinate the Labour Party with the firm and reasoned belief that an expansion and equalisation of consumption is the first step to economic health.”¹⁵

In early May, the *New Leader* reported the NAC proposals for the coming meeting on standing orders with Labour.¹⁶ The month also began optimistically for Dollan, who still anticipated a positive outcome from the negotiations with the Labour Party. Successive headlines of his *Forward* contributions proclaimed “Now For Unity” and “Nearing Unity: Labour Party Ready—ILP Willing.”¹⁷ But then his focus shifted to the efforts of the Glasgow and West of Scotland Disaffiliation Committee, which had held a meeting, with Maxton and McGovern on the platform, attended by three hundred people. He dismissed the two speakers as “the advocates of working class disunion.”¹⁸

At the beginning of June, it was reported that Labour had refused to revise the standing orders as “a condition precedent to the admission of I.L.P. Members” but that the PLP would be reviewing them.¹⁹ This generated some mild hope for a successful resolution of the long-running dispute, but it proved a very temporary moment of optimism. The following week, Brockway’s statement as chairman began by noting the *Daily Herald* report of 2 June, according to which the PLP had decided that any reconsideration of the standing orders would be postponed “until prior to the creation of the next Labour Government.” Brockway’s account was supplemented by Paton’s “Full Story of the Negotiations,” which concluded with the NAC’s decision to call a special conference. The decision of the PLP was confirmed by Labour’s national executive. A “satisfactory revision” of the standing orders, Paton concluded, was indispensable if ILP affiliation was to continue.²₀
Dollan dissented passionately from the NAC’s recommendation to support disaffiliation at the coming Bradford conference. He was supported by Forward. “To wreck the Labour Socialist alliance on a minor issue like that of Standing Orders is a calamity,” the editor of the Scottish ILP paper concluded. With Labour in opposition, the standing orders were “practically non-existent,” and the ILP MPs could join the PLP “without sacrificing an iota of their enthusiasm and anxiety to achieve Socialism in Our Time.” Forward noted that many of the Left had said that they expected the ILP to return to Labour within two or three years, which made the idea of disaffiliation even odder. The paper appealed to the “rank and file” to oppose the move.21

The New Leader issue of 24 June is particularly helpful in gauging the point that relations between Labour and the ILP had reached by that time. It included a letter from Labour Party Assistant Secretary J. S. Middleton confirming that the ILP must accept the party’s constitution and its MPs must be members of the PLP. That meant accepting the standing orders. An editorial comment followed claiming that if there had been “a real desire” on the part of the Labour Party to reach a settlement, “such Constitutional difficulties could have been overcome.”22

Most revealing, however, is Hilda Lane’s account of the situation in “Why We Left the Women’s Conference.” The ILP had been represented at the Labour Party women’s conference by four delegates—Dorothy Jewson, Dora Russell, Annie Hambley, and Lane herself. There had been, Lane conceded, two “bright intervals.” But she complained of problems created over Russell’s credentials and the hostile chairing during Jewson’s and Russell’s speeches, which led to 105 delegates voting in their support “as a protest against the treatment meted out to them by the Chairman.” Faced with what they saw as unrelenting hostility, the ILP delegates decided to withdraw from the conference. “As we got to the door,” Lane recounted, “some delegates shouted good-bye and applauded.” For Lane and the others, this experience was decisive:

We realised that it’s not only a question of Standing Orders which makes the difference between us and the Labour Party, but the outlook towards vital things. In our wildest dreams we did not imagine a Labour Women’s Conference giving a great ovation to an ex-Minister responsible for an Act which operates so unjustly and harshly against women; that they would turn their backs on Socialism at the bidding of the same Minister; that they would uphold the Chairman in her very unfair treatment of one section.23

The ex-minister was, of course, Margaret Bondfield. Labour Party hostility towards the ILP was not confined to the women’s conference. As George Hardie...
put it in an anti-disaffiliation letter to *Forward* a week later, “It is unfortunate, but true, that many of the trade unions and other sections of the Labour Party are hoping the I.L.P. will get out.”

At the beginning of July, a statement was issued by Maxton and Brockway as the chairmen, respectively, of the I.L.P. parliamentary group and of the I.L.P. itself. Labour had rejected the party’s proposal to meet for the purpose of “settling the differences” and was insisting there could be no further discussion until the I.L.P. accepted the current standing orders. Brockway and Maxton maintained that the real source of the difficulties was “the compromising policy of the Labour Government and its betrayal of working-class interests and the Socialist cause.” The I.L.P. had no course open to it but to leave the Labour Party. A special conference was announced for 30 and 31 July in Bradford. It was to plan for “reorganisation as a completely independent political force.” Paton reiterated the belief that responsibility for the breach did not lie with the I.L.P., emphasizing his claim that “had the will to peace existed in the Executive of the Labour Party, the technicalities could have been surmounted.”

Not all of those favouring disaffiliation were prepared to wait for the Bradford conference. Some rejected the idea of remaining with the I.L.P. while it debated disaffiliation. In early July, the *CPGB*’s *Daily Worker* published a letter from J. Corbett, who had been secretary of the West Bromwich I.L.P. branch. He was now joining the Communist Party. By concentrating on Parliament, he declared, the I.L.P. was “damping down the struggle” when what was needed was a “soviet system.” Corbett’s views would be echoed in the I.L.P. in the years following disaffiliation.

The opponents of disaffiliation had not yet conceded defeat. *Forward* published a long pro-affiliation letter from E. Haydn Jones, preceded by an editorial statement that noted that the correspondent’s branch, Briton Ferry I.L.P., was the biggest branch in Wales and one of biggest in the entire United Kingdom. Briton Ferry had unanimously opposed disaffiliation.

A final summation of the cases for and against affiliation appeared in the *New Leader* on 15 July—which may have been in time for branches to take the rival arguments into account before mandating their conference delegates. The arguments of Brailsford and Stephen appeared on facing pages. Brailsford insisted that the standing orders issue was relatively unimportant: “History moves on a broad front, with masses of men as its counters. If the whole body advances, it matters not at all that at some moment in the march our little platoon may have felt some restriction on its pace, or enjoyed something less than the full luxury of self-expression.”

Brailsford went on to say that outside the Labour Party, the I.L.P. would find, as the Communists had, that it was “difficult to fight on two fronts.” Contesting
parliamentary elections would be, he argued, difficult in the absence of proportional representation—which, as we have seen, he supported. It was probable, in the actual circumstances in which the disaffiliated ILP would find itself, “that its efforts will lessen the total representation of Labour.” As he saw it, Labour had a real chance of advancing towards socialism, but that window would not stay open forever: “Tides do not stir history daily, as they move the sea. The chance that offers to-day, while the capitalist system swoons and staggers, may not return in our lifetime.”

The ILP had been right to rebel against the MacDonald government, Brailsford continued, but when MacDonald, Snowden, and Thomas left and Labour “challenged the City, ought we not to have seized the moment for reconciliation?” Neither side had “behaved with the bigness and generosity that our ideals should inspire.” Yet the fact remained that “at the last election the Labour Party executed a remarkable change of front. It abandoned the old gradualist, reformist tactics. It made a frontal attack on the City, the central seat of the power of British Capitalism. On this it has not gone back.” Its program for the coming Labour Party conference in October concentrated on “four strategic keys: banking and investment, electricity, transport and the land.” Finally, Brailsford asked, why should the ILP, “feeling hopefully within itself the force to attract the millions to its banner, doubt its ability to achieve this end within the existing Party?”

On the other side, Stephen dismissed out of hand those favouring affiliation unconditionally. Not only had they been “absolutely out of sympathy with the policy of the I.L.P. in recent years,” but they had also been “contemptuous of the ‘Socialism in Our Time’ policy and should have left the ILP with Snowden and MacDonald. He turned to the conditional affiliationists, some of whom had “become fainthearted and are ready to advocate a complete surrender” when faced with the prospect of disciplinary action. “A Labour Party which rebuffs the approaches of an I.L.P. anxious for a settlement will not prove a stronghold for any section of the working class in the day of trouble, whether nationally or internationally,” he insisted.

Stephen invoked the example of Lenin, who had not feared splits in the movement. He had been reading Trotsky’s History of the Russian Revolution, which had featured in a New Leader article the previous week. “Is there any Socialist to-day who does not realise, as Trotsky makes plain, that we owe a Socialist Russia to the courage and independence of Lenin and his associates?” he asked. The Labour Party might have lost MacDonald “for the time being as its titular leader, but the doctrine of which he was the most notable spokesman is still the philosophy of the Party, in spite of the brave words of a leader here
and there regarding the futility of gradualism.” His conclusion was predictable and uncompromising: “disaffiliation is the only way.”

Elsewhere in the same New Leader issue, it was announced that Jowett’s pamphlet *The I.L.P. Says “No”* was now available. Jowett was able to draw on his experience as a founding member of the I.L.P, a long-serving Labour MP, an opponent of the war, and a member of the 1924 government. His argument began with the I.L.P’s role in the formation of the Labour Party: “Without full liberty of its M.Ps in the House of Commons to give effect to its propaganda, within the limits of Labour Party Conference decisions, the I.L.P. as a Socialist organisation could not have become affiliated to the Labour Party.”

This right had been unchallenged for more than twenty years. “Over and over again since the Parliamentary Party was formed in 1906,” Jowett argued, “this right has been asserted and maintained by I.L.P. Members of Parliament.” He rehearsed the many occasions when the I.L.P had opposed the prewar unofficial alliance with the Liberals and when it had been “a dissentient minority”—which included MacDonald and Snowden throughout the war years. Snowden’s “historic Socialist resolution” would have been impossible under the standing orders they were now being asked to accept.

Jowett maintained that, when it was free of the restrictions now being insisted upon, the I.L.P had played a crucial role throughout the time that Labour had been in Parliament. A great misfortune had been the absence of “a militant I.L.P.” from the House of Commons between 1918, the year of the khaki election, and 1922. This had been a disaster, “for in those four years, the vast accumulation of national property, machinery and plant owned by the nation when the war ended was deliberately pillaged for fear it would be used as effectively for peace as it had been for war.” Then came the first Labour governments. The turning point followed. The party leaders were “determined that a future Labour Government must not be hampered by a dissenting minority under any circumstances.” The 1929 government had pursued a course of compromise, fishing for Liberal support, which culminated in “the last big compromise”—giving in to the bankers. This and the gulf between Labour’s propaganda—with its promises on pensions, housing, school maintenance, and unemployment insurance—and its parliamentary practice accounted for the huge decline of support at the previous year’s election.

It is not possible to gauge the influence of Jowett’s pamphlet on the views of members and the stance taken by branches. It was published shortly before the crucial Bradford special conference, which may have been too late for some members to consider its arguments. What is crystal clear is that for Jowett, his position on the standing orders dispute was of a piece with his critique of the “cabinet system” and his commitment to a representative democracy.
that maximized the accountability of the government to Parliament and of MPs to their constituents. He summed it up in one statement: “We of the I.L.P. who refuse to be bound by the present Standing Orders of the Parliamentary Labour Party refuse because the present Standing Orders empower the Parliamentary Party, at its own discretion, to prohibit Labour members from acting in the House of Commons in accordance with their platform propaganda.” The 1914 ILP conference had, Jowett continued, determined in passing the Bradford Resolution that ILP MPs should vote “on all issues in accordance with the principles for which the Party stands,” and that remained official policy. The ILP had “distinctly repudiated the mischievous pretence that Labour Members of Parliament may act and vote in the House of Commons contrary to the policy and principles of the Party purely to keep in step with a Cabinet.” Consequently, Jowett concluded, “The answer to those who demand that it must surrender the freedom of its MPs to fulfil their pledges honestly made in accordance with the principles and policy advocated officially by the Labour Party for election purposes is—No—No—Never.”

By this time, the attention of other key figures in the ILP was already turning away from the pros and cons of disaffiliation and towards the “revolutionary policy,” the search for which was to become the ILP’s distinctive feature once it had abandoned the Labour Party. Paton referred to the new constitution that the NAC would propose. Its basis would be “definitely Marxist,” and it would embody “the new thought and spirit with which the I.L.P. is surging.” A New Leader editorial the following week amplified this. The ILP, it said, would frankly accept “the Marxian philosophy of class struggle” and restate socialist policy “in the circumstances of the breakdown of Capitalism.” A change of emphasis was now needed: “First power—then a Socialist Plan is the slogan required.” The draft constitution to be submitted to the conference rejected “methods of gradual reform” and sought to concentrate its activities “upon achieving the decisive change from Capitalism to Socialism.” In the same issue, an article by John Lewis, titled “Goodbye to All That,” attributed the mistakes of the past to Fabian influences: “The Fabian tide flowed well up to the highest councils of the I.L.P. It is going out, and it must not return.”

The following day, Forward featured Dollan’s final appeal against the “mischievous policy” of disaffiliation, the responsibility for which he placed squarely on the “Maxtonites.” Apart from Maxton, he maintained, no one on the NAC had “any following in the country.” As for Maxton himself, he had “no disposition or ambition” to lead a revolution. “But thanks to the admiration of unthinking admirers he would rather be the leader of a small party in Parliament than a co-operator in the Labour Party.” Two days later, the Communist Party’s
Willie Gallacher, in a *Daily Worker* article headlined “The I.L.P.’s ‘Gentlemanly’ Revolution,” mocked the *ILP* for advocating “revolution without struggle.”

According to a front-page article in *Labour’s Northern Voice*, written two days prior to the start of the conference, the Blackpool branch was firmly of the opinion that unless the “obnoxious Parliamentary Standing Orders” were modified, the *ILP* should not remain affiliated. The Blackpool branch urged the party to “preach revolutionary Socialism.” In the issue of the *New Leader* published the day before the special conference, John Lewis urged the *ILP* to “prepare to take whatever steps are necessary, when the time comes, to ensure that the express will of the people shall prevail, and not be thwarted by Fascist Dictatorship, the inevitable alternative to Democratic Socialism.” In another article in the same issue, readers were also informed that branch amendments to the NAC’s motion calling for disaffiliation fell into four categories. Five branches supported disaffiliation but wished to “strengthen the wording.” Two wanted the *ILP* MPs to rejoin the *PLP* and press for changes to the standing orders. Two others demanded a “plebiscite of members,” and six were in favour of delaying the decision. But, the article pointed out, there was common ground in the demand for policies recognizing the need for “revolutionary change.” About a week earlier, the *Daily Herald* had reported the demand for a plebiscite and had identified the Gorbals *ILP* branch, whose local MP was the “disaffiliationist” Buchanan, as the source of the demand. A few days later, the *Herald* published an article under the headline “Many Branches to Oppose I.L.P. Leaders.”

But if the *ILP*’s desire for “revolutionary change” was distasteful to gradualists within the Labour Party, neither did it satisfy the appetite of the Communists. On the opening day of the conference, the CPGB’s *Daily Worker* carried a manifesto addressed to *ILP* members under the heading “No Middle Policy Possible.” In addition to disparaging the record of the *ILP* leadership in the fight against cuts to public expenditures, the manifesto criticized as ineffectual *ILP* policies that attempted to steer a middle course between revolution and reform. A few days later, the newspaper presented the outcome of the *ILP* conference as a “game played by Maxton, Brockway and Co.,” the goal of which was merely to “prevent the decline in membership.” Clearly, from the Communist standpoint, not only was the *ILP*’s leadership cynical and manipulative, but the party’s initiatives were essentially useless.

In the meantime, the opening day of the conference saw Kirkwood’s defiant declaration in *Forward*, headlined “Why I Refuse to Leave the Labour Party.” The same issue included Dollan’s statement favouring a referendum of *ILP* members irrespective of the decision to be made at Bradford. It was, he argued, the only fair method on such an important decision. From the time that disaffiliation was first mooted, however, almost everyone who made any
statement about it (with the exception of Jowett) had insisted that the issue of the PLP’s standing orders was only the most immediate cause of the breach with Labour. Yet it was clear at the Blackpool conference that the majority of delegates, and presumably of the membership, wished to stay with Labour if the standing orders issue could be resolved. It was this issue that had, as Gidon Cohen puts it, “the pivotal role in the decision to disaffiliate.”

For London supporters of the Revolutionary Policy Committee, which had pressed hard for disaffiliation since its inception, the Bradford result was a foregone conclusion. Months earlier, the committee had predicted that 30 July would be “an historic day for the British Working Class Movement.” The ILP would decide that it could “no longer work within the Labour Party or with the leaders who betray the workers.” By the time of the Bradford conference, the outcome did appear inevitable, yet the most prominent opponents of disaffiliation certainly carried the fight to the very end.

Bradford and Its Aftermath

At Bradford, Dollan attempted to refer back the crucial section of the NAC’s report recommending disaffiliation. He argued that the conference was not sufficiently representative to make such a momentous decision and called for a direct vote of the membership on the issue. Defeated by 252 to 115, he warned of “civil war in the Branches.” Wise was the main speaker opposing the disaffiliation motion, which was passed by 241 to 142. The New Leader reported the reaction: “‘The I.L.P. is now disaffiliated from the Labour Party,’ said the Chairman. Immediately the cheers swept the hall and delegates sprang to their feet and sang the ‘Red Flag’ whilst the Guild of Youth ‘red shirts’ on the platform held their flags over the platform, waving them excitedly from side to side.” Red shirts and banners were a feature of the conference, and Brockway told the New Leader that he “hoped that red shirts would soon be a common sight in every part of Britain.” Within a few weeks, an advertisement appeared in the paper for red shirts and blouses.

Both Dollan and Wise left on the second day of the conference. Wise had resigned from the NAC. In his letter of resignation, which Brockway read from the chair, Wise said that “secession from the Labour Party when it is more Socialist in outlook, intention and opportunity than at any time in its history seems to me to be an act of treachery to the Labour Movement and of suicide for the I.L.P.” The decision had been made, but there were immediate, as well as longer-term, consequences—and recriminations.

Dollan, Brailsford, and Wise were scheduled to be speakers at the ILP summer school in August. Wise actually made his contribution, arguing that there would be “no complete collapse” of capitalism. The fact that they had
agreed, before the disaffiliation decision, to speak at the summer school suggests that these leading advocates of continued affiliation had not regarded the result at Bradford as inevitable, as does Brailsford’s angry, rather than resigned, response to the conference’s decision. He would not, he said in a letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, be lecturing at the summer school since he would have “nothing to do, whether as writer or speaker, with an organisation which has behaved with such conspicuous silliness.”

The following week, Maxton responded to Brailsford’s comments in a *New Leader* article headed “After the Great Decision.” Regarding Wise and Brailsford, he said that “the I.L.P. has been a good friend to both of them for some years, has given them the status in the public life of this nation that they possess.” A “certain restraint,” he said, “would have been “more in keeping with the ordinary decencies.” He preferred to believe that Wise was “not himself,” but he made no mitigating plea for Brailsford’s “contemptuous phrase” about the “conspicuous silliness” of the Bradford decision in a letter “to a well-known Capitalist journal.” Maxton added, “These sentences are the only harsh personal things I want to say of anyone.”

In the editorial that same week, Brockway said he was puzzled by Brailsford’s response to the disaffiliation decision. “After all, it was only a year ago that Mr. Brailsford said at the I.L.P. Summer School that ‘Socialist honour’ demanded that the I.L.P. should leave the Labour Party.” But, he concluded, many of those members not accepting the decision had been out of step with the **ILP** for many years.

Brailsford proved quite capable of defending his decision to cancel his summer school lecture, and the *Leader* published his letter a week later. According to his account, the *Manchester Guardian* had approached Paton, as **ILP** secretary, to inquire whether he, Brailsford, was still intending to take part in the summer school. He claimed that he had already made his position clear in case the Bradford decision was to leave the Labour Party. Following the letter was a long note in which Paton conceded that Brailsford had indicated that he would withdraw from the **ILP** if it disaffiliated, but Paton pointed out that there were many precedents for nonmembers addressing **ILP** summer schools. He had assumed that Brailsford would attend. Brailsford also dismissed the charge concerning “Socialist honour.” The political situation had been transformed since he had made the statement, he explained:

At that point the Labour Government under MacDonald and Snowden was the abject servant of the City. A month later the Labour Party was free, and began the frontal attack on the Bank, in which it is still engaged. The root of our difference of opinion is that your watch stopped twelve months ago. Have you sworn an oath never to wind it again?
Immediately following Bradford, Dollan questioned whether the ILP had truly been represented at the Bradford conference. He doubted whether a third of the 250 Scottish branches had been represented and believed that at least half of the Lancashire branches were opposed to disaffiliation, which was supported by the “most backward” areas. No one would be more delighted, he insisted in a variant of his Blackpool conference speech, “if Mr. Maxton succeeds in creating such intense feeling in the South of England that the Red Flag will soon be hoisted over the town halls of Bournemouth, Eastbourne, Exeter and Chelsea.”

Despite the negative response from prominent ILPers, support for the Bradford decision seemed solid. Successive issues of the New Leader carried headlines proclaiming “Branches Back Bradford: Overwhelming Support for Disaffiliation” and “Solid for Disaffiliation: More Support for the Bradford Decisions.” The same editions reported the expulsion of Dollan and fifteen other Scottish members for “organising openly to wreck the I.L.P.” The London Division was asking for expulsion of ten members including Brailsford, Wise, and Creech Jones for “actively opposing” the special conference decisions. All three authors of the original Living Wage report still active in the ILP had clearly reached a parting of the ways. On the eve of the Bradford conference, the Daily Herald had quoted Wise as saying: “Not one of the authors of the ‘Socialism in Our Time’ pamphlet . . . is in favour of disaffiliation.”

The New Leader dismissed as “just bubble and bluster” press reports of resignations from the party. More than a third of delegates had voted against disaffiliation but “only the merest fraction” had left. From outside the ILP—and very much on the Labour Party side of the fence—the Daily Herald, on 1 August, headlined its front page with “I.L.P. Cuts Adrift,” while its editorial expressed regret for the loss to Labour of Maxton and Brockway, “two able and sincere men.” The ILP leadership had clearly “determined beforehand on severance.”

“The I.L.P. has marched off, a little contingent on its own, with a loud beating of tom-toms,” wrote the Labour MP for Woolwich East, George Hicks, in the Workers’ Monthly. The Herald predicted that membership losses would be great, particularly in Scotland, and that after a time, ILPers would either return to the Labour Party or accept the logic of their “revolutionary phrases” and join the Communist Party. Neither fate was what most supporters of disaffiliation in the ILP intended or foresaw in the summer of 1932. The party was now embarked on a career based on a revolutionary policy—but whether there was any agreement about what this actually meant remained to be seen.