Turbulent Waters
A United Front—or a United ILP?

As became evident in 1933, central to debates surrounding the ILP’s revolutionary policy was the issue of relations with the Communist Party of Great Britain. The key question was whether forming a united front with the CPGB would culminate in undermining the unity of the ILP itself. Neither the party’s 1933 conference nor the NAC would succeed in resolving the differences on this question, and a decision on the respective roles of Parliament and workers’ councils remained equally elusive. Indeed, by July, the national leadership had become a cacophony of different voices.

With the 1933 conference approaching, the London Division, which was by now dominated by the RPC, protested when John Paton, the party’s national secretary, refused to circulate to all branches a pamphlet explaining the new ILP constitution that London was proposing. In a letter to the London divisional organizer, John Aplin, Paton argued that to distribute the pamphlet would “establish a most undesirable precedent” and would mean that branches would be “faced with a deluge of opposing statements.” At the same time, Paton insisted that he was personally “in sympathy” with the London proposals, even though they were “exceedingly badly and loosely drafted.” He wanted the coming conference to adopt a constitution that would, in the most explicit way, express “the Marxist conceptions” that both he and London wanted the ILP to endorse. Yet the partial but considerable success of the RPC at the coming annual conference would soon lead to Paton’s resignation. As we saw in the previous chapter, his idea of “Marxist conceptions” was, like Murry’s, totally at odds with that of the RPC.

The assurance of personal sympathy was missing from the letter to branches in which Paton reported the rejection of the London proposal. He could not, he said, circulate a one-sided statement to branches unless the same opportunity was extended to opponents of its position. Such a “printed paper debate” would, he said, “usurp the function of Annual Conference itself.” To the plea that branches might mandate conference delegates without having heard London’s
proposal, the secretary replied that it appeared to him that London’s pamphlet was “an attempt to secure the mandate” by “an ex parte statement to which their opponents have no opportunity of effective reply.”

An attempt to reverse Paton’s decision at a meeting of the NAC’s Consultative Committee at the House of Commons on 30 March failed. At the next NAC meeting, held on the eve of the conference, Paton criticized the RPC’s Bulletin No. 8, whose “tendencies seemed to him to be dangerous to the Party.” The NAC agreed to emphasize “loyalty to the Party,” but Sandham’s motion to ask the London Division “to take steps to put to an end the activities of this association” was lost by eight votes to two.

Though prevented from circulating its pamphlet, the RPC had enough success at the 1933 ILP conference at Derby to increase the alarm felt by its opponents in the ILP. Gaster, representing the London Division, had emphasized the need to make clear “not merely that they were out to bring a complete change, but that the change was to be made by the seizure of the power of the machine from the capitalist class by every means in their power.” The party needed to “clear up the ambiguities” left by the special conference at Bradford, he argued. Was power to be sought through Parliament or through workers’ councils?

The NAC had made its own attempt to clarify the party’s position on parliamentary activity in a statement drawn up by Maxton, Brockway, C. A. Smith, J. Allen Skinner, and Paton. It is notable that Jowett, who was both the most experienced former parliamentarian still in the ILP and the party’s acknowledged authority on the reform of parliamentary procedure, was not a member of this subcommittee. In its report, the NAC claimed that the conference at Bradford had placed the ILP on a “definitely revolutionary Socialist basis.” The statement drawn up by the subcommittee further declared that the struggle for socialism would depend on effective “industrial and class organisations” such as workers’ councils. The working class must “discard the belief that Socialism can be achieved simply by voting power exercised through Parliament.” Parliament was “an instrument of government of the Capitalist State” and could not be the main instrument of its destruction. The statement went on to list seven advantages to parliamentary activity, mostly variants on Parliament as a highly visible platform for “agitation.” However, a revolutionary party must realize that these activities were “only ancillary to the creation outside Parliament of a working-class organisation based on industrial power.” In addition to being the chief instrument in overthrowing capitalism, this would be “the embryo organisation for the economic and political administration of the subsequent Socialist Society.”
The Derby Conference: The Role of Parliament and the New Constitution

At the Derby conference, Brockway, in his chairman’s speech, began by asserting that “the old policies of the Labour and Socialist Movement are utterly useless and must be scrapped.” Capitalism was “crumbling” and the only way forward was “to pull down the ruins and rebuild on new foundations.” He insisted that the “quality of a revolution is not to be measured by the degree of violence that accompanies the change but the degree of the change itself.” The workers would take control of workplaces with a National Workers’ Council to “co-ordinate all industries and plan their operation according to needs.” While he rejected Parliament as “inadequate for administering the new system,” he believed that it could still be useful in the period leading up to the revolution. In concluding, he argued that the historic role of the ILP was to act as “a bridge to join the divided forces of the working class movement” and that its “special duty” was to “build a united front in the international field.”

At the conference, Maxton put forward a motion to accept the NAC’s statement on the place of parliamentary activities within the party’s new program. In his opening comments, however, he insisted that the delegates be under no illusion as they voted on the NAC’s proposal. As he pointed out, the statement “did not throw away the Parliamentary weapon—it retained it as one weapon to use in the struggle to revolutionary Socialism.” At the same time, it gave Parliament “diminishing importance in the struggle as compared with what had been the general view in Labour Party circles.”

Following Maxton’s speech, Murry moved that the statement be referred back to the NAC. Paying due attention to “traditions, customs and political habits” was fundamental to Marxism, he argued, and the downgrading of Parliament ran contrary to the “essential psychology of the British working-class.” Every revolutionary socialist “knew instinctively that they must do all in their power to preserve to the last possible moment those democratic methods because if they threw them over their opponents were ready to use them.” Murry was opposed by McLaughlin from the Sheffield branch, who cited Lenin’s view of the state and said he believed that the NAC statement expressed “the new feeling” growing within the ILP.

Murry’s motion was also opposed by Jennie Lee and by William Warbey, with the latter arguing that the choice was either “the Capitalist State machine or the development of the workers’ alternative.” The workers’ seizure of power must be based on industrial power and on “all that has been built up on the traditions of the people, the Trades Unions, the Guilds, the N.U.W.M., Tenants’ defence organisations and other bodies thrown up by the struggle.” Workers’ councils would be simply “a co-ordination of all forms of struggle.
developed by the workers in their attack upon the system.”

Although the unanimous approval that Maxton had requested was not achieved, the NAC’s statement was eventually endorsed later in the conference.

For the RPC, the most important part of the conference deliberations took place on a proposed new constitution, which appeared on the agenda in the name of the London Division and eleven of its branches. Cullen moved the London proposal as a “complete alternative” to the party’s existing constitution. The division’s desire for a single vote on the constitution was frustrated by the decision of the Standing Orders Committee that constitutional proposals should be debated and voted on in separate sections. Cullen would complain the following month that, in the debates that followed at the conference, the London Division’s efforts had repeatedly been sabotaged by the Standing Orders Committee, which had exhibited a “damnably silly (or damnably knavish) attitude,” and that Brockway, in chairing the debate, had excluded many London delegates from speaking.

Of a possible 195 votes, only 37 were made against the least contentious section of the London proposal, “Responsibilities of Membership.” Given that membership would require “full acceptance” of the constitution’s principles and strict adherence to the party’s rules, it was presumably the same 37 votes that were recorded against the final acceptance of the constitution after all its constituent parts had been decided. Rather more contentious was the section titled “Development of World Socialism.” This section committed the party to opposing “imperialist domination over subject races,” to seeking “affiliation or association” with most effective international movements, to resisting war, and to supporting the USSR as “the first workers’ republic.” It was passed by 91 votes to 68. The section titled “Objective” was yet more divisive. Here, the aim of the ILP was declared to be a “classless society” in which all would perform “work of social value.” All economic resources were to be “communally owned and controlled,” and there would be an end to “rent, interest or profit” and to “all forms of monarchical or hereditary government.” Even after some amendment, this section passed only by a vote of 87 to 80.

The London Division was narrowly defeated, by 90 to 87, on the central and most contentious part of the proposed constitution—the section that dealt with method. This sought to commit the party to developing “the militancy of the workers” with “the objective of seizing power.” The ILP should make use of “any critical situation arising out of the breakdown of capitalist economic machinery or war.” It would develop a “powerful organisation of the unemployed” and would work for the creation of workers’ councils to prepare for “a workers’ dictatorship . . . for the carrying out of working-class measures necessary in the transitional period.”

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The debate was intense. Cullen declared that the Bradford conference had left the party “in a state of confusion.” It was “a mixture of idealist conceptions which completely ignored the facts of capitalist democracy.” Real democracy was possible only in a classless society: in a stratified society, there “was no such thing as democracy as the machine was biased in favour of the monied and propertied classes.” Skinner, speaking for the NAC, pointed out that what was now being referred to as “the old Constitution” was in fact “formulated at Bradford six months ago.” The ILP was, he said, “going through a feverish time and suffering from a number of infantile disorders.” Gaster’s proper place was in the CPGB, Skinner maintained, inasmuch as he and his comrades were “making the I.L.P. into a receptacle for petit bourgeois anarchism.”

For Jowett, another NAC speaker, the whole debate had an air of unreality. He recalled the 1922 Nottingham conference, which had accepted the “guild socialist” constitution. Conference delegates, like those involved in the current debate, had also attempted to put “doctrinaire theories into the constitution,” theories in which “two Parliaments were postulated, one the political Parliament the other a parliament of consumers. Their theories had no more relation to the man in the street than playing with toy bricks.” He then made his usual declaration that “representative Government had never been tried. Instead they had the antiquated system of Cabinet rule.” Now, he said, there were those who wanted “to get power by civil war.” He expressed his total opposition to this, but he also predicted that it was unlikely to happen in a country where you needed a licence to hold a gun.

The result of the debate was only a partial success from the point of view of the RPC. The ILP, according to its new constitution, now rejected all forms of “collaboration with the capitalist class,” and though electoral activity was declared to be “essential,” it was “only one aspect of the general struggle.” The party predicted that capitalist interests would “offer resistance” and resort to “some form of dictatorship.” But though the constitution now committed the party to “prepare the minds of the workers” for such a situation and for the “capture of power,” it made no mention of workers’ councils.

In spite of some setbacks, particularly on the issue of workers’ councils, the conference was, as Cohen says, “a considerable victory for the RPC.” In the New Leader’s report on the Derby conference, the section dealing with the debate on the constitution was headlined “The Marxists’ Field Day.” The RPC’s Bulletin declared that “the rank and file were looking to us for a lead” and went on to report that the RPC held two “conferences” of its own at Derby, the first attended by about fifty people and the second, towards the end of the main conference, by even more. At these meetings, “Comrades Cullen and Gaster outlined the views and organisation of the London Committee.”
Yet if, as we shall see, RPC members were far from satisfied with the results of the Derby conference, on the other side of the debate were those who were even less satisfied. Richard Wallhead, one of the five ILP MPs elected in 1931 and a veteran ILPer who had chaired the party between 1920 and 1922, resigned from the ILP in protest soon after the conference. Following his departure, the New Leader carried an article expressing appreciation of his work for the party. At the same time, it explained that Wallhead interpreted the conference result as “relegating the use of Parliament to a minor place and substituting for it a physical force revolution through Workers’ Councils,” adding that the decisions at the Derby conference did not “justify this interpretation.”

No doubt Wallhead’s resignation letter reflected his true estimation of the direction in which the ILP was heading and its dangers. However, it seems likely that his decision, or at least the timing of it, was also influenced by his failure to be re-elected to the NAC, albeit in circumstances that remain somewhat murky. Four national members of the NAC were to be elected by the conference delegates. After no candidate secured a majority in the first round of voting, the conference held a second vote, with the field consisting of the eight candidates who had gained the most votes in the first round. Maxton, who had initially polled the highest and now gained a clear majority, was declared elected, and then a third round was held, in which the four next highest scoring candidates took part. This resulted in the election of C. A. Smith, Campbell Stephen, and Jennie Lee, with the last garnering 115 votes to Wallhead’s 107.

When the newly elected NAC met the following day, close to the end of the conference, Brockway, who had been returned unopposed as chairman, proposed that Wallhead “be informed of the statement made that day at the Conference with regard to the unfortunate hitch in the ballot proceedings,” as well as told that “the Parliamentary Group was to be recommended to appoint him as liaison member to the N.A.C.” This proposal was accepted, though Wallhead did not take up the offer. The New Leader’s report on the conference three days later indicated that there had been a “mistake in the method of counting.” According to the conference report itself, during the final session the three successful candidates had offered to resign so that the vote could be held again, but the NAC had decided against this after consultation with the Standing Orders Committee—and with Wallhead himself.

Proposals for workers’ councils could be dismissed as simply hot air by the likes of Jowett, but Wallhead and Paton clearly did not take the matter so lightly. However, the aspect of revolutionary policy that would provoke yet further internal conflict—and, eventually, a significant loss in membership—was “Co-operation with the Communist Party,” an item that appeared on the agenda for the final day of the conference. On the eve of the conference, at a
meeting of the NAC, Wallhead had asked “that his dissent should be recorded to co-operation with the Communist Party in any form.”

Cooperation with the CPGB: The Derby Conference Debate

More than a decade earlier, the Left Wing of the ILP had tried to bring the ILP into the Comintern fold. Now, having parted with Labour, the party was once again under siege from the same quarter, with Comintern affiliation again on the agenda. The Affiliation Committee, inspired by the CPGB leadership and particularly by writer and editor Palme Dutt, sought to propel the ILP into unconditional Comintern affiliation—an effort that proved to be counter-productive. The RPC was embarrassed when two of the Affiliation Committee members were revealed to be undercover members of the CPGB and were duly expelled from the ILP. This was followed by the temporary suspension from the party of two other committee members after they paid a visit to Moscow, “to try to clarify the Comintern’s twenty-one conditions and alleviate the fears of some ILPers about what fulfilling those conditions would really mean,” as Cohen explains. One of those suspended was Bob Edwards, who would play a very prominent role in the ILP in later years. The suspicion was that their visit had been at least partially Communist-funded.

As before, in spite of such clumsy efforts at intervention by the Communist Party itself, the issue was fought out in the ILP and in the minds of its members. Those with an interest in the left-wing politics of the day who believed the adage that “the spectator sees more of the game” might have taken note of Forward’s headline on the coming ILP annual conference a few days before it began. “Will the I.L.P. Join the Communists?” it asked, with the commentator concluding that “it looks as if the I.L.P. is going to meet the usual fate of ultra Left organisations and split up into more Lefts and Rights.” Those now regretting disaffiliation would “find their way back” to the Labour Party.

That the eventual fate of the “revolutionary” ILP would be to be taken over by the CPGB seemed all too obvious to those in the party who feared such an outcome. The fact that a conference convened by Labour Monthly, which took place on 11 March 1933, not long before the ILP’s annual conference, was well attended by members of both the Communist Party and the ILP could only reinforce this belief. Later revelations about the activities of the Communist-led Affiliation Committee and the undercover role of CPGB members in the ILP simply confirmed such suspicions.

The fears of those ILPers who were alarmed at the prospect of working with the Communists began to be realized right at the start of the Derby conference during the debate on the NAC report. The debate focused on the stance that the party should adopt towards organizations of the unemployed. Reports
gathered by the NAC from across the country revealed a very patchy pattern of support among ILPers for the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement (NUWM), a pattern that was attributed to the “sectarian” and “partisan” tactics of the Communists. A resolution recognizing the Communist-led body as “the only national body of the unemployed” was moved by the London Division. This was accepted after an amendment pledging support for “all organisations” working for the unemployed was lost by 65 to 100. During the debate, Berriman from the Bristol branch put forward the case for the National Federation of Unemployed Workers, while Murry objected that the NUWM “was controlled by the C.P.”

This debate was followed by a motion to “approach the Secretariat of the Communist International with a view to ascertaining in what way the I.L.P. may assist in the work of the International.” Moved by Warbey, with Gaster supporting it, the motion generated opposition from the Bootle, Edinburgh, and Sheffield branches—and not least from the NAC. Opposing it for the NAC, Paton maintained that “the failure of the Comintern had been even more spectacular and colossal” than that of the Labour and Socialist International. He claimed that in several cases, the “Left” parties associated with the ILP had larger memberships than the Communist parties of those countries. The NAC wanted an “all-inclusive International which must be formed from constituents of both the present Internationals.” Nevertheless, in spite of the NAC’s opposition, the motion was narrowly passed by 83 to 79.

The debate on cooperation with the Communist Party was concluded in a “private session,” which excluded the press and everyone who was not a delegate, indicating how sensitive and potentially divisive the issue was. Only the final—amended—NAC proposals were reported. It was confirmed that “further co-operation” with the Communists was desirable for resisting fascism, defending the Soviet Union, and opposing capitalist attacks at home and abroad. The ILP would continue to seek a united international. Cooperation should be on the basis that “the co-operating parties will refrain from intersectional attacks in the united action campaign.”

The NAC proposals, now adopted by the conference, went on to comment on the use by the CPGB of the word “strikes” in its suggested program for cooperation. The ILP did not believe in advocating strikes indiscriminately “but only where there is a prospect of such action being effective.” Also, in the ILP’s view, “the agitational method of ‘demonstrations’ should not be carried to the extent that familiarity with them destroys their effect,” nor should they be “used ineffectively or needlessly to expose the demonstrators to police attack.”
After the Conference: Trying to Shape a Revolutionary Policy

The ambiguities of the positions adopted by the ILP at the Derby conference are to some extent evident in the *New Leader*’s front-page article headlined “How Workers Can Unite,” appearing soon after the conference. While at a national level, only the ILP and the CPGB were cooperating, the writer claimed that a wider “united front” was being formed in many areas.41

Meanwhile, on the NAC, Elijah Sandham was unsuccessfully pressing for divisional councils to report on RPC activities at the next NAC meeting.42 From the sidelines, *Forward* saw the ILP now “divided into two almost equal sections”: one supported the “Moscow International” and the other was “hesitating to throw over completely the traditional theories and practices of British Socialism.” The “vague declarations” of the leaders of the party, Maxton and Brockway, made it difficult to know where they stood, the writer concluded.43

Just how difficult the ILP was already finding its attempts to cooperate with the Communists was already evident. At the beginning of the year, the *New Leader* had scorned “the pitiful futility of the Communist Party leadership of the Hunger March to London” and maintained that Communist sectarianism had “destroyed the possibilities of effective organisation.”44 In early February, B. Grooms, a member of the Stapleford-Sandiacre ILP branch, spanning the border between Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, wrote to the Leader complaining that at a Communist meeting in Stapleford, Harry Pollitt, the CPGB’s general secretary, had “implied” that the ILP had failed to assist striking cotton workers and the recent hunger march, among other similar damaging accusations.45 A debate between Pollitt and C. A. Smith, speaking for the ILP, took place in Stapleford in the spring. “The red-shirted Guild of Youth were vividly in evidence,” reported the *New Leader*, going on to say that Pollitt had announced that his party would “wage a merciless war on the conception that there can be two parties” committed to revolutionary socialism. For his part, Smith insisted that the ILP was “the most democratic political party in the country in the way in which its policy is formulated, as well as in the way its finance is raised.” The implication that the CPGB was not democratic in either respect was very clear.46

Concerns about the RPC also continued. The same issue of the *Leader* carried a letter from J. Allen Skinner under the titled “Is the R.P.C. a Danger?” Skinner, who had resigned as chair of the London Division, asserted that an RPC conference prior to the London divisional meeting had agreed on the constitutional proposals that were then “carried without a single amendment” at the subsequent ILP divisional meeting. The divisional council had become “a redundancy.”47 But at a NAC meeting the following week, only Sandham dissented from “no action” in response to a letter from another member protesting...
against “the operations of the R.P.C.” Maxton deplored what seemed to him to be “the development of rival factions.”

The NAC also discussed cooperation with the CPGB. Sandham was again alone in proposing that the council dissociate itself from the report of the representatives negotiating with the Communists. Both Jennie Lee and Campbell Stephen expressed worries about the danger of being “absorbed.” Paton and Jowett also voiced concerns, while Sandham called for negotiations to be discontinued.

Responding to questions from readers soon thereafter, Brockway, as editor of the New Leader, tried to clarify ILP policy. Revolution meant “fundamental change” from capitalism to socialism. The party had not “thrown over Parliamentarism” but doubted whether a parliamentary majority was enough to avoid revolution, since the ruling class was likely to turn away from democracy if faced with socialism. Fascism was a real danger, but the ILP did not favour physical force insurrection.

If this was meant to calm the internal conflicts, it failed. The Leader soon published a piece headlined “The R.P.C. a Danger? Should Sections Within the I.L.P. Be Tolerated?” This featured three letters. Skinner dismissed Maxton and Brockway’s defence of “general discussion” as “a wilful blinding of one’s eyes.” He charged that the RPC’s avowed aim was to capture all the divisional machinery and achieve a “United Communist Party.” Skinner was supported by Fred Howard, whose letter attacked the “subversive pseudo-Communist tactics” of the RPC, which, he maintained, was “not an honest organisation” but a “parasitical group.” The third letter, from Cullen, defended the RPC as an organization that would “continue to be a danger to tradition and convention,” which clearly did nothing to reassure members who were uneasy about the RPC’s activities.

This discussion in the Leader was followed later that month by an exchange between Jowett and Maxton. The former’s article, explicitly repudiating any idea of violence, was headed “Towards Revolution, Parliament Must Be the Instrument.” He again dismissed the notion of workers’ councils composed of an “intermixture of unrelated and discordant bodies.” Maxton’s reply reiterated that Parliament was not being rejected, but it was “only a small part of the fight.” The essential task, he concluded, was to build workers’ councils. “I have pushed the United Front proposals,” he added.

The day after Maxton’s article appeared, the NAC met. Sandham insisted that branches had complete autonomy: if they did not carry out united front activities, the divisional council could not make them. A united front including Labour was fine; one with only the CPGB was “all wrong.” On this, the Lancashire Divisional Council executive was unanimous, he said. He attributed
a fall in membership in the division—from 9,000 to under 2,000—to the
United Front policy.53

Sandham was not alone on the NAC in questioning that policy. Jennie Lee
was, as Cohen says, a “vocal advocate of the new revolutionary policy.”54 But
she agreed that continuing to pursue a united front with the Communist Party
alone was “harmful” and that too much attention was being given by the ILP
to the Communists. In mining areas in Scotland, she argued, the policy had
done the ILP infinitely more harm than disaffiliation had. It had “killed some
of the branches and halved the membership in others. This was not a loss of
ineffective members but of real revolutionary fighters.” Where there was no
tradition of Communist activity, she thought a united front was possible, but
where the CPGB had been active, the long-standing bitterness and antipathy
made it impossible. In such areas, the combination of the ILP and the Com-
munist Party was “a weaker thing than the I.L.P. alone.”55

Stephen added that the general view from reports from the localities was
that the United Front policy had gained nothing for the ILP but had led
to membership losses. While Gaster insisted that the NAC could not vary
conference decisions, Percy Williams, the Yorkshire representative, said that
it should act when a policy was found to be “disastrous” and that the partici-
pation in the united front should be confined to “concrete proposals.” Five
different motions were then debated at some length, culminating in the one
moved by Smith, calling for the United Front policy to be continued “in
conformity with the decisions to be reached on general policy,” being passed
by 7 votes to 3.56

Much of the final day of the NAC meeting was devoted to a long discus-
sion of “general policy,” which again revealed deep divisions. C. A. Smith
wanted a “Marxist view of the class struggle and the State”: the real fight
was “not so much against Capitalism as against the State,” he maintained.
The ILP needed to occupy key positions in all parts of the working-class
movement and to turn its attention to the civil service, the armed forces, the
docks, and munitions works. Socialism could not be won by industrial force
alone: there would be a “final determination by physical struggle.” Meanwhile,
more power should be concentrated in the ILP’s executive committee, with
“no nonsense about local autonomy.” They should “organise the branches on
a semi-military basis.” For her part, Jennie Lee was looking forward to “the
formation of a new revolutionary party.” The ILP could make a contribution
to that goal, but she believed that the CPGB-like methods of Gaster and his
associates were “really only possible for a party that is heavily subsidised
and not dependent on the resources of its own members.” However, she did agree
that parliamentary activities should be “secondary.”57
Gaster insisted that the ILP needed “a sound theoretical basis,” but his view of the membership did not suggest much confidence that this might be achieved. He urged the NAC to face the fact that the ILP “was largely composed of second-rate brains and a large percentage of its members were incapable of consecutive and logical thought.” For Sandham, the entire discussion had been “poisoned” by the idea of reliance on force. Stephen, citing the failure of “the anti-parliamentary party led by Guy Aldred,” believed that the weakness of the ILP was that it was widely perceived as an “insurrectionist” party—a view encouraged by Labour. For him, the goal should be to capture Parliament and turn it into a workers’ council. McGovern thought that “their activities must centre round Parliament,” a view shared by Paton.58

As usual, Maxton and Brockway attempted to play a peacemaking role, which carried the very considerable danger of satisfying no one on any side. ILPers were “idealists,” said Maxton, and “for such people crudities such as war, even class-war, were repellent.” The workers’ council issue should not be allowed to “get on top of the Party” and sow strife, he argued. Brockway stressed that despite claims to the contrary there was considerable agreement within the party. He therefore supported the idea, put forward at the beginning of the discussion, of setting up a subcommittee to produce an “agreed statement” on ILP policy. Other NAC members might submit “documents on the matters arising” to the subcommittee, which would be made up of Brockway, Paton, Williams, Garton, and Gaster. When such a resolution was passed, Sandham immediately asked for his dissent to be recorded.59

With opinions so divided among members of the NAC, there was little sign of any agreement on policy among the wider membership in the pages of the New Leader. At the end of June, a few days after the NAC meeting, letters to the paper debated the question “Should the R.P.C. continue?” Skinner charged the RPC with disloyalty to the ILP, claiming that the great majority of its adherents gave “their first organisational loyalty to the R.P.C.” Richard Rees, now an active ILPer in the London Division, maintained that in the capital, the movement had always been too much influenced by “intellectual theoreticians.” From the other side of the argument, T. K. Frienensen, of Sheffield, maintained that Skinner and “the Right Wing democrats” were simply “disgruntled” about the results of the annual conference.60

“A Clear Lead”: The NAC Policy Statement

As Cohen says, the decisions made at the Derby conference “did not resolve the central ideological disputes within the ILP.”61 Indeed, if anything, it intensified them. The RPC had moved the party only some way towards what it regarded as a revolutionary policy. Its opponents, with their own conceptions of what
should constitute such a policy, were determined to reverse the resolutions adopted at the conference. To complicate matters further, the positions put forward were often less than crystal clear. Could the newly established policy subcommittee, or the leadership generally, arrive at a clear statement of a policy that would suffice to restore unity to the ILP? The subcommittee’s deliberations would demonstrate just how difficult that would be.

The first meeting of the Subcommittee on General Policy took place at the very beginning of July. As originally proposed, its members were Brockway, Paton, Williams, Garton, and Gaster. It was agreed that, while the ILP’s position must be sufficiently flexible to cope with other possibilities, the most “probable developments” included the decline of British capitalism with a lowering of the “standards of life.” In such circumstances, the “capitalist class” would abandon democracy for fascism. Complications might include war against Russia triggered by the threat posed by that country’s “example of socialist construction,” the clash of imperialisms in the Far East, or the “struggles of subject peoples,” especially in India.

The subcommittee concluded that parliamentary institutions were “an instrument of capitalist domination” and that parliamentary activities must be linked to a “united working class organisation” that would be prepared to act against “capitalist dictatorship and war” in a revolutionary crisis. These conclusions were described as “tentative” and were to be the basis for “private discussion”: NAC members could express their own views and, if necessary, submit supplementary reports, but meeting minutes would be circulated only to subcommittee members. Meanwhile, Garton, Brockway, and Williams, who appeared to be in near agreement on both the constitution and the role of workers’ councils, should seek to produce a joint statement prior to the next meeting.

In the initial draft of its report to the NAC, the subcommittee declared “the most important task of the Socialist Movement” to be the creation of “a united working-class organisation.” Paton, however, submitted a supplementary report, in which he registered his “complete opposition” to this draft, including the “relegation of Parliamentary activities” to a subordinate role. In addition, Paton wrote a longer piece, titled simply “Party Policy,” in which he outlined his own views on the subject. In it, he commented that, although the ILP was united in its “desire for revolutionary socialism,” judging by the various interpretations of decisions made at the 1933 annual conference, there were “at least half-a-dozen definitions of what that means.”

As if to illustrate Paton’s point, Brockway submitted his own statement on party policy. He dismissed the possibility of achieving socialism by the “gradual transformation of Capitalism” and presented the gaining of parliamentary
seats as “an incidental part of our general socialist agitation and organisation.” Furthermore, he wanted to reverse a decision made at the Derby conference to the effect that ILP members in trade unions should not pay the political levy—which normally went to the Labour Party. He also argued that, as a general rule, workers’ councils should not be set up in areas where they would rival existing trades councils, which were already well-established in many localities and served to represent trade union branches in the area.66

Brockway was equivocal on relations with the Communists. Although cooperation with the CPGB was “natural” because both parties had “a revolutionary outlook,” he urged caution. “Two months ago,” he pointed out, “the British C.P. changed its policy, and even, apparently, its temper, over one week-end. Sudden conversions of that kind are not reliable.” Moreover, this reversal of CPGB policy had been “artificially imposed from outside.” While the ILP did want to cooperate with the Comintern, he argued, it would not accept “subservience.”67

The Subcommittee on General Policy met again, roughly three weeks later. The minutes cover a single page and list only three items. Brockway presented a “revised draft” of the report which reflected discussions between Brockway and Garton that had taken place between the meetings. After “full consideration,” the subcommittee agreed to submit the revised draft to the NAC. According to the minutes, Williams was to be asked whether he agreed with their conclusions. In the meantime, Paton, who was “opposed to the basic assumptions of the document,” and Gaster, who registered his “dissent from several sections,” were asked to submit minority reports to the NAC.68 When the NAC met two weeks later, it was faced with resolutions against the RPC from six ILP branches. Once the NAC turned to the subcommittee report, there was unanimous agreement on the recommendation to reverse the political levy decision—but on very little else. Gaster’s minority report viewed the policy statement as still too favourable to parliamentary action: in his view, the main job of the ILP was to “initiate Workers’ Council work outside Parliament.” The party should pursue “one line rather than half-a-dozen,” he argued, and it should also seek “daily co-operation with the C.P. and other revolutionary elements with a view to the definite formation of united leadership of the mass movement (finding ultimate expression in Workers’ Councils) in a united revolutionary party.” There must be no “cutting down” of the Derby conference decisions, Gaster concluded.69

For his part, Paton insisted that he stood by the ILP’s rejection of reformism and was committed to “an absolutely revolutionary outlook and policy.” However, many of the “frothy utterances” of the “majority” report, as the report drafted by Garton and Brockway had come to be called, were “mere romantic posturing and mock heroics from people who lived in a dream world of
illusions.” While it was totally impracticable to build up a mass movement divorced from existing organizations, he argued, the alliance with the CPGB was “disastrous.” Instead, the ILP should seek to “fill the place the Communist Party had never been able to occupy by becoming the first really revolutionary party in Great Britain, an achievement which would mean the extinction of the Communist Party.” Not only should cooperation with the Communists be ended, Paton reiterated, but the ILP should “proceed to open attack on their disruptive influence.”

Percy Williams, E. B. James, and Campbell Stephen supported Paton, while C. A. Smith declared himself “appalled” that matters decided at the annual conference were being regarded as “open questions.” The conference had decided that parliamentary activities were “ancillary,” Smith said, but members of the NAC were going against the ILP’s policy and “putting forward Parliament as the main instrument.” They were “ridiculing” workers’ councils and trying to get out of the agreement with the CPGB. Smith claimed that membership had held up better in areas where cooperation with the Communists was most “enthusiastically” carried out, and he threatened to resign from the NAC and force a by-election for his replacement.

It was left to Garton to defend what was still called the majority report. It had put forward an outline of “comprehensive policy,” of which the United Front policy was “only an incidental part,” he insisted. The subcommittee agreed, on Gaster’s suggestion, to take the majority report as the motion and vote on the minority reports as amendments. Although Elijah Sandham insisted that a vote should first be taken on whether the “association with the Communist Party should be maintained,” he was alone in supporting this idea, presumably because Paton, as an ILP official, had no vote. A motion to accept Paton’s minority report was then lost by a vote of 10 to 5, Gaster’s was rejected by 14 to 1, and the majority report was carried by 10 to 5, with Sandham, Jowett, Stephen, Williams, and James in the minority. Gaster than asked for his dissent on the section “The Place of Parliament” to be recorded.

It now fell to the New Leader to report to the membership the results of the NAC’s deliberations, which it did on 11 August. According to the paper, the statement released by the NAC provided a “clear lead.” Cooperation with the CPGB was to be regarded as the first step in realizing a real unity of working class forces for revolutionary socialist purposes.” On the contentious issue of workers’ councils, the statement read:

Workers’ Councils should be formed only when the organisations prepared to co-operate represent the power of effective working-class action in the locality. The Councils should represent not only such existing organisations as are prepared to co-operate (Trade Union branches,
Co-operative organisations, the I.L.P., the C.P., N.U.W.M. etc.) but even more importantly, factory committees, street and estate committees which definitely represent the workers where they are employed and live.

As immediately became evident, if this was a clear lead, it was not one that all members were prepared to follow. The same New Leader issue announced that Paton was resigning because of a “difference on policy” and that, in December, Brockway would take his place as secretary, with Maxton again becoming party chairman.73

Maxton and Brockway would continue to do their best to reconcile the irreconcilable. In a pamphlet titled A Clear Lead, they took a wary position on the United Front policy, stressing crucial differences with the CPGB:

The temper of the two parties is different. The tactics are different. The I.L.P. believes in democratic control by the party membership. Its members would never be willing to obey orders, from either a national or an international executive, which they had no voice in determining.

Under present conditions the amalgamation of the I.L.P. and the Communist Party is impossible. The Communist Party is not prepared to break from the rigid organisational and financial control of Moscow.74

They confirmed, however, that where cooperation was possible, the I.L.P. would pursue it. Even before this declaration, however, it had become clear that the I.L.P. stronghold of Lancashire was not—for the most part—willing to go along with even this qualified version of a united front.