PART IV

Unity Remains Elusive
Lancashire Revolts
Continuing Conflict over the United Front

At the end of July 1932, at Bradford, the ILP made the momentous decision to leave the Labour Party in order to pursue a new revolutionary policy. In the year following that decision, it swiftly became apparent that party members, including the ILP’s most prominent leaders, held radically divergent views—some of them outright incompatible—as to what this policy should be. Paton’s desire to see the ILP “open attack” on the “disruptive influence” of the CPGB, with the goal of ultimately stepping into that party’s place, could hardly be reconciled with the vision of those who favoured cooperation with the Communists, with whom the ILP should join in a united front. Debates also swirled around the nature and function of workers’ councils and the place of parliament and electoral activities under this new, more radical dispensation. Although the ILP had always prided itself on being more decentralized and democratic than most political organizations, in the face of internal discord, it fell to the NAC to provide the party with a clear sense of direction—provided, of course, that it could arrive at some measure of consensus itself.

The Lancashire Revolt

Among the members of the NAC, Elijah Sandham was the most outspoken and unyielding opponent of new ILP policies. As we saw in the previous chapter, despite sitting on the NAC, Sandham was a strong supporter of divisional autonomy, in keeping with the ILP’s tradition of decentralization. In April 1933, his Lancashire Division—pleading a weak financial situation—refused to contribute to the ILP’s recently established Power for Socialism Fund, which all branches were expected to support, thereby directing a proportion of divisional resources towards the party’s central operations. Sandham and his circle of associates were especially incensed by the costs associated with the ILP’s national publication, the New Leader. At the NAC meeting the following month, Sandham opposed paying the editor of the New Leader on the grounds that such work should be performed as a “voluntary service,” as was the
case with his division’s own paper, *Labour’s Northern Voice*. While Sandham’s opposition to centralized authority was doubtless grounded in principle, it also reflected his dissatisfaction with the direction in which the ILP seemed to be moving—namely, towards a closer relationship with the Communists.

Sandham was implacably hostile to the RPC, an attitude in which he was not alone. In June 1933, a *Labour’s Northern Voice* article by J. Allen Skinner—the London Division’s former representative on the NAC, whom Gaster had replaced—urged the ILP to take the necessary “steps to safeguard the Party.” Despite what Brockway and the NAC seemed to believe, Skinner declared, the RPC was not some sort of discussion group but “an internal caucus aiming at placing those members who are not so organised at a disadvantage in the Councils of the Party.” He suggested that, “regrettable as is the necessity,” ILP members opposed to the RPC should form their own “protective caucus.” It should have no policy other than “the purely negative aim of protecting the Party against the danger of becoming further caucus-ridden by the R.P.C.,” and it should “go out of existence as soon as the R.P.C. caucus is brought to an end and the Party reverted to the normal healthy functioning of a democratic movement.” In the following month’s edition of the paper, Richard Rees and his close associate from *The Adelphi*, John Middleton Murry, wrote in support of Skinner’s position.

These anti-RPC sentiments led to the formation of the “Unity Group,” in which both Sandham and the Lancashire Division organizer, Tom Abbott, played leading roles. By late July, *Forward* was reporting on developments within the Lancashire Division under the headline “The United Front with Communists: An I.L.P. Breakaway in Lancashire.” According to the paper, on 17 June, a circular from the Lancashire executive committee had recommended that branches withdraw from any collaboration with the Communist Party. The article went on to say that CPGB’s *Daily Worker* was devoting two or three of its columns every day to attacking Brockway, and it looked as if the Communists were now demanding that the NAC expel the Lancashire Division’s executive.

When the NAC next met, in early August, Gaster attacked Lancashire’s “disloyalty to the Party” while Sandham defended branch autonomy. After Brockway ruled that conference decisions had to be applied by the party as a whole, Sandham insisted that the party was “falling to pieces” and that his executive was struggling to cope with this situation. Three different motions were discussed, after which it was agreed to send Paton, himself now close to resignation, to the Lancashire Division to demand that the offending circular be withdrawn. A few weeks later, the *New Leader* reported that the Lancashire Divisional Council had, by a vote of 10 to 5, refused to withdraw the circular
and was insisting that united front activities were “killing our identity as a Party.” Meanwhile, in *The Adelphi*, Skinner continued his critique. Was the RPC and the urge for a revolutionary policy “revolution or romance?” he asked.7

Lancashire was supported by the Welsh Division and the Bradford, Norwich, Hutchinsontown, and Clydebank branches, the latter suggesting that “a plebiscite of the members” should be taken on the United Front policy. But many others supported taking a firm line with Lancashire, including, within that county, the Liverpool Federation, which dissociated itself from its divisional conference’s decisions and asked for the formation of a new divisional council. Only by a narrow vote had it agreed to continue to pay fees to the divisional council until a new organization was formed. When, at the September NAC meeting, the chairman ruled that the NAC could replace the Lancashire council, Campbell Stephen maintained that “no Law Court would allow such a ruling,” and Sandham supported him. Gaster’s motion of censure was carried by 8 votes to 6, while Garton’s proposal that the Northern Voice should be regarded as an “opposition organ” if it continued publishing articles “contrary to Party policy” was passed with an even smaller majority of 7 to 6.8

Meanwhile, the September 1933 issue of *Labour’s Northern Voice* was defiant. Its front page was headlined “Lancashire I.L.P. Says ‘No’ Because It Believes in a Real United Front.” Claiming that there was little support for the NAC’s policy in the division, the paper charged that the London Division had been “the consistent advocate of an alliance with the Communists,” with its representatives openly proclaiming their objective to be “the absorption of the I.L.P. in the Communist Party.” The RPC, it claimed, dominated the “vacillating” NAC. The Lancashire Division and the Voice were diametrically opposed to the CPGB’s policy of “a bloody catastrophic revolution” and did not want to be “tarred in the minds of the public with the same brush.” A key part of “Our Credo” followed the article which insisted that it was simply “traditional I.L.P. policy”:

> In this country we believe that Socialism cannot be established except by the will of the ordinary wage-workers of this country. That to establish Socialism we have to use all the organisations built up by the workers, including Parliament. That it is equally important to organise class-conscious workers at the point of production as it is to organise them at the ballot box.

If the NAC as a whole was “vacillating” in the eyes of the Voice’s editor, Jowett was clearly seen as an exception, since the same issue carried his article “Why I Disagree with the I.L.P.'s New Policy.” He was against any idea of trying to seize control without majority support and any limiting of parliamentary and municipal activity; he was also against “day-to-day” cooperation that could
involve association with the CPGB in “mutinous and purely explosive industrial and insurrectional activities.” He concluded by quoting John Middleton Murry on the “real issue” of the Derby conference: it was not a question of being “for or against the Parliamentary weapon as such, but for or against the futility with which the Parliamentary weapon has been used.”

Those who expected the Lancashire Division to fall into line after the NAC had censured it were immediately disappointed. Crisis in the ILP had been brought nearer, said Murry in The Adelphi, by the NAC policy statement that relegated Parliament to “a mere platform for propaganda,” endorsed the continuation of “the discredited ‘united front,’” and insisted on creating workers’ councils—“on paper.” Murry then appeared in the October edition of Labour’s Northern Voice. In “Our Task as Revolutionary Socialists,” he praised the previous issue of the paper for giving a lead and predicted that workers would “reject with contempt” the policy now advocated by “the disruptive element in the ILP,” which wanted them to ignore their traditional methods and organization “in favour of semi-military Workers’ Councils and go into training for a life-and-death struggle with the forces of the State.” The real task, said Murry, was to ensure that the Labour Party went into the next election with “a thorough-going Socialist policy” before it was too late. “History will not wait while our left-wing intellectuals draw up their plans for the revolution,” he warned.

The following month, the Voice carried a long letter from Arnold Higginson of Preston defending the role of Parliament and objecting to its “degradation” while demanding radical reform. But T. W. Sudlow from Blackpool could not “see where Middleton Murry’s revolution comes in” and mocked those afraid to cooperate with “those terrible people, the Communists.”

From the sidelines, Forward continued to pour scorn on the ILP. Robert Calderwood, who had been the Labour Party election agent at the Kilmarnock by-election, charged that “Kilmarnock was the first victim of Maxton’s new methods of achieving Socialism.” The ILP had helped to lose the election for Labour, he argued. He blamed Maxton personally: “Without Maxton the ILP in Scotland would not live to see another by-election.” In the same issue, John J. Fraser, the former ILP organizer for Yorkshire, explained why he had left the ILP. There had been nothing but confusion since disaffiliation, he said. He had no sympathy with violence, thought workers’ councils impracticable, and was totally opposed to dictatorship “either in a Capitalist or a Socialist State” and to a united front with the CPGB.

At the end of the year, few ILPers, whatever their views on the United Front policy and the RPC, were happy with the state of affairs in the party. The second edition of Controversy, the new internal discussion organ, addressed the situation in “The Basic Problem of the ILP To-day.” The approaching
1934 annual conference would have to face up to the party’s problems, the editorial said. The Derby conference decisions and NAC statement had not solved the party’s problems. While the ILP had broken with “the old reformist and Social-Democratic basis,” opponents of the “present revolutionary policy” would try to reverse the Derby decisions.14

Meanwhile, the crisis in the Lancashire ILP showed no signs of abating. The writer of a New Leader report in February 1934 on the division’s recent council meeting detected the existence in the divisional council of two distinct forces—one supporting the NAC, the other “rejecting root and branch its interpretation of party policy on co-operation with the CPGB, workers’ councils and the relegation of Parliamentary activities to a secondary place in the struggle for power.” The latter group significantly outnumbered the former. At the Lancashire meeting, a motion calling for ILP policy to revert “in every detail prior to Derby” was passed by 29 to 16, and another one insisting that socialism “must be presented as a constitutional end” was adopted by 29 to 14. Sandham’s report on the NAC meeting was accepted by 30 to 12, and its condemnation of divisional officers rejected by 34 to 9.15

Much of the February edition of Labour’s Northern Voice was, predictably, devoted to the triumph of the Lancashire majority. “Lancashire Stands Firm,” proclaimed its front page. The article warned that the “philosophy of violence of the Communist Party” had “bored its ruinous way into the I.L.P.” and sought to destroy the only socialist force that stood between the CPGB and the reformism of the Labour Party. But in Lancashire, “the wreckers” — the RPC and other supporters of unity with the Communists and CPGB — had failed. Lancashire wanted a “real revolutionary policy” that was “acceptable to the majority of the British people.” Socialism must be presented as “a constitutional end to be sought by constitutional means,” and a socialist government would have to make every effort constitutionally available to it against any “anti-democratic and unconstitutional opposition by the King, the House of Lords, or by capitalists, or by financial revolutionaries.”16

The editor of the Voice jokingly proposed putting out a pamphlet with the title “How Not to Do It,” to be offered at a reduced price to RPC branches. He looked forward to another to be published after the York conference, to be called “How Lancashire Did It,” with, he hoped, a “congratulatory foreword by Maxton and Brockway and a minority foreword by Comrade Jack Gaster.”17

Lancashire was not entirely alone in its opposition to the new policy. At the beginning of the year, the NAC had decided to conduct a survey of members on the United Front. The questionnaire was drawn up by Brockway and Campbell Stephen.18 The results revealed that Yorkshire, East Anglia, and Wales had majorities of respondents opposed to continuing cooperation with
the Communists. In addition, surprisingly, thirteen London branches showed majorities opposing it, though the individual responses from the London Division showed a narrow majority of 96 to 92 for the United Front policy. Some went further. The Stapleford-Sandiacre and New Ferry branches wanted “disciplinary action against the R.P.C.”

For its part, Labour’s Northern Voice looked forward with optimism to the coming ILP conference. The NAC had been “insulted and smacked enough by the Communist Party to have learned, what everyone else knows, that ‘united front’ with the C.P. means absorption.” It was hoped that the party would “tread anew the democratic Socialist path.”

The York Conference: Disagreement, Division, and Defections

As had been the case the year before, few in the ILP were satisfied with the outcome of the 1934 annual conference. That it would be extremely divisive had long been clear. While the Sheffield branch had submitted a motion supporting cooperation with the Communist Party Murry’s East Anglian Division declared both the workers’ council policy and association with the Communists “disastrous.” It demanded instead a “real” united front of workers’ organizations rather than “the pretence that goes by the name of the ‘United Front.’” The Norwich branch argued that in a country with a working-class majority, socialism could only be based on the “enlightened democratic consent of the majority of people” and that it was essential not only to propagate “Collectivism”—which fascists and Nazis also did—but “Socialism as an ethically superior social system.” In contrast, the motion from the London and Southern Counties Divisional Council demanded that the party concentrate on “the economic and industrial struggle.” Workers’ support could not be secured by “idealistic and utopian propaganda,” the council maintained.

The NAC report to the conference noted that the Lancashire Division had opposed the policy adopted by the previous year’s conference. It recognized the right to try changing the policy, but the division had encouraged branches to refuse to carry out the policy decided upon at the national conference, and it had used “its organ the ‘Northern Voice’ publicly to attack the policy of the Party.”

The policy statement adopted by the York conference was alarming for those wanting to revert to pre-Derby positions, while at the same time being far too cautious and lukewarm from the point of view of RPC supporters. The ILP, the statement said, would “associate with the Communist International in all efforts which, in the view of the I.L.P., further the revolutionary struggle of the workers.” The goal of seeking a united socialist-communist international was reaffirmed, as was the United Front—though on a significantly limited basis:
“After surveying the results of co-operation with the Communist Party over the last year,” the NAC now recommended that “the national co-operation of the two parties be based on specific objects as agreed upon by the representatives of the two parties from time to time.” While the ILP looked forward to the ultimate creation of a single revolutionary party, said the statement, the “fact must be faced . . . that in other areas, co-operation with the Communist Party has tended to estrange sections of the ‘official movement.’”

As the New Leader reported, Sandham was successful in defeating a particular clause in a motion, a clause that he attributed to a “London complex” that sought, he maintained, to turn the ILP into “an insurrectionary organisation.” The rejected clause had called for the planning of party work “during a period of illegality.” The ILP paper commented, “Evidently a majority of the Conference was convinced of the tactical error of including references to illegal work.” This was not an interpretation of the decision that Sandham would have welcomed or accepted.

On the advice of the NAC, a London Division motion that called for “real democracy” via workers’ councils and insisted that “a Parliamentary representative must be drawn from the working-class struggle in the locality” was defeated by 85 to 66. This was after Brockway had argued that it “subordinated Parliament to a greater degree than was desirable.” But the attempt by Murry’s Norwich branch to commit the party to the idea that “constitutionalism was the only real line of activity for a revolutionary party in this country” was also rejected by 101 to 61. A similar move by the Manchester City branch to adopt a “real revolutionary policy” that was “constitutionalist” suffered the same fate.

If the outcome of the conference was disappointing to the opponents of the United Front and workers’ councils, it was a great deal less than a success from the RPC point of view. The London R.P.C. Bulletin rejected the Leader’s claim that the York conference had “cleared up” ILP policy and “reaffirmed the revolutionary policy adopted at Derby. There was no plan of action and not even a recognition that revolution involved a struggle.”

Just how divided the ILP had become, even at the level of its national leadership is evident from the continuing controversy after the 1934 conference. Almost all the energy of the party seemed to be absorbed in the internal conflict. Reaching any agreement on what constituted the revolutionary policy that the disaffiliated ILP was committed to pursuing seemed less and less achievable.

One campaign in which Gaster had been successful was in securing Sandham’s removal from the list of ILP parliamentary candidates by a vote of 88 to 71. He had attempted this earlier at the January NAC, arguing that since candidates were required to accept party policy “in general,” Sandham’s opposition to the August statement disqualified him. At the NAC meeting on the final day of
the conference, Maxton tried to conciliate with suggestions that the NAC might recommend restoring Sandham to the list “if Lancashire would now co-operate wholeheartedly.” He did not want, he said, to “drive out Lancashire.”

Sandham agreed on the basis that “the York Conference had reversed the decision of the Derby Conference on C.P. co-operation and that had been the mainspring of the difficulty in Lancashire.” This was the proverbial red rag to a bull. Gaster denied that the conference had “reversed” Derby policy and insisted that Lancashire must show that it was “in line with revolutionary policy and not reformism.”

The confident and jocular tone of the pre-York Labour’s Northern Voice had now gone. “Lancashire Under the Hammer! The Last Round-Up?” it asked, focusing on the rejection of Sandham as candidate for the Liverpool constituency of Kirkdale, which he had represented as MP between 1929 and 1931. “Here was a chance to down Sandham, and up rose the bold Gaster, moving that his name be deleted from the list. Away with him!” Maxton, the writer went on, had played a Pilate-like role, insisting that “Sandham was a just and honourable man and had done no constitutional wrong.” This made no difference. “Vengeance was theirs,” concluded the article, “and off the list goes Sandham’s name, and at the same time is recorded one of the most discreditable episodes in the history of the I.L.P.” Some might well have recalled the circumstances of Wallhead’s resignation the previous year.

By the middle of April 1934, the New Leader was reporting further “dissension” in Lancashire in the form of a Unity Group meeting at which the topic of discussion was—rather ironically, in view of its name—the formation of an Independent Socialist Party. Others advocated joining the Socialist League as an alternative. The new National Executive Committee, elected at the York conference, was sufficiently alarmed to send Campbell Stephen to talk to the Lancashire ILP. He and John McGovern met the divisional council on 12 May. Their report to the Inner Executive—another innovation of the recent conference, examined later in this chapter—on 26 April showed that they still hoped to keep the dissident Lancashire members on board. Demands from the Wigan branch and the Liverpool Federation for official recognition of a recent conference of “revolutionary” ILPers was rejected. They were told that “the N.A.C. was negotiating with the Divisional Council with a view to securing that national policy is applied in the Division.” But it was too late. The divisional organizer, Tom Abbott, who had already resigned from the ILP, called a conference on 13 May, the day after Campbell Stephen and McGovern’s visit. It was there that the Independent Socialist Party (ISP) was founded.

Abbott’s letter of resignation had already appeared in full in Forward, headlined “Veteran Lancashire Organiser Leaves I.L.P.” Abbott claimed that “the
York conference had taken away every bit of autonomous freedom which members and branches have enjoyed since the Party came to life in 1893.” Workers’ councils would “sabotage the Trade Unions.” For him, York seemed to have been the next step in allowing the absorption of the ILP into the CPGB. This was the result, he said, of tolerance of the RPC at its inception by the national leadership. Now, it dominated “the central control and the new Executive.” The RPC, almost equally dissatisfied with the results of the York conference, drew some comfort from noting that the “extreme Right element” had been “defeated so decidedly that the majority of it has retreated from the struggle.”

For Abbott and others—including Murry, who also left the ILP at this point—the decisions made at York were clear evidence of an RPC conspiracy to deliver the ILP membership to the Communists. But this is far from how it seemed to the supposed head conspirator. “John Middleton Murry—you need not have resigned!” began Gaster’s article “On Leadership,” published in the June edition of Controversy. “Sitting on the fence,” he went on, “may be an uncomfortable position for ordinary people like you and me: it is the normal position of the professional politician.” Murry “need not have feared that the wild revolutionaries of London” would dominate the ILP. The result of York had not been a triumph for the advocates of a revolutionary policy. On the contrary, the party was “left bitterly disillusioned with the failure to clarify anything, realising that that failure was due to the timidity and cowardice of the platform.”

The July–August edition of Controversy featured responses to Gaster. The lead piece was by George Johnson, who represented East Anglia on the NAC. He agreed with Gaster’s “long wail” to the limited extent that ILP policy had been left in mid-air. Even a “harmless resolution” from Norwich, which was only a plea that “the ethical side of our propaganda should not be neglected,” had been rejected.

It is certainly true to say that we are sick and tired of wrangling with the C.I. [Communist International], and I am certain that there is a real majority of us who are sick of our futile association with the C.P. and all that it entails. We are sick of the “high falutin” on Internationals and consider it would be more profitable to leave them entirely alone for some time.

The break with the Labour Party had not been primarily about the standing orders issue, Johnson maintained. Rather, it was “the culmination of a long dispute on the difference between promise and performance.” There was no question of a new policy. Johnson defended the “Parliamentary and Trade
Union tradition” as something “in the blood and bones of the British working man.” He wanted the ILP to “repudiate all the half-baked Communist and Syndicalist notions that go by the name of the new policy” and to return to the policies of the immediate post-disaffiliation period. The same edition of Controversy also carried Aplin’s article “The ‘Infantile Disorder’ in the I.L.P.”

Meanwhile, in June, Labour’s Northern Voice, which was to align itself with the ISP, published a long letter from the former ILP secretary, John Paton, in which he expressed regret about the opportunity lost by the ILP after disaffiliation. Not only should the party have rejected the “pseudo-revolutionary tactics” of the CPGB, but it should have mounted a “consistent and informed attack” on it. Instead, it had “succumbed to the fatal lure of revolutionary romanticism and become a pale imitation of the discredited Communist Party.” In the same issue, an editorial on the basis of the founding principles of the ISP declared that the new party would represent “not merely ‘collectivism’ as an economic system, but Socialism as an ethically superior social system.”

The following month’s edition included the full text of Elijah Sandham’s letter of resignation. After twenty-six years of membership in the ILP, he specifically addressed Maxton in an open letter: “My friends have been defeated . . . by the unexpected fact that the leadership of the party, yourself especially, have been on the side of the Communistically-minded elements whose object has been to so identify the I.L.P. with the Communist Party that the I.L.P. will be rendered redundant.” Sandham’s letter was applauded by Katharine Bruce Glasier in her regular Voice column. “Let us Socialists cease to apologise for believing in democracy,” she urged.

Remaining opponents of the United Front would not have been reassured by what the ILP’s executive called the “disruptive tactics” of the Communists in inviting ILP divisions and branches to send fraternal delegates to the coming Comintern conference while not extending that invitation to the national ILP. The NAC would have been glad to send a “fraternal delegate,” but its members believed that since they had been “deliberately excluded,” it was not in the party’s interest that other sections of the ILP should attend. The view taken in the New Leader was optimistic—outwardly, at least—about the losses of members to the new ISP. “There is no doubt,” he wrote, “that within a short time the I.L.P. in Lancashire will be in a stronger position to do effective work for Socialism than it has been for many years.”

More than any other factor, it was the United Front policy that had caused defections from the ILP in 1934. Yet for those who favoured such cooperation, the prospects by the end of the year were still far from encouraging. At the NAC meeting in November, Brockway reported that he had indicated in discussions with the CPGB that “an extension of joint action would be difficult if the
C.P. continued to disintegrate the I.L.P. from within by contacts acting on its behalf.”44 This theme was repeated in more detail in the report, the following month, of a meeting of the I.L.P.’s Inner Executive with Communist representatives. Brockway referred to the statement by Harry Pollitt, the CPGB general secretary, that his party had refused applications for membership “and advised applicants to remain inside the I.L.P. with a view to securing the affiliation of the I.L.P. to the Communist International and the unification of the two parties.” From the I.L.P. side, this seemed anything but innocent, as the minutes of the meeting make clear: “Brockway said it was legitimate for a loyal member of the I.L.P. to advocate this policy within the Party, but when an I.L.P. member applied for membership of the Communist party it showed that his real loyalty was to the C.P. and he only remained in the I.L.P. to carry out C.P. purposes. The I.L.P. could not permit this tactic.” For his part, Pollitt claimed that there were no organized Communist factions in the I.L.P.45

Another factor that was to increase the alienation between the I.L.P. and the CPGB had made its appearance in 1934. The I.L.P. was being caught up in the Stalin versus Trotsky conflict. In June, Gaster alerted the NAC to a statement made by former members of the Communist League, a Trotskyist organization, that had appeared in Controversy.46 The RPC’s own Bulletin warned of the League “attempting to use the I.L.P. as a medium for propaganda in favour of a Fourth International.”47 Then, at the December meeting with the CPGB, Pollitt referred to the “Marxist Group” claiming, not without foundation, that “these Trotskyists were organised as a group within the I.L.P. to oppose any united action with the Communist Party.” Maxton responded by pointing out that “the rules of the I.L.P. permitted groups within the party to advocate particular policies,” adding that “the Marxist Group had been preceded by the Revolutionary Policy Committee which advocated affiliation to the Communist International and the objective of the unification of the I.L.P. and the C.P.”48 A few months later, following the 1935 annual conference, Brockway claimed that the conference had proved that the vast majority of the I.L.P. accepted the “‘Revolutionary Socialist’ line, and only fractions the ‘Communist’ and ‘Trotsky’ lines.”49 However, both Communists and Trotskyists would continue to feature in the ideological struggles within the I.L.P. in the mid-1930s.

The Move to “Democratic Centralism”

One feature of the I.L.P. since its earliest days had been its maintenance of a strong form of internal democracy. This can be seen as a weakness. Dowse, for instance, identifies a critical problem in the I.L.P. as being “the almost complete lack of political discipline in the party.” But it was also a source of strength in
maintaining the party’s independence and commitment to a distinctive form of democratic socialism. This went back, as Dowse says, to the decision, at the time the ILP was founded, to establish a central body—the National Administrative Council—with relatively weak executive powers.50

The decentralized approach was confirmed towards the end of the First World War. In defining the duties of the NAC, the 1918 conference resolved that the council should not “initiate any new departure or policy between Conferences without first obtaining the sanction of the majority of branches.”51 In 1920, it was established that, “subject to the general constitution of the Party, each Branch shall be perfectly autonomous.”52 By this time, the party was operating with a smaller executive committee drawn from the NAC. Then, in 1924, delegates were told that “the N.A.C. decided at their first meeting to abolish the Executive Committee and to meet more frequently itself.”53

A decade later, those wishing to promote a revolutionary policy and transform the ILP into a real revolutionary party believed that the commitment to decentralization and branch autonomy to be yet another symptom of what was wrong with the party. At least in principle, they were successful in introducing a form of Leninist “democratic centralism.”54 In early 1934, the NAC agreed, by 7 votes to 4, to propose changes designed to improve efficiency and to create “a real leadership for the party.” This was to be achieved by re-establishing an Executive Committee, as well as by setting up an even smaller group, which came to be known as the Inner Executive, with the power to make emergency decisions. The changes were proposed with the possibility in mind that the party might have to function underground, as an illegal body, after an authoritarian government suppressed dissent.55 At the York conference that April, it was agreed that the new Executive Committee should meet at least once every six weeks and the full NAC not less than once every twelve weeks. Changes to rules were no longer to be solely the prerogative of the annual conference. If two-thirds of the NAC’s members supported a proposal, the council could now make a change unless either one-third of the branches or two-thirds of the divisions objected within two months of its circulation.56

Alarm bells rang instantly, especially for those already disenchanted with the direction in which the party seemed to be travelling. Looking forward to the soon-to-be-inaugurated Independent Socialist Party, J. T. Abbott, the former Lancashire Division organizer, cited, in his letter of resignation, what he saw as the crushing of autonomy: “The Dictatorship is now in possession of what I think will prove a corpse, but its spirit and intention, to my mind, is by implication the desire to dictate through a political party to the whole community.”57

Following the 1934 conference, the New Leader changed in both appearance and substance. It adopted a tabloid format and attempted to become a simple
source of propaganda for agreed ILP policy. It would no longer feature internal debates; that function would be confined to the ILP’s “internal” organ, Controverts. Elijah Sandham objected strongly to the changes in the Leader. “No controversy is allowed in the New Leader in case the workers hear something which is not fit for their ears,” he wrote. “Everything in the party has to be designed by the select few supermen at the head of affairs, then told in simple language to the humble rank and file.” Sandham had hesitated to join the ISP—though once he did so, he was elected as its chairman by the first of its annual conventions. For him, the direction the ILP was heading in was clear; it was following “the Communist and Russian model.”

But if anything along the lines predicted by Sandham had been the intention, it failed to work out in quite that way in practice. One contender for the position of chief offender was the new national secretary, Fenner Brockway. His articles critical of Soviet foreign policy, which will be examined in a later chapter, led to protests and accusations of breaching ILP policy from the most determined proponents of democratic centralism—notably, Gaster. But more than any other issue, the notion of a highly disciplined and united democratic-centralist party would be tested, almost to destruction, by the Abyssinian crisis of 1935.