Abyssinia, as Ethiopia was commonly known in Britain at this time, was the sole survivor—if one discounts Liberia as a special case—of the late nineteenth century “scramble for Africa.” The country had successfully fought off a previous Italian invasion in 1896 but continued to face potential threats from Italian colonial territories on its borders. In early 1935, following a border incident the previous November, it became obvious that Mussolini was preparing for another attempt at conquest. The crisis was a significant test of the League of Nations and collective security.

For the ILP, the crisis, which became inextricably bound up with the party’s desire to prevent another war into which Britain would inevitably be dragged as it had been in 1914, led to sharp differences. The resulting internal conflict ultimately led to a unique situation whereby the Inner Executive, composed of ILP MPs, effectively overturned the decision of the party’s annual conference and had its action endorsed by a referendum—or “plebiscite,” as it was referred to at the time—of ILP members. The two most prominent members of the party, Chairman Jimmy Maxton and General Secretary Fenner Brockway, found themselves on different sides of the debate; rather strangely, this division was reflected in the leadership of the RFC, with its two leading figures, Gaster and Cullen, also taking opposing sides.

A Three-Way Split on Abyssinia

The New Leader first reported on the issue towards the end of February 1935. In contrast to two of the positions adopted later, the paper placed some hope in the fact that, with the USSR now a League of Nations member, “enemies of Imperialism look to Litvinov to champion the rights of an ancient nation even in the corrupt courts of Capitalism.” Further developments were reported by the paper in March. In June, in “Musso Still Mobilising,” the paper warned of the Italian threat, and, in July, an article headlined “War in the Autumn”
predicted the imminent outbreak of conflict. Arguing that it was “up to the workers to do everything in their power to stop war supplies going to Musso-
lini,” the author of the article called for an “organised refusal to handle arms for Italy.” This call was repeated the following week with a plea for the “common people of all countries” to “hamper and obstruct” war preparations. If threat-
ened with a mass movement at home, the author reasoned, France and Britain would think again before “vouchsafing open or camouflaged support to Italian Fascism.”

“We Must Stop the War!” the New Leader declared on its front page in August, going on to argue that, rather than relying on capitalist governments, workers should take action themselves. An equal duty rested “upon the Communist International,” the paper opined, and particularly upon Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet representative to the League of Nations and also the chair-
man of its Council. Faith in Litvinov seemed limited, however. Two weeks later, a front-page article headlined “Workers, Beware! You Are Being Led into War” warned the workers in question not to leave the taking of action to “the Capitalist-controlled League of Nations.” Opposition to war, the New Leader maintained, had been weakened by the Labour Party, the CPGB—now well advanced with its “popular front” policy—and the Trades Union Congress, all of which supported League sanctions against Italy. The threat of war was real. “This is July, 1914, over again,” the paper declared.

The policy of rejecting calls for action by the League and relying instead on “workers’ sanctions” had now taken political shape. A September ILP leaflet titled Abyssinia—Crisis Faces the Workers warned that the conflict might be “the spark to the world war.” No reliance should be placed on the League or on a British government hypocritically “posing as a defender of the liberties of Abyssinia.” Rather, the British labour movement should “follow the magnifi-
cent example of the Trade Unions in South Africa who are refusing to handle goods” and get their local trades council to set up “an all-inclusive Workers’ Committee of Action.”

The London Division’s leaflet Workers’ Action Can Stop the War! made the same plea, invoking the 1921 Councils of Action and the SS Jolly George epi-
sode in 1920, when a strike of London dockers had prevented the dispatch of munitions to Poland during the war with Russia. The leaflet described the British government’s motives in the new crisis as aggressive and devious in the extreme. The government had, it said, “assisted the war-like Fascist powers to arm.” It had encouraged Germany, Italy, and Japan. Its talk of peace was “so much hypocrisy.” Though protecting its African imperialist interests against Italian encroachment, the government wanted peace so that it could “unite with Germany and Japan in preparation for war on the Soviet Union.”
Under the headline “Dangerous Policy of Labour Party and T.U.C.,” the New Leader claimed that the British government wanted “a share themselves” in Abyssinian territory. It cited the ILP Inner Executive’s resolution in declaring that “the struggle between these rival imperialisms is not worth the loss of a single British life.” But the wording of the Inner Executive’s resolution—reported in the same issue—hardly lent itself to the interpretation offered here. The resolution spoke not simply of rival imperialisms but insisted that “the difference between the two rival dictators and the interests behind them are not worth the loss of a single British life.” Rival imperialisms suggested actual or potential conflict between British and Italian empire builders. Rival dictators meant Mussolini and Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian emperor. The Inner Executive resolution went on to call “upon its members and the working class of Britain to offer the maximum opposition by holding mass demonstrations in their area, by refusing to bear arms, and in every other way possible to show to the Government their determination that they are not going into another blood bath under the false cry of a small defenceless nation.”

There was now a three-way split in the ILP. There were those who saw the imminent conflict in terms of the two rival dictators—Mussolini and Haile Selassie—and who believed that the ILP should support neutrality. The second group, wanting to oppose Mussolini, supported the League of Nations’ action, and the third rejected the League’s action and favoured trying to support the “small defenceless nation” by means of “workers’ sanctions.” Maxton and the parliamentary group favoured the first approach; the RPC, with the exception, notably, of Gaster and Hilda Vernon, took the second line; and Brockway, the general secretary and editor of the New Leader, supported the third. Outside the ILP, most of the Left supported the demand for serious action by the League.

As the crisis grew, that erstwhile ILP stalwart, Forward, came out in support of League action, but it gave some front-page support to Brockway’s alternative policy of “workers’ sanctions”—action by trade unionists, mainly dockers and seamen, to deny war materials to the aggressor. Clearly, though, like many on the Left, it doubted whether such sanctions could be an effective alternative rather than an additional support for action by the League.

To complicate matters further, within the RPC leadership, Cullen backed the CPGB’s support for League sanctions. He argued that, with the adherence of the USSR, the character of the international organization had been transformed. Meanwhile, Gaster sided with Brockway. At an ILP Executive Committee meeting in September, it was reported that the membership was “overwhelmingly opposed to a War or sanctions” and that antiwar meetings had taken place in
many areas. But despite the New Leader’s insistence, in an editorial, that the ILP had a “clear line,” the reality was very different.10

Within the London Division, Cullen and most of the RPC membership were faced with opposition from a strange alliance of Gaster, Aplin, and the Trotskyists of the Marxist Group. One group of Trotskyists had joined the ILP in February 1934. Others arrived later that year. Together, they formed the Marxist Group, which included the Trinidadian-born intellectual C. L. R James.11 In October 1935, as the long-anticipated Italian invasion of Abyssinia began, the New Leader gave front-page prominence—complete with a photo and full-cap headline—to James’s denunciation of the League of Nations “imperialistic plot” against Abyssinia. James decried the “League’s scheme to rob Abyssinia of its independence,” anticipating a deal along the lines of the stillborn Hoare-Laval plan unveiled a few weeks later. Instead, he argued, the ILP should stand for “independent organisation and independent action.”12

Cleavage in the RPC: League Sanctions Versus Direct Action

Italy was condemned as an aggressor by the League of Nations, of which both it and its victim were members. The League’s imposition of sanctions followed, but the process was long-winded, half-hearted, and partial, omitting oil and other crucial war materials. On 7 October, the RPC held a special conference of “London supporters,” which approved a “Statement of Objectives.” The New Leader having refused publication, the statement appeared in the R.P.C. Bulletin. It declared a “complete lack of confidence” in the ILP’s policy and insisted that the Abyssinian crisis had exposed the “delaying tactics of the major imperialist powers” in contrast to the “consistent stand” of the USSR. It expressed support for an economic and financial boycott of Italy via the League and claimed that the New Leader had deliberately thrown doubt on “the honest endeavour of the Soviet Govt. to check Italian aggression and preserve world peace.”13 At the NAC meeting two days later, Gaster managed to win only four votes—including his own and Brockway’s—for a motion to support “in principle the Abyssinian opposition to Italian aggression.” Maxton was one of the nine voting against.14

Shortly thereafter, the New Leader was reporting the “tremendous activity” throughout the country generated by the ILP’s antiwar campaign, which followed the issuing of a manifesto by the NAC.15 The National Government was not concerned with Abyssinian independence, the manifesto claimed. The real issue was not between Italy and Abyssinia, but between Italian imperialism and British imperialism: “The Report of the Committee of Five, in which the British representative took a leading part, would place the economic, financial and political control of Abyssinia in the hands of European Governments (with
Britain no doubt dominant). British Imperialism would sacrifice Abyssinia no less than Italian Imperialism.” By demanding League sanctions, the Labour Party, the Trades Union Congress and the Communists were lining up the workers behind British imperialism, the manifesto concluded. Sanctions would lead to war—which the advocates of sanctions would then have to back. The government had already made full preparations for a naval blockade of Italy. Its “War policy” had to be opposed.16

An article in the October issue of Controversy, written by Jack Gaster on behalf of the London Emergency Committee, addressed the stance of the ILP on Abyssinia. Gaster rejected Maxton’s “two rival dictators” position, claiming that a defeat for Italy might mean “the collapse of Italian Fascism.” His main point was that Abyssinia, though “feudal,” represented “a small force in opposition to imperialist expansion.” Rejecting the “Imperialist line of the T.U.C.” and the “wrong but completely different line of the C.P.”, Gaster called for “workers’ action under workers’ control.”17

An editorial note explained that the London Division had appointed the Emergency Committee, composed of Aplin, Cullen, Gaster, Matlow, and Vernon. As Cohen points out, the editor’s statement that all members of this committee except for Cullen had approved Gaster’s article masked what the RPC’s own Bulletin called a “sharp cleavage” within the RPC, with Cullen leading the majority who supported the CPGB’s line urging effective League sanctions.18

Cullen chaired the RPC but his two colleagues from that group, Jack Gaster and Hilda Vernon, found themselves making common cause in supporting “workers’ sanctions” with both Bert Matlow of the Marxist Group and that implacable opponent of factionalism, John Aplin. The October Bulletin contained statements of the two competing views within the RPC leadership. The introduction to the statements was headlined “Crisis in the R.P.C.??” and the response below this question was “Yes, there is a crisis in the R.P.C.”19

Cullen’s piece, “The War Crisis,” denied that there was any parallel with 1914 or any real danger of a war between Britain and Italy in spite of the bellicose language being used on both sides. The League was—now that the USSR had joined—a possible “stalking horse” for the workers, since “we have our own powerful representative leading and consolidating the opposition to the designs of the Imperialist Powers.” He went on to endorse the Popular Front policy of the CPGB, arguing that there was a “limited and temporary community of interest amongst the general mass of the population including the middle classes.”20

Unless animated by “sectarian prejudice,” no socialist really believed that the USSR was “betraying the workers” or lining up with capitalist powers, Cullen asserted. Was not the British capitalist press complaining of “the subversive

253

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Communist influences at work in the League? The fight of the Abyssinian people, he insisted, was “the fight of the Italian workers, our fight, the fight of the workers of the world.” If the ILP persisted in its “ultra-left sectarian line” it would lose “the last shred of respect that still clings to it.”

The case for “effective direct working class action” was made by Jack Gaster and Hilda Vernon, who believed that the League was “finished.” Even those who supported action by it, they wrote, knew that this could only be “an auxiliary to direct working class action.” The Bulletin made it clear in a foreword that it was Cullen rather than Gaster and Vernon who spoke for the RPC on this issue.

The next issue (November) of the R.P.C. Bulletin announced itself as the final one. The issue’s foreword noted that meetings of the NAC and regional representatives and of the London Division had brought about an entirely new situation and that a conference of the RPC had decided, by an “overwhelming majority,” to leave the ILP. The foreword called upon “all revolutionary socialists” to apply for CPGB membership. It is clear that although the Abyssinian crisis was not the underlying cause of the RPC’s departure, it was certainly the catalyst.

The foreword of the Bulletin explained that differences over Abyssinia were completely overshadowed by other urgent issues, and it stressed that the RPC had the “full support” of Gaster and Vernon. The minority of six who had opposed leaving the ILP was “led by members who for some time past have been trying to make use of the R.P.C. for the propagation of the policy and views of the ‘Communist Opposition’ and for the formation of an ‘Opposition’ grouping.” The RPC dissolved itself but the “tiny opposition group anxious to inherit the ‘goodwill’ of the R.P.C. within the I.L.P.” was continuing and “attempting to take the title to itself.”

The main article in the final issue of the Bulletin, “Why We Left the I.L.P.,” was signed with Cullen’s initials. He wrote that the “Fascist onslaught on Abyssinia started a chain of consequences” and opened “a new phase of working-class struggle.” Hostility to the USSR, Comintern, and the United Front policy by the ILP leadership had been a bone of contention for the RPC for some time, he continued. It had been hoped that a serious crisis would bring about unity; instead, the Abyssinia crisis had given a “death-blow to that hope.” The ILP leadership had “laid it down that there is no difference between the rival imperialisms of Italy and Abyssinia” and had rejected “even the encouragement of working-class action in support of the Abyssinian people.”

Gaster’s resignation letter also appeared in this final issue of the Bulletin and his leaving was reported in the NAC minutes at the end of the month. He
made no mention of Abyssinia. But if the departure of the RPC simplified the ILP debate, it certainly did not curtail it.\textsuperscript{27}

**Democratic Centralism Stumbles: An Internal Clash over Abyssinia**

The *New Leader*, under Brockway’s editorship, may not have directly repudiated the “rival dictators” approach of the Inner Executive, but certainly the way in which it reported the progress of Mussolini’s aggression was far from neutral. “Abyssinia Sacrificed” was its front-page headline in December 1935 at the time of the abortive Hoare-Laval deal, with the subtitle “National Government Offers Half Its Territory to Italy.” The following week, the front page drew attention to the “important article by C. L. R. James” in that issue. James concluded with the statement “If Abyssinia is to be saved it will be by her own exertions and the help of the International working class.” The final issue of the paper for that year called for “working class action to end the Italo-Abyssinian war.”\textsuperscript{28}

At the beginning of 1936, a *New Leader* editorial titled “Socialists and Sanctions” declared that the only aim of the British government was to maintain the interests of British imperialism. The Labour and Communist parties had “made a profound mistake in urging the operation of Government sanctions.” Instead, “the workers must act through their own organisations.” Opposition to Italian aggression was, then, to be pursued by means of sanctions imposed by workers. An editorial in March ended by quoting a note to the League from the Abyssinians to the effect that they “seldom met foreigners who did not desire to possess themselves of Abyssinian territory and destroy our independence.” Abyssinia was clearly portrayed by the *New Leader* editor as a victim of imperialism.\textsuperscript{29}

Moreover, when the ILP divisions met in the run-up to the annual conference, dissent from the stance of the Inner Executive was evident. Yorkshire supported the Sheffield branch’s rejection of the Inner Executive’s position, while the Midlands Division congratulated the *New Leader* editor “on the early line adopted by him with regard to the sanctions policy of the League of Nations.”\textsuperscript{30} The minutes of the NAC meeting in February also noted a protest from the Hull branch against the official policy.\textsuperscript{31} With just over a week to go before the start of the conference, the *New Leader* headlined an article with “League Betrays Abyssinia: Knew Poison Gas Was to be Used.” It reiterated support for workers’ sanctions, adding that “workers must trust themselves and their own actions.”\textsuperscript{32}

The NAC’s report to the 1936 conference at Keighley included the letters sent to other organizations explaining the ILP’s opposition to “reliance on the League of Nations” and urging “united action to resist war.” Five thousand
letters and forty-eight thousand leaflets had been distributed via branches, it said. The report also included, in an appendix, the text of a resolution of the International Bureau for Revolutionary Socialist Unity (IBRSU) from August 1935, which supported the “workers’ sanctions” rather than the “rival dictators” line. The IBRSU resolution made the Bureau’s position quite clear: “The International Bureau for Revolutionary Socialist Unity unconditionally takes the side of suppressed peoples against Imperialist rulers and declares openly that it wishes for the defeat of Italian Fascism and the victory of the Abyssinian people.” It called for the “liberation of Italy’s slaves” and for the prevention of sending arms to Italy and troops to Africa by the “International Working-Class.”

The Sunday morning session of the ILP conference began with C. L. R. James’s successful reference back of the “Activity Against War” section of the NAC report on the grounds that the Inner Executive had “adopted a do-nothing policy on the Abyssinian war.” Jones, for Lancashire, with Aplin seconding, then moved a motion congratulating Brockway “on the line adopted by him on the sanctions issue” and declaring that the conference was dissociating itself “from the declaration of the Inner Executive of the N.A.C. as published in the ‘New Leader’ of September 13 1935.” This declaration, the motion asserted, conflicted with party policy and contradicted Party discipline. Jones’s motion was carried by 70 to 57, and James’s reference back won by the narrowest of majorities—66 to 65. It seemed as though the authority of the annual conference as the policy-making body of the party had been vindicated—if only by a single vote—and the “rival dictators” position of the Inner Executive repudiated, along with its interpretation of “democratic centralism.” But the following day was to be one of the most dramatic for the party during the whole period covered by this book—and indeed during its entire existence.

The Revolt of the Inner Executive and the Plebiscite

The day after these crucial votes, Maxton made a statement from the chair. They were all, he said, united against capitalist and imperialist war, but they differed on their positions on “working class action against Italy.” Then came the bombshell: “The Chairman of the Party, the three members of the Inner Executive, the Parliamentary Group, and other members of the National Council are unable conscientiously to operate the decision reached yesterday.” Maxton reported that the NAC had decided, in light of the narrowness of the majority, to refer that matter to a “ballot vote” in three months’ time. In the meantime, there would be “liberty of expression for different views,” and the conference was asked to express its confidence in the NAC—which it agreed to do by 93 to 39. Before the conference ended, the NAC had met once again; agreed on
The Abyssinian Crisis and the Fate of Democratic Centralism

arrangements for the plebiscite, as it was referred to; and appointed Aplin, Johnson, and McGovern as scrutineers.38

The Abyssinian debate was the main topic in the New Leader’s report of the conference at the end of that week, with Brockway giving his summation of the different responses to the Italian aggression by the Leader and the Inner Executive and the nac:

The New Leader took the line that as International Socialists the I.L.P. must ally itself with the Abyssinian people in their struggle against Imperialism. It was urged that the form of support should be working class action against Italy by refusal to handle munitions, oil, and war materials for Italy.

This line, maintained by the New Leader for several weeks, was changed by a decision of the Inner Executive (later endorsed by the National Council), that the Party should be neutral and should regard the Italo-Abyssinian conflict as one between “two rival dictators.”

The Leader’s report explained that Brockway, fearing the resignations of the whole of the Parliamentary group, and especially Maxton, had supported the nac’s plebiscite proposal. It had been fiercely opposed by the London Division, with C. A. Smith maintaining that the nac was “wrong strategically, tactically, psychologically, and morally, and that the Party had missed a great opportunity for giving a clear and courageous lead to the workers of this country who were ready to respond.”39 From the political sidelines, Forward, which had supported the ILP before disaffiliation, published “I.L.P. Revolt Against Maxton,” by Emrys Hughes. He described how, when Maxton had threatened to resign, “the conference performed another somersault.” He then asked how long the party could last without Maxton.40

Severe internal conflict was still far from over. The Executive Committee declined, by a narrow vote of 7 to 6, to circulate a document stating the London case. According to meeting minutes, the committee decided that it was “undesirable” to circulate more than the “pamphlet stating both sides.” The way the Inner Executive had behaved became an issue in itself. The Larkhill branch, it was reported at the Executive Committee meeting, “condemned the I.E., the Parliamentary Group, and the N.A.C. for their refusal to accept Conference decisions.” The Executive Committee agreed to pose “alternative questions” in the plebiscite, though, as we shall see, this by no means placated all the critics of the wording.41 An issue of Controversy published Maxton, McGovern, and Southall making the case for neutrality versus James, Brockway, and Bob Edwards, who advocated “workers’ sanctions.”42 In spite of the prohibition on discussion of “inner organisational matters,” the New Leader published both
a letter from McGovern complaining about the content of Controversy with respect to Abyssinia and one from its editor, C. A. Smith, defending it.43

The plebiscite scrutineers reported at the end of June. The vote itself was now controversial. The Ilford branch “decided to return the ballot papers unmarked because there was no opportunity for expressing support for workers’ sanctions.” From Salisbury, it was reported that the branch, “as a protest, feels unable to take part in the Plebiscite, owing to the questions, as put, do not cover the issues as raised at Annual Conference.” There were thirteen individual protests and seven branch resolutions complaining about the wording.44 More were reported at the NAC meeting a few days later: twenty-four additional branches and guilds had protested about the form of the questions, including the Swindon branch. The Gateshead and Watford branches had refused to vote because of their dissatisfaction with the questions.45

No wonder the Dundee branch resolved that “in view of the strong feelings aroused members of the Party should preserve a sense of proportion and recognise that Party unity should take precedence over all differences.” For his part, Maxton insisted that “not a single speech had been delivered in Parliament by members of the I.L.P. Group which had not advocated revolutionary working class action in relation to the Italo-Abyssinian War.” As if to add further to the confusion and conflict, the NAC agreed that a policy statement by Brockway should be circulated to the branches and published in the New Leader, but “without giving majority figures in the Plebiscite.”46 One result of this decision seems to have been that when the NAC reported to the 1937 annual conference, the appendix dealing with the plebiscite gave only the wording of the two questions, without any indication of the result.47

The “ballot vote” was supposed to establish clearly the view of at least the majority of ILP members and to draw a line under what, as we have seen, was a difficult, divisive, and confusing issue. But if this was the intention, it was hardly the result. Of the 3,751 ballot papers sent out, only 1,442 were returned. The first question “Should the I.L.P. have declared against Italy and in favour of Abyssinia by advocating the refusal of War Materials to Italy?” was answered “yes” by 576 compared to 734 votes for “no,” and the second one, “Should the I.L.P. have refused to back either Italy or Abyssinia and opposed the sending of War Materials to either side” received 809 votes for “yes” and 554 for “no.”48

By this time, as Cohen points out, the war was over. Haile Selassie had been forced out and Mussolini was triumphant—for the time being. In June, the New Leader had used the headline “The League Is Dead” and had concluded, “Italy has got away with it.”49 But the problem within the ILP remained, with the NAC “attempting,” as Cohen says, “to square the circle.”50
The NAC statement following the vote explained that “the National Council does not regard the vote of the Party on the Italo-Abyssinian War as laying down a policy to be applied under all circumstances” and acknowledged the need for clearer policy as regards wars that did not involve the United Kingdom. The ILP opposed “unity” with capitalist governments preparing for or prosecuting war and rejected any support for a war authorized by the “Capitalist-dominated League of Nations,” the policy statement said, emphasizing “class struggle,” the “seizure of working class power,” and “the special duty of defending the Soviet Union.”

When the NAC reported to the 1937 conference at Glasgow, it included the statement that if a “subject people” was attacked by an “Imperialist Government,” it would be the duty of the British working class “to take all possible action in support of the subject people, including organised action to refuse materials to the Imperialist Government.” This was exactly the policy that the Inner Executive and the plebiscite had rejected, in the case of Abyssinia. The NAC statement allowed the leadership some wiggle room by giving it a degree of discretion in how the policy might be applied in particular cases. But it was evident that, as Cohen says, “the plebiscite was a short-term measure to keep the Parliamentary Group within the Party.”

This was a strange state of affairs for an organization that, a few years previously, had embarked on the construction of a revolutionary policy, one of whose tenets was the downgrading of the importance of parliamentary representation. The whole episode also suggests that—for better or worse—the idea of the ILP practising democratic centralism was a nonstarter. This seems borne out by criticisms made within the party.

Democracy and Party Discipline in the 1930s

It would be wrong to imagine that the NAC, in earlier years, had always strictly confined itself to administrative matters. For one thing, it is seldom easy to distinguish such issues from those of policy. Opinions on what fell on either side of the dividing line were always likely to vary considerably. It would also be naïve in the extreme to imagine that in the ILP, everything that was said was dutifully minuted and that factional manoeuvres and individual intrigues were unknown. But policy debates in the NAC certainly became more frequent in the post-disaffiliation years.

A noticeable feature of NAC meetings at this time is the number of issues where the voting of each member was recorded in the minutes. In most of the NAC meetings of 1933 and 1934, there was at least one such instance, something that would normally only take place when it was insisted upon by a participant. The largest number of such votes was in September 1933, when nine were
recorded in the minutes of the meeting. During the following year, after two in January and four in April, the number of roll call votes rose to seven at the March–April meeting and six in both the June and August meetings. On the latter occasion, no fewer than five dealt with alternative methods of dealing with the case, mentioned earlier, of the two members suspended for participation in the “unofficial” deputation to the Comintern in Moscow under the auspices of the Affiliation Committee.53

The increased number of such votes was not the only unusual feature of the post-disaffiliation ILP. The Inner Executive was decidedly odd in certain respects. Apart from its rather sinister-sounding title, it seems strange that, at a time when the role of Parliament was being presented as less central than it had been previously, the body at the top of the ILP hierarchy should be composed predominantly of MPs and that it met most frequently in a House of Commons committee room. If the object was to achieve an effective central leadership whose writ would run throughout the party, it was clearly not very successful. One possible exception to this is the Abyssinian issue, given the way the plebiscite majority fell in line behind the Inner Executive. But was the key factor in that issue the democratic centralist structure or the unrivalled charismatic leadership of Maxton and the real importance of the parliamentary group, despite the party’s declared policy about MPs taking a back seat?

The New Leader certainly became almost opaque as far as internal debates were concerned, with the exceptions already noted. But the emergence of a monolithic party line was undermined by the existence of Controversy—and later, Between Ourselves. In 1935, the editor of Controversy, C. A. Smith, said that the paper’s circulation was confined to ILP members because of what was hoped to be a temporary lack of agreement within the party. He looked forward to its distribution, following the resolution of the policy issues, to “all progressive students of politics.”54 The 1936 annual conference accepted Smith’s proposal to make it “available to the public.”55 An order-form leaflet described Controversy as “the only open forum for all Socialists and Communists” and listed G. D. H. Cole, J. R. Campbell, Harold Laski, Ignace Silone, and Stafford Cripps—as well as Jimmy Maxton—as contributors.56

In 1937, the NAC report to the annual conference in Glasgow confirmed that, as its name suggested, Controversy’s role was to “maintain a genuine open forum, with the regular presentation of I.L.P. policies and also of opposed policies.” It was now in a printed form and internal discussion was to be continued through a Bulletin . . . issued to Party members who take ‘Controversy’.”57 In November of that year, in “A Survey of the Party Position,” Fenner Brockway requested that lists be prepared of “Lefts” outside the party who might be sympathetic to the ILP so that they could be sent specimen copies of Controversy, accompanied by
“a persuasive letter.” He suggested as suitable targets the Workers’ Educational Association and the National Council of Labour Colleges, university socialist societies, and the Labour League of Youth, as well as trade union and branches of the Co-operative Party.58

By 1939, a virtue was made of the fact that Controversy was being sold to “serious students of politics in the Communist, Labour, and Co-operative parties.”59 But if the idea was to show a united front to the world and keep internal disagreements within the party, it was no more successful than such attempts usually are. In 1936, the Perth and Govanhill branch protested against the wider circulation of the ILP pamphlet that gave competing arguments on the Abyssinia policy in preparation for the plebiscite—but how was it possible to keep such controversies out of the public gaze?60 As we will see in a later chapter, this was certainly not possible in the case of another internal controversy—the disagreement over Maxton’s response to the Munich Agreement in 1938.

C. A. Smith, the former editor of Controversy, became chairman of the party in 1939. Soon after this, he contributed a piece to the new internal forum, Between Ourselves, headlined “Re-establishing Party Discipline.” His title, in itself, suggests that the democratic centralism enterprise had been far from successful. Smith began by declaring that “the I.L.P. has suffered severely because of a deplorable lack of discipline.” The ILP claimed to be a democratic party, he said.

But democracy does not mean anarchy. Democracy means majority rule. And when the majority has declared its will, or when a decision has been given by the appropriate elected authority, then opposed minorities or individuals must obey or leave the Party. That is a simple statement of the theory of democratic centralism and it is the lack of central control which is one of the I.L.P.’s chief weaknesses.

Smith went on to trace the “succession of episodes” since 1934 that he regarded as abuses of ILP freedom and even as “flagrant treachery.” In 1934, “the Sandham-Abbot group, controlling the Lancashire Divisional Council, tore away an important section of members, premises and press.” The following year, the RPC left to join the CPGB “four months after denying my charge that they were preparing that very step.” In 1936, Trotskyists carried out “similar manoeuvres and a smaller breakaway.”61

Smith identified four species of “indiscipline” that had undermined the ILP in the previous five years: the use of “party platforms” to advocate policies not accepted by the ILP; the occasional actions, in conjunction with outside bodies, of groups with their “own policy and discipline”; attacks on the party and its
leadership; and the refusal to perform specific duties such as the distribution of the New Leader. “All such anti-Party conduct must cease,” he concluded.62

One obvious response to Smith’s plea is to conclude that, in itself, it amply illustrates that the attempt to adopt democratic centralism had been a total failure, despite the recent increased stress on discipline. Smith himself, as editor of Controversy, had written to the Inner Executive in 1936 drawing attention to criticisms of the nac made in that publication and asking whether a reply could be authorized. The Executive’s response was to agree that McGovern should respond “in his individual capacity,” hardly exemplifying the iron fist of centralized control.63

Was democratic centralism in the ilp any more than part of the attempt to be revolutionary by adopting a Leninist vocabulary that had little correspondence to the party’s reality? If democratic centralism meant avoiding the four kinds of indiscipline mentioned by Smith, it is difficult to see anything very novel about it. Their rejection and avoidance is part of the usual pattern of behaviour expected in any internally democratic organization—even if honoured, not infrequently, more in the breach than the observance. In any event, the idea that the ilp was actually operating according to any notion of democratic centralism was hardly made credible by the party’s three-way split over the Abyssinian question. Few, if any, would argue with Cohen’s conclusion that “factionalism remains central to understanding the ilp in the 1930s.”64

As Brockway reported to the nac following the 1935 annual conference, though an amendment “for the abolition of groups” had been passed, the motion to which it was attached had been defeated, and “consequently the matter had fallen.” Maxton commented that while there was a “strong majority feeling in the Party against the existence of groups that take permanent form and carry on permanent activities,” the majority of delegates were not prepared to support the expulsion of group members.65

As we have seen, the London ilp organizer, John Aplin, had been concerned about the activities of the RPC since at least 1932. He resigned from his position following the 1935 annual conference, telling the Inner Executive and the nac that he had done this because “the Divisional machinery was being used by the R.P.C. for group purposes and in order that he might have freedom to mobilise opinion in that Division against the group system.”66 The nac reported that an investigation by the Inner Executive had failed to prove Aplin’s allegation, but the Inner Executive had put forward, and the nac had endorsed, the recommendation that rather than resort to group activities, members should argue their case at ilp meetings or in Controversy.67 “Just prior to the General Election,” said the nac’s report to the 1936 annual conference, “a majority of members of the R.P.C. resigned from the Party, but the existence of other
unofficial groups has persisted.” The NAC declared its intention of bringing a motion to outlaw such groups to the 1936 annual conference.68 Brockway reported to the NAC a few weeks later that “despite the N.A.C. statement that membership of unofficial groups involves disloyalty to the Party, the minority of the R.P.C. had decided to maintain itself as the Communist Unity Group and the Marxist Group still continued.”69

Whatever one makes of the ILP’s democratic centralism, the protracted controversy over Abyssinia threw significant light on how its internal democracy actually worked during these years. Abyssinia was the final straw for the RPC and marks the effective end of the possibility that a united Communist Party might be achieved by a CPGB-ILP merger. Abyssinia in 1935, much more than Czechoslovakia three years later, was what Neville Chamberlain would eventually infamously call “a far away country” that ILP members, along with the rest of the population, knew little about. There was no recruitment of volunteers to fight against fascism there. But there would be in Spain, whose civil war was well underway by the time the convoluted tale of the ILP’s response to the Abyssinian crisis had come to an end. Spain would put the seal on the party’s breach with the Communists and mark a vital stage in its disillusionment with the USSR. This very hesitant process began earlier in the 1930s, however, with criticisms of Soviet foreign policy and continual difficulties with maintaining a united front with the Communists.