Calls for Unity as War Approaches

Despite the arguments of Jowett and other opponents of the new revolutionary policy, many in the ILP had come to view Parliament as inextricably bound up with a hostile capitalist state. In their eyes, the role of Parliament in the struggle for socialism had been downgraded. This did not, however, mean that electoral politics no longer had any significance. After all, if the party could not secure substantial support in the ballot box, which simply required supporters to take a few minutes every so often to cast a vote, what prospects were there for the success of an extraparliamentary policy requiring sustained commitment and active participation? All the same, the results of the party’s electoral efforts were not at all encouraging—a circumstance that was the source of no small concern.

The 1935 General Election

The only general election falling between the ILP’s disaffiliation from Labour and the outbreak of war in 1939 (or indeed until 1945) took place on 14 November 1935. Prior to this, the ILP had contested three by-elections, none of which it managed to win. On two occasions, the Labour Party candidate was returned, while in the case of the Kilmarnock by-election, the Left’s vote was split between Labour and the ILP, which allowed the return of a supporter of the National Government with a minority of the vote.

The NAC policy statement delivered at the ILP’s 1935 annual conference had foreseen the party putting up candidates in the upcoming general election, not only in areas where the ILP was strong but also in several constituencies regarded as “special circumstances,” including one in which “a notoriously reactionary Labour Party candidate” had been adopted as that party’s candidate. In the end, the ILP ran candidates in just seventeen contests.

In the weeks preceding the election, with the Abyssinian crisis at its height, the ILP actively pursued its antiwar campaign. On Sunday, 15 September, London’s St. Pancras branch held a march from Mornington Crescent to a rally in Regent’s Park under the slogan “Abyssinia! Workers’ Action or World
On Thursday, 26 September, the London Divisional Council held a meeting at Memorial Hall at which Brockway, Maxton, and Gaster, among others, gave speeches.¹ The party produced a four-page election manifesto that attacked the “war-minded Government,” which, it predicted, would return to “warlike measures” if the negotiations with France and Italy over Abyssinia failed to “recognise British Imperialist interests.” The manifesto made it clear that the ILP rejected League sanctions and rearmament, describing them as “futile schemes to reconstruct or patch-up Capitalism” by the National Government and by Labour.Anticipating workers’ resistance, it also warned of the possibility that a fascist dictatorship could come “to maintain class privilege against the revolts and amidst the ruins of the present system.” In places where no ILP candidate was running, workers were advised to vote for any Labour Party candidates prepared to pledge consistent support “by vote as well as by voice” for “Peace and Justice for the Unemployed—as well as the fundamental objective of Socialism.”³

Some ILP parliamentary candidates—like Brockway, who ran in Norwich—emphasized the party’s wider objectives, while others placed much greater stress on domestic issues such as unemployment benefits.⁵ Although Jowett, running in Bradford, announced himself as “an anti-war candidate,” his election address concentrated on bread-and-butter questions. Jowett also devoted about a third of his address to explaining why he was not an “official” Labour Party candidate. He reiterated his well-established objections to the pledge required by Labour since 1931. This meant, he said, that as a Labour candidate, he would not have been able to “honestly make a promise to the electors to support any proposal.”⁶

The final issue of the R.P.C. Bulletin presented the ILP’s election strategy as hopelessly sectarian. Having cooperated with the CPGB in developing a united front, the ILP should have been working for “the only immediate alternative,” namely, “the return of a Labour Government.” Instead, the Bulletin concluded, its tactic had been to undermine and demoralize the mass resistance to the National Government “on a pretext of putting forward a revolutionary line.”⁷

The ILP was successful only in four constituencies, all in Glasgow. Maxton, Buchanan, and McGovern were re-elected, with Campbell Stephen as the only new MP. In both North Lanark, contested by ILP candidate Jennie Lee, and East Bradford, where Jowett was the candidate, the Labour Party took enough votes to deny the ILP a victory.⁸ Despite this decidedly tepid electoral performance, there was no sign of repentance from the ILP. The following month, the New Leader made it clear that the party was “not prepared to follow the Communist Party in surrendering [its] liberty to voice, vote, and act for its principles in order to join the big battalions,” arguing that “such big battalions tied to a
policy of compromise would melt away in a crisis.”9 It seems very unlikely that anyone reading this in December 1935 would have anticipated that, within only two years, the ILP would be contemplating rejoining the Labour Party. First, however, the ILP had to exhaust its attempts to bring about a united front that included both Labour and the CPGB.

The ILP Calls for a United Front

Several months before the general election of November 1935, Brockway and Maxton, for the ILP, and Pollitt and Gallacher, for the CPGB, had agreed on electoral cooperation, which would include joint meetings designed to generate “mass feeling to bring pressure to bear on Labour Party candidates in favour of the united front and a militant policy.”10 While many Labour Party members favoured such cooperation, there was very little chance that Labour would agree to any activity that involved working with the Communists.

In 1933, the National Joint Council of Labour, which represented both the Labour Party and the TUC, had responded decisively to proposals for a united front. Its policy statement Democracy Versus Dictatorship “stated the case against Communism and Fascism with equal vigour,” as Jupp succinctly puts it. The following year, the Labour Party conference banned any united action with the CPGB or with Communist “front” organizations without the National Executive Committee’s approval—a very remote possibility.11 Not that any of this deterred the ILP.

The NAC’s report to the 1936 conference took heed of outcomes in the recent general election, in which the presence of rival candidates on the left had worked to the advantage of the Conservatives. The NAC recommended that, in the future, the ILP should “make the United Front proposals to other working class parties with the objective of eliminating the danger of a split vote and lessening the chances of the ruling class candidate.” But this recommendation did not mean that the party leadership had any long-term hopes for Labour. “The sooner a Labour government with a working majority is returned,” declared the NAC, “the sooner will the workers lose faith in Reformism.”12

In August, the ILP wrote to the Labour, Communist, and Co-operative parties, a letter that was subsequently published as a leaflet titled Get Round the Table. In it, the ILP leaders claimed that there was “an overwhelming demand for united action among the rank and file of all sections of the working class.” The letter urged the formation of a joint committee, which would draw up plans for united action and make arrangements to ensure that only one “working-class” candidate ran in each constituency. Such “an immediate alliance of all working class Parties,” it noted, had taken place in France and Spain, although there the alliance had been extended to include “non-working class elements.”13
This last remark represented a very muted rejection by the ILP of the “popular front” approach. And when, around the same time, Eleanor Rathbone, speaking at the ILP summer school, called for “a Popular Front from Harry Pollitt to Winston Churchill,” the New Leader confined itself to commenting that “Miss Rathbone’s faith in Winston Churchill was the most surprising feature of the lecture.”\textsuperscript{14} In any event, the NAC was obliged to report to the 1937 annual conference that the Labour Party had rejected the Get Round the Table proposal. The Co-operative Party had simply not replied, while the CPGB had “put forward the alternative course of affiliation to the Labour Party.”\textsuperscript{15}

Meanwhile, “critical support” was given to Labour candidates in by-elections at Derby and Balham. The Communist Party’s pursuit of Labour Party affiliation, doomed as it turned out to be, left the NAC in the rather odd position of agreeing, by 10 votes to 2, to support the Communists’ right to affiliate while urging ILPers to explain that their party could not follow the same course because of the “restrictive conditions involved.”\textsuperscript{16} The prospects for the ILP’s United Front initiative looked anything but promising.

As ever, outwardly at least, the ILP remained optimistic that a degree of unity could be achieved. Back in March 1933, Brockway had given his New Leader editorial the title “Hope for Unity at Last,” and three weeks later, on the paper’s front page, he announced, in another headline, “United Action Is Coming!” All sections of the working-class movement could agree on resistance to fascism, war, and wage cuts and could campaign for the abolition of the means test for unemployment benefits.\textsuperscript{17} Yet, three years later, there was still little to justify such optimism. As we have already seen, the ILP was struggling to maintain its own unity in these years—and not with any great success.

Brockway would, in retrospect, write that “the most impressive co-operation between the I.L.P and the Communist Party” occurred in connection with the organization of counterdemonstrations against the provocative attempt by Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists to march through London’s East End—then an area with a large Jewish population—on 4 October 1936.\textsuperscript{18} But how far what happened can accurately be regarded as a clear example of cooperation between the two parties is debatable.

For most of the Left, the episode was seen in the context of the war in Spain—particularly the siege of Madrid and the “¡No pasarán!” (“They shall not pass!”) speech of the iconic Communist orator “La Pasionaria.”\textsuperscript{19} As Robert Benewick puts it in his study of the British fascist movement, the East End was “transformed into an expectant Madrid.”\textsuperscript{20} This interpretive parallel is evident in the way that the “Battle of Cable Street”—which subsequently became such an emotive reference point for so many on the British Left—was reported in the press at the time. The day after the march, the Communist Party’s Daily
Calls for Unity as War Approaches

Worker headlined its report “Mosley Did Not Pass: East London Routs the Fascists,” an allusion that was echoed at the end of that week by the New Leader’s “Mosley Did Not Pass! What Happened in East London and Why.”

Similarly, when the ILP published what was described on its cover as a “Souvenir of the East London Workers’ Victory over Fascism,” it did so under the title They Did Not Pass: 300,000 Workers Say No to Mosley.

The ILP did not hesitate in taking a large share of the credit for the protest. According to the New Leader, “A great demonstration organised by the I.L.P. in East London sent a telegram to the Home Secretary demanding that the march should be stopped. But the I.L.P. was prepared for refusal. It announced in the Press that it had called the East London workers to mass in Aldgate in such numbers that the march would become impossible.”

The Leader did at least mention, however, that the Communist Party had made the same call. In contrast, the Daily Worker’s report ignored the ILP, stating simply that “the Communist Party had appealed to the workers to throng Aldgate and Cable Street.”

The ILP’s “souvenir” pamphlet began by celebrating the way in which “East London workers irrespective of their race, or creed, irrespective of their political affiliations, Jews and Gentiles, Communists, Socialists and Labour Party supporters demonstrated to the whole world that the best traditions of East London’s militant past were safe in their hands.” It again gave equal credit to the Communist Party for the call for the counterdemonstration, while noting that neither the opposition of the Labour Party nor the advice of the Jewish Board of Deputies, which had recommended that people stay away, had deterred the “rank and file.”

Mentioning both “the I.L.P. and Communist sections,” the local East London Advertiser reported that a large number of men “had met at Aldgate to take part in the I.L.P. demonstration.” But it also reported on the representations made the previous week by mayors of East London to the Home Secretary calling for the march to be banned.

Benewick likewise draws attention to the “quieter forces at work,” including the efforts of J. H. Hall, the MP for Whitechapel, and George Lansbury, the mayor of Poplar (and, until the previous year, the leader of the Labour Party). He also notes that the Jewish People’s Council had collected one hundred thousand signatures on a petition demanding that the BUF march not be allowed to go ahead, describing the ILP as “more active” than the Communists in organizing the resistance to the march.

Barricades had been erected in and around Cable Street, and there was considerable violence when the police attempted to clear them. But, in the end, the five-thousand-strong fascist march, which posed the near-certainty of serious bloodshed had it been allowed to proceed, was diverted away from the East End by the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. Brockway later wrote,
in *Inside the Left*, that even though the Communist Party was stronger in East London than was the *ILP*, “by chance our propaganda had the bigger effect” because *The Star*, a London evening newspaper, had run an article headlined “I.L.P. Call to Workers.”

Up to this point, it had been the *ILP* that took the lead in calling for a “united front,” but soon there was an initiative from another quarter. It came just a few weeks after the Cable Street incident.

**The Socialist League’s Unity Campaign**

Encouraged by the significant vote for unity at the 1936 Labour Party conference, the Socialist League now took up that cause. It had been formed in 1932, largely by former *ILP*ers who chose to remain with Labour, including Brailsford and Wise. Four years later, the League’s most dominant figure was Stafford Cripps. Appointed Solicitor General and knighted by Ramsay MacDonald in 1930, as well as one of the few Labour MPs to survive the 1931 general election, Cripps had refused to serve in the National Government. Subsequently, he had moved swiftly to the radical Left. Meetings of the Socialist League with the CPGB and the *ILP* took place. It was agreed to join negotiations in early November 1936 and the League’s executive committee endorsed the Unity Campaign. A joint statement with the other two participants called for “facilities for the provision of arms” to the Spanish Republic to be made available.

The *New Leader* greeted the venture with its usual optimism on New Year’s Day 1937, in “Unity of the Left?” This was soon followed with the front-page article “Unity Move This Week-End?” and the hopeful headline “Campaign by Socialist League, I.L.P. and C.P. Proposed: Mass Support Certain.” News of “The Unity Manifesto,” the joint statement put out by the three parties, and an article by Aneurin Bevan explaining why he supported unity followed. At this point, the optimism seemed fully justified. Meetings were well attended and enthusiastic, with the most important of them including addresses by the three leading figures of the Socialist League, the *ILP*, and the CPGB—respectively, Cripps, Maxton, and Pollitt. This seemed, as Cohen says, “a signal of hope.” But from the start, the Socialist League’s initiative faced major problems, which only grew with time.

The Communist Party was hoping to achieve its goal of Labour Party affiliation. This was supported by the Socialist League—but it set off alarms in the Labour Party, especially in the highest echelons. Whether Ben Pimlott is right to say that “Cripps, ever open to the influence of a new *guru*, especially a conspicuously working-class one, had indeed fallen under Pollitt’s spell,” there is little doubt that this was how most of the Labour Party leadership saw it. The CPGB had wanted to base the campaign on the participating organizations
seeking Labour Party affiliation and on support for a popular front. The ILP would accept neither. The Labour Party would need to change in a radical and democratic direction before the ILP could consider re-affiliation, the party's leaders argued. As for the popular front, “we are not prepared to become allies with the Liberal Party, Tory ‘democrats’ or other sections of the Capitalist class.”

There was some support for unity from Labour's Northern Voice. Reporting the Manchester launch of the campaign on 24 January, the Voice gave front-page support under the headline “Unity for Attack! Close the Ranks for the March to Socialism.” The former ILP-supporting and now Scottish Socialist Party paper, Forward, was much more skeptical. Dollan, expressed his doubts about the campaign in “Maxton's Latest Move.” The Scottish Socialist Party had been invited to participate in the campaign but wanted “more assurances” about real unity. This would best be achieved, Dollan said, if the ILP were to re-affiliate with Labour. “But,” he concluded, “can anyone tell me why it should be made a condition of a scheme for working-class unity in Great Britain that the contracting parties refrain from any general criticism of the policy of the Soviet Union or its government?”

The huge differences between the ILP and the CPGB over events in Russia—and especially over the war in Spain—made it difficult for them to subordinate these issues to the interests of domestic unity. But the ILP certainly wished to do so. Already by February 1937, Brockway was urging that Spain must not be allowed to undermine the unity campaign. He cited a letter from McNair, the ILP’s representative in Barcelona, who wrote, “We must use the unity in Britain to bring unity in Spain rather than allow the disunity in Spain to bring disunity to Britain.” McNair had suggested unity meetings in Valencia, Barcelona, and Madrid with Maxton, Pollitt, and Cripps, “but I fear that it is not yet practical politics,” wrote Brockway. In this area, things could only get worse for the Unity Campaign. One has only to recall the mutual recriminations, and especially the content and tone, of Daily Worker attacks on the ILP later in 1937 to appreciate how difficult it was for these two advocates of unity to maintain a semblance of it in practice.

The third constituent of the alliance, the Socialist League, soon had its own troubles. On New Year’s Day, William Mellor set out the League’s objectives in “What We Stand For in the Struggle for Socialism” in the first issue of the Tribune, which he edited. The paper was set up by Cripps and fellow Labour MP George Strauss to back the League’s Unity Campaign. The first issue also included a review of books on Spain by Brockway—which might have seemed a promising start in the direction of unity. Much less promising was the fact that a substantial minority of members voted against supporting the Unity Campaign at a special Socialist League conference in mid-January.
When added to the abstentions, they slightly outnumbered those approving the Unity Manifesto.\(^3\)

Soon thereafter, the Labour Party \textit{NEC} announced that the League was to be disaffiliated from the party. This proved to be the beginning of the end for the Socialist League. It tried to continue the campaign by relying on individual members to promote its aims in the Labour Party, but Labour’s \textit{NEC} was determined to prevent any further moves to achieve unity with the Communists. It announced that from 1 June, League membership would be incompatible with remaining within the Labour Party.\(^3\)

The \textit{New Leader}'s optimism still continued: “Unity Can Win,” it insisted at the beginning of April. But the following month, the League’s conference was faced with a difficult decision. Could the organization survive not only its disaffiliation but the expulsion of its members from the Labour Party? On the eve of the conference, the \textit{Tribune} expressed the hope that the conference would not abandon the Unity Campaign, but only a week later, it carried an article by Cripps on why the League had decided to dissolve.

\section*{Reassessing Unity}

By the summer of 1937, a number of things were becoming increasingly apparent. The \textit{ILP} was not on the way to replacing the \textit{CPGB} as a “revolutionary socialist” party. Still less were supporters of Labour going to abandon “reformism” and come over en masse to the \textit{ILP}. The fate of the Socialist League’s Unity Campaign confirmed that Labour had no intention of allowing affiliation by the Communists or of taking part in any sort of united action with them. The notion that the \textit{ILP} could cooperate with the \textit{CPGB} while retaining its own independent policies on matters outside a unity agreement was increasingly difficult to maintain in light of the extreme discord over Spain.

It was also evident that it was working with the Communists that Labour objected to. Cooperation with the \textit{ILP} was quite a different matter. So much was clear from the \textit{NAC}'s report to the annual conference during Easter 1938:

\begin{quote}
The failure of the Unity Campaign was due to (a) the retreat by the Socialist League and the Labour Party participants when threatened with disciplinary action (b) the political conflicts between the \textit{ILP} and Russian policy, the persecution of the P.O.U.M. and other questions, and (c) the antagonism within the Labour Party to the C.P arising from the Moscow Trials and the “purge” in Russia.
\end{quote}

This, the report continued, “points to the desirability of the \textit{ILP}, when the occasion arises, approaching the Labour Party for united action independent of the Communist Party.”\(^4\)
The previous November, Brockway had submitted “A Survey of the Party Position,” marked “Confidential,” to the NAC. He began by maintaining that the ILP had been right to disaffiliate five years earlier. Before disaffiliation, he wrote, ILP policy and membership had been “vague.” In recent years, the party had become “a conscious political unit” with a “clearly defined political line.” In these new circumstances, affiliation was now “a tactical question.” Weighing the pros and cons of reaffiliation, he saw the advantages of a return to Labour as threefold: it would bring greater contact with and influence on a larger organization, provide a chance to increase membership, and lead to a larger circulation for the New Leader and other ILP literature.

It would be necessary, Brockway continued, to insist that the ILP be able to continue as an “organised unit” with its own newspaper and other publications, to voice its own policy on platform and in Parliament, and to criticize official policy “in a comradely spirit.” He conceded that the party would have to forego the right to vote independently in Parliament, but this was something he would be prepared to accept. He stressed that the voting issue must not lead to another split in the ILP. On the contrary, possibilities for unity with other small socialist parties—including the Independent Socialist Party—should be pursued. “We have to convince these of the role of the I.L.P. as the Revolutionary Socialist Party in this country,” he emphasized.

Towards the end of the document, Brockway turned to the best way to approach the reaffiliation. The ILP must challenge Labour’s policy aggressively, but “at the same time we must keep before ourselves and the workers the aim of Working Class Unity.” Before making any further moves towards Labour, the ILP should seek an “electoral understanding” with it. The party had, said Brockway, little hope of defeating Labour candidates anywhere other than in Glasgow. He proposed seeking an agreement for the next general election whereby, in return for not contesting elections elsewhere, Labour would leave the four Glasgow seats—as well as North Lanark, East Bradford, and one of the Norwich seats—to the ILP.

In December 1937, the NAC unanimously agreed that “the first necessity at the present moment is to concentrate on strengthening the I.L.P.,” and it endorsed a motion to be put to the annual conference reiterating its desire for socialist unity with “a permanent structure for common action by the working class on class issues.” This was approved by the 1938 conference, whose resolution on ILP policy read, in part: “An essential step towards securing the unity of the working class on a federal basis, either within the Labour Party or by a Workers’ Front including the Labour Party is for Revolutionary Socialists to unite in one Revolutionary Socialist Party.” The immediate task, the resolution concluded, was to “strengthen the I.L.P. as the Revolutionary Socialist Party of Britain.”
The ILP would continue to support the idea of a “Workers’ Front.” Brockway’s lengthy book of that title was published in 1938. Here, he qualified the opposition to the Popular Front, including bourgeois parties. In his chapter titled “The Popular Front in France,” Brockway maintained that the first step should have been the formation of a “Workers’ Front Alliance between all the working-class forces, Socialist, Communists and Trade Unionists.” This could have been followed by an “electoral understanding” with the Radical-Socialists to support each other’s candidates in the second ballot without committing to any longer-term alliance. Though clearly, as Brockway pointed out, the French approach could not be applied in Britain with its simple plurality electoral system, the experience in France seemed sufficiently important to warrant a summary of its advantages in italics: “This tactic, from the Workers’ Front point of view, would have combined the advantages of obtaining the maximum vote against the reactionaries and Fascists without surrendering the right to carry on the class struggle and to seize any opportunity to carry through the social revolution.”

Meanwhile, the threat of war was growing.

The Approach of War and the Munich Agreement

Recalling the attitudes of the 1930s in her autobiography, Simone de Beauvoir wrote: “To sum it up in a nutshell, everyone on the Left, from Radicals to Communists, were simultaneously shouting ‘Down with Fascism!’ and ‘Disarmament!’” This was as true of the ILP as of the Left more generally. No one in the ILP was anything but an opponent of war, but only a minority were pacifists. For some, Spain had provided the crucial test. Brockway’s account, written just a few years after that war ended, was clear: “The Spanish civil war compelled me to face up squarely to the pacifist philosophy which I continued to cherish.” Faced with the proposal by Bob Edwards for an ILP contingent to fight against Franco, he knew that “this would have the support of the great majority of the membership” and realized that his support for it meant “a final break with pacifist traditions.” He recalled that he “did not hesitate.”

Total distrust and rejection of British imperialism, whose record seemed to the ILP to differ hardly at all from that of fascism, was a hugely important factor in the approach of the ILP towards the coming war. A New Leader editorial in early 1937 could hardly have been clearer on this point:

British Imperialism is as great a menace as German Fascism. It is a menace because British ownership of one-third of the earth’s surface is a continual challenge to other nations, and we must not forget that within the British Empire, and particularly in India, the worst practices of Fascism are being applied to keep the peasants and workers in subjection.
Underlying both imperialism and fascism was the capitalist system: both were “an expression of capitalism.”  

The ILP was critical of Labour Party support for—or failure to oppose—rearmament. This, the New Leader said, was “compelling thousands of Socialists to reconsider their position.” On Christmas Eve 1937, the Leader ran an article under the headline “Last Xmas Before War?” By the following summer, it seemed as though that might well be the case, given Hitler’s move against Czechoslovakia. In July, the paper highlighted the threat that this could lead to general war. At the beginning of September, its front page demanded, under the headline “Stop War!” that the brakes be applied, and by the month’s end, the paper was attacking European leaders in “Betrayers All! Chamberlain, Hitler and the Whole Capitalist Gang” and was urging readers to “resist war.”

The Munich Agreement, which ceded part of Czechoslovakia to Germany, was signed by Britain, France, Germany, and Italy on 29 September 1938. Gidon Cohen has described how the Munich Agreement and the response of the ILP Parliamentary Group—and, more specifically, of Maxton and McGovern, to Chamberlain’s role in it—led to “perhaps the most public controversy within the ILP during the 1930s.” The NAC, with Maxton chairing as usual, had met on 25 September and unanimously agreed on a statement, which was issued as a leaflet titled simply Resist War! The one-page statement called for opposition to a war that “would not be fought for Czechs, but for Capitalist profits” and would “immediately bring the destruction of those democratic liberties that now exist in Britain.” Whereas, in 1914, resistance to war had been limited to only a “relatively small minority of the working class,” the ILP now recognized the existence of “a widespread opposition both to war and to commitments leading to war.”

The initial New Leader report, by John McNair, of Maxton’s speech of 4 October, less than a week after the Munich Agreement was signed, gave little hint of the divisions that were to follow. Three days after the Commons debate, the paper headlined “Maxton’s Great Speech in Parliament.” Maxton had said that “the Prime Minister did something which the common people wanted to be done,” though he had made it clear, wrote McNair in his report in the same issue, that “whilst he had congratulated the Prime Minister, he accepted neither the political nor social philosophy of the Prime Minister.” Congratulations on the speech from the Bradford branch were also reported, but not all ILP members saw the speech in that light.

Inevitably, the BBC and the press concentrated exclusively on Maxton’s congratulation of Chamberlain, which seemed to suggest ILP endorsement of the Munich Agreement. According to Brockway, prior to the speech, he and Aplin had urged Maxton to avoid any such impression. Maxton made no
such a commitment. A hastily convened Inner Executive meeting supported Maxton, with only Brockway and Aplin dissenting. But it was agreed that the Inner Executive would “put no obstacle” in the way of the dissenters making public statements critical of Maxton’s—and McGovern’s—speeches. Refusing to accede to Maxton’s request for a delay, Brockway did exactly that. He later regretted his haste. In his 1955 biography of Maxton, John McNair would write of his subject’s state of mind at the time of this incident: “To be misunderstood by some of his friends was more than he could bear and he had what amounted to a physical breakdown.”

The episode remained an issue at the 1939 conference the following April. A motion from the Greenwich branch began: “This Conference repudiates the congratulations offered to Mr. Chamberlain by Comrades J. Maxton and J. McGovern at the time of the ‘crisis’ in September 1938. It condemns their failure to use the opportunity they had to put forward a clear revolutionary analysis of events, and their consequent misrepresentation of Party policy.” The quotation marks around “crisis” seem to reflect the belief that “the Government Propaganda deliberately created a War scare in September 1938,” as Joseph Southall put it in an open letter to ILP members a few weeks before the conference.

After also repudiating an “Imperialist speech” on Palestine by McGovern, the Greenwich motion demanded that “immediate steps be taken to bring the Parliamentary Group within the discipline of the Party.” Amendments showed the depth of disagreement among the membership. While Bradford’s proposed amendment sought to completely reverse the motion, turning it into one congratulating the two MPs, Croyden’s demanded the expulsion of the whole Parliamentary Group. Clapham wanted the Group “entirely subjugated to the authority of the Party.” All three proposals, supportive and critical alike, were defeated, but a large minority, 43 to 45, voted in favour of referring back the Parliamentary Group’s report. Brockway—whose contribution to the debate was conciliatory, stressing common ground—records Maxton’s comment to him that while members “did not like what we did,” they were not prepared to “chastise us for it.” Brockway agreed. But, as Cohen concludes, it was “a very uneasy vote of confidence after a very public spat.”

In the meantime, during the post-Munich weeks of 1938, Brockway tried to make the ILP’s position clear so as to distance it from pacifists without alienating them. He gave a speech, subsequently published as a pamphlet, to the “After the Crisis” conference organized by a London group of the Peace Pledge Union, in which he put forward the ILP’s stance on war:

We would oppose a war between the “democratic” states and the Fascist states. We would oppose a League of Nations war. We would oppose a collective security war. We would oppose them because we recognise
that they are all still capitalist and imperialist wars, arising not from any struggle for democracy and liberty against tyranny, but from rival imperialist interests.

At the same time the I.L.P. is not pacifist. Pacifists and the I.L.P. may join in opposing rearmament and war, but the I.L.P. does not believe that the transition from capitalism to socialism will be made by the pacifist method. If war occurred the I.L.P. would not merely resist passively, but would prepare for the moment when the war could be ended by the overthrow of the capitalist and war-making governments across the frontiers.56

There was a belief, in the ILP and elsewhere on the Left, that just as the war that began in 1914 led to the Russian Revolution, any new conflict would produce a similar upsurge of revolution on a much wider scale. But this was not a welcome scenario. Brockway again summed up the prospect from the ILP perspective in Workers’ Front: “One may be confident that the war will end in social revolution, but that will only be at the cost of millions of lives, victims not only of Capitalism, but of the failure of the working-class movement to destroy Capitalism before it moves on to its final disaster.”57

It was against this background of the growing threat of war and the ILP attempts to find a credible position that reconciled its hatred of war and its opposition to both fascism and capitalism that serious moves were initiated to bring the party back into the Labour fold.

Feeling a Way Back to Labour

By the late 1930s, it had become extremely difficult for any of the supporters of disaffiliation to retain the hopes they had had in 1932. Like Brockway, they could cling to the idea that disaffiliation had made the ILP “a conscious political unit,” but this was far from any of the disparate futures for the party that they had hoped for. Members of the RPC and others who wished to see a merger with the CPGB to create a united revolutionary party had either postponed their dream to an indeterminate future or left the ILP altogether. Efforts to at least cooperate in a united front had finally broken on the growing hostility over events in Russia and, above all, in Spain. Even the majority of the Trotskyists who had “entered” the ILP had given up and gone their own way. Nor had the ILP been able to make any discernible progress in weaning the working class away from the reformist and gradualist Labour Party. Gidon Cohen estimates that ILP membership declined from 16,773 in 1932 to 2,441 in 1939.58

Even so, by the standards of groups that were self-consciously to the left of Labour, in the 1930s as well as before and after that decade, the ILP was still a formidable force—still, says Cohen, “relatively strong.”59 But while the
CPGB was enjoying a modest upsurge, thanks to Comintern’s adoption of the Popular Front policy, whose most effective instrument in Britain was the Left Book Club, the ILP was struggling to keep up. In his survey of the party’s position, Brockway had noted the great disadvantage the ILP endured because of the absence of books in tune with ILP philosophy and policy. “The ‘Left Book Club’ is a powerful instrument for the C.P. in this respect,” he acknowledged. The ILP’s limited financial resources were the problem; the best it had been able to do was “to encourage Messrs. Secker and Warburg to publish a number of books.”

The failure to form a second United Front had confirmed that there was no prospect for a united front—or “workers’ front”—that included the Communists as well as Labour, but there were clearly plenty of erstwhile members of the Socialist League—including former ILPers—whose politics were not too distant from those of the ILP. The prospect of a reaffiliated ILP being able to recruit many of these, or at least to work with the emerging “Labour Left,” must now have seemed more promising than any of the other routes towards some sort of socialist unity.

The atmosphere in which reaffiliation began to be considered was very different from that of the earlier years of the decade. There was little real enthusiasm for Labour on the part of advocates of rejoining the larger party; Brockway, for example, would continue to reiterate that it was a “tactical question.” And although determined opposition continued, a resigned acceptance that reaffiliation seemed inevitable is readily detectable in the statements of some who argued against it. The direction in which the ILP was now heading—and the doubts and difficulties that that entailed—became evident in 1938.

In July of that year, the New Leader reported that talks were taking place with the Labour Party on the ILP’s relationship with it. There were, it said, different views in both the NAC and the party generally. The guiding principle was “the need for contact with the mass movement and at the same time the need for freedom to maintain the Revolutionary Socialist policy of the Party.” At a NAC meeting two weeks later, the council agreed to continue negotiations. Only John Aplin dissented. More references to ongoing discussions appeared in the Leader in subsequent weeks, and in September, the paper published a letter from Joseph Southall opposing reaffiliation. The New Leader was not supposed to be a “discussion paper,” it said, but it wanted to avoid any appearance of unfairness. It is clear, though, that Brockway, at least, had made up his mind. “I reached the view,” he would later write, “that some sacrifice of freedom was justified in order to function within the mass political movement of the workers.”
The NAC annual report for 1939 explained that a meeting with Labour had taken place on 14 June and that, ten days later, a letter was received from Labour's NEC stating its view that the only “satisfactory basis” of association between the two parties would be the affiliation of the ILP. The NAC decided to try again for a “united action and an electoral agreement” and, if this was rejected by Labour, to ask for clarification of conditions of affiliation. Brockway’s letter to James Middleton, the Labour Party general secretary, was included in an appendix to the NAC report. It began with a friendly “Dear Jimmy” and went on to rehearse the ILP’s desire for cooperation, noting that Labour’s NEC “thought the best method for co-operation between our two Parties would be the affiliation of the I.L.P. to the Labour Party.” As Brockway also noted, he appreciated the fact that the PLP’s standing orders—such a matter of contention during the previous five years—were being “liberally interpreted,” with Lansbury and others allowed to vote against rearmament.

The NAC assumed, wrote Brockway, that if the ILP were to rejoin Labour, the party would “enjoy the rights which it held when previously affiliated,” but it wanted to know what limitations the party would need to accept. The Munich crisis delayed Labour’s response, but a reply was finally received at the end of February 1939. In Labour’s view, there was no need to discuss conditions of affiliation since these were already laid out in the party’s constitution and were “not negotiable.” By this time, the NAC had set up a subcommittee to consider the future of the ILP, including the possibility of Labour Party affiliation.

How divided the ILP remained on this crucial issue was evident from the motions submitted for debate at the annual conference. The Alexandria branch wanted to instruct the NAC to terminate the negotiations, believing that a return to Labour “under any conditions would discredit the I.L.P.” The Guild of Youth was also, predictably, opposed, but Nottingham supported conditional reaffiliation and the Welsh Divisional Council welcomed the negotiations. There was support, too, from the East Anglia Division, and its motion attracted a long amendment from Clapham, which concluded that “seeing there is no possibility of Soviets in this country at the present time,” the “correct tactic” was to apply for Labour Party affiliation.

The ILP’s final annual conference of the interwar years opened on Saturday, 8 April 1939, in the Yorkshire seaside resort of Scarborough. The day before, Brockway’s editorial in the New Leader had acknowledged the doubts about Labour Party affiliation but concluded that “the duty of working within rather than against the mass Working Class Movement persists, even if we reject affiliation.”

Although the report of the NAC subcommittee did not support formal reaffiliation, it did recommend that ILPers join the Labour Party as individuals—a
compromise that was defeated by 68 votes to 43. Among the more vocal opponents of affiliation, Jowett was still arguing that the standing orders of the PLP were unacceptable, as was Labour’s stance on rearmament and the possibility of war. Jennie Lee similarly rejected the prospect of affiliating “at the moment when the Labour Party is disintegrating and lining the workers up behind the Government for war.” Others, however, feared the prospect of the party’s increasing isolation and diminishing membership, while the Glasgow-based Tom Taylor was concerned that the ILP might become “a second SPGB.” The Socialist Party of Great Britain (which still exists) had, like the Socialist Labour Party, broken away from the Social-Democratic Federation at the beginning of the twentieth century. An “impossibilist” party, it was sometimes known derisively by members of other left-wing groups as the “Small Party of Good Boys,” the idea being that its purist approach had rendered it totally ineffective.

The need to avoid such a fate for the ILP was a major factor in generating support for reaffiliation. Yet the 1939 conference was not ready to embrace “unconditional” affiliation, which it rejected by 68 to 43 while supporting the pursuit of a “conditional” variety by a very similar, though reversed, margin of 69 to 40. C. A. Smith, who opposed reaffiliation, was elected as chairman of the party. The ILP lost one of its four MPs soon thereafter when George Buchanan rejoined the Labour Party.

When the Executive Committee met following the conference, it appointed a negotiating committee comprising Brockway, Maxton, Smith, and McNair to attempt to implement the “conditional affiliation” decision. The debate within the party continued. In mid-July, the New Leader reported a letter from Middleton on behalf of the Labour Party NEC, which simply stated that the NEC would not “vary its position.”

Nothing better sums up the dilemma of the ILP in 1939, as well as the party’s predicament throughout the interwar years, than an article by Douglas Moyle, “The Outlook for the Party,” in the July edition of the internal discussion journal Between Ourselves. The ILP would, Moyle began, “feel relieved to shelter within a larger organisation which would ease us of some of the strain.” The Labour Party could “comfortably absorb us.” This was clear, since “entry can only be accomplished in accordance with the arrangements made by the Executive and the T.U.C. to render us ineffective.” The normal functioning of the Labour Party machine would “do the rest.” It would not matter much to the British working class whether the ILP was “inside or outside the Labour Party.” There was no “fundamental gain” in rejoining Labour. But to remain outside was “to court the danger that threatens the existence of our party as we know it.” The strength of the ILP would be “further minimised,” and, sooner or later, the ILP might be suppressed. At least one member, Moyle said, had told him that that
“would be the best thing that could happen to us.” Much greater effort would then be made by the active members “to build and expand on an industrial basis—for which our party cries out at this moment.” Without this, there was “no hope for our party.”

If the ILP rejoined Labour, members of its parliamentary group would be known as ILP MPs. But, Moyle cautioned, since “the legislature is more or less completely controlled by the ruling class, and becoming more so, it correspondingly ceases to be a useful channel through which the workers can put right those things which are wrong.” Therefore, in spite of the best intentions of the parliamentary group, “we can expect no good results in this sphere.” The press only reported the parliamentary group’s “mistakes” and “the Party and Group cannot afford to make many more ‘mistakes.’” It was to be hoped that in the future, the ILP would not “bank so much on Parliamentary work. If we do not go into the Labour Party the I.L.P. might consider the possibility of withdrawing from Parliamentary activity.”

NAC members who had not already expressed their opinions on the affiliation issue at an earlier Executive Committee meeting were asked to do so at the NAC meeting on 5 August. There were still voices both for and against, but a sense of inevitability is palpable in some of their comments, such as Tom Stephenson’s statement that he was against affiliation—but would accept whatever was decided. Or that of Trevor Williams, who declared himself for affiliation—reluctantly. After all had spoken, Brockway proposed a special conference and a motion supporting affiliation subject to maintenance of “organisational independence” and the right of ILP MPs to abstain from support of PLP policies on matters of principle.

Brockway was opposed by Jowett, who stressed the impossibility of amending the PLP’s standing orders and predicted that they would be “smothered at the Annual Conference by the block vote” if they returned to the Labour Party. He urged that any decision be postponed until the 1940 annual conference. Surveying the ILP’s experience since disaffiliation, Maxton said that they “had not had the success we expected.” In the Labour Party, he added, the ILP could “make its distinct personality felt,” but whatever they decided, they “must carry the Party with us.” That this would be particularly difficult in the event of war was stressed by both Smith and Bob Edwards. The former thought that in a war, “there would be no place for us inside the Labour Party, and we should realise this before applying for affiliation.” But Edwards maintained that in that eventuality, the Labour Party would split and “our place should be inside to rally the anti-war elements.”

A vote in favour of seeking affiliation was narrowly carried by 8 votes to 6, with Smith and Jowett among the minority. It was agreed that a conference
would take place on 17 September in or near Leeds, with just the one motion for discussion. The next edition of the New Leader dedicated its front page to the story, under the headline “National Council of the I.L.P. Recommends Affiliation—Special Conference to be Held.” The report emphasized that formal affiliation did not imply ideological absorption: as it insisted, there would be “no going back on the international revolutionary Socialist convictions which we hold.” The same issue featured an article by Fred Jowett under the title “The Sham of Our Parliamentary Democracy.” In it, Jowett looked back thirty years to the beginning of his “lone agitation” for the committee system as a replacement for the existing parliamentary structure. As he noted, Labour Party advisory committees on the “Machinery of Government,” composed chiefly of members “who were then, or had been, connected with the Civil Service,” had supported such changes, but their advice was ignored in both 1923 and 1928. Jowett’s opposition to renewed affiliation remained implacable.

On 23 August, little better than two weeks after the nac agreed to seek affiliation, Stalin signed the notorious alliance with Hitler. Two days later, the Leader carried a piece on its front page headlined “Capitalism Marches on Towards War,” as well as an article by John Aplin with the title “No Good Can Come of the Soviet-German Pact.” On 3 September, only a fortnight before the ilp special conference was scheduled to take place, Britain declared war on Germany. The following spring, the nac reported to the annual conference: “The outbreak of War on 3rd September led the N.A.C to suspend the special conference. The N.A.C. takes the view that under present War circumstances it is not desirable that the Party should apply for affiliation to the Labour Party.”

One can only speculate about what might have occurred had the special conference been scheduled for a few weeks earlier. Clearly, there would have been considerable opposition to affiliation, but it seems most likely that the nac majority would have carried the day, possibly at the expense of another split, which all were so anxious to avoid. Then again, the nac’s 1940 annual report opened with the observation that the outbreak of war had “completely dominated all other events.” It could thus be that, even if the special conference had taken place and had voted to pursue reaffiliation, the overriding issue of the war would have brought the process to an end before it had been completed. As it was, however, Britain had embarked on a “capitalist and imperialist” war to which the ilp quickly affirmed its opposition: “I.L.P. Takes Historic Stand” proclaimed the headline in the 8 September 1939 issue of the New Leader.