

THE CPGB NOW

BRITISH AND IRISH
COMMUNIST
ORGANISATION

From its foundation until the late 1940s, the Communist Party of Great Britain set itself a very clear political task - to lead the British working class. Its justification was that the working class required the abolition of capitalism for its emancipation, and only the Communist Party was able and willing to lead the working class in undertaking this.

The CP recognised that it might have to bide its time before a seizure of power was practicable, mainly, it believed, because the working class' consciousness was not yet revolutionary. But its task was still to lead the working class: only by leading the working class in the immediate, partial day-to-day class struggle could the CP hope to show that the abolition of capitalism was the real solution to their grievances. It was through such struggle that the proletariat

would learn; and without the Communist Party to point out the lessons of the struggle, the proletariat would draw only partial and superficial conclusions from its experience.

By the mid-1930s, the Communist Party was compelled to acknowledge that the Labour Party had gained the allegiance of the working class. This state of affairs, however, was viewed by the CP as purely temporary. It was due partly to the Communist Party's own shortcomings - namely in failing to pay enough attention to the day-to-day mass struggles of the working class and in not putting its own political line firmly enough to the fore. The Labour Party's position was also due to the objective situation which required the working class not to prepare for a seizure of power, but instead to defend democracy and the rights it had already won under capitalism.

Nevertheless the CP maintained that even in such a non-revolutionary situation it was necessary for the Communist Party to lead the working class. It recognised that events might require the proletariat to take the offensive at some time in the future, and that in any case the CP's leadership was necessary if the working class was to draw the correct lessons from united front activity. Against the CP's contention that a united front was incomplete without itself, Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison insisted that the united front of the Labour Party and trade unions was all that was necessary to defend democracy. Bevin and Morrison were both logically and physically correct. The CP's claim to a place in united front activity rested on its politics, and its belief that its politics must be at the head of the proletariat if class struggle was to be won.

With the overwhelming Labour victory in 1945, the Communist Party was bound to take account of the evident permanence of Labour's success in leading the working class, and its own failure. The CP did so by slightly revising its view of its role in the working class. Hitherto the assumption had been that CP leadership of the class struggle would cause workers to draw Communist conclusions from their experiences and withdraw their support from Labour. Now, the Party's view was that it, the Communist Party, was necessary in order to

lead the Left of the Labour Party to abolish capitalism. The Labour Party still lacked the vital understanding and will to do this. But Left Labour was open to Communist influence. Communists could cooperate with the Labour Party because the vast majority of the Labour Party's members also had the working class' best interests at heart, and could prove as constant in furthering those interests as Communists, if they were led by Communists.

The sharpened international class conflict taking place in the 1950s did not affect the CPGB's position with regard to the Labour Left, though it did become a vigorous critic of the 'rightwing' policies of Bevin, Morrison and Attlee. The belief in the possibility of socialism being achieved through Communist influence on the Labour Left, the trade unions and a popular 'anti-monopoly' all-class alliance was not laid aside, but further developed.

By the 1950s a loss of political direction in the Communist Party was evident. The Communist Party's involvement in trade unions was confined to maintaining its strength on the shop-floor and functioning as a campaign organisation for the election of its members to trade union office. While the more adventurous and enquiring young workers continued to join the CP (as they had done in the 1930s and the war), most of them soon drifted out again. After 1956, even this pattern was broken. By the 1960s, the Labour Party Young Socialists and the Trotskyist groups were at least as likely as the CP to be the agents of working class youth's coming of age. In addition, the CP's old membership left in considerable numbers, and those who remained became dormant.

But the Communist Party did not die. Apparently locked inextricably in a slow decline, the upsurge in idealism in the late 1960s gave the Party a new lease of life. Like the Trotskyist groups and the Labour Party, the CP benefited from the politicisation of a generation of students and a shift in cultural fashion towards Marxism. Its increase in membership since the late 1960s has been mainly students and post-student intellectuals.

Most of this new membership did not arrive in the CPGB imm-

mediately. The CPGB's activity was too orthodox and unadventurous to appeal to students who had experienced the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, the LSE and May 1968. However, with the fading of such 'revolutionary' movements as the Situationists and the acquisition by some activists of some political common sense (or conservatism), growing numbers of these now ex-students joined the CPGB. They found the existing student members rather more sober and 'old fashioned' in politics than they were used to.

With the beginning of the 1970s, leftwing students began joining the CPGB as a matter of course. Labour politics were at their lowest ebb on the campuses, and CPGB membership made sense to an up-and-coming student politician. In the late 1960s Trotskyist organisations had built up their memberships out of the student revolt. In the early 1970s the ex-student Trots were sent out to the factories to build the mass base. Back in the colleges, the Trots' relative indifference gave the CPGB Young Bloods a real opportunity to dominate student politics. In many colleges the CP was successful in attracting continuing numbers of new students.

REASONS FOR THE DECLINE

In the late 1940s the CP's tacit admission that the Labour Party had come to occupy a permanent place at the centre of working class political life seemed an admission of defeat to CP members. They had joined the Communist Party because they believed that the Labour Party was incapable of political action which could bring revolution, or even significantly further the working class interest. They had spent all their political life inside the CP arguing this proposition, and acting on the assumption that it was true. For them, the revision implicit in 1945 and amply confirmed in the first *British Road to Socialism* looked like a climb-down for no political reason. The *British Road* argued that the Labour Party and its members were for the most part sincere socialists who would not balk at trying for the abolition of capitalism. Yet these same members of this same Labour Party

were no different than they had been in 1934 or 1939. The only thing which had changed, it seemed to CP members, was the CP itself. It had rejected its commitment to revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat for pragmatism.

These feelings, present in varying degrees throughout the CPGB, were a major cause of the Party's loss of political direction. The substitution of working with the Labour Party and a popular anti-monopoly alliance for the seizure of power and the dictatorship of the proletariat was not accepted. It was acquiesced in, but not believed, by Party members, who saw the 'new line' as an abdication of Communist leadership. Those old members who remained in the Party, in an attempt to hold on to a little of their former commitment, no longer worked for its political line. They went to *Daily Worker* bazaars, but they did not argue the Party line on the shopfloor or elsewhere.

HOW THE DECLINE WAS HALTED

For the new Communists of the 1970s it was not a sell-out to accept that the Labour Party could represent the working class. For them working with the Labour Party was not a sign of lack of revolutionary intent. Even if this new Party line was in fact a slight revision of policies thirty years previously, the change seemed very slight to the new student recruits. After all they had grown up with the Labour Party's preeminence: it was a fact of life, part of the normal surroundings. It was no great betrayal for the *British Road* to assume what they had always assumed anyway.

The crucial feature of the CP and the *British Road* for this new generation was the claim to *lead* the Labour Party, its members and the whole of the working class in class struggle, because only through such Communist leadership could socialism and popular emancipation be achieved. For the new members, the *British Road* did not prevent the CP from being the party of revolution. There was no contradiction for them between working with the Labour Left and Communism. Consequ-

ently they entered the CP in good faith with their revolutionary vision intact.

It must be assumed that these new members were no political agnostics. While a young careerist may join the Labour Party and remain a political agnostic, the CP continues to require greater commitment. It is not out of desire to further one's career that anyone joins the CP, but out of desire to further one's politics. While of what precisely those politics consist may be unclear to the new member, the fact that they amount to a belief in the total transformation of society and the abolition of capitalism is clear.

It must also be assumed that CP members believe that the best way to achieve their aims is membership of the CP, or else they would not have joined. It may, of course, now be the case that many a youthful idealist of 1968, 1972 or 1974 has become disillusioned with the Party but remains within it. Like many others who have lost their ideals, such members find it easier to acquiesce in their past behaviour than to undergo the humiliation of an open disavowal of their earlier folly. Such worldly adults may have many intricate rationalisations for their continued adherence to the CP, but these may be taken as nothing more than the smoke-screen protecting the earlier substantial ideal from too close scrutiny. Once that original intention and reasoning have been examined, if they are found lacking then the camouflage quickly vanishes.

IS THE CPGB STILL COMMUNIST ?

What justification, then, is there for the view that the Communist Party is necessary if capitalism is to be abolished, that the CP must lead the Labour Left and LP members who are themselves incapable of leading an all-out struggle? Formally, the CP asks to be accepted on the basis of its programme - *The British Road to Socialism*. Unique among Western CPs, the CPGB has had the *BRS* in one form or another since 1951: it has gone through five editions to the present day, each one significantly different from the preceding

one. Taken together, they represent a smooth, if opaque, transition from an ambiguously revolutionary position to a covertly reformist one.

Even so, the programme remains utopian - in the sense that there is a radical discontinuity between the programme's prescriptions and the place of the CP in British society - throughout. Indeed, succeeding editions have gained in utopianism: where they were revolutionary, as at least the first arguably was, it could be assumed that the measures prescribed could come about by the sheer force of the revolution, and possibly (as was hinted at in the 1951 *BRS*) by proletarian dictatorial means. Where they are reformist, they should logically take into account democratic constraints - something the later *BRS*'s have never actually done.

The *BRS* (1977) economic programme has been described in *Problems of Communism* no. 10 (Spring 1978): it was concluded there that the purely economic/industrial measures advocated were 'revolutionary' in the sense that only a government prepared to monopolise state power could push them through, while the reformism of the political measures meant that this 'pushing' was not provided for.

It was further argued that the economic programme was substantially the same as in previous editions of the *BRS*, and that the major changes were (a) in the insistence that the CP's participation in a left government was essential for the democratisation of society; (b) in the importance given to the role of the women's liberation movement; (c) in the inclusion of a comparatively lengthy, but muddled discussion on how to achieve Labour/Communist unity; and (d) in a more minor way, in the absence of discussion on the Soviet Union.

What requires to be added here to these conclusions is the further observation that the *BRS* is only organisationally distinct from the Labour Party: in every other way, its terms of reference have been swallowed up within the general political struggles within the LP and the Labour movement, a struggle which the *BRS* and the CP itself increasingly echo, rather than influence, as they once did.

An example clarifies the point. During the General Election campaign, the *Daily Express*, flogging a dead horse with renewed vigour, compared the Labour Party's programme to that of the CP. The similarities were many: calls for a 35 hour week, more nationalisation; free collective bargaining, a higher level of social service provision; lower defence spending; wealth tax, and higher company taxes, were common to both. The point - it hardly needs spelling out - was to illustrate yet again the swing/drift/lurch/march/rush to the left in the Labour Party. However, though it did not suit the *Daily Express* to make the point even if it knew it, the real point of interest is that it was the CP programme which had swung into line with leftwing social democracy. This is largely because, since it has gone reformist, there is effectively nowhere else for the CP to go. Furthermore, the Labour Party programme traditionally represents the 'heart' of the movement, and is thus licensed to go in for a certain amount of (controlled) utopianism and simple rhetoric. The two parties' programmes thus meet on a largely spiritual plane: the crucial difference, however, is that Labour - especially its right/centre - has learned to operate and wield power in the real world (having a heart is a necessary part of the operation), while the CP is increasingly content to stay in more ethereal territory.

The programme which Labour produced for the General Election was, as has continually been stressed elsewhere, conservative in tone - where conservative means proposing no new initiative and being content to rely on past practice as a guide to the future. It was, for all that, impeccably social-democratic in the British tradition in the policies it offered.

It was also, in its way, straightforward enough. It of course said nothing about what Labour would actually do, given the expected real conditions of government over the next five years: instead, it indicated what Labour wanted to do and thus what, in some cases, it might be reasonably expected to attempt, given a chance. Everyone with any interest in politics understands this.

But the utopianism and mere idealism which the Labour Party

shares (insofar as it matters: and it matters less and less) with the Communist Party is now manifestly no longer enough - simply because the Labour Party's egalitarianism can no longer count on its implicit and most important ally, a vigorous private sector. The paraphernalia of measures which are integral parts of Labour's programme cannot, taken together, create sufficiently secure conditions in which the country's apparently rather nervous capitalists can feel secure enough to invest and innovate at the rate required to remain competitive within Europe, leaving aside the US and Japan. At the same time, it has no general policy for working class advance towards a position where it could itself control investment and production in its own interests.

In this context, Labour's programme is clearly much less considered than that of the Conservative Party, which has a rightwing programme broadly helpful to capitalism (though not necessarily to UK investment). It is possible that, subject to a variety of moves and shifts both within the economy and within the Labour movement, a programme which argues for working class advance towards control of industry may emerge in the future. If it does not, the party will have little fresh to offer the electorate, and may remain in opposition for some time to come.

The Communist Party is increasingly irrelevant to this - and for all its intellectual ferment of recent years, does not look like getting more relevant, because the terms of the debate about socialism are almost wholly contained within the Labour Party itself. The CP cannot even make a convincing appearance of acting as a ginger group on the left when leading MPs, trade unionists and even Cabinet ministers appear, at times, to the left of it.

In the 1930s and during the war, Labour leftwingers took their politics from the Comintern via the CPGB. The left took its cues from *Notes of the Month*, John Strachey, and Harry Pollitt's orations. But that situation ceased in the late 1940s. Today it is the case that the CP takes its cue from *Tribune* and the Tribune group of MPs. In the 1930s the Communist Party could get the ablest and most thoughtful of Labour leftwingers to speak on its platforms and support

its initiatives. The giants of the Labour left, Nye Bevan and Stafford Cripps, were willing to risk expulsion from the Labour Party to continue working openly with the CP. Today the *Morning Star* Rally plays host to pygmies - Sid Bidwell and Joan Maynard were two recent guests. The most vigorous leftwingers in Parliament - Eric Heffer and Dennis Skinner - are very much their own men and stay well away from the CP's embrace. The leftwing trade union general secretaries and officials of the 1930s and 1940s were always prepared to move a resolution supporting the Soviet Union or berating Sir Walter Citrine for his red-baiting. Party members in union leadership, like Arthur Horner, spoke for Communism. Today even those general secretaries who are themselves Communists do not openly espouse Communist policies.

Ken Gill, can reasonably assume that his speeches at the TUC are taken to be Communist, even though they do not mention the Party's line. Gill puts the *Tribune* line, but his audience deduces that the *Tribune* line is also the CP line, because they know Gill to be a CP member. The CP position is thus upheld by logical deduction! Gill, a Communist, speaks like a Tribunite. But the fact of his membership of the CP makes his speech 'Communist' !

It is easy to see why the CPGB leadership should take care to tailend the Labour left. Above all else, the Communist Party must be seen to be acting for and with the working class. The first lesson which Lenin had to teach the British CP was that it could not be content with being "left-wing communist", spouting revolution in isolation from the working class. It was by applying this lesson that the CP gained a position of leadership in the trade unions.

But now the CP has no politics to attract trade unionists. It can only *appear* to retain its former place by saying the same thing as *Tribune*. Thus it can claim that support for a Labour Left position is really support for the CP line, and by so doing lose no face - it hopes. The Party still appears to be leading the left wing, even if the discerning can see that all its leading takes place from the rear.

If the CP's politics are now indistinguishable from those of the Labour Left, why does it continue to exist? In 1979 the Labour Party is a very different kettle of fish than it was under Morrison, Bevin, Attlee and Gaitskell. The firm achievement of governmental power and the firm knowledge of being the 'natural party of power' have made a relaxation of internal party discipline inevitable. The Labour Left have been making a determined bid for party power through their insistence on greater internal democracy. The centre/right have been virtually defenceless against such tactics, since their own campaign for 'democratic socialism' in the Cold War against 'Stalinism' makes it very difficult for them to appeal to the rights and duties of leadership.

It is now possible to argue for virtually any socialist policy imaginable inside the Labour Party, and what is more be assured of a respectful hearing as 'another point of view'. It is even possible to build up an organised faction inside the Labour Party with the aim of taking power within it. The Trotskyist group, the Revolutionary Socialist League, have done exactly that with their Militant faction. Militant now boast at least one MP, the Party's National Youth Officer, and a few seats on the National Executive Committee.

The Labour Party refused the CP affiliation - and kept it and its members very much at arm's length - on the grounds that the CP's aim, the dictatorship of the proletariat, was incompatible with Labour's own, and that the CP would not observe the LP constitution by refraining from attacking Labour policy. But now the CP believes in democratic socialism, and the Labour Party permits the most sweeping criticism - even factionalising - within its ranks. So why should these two not get together at last? If the problem is the Labour Party's continued refusal to recognise the CP's change of heart, the CP can easily dissolve and re-form again inside the Labour Party after its own members have joined the LP as individuals. The existence of an organised Trotskyist group inside the LP is evidence enough that such an operation would be feasible.

There is no political reason for the CP not to adopt the above course of action. The CP accepts that the Labour Party is the main political party of the working class. The Labour Party now permits the most diverse political opinions and politicking in their support inside its ranks.

ENTER EURO-COMMUNISM : SAVIOUR OF THE CPGB

In order to justify its continued existence, the CPGB has had recourse to a ruse. The CPGB has taken Euro-communism to its bosom to provide a new *raison d'être*. The ruse is that the practitioners and originators of Euro-communism in Spain and Italy claim nothing more for it than that it is a pragmatic tactic. The Young Turks of the CPGB have taken it to their hearts and pronounced it the *sine qua non* of Marxism and revolution. They argue that the CPGB must exist because democratic struggle is impossible without Communists. In order to have true popular struggle, Communists must participate. This argument is supported by the examples of the PCI and PCE, and Euro-communism is confidently put forward as the correct revolutionary strategy for Britain.

Euro-communism was invented by the Spanish and Italian Communist Parties in order to provide themselves with some justification for participating in the legitimate parliamentary processes in their respective countries. For both parties, the objective justification for their action has been the needs of the working class. In Italy the Communist Party is the mass working class political party. To refuse to operate in the day-to-day life of the capitalist state would be abstentionism (of which V.I. Lenin greatly disapproved) and would leave the proletariat wide open to Catholic and bourgeois influence. In Spain, the Communist Party's acquiescence, ⁱⁿ even positive support for, a constitutional monarchy is underpinned by its knowledge that the Spanish working class have no wish to endure another Civil War, which would surely flare up if Communists got serious about undermining the state (and in Spain the PCE is strong enough and possesses the underground experience to be capable of doing so).

The political justification which both parties offer for their change of heart is that the experience of the resistance movements against fascism in Italy and against Francoism in Spain showed the working class that there were positive gains which could be made through democracy and that it is therefore incumbent on the Communist Party to participate fully in the present democracy, such as it is, and seek to extend it. We need only recall the concrete situations in each country to realise that unless the CP had participated in and supported the present political status quo, both the democratic content of this status quo and even the continuance of the state would have been threatened.

The Euro-communists of the CPGB can make no such claims for the necessity of Communist participation in British democracy. If the CPGB preached an abstentionist position, not one MP would lose his seat on account of the working class staying home from the polls. There might possibly be one Scottish local councillor who would be forced to stand down if the Party gave democracy a miss, but that is all. And it is also true that there would be no threat to the state if the CP went underground and armed itself (a thing it has never contemplated doing in Britain). The state's instruments of repression could deal with such a threat without trouble - and the working class would most probably applaud the law for so doing. The CP could chuck democracy out the window, and the British proletariat would not be one iota worse off or more likely to be duped by the bourgeoisie.

Faced with overwhelming empirical evidence that democracy can survive in the UK without the CPGB, the Euro-communists here have had to elevate Euro-communism to a *principle* of universal applicability. They claim for Euro-communism equal importance with Leninism (something the PCI, at least, has been reluctant to do). What in Spain and Italy makes good sense as a tactic has to become a dogma here which must be applied in all places at all times.

It is understandable that its British supporters have had to turn Euro-communism into a principle - when applied concretely here it is seen to be quite irrelevant and its supporters become mildly ridiculous. At least as a principle -

'Communists must participate in democracy and take it seriously' - it sounds impressive.

There is another advantage to Euro-communism, the abstract principle: you can turn it on its head and use it ass-ways round without anyone noticing if you are lucky. The British Euro-communists argue: 'If Communists do not participate in democracy then who can take democracy seriously?' This allows them to insist on their inclusion in all sorts of *ad-hoc* agitational bodies - not by virtue of their political merit or influence, but merely to satisfy democratic Euro-communist convention.

Both of these permutations on a theme have been used by British Euro-communists to good advantage. Permutation I ('Communists must participate in democratic struggle') is used to winkle out the old Stalinists who may still hold leadership positions in the Party, and whom the Young Turks wish to replace. Permutation II ('Democratic struggle is not truly democratic without Communists') is used to prove that the Labour Party and trade unions are insufficient vehicles for the exercise of real democracy.

It is very neat. In this one dogma is contained a perfect justification for the CPGB's continued existence. On the basis of Euro-communism it would even seem that the needs of the working class *demand* the CP's continued existence. Beside the glitter of this dogma the facts of the Labour Party and trade unions rather pale into insignificance.

Permutation II can be and is stretched to mean that if the CP does not participate and is not accorded its rightful place within any movement, then that movement is not really democratic. Such a device is highly serviceable in that it allows Communist Party members to claim greater importance for themselves not, apparently, from self-interested motives but in support of the proven democratic principles of Euro-communism.

It need hardly be said that Euro-communism has not exactly been proclaimed from the shopfloor by the CPGB. Its application is not being taken seriously as far as the working class side of either the CP or the Labour movement is concerned.

Euro-communism's practical use to the Communist Party is confined to the semblance of life that it imparts. And it must be admitted that the discovery of a new principle of class struggle should indeed give great cause for enthusiasm and hope. Furthermore, the mass life of the CPs on the continent can act, via Euro-communism, as a substitute for the mass life which the Party lacks here. A voyeurist mass base is better than no mass base at all. While in the 1930s the Soviet Union provided a source of inspiration for Communists in Britain, it is hoped that France, Italy and Spain can now do the same.

Leftwing intellectuals may well feel excited by the politics of Euro-communism in France, Spain and Italy. In these countries intellectuals are far more important in politics than in Britain. It must be inspiring to watch one's fellows occupying much of the centre of the political stage. But, the greater importance of intellectuals there is no sign of a greater development of socialist merit. It is no more than a reflection of a historical difference dating back several centuries.

As far as the working class are concerned, conditions in France, Italy and Spain can bring no inspiration as the proletariat there are evidently worse off as regards social, economic and political power. The Soviet Union in the 1930s provided inspiration to British workers, both Labour and Communist. It had conquered unemployment; its Five Year Plans were using labour to build much-needed industry and above all it was showing the bourgeoisie that a workers' state was a practical proposition. There is no comparable source of succour in Italy, Spain or France.

THE CPGB CONTINUES FOR NON-POLITICAL REASONS

We have been able to find no legitimate political reason for the CPGB's continued existence given its present political aims. Its substantive politics place it inside the Labour left, whilst Euro-communism is no more than a ruse. How then

can the Party's recent relative vigour be accounted for? Why has the CPGB not simply faded away into the political woodwork to become, like the SPGB, a relic of a bygone age?

It is to the New Intake of the 1970s that we must look for an answer. For if the Party had not gained these new members atrophy would indeed have been its fate. Its old members would have subsisted without complaint on the memories of past glory and a continuing faith in the Soviet Union, and hope to live long enough to fight another day when that day should come.

Communists under 35 did not join to nurture the past nor to venerate the Soviet Union. We have already noted that the vast majority of the New Intake are students and ex-students. It has never been uncommon for a few, exceptional individuals to desert their class and take up the working class cause for reasons of conscience. Marx and Engels after all are only the first of a long line from which Lenin also springs. When, however, the numbers of students and ex-students joining a working class party grow to such proportions that they are no longer exceptional but typical members of that Party, something more than conscience must be involved. The dedication and high spirit necessary to act out of conscience are not found in such profusion.

The dominant feature of British social and cultural life since 1945 has been the demise of the middle class and middle class values. This feature has been ruefully observed and chronicled by rightwing intellectuals, but not much remarked on by those of the left. However, the demise of bourgeois culture has not led to a vacuum, the life and vicissitudes of the working class have been portrayed with increasing accuracy and richness by our institutions of culture.

It was only to be expected that some of the middle class students in the late 1960s should react to their own class's evident loss of substance by switching allegiance. For such adolescents, joining the CP had two functions: 1) it shielded the member against the insecurity he felt as part of the bourgeoisie by placing him firmly on the side of the

working class, and 2) it allowed him/her to carry on being an intellectual in good conscience. (It is interesting to note that intellectuals have not always been able to have a good conscience in the CP. In the old days, the intellectuals deferred to the working class members. Intellectuals had their uses, and were used - mainly to impress other intellectuals, and to lend respectability to united front organisations. But they did not lead or aspire to lead, nor did they feel that their problems should occupy a central place in the Party's work. A glance at the composition of the Executive and Politburo in the 1930s is instructive in this connection - Emile Burns and R. Palme Dutt were the only two intellectuals out of a body of twenty or thirty that we can recall.)

The comfort that membership of the Communist Party brought was equally important for students from the proletariat. The disorientation of the college environment - the attraction of the intellectual layabout existence, coupled with doubts felt at leaving the working class - made the Communist Party seem a rock in the storm. The numbers of working class students attending universities and polys has continued to increase. For most of them the decision to 'go on' was not the result of reflection and commitment, but rather a reflex - it was what one did and was encouraged to do by teachers, if one showed the requisite 'intelligence'. It would be extraordinary if an adolescent being removed for the first time from a working class environment were not disorientated by higher education. Membership of the Communist Party provided a way of remaining faithful to the working class life left behind as well as a way of relating to the new groves of academe. The university could be rejected and yet lived within, through Communist Party membership.

COMMUNIST INTELLECTUALS

In desiring to maintain a separate existence as a caste, the New Intake intellectuals have departed from previous

British intellectual tradition. In Britain, 'intellectuals' could be accurately described as 'people who spend more time in reflective thinking and searching for knowledge', but who, apart from this peculiarity, remained happily integrated into whatever part of society they had been born in or risen to. (This is, of course, in marked contrast to the continent, where intellectuals have been a caste since the first growth of the secular monarchical state. Pre-dating the emergence of the bourgeoisie in Europe, intellectuals never fully integrated with it. The continued strength of the state machine and the relative weakness of civil society reinforced the intelligentsia's exclusiveness and sense of separation.) The early and very full development of rural and manufacturing capitalism in England had produced a population whose interest in the products of thought and knowledge was intense. Because they were part of this society, it was natural for intellectuals to address themselves to it and expect to be understood.

The left intellectuals' desire to retreat from society to an enclave can only be considered retrograde. To adopt a terminology and world view which differs radically from the normal mode of communication can only be a sign that the users of these new modes do not wish to be understood by normal people. It does not matter whether Gramscian, Poulantzassian, Althusserian or Hirstian is used, the effect on a thinking population is the same - utter incomprehension. There is no reason but fashion for intellectuals to adopt an exclusive, secret language. Adam Smith, Macaulay, David Hume, John Locke, Hobbes - to mention only a few - found the vernacular an adequate vehicle.

The fashion among leftwing intellectuals for secret languages must spring from a need to separate themselves from society. Such separation is indeed 'functional' for intellectuals who have nothing of substance to say. The foreign terminology effectively disguises the lack of content and lends an appearance of great import.

But leftwing intellectuals, unlike most social scientists, should have a great deal which they could say to the working class if they cared to.

It is also true that exclusive modes of discourse come naturally to a coterie of thinkers who feel themselves alienated from the rest of society. But why should leftwing intellectuals want to separate themselves in this way from the rest of us? The reasons for the desire to retreat into exclusiveness cannot be positive. Whilst it is true that the creation of monasteries in the Dark Ages by the Church was necessary to save Greco-Christian culture, can we really compare Britain in 1979 with Europe after the sack of Rome?

It is true that the revolutionary impulses which Communist Party membership assumes are not common among the working class at present. And it makes sense that a revolutionary party may indeed have recourse to exclusive, sectarian modes to protect and succour their own feelings. But such behaviour does not mean that the revolutionary sect refuse to communicate with the rest of society. On the contrary, such sectarian behaviour assumes a constant communication in order to find and draw out the others in society who have similar revolutionary impulses. To be unable to speak to society means impotence to a real revolutionary sect.

It is indeed a strange phenomenon, this New Intake. The inclination toward revolution implanted in the 1960s must have bitten deep, or else such students would have been contented *Guardian* readers living in Sunday supplement bliss long ago. No, the commitment to revolution is still alive in their breasts and has impelled them into the CPGB. At least in the CPGB, the soul feels the desire for change, and its sense of alienation from the present is succoured. And yet, and yet... when it comes to actually trying to act politically, there is paralysis. In order to disguise the crucial absence - the lack of a desire to accomplish anything - the secret language and caste-like existence is necessary. There is definitely a feeling *for* the working class, but it is not deep or intense enough to shake off the lethargy of intellectuals who, being unused to action, feel some fear and distaste for practice. Besides, an endless round of meetings with one's intellectual comrades, and magazines in the secret code, give the illusion of practice well enough.

The above description of the non-political reasons students and intellectuals have for joining the CP is not presented because the writers have a commitment to psychology or sociology, but in order to analyse the present state of the CPGB. Once it is clear that the CPGB is not fulfilling a political function - either for British society or for its members - it is necessary to establish exactly what function the CPGB does have. From the above description it is necessary to conclude that the New Intake's commitment to the CPGB is primarily spiritual. The spiritual unease felt by middle class students at their way of life withering away is resolved by CP membership, as is the spiritual conflict caused by a working class adolescent's translation to university.

THERE IS NO OBSTACLE TO POLITICS

Now it is certainly true that if the younger members of the CPGB had definite political aims which they wished to see fulfilled, the CPGB could provide an instrument of sorts for this purpose. One has only to look at the actual quantity of concrete achievements notched up in the past by CP members *despite* prejudice against Communists in society in general and the working class to see that this is so. Those individual communists who had powers of reflection and determination did look round them and see what the working class needed to gain the upper hand in the class struggle. These individuals acted on their observations, and King Street was as powerless to stop them as it had been to start them. These individuals used the services and resources of the Communist Party to further their work. They became shop stewards, local councillors, or merely 'militants'.

Though the CP at present lacks the political will to act, it still retains most of the reflexes of its active past. It retains enough of a Leninist commitment to the primacy of practical struggle to ensure that if the young CP intellectuals wanted to do something, King Street would be drawn

into helping them to do it. If these Young Turks were committed to leading the working class, and showed signs of the practical ability to do so, King Street would fall in behind them out of its reflex for supporting practical struggle.

But CP membership for the New Intake fulfils a spiritual, not a political function. Being in the Party allows these young intellectuals to live out their lives without mental anguish or self-doubt. This is certainly a practical, some might even say positive, function. It is a function which preserves the status quo.

We can now understand why these intellectuals have been attending serious and solemn revolutionary conferences for over ten years without any practical results. Such colloquia are not intended to achieve results. They provide the necessary recharging of spiritual batteries. If a sub-culture which declares itself to be absolutely at odds with the rest of society is to survive, it has to periodically reassert its differences and feel them down to their very depths. This is particularly true when the members of this sub-culture behave, for all that one can see, just like any other well-adjusted bourgeois intellectuals. One feels that unless the subjective conviction of difference is not fervently asserted at intervals, it might disappear.

The Communist University, the frequent conferences etc., are all vital to the New Intake's vitality. Such gatherings enable the troublous position of the individual intellectual in this atomised capitalist society to be minutely, richly and subtly contemplated. Out of this dense foliage comes the sense of timelessness so typical of any effective spiritual balm. Such contemplation of the complexities of capitalist society will continue until the end of time. At every turn there is some detail, some facet of capitalist civilisation and the individual's problematic to be investigated and appreciated.

For those of the young intellectuals who hold down practical jobs - like social workers and teachers - such conferences provide a chance to re-commune with their headier, less practical past, when as students they had nothing

better to do than contemplate capitalism with great anger. It is also true to say that having felt for three hours or a weekend all the indignation and righteousness of the 'revolutionary intellectual', it is possible to go back and do an ordinary middle class job with good conscience.

Now such communings would be harmless and could be put in their proper place as part of the panorama of pluralist culture, but for one fact. There is an objective need in Britain today for practical communism: i.e., for people to provide a lead for the working class to displace the bourgeoisie.

THE CHANCE FOR COMMUNIST POLITICS

One fact of life is obvious, inescapable and puzzling to members of the working class: the loss of bourgeois authority and power. In car factories, in pits, in offices, this fact is evident and has been evident for some considerable time. At present, most trade union officials are trying to avoid the consequences of this fact. When the bourgeoisie had some power and authority to attack, there was some point to trade unions demanding more wages and control from the bourgeoisie because there was something to be gained. Attacking the bourgeoisie was a practical proposition with tangible results. At present, trade union practice precipitates domestic economic crises and closes down plants when it is successful. Most trade union officials try to avoid admitting this because to do so would mean admitting the need for new means of increasing working class power and living standards.

Members of the working class who are objective and reflective can clearly see the limits of the present practice. They are open to suggestion as to other ways in which the class can achieve its aims of security and greater prosperity. They will listen to practical propositions. The matter of working class authority replacing bourgeois authority is very much on the agenda in Britain. The vacuum being left by the bourgeoisie's decline is not being filled. The re-

sult is that British society lacks the motor force of a class to propel it forward. Economic, social and political evolution in Britain have made the replacement of the bourgeoisie no dream, but a real necessity.

THE PECULIARITIES OF COMMUNIST POLITICS IN BRITAIN

The one germ of truth which the CPGB of the late 1940s grasped was that neither the state apparatus nor Parliament presented a problem here to the working class. For about a hundred years the working class had been learning how to make the state apparatus and Parliament do its bidding. The resistance of both organs was neutralised by the working class when a definite object of struggle was in view.

What is at present required is that at the point of production, the working class replace the bourgeoisie. It is here that bourgeois failure has the most serious consequences for the working class, and here that the greatest possibilities for working class advance exist.

That these reflections are obvious and commonplace to reflective workers can be seen from the Bullock Report. Jack Jones was responsible for the Bullock Report. He was an unusual trade union leader in that he had retained and nourished his own thoughtfulness. But his thoughts were not atypical of his class, though better developed.

Jack Jones had a good idea. Because he was General Secretary of the TGWU, his idea became the Bullock Report. It was not acted upon because the political forces necessary to keep the Report on the agenda did not exist.

The Labour Party is not capable of leading any political struggle except that which occurs around elections and Parliament. In the past, class struggle was led by trade unionists, who developed their political ideas through socialist organisations such as the SDF, ILP or CPGB. There is good reason why this division of labour between class struggle

and the business of governing should have grown up. A political party seriously aspiring to win elections and govern must devote most of its time, energy and thought to doing exactly those things. Fighting the class struggle and having wider political perspectives than votecatching and administration would quickly undermine the Labour Party. These very different things must occur completely outside the Labour Party's orbit, or they will not occur at all. Inside the LP, impulses to class struggle are inevitably sucked into electioneering or parliamentary manoeuvre lest they endanger the Labour Party's position.

This is not, of course, to say that the Labour Party should be fought against because it electioneers or is interested in government. The working class clearly needs a party which can do these things. The benefits for the British working class of having the Labour Party are self-evident. It was precisely the leaders of class struggle, the trade unions, who recognised the need for a Labour Party which could win elections and govern. Equally, it was these same leaders in the 1930s who steered the Labour Party back onto course when it had become too preoccupied with governing and too little aware of its responsibilities to the working class.

A working class political organisation outside the Labour Party, but not hostile to it on principle and clearly indifferent to elections and governing, could provide an instrument for working class politics appropriate to the shopfloor and taking the boardroom. Indeed, it is not until such an independent group exists, which the working class can use to develop its ideas, that workers' control can make any real headway. At present all impulses towards advance are neutralised by conservative championing of collective bargaining or 'wellmeaning' left Labour MPs desiring help in pushing through a new Labour Party programme for socialism.

The Young Turks of the Communist Party could use the CP to provide one such independent group. After all, they have nothing to lose. Unlike the youthful careerists in the Labour Party, they have no commitment to reformism or grad-

ualism. The Communist Party, for all its decrepitude, still has some remnants of its former vanguard position in the trade unions and on the shopfloor. In certain pockets of industry, its reputation for leadership is even still deserved. Certainly the Party contains enough working class members to make a real impression on the trade unions, if it only had something relevant to say.

The not inconsiderable social uncertainty, and the not un-serious bourgeois and bureaucratic (trade union bureaucrats') opposition which a fight for the adoption of the Bullock Report would involve are a Communist's bread and butter, are they not? The first problem - getting a large enough part of the Labour movement to make Bullock the prime object of class struggle - certainly will bring argument and confrontation with conservative and leftwing trade unionists. But is that not what Communists do - lead the working class by outflanking the existing leadership, whose own views of the class struggle are partial and inadequate to realise the possibilities inherent in the present situation?

BUT THE NEW INTAKE ARE NOT INTERESTED

But the New Intake have never been further from the practical outposts of working class power. They do not attempt to go where the action is. They prefer to be away from it, contemplating revolution. If Euro-communism teaches that a democratic revolution is impossible without the CPGB, then nothing can happen without them after all.

There can be no question of workers not listening to intellectuals who have anything practical to say. The British trade union movement has always provided a captive audience for bourgeois experts who had facts and theories about how to better the class's lot. Stuart Holland and Tony Benn, for all their arrogance and public school moralising, are listened to avidly because they take great care to create the illusion that they have a plan for getting us out of our economic difficulties. The yawning chasm which the

young Communist Party intellectuals believe to exist between themselves and the proletariat certainly does exist at the social and cultural level. This existential gap, however, in no way precludes united political action, as far as the working class is concerned. The problem lies with the intellectuals. Students and ex-students feel the difference in their own and a worker's perception of life to be so great that communication is impossible: whole new sets of vocabularies are invented to make this difference more concrete. Furthermore, the intellectuals are not interested in reflecting about the practical problems facing the working class. They find their own middle class intellectual problems far more interesting. Not only do the New Intake feel unable to speak to workers as one man to another, they also have nothing of value to say.

It would be unfair to say that the New Intake are oblivious, or even indifferent, to the working class and its vicissitudes. They would not be Communists otherwise. The columns of *Marxism Today*, under Young Turk editorship, and the classes of the Communist Universities give ample space to trade unions, wages, etc. But the Communist Party intellectuals are only willing to discuss the working class on *their* terms - that is, as an "other". This means that the discussion will go no further than *Marxism Today* or the classroom - it is of academic interest only.

Some of the ex-students are undoubtedly concerned with the Party's falling working class membership. These intellectuals know perfectly well that a CP without workers is in poor shape. But this knowledge will be quite useless unless they can give up their own feelings of separateness and behave as if workers' problems had a more than hypothetical existence. The closest a "Euro-communist" intellectual comes to the working class these days is to become a trade union functionary - in which post his behaviour is hard to distinguish from his "Hardline" Communist Party predecessors.

Without the influx of new, young blood in the 1970s, the CPGB would very probably have faded away into the woodwork. King Street had the acumen to sense this, and grasped the lifeline thrown by young intellectuals and Euro-communism. If nothing else, King Street has staying power. It espoused Gramsci and feminism to attract new blood - it had to settle for students because no one else was coming. The most recent version of the *British Road to Socialism* reflected King Street's eye for trendy politics. In order to attract young intellectuals, their thinking and problems had to be catered for.

There are signs, however, that King Street may be having second thoughts. The old hard centre has been far too astute to allow the new blood any access to the decision-making process. Despite the presence of Euro-communists on the Executive and Political Committee, it is still the old guard who call the tune: even though they may take care to nurture in the Euro-communists the feeling that a "more open style of leadership" has been adopted. This is done by throwing a few crumbs to the Euro-communists here and there.

King Street's stranglehold on the Party has not been continued because Gordon McLennan is a secret enemy of Euro-communism. No. King Street functionaries have too little politics in their bones to be for or against any political position for political reasons. Rather, King Street has taken care to keep its monopoly of power in the Party free from any political taint except the vague whiff of incense when "the good old days" and all that went with them (like Harry Pollitt) are invoked. The young intellectuals have been too keen to make their ideas prevail in the CP to be trusted.

Such reticence from the Old Guard would seem to be paying off now. The tide of Euro-communism is ebbing in the British CP. Its erstwhile cadres are a little demoralised at their apparent failure to transform the CPGB. (Strangely enough,

the New Intake seem surprised by their performance. It is strange because all along they have refused to go for the jugular vein - King Street itself. It was only by smashing the Party machine altogether that the young blood could have had any hope of getting Euro-communism seriously adopted. Instead, the New Intake has shown a curious lack of fighting spirit - preferring to sneer, manoeuvre and intrigue. An all-out frontal assault on King Street would have had the great merit, even if it had failed, of forcing politics onto the Party. Its mere occurrence would have so shaken the CP that the ripples would have carried on for long afterwards. Such ripples undermine a bankrupt leadership by providing fuel for inchoate discontent. The way in which the Euro-communists handle the *Minority Report on Inner Party Democracy* will be significant. A refusal to have a good fight on this question is to be expected from them.)

It is highly unlikely that King Street will completely squash Euro-communism or the young bloods in the way in which it crushed Titoism or Trotskyists in the old days. There is now no orthodoxy to uphold. No. All King Street wants to be certain of is that these new comrades do not get too big for their boots. So King Street can dispense favour to the Euro-communists one day, and to the Brezhnevites the next, keeping them all dangling on a string. Such calculation from King Street is, after all, simple prudence. Euro-communism has brought no workers into the Party. A base in the trade unions remains the minimum necessary for the Party's self-respect. If the Party can have Euro-communist students *and* "hardline", "economist" workers too, it can limp along for another year or two yet. And King Street's dreams do not go any further than such modest goals these days.

An additional reason for King Street's prudence is that the CPGB is no longer attracting large numbers of undergraduates. The ideological force of the late 1960s has spent itself; Marxism and revolution are no longer vitally attractive new ideas, but rather a well-worn fashion which lecturers are quite likely to teach as academic orthodoxy. Thinking, rather more serious students are still attracted

to the left - but such scholars are comparatively few, and cannot provide the CPGB with enough new blood to counteract the continuing loss of working class members.

It is to be hoped that enough of the idealism of the late 1960s still permeates the New Intake that they are profoundly shocked by such a sordid end to their high hopes for the Communist Party. At least, if the Euro-communists had to be dragged kicking and screaming from Party Congresses and Aggregates, the atmosphere of unrest might embolden a few workers into speaking their minds.

For it is a profound illusion to think that all Party-members over thirty-five like salaaming to King Street. Some of them do. But many of them have never stopped thinking for themselves. Because the structure and ethos of the CPGB did not cater for individual thought, their ruminations were always irrelevant; and so, these working class thinkers saw no point in uttering what they nevertheless could not stop themselves from doing, even though they knew it had no point.

If this thought could be coaxed into the open, it would provide enough inspiration to fertilise a giant step forward in the Communist Party and the working class movement. But the habits of years are difficult to break. An intellectual pours forth his most superficial impression in the confident belief that his most intimate nail-parings must be fascinating. It is part of the lifestyle to intellectualise about everything with fluency and wit. But a worker thinks to satisfy his own curiosity and as an aid to his survival. Since it is early learned that too public a display of thought can lead to trouble - in the family, school or work - it is prudent to confine the social practice of thought (and discussion) to good friends or comrades in trade union struggle. A worker joining the CPGB never lost this tendency to prudence, and a certain canniness towards his own reflections. Party membership, if anything, reinforced it.

If the Euro-communists of the CPGB take the struggle for democracy seriously they will make every attempt to bust

King Street wide open. They have a better chance than most to do this, for King Street has allowed them further into the corridors of power than most. The Euro-communists are just numerous and important enough for King Street to have a difficult time shutting them up if they decide to speak their minds. By breaking King Street, the Euro-communists might destroy the Communist Party. (In their hearts the more timid of these "democrats" undoubtedly fear such an outcome, so great is their belief in the power of the centre.) But there also might be enough material for the production of Communist politics in the brains of the old "hardline" members to steer the party onto a new course. If the Euro-Communists put their minds to it, they could probably come up with practical politics relevant to the working class in Britain (though they might have to give up Euro-communism in the process).

When the choice is between daring to try and sinking into insignificance under the old guard's thumb, is it not better to try? Unfortunately it is all too likely that the New Intake will sit back and let its political opportunity pass. If membership of the Party is undertaken for unpolitical reasons, then such considerations as lost political opportunities are not important. As long as King Street takes care to preserve the dual illusions of a proletarian centre and an open leadership, spiritual balm can still be gained from Party membership with only a moderate amount of self-deception.

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