The Minority Movement

The essence of sectarianism is encompassed in this definition. Sects, as opposed to sectarianism, have, of course, a role to play. For long periods of capitalist stability and working-class decline the maintenance of the Marxist tradition and the future worker's party is secured by 'sects'. Marx in his letter to Bolte makes the point clear: 'Sects are justified (historically) so long as the working-class is not yet ripe for an independent historical movement'.

None of this, however, is to deny the need for a party. It is, nevertheless, to put the question into perspective. Too frequently do we find the most vociferous worshippers at the shrines of Lenin and Trotsky doing the gravest injustice to the spirit and intention of their writing. For Lenin even less than for Trotsky, was the party the end product for which they fought. The party was a tool, albeit an indispensable tool, by means of which the working-class could carry through the revolution. For the blinkered 'Bolsheviks' who see 'What is to be Done', abstracted from time and place as the last word, there is no redemption from sectarian futility and isolation. The Lenin of 1903 is also the Lenin of State and Revolution, The Worker's and Peasant's Inspection and much else in similar vein.

Historically every serious revolutionary tendency has attempted to carry through the job of welding together revolutionary theory with the worker's movement. At no time has the task been easy, at some times it has been impossible.

All of this is still unexceptional, and it is possible having said it to relapse, virtuously and with easy conscience into the small change of group politics. Knowledge is never dangerous to anyone, including the ruling-class, unless it is translated into action. The dilemma still remains: how does a small group of committed revolutionaries, with limited resources and personnel, make serious contact with significant groups of workers. The difficulties are legion. Lack of contact, non-working-class social composition, age differences, lack of experience. All of these things plus the womb-like warmth of inbred politics, where the sweeping generalisation has only to convince other members of the elect and is not subject to the cold complexities of the real world. Overriding all other difficulties in importance is the existence of reformist traditions and institutions encompassing the trade union bureaucracy, the Labour Party and, by extension, the Communist Party.

Despite all these problems the attempt to cut through and circumvent the obstacles has been made. The lack of success, in the past, has not only been due to sectarianism: as often as not the objective conditions made more than passing progress impossible.

For long years the Trotskyist movement suffered from an inability to approach the class in any but the most oblique fashion—in the early 1930's as a miniscule left opposition in the CP, subsequently in the ILP, the Socialist League and the Labour Party. Of these organisations only the CP, and that illusory, saw itself as providing a complete industrial and political answer to working-class problems; the ILP and the Socialist League were already operating, consciously or otherwise, at one remove from the working-class.

Only during the special conditions of the second world war were the Trotskyists able to maintain a precarious independent existence. After the Russian entry into the war the CP became a super partisan of the Labour-Conservative coalition, completely abdicating its role in industry and conniving at the erosion of working conditions in the interests of the 'great patriotic war'. In these circumstances the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) and its predecessor the Worker's International League (WIL) were presented for the first time with opportunities for autonomous agitation among industrial workers.
The Trotskyists were active in, and virtually controlled, the Militant Worker’s League an organisation mainly based in the important Royal Ordnance Factories, but which acquired affiliation from some shop stewards committees, a few district committees and a number of individual militants. However the high revolutionary hopes of the war years, epitomised in the 1917 conference document *Preparing For Power* were rapidly evaporated in the harsh realities of the post-war world. Virtually the entire industrial membership and periphery of the RCP disappeared. In 1949 the RCP went into voluntary liquidation, its hopes wrecked on the twin rocks of a revived social democracy and a strengthened Stalinism, a possibility not only catered for in its perspective, but also one specifically denied in the works of Trotsky.

The Militant Worker’s Federation is poorly documented, even in the pages of the RCP press, and apart from some obscure internal bulletins only the fallible recollection of a few participants is available. In the case of the Minority Movement (MM) we are a little more fortunate and Roderick Martin’s recent book on the RCP is an important addition to our knowledge of the way the revolutionaryists in the 1920’s attempted to bridge the gap between the revolutionary party and the organised working-class.

An understanding of the Minority Movement and its early comparative success is impossible without setting the movement within its own historical context. Both the CP members involved and their non-CP co-workers were, in the main, people with an experience of rank-and-file movements going back to the pre-1914 period. Without these contacts even the limited success of the MM would have been impossible.

Rank-and-file movements do not exist because revolutionaryists will them; as Brian Pearce says, ‘The source of rank-and-file movements is the conflict between the struggle of the working class for better conditions and a new social order, and the increasing reconciliation between the leaders of the trade unions and the capitalist class, their growing integration into the upper reaches of bourgeois society.’

**BACKGROUND TO THE MINORITY MOVEMENT**

The growth in the 1860’s of financially stable trade unions with an assured continuity allied to the extension of the franchise meant that trade union leaders, as Engels observed, ‘... had overnight become important people’. They were visited by MP’s, by Lords and other well-born rabble, and sympathetic inquiry was suddenly made into the wishes and needs of the working-class. In short order the trade union bureaucracy was accepted as a viable estate of the realm. Resting on British industrial supremacy and the fruits of empire, the trade union leadership swiftly acquired the dress, demeanour and life-style of the employers and politicians they mixed with more frequently than their members. Mass production of clothing has today somewhat obscured the external differences (Burton’s natty gents suit has, to the untutored eye, much the same appearance as the product of Savile Row) but fundamentally the phenomenon is the same. Indeed with the growth and expansion of the system it becomes possible to suborn wider and wider layers of the worker’s representatives. In America, the closed shop, the check off, maximum seniority and overtime for committee men, with management paying committee men’s wages, gives rise to a privileged stratum within the workshop itself. For the payment of a few more dollars the management acquires another supervisor to police the agreement and the workers acquire another gendarme in the process of production.

The period before the first world war saw the natural consequences of the quietism and collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy. Reform movements sprang up in industry after industry. James Connolly introduced the ideas of the American SLP on politics and industrial unionism into Britain. Tom Mann, strongly influenced by French syndicalism, together with Guy Bowman, formed the Industrial Syndicalist Education League in 1910. The year before, a strike at Ruskin College resulted in the Pilsa League-Labour College which gave added impetus to the propaganda for rank and file control and revolutionary change. *The Miner’s Next Step* was the product of graduates from the Labour College.

Enterprises of this sort, multiplied throughout the country, influenced a whole generation of militants. Apart from Mann and Connolly, men like A J Cook, Richard Coppock, A A Purcell, Ben Tillet and Noah Ablett were well to the fore. A further layer of young workers was also coming into local prominence: Arthur McManus, Tom Bell, Gallagher and others who were later to become the leadership of the CPGB.

Trade union membership grew by leaps and bounds and a series of strikes broke out, frequently unofficially inspired, that bore a reluctant leadership on. In 1908 man-days lost through strikes quadrupled. Between 1910 and 1913 strikes never fell below 10 million days each year.

The notion of the industrial union was a powerful weapon in the propaganda of revolutionaries. In the period it had profound transitional significance. The simple idea of maximum solidarity in the face of the employers was immediately relevant to workers faced by rising prices, the incapacity of parliamentary reformism and the trade union bureaucracy. At the same time it emphasised the realities of class difference and gave the possibility of working-class politics. An integral part of the agitation for the industrial union was the notion of rank-and-file control from the workshop floor. The transformation of industrial capitalism to the socialist society was to be ensured by present working-class organisation. The experience of the Soviets in the 1905 Russian Revolution was one influence acting on the practical agitation of the industrial unionists.

Practically all of the massive amalgamated unions of today derive in some measure from this period of pre-1914 agitation. That the problems remain is a measure of the complexities of the situation undreamed of by early industrial unionists.

The impact of the war in 1914 stilled for a time the upsurge of industrial militancy with a wave of chauvinism. As in 1939-45, the trade unions virtually abandoned their traditional defensive and bargaining role, in aid of the war effort. A vacuum existed that could be filled by the residual activists of the pre-war period. Unofficial committees of militants and shop stewards acquired a new accession of strength and, despite a deal of harrassment and persecution, were able to organise, at rank-and-file level, thousands of workers in sporadic but important struggles. These battles inevitably spilled over into political agitation. The government prescription on normal trade union activity made the simplest defensive struggle of necessity political. The predilections of many militants sided this tendency and strikes and demonstrations were successfully fought against rents, conscription and dilution. Not all were successful. Poor communications made organisation difficult. As with the IWW in America, successful struggles, whatever their national significance, were fought locally and the problem of spreading disputes at the right time was often insurmountable.

Deportations to other towns and imprisonment, under the Defence of the Realm Act, of the unofficial leadership added to the difficulties. In the nature of the movement with its strong syndicalist tendency, the need for a disciplined centralised leadership was specifically excluded. Yet working-class militants engaged full-time at their trade are, no matter how their imagination may soar, physically confined to a limited geographical location.

The development of the shop stewards’ movement in the first world war set the essential form of shop-floor representation
the, even in the worst periods of reaction has saved the movement from the worst excesses of the trade union experiences abroad. Today it represents a considerable rank-and-file organisation into the trade union machine.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 provided a living proof of the viability of the revolutionary’s propaganda. Worker’s control through Soviets was a living reality. Enthusiasm for the revolution extended far beyond the limited circle of groups that, in 1920 coalesced to form the Communist Party. Aneurin Bevan gave a statement of the viability of the revolutionary’s propaganda. Worker’s councils, ILP branches, trade unions and other Labour organisations. The strength of the sentiment that called the conference together into the streets with tears streaming down their cheeks, shaking hands and saying ‘At last it has happened’. At the Leeds Workers and Soldiers Convention of June 1917 some 1,300 delegates attended from Labour parties, trades councils, ILP branches, trade unions and other Labour organisations. The strength of the sentiment that called the conference into being compelled such dyed-in-the-wool reformists as Ramsay Macdonald and Philip Snowden to participate and sit on the Central Committee (a fact that may have something to do with its ineffectiveness).

As early as January 1918 the Russian Congress of Trade Unions called for a new trade union international to replace the discredited Amsterdam International. In 1920 at the second congress of the Communist International the famous 21 conditions, (for affiliation to the CI) were passed, point 10 of which called for: ‘Uncompromising opposition to the yellow international of Amsterdam’. The decisions were taken against the background of a massive strike wave in Western Europe and revolutions in Hungary and Bavaria. In Britain the strike wave was also accompanied by the Hands Off Russia Campaign which led to the formation of a joint Labour Party-TUC National Council of Action to organise ‘the whole industrial strength of the workers against the war’. Twelve months of such experiences, following the founding conference, convinced the Second Comintern Congress that the time was ripe for the formation of a revolutionary trade union international.

In September 1920, after some fairly heated debate about the need for a revolutionary party and the degree of independence allowed to the sections, a Provisional International Council of Trade and Industrial Unions was set up with the task of organising a conference in July 1921.

The newly formed Red International of Labour Unions produced a Programme of Action* which laid down in some detail the strategy and tactics to be followed by ‘Red Trade Unions’. All trade union action was to be seen as leading on to mass actions — demonstrations, street actions, factory occupations, armed insurrection. Industrial unionism was to be pursued, by a programme of amalgamation, through local, district and national trade union machinery. The basis of organisation of the red trade union was to be the democratically elected workshop committee to replace the redundant geographically based branch. Members of the national RILU sections were to form factory cells and press for the implementation of such a policy.

Trade Union strategy was cast within an offensive framework — unemployed workers to receive full pay from the employers; closures and short time to be fought, special worker’s commissions to examine the books, factory occupations to continue production. Arguments from the national interest and against foreign competition had to be ignored, the only interest of the red trade unions being to maintain and increase working class power. Alliances were to be made across industries (eg Rails, Transport and Mines) to prevent divide-and-rule tactics. All strikes had to be carefully prepared with particular emphasis on defence and defence squads to beat blacklegging and ‘White Guard and fascist elements’. Workers’ control of production, and the organic unity of the CP and the revolutionary trade unions was to be aimed at.

Now this is not a bad programme at all but in the conditions of 1921 it had one serious drawback. The programme was specifically tailored to a period of mass radicalisation and pre-revolutionary ferment. Unfortunately the strike wave was beginning to wane.

In Britain the post-war boom was beginning to falter and the employers used the opportunity to reassert their control over industry. In 1921 the mine owners proposed to eliminate the wages pool that had operated during and after the war, and to institute local rates based on local profitability. Ill-conceived in this proposal were wage cuts, as much as 42s per week in some cases.* The miners at this time were the largest and most powerful union in the country. The mineowners’ attack was seen, correctly, as an attack on organised labour as a whole. The miners invoked the triple alliance with the Rail unions and the Transport union; all the miners were out, including the safety men, in the most complete shutdown up to that time. On April 12th the transport and railway workers were due to strike in sympathy, but at a worried conference the triple alliance leaders were able to persuade the miners to return the safety men and to postpone the strike to Friday, April 15th.

A statement by the minerworker’s secretary (Hodges) to an audience, largely composed of Tory MP’s which spoke of conciliation on the miners’ claim was rejected by the Miner’s...
Federation Executive. On this pretext the Railwaymen and Transport union leaders reneged on the triple alliance an act which caused many miners to describe it as the 'cripple alliance'.

The miners fought on for 13 weeks until funds ran out. As a result of this defeat wages were cut by some 34 per cent. The defeat of 'Black Friday' set the whole trade union movement back. Between 1921 and 1923 affiliated membership of the TUC dropped by 2,000,000 rather more than the increase since 1918.

It is against this background that the British section of RILU was formed. There was no attempt to form new unions and, when the South Wales Miners Federation was threatened with expulsion from the TUC after declaring for affiliation to the Red International, there was little point in pressing individual unions to affiliate, although they were to return to the question of international trade union solidarity with a considerable difference, after the formation of the Anglo Russian Trade Union Committee.

The revolutionary optimism of the Programme of Action was transformed into a 'stop the retreat' campaign. The drain of TUC membership was combated and the leadership urged to fight back. Minority movements, so-called because a trade union leader complained about a 'minority of troublemakers', appeared in a number of industries, particularly mining.

The prestige of the Russian revolution and the Russian leadership, together with the shared experience and tradition of many CP and non-CP militants ensured a considerable community of interest and aspiration. Despite the objections of Tanner and others to the organisational form and political content of the RILU, the Shop Stewards and Worker's Committee Movement (SS and WCM) were content to leave the main direction and control of the rank-and-file movement to the Communist Party. At a meeting of the National Administrative Committee of the SS and WCM, in 1920, it was decided: '... The NAC of the SS and WCM recognise the necessity for acting in close contact with the Communist Party. It will stress the need of its active members joining the Communist Party. The SS and WCM and the Communist Party should devise some convenient arrangement to ensure the perfect harmony of the two organisations.' At a joint meeting between the NAC and the CP early in 1921 the need for a national unity of industrial movement under the hegemony of the CP was agreed.'

Agreement on shared perspectives and common organisational objectives between communist and non-communist activists was important, but the action that flowed from these agreements was even more difficult. The miners' defeat was closely followed by an attack on all working class living standards; by the end of 1921 some 6,000,000 workers had suffered a decrease of 8s per week. In 1922 the employers felt able to take on the powerful AEU in a lock-out over control of overtime and managerial functions. From March to June the AEU funds were milked dry and the engineers beaten. In 1923 the dockers were engaged and defeated. In a period of general working-class retreat the hard facts of the class war were all too nakedly apparent but the way to fight back was not nearly so clear.

At the Fourth Congress of the CP, J T Murphy replied to criticism from Zinoviev, that the British Party had little influence in the workshops and in the formation of factory and workshop committees, by saying that 'in England we have had a powerful shop stewards movement. But it can and only does exist given objective conditions. These necessary conditions at the moment in England do not exist. How can you build factory organisations in empty and depleted workshops?'

Despite these difficult objective conditions the British section of RILU were urged to set up a national organisation. Gallagher was put in charge of the enterprise and preparations were in hand by 1924 for a conference for a National Minority Movement (MM). Although the formation of a national movement was slow, the intervening period was not without success. In particular the Miner's MM increased its influence considerably, especially in the Scottish and South Wales coalfields and in early 1924 the MM were influential, if not decisive, in obtaining the election of A J Cook (a prominent and active supporter of the MM) to the secretariat of the Miners' Federation. Less spectacular, but significant, advances were also made in Rails and Engineering. The party already had a fairly large influence in some smaller trade unions, like the Furniture Workers and the Tailors and Garment Workers.

The conference, that was to unite the various industrial sections into a National Majority Movement, was held on August the 23rd and 24th, 1924. Some 270 delegates representing 200,000 workers attended. If the figures as to workers represented may be a little suspect, the conference was nevertheless a considerable achievement on the part of the organisers. In a way it was the high point of the Minority Movement, for even though in the future this was to be able to claim far greater and wider representation, the original intention — to unite the rank-and-file industrial movement with revolutionary communist politics in the interests of working-class socialism in Britain — was to come under considerable strain almost immediately. The independent movement of British workers was very quickly subordinated to the needs of the growing Russian bureaucracy and their foreign policy interests.

REVOLUTIONARY TRADE UNIONISM

At the founding conference of the National Minority Movement Tom Mann was elected chairman and Harry Pollitt explained the objectives as follows: 'We are not out to disrupt the unions, or to encourage any new unions. Our sole object is to unite the workers in the factories by the formation of factory committees; to work for the formation of one union for each industry; to strengthen the local Trades Councils so that they shall be representative of every phase of the working-class movement, with its roots firmly embedded in the factories of each locality. We stand for the formation of a real General Council that shall have the power to direct, unite and co-ordinate all struggles and activities of the trade unions, and so make possible the end of the present chaos and go forward in a united attack in order to secure, not only our immediate demands, but win complete workers control of industry.'

Allied to this general programme were the bread-and-butter demands; a £1 a week wage increase; a minimum wage of £4; the 44-hour week and no overtime. As a leavening to the demand for more power to the General Council, they also added demands for the direct affiliation to the TUC of the Unemployed Workers' Movement and the Trades Councils.

The whole programme was set within the context of the primary aim of the Minority Movement: '... to organize the working masses of Great Britain for the overthrow of capitalism, the establishment of the Socialist Commonwealth; to carry on a wide agitation for the principles of the revolutionary class struggle ... and against the present tendency towards social peace and class collaboration ...' The introduction of straight economic demands connected the immediate pre-occupations of workers with the strengthened organisational form that might give them substance. The organisational form also provided a unified working-class army that could be directed to revolutionary action. The factory committee structure, directly represented on local trades councils, which in their turn were directly affiliated to the TUC, displayed, in embryonic form, the idea of the Soviet. The
affiliation to the TUC of the Unemployed Movement also had some considerable advantages, not only because the NUWCM (National Unemployed Worker's Committee Movement) was firmly under CP control, but also because the organised unemployed, despite their immediate lack of industrial power, displayed a satisfyingly militant spirit, particularly so during the working-class as whole and indivisible. The logic of a union firmly under unemployed, despire their immediate lack of industrial power, gave voice to the new conciliatory line: 'We have no desire to break up the Amsterdarn International. What we want is to create a strong, vigorous International'. It is interesting to contrast this statement with the 'uncompromising opposition to the yellow International of Amsterdarn' of the 21 conditions. In the same speech Tomsky indicated the route the Profintern had chosen to the heart of the TUC General Council, when he spoke in laudatory terms of Purcell, a 'left' member of the General Council: 'Beyond question a man upon whom we can rely in an emergency is Purcell, a true-hearted champion of the workers'. In retrospect it all sounds like a rather sick joke.

At the Hull TUC in September of that year Tomsky again spoke for unity in a very conciliatory spirit. Following the Congress a delegation from the General Council (Purcell, Bramley, Tillotson, Turner and Finlay) attended the Sixth Congress of the Russian Trade Unions, and in early 1925 the Anglo-Russian Committee was set up. In 1924 the Labour Government, had, despite Liberal protests, signed an Anglo-Russian trade treaty and guaranteed a loan to the Russians. A strong pro-Soviet tide was running not only through the TUC but also through the organised workers. The economic situation was improving and the coal industry made large coal exports. One reason for this was the French occupation of the Ruhr following the failure of the Germans to meet their reparations bill, which effectively handicapped a prime competitor of British coal. Economic improvement gave an opportunity for workers to regain some of the losses of 1922-23. But the recovery was short lived. The Dawes plan stabilised the mark, enabled reparations to be paid and helped the recovery of Germany as an international competitor.

The advent of the first Labour Government in 1924 shifted, to a degree, the political centre of gravity of the General Council. Right-wingers like J H Thomas, Bondfield and Gosling were taken into MacDonald's government. As a result Swales, Hicks, Purcell and other 'lefts' gave the TUC a verbal militancy that corresponded to the more genuine swell in the unions.

In the period following the founding of the national movement, the MM made some advances. Affiliations from some small national unions and from numbers of district committees were secured. Between 1924 and early 1926 affiliation rose from 200,000 to 957,000.16 Allowing for some exaggeration, duplication and, perhaps, triplication, this still represents a sizeable increase in influence. In mining, always the largest supporter of the MM, 200 MM branches were formed and very large delegations sent to the Movements' conferences. Slightly smaller representation was forthcoming from Engineering (156 delegates at the August 1926 conference) and Transport (NUR and TGWU some 76 delegates).17 However, apart from these main areas of strength, and a few small unions based primarily on the East End of London, the MM made little impact. Even in these industries the support was in specific geographical locations—South Wales, London, Scotland, the NW areas, interestingly enough, that corresponded closely to the successes of the pre-1914 rank-and-file movement and to the later SS and WCM.

In this period the NMM not only acquired greater membership, but also engaged activity in the struggles in mining, railways and engineering. MM policy was discussed in a number of the unions and parts adopted in some. The South Wales Miners Federation adopted the MM programme in full, including TUC affiliation to the RILU. But already the pattern was beginning to take shape. Greater and greater emphasis was given to the importance of international trade union unity and the part that the Anglo-Russian Committee could play in this venture. As delegates to the TUC were urged to act as a bloc. At the 1925 Trades Union Congress the MM were able to get a resolution committing the General Council to fight, through the IFTU for Russian affiliation. At the same Congress the Tailors and Garment Workers moved and Pollitt, for the Boilermakers, seconded a resolution which, called for the trade unions to organise for the overthrow of capitalism 'in conjunction with the party of the workers', opposition to 'capitalist schemes of co-partnership' and strong workshop organisation. After a card vote, the resolution was carried by 2,456,000 votes to 1,218,000 votes.

The 1925 Congress represented a high point in the relationship between the MM movement and the TUC 'lefts'. Alonzo Swales, in his Presidential address had said that 'a militant and progressive policy, consistently and steadily pursued is the only policy that will consolidate and inspire our rank-and-file . . . there cannot be any community of interest between the working-class and the capitalist-class'. He went on to urge the Congress to give the General Council 'full powers to create the necessary machinery to combat every movement of our opponents'.18

The background to these largely verbal pyrotechnics is to be found in the events of July 31st, 1925 'Red Friday'.
The effects of the Dawes plan, and the Baldwin administra-
tions decision to return to the gold standard, produced, as
Keynes succinctly put it, 'an atmosphere favourable to the
reduction of wages'. Export prices fell rapidly, particularly for
coal—suffering especially from the Dawes scheme of payment
in kind with Ruhr coal. The mineowners proposed a return to
the wage structure of 1921 and an increase of one hour in the
working day. The actual effect of this cut is best expressed in
Symons book The General Strike: '...the proposed wage
cuts were between 10 per cent and 25 per cent of the wages
earned and these wages vary between £2 and £4 a week'. On
top of this, of course, it would take an extra hour a day to
earn the decreased wages. The miners' leaders, A J Cook and
Herbert Smith adamantly refused any attempt to compromise.
Herbert Smith, a taciturn Yorkshireman, seems to have
restricted his contributions to the discussion to the simple,
yet telling phrase 'nowt doin', on one occasion while cleaning
his false teeth on his handkerchief.

The triple alliance had not survived Black Friday and,
although a new 'Industrial Alliance' was in train it had not
made much progress. The TUC was the only organisation
able of bringing aid to the miners. The TGWU agreed to
call a strike in solidarity, and the General Council put a
complete embargo on the movement of coal from July 31st,
the day the employer's notices were to come into effect.
the government, whatever the wishes of the coal-owners, felt
compelled to enter the debate. At a meeting with the mine-
workers the Prime Minister, Baldwin refused to agree to
subsidise the mines. In a prophetic statement he indicated that
the miners were merely the first of many workers to pay for the
country's difficulties: 'All the workers in the country have
got to take a reduction in wages'. Only hours before the
July 31st deadline the government caved in and agreed to pay a
subsidy to the industry until May 1st, 1926. The subsidy, estimated
to cost £10m, in fact cost £23m, but, whatever the subsidy cost the government, it certainly bought them
nine months in which to prepare. The lack of preparation
displayed by the TUC and the MM were to cost the working-class
far more than £23 million, which they repaid many times over
in lower wages and worsened conditions. They also lost for
years the possibility of revolutionary change.

The Scarborough (1925) TUC that reflected, in words, the
working-class élite induced by Red Friday made little or no
attempt to prepare the movement for the decisive struggle that
all agreed had merely been postponed for nine months. It was
also significant that, apart from the speeches of Swales and
A J Cook, no left-wing member of the General Council spoke
in any of the major debates. The right-wingers were not so shy.
Bevin, Thomas and Clynes all spoke against the idea of turning
the TUC from a federation to a directing centre of the working-
class. Clynes went so far as to declare, 'I am not in fear of the
capitalist class. The only class I fear is our own'. In this
Clynes merely reflected the general attitude of the Labour
Party right-wing. Ramsey MacDonald called Red Friday 'a
victory for the very forces that sane, well-considered, thoroughly
well-examined Socialism feels to be probably its greatest enemy'.
J H Thomas said the subsidy is wrong and will prove a
danger to the country' and Hodges (General Secretary of the
Miners' Federation before he entered Parliament in 1924) thought it 'a sure step in the direction of national bankruptcy'.

In the order of social upheaval a General Strike is the
next best thing to an armed insurrection and inevitably the
very suggestion of such an event raises directly the question
of power. The logic of May 1926 draws one ineluctably to this
conclusion. Capitalism had clearly and manifestly failed; at
one trade union conference after another the straight experience
of the members gave witness to this truth. Resolution after
resolution expressed determination, in words, to carry through
the socialist revolution. Realistic analysis was not in short
supply; there was no premium on the discussion of radical
solutions. The missing factor was any sort of direct class
preparation.

The right-wing trade union leadership were opposed to
the strike, seeing it only as a never to be played bargaining
counter to obtain concessions from the Government. The
centrist elements on the General Council saw the strike as a
continuation of normal trade union pressure that might well,
in some undefined way, enhance the social influence of the
workers and could, at some other time, give rise to social
change. Neither of these groups, for their different reasons,
made any serious preparations.

The Communist Party and the other militants of the
Minority Movement were quite clear as to the revolutionary
implications of the General Strike. It was the event which
accompanied with their whole history and traditions, as industrial
unionists, and also the likely route that a mature working-class
with a developed trade union movement would follow.

The basic problems that vitiated their efforts were two-fold.
The first and least important, was the small size of the CP,
(5,000 members in the CP, 5,000 in the YCL) and the
psychological inhibitions that this lack of numbers induced.
Second, and more important, was the Russian influenced
emphasis on the General Council as the vehicle on which the
party should ride.

The first problem could have been overcome. The CP,
at that time, had far wider working-class periphery than they
have ever enjoyed since. In the Minority Movement they had
a far reaching influence in at least three major unions and a
wide following in trades councils and trade union branches.
It is in just such circumstances as this that a small organisation
that prepares to operate independently can become a mass party.
There is no guarantee, of course, that had the party had
Lenin at the helm and Trotsky organising the operation they
would have succeeded. What is clear, however, is that there
was no chance of success in the policy and procedure they
adopted up to and during the strike.

The General Council were instructed to extend the
Industrial Alliance, to create Councils of Action, to strengthen
committee, to form workers' defence squads and
to prepare for the maintenance of essential services. The General
Council could not, would not and did not do any of these things.

Despite the clear warning of Government intentions in
the arrest and sentencing of 12 leading members of the party
(Inkpin, Pollitt, Rust, Galbraith, Hannington, McManus, Bell,
Murphy, Campbell, Page Arnot, Wintringham and Cant) in
1925, its precautions and preparations were rudimentary.
During the strike over 1,000 party members were arrested.
Although leading members were sent out to the provinces,
communication was almost impossible because the necessary
provisions had not been made. Decisions taken by the Political
Bureau during the strike were not transmitted to the branches
for four days.

The slogans of the party were defensive slogans — 'Not a
penny off the pay, not a second on the day' — cast within the
framework of defence of the miners. As the report to the
Eighth Party Congress confessed in October 1926, 'Once the
masses were on the streets the business of Central Committee
was to extend these slogans at the same time making them
aggressive in character'. In their manifesto, The Political
Meaning of the General Strike, published during the strike,
the main emphasis was on the miners' demands, nationalisation
and the replacement of the Tory government with a Labour
government. Even when the CP considered raising demands
for groups of workers other than the miners they decided to operate through the appropriate unions.24

The story of the General Strike is too well known to rehearse it here. It suffices to say that whatever opportunities the situation offered to the revolutionary movement were not grasped. The working-class paid and paid heavily for the debilitating influence of the Comintern. For the Minority Movement and the Communist Party the Movement lived on until the early 1930's, the Communist Party is still with us bereft of the certainties of outright Stalinism yet incapable of drawing any lessons from its failures. Its main function as an organisation is to stand as an obstacle in the way of a genuine revolutionary organisation.

The post-strike history of the Minority Movement stands in no way as an object lesson for revolutionaries. It is unlikely that any future revolutionary organisation would perform the grotesque antics that drove the movement into oblivion. The whole 'third period' insanity of the 'Class against Class' policy and the dual unionism of the early 1930's cannot be explained except through the abject subordination of the CPGB to the dictates of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The tragedy of the Minority Movement and the infant Communist Party is not, however, in its failure; for every movement has its failures. The tragedy is in the loss, from meaningful class politics, of a whole generation of working-class militants. The early CP contained thousands of workers, dedicated to revolutionary socialism and with a wealth of rank-and-file trade union experience. That men like Pollitt, Mann, Murphy, Gallacher, Bell and hundreds of others spent their talented lives in the sterile service of Stalinism, through all the betrayals, small and large, that were entailed, says a great deal for the conviction that originally brought them to the socialist movement.

The minority Movement is no more and the conditions and traditions and the men that gave rise to it, in its specific form, no longer exist. Attempts to set up its latter day equivalent are an exercise either in historical nostalgia or attempts to repeat the tragedy of the 1920's in the farce of 1970.

Nowhere in Britain today does the revolutionary movement have the working-class base or the working-class periphery to set in motion an organisation that can operate as a coherent opposition within the unions. The immediate task is not to build meaningless paper organisations but to expand our influence and membership among the class. The job is more exacting and less exciting than the search for surrogates at any number of points on the third world compass. Nor is it as exhilarating as the construction of an exclusive super bolshevik party, with all of 400 members, that, in its own estimation, teeters on the brink of power. (How long can one teeter without actually falling on one's face?) Nor is it as easy as the illusory soft option of snuggling up to the 'left wing' of the trade union leadership and the parliamentary Labour Party. It is much more difficult than all of these things, but ultimately it is the only way to success.

1 Marx-Engels, Selected Correspondence, p. 326.
2 Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-33. Oxford University Press, 50s.
4 Quoted in Pearce, op cit.
5 See Martin Glaberman, 'Be His Wages High or Low', IS 21.
6 Walter Kendall, The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, p. 25.
7 Quoted in Coates and Topham, Workers' Control, p. 95.
8 Thesis of Third Congress CP and RILU, quoted in Coates and Topham, op cit, p. 85.
9a ibid. p. 61.
10 R Fox, Class Struggle in Britain, p. 79.