

Alan McKinnon

# Communist Party Election Tactics - a historical review

This article represents an attempt to tackle the complex question of Communist Party election policy from a historical point of view. It shows a number of phases in the development of Communist Party tactics and strategy, and provides a summary of the main lessons drawn. Two opposing tendencies have appeared in the Party's approach to electoral work: on the one hand, a sectarianism expressed in the isolation of the Party from the mass organisations of the working class; and on the other, the tendency to dissolve the Party into these organisations and lose its identity.

The article will examine two distinct periods in which both of these tendencies appeared. The first period runs from 1927 until the mid 1930s, and corresponds to the adoption of the 'class against class' line by the international communist movement. The second period begins in the closing years of the Second World War and ends in 1951.

The argument is illustrated by figures for general and local election results. Figure 1 shows the major statistics for the Communist Party contests at every General Election since the Party's formation in 1920'. In figure 2 are charted the parliamentary constituencies where the Communist Party has contested most consistently<sup>2</sup>. Figure 3 follows local election results from four wards in Glasgow<sup>3</sup> where the Communists had a fairly strong base, and helps to fill in some of the gaps between General Elections.

The figures reveal a number of dramatic changes in electoral support: the high vote in the early twenties followed by the sharp fall in 1929, and the gradual rise thereafter throughout the thirties; the peak figures of 1945 and the astonishingly steep decline to 1950.

In the aftermath of the First World War the British ruling class needed new forms of social control over the working class. The new mood of militancy combined with the dramatic growth of the Labour Party in organisational strength and support, had created a most unstable situation. They opted for a policy of 'educating' Labour, using various forms of ideological persuasion, so that the new political identity should be turned into constitutional and reformist channels. At the same time they had to effectively isolate the Left, and above all the Communist Party from the Labour Party and trade unions, if Labour's newly elected class organisations were to be used to halt and not develop class mobilisation.

## Communist strategy

If ruling class strategy depended on dividing the working class and isolating its militant section, then Communist policy on the other hand, was concerned to counter this. From its formation in August 1920 it stood for working class unity and sought affiliation to the Labour Party. The Labour Party was seen as the mass political party of the British working class which brought together a united trade union movement and all types of specialist organisations into a single federated party. Lenin had stressed the importance of British Communists remaining in the ranks of the Labour Party as trade unionists and individual members, and for the Communist Party to

seek formal affiliation, provided it could maintain freedom of criticism and could pursue its own policy.

In the General Election of 1922, the Communist Party election manifesto was entitled *A United Front Against the Capitalist Enemy*. Its emphasis was on the need for working class unity against the capitalist offensive: 'To demonstrate our strength and unity we must stand together. We must present a united front of the working class. No worker must stand against a worker to the advantage of the capitalists'.<sup>4</sup>

Altogether the Party put up 6 candidates: 2 as official Labour candidates, 2 as Labour candidates with local but not official Labour Party endorsement; and 2 as direct candidates of the Communist Party. No Communist stood against a Labour Party candidate. Electors were asked to vote Labour where no Communist was standing, but were warned against any illusion in the event of Labour victory: '... support the Labour Party candidates with your eyes open.'

A similar approach was adopted in the election campaigns of the successive years of 1923 and 1924, although by 1924 official Labour Party endorsement of Communist candidates was no longer permitted.



### Class against class

The General Strike and the years which followed saw the right-wing on the one hand adopting far more openly collaborationist policies, and, on the other hand, intensifying its organisational grip on the official movement. Cynicism replaced militancy. Trade union membership fell. For the Communist Party these developments posed particularly difficult problems, and it was the struggle to come to terms with them that largely explains the Party's first departure into electoral sectarianism.

In October 1927 the 9th Congress received a telegram from the Executive Council of the Comintern which argued that, since the General Strike there had been a growing tendency towards the merging of the trade union and Labour Party leaderships with the state apparatus. The Labour Party, it went on, had undergone certain changes since 1920, and was in the process of being transformed from a federal organisation to a party of the European social democratic type, with a growing tendency towards centralisation and unified discipline. It argued the need to step up '... the fight against the bourgeois leadership of the Labour Party, against parliamentary cretinism in every shape and form, and to prepare to fight the forthcoming elections as an independent party with a platform and candidates of its own, even in those cases where the Communist Party will be opposed by the so-called official candidates of the Labour Party'.<sup>5</sup>

This new, more independent line meant that instead of calling for the return at the next election of a Labour government which would be controlled by Labour's EC, British Communists should put forward the slogan of a Revolutionary Workers' Government. Thus evolved the tactic of 'class against class'.

There was indeed some justification for the position put by the Comintern. The situation in 1927 was very different from that of 1920. Workers now had the experience of a Labour government, the sell-out of the General Strike, and the defeat of the miners' struggle. In addition, there was the new open class collaboration line of Mondism and the exclusion of Communists and militants from the Labour Party and some trade unions. This changed situation was not properly recognised by the leadership of the British Communist Party.

### Sectarian errors

At the same time there were sectarian errors made, both in the formulation of the new line by the Comintern, and particularly in its interpretation and application by some Communist Parties. It was based on the assumption that reformist organisations as a whole had already gone over completely to the side of the capitalist class. Too often there was no clear distinction drawn between the right wing leaders and rank and file social democrats. At times social democracy was virtually identified with fascism. The 10th Plenum of the ECCI in July 1929 stated: '... in countries where there are strong social democratic parties, fascism assumes the particular form of social fascism.'<sup>6</sup> Communist Parties were set the '... task of decisively intensifying the struggle against Social Democracy and especially against its "left" wing as the most dangerous enemy of Communism in the labour movement and the main obstacle to the growth of militant activities of the masses of the workers.'<sup>7</sup>

In this way barriers were erected between Communists and workers influenced by social democratic ideas, and it became impossible to build a united front of the working class against the growing threat of fascism and war.

In addition, the Comintern overestimated the changes in the British Labour Party since 1920. In spite of its right wing leadership and the attacks on Communists, the basic structure of the Labour Party remained intact. Certainly in the new situation it was necessary for the

Communist Party to present a position of clear and principled opposition to the Labour leaders, and this the Party leadership had failed to do adequately. But this had to be done by campaigning in and through the key economic and political organisations of the working class. The new electoral tactic was sectarian because it counterposed to this the 'independent' leadership of the working class by the Communist Party, thus bypassing these organisations and leaving the Communists isolated.

### Internal differences

At first the new line was resisted by a majority in the Central Committee of the CPGB. They argued that British capitalism had been stabilised temporarily, that there was no evidence of an imminent revolutionary upsurge, that the essential nature of the Labour Party remained unchanged, and that the mass trend towards Labour was continuing. It was therefore necessary for Communists to continue their support for the Labour Party and step up the drive for affiliation.

A minority within the Central Committee, led by Dutt and Pollitt, supported the Comintern line.<sup>8</sup> They proposed putting up candidates against Labour Party leaders like Thomas, Henderson and MacDonald in order to bring out the independent role of the Communist Party on a national scale. Elsewhere specific united front proposals should be put to Labour candidates where no Communist was standing. If they agreed to these proposals, then Communists should support them. Where they refused, Communists should give no support and refuse to vote. The minority agreed on the correctness of paying the political levy, but argued that the Party should persuade the local trade union organisations to refuse to hand it over for the support of Labour candidates, and to reserve it for the Communist Party election fund or for financing non-Party militants. This new situation, they went on, meant that the Communist Party should now cease to demand affiliation to the Labour Party.<sup>9</sup>

By the 10th Congress of the CPGB in January 1929, the minority view had triumphed. Congress adopted the 'class against class' line without reservation. The main arguments now were about the interpretation of the new line..

During this period Communist Party membership fell steadily. From the high point of 10,000 in October 1926 it dropped to 3,500 by January 1929,<sup>10</sup> reflecting the growing isolation of the Party from working class struggles.

The General Election in the summer of 1929 took place against a background of growing working class resentment against the Baldwin government. The Communist Party, with its new independent line, put forward 25 candidates, all in opposition to Labour candidates. Except in the mining areas of West Fife and Rhondda East, the Communist vote slumped disastrously. At the time when the working class movement was beginning to stir again, and had elected a Labour government (albeit in coalition with the Liberals), the growing isolation of the Communist Party was reflected in its falling vote. In 1924 with only 8 candidates the Communists had polled over 55,000 votes. Now in 1929 with 25 candidates, they had barely managed

<sup>1</sup> F W S Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-9, 1950-70*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Glasgow Herald*.

<sup>4</sup> *Communist*, October 28, 1922.

<sup>5</sup> *Outline History of the Comintern*, p269.

<sup>6</sup> *Thesis of Tenth Plenum of ECCI*, p8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp15-16.

<sup>8</sup> See *Communist Policy in Great Britain* — report of the British Commission of the 9th Plenum of the Comintern, 1928.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Bell, *op cit*, p130. This latter position was not supported by the Comintern and was never adopted as Party policy.

50,000. As a percentage of total votes cast in the contested constituencies, this represented a fall from 19% to 5% (see Figures 1 and 2).

The 1929 General Election manifesto of the Communist Party marked a clear break with previous electoral policy. The Labour Party was defined as 'the third capitalist party'. All three parties, Tories, Liberals and Labour were summed up as representing 'Empire and Mondism' without any distinction between them.

Instead was counterposed the 'independent' leadership of the working class by the Communist Party: 'Class is against class. The Labour Party has chosen the capitalist class. The Communist Party is the Party of the Working Class.'<sup>11</sup> In place of the demand for the return of a Labour government was the call for a 'Revolutionary Workers Government'.

There was a certain confusion in the new electoral position. If indeed the Labour Party had become simply a third bourgeois party, then why had the Communist Party not dropped its demand for affiliation? Why did it not ask the trade unions to withdraw from this 'third bourgeois party', and either use the disaffiliated constituency Labour Parties to form a new political party to which the trade unions should be affiliated, or seek direct trade union affiliation to the Communist Party?

#### A propaganda sect

There continued to be sharp differences inside the Communist Party leadership over the application of the new line. The 11th Congress of the Party in December 1929 proved decisive in overcoming this internal crisis. The Party still came to strike centres from the outside 'like an ambulance corps', was still acting as 'a propaganda sect, and did not play a leading role in economic or political struggles'.<sup>12</sup> Most Communist Party members remained very weak in theory. All this was preventing the Party from growing in size and influence.

A special letter from the Comintern called for a break with hesitation and vacillation, and an end to the bad internal situation

within the Party. At the same time it insisted that the Party must transfer its main efforts to mass work in the factories, and to the development of the Minority Movement. To carry this through effectively the Party needed to elect a new leadership introducing new men and women from the factories.

There now was irresistible pressure, both from the membership and from the Comintern, to make the transition from predominantly propagandist methods of work to organisation and agitation from within the key factories, pits and depots throughout the country.

Prior to the Congress, as a result of rising pressure from the membership, the Central Committee had made changes in the leadership, replacing Albert Inkpin with Harry Pollitt as General Secretary. The 11th Congress went much further. A big sweep was made of Central Committee members. Only 12 of the old members were adopted, and 23 new members were elected. Within a month the long awaited *Daily Worker* was finally launched.

#### General Election 1931

The election took place in October 1931, and was fought in an artificially produced atmosphere of panic. The Labour government had collapsed in the credit crisis two months earlier following MacDonald and Snowden's desertion. The Tories, who had posed as the patriots in favour of a National government with MacDonald at its head, were returned with a thumping majority. The Labour vote fell from 8.3 million to 6.6 million. The Communists, again pursuing their independent line of outright opposition to Labour, put up 26 candidates. Their total poll increased from 50,000 to 75,000 but still made no serious impression outside the coalfields of Fife and South Wales (see Figures 1 and 2).

The Communist Party was now less than 3,000 strong and largely isolated from the organised workers. After the election the new leadership set up a commission of active members to examine the practical activity of the Party branches and propose changes. Arising from this the January resolution was adopted by the Central Committee in 1932. It demanded a complete transformation in the direction of mass work in the factories and trade unions. It stressed the need to combat 'left' sectarianism, which interpreted independent leadership as the abandonment of all work in the reformist trade unions.

Communists were now winning support through their role in rank and file bodies like the National Unemployed Workers Movement and the London Busmen's movement. The new methods of work were beginning to pay off in the electoral field too. The municipal elections of 1932 and 1933 showed considerable gains in Communist votes (see Figure 3). The Party was beginning its slow climb out of isolation. By the Communist Party's 12th Congress in November 1932, membership had increased from 2,756 in June 1931 to 5,400. Sales of the *Daily Worker* had doubled in 18 months.

Meantime the fascist menace was continuing to grow throughout Europe. After the victory of Hitler and the Nazis in 1933, Comintern policy towards fascism began to change.

But it was the events of 1934, especially the clashes with fascism in France, Spain and Austria which marked the turning point in the development of anti-fascist unity. In France the Communist Party had identified the defeat of fascism as the main task facing the working class movement. A practical united front in action and the accompanying mass pressure had forced French Socialist leaders to open negotiations with the French Communist Party and reach agreement. Such an alliance in Germany could have prevented Hitler from coming to power.

By the 7th World Congress of the Communist International in July/August 1935 these experiences had been well digested. Past errors were criticised mercilessly. The movement had been too slow to

The Communist Vote Figure 1

Election	Candidates	MPs elected	Forfeited deposits	Communist vote	(1)	%(2)
1922	6	2	1	44,948	222,704	20.2
1923	9	0	0	76,741	286,073	26.8
1924	8	1	1	55,346	290,522	19.1
1929	25	0	21	50,634	993,425	5.1
1931	26	0	21	74,824	984,591	7.6
1935	2	1	0	27,117	71,741	37.8
1945	21	2	12	102,780	941,549	10.9
1950	100	0	97	91,765	4,696,995	2.0
1951	10	0	10	21,640	493,290	4.4
1955	17	0	15	33,144	710,317	4.7
1959	18	0	17	30,896	758,792	4.1
1964	36	0	36	46,442	1,406,142	3.3
1966	57	0	57	62,092	2,206,027	2.8
1970	58	0	58	37,970	2,336,620	1.6
1974(F)	44	0	43	32,743	1,925,227	1.7
1974(O)	29	0	29	17,426	1,142,826	1.5

(1) Total vote in constituencies contested by Communist candidates.

(2) Communist vote as a percentage of the total vote in the contested constituencies.

realise that fascism could only be stopped by developing the broadest anti-fascist unity. It was necessary to draw a clear line between fascism and bourgeois democracy so that all those opposed to fascism could be drawn in to united action.

### A new electoral policy

Even before the 7th World Congress, British Communists had gone some way towards this new policy. In the municipal elections of November 1934 and 1935 the Party came out in support of Labour candidates who were prepared to fight for a programme of immediate demands, as well as putting forward its Own candidates in places where it had a mass basis. In 1934 Labour had made striking gains in municipal seats. In the following years that position was consolidated and the Communist Party gained at Cowdenbeath (2 seats), Perth and Clydebank.

The Party's programme *For a Soviet Britain*, published in February 1935, made no specific mention of electoral tactics. It denounced Labour Party and TUC leaders for refusing united action against fascism and for sabotaging unity where it was developing but called for joint action with the 'millions of sincere and stalwart working class fighters in the ranks of the Labour Party and trade unions' (p.8).

Before the General Election the Communist Party had been in contact with the Labour Party EC. In the interests of unity they had proposed to withdraw all candidates from opposing Labour candidates, and asked the Labour Party not to oppose the candidature of Pollitt in East Rhondda and Gallacher in West Fife. The proposals went even further: 'The Party is prepared in these two constituencies to, in conjunction with the trade unions and Labour bodies in them, convene a selection conference, bring the various working class candidates before it, and abide by their decisions.'<sup>13</sup>

The Labour Party rejected these proposals, but the Communist Party's position remained firm. Working class unity against the threat of fascism and war was now the order of the day. The Party's election campaign was no longer confined to the seats it was contesting, as it had been in 1929 and 1931. Everywhere Communists were urged to win the support of local Labour Parties and candidates for a united front on immediate demands, and to secure the defeat of the open representatives of capitalism. The slogan of a 'Revolutionary Workers Government' was replaced by 'Vote For a Labour Government to Fight Capitalism.'

### General Election 1935

The National government was returned with a much reduced majority and a net loss of 171 seats. Votes for the Communist Party were substantial, totalling 27,117 for the 2 seats it contested. Since the General Strike the Party had been steadily consolidating itself in the mining areas of Fife and South Wales. Now this had paid off in electoral terms with Willie Gallacher being elected to represent West Fife in Parliament (see Figures 1 & 2).

At an enlarged meeting of the Communist Party's Central Committee in January 1936, Pollitt reviewed the Party's General Election efforts. During the election campaign the Party's work had taken it much closer to ordinary Labour Party members and trade unionists, but much remained to be done. Many concessions had been made to the Labour Party in the course of the campaign and too often the Communist Party became submerged in the general Labour propaganda. These opportunist mistakes had been made because the Party knew that the workers wanted unity against the National government, but it must not be achieved at the expense of submerging Communist Party policy. He went on to call for a new campaign to secure affiliation to the Labour Party. A petition was to be organised within the labour movement in support of the Party's affiliation, which could receive widespread backing, and could exercise a profound effect upon the next Labour Party Conference.

In just a few years the Party's position had been transformed. Since the leadership changes of December 1929, and particularly since the historic January resolution of 1932, the Party had been playing a growing role in the mass struggles of the unemployed and against Mosley's Blackshirts. The Party was now becoming firmly based in the factories. Throughout the 30s it increased steadily in strength and influence. By October 1936, Communist Party membership had risen by 4,000 in just over a year to reach 11,500 and *Daily Worker* sales had doubled. By the eve of the war in 1939, the Party was to be 17,000 strong. In addition strenuous efforts were now being made to shed all traces of the sectarianism of the earlier period. Working class unity against fascism and war was the key issue. The new drive for affiliation was geared to that end. So also was the changed electoral strategy. In

<sup>10</sup> *Communist Review*, VI, p383.

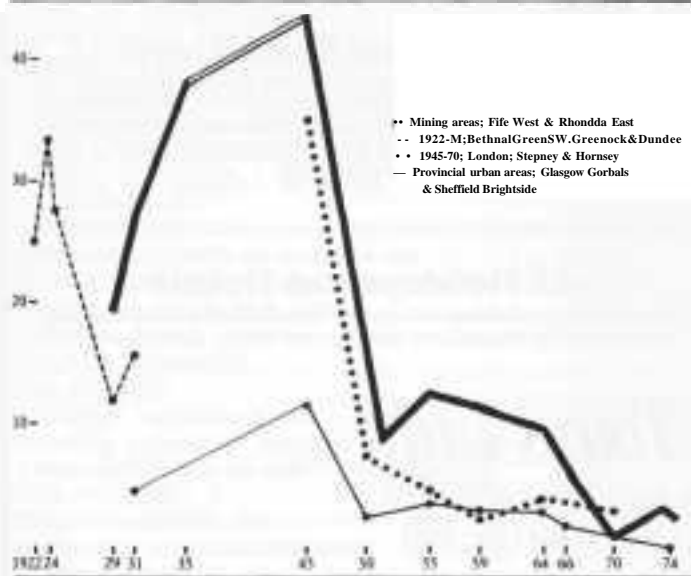
<sup>11</sup> *Class against Class*, CPGB election programme 1929, pi0.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Bell, *op cit*, pi37.

<sup>13</sup> *Report of National Conference of CPGB on October 6, 1935.*

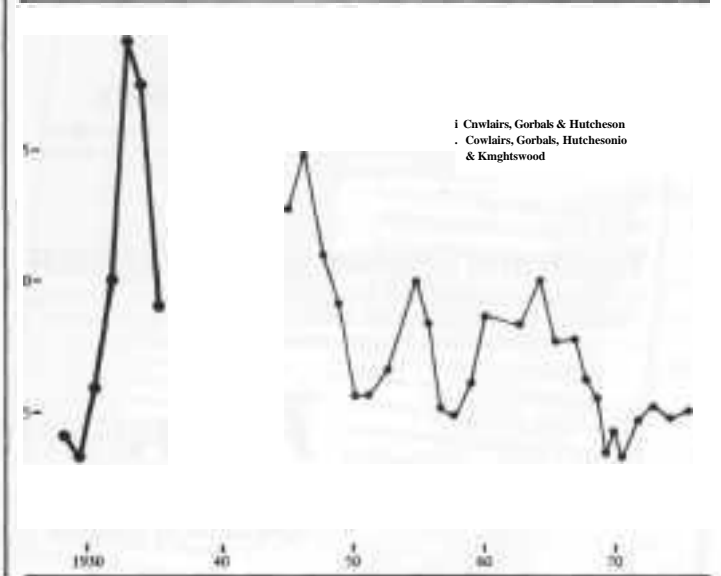
General Elections 1922-74  
Communist vote as a percentage of the total vote

Figure 2



Local Elections: Glasgow  
Communist vote as percentage of total vote in same wards

Fig. 3



the years to come this strategy was to meet with considerable success, and it was only with great difficulty that the right wing leaders were able to prevent Communist Party affiliation and formal organisational unity being achieved in the early 40s.

### Anti fascist unity

From 1941 onwards, following the Nazi assault on the Soviet Union, the mood of British workers began to change. The Soviet people were now facing the full weight of the Nazi war machine. Communists were emerging as the champions of national unity in the fight against fascism at home and abroad. And for the first time in the history of capitalism, working class militants were leading the drive for production. Membership of the Communist Party and sales of the *Daily Worker* grew dramatically<sup>14</sup>. The shop stewards movement was coming to the fore and the Left was gaining ground at all levels inside the trade union movement.

Meanwhile the Communist Party's electoral policy continued to follow the guidelines which had characterised it from 1934 onwards. It continued its campaign for affiliation. It proposed an electoral agreement with the Labour Party so that there should be only one working class candidate in each constituency. That refused, it entered the General Election campaign of 1945 with a policy designed to strengthen the trend towards political unity. Its 21 candidates received more votes than ever before, averaging 11% of the total vote in the constituencies contested. Two Communists were returned as MPs and in Rhondda East Harry Pollitt was only 1,000 votes behind the Labour candidate. As in 1935, the Party's campaign was by no means confined to the constituencies it was contesting. Elsewhere Communists gave active support to local Labour candidates — a fact acknowledged by several of the newly elected Labour MPs<sup>15</sup>.

In the local elections in the autumn of 1945 and the spring of 1946, the Communist Party improved on this performance (see Figure 3).

The number of Communist councillors throughout the country rose to 206, the main strength being in Wales and Scotland<sup>16</sup>.

At the same time, however, far reaching changes were taking place in the Communist Party's style of work and organisation. At its Congress in 1943, the method of electing the leadership by recommended list was abolished and changes in the nomenclature of the basic Party units introduced. The Central Committee was renamed the Executive Committee, Politburo changed to Political Committee, factory cells became groups, and local cells became branches. Subsequently the conditions of membership were relaxed and theoretical education of members declined<sup>17</sup>. By November 1945, as the emphasis shifted to the area branches, factory groups were abolished and Communist organised work in the factories reduced to a minimum<sup>18</sup>.

There was now growing criticism in the Party press of these opportunist errors<sup>19</sup>. The Party's organisation was no longer geared towards class struggle at the point of production but was increasingly becoming an electoral machine adapted for parliamentary elections and parliamentary struggle. The unique situation of building national unity in the course of a war against fascism had fostered the illusion that national unity could be maintained in the period of post-war reconstruction. Moreover, with the election of a Labour government, it was widely believed that socialism could be won without bitter struggle against the capitalist class and the right wing Labour leaders, and therefore factory organisation was no longer of crucial importance.

### The change in line

1947 was the year of the decisive turn in the post war situation. A monthly balance of payments deficit and premature exhaustion of the US loan created an acute financial crisis. Instead of cutting military expenditure the Labour government cut social services and capital

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investments at home, lowered real wages and launched an export drive. The 'honeymoon period' was over.

Up until now the Communist Party had been muted in its criticism of the Government. But a policy of firm opposition to the Government's right wing policies had been argued by a minority inside the Party for some time. The Party had lost 12,000 members since the General Election and the YCL was down to one third of its pre-war size. Now a change of line was urged by the Cominform<sup>20</sup>. A statement issued by Zhandov called for clarity on the part of the fraternal parties. The world, he said, was split into two camps which were mutually contradictory and the role of right wing leaders like Attlee and Bevin was as 'loyal supporters of the imperialists, bringing disintegration into the ranks of the working class and poisoning their outlook'<sup>21</sup>

The theme was taken up in Palme Dutt's 'Notes of the Month' in the November issue of *Labour Monthly* with the heading 'Two Camps — One World'<sup>22</sup>. In a special report to the Executive Committee in December 1947 Pollitt made a searching re-appraisal of Communist policy<sup>23</sup>. The new situation required a change in tactics. The Party had been slow to recognise that US imperialism had become the driving force of world reaction. It was late in appreciating the full scale of the Labour government's drift to the right, and that the Government had become an instrument of imperialism. It had failed to understand that without a basic change in policy no production effort could solve the crisis. The working class had to be mobilised to go into action for its demands. The Communist Party had an essential part to play in this process, but it had to overcome some serious weaknesses. It had to end the illusion which grew after 1945 that the working class could advance to socialism without determined struggle against capitalism and the right wing leaders. The Party had to overcome the outlook that economic issues were an end in themselves, and it had to link them more closely with the fight against government policy. Above all, to be able to lead the workers in action, the Party had to be firmly based in the factories. The winning of trade union positions was all very well, but it was no substitute for basic Party leadership and organisation at the point of production.

### Election policy

In his report to the Executive Committee in December 1949, Pollitt proposed a major change in electoral policy to meet the needs of the new situation: 'The major task of the Communist Party in the coming local and general elections, therefore, is to carry through a mass independent campaign for our alternative socialist policy and to advance the maximum number of Communist candidates. The political situation requires that the Communist Party makes the biggest effort it has ever made in the electoral field and our aim should be the maximum number of local candidates and in the region of 100 parliamentary candidates'<sup>24</sup>.

Again in this formulation, as with the class against class period of the 1920s, was emerging the notion of 'independent' Communist

<sup>14</sup> From 19,000 in November membership increased to 65,000 by March 1943.

DW circulation in 1942 was 100,000 per day.

<sup>15</sup> DN Pritt, *The Labour Government 1945-51*, p28.

<sup>16</sup> *World News and Views*, 1946, p129.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 1945, p95.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 1945, pp90 and 368.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 1945, p370.

<sup>20</sup> Communist Information Bureau — established in 1947 for the purpose of organising exchange of experience and co-ordinating the activities of Communist Parties on the basis of mutual agreement.

<sup>21</sup> WN, 1947, p463.

<sup>22</sup> *Labour Monthly*, 1947, p323.

<sup>23</sup> Report of the EC of CPGB 13/12/1947.

<sup>24</sup> Report to EC of CPGB, 28th Dec 1949.

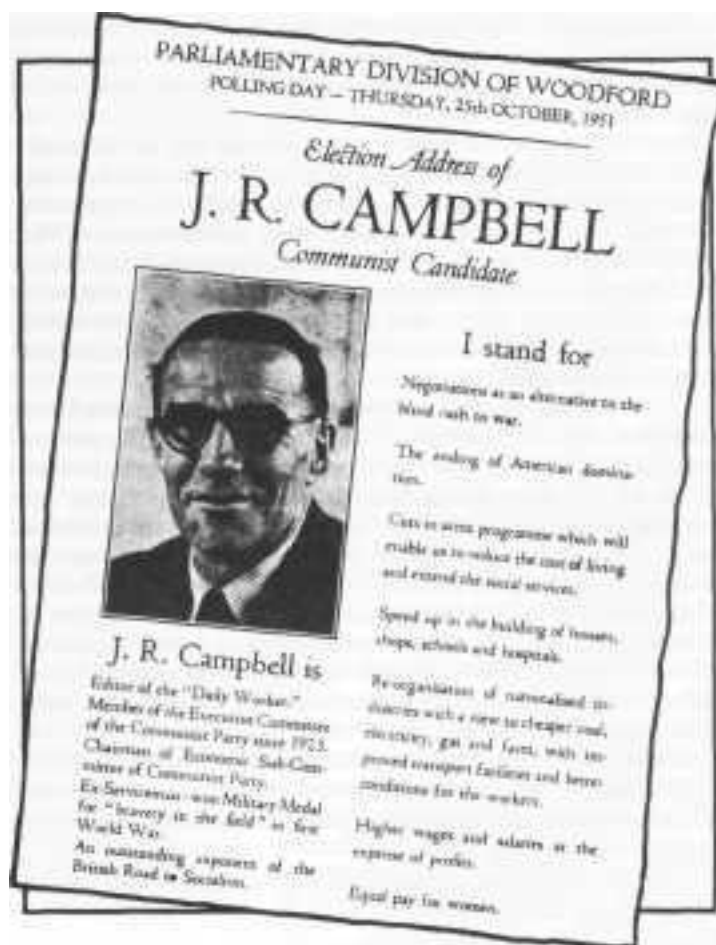
leadership of the working class. The first pre-occupation for every member, from the Executive Committee down to the smallest branch, must be the building of the Party organisation in the factories. In addition it called for more serious and systematic educational work within the Party on the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism, and a wide sale of the marxist classics to popularise marxist ideas.

At its 21st Congress in November 1949, the Communist Party finalised its General Election programme. It was entitled *The Socialist Road for Britain* and issued a clear challenge to the existing policy of Toryism and right wing Labour.

The Communist election campaign in February 1950 was the biggest to date with 100 Communist candidates. In practice there was no attempt to campaign in areas outside the 100 Communist contests. The Labour government was returned but with a much reduced majority. All the militant Labour MPs had been eliminated. For the Communists the result was disastrous. Both MPs lost their seats. Only 3 candidates saved their deposits. In spite of the fact that the Party put forward 5 times as many candidates as it had in the previous election, its total vote had declined by 10,000. Its percentage of the vote in the constituencies contested had fallen from 11% to 2%.

### The post mortem

What were the reasons for the low Communist vote in 1950? In the post election discussion 4 main causes were identified. The Party was not yet sufficiently rooted amongst the workers in the factories and trade unions to be able to counter all the confusing Labour and Tory propaganda. The fear of a return to the Tories induced many workers to vote Labour rather than Communist. In spite of all its weaknesses, many felt the Labour government to be responsible for full employment and benefits like the National Health Service. The workers' minds had been poisoned by the virulent anti-Communist campaign in the press and radio.



At the July meeting of the Executive Committee the analysis was taken much further<sup>25</sup>. Not enough attention had been given to the fight for national independence, and against the growing dependence economically and politically on the USA. In terms of the Party's style of work, sectarian tendencies had developed in recent years. The Party had accepted a position of self imposed isolation which made it appear that it looked upon all workers in the labour movement as one reactionary mass, because of the wrong policy of their leaders, and saw no possibility of differentiating between them. It had ceased to make any serious efforts to influence local Labour Parties through the character of the trade union representation to them. These sectarian errors had been reflected in the Party's electoral work. Pollitt agreed: 'Our fundamental mistake was that we saw only our candidates and the defeat of Toryism in the constituencies which we were fighting as our aim. The practical result was that, for our Party, the General Election was a contest between the Communist Party and all the others, without any serious attempts to make any differentiation between the Labour supporters and the right wing Labour leaders.'

### The way forward

As it was the Party had nothing concrete to show for its election efforts. The left caucus that had existed in the previous parliament had gone. In particular, the decision to increase the number of contests fivefold over the previous election, at a time when Party membership had fallen by 10,000, seemed hard to justify, especially in a situation where there was a real chance of a Tory comeback. Certainly there was a need for clear and principled opposition to the Labour leaders in the course of the General Election, but this opposition had to be channelled in and through the mass organisations of the labour movement in order to influence and change the policy, and at the same time retain the perspective of winning political unity. The Communist Party's policy of putting forward 100 candidates and concentrating its effort exclusively around them, tended to present the Communist Party as an alternative to the Labour Party and served to isolate the Communists from the mass of the labour movement in these difficult circumstances.

The final section of Pollitt's report showed the way forward. Communists must use every opportunity to develop unity in action with the rank and file Labour workers, through their activity in the factories, localities and mass organisations of the working class. The Party had to select carefully the constituencies where it stood, and concentrate on a limited number of candidates in areas where it had a real political basis. In all other constituencies Communists should work to secure the nomination of militant Labour candidates, pledged to fight for a progressive policy.

In the General Election of October 1951, the Communist Party contested only 10 constituencies. The main theme of its election policy was that a Tory victory would be a disaster. Tory policy would attack workers living standards in the interests of big business. The working class needed a progressive government to negotiate peace, to send home the US troops and stop the arms drive, and to use the money to meet the people's needs. Communists were opposed to the wage freeze and had led the fight against it. This time, in addition to mounting its own contests, the Communist Party actively supported the campaigns of Labour candidates throughout the country. There was mass election activity by the shop stewards movement and anti-Tory committees in the factories and trade union branches.

The election resulted in victory for the Tories. They secured 321 seats as against Labour's 295, while the Liberals were reduced to 6. The Communist vote increased slightly but remained very low in comparison with 1945.

<sup>25</sup>'The Fight for Peace and Working Class Unity', H Pollitt—report to EC of CPGB, July 8, 1950.

In 1953 the Party established an electoral commission to examine the poor electoral showing since 1950. It noted that in all those areas where Communists had won local and parliamentary seats — West Fife, the Rhondda, Cowdenbeath, Buckhaven, Lanarkshire, Dumbarton, Greenock, Stepney — it had been done on the basis of local and factory branches leading fights on unemployment, wages, evictions, rents, fascism, Spain, and peace.

Since the late forties the Party had lost most of these seats. There were subjective as well as objective reasons for this. Often branches adopted a haphazard and halfhearted approach to contests, changing candidates and wards from year to year and running campaigns which were too limited in time and scope. But more important, many branches did not lead campaigns on the key issues facing working people, drawing them into struggle. There had to be more attention to developing selected concentration areas for mass work and electoral activity. Branches had to give more attention to local conditions and demands, developing united action around them. Only this could lay the basis of the Communist Party's electoral advance.

### Conclusion

Our study of both the 1927-34 and the 1943-47 periods reveals a number of important lessons. It stresses the importance of criticism and self criticism as a principle of inner party life, so that mistakes can be quickly recognised and corrected. Moreover, it emphasises the need for the Communist Party to continually analyse the concrete conditions in which it is working, and to discover what is new and changing.

Between 1943 and 1947, the British Communist Party tended to generalise from its unique experience of building national unity against fascism, and continued to call for national unity after the war when conditions had changed irreversibly. As in the late 1920s, what had been a tactic devised for one specific situation, became a general strategy for winning socialism.

But with the defeat of the main fascist powers in 1945, the tactics of the working class had to change. The main enemy was no longer fascism. Its place had been taken by US imperialism and its British junior partner. Under these circumstances, any attempt to build 'national' unity in the period of post war reconstruction was doomed to failure.

The Communist Party was slow to react to these changed conditions, but when it did, it acted decisively to correct its mistakes. However, in its enthusiasm to implement its new tactical line, excesses were committed reminiscent of, but not so serious as those of the 'class against class' period 20 years earlier. Again the Labour Party was treated in practice as one reactionary mass, joint work with local LP members abandoned, trade union work suffered, and the perspective of Communist Party affiliation to the Labour Party was lost. Electoral tactics became sectarian and tended to isolate the Communists from the working class and its mass organisations. This undoubtedly contributed to the precipitate fall in the Communist vote in 1950, although it was by no means the only factor.

In the summer of 1950 the lessons had been learned. Once again the Communist Party had identified its key strategic aim as working class political unity against the capitalist class, and its electoral policy was tailored to meet this end.

The Party had been severely tested. In the difficult and rapidly changing post war situation, as with the period after the General Strike 20 years earlier, mistakes had been made, first of an opportunist character, and then later, after these had been over-corrected, of a sectarian nature. But it was a sign of the Party's growing maturity in these years that it was able to detect and fearlessly criticise these errors. This was to stand the Party in good stead in the struggles that were to take place in the following decade.