

DISCUSSION

A further note on British Communist History

Mr. Pelling, in this history which J. T. Murphy reviewed in the last number of the *New Reasoner*, has written a tract for the times - an anti-communist textbook that provides the historical background to the pamphlets and articles of IRIS and similar bodies. The purpose of all these publications is to make clear to all who can read that the whole history of the Communist Party in this country has been a scabrous record of folly, stupidity and chicanery, and that its members have been the dupes of particularly naive illusions. That the history of any left wing organisation, anywhere, anytime, involves the hopes and aspirations of ordinary men and women for a better society finds no place in Mr. Pelling's narrative. Write the history of Chartism as Mr. Pelling has written the history of the C.P. and it would be no more than a record of struggle for position, of narrowmindedness, ill-faith and mutual hatreds. Apply the same technique to the Social Democratic Federation - as indeed is usually done - and you have a picture of a sectarian band of dogmatists whose influence upon the movement they sought to serve was minimal. Of the idealism and the self sacrifice of the men and women who make up these movements and organisations, of their passionate rejection of inequality and oppression, there would be nothing.

In all this, Mr. Pelling is treading a path that is well worn. But he adds his own gloss that is peculiarly the product of the cold war fifties. When Mr. Pelling refers to John Gollan as 'a native of the Edinburgh slums' (p.171) and leaves it at that, without any other reference to Gollan's characteristics or qualities, it is surely not John Gollan who comes out of this exchange at the wrong end? Or when Mr. Pelling suggests that the reason why proportionately more communists were arrested during the nine days of the General Strike was 'principally because the Communists enjoyed the martyrdom of arrest and imprisonment for the cause whereas the average worker was only interested in escaping the attentions of the police if he could honourably do so' (p.36) he is arguing on the level of a leader writer for the pulp press. Or take the extraordinary paragraph on p.161 where Mr. Pelling is discussing the Korean war. 'From the middle of 1950,' he writes 'British troops were committed to battle in Korea against Communist forces and a case could easily have been made out for suppressing the British party on the grounds that it was assisting the King's enemies.' Indeed. Mr. Pelling tries to suggest that there were special reasons in the case of the Korean war, but to those who are involved in wars there are always special reasons why opposition should be silenced. Exactly the same argument was used against those who denounced the Boer War, and I wonder whether the large minority which opposed the Suez misadventure of the Tory Party included Mr. Pelling among their ranks? Had the war against Egypt continued, would Mr. Pelling, whatever his attitude to the Suez aggression, have been prepared to argue that those who were actively in opposition should be suppressed because they were helping the Queen's enemies? This is pernicious and dangerous doctrine, and Mr. Pelling has been betrayed by his anti-communism into a position that I hope he will not defend.

Nor is his attention to detail as scrupulous as it might be. Given that facts are not born free and equal - and Mr. Pelling's volume is as good a commentary on this theme as one could wish for - yet there are certain combinations of circumstances about which it is not easy to have an alternative explanation. The facts do seem to stick out. One example must suffice. On pages 56, 85, 87-8, there are references to the establishment of the United Mineworkers of Scotland which suggest that the U.M.S. was a product of the social fascist line and the insistence upon the Communist Party's independent role in the labour movement. Now this is certainly part of the story, but to leave it without qualification and to write that the members of the U.M.S. 'revolted' from the older Scottish miner's union is to mislead totally the reader. For the history of the Scottish miner's organisation after the General Strike is a grim record of crooked dealing by the Right Wing officials who, voted out of office by their members, refused to give up their positions to the Left Wing which had triumphed. Whether the Left was correct in allowing itself to be provoked into the formation of an independent union is quite another question; but Mr. Pelling, in his insistence upon the Communist Party playing the role of scapegoat in each and every situation, has been, shall we say ingenuous, in omitting four fifths of this particular story?

It is a melancholy fact that many ex-communists take up a position identical with that defined in this present volume. Brian Pearce (*Labour Review*, December, 1958), writes that Mr. Pelling's book is a useful contribution, by which he means that its usefulness mainly consists in the harm it is capable of doing to the communist cause in this country. The anti-communism which pervades the volume is not felt by Mr. Pearce to be in need of criticism. Such an approach is a stale repetition of the attitudes which have cursed the British Left for the past half century, for the Left has been consumed with a sectarianism which has been expressed in a bitter mutual hatred of other left groupings. This hostility of one section against all other groups which do not share its particular version of received dogma is a tradition of left wing politics familiar to all of us - certainly to those who have been members of the Communist Party; and there is no doubt that as the largest left wing organisation in the past two decades or so the Communist Party has been the most serious offender.

But the verdict of history upon the communist movement in Britain will not be contained within the narrow straitjacket that Mr. Pelling provides. The contribution that the C.P. has made to the theory and the practice of English socialism is in many respects considerable; and I speak, I think, not only for myself when I say that membership of the Communist Party was an immensely exhilarating and enriching experience. While the C.P. in the inter-war years was far from having the monopoly of progressive ideas and practice, as we so wrongly believed at the time, its contributions to the development of marxist ideas, its consistent struggle against imperialism, its leadership of the unemployed workers' movement - and the list is by no means complete - are important and significant items on the credit side of the balance sheet.

For this is not to ignore the many unpleasant aspects of Communist history or to refuse to recognise the many lost opportunities which stemmed from dogmatism and sectarianism. There are indisputable facts in Mr. Pelling's narrative which are not to be glossed over. The Russian financial

subsidies in the '20s, the incredible stupidities of the social-fascist line in the 1928-1933 period, above all the domination of the Communist International over the British Party and the way that the internal struggles of the Russian Party have been minutely reflected in the political line of the British Party ('We tell them that we do not give the U.S.S.R. "uncritical support", but when they ask us when we disagreed with its policy, all we can point to is Nina Ponomareva's hats' Eric Hobsbawm, quoted Pelling, pp. 185-6) - these are sad chapters in the history of the socialist movement in Britain but their relevance to our present situation cannot be denied.

No one can read the record on the Left of suspicion and fratricidal conflict, the sterile debates which have so often separated those who are natural allies in the common struggle, without a growing emphasis upon the need for discussion on a plane of mutual toleration and understanding. What the Left needs is unity - not unity campaigns that change into their opposite when the political wind blows from another part of the compass, but a deep abiding recognition that those who are the enemies of our enemies, despite all differences, are fundamentally our kind. Today, at the end of the fifties, the socialist content of the working class movement is lower than it was thirty years ago, and the Left has less dynamic than at any time in the past half century. The small Trotskyist groupings, young, energetic and lively, are consumed with hatred of the Communist Party. The Communist Party, still by far the largest grouping of socialists, has, in its self-imposed isolation and with an ageing leadership, less impact upon national politics than, probably, at any previous time in its history. The intellectual Left in general has little influence in the world of ideas. In this situation we need, not the self deluding congratulations of a few hundred more readers here or of a rank and file Conference there (and I do not suggest these are unimportant), but the urgent recognition of the steady drift to the Right of the Labour Party and the failure of the Left to offer an alternative. We need not dramatic poses, always so easy to those who reject the world and are in turn rejected, but rather to find our way, slowly and no doubt uncertainly, to make a contribution to the renewal of our movement.

I have made it clear that I do not like Mr. Pelling's book. For one thing it is shot through with the anti-Communist attitudes of the past decade, and there are no more degenerate and stultifying assumptions. For another it is bad history in that it makes no attempt to relate the evolution of the Communist Party with the general development of the Labour movement. We may weep at the follies of the social-fascist period, but it must never be forgotten that these were the years of MacDonaldism at its peak. While this fact does not excuse these follies, it makes at least part of the sectarianism of those years explicable, and it must be added that without the intervention of the Communist International in 1928-9 the majority of the executive of the British C.P. would certainly have been less stupid. Nevertheless, bad though it is, Mr. Pelling's book ought certainly to be read. It is the only sketch of the whole period that we have, and reading it will compel all of us to begin that re-assessment and analysis of the history of our whole movement that is so much needed. That, at least, is one credit title we can give to Mr. Pelling.

John Saville.