

# OUR HISTORY

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## THE STRUGGLE AGAINST FASCISM & WAR IN BRITAIN 1931-1939



## THE STRUGGLE AGAINST FASCISM AND WAR IN BRITAIN 1931-39

by Mike Power

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The next issue will examine the origins of the Engineering Shop Stewards' movement in Paisley before the First World War.

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The cover photograph shows part of an anti-fascist demonstration in South-East London at the Borough near Elephant and Castle in 1936.

The struggle against Fascism and War in Britain in the 1930s had many similarities with other European countries; equally there were many profound differences. The anti-fascist struggle was many sided and in spite of its small size and ideological isolation, the Communist Party was able to make a major contribution to initiating and sustaining the fight of those sections of the British people, who for many and various reasons opposed fascism and war.

The British ruling class under the leadership of Chamberlain, who became Conservative Prime Minister in 1937, were the architects of "appeasement" of Hitler. Chamberlain aimed for a deal with Hitler so that Germany could find outlets for industry in Eastern Europe which would allow Britain to carry on as before. Politically he worked towards a military conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union, throughout which Britain would stand aside allowing mutual destruction to take place, finally emerging as the victor over Germany's imperialist challenge and Soviet socialism. This led to the policy of making concessions to Hitler in the hope that he would turn Eastward against the Soviet Union. Appeasement meant German re-armament. The Munich agreement and the phoney war led to disaster. Later Great Britain, under the premiership of Churchill who had opposed the appeasement policy, thus expressing a tactical difference within British imperialist foreign policy objectives, became part of the grand coalition against Hitler. This was to make the forms and nature of the struggle in Britain different to other European countries after the outbreak of war in 1939. Before the outbreak of war, during the '30s, the fight was directed against Hitler fascism and its effects on Europe against Hitler's British supporters and imitators, notably the Mosley fascists, and equally against the British 'National' government who encouraged foreign fascism and protected it at home.

The 7th World Congress of Comintern in 1935 outlined the need to build the widest front of struggle against fascism and war. Even before the Congress, activity had begun in Britain along those lines. There was the building of a movement of humanitarian and political support for the victims of Hitler fascism and the Campaign to defend Dimitrov-including a counter-trial. Support was also built up for the anti-war movement launched in August 1932 by Romain Rolland, Henri Barbusse and Maxim Gorki. Later there was the movement to defend republican Spain, the political fight against the appeasement policy, and after the Munich agreement in 1938 the Campaign for an Anglo-Franco-Soviet pact to stop Hitler. Concurrent with all these was the consistent struggle against British fascism.

The anti-fascist and anti-war movements recorded many successes and engaged many and various people in action, but these movements tended to remain informal with the leading bodies of the labour movement refusing to take part officially. The persistent efforts by the Communist Party and some sections of the left for unity were consistently rebuffed. Right-wing reformism remained entrenched in the leadership

of the Labour movement and in the ideology of the working-class throughout the 1930s. The revolutionary left remained numerically small, and considering the enormous difficulties it had to confront, the achievements of the anti-fascist struggle are all the more significant.

To obtain a balanced view of the working-class struggle against fascism and war, it will be useful to sketch, very briefly, the economic and political setting.

## 1. ECONOMIC SETTING

The world capitalist economic crisis hit Britain at a time when a severe depression in international trading had taken place, which had a particularly bad effect on an economy whose rulers coined the phrase "export or die". The export industries or staple industries of textiles, shipbuilding, iron and steel and coalmining, which were located mainly in the North and West of Britain—Clyde, Tyne and Tees, Manchester and Liverpool areas—fell into sharp decline and became depressed areas. In the shipbuilding town of Jarrow after the closure of the shipyards the level of unemployment in that town reached well over 60%. It was from Jarrow that the most famous hunger march began as the Jarrow crusade. Many other industries and towns which produced and existed as subsidiaries to the staple industries, were also badly affected by the adverse trading conditions of the export trades. The depressed areas witnessed a decline in the standards of working-class life; malnutrition which was felt hardest amongst children, increasing rates of infant mortality, greater incidence of tuberculosis and disease and a general feeling of despondency. At its height unemployment reached 23% or three million jobless in the year 1933. Coupled with that level of unemployment was the lowest number of workers organised into trade unions, there being 4,300,000 compared to 8,300,000 in 1920 and 5,200,000 in 1926 at the time of the General Strike. At the same time small independent businesses and firms were hard hit by the world wide financial crisis which began in 1929.

The 1930s also witnessed the growth of the so-called 'new industries' which included artificial fibres, electrical engineering and manufacturing motor vehicles, aircraft, cycles, chemicals and scientific. The new industries were growing as were some servicing and entertainment; there was also a boom in housebuilding. These developments took place largely in the Midlands and South East of England (outside the depressed areas). Britain was still the centre of the greatest empire the world had seen, covering one quarter of the globe and embracing 500,000,000 people, and containing some of the richest sources of raw materials. Britain's economic exploitation of the Empire helped the ruling circles to prevent more decisive confrontations with the working-class. Food and raw materials could be imported cheaply and during the slump with the terms of trade in Britain's favour, imported food prices fell sharply, and since a large part of the British workers diet consisted of food imports, they experienced a rise in real wages. The imperial preference system enabled British capitalism to give protection to its own industry in home and empire markets. The shrinking volume of world trade which curtailed the opportunities for British capitalism, was offset by the income from 'invisible' exports such as financial services, shipping and overseas investments, which were an inheritance from the days when British capitalism was the most powerful.

The British working-class were therefore faced with mass unemployment, while at the same time those in better paid regular jobs, the middle sections and salaried

workers received gradually improving standards. Mass unemployment had hit the older staple industries hardest which were the industries where workers had the longest traditions of struggle and organisation. It was these industries in which the workers were thrown furthest onto the defensive. This helps to explain the relative passivity of the trade unions during the 1930s. Concurrently the unemployed often engaged in bitter battles with the state which tried to cut unemployment pay. At the same time some significant local union struggles took place. The mass of workers, while responsive to immediate attacks on their conditions, did not envisage a fully socialist alternative to the crisis that capitalism had caused. This partly explains the continued ideological and political domination of the Labour and Trade Union movement by right-wing reformism.

## 2. POLITICAL CURRENTS

The British ruling class were by no means united with a common strategy to maintain the dominance of British imperialism. They had to deal not only with the rival German imperialism but also with the example of socialism emanating from the Soviet Union. The two conflicting strategies were, on the one hand to build up the military might of Germany in order to launch the Germans into a war of aggression against the Soviet Union. Alternatively to co-operate with the Soviet Union to check German imperialism. Both strategies assumed a future German-Soviet war, during which the West would look on and be ultimately victorious. Equally, both strategies served the interests of British imperialism, but they were incompatible. Chamberlain pursued the policy of appeasement which collapsed in 1939 with the outbreak of war. Churchill pursued the more subtle strategy of an alliance with the Soviet Union while ultimately ensuring the delay of the second front in Europe hoping to allow time for the destruction of the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1930s Churchill had opposed the building up of Germany because he considered it would not be possible to control Hitler to the extent required. There also existed a lesser tendency which favoured the establishment of a fascist government in Britain; among its supporters were Lord Rothermere whose **Daily Mail** gave support to Mosley fascism.

From the Autumn of 1931 Britain was ruled by a 'National Government' which was formed following the defection of Ramsey MacDonald, Prime Minister of the Labour administration which had held office during the international financial crisis. The General Election in October 1931 gave the National Coalition of Conservative, National Liberals, and renegade National Labour a total of 556 seats (471 of which were won by the Conservatives) compared to the opposition 59 seats, made up of Labour 52, Liberal 4 and Independents 3. The official Labour vote had dropped from 8,360,000 in the 1929 election to 6,600,000 in 1931, while the Communist Party with 25 candidates received 75,000 votes and no Members of Parliament. Ramsey MacDonald had been expelled from the Labour Party and his actions denounced. Even so the underlying reformist ideology, which led to the open and public demonstration of class collaboration through the formation of the National Government, was still embraced by the dominant right-wing Labour leadership.

The election was held in an atmosphere of panic, whipped up around the financial crisis and the need for a strong united national coalition of parties to save Britain. The Manchester **Guardian** described the election campaign as "the most fraudulent campaign of modern times". It was creditable that in that hysterical atmosphere that Labour retained six and a half million votes, but the leadership of Labour never

mobilised that support against the reactionary policies of the National Government. In the face of appeals from the mid-thirties for unity and action on issues of common agreement from the Communist Party, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Socialist League, the Labour leaders stuck rigidly to the constitutional and parliamentary approach of calling for patience and awaiting the return of a Labour Government. In the meantime the National Government passed emergency legislation to enable it to bypass the normal parliamentary procedures and make legislation through Orders in Council. Oppressive and reactionary laws such as the Incitement to Disaffection Act (1934) were passed which, in spite of widespread protest and amendment in the House of Commons, included "provisions of so wide and general a character that under it almost any pacifist and anti-war activity" could be proved an offence.<sup>1</sup>

It was under the impetus of the fight against the Act that the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) was formed. The refusal of the official Labour movement to mobilise anti-government forces outside parliament strengthened the forces of appeasement and reaction. The Labour Party was not an ideological monolith even though right-wing reformism remained dominant. In 1932 the ILP disaffiliated from the Labour Party and had maintained a sharply defined socialist view inside the Labour Party. It disaffiliated because it shared the erroneous view, which was current at the time among sections of the left, that the old political alignments were breaking down and must be replaced by new ones. The void inside the Labour Party was filled by the Socialist League. "The League's Executive Committee encompassed every shade and nuance of the left from barely left of centre to near Communist".<sup>2</sup>

The Communist Party in 1930 had a membership of 2,555 many of whom were unemployed. The Party emerged during the following years from the 'third period' sectarianism enunciated in the policies of 'class against class' and the definition of social democracy as social-fascism and was able to increase its strength. A number of features converged which gave the Party some opportunities to advance. They included the response of the Party and the Soviet Union to the rise of fascism in Germany and to the threat of War. Also the uncompromising militancy of the Party enabled it to gain influence and size among those sections of the working-class with some socialist consciousness reaching by 1939 17,756 members. In the early 1930s the small and relatively isolated party was nevertheless able to give leadership in industrial struggles and to publish and maintain the *Daily Worker* without which even many socialist activists outside the ranks of the Communist Party would have been severely disarmed. The Communist Party was to play a leading role in initiating and organising the struggle against fascism and in support of the Spanish republic.

Fascism in Britain existed in a para-military and organised form, and there also existed an influential group that openly admired Nazi Germany. Oswald Mosley who was a minister in the 1929 Labour government resigned from the Labour Party in 1930 following the Labour Party Conference rejection of his memorandum advocating largely Keynesian economic policies to solve unemployment. He formed the 'New Party' which contested the 1931 election with no success and with Mosley himself losing his parliamentary seat. A year later in the autumn of 1932 Mosley formed the British Union of Fascists (BUF). The BUF was to become a para-military organisation which in a short time was to imitate totally its fascist counterparts in Italy and Germany. Amongst those who admired Nazi Germany were Lord

Londonderry (coal owner and former Air Minister) Conservative MP Sir Henry Channon and his wife Lady Honor Channon of the Guinness family. Lord Astor who owned the *Observer* newspaper was for an agreement with Germany as was his wife Lady Astor who was a Tory MP. He was renowned for his houseparties held at his country home, Clivenden. The 'Clivenden set', as they became known, are important to mention because leading people were amongst them: Geoffrey Dawson, the Editor of *The Times*, many diplomats and members of the Government.

### 3. STRUGGLE FOR WORKING-CLASS UNITY 1932-1935

The struggle for working-class unity was posed as an important objective of the Communist Party throughout the period. In the autumn of 1932 following the desertion of the working-class by its leaders, there followed a popular and spontaneous upsurge of action against the National Government by masses of workers and unemployed. It initially took the form of opposition to cuts in government spending by the unemployed, public employees and armed forces. In September 1931 some 12,000 naval ratings refused to set sail on Admiralty instructions from Invergordon in response to proposed wage cuts. The incident became known as the 'Invergordon Mutiny'. In the year that followed intense struggles took place and individual Communists played leading roles in many of the battles, while the *Daily Worker* gave unstinting support to the workers in action. The Party gained some new members but remained relatively isolated. However, in the heat of the battle the Party shed some of its sectarianism and began to work for a united front. The aim of this front was to unite all sections of the working-class on day-to-day issues within which the Party could play a role. At the twelfth Congress of the Communist Party in November 1932, Harry Pollitt, the General Secretary said: "The United Front is not a Party manoeuvre. It is necessary to instil this fact into our Party and into the working-class, for we can say what we like but when the Communist Party-speakers speak about the United Front 99% of the reformist workers believe it is a manoeuvre, believe that we have some ulterior motive. We must make it clear that it is not a manoeuvre but something that is vital for the workers if they are to achieve their everyday demands."<sup>3</sup>

The fight for unity was carried into all aspects of the Party's work. The line was essentially for a united front **from below**. The Party called for a struggle to be waged by the rank and file and independently of the reformist leaders and rejected the view of the "'rights' who believed that the union apparatus can do everything and that the leaders can be 'made to fight'".<sup>4</sup> The 'third period' strategy adopted by the Comintern at its sixth congress in 1928 was still current. That meant that the leadership of social democracy was considered to be a major obstacle to revolution which was believed to be approaching due to the period of stability of capitalism coming to an end. The Labour and Socialist International (LSI) approach to the Comintern, in February 1933, for joint talks about a joint effort against fascism came after Hitler took power. The approach was treated with circumspection by the Comintern. However, the reply called on Communist Parties to approach the social democratic parties in their own countries to establish a united front. The LSI subsequently made clear that it expected all its affiliated organisations to refrain "from all individual negotiations so long as the negotiations between the two internationals do not take place."<sup>5</sup> Within the LSI the British Labour Party maintained constant opposition to any form of contact or **rapprochement** with the Comintern. Following the appeal of Comintern, the Communist Party of Great Britain sent letters to

the Labour Party, the ILP, the General Council of the TUC and the Co-operative Party. Only the ILP responded in a positive way following which certain agreements were reached. The ILP had been disaffiliated from the Labour Party for nearly a year at that time, and during that first year its branches declined from 653 to 452 and its membership from over 16,000 to just 11,000.

There existed a number of trends within the ILP which ranged from the right to the left of socialist ideas. On March 28, 1933 the Communist Party and the ILP together made an appeal for a united front to fight fascism with the Labour Party which was promptly rejected. The National Joint Council of Labour, which represented the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party, the General Council of the TUC and the Parliamentary Labour Party issued a Manifesto entitled Democracy and Dictatorship. The Manifesto stated: "If the British working-class . . . hesitates now between majority and minority rule and toy with the idea of dictatorship, fascist or communist, they will go down to servitude such as they have never suffered."<sup>6</sup>

The National Joint Council considered itself to be a united front and saw no purpose in discussions. The fascist and war threat was growing and despite the official attitude of the leadership, which was confirmed at various conferences, there were many within the Labour movement prepared to take action and participate in joint activities initiated by Communists and the Left. In spite of the unfavourable response received from the Labour Party, the Communist Party and the ILP met and declared: " . . . in view of the urgency of the crisis in Germany and Austria and the danger of war" to proceed with the organisation of united mass demonstrations on April 2, 1933 and "to follow this by sustained propaganda for united working-class action on these issues."<sup>7</sup> It was agreed to call upon the rank and file of the Labour Party, the Trade Union movement and the Co-operative movement to strongly support the united front campaign . . . The existence of that measure of unity plus the consistent exposure of Nazi crimes by the Daily Worker prior to Hitler's seizure of power, laid a firm base for future actions. When Hitler was finally placed in power and the Nazis proceeded to imprison and murder the German Labour Movement leaders, there was quickly established a committee for the relief of the victims of fascism. This body was founded on the initiative of the Communist Party and many leading Labour movement people joined in the work. The committee held conferences and meetings all over Britain and many crowded halls heard the truth about fascist terror and, in response donated large sums of money. Wide sections of the people were drawn into this activity which had important humanitarian aspects. It was through this work that a great deal of political understanding of the nature of fascism was extended. The outstanding campaign of the Relief Committee for Victims of Fascism was the fight to save the lives of Dimitrov and his comrades following their arrest on the charge of setting fire to the Reichstag. The committee set up a 'counter-trial' in London in a court room. There, under the Chairmanship of D N Pritt, KC, an international group of lawyers examined witnesses from many countries. The Court of Enquiry found the Nazis to be guilty and Dimitrov innocent. Wide publicity was given to the evidence of the court in the world's press, and this undoubtedly played a part in the decision of the Nazi court to acquit Dimitrov. The personal and political courage displayed by Dimitrov had an immeasurable impact in strengthening the anti-fascist struggle in Britain. Anti-fascist committees existed in many parts of Britain and new sections of people were drawn into its support. Writers joined the movement following 'the burning of the books' in Berlin. As Isobel Brown, the veteran Communist anti-fascist leader recalled: "the main literary figures in Britain,

almost without exception, supported the fight and many of them spoke at the immense public meetings and conferences."<sup>8</sup>

Scientists, lawyers, artists and intellectuals of all kinds were gradually won as allies to the broad movement. Funds were collected which were used to finance the escapes of many men, women and children from fascist Europe. Children's homes were set up in the Saar and Paris and many children were adopted into homes in Britain. The National Government had to be fought to ensure that asylum would be granted to Nazi victims who arrived without papers. The Committee campaigned for the lives of Thaelmann, Edgar Andre and many others. As Isobel Brown further recalled: "In addition to the wide mass movement some of the highlights of the Thaelmann campaign were: the unfurling of a banner demanding his release across the Strand on the route of a royal procession; the insertion of a film strip in a West End cinema with the same demand and fairly frequent voices interrupting dance bands on the BBC. So the campaign was widely featured in the press."<sup>9</sup>

In early 1934 the CP and ILP made a further approach to the Labour Party with a request for a United Front, to assist foreign comrades and resist the advances of fascism in Britain. The approach was once again rejected and had, in fact, been preceded by the publication by the Labour Party of a pamphlet entitled The Communist Solar System which warned about association with Communist 'front' organisations. At the Labour Party Conference held in October, the Committee for the Relief of the Victims of German and Austrian Fascism was proscribed which meant that the committee supporters who were Labour Party members ran the risk of expulsion from the Party. Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) were boasting 400 branches and 20,000 members but such a threat did not shift the Labour leaders. They maintained their opposition to unity within the LSI. The French, Spanish and Italian socialists had signed United Front agreements in face of the official opposition to such moves taken the previous year and the attempts of the French socialists to change LSI policy was opposed most strongly by the British Labour Party.<sup>10</sup> However, a committee for co-ordinating anti-fascist actions was set up under the secretaryship of John Strachey and was to play an important role in mobilising rank and file activity.

#### 4. THE STRUGGLE FOR PEACE 1932-1936

Attitudes towards the question of peace ranged from those who took a sharp class position and saw war as having been caused by a struggle between rival imperialism for profits, in which the working-class suffered most, to those who denounced all war as senseless and opposed the taking up of arms under any circumstances. These cross currents of opinion also existed within the working-class movement. Prior to Hitler's seizure of power, attitudes were very much conditioned by the vivid experience of the First World War. Horror and indignation was felt at the senseless slaughter of nearly a million young Britons in that war. A fear of what a future war might be like led some people to pacifism. The static trench warfare with its long drawn out objective of attrition, which could only lead to pyrrhic victory, had acquired new dimensions of horror. The use of chemicals for gassing, the growing use of aerial bombardment, attacks on civilian targets and the increasing sophistication and explosive power of weapons were in the minds of people when they fashioned their ideas about war and peace. The jingo propaganda that had accompanied World War One had, by the 1930s, been exposed. The slogans of imperialism which had led the nation to war had been cynically laid bare, and only the politically

illiterate or devious still maintained that it had been a 'war to end all wars', or a 'war to keep the world safe for democracy', or a 'noble sacrifice for King and country'.

The campaign for peace was spurred into action by a number of events; there was the slow death of the League of Nations disarmament conference, which finally broke down in mid-1933. The Japanese aggression against China in 1931 which passed without any action against it, shocked people's conscience, as did the growing fascist menace. The Labour Party Conference in 1933 adopted a resolution which referred to the "deepening imperialist and capitalist rivalries as a direct cause of war".<sup>11</sup> It went on to say that the working-class of one country has no quarrel with the working-class of another, and pledged itself to take no part in any war and to resist it. Conference also decided to investigate the possibility of a General Strike in the event of war and called for approaches to ensure international action by workers in other countries along the same lines. The experience of the failure of the League of Nations to act against the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 through the system of collective security underlined the belief that the prevention of war depended on the workers' action against their own governments.

A number of peace movements and campaigns grew up in Britain in the early 1930s. The World Conference of the Anti-War Movement held in Amsterdam in August 1932 included a delegation of eighty from Britain. In the report of the delegation it stated that "about fifty of the delegates were active trades unionists who had been nominated by their branches at various local anti-war conferences, amongst them were members of the ILP, the Co-operative Movement, National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) and the Communist Party, as well as students and teachers."<sup>12</sup>

The Conference had a significant impact in Britain. During its return journey the British delegation constituted itself into a provisional British anti-war council, which pledged to continue the work from Amsterdam and call a National British Anti-War Conference, from which to launch a broad movement. A conference was called in March 1933 and was held in Bermondsey (South-East London). That Conference was preceded by a great deal of agitation within the Labour Movement. John Strachey, a member of the Anti-War Movement's National Council, reported: "This work, consisted of the summoning of hundreds of mass meetings, and what was perhaps even more important, of conferences of delegates from trade union branches, co-operative societies, Labour Party branches, ILP branches and Communist Party locals." He records the results of the Conference: "There assembled at the Town Hall, Bermondsey, 1,510 delegates from 600 branches of national organisations, representing some 2,000,000 members."<sup>13</sup>

The Conference was a great success and was the forerunner of a great deal of anti-war activity through the Labour Movement. It is even more significant in view of the official hostility of the leadership of the Labour Party, who called upon all its members and affiliated organisations not to associate with the movement. However, at the annual conference of Labour that year, a motion against war was passed and a delegate from the Cambridge Trades Council and Labour Party said: "I say seriously that for some of the younger members of our Party this resolution comes only just in time. In my own local party ... we have had a suggestion to start a branch of the Bermondsey and Amsterdam anti-war movement. We have considered the request the Head Office put lately to us, not to connect ourselves with a movement which, it was alleged was designed to break the Labour Movement... but we have no

moral right to say: You shall not join a movement like the Bermondsey one, unless our own policy is as good as theirs."<sup>14</sup> The anti-war movement published a monthly bulletin called War which, at the time of the Bermondsey conference, had a circulation of 20,000. A number of National Executives of Trade Unions affiliated, including the National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers and the Union of Furnishing Trades. Committees in many universities and colleges were formed by students and a student and youth anti-war council was set up. Artists, intellectuals and literary figures also joined the movement—an authors' committee was immediately successful with 100 members.

The Campaign against war had a powerful impact on many people who looked for a means to publicly demonstrate their feelings. Consequently the debate at the Oxford University Union in February 1933 had a special significance. The motion "that this house will, in no circumstances, fight for its King and Country" was carried by 275 votes to 153. The importance of the passing of what became known as the Oxford 'pacifist' resolution, was that Oxford University, like most universities at the time, educated the upper and middle-classes and also built the future elite of the armed forces. While it is true that pacifists supported the resolution, so too could those who were prepared to take up arms in a struggle for democracy but did not believe that World War One was a struggle for democracy. The resolution therefore reflected a basic challenge to imperialist ideology from the very institution and people upon whom imperialism relied for its survival. The bourgeois press and its spokesmen exploded at the result of the debate with denunciation, but nevertheless the attempt, made the following month, to delete the resolution from the records was defeated by 750 votes to 188.

In response to what was a strong feeling in Britain to make a personal declaration to renounce war and weapons, a Christian based pacifist organisation was set up. In October 1934 the Reverend Dick Sheppard in a letter to the press, asked all those men who would support the resolution: "We renounce war and never again directly or indirectly will we support or sanction another" to write to him. He received 100,000 replies and subsequently organised a meeting, which filled the large auditorium of the Albert Hall and at which the Peace Pledge Union was founded. These ideas had a base in the Labour Movement, the Women's Co-operative Guild—an organisation in whose ranks were thousands of working-class women sponsored the selling of White Peace Poppies on Armistice Day. Certain leading individuals also embraced pacifism but it was never to be the dominant attitude in the Labour Movement. The seizure of power by Hitler and the subsequent events meant that the resolution passed at the Labour Party Conference, and attitudes adopted hitherto that saw all war as evil, no longer seemed appropriate to many people. The destruction of the German working-class movement required a new approach because it was obvious that joint international working-class action was no longer possible. The entry of the Soviet Union into the League of Nations in 1934 meant that the League could no longer be seen as an exclusively capitalist organisation. The decision of Germany to withdraw from the League and re-arm placed a further responsibility on the movement to reconsider its course.

It was against this background that the League of Nations Union in the summer of 1934 evolved the idea of taking a poll of public opinion on the subject of the League and collective security. The League of Nations Union was a body set up to promote the aims of the League. It invited other bodies to join a National Declaration

Committee. The Committee sponsored a ballot on international disarmament and collective security. Thirty eight bodies agreed including the Labour Party, TUC, the Co-operative movement, the Liberal Party, Peace organisations, Women's organisations to work voluntarily in carrying through the ballot. The Communist Party also played its part in the activity. The Conservative Party and reactionary sections of the press opposed the scheme. The organisers aimed to get the biggest possible sample of public opinion and called for local committees to be set up in every constituency—in the event over 1,000 committees were formed and over half a million volunteers took part in the work of conducting the ballot. When the final results were announced in June 1935 it was revealed that 11.5 million people or 51.5% of the voting population had voted. The Peace Ballot, as it became known, authoritatively showed the feelings of the British people on the major issues at the time and had a considerable impact. The six questions that were posed in the ballot were:

- i. Should Britain remain a member of the League ?
- ii Are you in favour of an all-round reduction of armaments by international agreement ?
- iii Are you in favour of all-round abolition of national military and naval aircraft by international agreement ?
- iv Should the manufacture and sale of armaments for private profit be prohibited by international agreement ?
- v Do you consider that if a nation insists on attacking another, the other nations should compel it to stop by:
  - (a) economic and non-military measures
  - (b) if necessary military measures ?

The questions showed that the ballot was not aimed to produce a pacifist result, and the voting on question five showed that the British people were not in a pacifist frame of mind.

The numbers voting on each question are given below.<sup>15</sup> Doubtfuls were those who answered in such a way that meaning was not clear. Abstentions were those who failed to answer that particular question though they answered others. Christian pacifists were permitted a special classification for question five.

Question	Yes	No	Doubt	Abs	Ch.P	Totals
1.	11,090,387	355,883	10,470	102,425	—	11,559,165
2.	10,470,489	862,775	12,062	213,839	—	
3.	9,533,558	1,689,786	16,970	318,845	—	
4.	10,417,329	775,415	15,076	351,345	—	
5. (a)	10,027,608	635,074	27,255	855,107	14,121	
5. (b)	6,784,368	2,351,981	40,893	2,364,441	17,482	

The ballot did not simply ask people to choose between war and peace, but required a considered attitude on how peace might be maintained. The results of the ballot had an enormous impact. The British Government which was already preparing for the appeasement of German and Italian fascism was sufficiently taken aback by the results as to initially take a strong line against Italian aggression towards Abyssinia. A General Election was due later in the year and the Government meanwhile took a stand in favour of sanctions against Italy in line with public opinion. The British

people showed that in the period which followed Hitler's rise to power that they did not favour 'peace at any price' which they appeared to want prior to Hitler. The situation and mood was one which could have been used to transform the situation in Europe. But the Labour Movement was disunited and the Labour Party remained totally ineffective and refused to take any action. The National Government was conniving at appeasement; the attitude that already existed can be summed up by Thomas Jones, a former cabinet secretary who was close to Stanley Baldwin, Conservative Prime Minister. Jones wrote to a friend in May 1936: "Hitler feels quite unequal to standing up alone to Russia .... he is therefore asking for an alliance with us to form a bulwark against the spread of Communism. Our Prime Minister is not indisposed to attempt this as a final effort before he resigns after the Coronation next year to make way for Neville Chamberlain"<sup>16</sup> Neville Chamberlain was himself head of a private firm of armament manufacturers.

## 5. FIGHT AGAINST NATIONAL GOVERNMENT'S WAR AIMS

The Anti-War movement exposed the highly profitable traffic in armaments by private manufacturers over a long period. The consistent exposure led to widespread public criticism and concern. Pamphlets such as **Patriotism Ltd** and the **Merchants of Death** gave wide publicity to the facts. Public concern reached such heights that it appeared that the Government might have to do something to calm the fears. Using classic parliamentary tactics to avoid an awkward issue, the Government appointed a Royal Commission to investigate the private manufacture and trade in arms. In May 1935 the Communist Party submitted a memorandum to the Commission which gave the facts and arguments in favour of the view that private arms manufacture should be stopped and the traffic in them prohibited. Harry Pollitt appeared before the Commission to give verbal evidence.<sup>17</sup> His testimony was stunning. He showed that Britain was the mainstay of the world arms traffic, that the Government and the capitalist class bore the direct responsibility for the traffic and were preventing a proper enquiry into it. He showed how the private arms trusts and the government worked in collaboration and that "while the League of Nations was trying to check Japanese aggression on China, British arms manufacturers were supplying the means for it to be carried out."<sup>18</sup> British tanks were being used against the Chinese communists and British war planes sold in South America. The greatest crime was that British firms such as Vickers and ICI were arming Hitler. During his evidence Pollitt pointed to the fact that the Chairman of the Commission, Sir John Eldon Banks, held shares in ICI, other shareholders in munitions were politicians, government ministers, royalty, the church and nobility. He also gave facts which proved that the government had used diplomatic pressure to prevent documents involving British interests being placed before the Arms Enquiry in the US.

The Communist Party's attitude to war was that war was inevitable in a capitalist world but it was essential to delay the outbreak of war long enough to build the movement for socialism, in order to create the only circumstances in which war could be prevented, which was a working-class government or Soviet Power. It also became clear, particularly after the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern, that the building of a movement for peace was in itself an important contribution in the struggle for socialism. The Party reiterated its belief in, and the urgency for, a United Front and while calling for the defeat of the National Government, recognised that the only immediate alternative was a Labour Government. A Labour Government with Communist MPs in Parliament and a growing united front would create greater possibilities for success in the struggle against fascism and war.

It was in July/August 1935 at the Seventh World Congress of Comintern that the position to which the CPGB had been moving was confirmed. The call from Dimitrov for the broadest possible alliance of the people against fascism and war served as a "great spur forward to the broadening out of every phase of the Party's work."<sup>19</sup> The British Communist Party made a considerable contribution to the new developments by criticising the practice of "making united action dependent on conditions unacceptable to Labour and social democratic workers and called for greater efforts to follow up the withdrawal by the LSI of the ban on its sections co-operating with Communist Parties."<sup>20</sup>

The Popular Front, concluded in France, was a major experience which led to the new propositions. But in Britain significant advances had taken place in the building of a broad and substantial movement against fascism and Mosley in particular, largely under the Communist Party's initiative. A more positive attitude emerged to the opposition to war. The declaration stated that "in wars of national liberation the Communist Parties would support their own ruling class in defending the attacked nation. We have in mind Poland and Czechoslovakia."<sup>21</sup> In the report to the London District Committee of the Party this was explained further.... "if you are prepared to surrender the independence of such countries.... mentioned to German fascism you are not only preparing a rod for the backs of the Russian workers, but one for the backs of the working-class all over the world."<sup>22</sup> At the Comintern Congress, Harry Pollitt stressed the role of the National Government in carrying out fascist type policies; "The Ruling Class holds Mosley in reserve while the National Government carries through its preparatory work, taking advantage of the mass hatred of fascism as expounded by Mosley to present its own policy as upholding the traditions of British democracy. The fight against fascism is seen largely as a fight against Mosley. The tendencies towards fascism in the policy of the National Government are not seen as a vital danger making its defeat imperative."<sup>23</sup>

There was a qualitative and quantitative improvement in the Communist Party's work in the period which followed the Seventh World Congress. The membership of the Party doubled to 12,500 during the following two years; the sales of literature and the circulation of the Daily Worker increased many times. As a result the Party's influence among the rank and file class-conscious workers and intellectuals increased correspondingly.

The Communist Party maintained a consistent campaign of exposure of the National Government's foreign policy. The Government conceded to Hitler the right to build a new navy when it signed the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in May 1935. Previously the Government had uncritically noted Hitler's re-introduction of conscription. As great numbers of the British people became concerned at the continuing concessions, the Communist Party was always to be seen in the forefront of the fight against appeasement. The growing threat of an invasion of Abyssinia by Italy had been preceded by three-power talks between Britain, France and Italy. With classic imperialist arrogance Britain and France placed proposals before Italy to carve Abyssinia into three areas of influence. However, fascist arrogance was supreme and Mussolini declared his intention of building up a fascist empire. By September 1935 it was clear that the Italian invasion was imminent and the Labour movement took an attitude. The TUC passed a resolution which pledged "firm support for any action consistent with the principles and statutes of the League of Nations to restrain the Italian government and to uphold the authority of the League in enforcing peace."<sup>24</sup>

The Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, spoke with apparent sincerity to the League of Nations Assembly on September 11 and declared the support of Britain "for steady and collective resistance to all acts of unprovoked aggression."<sup>25</sup> The Labour Party Conference met during the week commencing September 30 only three days prior to the actual Italian invasion. A motion was passed which was in a similar vein to the one passed by the TUC a few weeks earlier. It was, however, clear to the left at the Conference and also to the Communists outside, that the leadership intended to rely on the Government to take the necessary action. There was to be no campaign in support of Labour's policies even though the leadership acknowledged that the "Peace Ballot had shown widespread support for them."<sup>26</sup>

Prior to the Conference it had been suggested to the Labour Party by the Communist Party that they should host an international meeting of Socialist and Communist Parties and trade unions to express "the workers determination to preserve peace."<sup>27</sup> The suggestion arose from the fact that Comintern had approached the LSI proposing joint action. As the LSI executive had not discussed the Comintern approach, at the opening of Labour's Conference the Communist Party addressed a telegram to the Conference Chairman, which said: "London evening papers declare Adowa bombed, hundreds dead. We beg you in the name of humanity to agree to the proposal of Dimitrov for common action between the Socialist and Communist Internationals... we appeal to you in all sincerity to take the initiative in this fateful hour to ensure the workers' international unity can still save the world."<sup>28</sup> The following day all the delegates to the Conference were handed copies of the Daily Worker which contained the text of the telegram. But the Executive declined to act. On October 12 the LSI Executive discussed the Comintern proposal. A majority favoured acceptance but five parties led by the British Labour Party "rejected any kind of joint action with the Communist International".<sup>29</sup> The Communist Party called for the mobilisation of the working-class on a national and international scale in order to force the imposition of sanctions against Italy through the League of Nations. The Party's demands included the "stoppage of all war materials to Italy and refusal to load or unload Italian ships in British ports. No loans to Italy. The ending of the arms ban to Abyssinia, closure of the Suez Canal to Italian ships and the surrender of all British mandates in Abyssinia."<sup>30</sup> Along with these concrete demands regarding Abyssinia went the following: "We also demand that the National Government shall be forced:

- (a) To renounce the German Naval Agreement
- (b) To abandon all forms of support of Hitler
- (c) To give full support to the Franco-Soviet Pact
- (d) To sign a peace pact with the Soviet Union
- (e) To renounce its own imperialist conquests, concessions and mandates."<sup>31</sup>

In November a General Election was held and the National Government was returned with a smaller, but still overwhelming majority. Within three weeks of the declaration of the election results the infamous Hoare-Laval peace plan for Abyssinia was revealed. Mussolini was to be handed almost the full fruits of his aggression. The National Government leaders had lied when they claimed to support sanctions against Italy following the Peace Ballot. They took the stand only to ensure re-election. Sir Samuel Hoare proposed that Haile Selassie "give Italy a large part of his territory in the North and South East where it was adjacent to the Italian colonies and, in addition, about half of the country would be reserved exclusively for Italian exploitation

and settlement..."<sup>32</sup> When these proposals became known a political storm broke with such far-reaching repercussions for the Government that on December 23 Hoare resigned and was replaced by Anthony Eden. The Communist Party organised meetings throughout the country during the war and widely circulated its pamphlets and leaflets. The Party also played a role in the League against Imperialism another organisation which campaigned vigorously. Walter Holmes, as the correspondent for the Daily Worker, was the only journalist who stayed in Abyssinia throughout the war and his dispatches proved an invaluable source of information to the Labour Movement.

In the General Election, as part of the Communist Party's policy of creating unity to defeat the National Government, only two Communist Party candidates were nominated; elsewhere the Party called for support for Labour and the building of United Front Campaigns in the constituencies. The slogan for a 'Revolutionary Workers' Government' was replaced by 'Vote for a Labour Government to fight Capitalism'. Of the two Communist candidates, Willie Gallacher was elected in West Fife (Scotland) and Harry Pollitt who stood in Rhondda East (South Wales) polled 13,655 votes to his Labour opponent's 22,088. The ILP had seventeen candidates, four of whom were elected in Glasgow. The Labour Party increased its representation to 154 seats, but the National Government won 428 seats which, compared to the combined opposition of 184, meant that the National Government remained entrenched. The Communist Party actively worked for the return of a Labour Government and offered its help to Labour candidates. It was reported that "In the sixty two constituencies of the LCC (London) area, Communist help was accepted in fifty seven."<sup>33</sup> It was at the grass roots that further contacts were built up which laid the basis for future united campaigns. It was perfectly clear that parliamentary opposition on its own would achieve very little and, in view of the commitment of the Labour Party leadership to parliamentary tactics alone, it was on the Left, and Communists in particular, that the responsibility rested to mobilise the people.

## 6. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST MOSLEY FASCISM

Mosley formed the New Party in 1931. He had resigned from the Labour Party following his failure to convert the party to his views. He took with him a number of disillusioned socialists and members of Labour's left-wing, as well as gathering around himself people from various political tendencies. However, Mosley's course towards fascism was well noted, even at that early stage. Aneurin Bevan who sympathised for a short time with the New Party asked: "Where is the money going to come from ? Who is going to pay ? Who is going to call the tune ? I tell you now where this is going to end up ... as a fascist party"<sup>34</sup> Beatrice Webb went further and doubted a future for Mosley's ultimate fascist direction: "I doubt whether Mosley has the tenacity of a Hitler. . . . deep down in his heart he is a cynic. He will be beaten and retire."<sup>35</sup>

In little more than a year and a half all the earlier signs had manifested themselves and Mosley had moved over to fascism. In October 1932 those who remained loyal to Mosley put on their blackshirts and the British Union of Fascists was formed. Rallies and meetings were organised, including the first public meeting in Trafalgar Square within two weeks of the BUF's foundation. By the spring of 1933 Mosley had

visited Rome with a group of Blackshirts, and had been photographed taking the salute with Mussolini" at the fascist festival which celebrated the birth of Rome.

No further evidence was required to convince people how far Mosley had gone. However, even before his trip to Rome, he had to contend with militant opposition. At a meeting at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester Mosley indicated the presence of 140 members of his Defence Force; he had already been troubled by hecklers and disruptions during his meeting?. Scuffles and fighting broke out at the Manchester meeting; the police were called in and they cleared the hall. The incident in Manchester was important because it indicated the existence of the paid National Defence Force which was based in London. It also showed that the Communist Party was quickly into action and giving the lead against fascism as soon as it raised its head in a British form. Mosley himself claimed that the Communist Party was responsible for breaking up his meetings.

It was on the basis of the United Front with socialist groups, trade unions, branches, trades councils, local branches of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM), some industry-based ad hoc committees such as the Printers' anti-fascist movement and some local Labour Parties and Co-operative Guilds that the Communist Party was able to play a major role in bringing tens of thousands of workers into action against fascism. The political awakening gained in that struggle was to serve well later in the struggle to defend Republican Spain. Some of the biggest demonstrations in British Labour history were mounted against organised fascism.

At its height in 1934 the BUF claimed to have 40,000 members and 400 branches throughout Britain, although a close analysis shows these claims to have been "calculated to give an impression of exaggerated strength"<sup>36</sup> If, however, the advice of some of the principal trade unions and Labour Party leaders, to ignore demonstrations by the fascists in the hope that they will go away, had been heeded, then undoubtedly the movement would have grown even stronger. The para-military nature of the organisation was confirmed when the fascist barracks was opened in 1934 in Chelsea (London). Black House, as it was known, provided dormitories for the paid Defence Force, who numbered at various times up to 400, and contained drilling grounds, gymnasiums, canteens and various recreational facilities for Blackshirts. There also existed a 'Motor Corps' and an 'Air Corps' who were used to transport the drilled and trained Blackshirts to meetings all over the country.

The BUF attracted diverse elements "including romantically-minded white collar workers and semi-literate toughs in search of excitement. Its leadership was predominantly middle-class with a high proportion of ex-army officers"<sup>37</sup> The movement also had rich backers, including Lord Rothermere, which meant that his national newspapers, with a combined circulation of two and a half million including the Daily Mail, Evening News and Sunday Dispatch, campaigned for the BUF. On January 15, 1934, the Daily Mail headline screamed "Hurrah for the Blackshirts". Mosley's peak was reached in mid-1934 when, following a year and a half of constant campaigning he called a rally of 20,000 supporters at the vast auditorium at Olympia (London) on June 7. The event was very important, as Robert Benewick noted: "In terms of the controversy it aroused over political violence and public

order. Olympia was not only Mosley's largest meeting to date, but it was also the Communist Party's first large anti-fascist demonstration."<sup>38</sup>

Mosley aimed to impress 'important' people; his invitations had been sent to many notable personalities in order to impress them with his ordered and disciplined organisation. Large numbers of newspaper reporters were present, as were observers from the National Council for Civil Liberties and people of various persuasions. The Communist Party rallied thousands outside the hall but the police prevented them from getting inside. Phil Piratin, who was subsequently to join the Communist Party and become its second Member of Parliament, tells what happened: "Inside the meeting hundreds of courageous anti-fascists, men and women, exposed Mosley through the way they were battered and mauled by the Blackshirt thugs for the slightest interruption or protest. I was one of the thousands outside the hall charged again and again by the police, mounted and foot. We stood our ground and watched the anti-fascists ejected from the building, many in a state of collapse, bleeding profusely, clothes torn and tattered. Mosley's thugs could only get away with this brutality because of their protection by the police who stood by, cynical and indifferent, as the beaten up victims were thrown out of the building."<sup>39</sup>

The partiality of the police, apart from being obvious to those present, was reported in the *New Statesman* by Richard Jefferies who said that an "arrested man was informed by one Constable that they had received instructions on no account to interfere with the Blackshirts."<sup>40</sup>

The Blackshirts had used the most horrifying brutality in dealing with anybody who had interrupted Mosley. So bad was the violence displayed that night that in the days that followed a storm of protest erupted from the many eminent and respectable people who had been present. Among the voices raised were even some Conservative MPs—one of whom, Geoffrey Lloyd, said: "I came to the conclusion that Mosley was a political maniac and that all decent English people must combine to kill this movement"<sup>41</sup> The wave of anti-fascist feeling which swept the country was to some extent harnessed by the co-ordinating committee for anti-fascist activities, which was then set up headed by John Strachey, Ellen Wilkinson, D N Pritt and others from the Left.

The first major test of united action against the fascists came when Mosley called a mass rally of his followers in Hyde Park for September 9, 1934. The anti-fascists called for a counter-demonstration and issued the slogan 'Drown Mosley in a sea of working-class activity'. The official Labour movement banned the counter-demonstration to its members and the capitalist press suppressed news of the planned protest. In contrast the *Daily Worker* called: "All out on September 9" and throughout the summer the anti-fascist publicity campaign, directed by Ted Bramley, Secretary of the London Communist Party, worked to break through the press silence. So effective was the campaign that 150,000 anti-fascists poured into Hyde Park and swamped the 2,500 fascists who were being addressed by Mosley and protected by a solid wall of 6,000 police.

The people showed that they were not prepared to ignore Mosley in the hope that he might go away. Harry Pollitt described the anti-fascist demonstration that day as "the biggest breakthrough ever made against the ban on the United Front imposed by the Labour leaders"<sup>42</sup> The atmosphere among the anti-fascists was described by

historian Allen Hutt: "The sun blazed on a glorious September afternoon and contingents marched from all parts of London, stepping out briskly and gaily under their scarlet banners. I shall never forget my elation when the contingent of which I was a member wheeled into the park from the Bayswater Road. As we looked to the right across the gentle declivity that lies just the other side of the avenue of trees along the drive, we could see nothing of the open sward which was entirely covered by what looked like a solid bank of people. There were 150,000 Londoners there to greet the demonstrators and to show their hatred of fascism and its works. So immense was the anti-fascist crowd that its very size induced a gaiety and enthusiasm born of confidence in numbers."<sup>43</sup>

The turn-out had been so impressive that the capitalist press had been forced to admit the success achieved by the anti-fascists with the *Manchester Guardian* additionally saying: "The point for Sir Oswald Mosley to ponder over is that if this counter-demonstration, which outnumbered his by about 20:1 could be gathered from such small party as the Communist with large numbers of Londoners acting on their own initiative, on what scale would the opposition have been had it had the whole force of organised Labour behind it?"<sup>44</sup>

Following Olympia and Hyde Park some of Mosley's more respectable supporters began to cool off. The BUF was becoming increasingly discredited. The early policies of the BUF were based on those of the New Party and sought to solve unemployment and re-organise British society along the lines of the Corporate State based on the Mussolini model. Mosley believed that he would take power following another massive economic crisis which he saw being created by the old parties—but the crisis did not materialise, and his use of extreme violence created opposition and resentment. The Ruling Class did not want to see the Left consistently provoked into action, and what they considered disorder. They wanted to use more subtle means than head on clashes to deal with the Left. It had been proved moreover that the Left were quite capable of organising substantial and effective resistance. Therefore, while the police continued to be indulgent towards Mosley, the Incitement to Disaffection Bill (1934) was introduced into the House of Commons. Many people had expected that the Bill was to be directed against Mosley's private army but on the contrary, even the possession of pacifist literature could have been construed as an offence. However, as mentioned earlier, the Bill was modified before becoming law following the campaign of the NCCL.

The Blackshirts had not maintained their initial momentum and turned more and more to open anti-semitism. In contrast the growing power of fascism in Europe was a spur to the anti-fascist movement in Britain, as were the stories of inhuman treatment of Jews by the Nazis which were told by refugees who had fled to Britain. By 1936 the BUF policy was modelled more on Hitler fascism than Mussolini's. The anti-Semitic crusade was officially launched in April 1935 when Mosley said at a meeting in Leicester: "For the first time I openly and publicly challenge the Jewish interest in this country, commanding commerce, commanding the press, commanding the cinema, dominating the City of London, killing industry with the sweat shops. These great interests are not intimidating and will not intimidate the fascist movement of the modern age."<sup>45</sup> Following that speech, Mosley received a telegram of congratulations from Julius Streicher, Hitler's leading Jew-baiter. Later in October 1936 Mosley was secretly married in Germany and at a reception given by Goebbels' wife the honoured guest was Hitler.

Mosley concentrated his anti-semitic campaign in the East-End of London where there existed a large Jewish population. The East-End was an area which had suffered tremendous social deprivation for generations with overcrowding, slum dwellings, no social amenities, low wages and high unemployment. Phil Piratin was of the opinion that it was the social deprivation even more than the latent anti-semitism that attracted many 'ordinary working-class folk' to Mosley. It was necessary, therefore to have an immediate policy of confrontation with the hard core of the militarised Blackshirts, while at the same time engaging in a longer term struggle to detach Mosley's supporters from him by campaigning in the areas of fascist support.

The BUF campaign in the East-End of London was of considerable proportions, as was the opposition. There were not only the large demonstrations and parades through busy thoroughfares, but the daily and nightly street corner meetings, leaf-letting and pamphleteering. R Benewick records that: "**A News Chronicle** correspondent described a situation of bolted doors, lighted fireworks being thrown into the windows of Jewish shops, threatening letters and people afraid to go out"<sup>46</sup> In the House of Commons it was announced that the East London police had been present at 536 meetings during August, 603 in September and 647 in October and that nearly 300 police per day had been drafted into the area between 5 October and 8 November. This was the background to a call for a major BUF demonstration through East London on 4 October 1936. The fascists were to assemble in four columns and march to meetings in the heart of the area, which were to be addressed by Mosley.

So fierce had been the propaganda by the fascists that a deputation of five East London mayors went to see Sir John Simon, the Home Secretary, but he refused to ban the march. Deputations from religious bodies as well as the London Trades Council also received refusals from the Home Secretary. Finally the Jewish People's Council against Fascism and anti-semitism, a body that had vigorously campaigned against fascism (as opposed to the passive stance of the Jewish Board of Deputies, the accredited authority of British Jews) organised a petition, which in a few days contained 100,000 signatures demanding the banning of the march. The Home Secretary still refused. As a result the Communist Party launched a massive campaign aimed at preventing the marchers reaching their destination. The slogan issued was "the fascists shall not pass", which echoed from the defence of Madrid. Counter-propaganda emanated from the press, the Jewish Board of Deputies and the Labour Party, all of whom called on people to stay away, but, as Phil Piratin recalled "the appeal of the Communist Party brought a response from thousands of Labour Party members and supporters. On that occasion the leadership of the Communist Party was undisputed."<sup>47</sup>

When the day arrived, the police, on Sir John Simon's instructions did everything possible to ensure a successful conclusion to the fascist demonstration. Six thousand foot and mounted police were present from early in the day. At the fascist assembly point a crowd of 50,000 blocked the roads and at a crucial road junction an anti-fascist tram driver abandoned his tram. Police repeatedly charged the crowd but the roads remained blocked. The police and fascists then turned their attention to directing the march through Cable Street. The Battle of Cable Street, ensued and remains one of the most epic class confrontations in British working-class history. The street was barricaded and thousands of local people turned out in defence. The police charged many times but so overwhelming was the response that they were beaten back. A number of police actually surrendered and handed over their batons to the

people; a response never witnessed before. Finally, in spite of Sir John Simon, the police called off the march. Immediately the East End erupted in victory marches, meetings and celebrations. Phil Piratin sums up the result: "The people now knew that fascism could be defeated if they organised themselves to do so. There was towards the Communist Party, who had organised the people a warmth of feeling that the lies of our enemies will never eradicate."<sup>48</sup>

The immediate effect of those events was the introduction of the Public Order Bill in Parliament. The Bill banned political uniforms, prohibited para-military organisations and regulated public processions by giving powers to the Police Commissioner. The Left saw the dangers inherent in the proposed law: the restrictions on demonstrations constituted a grave threat to democracy while appearing to be limiting the activities of Mosley. In Parliament the Labour members supported the Bill and it became law. Mosley's activities were partly curtailed by the banning of uniforms and para-military groups.

In March 1937 the London County Council elections were held. The BUF contested in their three strongholds in East London. They received 8,000 votes in total and came bottom of the poll in two of the contests. One of the candidates was the traitor William Joyce who later became known as "Lord Haw Haw", as a result of his propaganda broadcasts from Germany during the war. Two weeks later, due to a financial crisis, Mosley announced the reduction of the paid staff of the BUF from 147 to 30. The organisation went into decline thereafter, although street battles in places such as Bermondsey (1937) took place and it remained necessary to maintain vigilance.

In the period up to the war Mosley's campaigns dwelt less on anti-semitism. In response to Hitler's take over of Austria he launched a 'Stop the War' campaign in early 1938; later the same year his 'Britain First' campaign was described by the Jewish Board of Deputies as a flop. A Peace Campaign in 1939 revived Mosley's fortunes temporarily when he addressed some very large meetings. Organised open fascism, however, had by that time been curtailed by mass action. The task was to defeat the collaborators with fascism who remained in office in the National Government.

### Spain

The response of the British government to the fascist generals' revolt on July 17, 1936 was to declare a policy of non-intervention. An agreement not to intervene had been reached with the Italian, German, French, Soviet and a number of other governments. The government posed as neutral, claiming that it aimed to prevent a European war. At no time did either of the fascist powers respect the agreement and evidence was abundant to prove the breaches. The National Council of Labour supported the non-intervention agreement by arguing that it was the policy of Leon Blum and British Labour had to take serious account of the French socialists' attitudes.

Another reason which was most forcefully argued was that if direct support was given to the Spanish government, then war with the fascist powers would ensue. At the Labour Party Conference in October the situation in Spain was debated on the first day. Although the fascist breaches of the non-intervention agreement were well-known the leadership argued for the policy of non-intervention and it was endorsed. Two days later two Spanish fraternal delegates spoke and listed many outrages and atrocities committed by the German and Italian invaders. So great was the clamour

from the delegates to reverse the earlier decision, that the leadership agreed to investigate the breaches of the non-intervention agreements and to support its abrogation if they were proved. It was not until the fascist forces were at the gates of Madrid that the the Labour Party abandoned the policy of non-intervention.

During the following months a couple of Labour Party deputations went to the Foreign Office to protest at the massive reinforcements being sent to the fascists from Italy and Germany. Later still the Labour Party appealed for funds in support of the Spanish Republicans; the cash was to be sent to the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) and the LSI. The dominant right-wing did not really mobilise in any effective way. To underline the attitude of the right-wing it is only necessary to look at the words of Ernest Bevin at the LSI/ IFTU meeting in London when the Spanish socialists called for a break with the non-intervention policy. The press reported: "Mr Bevin said he was speaking in the name of the entire British Socialist movement when he frankly told the Spanish delegation that the movement refused to accede to its demands. The decision and policy of the British socialist leaders, he said, must not be allowed to be influenced in any way by the war in Spain." <sup>49</sup>

That speech was described by Emile Vandervelde, Belgium's veteran socialist and the former President of the Second International as 'brutal' and as a 'cold douche' thrown on hopes of effective action for Spain. Not all Labour leaders adopted such a hostile stance, but the right-wing majority did. C R Attlee who was the parliamentary leader, was later to visit the British battalion of the International Brigade in Spain. A British company was subsequently named the 'Major Attlee Company'.

In contrast to the position of the official movement the Communists and the Left immediately went into action in order to win mass support for the legal Spanish government. From the outset, British public opinion was sympathetic to the Republican government. The opinion polls showed that at various stages of the war support for the Republican government varied between 57% and 72% while Franco support varied between 7% and 14%. Immediate action included the calling of a Conference by the Committee for the Relief of the Victims of Fascism, at which the Spanish Medical Aid Committee was launched. Within three weeks, the first British medical unit went to Spain. In October 1936 the National Joint Committee for Aid to Republican Spain was formed.

Practically every shade of opinion was represented; every political party was there though often represented by individuals due to official party policy being for non-intervention. The Committee was chaired for instance by the Duchess of Atholl, a Conservative MP. Officially represented were the TUC, many national trade unions, the Co-operatives and the Communist Party. Many religious bodies, including the Quakers and the Salvation Army also supported. The Medical Aid Committee was represented on the National Joint Committee by Isobel Brown, whose inspired leadership and outstanding eloquence was a driving force behind the relief work. She recalls that £2,000,000 was collected in cash and aid. Four thousand Basque children were brought to Britain and cared for while their homes were destroyed by Nazi bombers. Throughout the war thousands of meetings were held where people learned of the true events of the war, including the heroism of the International Brigade, which is a story in itself.

Despite the attitude of the official Labour leaders, feeling ran so high that strike action was taken in some of the large engineering factories. Two well-known examples were De Havilland and Dorman Long where the engineers stopped work and marched down Whitehall demanding arms for Spain. (These actions were a prelude to the actions by dockers in Southampton, Glasgow and London some months later in the campaign to boycott Japanese goods. Dockers on those occasions refused to load ships bound for Japan during the renewed aggression against China.)

In the early autumn of 1936 the veteran socialist H N Brailsford visited Harry Pollitt at the Communist Party offices to urge him to begin the recruitment of volunteers to fight in Spain. To his astonishment he discovered that, in response to the Communist's call, the first contingent of volunteers had already left Britain. Indeed the first Briton to fall in Spain was on the Aragon front on August 25, 1936. It was "Felicia Brown, an artist who had been attending a festival in Madrid and had enrolled in the militia immediately on the outbreak of war" <sup>50</sup> The British battalion received 2,000 volunteers during its service, of which half were members of the Communist Party, as were half of the 522 who were killed; few of the survivors were not wounded. On five occasions during the war the British troops were visited in the front line by Harry Pollitt. After January 1937 the Government declared it to be illegal to recruit volunteers for Spain, but that did not stop the flow of volunteers. The whole operation continued to be carried out by the Communist Party, who sent groups of volunteers to Paris on weekend tickets and handed them over to the French Communist Party who led them over the Pyrenees. When the volunteers returned as the war approached its end, more than 9,000 people packed the Empress Hall, Earls Court, to welcome them home. Harry Pollitt spoke, Paul Robeson sang and Isobel Brown collected £3,800 in twenty minutes. The Dependents Aid Committee which was also very broad and representative raised thousands of pounds for the disabled, wounded and the families of the volunteers.

In spite of the Government's policy it is clear that millions in Britain either worked for or supported the Spanish Republic. Isobel Brown points to some of the reasons: "The organised workers came in with a clear recognition of the class character of the conflict. The intellectuals recognised the threat of fascism in their own sphere of interests. The religious bodies came in because fascism threatened religious freedom and their humanitarianism urged them to help the sufferers. The leading Labour people were urged forward by the mass pressure from below. Even Attlee gave the red front salute on the terrace of the House of Commons... The Liberals joined in defence of bourgeois liberalism ... the group of Conservatives saw the threat to Britain's imperial interests." It was on the basis of these sectional interests that unity was found.

"How did the Communists work in such wide committees ?

- i We were openly recognised and respected as Communists
- ii We were the hardest working and most self-sacrificing and set an example of integrity and service
- iii We loyally accepted the limited basis of the agreed programme (For us any action against fascism was worthwhile)
- iv We constantly fed ideas and suggestions into the Committee
- v We never at any time exercised leadership through holding the majority in

any committee—we were more often in a small minority. Our leadership came through activity and working out plans, making suggestions that were acceptable to the broad committee."<sup>51</sup>

On that basis nobody who was involved was in any doubt as to where the main drive and force came from.

The atmosphere that was generated in the anti-fascist struggle helped to achieve new temporary successes in terms of unity. January 1937 saw the formal signing of a Unity Manifesto by the ILP, the Socialist League and the Communist Party. The Manifesto called for "Unity of all Sections of the Working-Class Movement ... in the struggle against fascism, reaction and war, and against the National Government." In spite of the fact that the Unity Campaign had as an objective the winning of a Labour Government, Labour's right-wing immediately opposed and proscribed the campaign. The campaign was officially launched at a mass meeting in Manchester and three days later the Socialist League was disaffiliated from the Labour Party. Disaffiliation was no bar to the continuation of the campaign which in its first few months received 30,000 individual pledges of support with united front meetings being held all over the country. But the right-wing leaders were determined to destroy the united front and ensure that all support should be only rallied around the Labour Party and its immediate programme which was published in March. Under the enormous pressure the Socialist League dissolved and individuals continued to work for unity. At the Labour Party Conference in October the National Executive's opposition to the Unity campaign was supported although three prominent Unity campaigners, Stafford Cripps, D N Pritt and Harold Laski were elected to the Executive. That situation was followed by a breach between the Communist Party and the ILP.

The ILP did not support the British Battalion in Spain but instead supported the leftist POUM to whose militia it sent its own volunteers. The antagonism was worsened by the ILP's criticism of the French and Spanish popular fronts and attacks on the Communist International.

Early in the following year (1938) the Communist Party once again proposed unity with a call for all peace and progressive organisations to demand a peace front including Britain, France, the Soviet Union and the US. The proposition was at three levels: a united working-class front; around this could be developed a people's front of broad progressive and peace organisations; political changes could then be won in Britain for a new direction towards an international alliance of states. In March following Hitler's occupation of Austria and his obvious designs on Czechoslovakia, interest in some form of popular front quickly grew. Harry Pollitt outlined the position on behalf of the Communist Party and declared: "Fascism's next step will be to attack Czechoslovakia. Abyssinia, China, Spain, now Austria—the circle is closing round us. Let us unite with the peoples of France, the Soviet Union and the Spanish Republic to oppose fascist oppression."<sup>52</sup> Support for collective security came from many sources—120 constituency Labour Parties, from the Socialist and Radical Sunday paper, Reynolds News, whose call for a united peace alliance was supported by the Co-operative Party, from the Liberal News Chronicle and from a variety of other bodies.

One important source of support was the Left Book Club. The Club published each month a volume to be sold exclusively to its members. The books, selected by Victor

Gollancz, Harold Laski and John Strachey, were usually inspired by Marxism and all were anti-fascist. At its height the Club had 60,000 members and 1,200 local discussion groups that were linked by the monthly bulletin Left News.

The Club had dozens of specialist groups and organised weekend and holiday schools. The Club held three vast rallies which on two occasions packed the Albert Hall. The third in the Empress Hall, in April 1939, brought together on the same platform, Stafford Cripps, the Dean of Canterbury, Lloyd George and Harry Pollitt.

Throughout the whole period the Labour leadership remained uncompromisingly hostile to any contact outside of its ranks. The Labour vote in the General Election in 1935 had increased by 2,000,000 to 8,000,000 and they believed that the basis existed for a Labour Government if the Party remained independent of any political ties outside the National Joint Council of Labour. There existed a very deep-seated opposition to any form of coalition following the experience of the MacDonald defection and establishment of the National Government. That genuine revulsion at the betrayal which was felt in Labour's ranks was greatly exploited by the Right in its fight against any Left coalition.

## 7. MUNICH

The summer of 1938 was the decisive period as to whether peace would be maintained. In May Hitler began military mobilisation and demanded the Sudetenland. This further attempt at expansion failed when the Czechoslovak alliances with France and the Soviet Union remained firm. Hitler therefore needed help from inside the alliance to achieve his ends. It was Neville Chamberlain who actually opened the door to Hitler. Throughout the summer a propaganda campaign was waged in Britain calling for the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and territorial concessions to Hitler in the name of 'natural justice' to the Sudeten Germans. In the meantime British diplomatic pressure was brought to bear on the French and Czech governments.

It was in September that the Czech issue became a crisis. The Labour Party and TUC placed the entire blame for it on the National Government's policy which had been 'indecisive and misdirected over the past seven years'. Labour called for collective defence against aggression in order to safeguard peace and called for the British to unite with the French and Soviet governments, to resist an attack on Czechoslovakia. The British Labour Party's position was in marked advance in comparison to other socialist parties in the LSI. After the Munich agreement it was one of the few in the LSI Bureau that condemned the agreement. However, even that was after much vacillating. In September the Labour Party's statement was issued, but the only action that was suggested was the recalling of Parliament from its summer recess. A few days after the publication of Labour's statement, Chamberlain offered to talk to Hitler. War preparations began in Britain with gas masks being distributed, trenches dug in the parks and air-raid precautions being issued. In spite of war hysteria, there were large demonstrations which demanded 'stand by the Czechs'. On September 18 Trafalgar Square was filled with demonstrators, and the News Chronicle reported that on the 25 September "Whitehall was packed from wall to wall with people carrying banners saying 'Stop Hitler'."<sup>53</sup> The Conservative newspapers suppressed news of these demonstrations. From the Communist Party Congress, which was in session between 16 and 19 September in Birmingham, emerged real clarity. Congress declared that under cover of the war scare the real aim of the government was to prepare acceptance of the betrayal of Czechoslovakia

as a supposed victory for peace. The end result however was more likely to be war because a sell-out of Czechoslovakia to Hitler would strengthen him and weaken Britain's position.<sup>54</sup>

Chamberlain visited Hitler in Godesberg on September 22. He presented the Anglo-French plan for Czechoslovakian dismemberment. Hitler considered the plan to be too slow and demanded immediate occupation. The Czechs rejected the ultimatum and began to mobilise; as a result the scare in Britain intensified to such proportions that everybody expected war to break out within days. The expectations were reinforced by announcements that the navy was being mobilised, that ration cards were ready and evacuation plans laid. Then on 28 September Chamberlain told parliament that he had been invited once again to meet Hitler in Munich. Parliament rose in acclamation at the proposed talks; every party leader spoke in support of Chamberlain and wished him 'God speed' on his mission. Only one voice was raised in opposition—that of Willie Gallacher, the lone Communist MP who said: "I am no party to what is going on here. I object to the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia."<sup>55</sup>

In the period to Munich the Communist Party campaigned vigorously against what it correctly saw as the impending sell-out. Vast quantities of propaganda material was distributed, 95,000 pamphlets were sold and large numbers of meetings were held. Other forces were also at work. The Left Book Club for instance distributed 2,500,000 leaflets.

In the immediate period after the Munich agreement the Party distributed 130,000 copies of a pamphlet which exposed the contents of the agreement. As the extent of the betrayal became known, public anger and indignation grew.

## 8. THE SLIDE TOWARDS WAR

The Munich agreement was the watershed; it had shown how far aggression could successfully be pushed; war had become inevitable. Only a genuine Anglo-French Soviet alliance could have prevented the advance to war. Newspaper opinion polls in Britain had shown 87% in favour of an alliance with the Soviet Union. Interest in some form of popular front was still strong and was advocated in the Labour Party by Stafford Cripps. Both he and Aneurin Bevan were subsequently expelled for their unity campaigns. A number of parliamentary by-elections showed significant support for popular front candidates and the demands to remove the pro-fascist Chamberlain government grew. Early in 1939 the Communist Party launched a 'Crusade for Britain' for the defence of 'the livelihood of the people' and for 'democracy and peace'.<sup>56</sup>

Following the German occupation of the whole of Czechoslovakia the public pressure was so great upon Chamberlain that he made an alliance and guaranteed Poland and Rumania in the event of attack. He also sent a token mission to Moscow to discuss a treaty; it was a junior mission without authority which was obviously not intended to succeed. At this stage the Communist Party reiterated its call for the ousting of the 'Men of Munich' and their replacement by a government that would stand up to Hitler: In March 1939 the Daily Worker headlines were 'Communist appeal to Attlee, Sinclair and Churchill—Urged to defeat Cabinet and form a new government ... Harry Pollitt addressed to Major Attlee, leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party, Sir Archibald Sinclair, leader of the Liberal Party and Mr Winston Churchill, most

prominent of the Conservative rebels, an appeal that they should 'get together with one another without delay'.<sup>57</sup>

The contradictions inside the Conservative Party reflected a growth in the opinion, supported by Churchill, Duff Cooper and Eden, that the growing strength of Germany, which had been assisted by the policy of appeasement, was creating grave dangers for British imperialism. Indeed, immediately after Chamberlain signed the Munich agreement, Hitler said contemptuously: "This old gentleman has signed away the British Empire."<sup>58</sup>

No peace alliance was forthcoming despite the enormous efforts and sacrifices that had been made throughout the 1930s. On August 23, 1939 the German-Soviet non-aggression pact was signed. Although the event was as much a surprise to the Communists as to everybody else, it was in direct response to the constant rejections of the Soviet proposals for a peace pact. On September 1 Hitler attacked Poland and two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany. Thus, despite the appeasement aims of Chamberlain and his concessions, Britain was at war with Germany. Hitler decided to absorb the militarily and politically weaker countries in the West before turning Eastward against the Soviet Union. The response of the Communist Party was to publish a statement on September 2 which gave its support for all measures necessary to secure the victory of democracy in a just war against fascism. It stated that the first and most important step was a new government that would genuinely fight fascism. A pamphlet called 'How to Win The War' by Harry Pollitt was published which outlined the Party's policy of 'the fight on two fronts' which were: "First to secure the military victory over fascism and secondly to achieve this, the political victory over the enemies of democracy in Britain." This was the logical position that emanated from political and practical development of the Party's work. Pollitt said: "To stand aside from this conflict, to contribute only revolutionary-sounding phrases while the fascist beasts ride roughshod over Europe would be a betrayal of everything our forbears have fought to achieve in the course of long years of struggle against capitalism."<sup>59</sup>

When the line was changed a month later on October 7 Pollitt's pamphlet was withdrawn and the war was characterised as an imperialist conflict on both sides. At the Central Committee meeting of the British Party the new Comintern line had been presented by R Palme Dutt, and opposed by Harry Pollitt and John Campbell. The majority however supported the Comintern line. Pollitt relinquished his position as General Secretary to which he was re-elected in June 1941. The October 7 statement said: "The immediate issue is the cessation of hostilities and the calling of a peace conference ... it is the ruling class of Britain and France who demand the continuation of the war."<sup>60</sup> The statement also characterised both Churchill and Chamberlain as equal enemies to be fought. Masses of workers could not understand or support this estimation, particularly in view of the Party's campaign to resist fascist aggression hitherto. The Communists were branded as traitors and new appeasers by the ruling circles, who attacked the Communists in order to hide their own pro-fascist past. During the period up to mid-1940 when very little action took place, the 'phony war', and also in the period after May 1940 when Chamberlain was replaced by Churchill, the Party engaged in a fight to build the People's Convention.

The People's Convention was a rank-and-file organisation, in the sense that it did not have official Labour Movement backing, although a number of trade unions supported

it. The Labour Party itself had entered into an electoral truce with the government and the TUC did not intend to offer any challenge industrially. This created a political and industrial vacuum which was filled by the active militant left and communists who built up enormous pressure in dealing with the basic day-to-day practical and political issues. In January 1941 the Convention met, it had been preceded by an appeal from over 500 leading and widely representative people from all parts of Britain.<sup>61</sup> At the Convention "there were 2,234 delegates present representing 1,200,000 people in 1,304 organisations. Of these, the great proportion were delegates representing working men and women. They numbered 1,136 and were sent to the Convention by 1,004,950 workers in trade unions ..."<sup>62</sup> This is not however to be confused with support for the Communist position to oppose the war, which remained small. A number of trade union branches and local labour parties passed resolutions against the war and **Labour Monthly** had in February 1940 held a conference of 878 delegates from 379 organisations which passed a resolution against the War.<sup>63</sup> In January 1941 the **Daily Worker** was suppressed. Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary, gave his reasons: "I came to the conclusion that it was not fair to wait until actual damage to morale had been done and that it was far better to anticipate the possibility of damage".<sup>64</sup> Only 15 Members of Parliament voted against the suppression.

The form of the work of the Communist Party and the position of the working-class was different in Britain compared to that in Europe after the outbreak of war. Britain was not occupied (except in the Channel Islands) and therefore the British ruling class did not expose themselves as the betrayers of the people in the way that their counterparts did in occupied Europe.

The anti-fascist feeling of the British people had been shown pre-war by the massive mobilisation and the opinion polls. The Labour Party had endorsed the declaration of war and demanded that the Government 'Speak for Britain' and 'Speak for the workers'. However, in spite of the lack of determination and growing public doubts as to the ability of Chamberlain to lead against fascism, the Labour leadership did not pressurise the Government until the final crisis of May 1940 when Churchill became Prime Minister. The Labour Party called for all practical assistance to be given to Finland in the Soviet-Finnish war (December 1939) and was thereby prepared to support a war against the Soviet Union. The Government proposed to send fifty bombers to aid the Finns which was really no more than a token. Undoubtedly the Government's caution was due to the powerful anti-fascist feeling in Britain which ultimately prevented the war being switched against the Soviet Union, and laid a firm base for the Anglo-Soviet alliance which came into being in June 1941, after the German invasion of the Soviet Union.

The war-time coalition government was one of national unity against fascism, the overwhelming public support for the war effort proved the correctness of the Communist Party's position before the declaration of war, as to the strength of the people's attitude against fascism. In the campaigns for increased production the Communist Party was wholeheartedly involved as it was to rid the government of the 'Men of Munich'. In September 1942 the **Daily Worker** reappeared. The movement which demanded a second front in Europe grew to massive proportions. Tens of thousands packed Trafalgar Square and, in silence, heard Harry Pollitt report on the Russian front. The deep hatred felt by the British people of the pre-war appeasement contributed in 1945 to the election of a Labour government with the biggest parliamentary majority of the 20th century.

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