

The Monument

the story of the Socialist Party of Great Britain

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The cover shows a SPGB speaker,

1974, and a group at a SPGB conference at the Fairfax Hall, Harringay, in the mid 1930s.

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Foreword

This is a book about a political party. It is not an official history: the only accounts of its early years sanctioned by the Socialist Party of Great Britain appeared in the Socialist Standard in 1931 and in anniversary editions in 1954 and 1974, and in a section of its pamphlet Questions of the Day. There are virtually no records of the Socialist Party other than those in its possession, and its feelings over granting access to them have been mixed. In 1956 a request for research facilities by a scholar was refused, partly because of the physical inconvenience and partly on the ground that the Socialist Party would wish its history to be written only under its own supervision. A few years later a member was granted access to gather material for a university thesis which, as far as I know, was not completed.

The greater part of this book was written when I was away from the Party, and I have had therefore to rely on memory as well as on notes and papers accumulated during my membership. My intention has been to present as full an account as possible of the Party’s history and, despite this unavoidable lack of complete documentation, I offer an assurance that every fact is as I have stated it.

The Socialist Party of Great Britain is a unique phenomenon in British political life. It is older than any other organization claiming the title ‘socialist’ except the ILP, and its antecedents go back much further.

Its history has been a matter not so much of policies as of the kinds of men, often quite remarkable, who made it. I have tried to describe them as I knew them and was conscious of their tradition and flavour.

A portrait which avoids the warts and blemishes is, of course, no portrait at all. In the final chapter I have stated my belief in the Socialist Party’s view of society as the only tenable one. That does not alter – nor is it modified by — the fact that in its history the Party has been more admirable at some times than at others. A minority is always under pressure simply for survival and keeping alive its idea. The stresses can be severe. They are exacerbated by the intimacy among a few hundred members who mostly know one another: conflicts become personal, ways of life involve themselves in political drama.

Whatever conclusions a reader may reach from this history, one

should not be overlooked: after more than seventy years, the Socialist Party is alive and well. The idea of changing to a society based on common ownership has been sustained and, continually, reinvigorated while popular acclaim for other solutions has risen and fallen. That surely merits attention by itself. Where I have delineated the warts in the picture, it is because they have been there. At no point, however, has my wish been to denigrate. On the contrary, I feel indebtedness to the Party and people I have known in it — for all the things learned, for the satisfaction of work in unison, for camaraderie and friendship.

One special explanation which needs to be given concerns the use of the phrase ‘middle class’. In the socialists’ context it is seen as a term confusing and misleading from the fundamental separation between capitalists and workers; and I have explained the reasoning of this. Never­theless, I have used it in several places simply because there seemed no adequate alternative phrase for a certain set of social claims and attitudes, and I must hope that will not be taken as a denial of other contentions.

A number of people have given me assistance in various ways.

I wish to thank R. W. Reynolds, for an invaluable gift of papers and Ted Wilmott, for many reminiscences and for checking the material relating to the nineteen-thirties. Several members of the Socialist Party read the manuscript; so did Charles Cain, John Pilgrim and Chris Pallis; and I am grateful to all of them for their comments and suggestions. My warm thanks must also go to Mark Paterson, who believed in the book and worked hard for its publication; and to the publishers themselves.

In addition, there is the anonymous sage who first coined a minor left-wing proverb. The Socialist Party, he said, was ‘not so much a movement as a monument’. Whoever he was, he provided the title of this book.

1.

The Movement and the Purpose

The tramway depot was built on land that had been my great-grandfather’s brickfield. Its railway-Gothic offices, irrelevantly head-and- shoulders up from the neat new terraces of houses, stood upon the duck pond. The trams themselves — the ‘light railways’ — began ceremonially in 1904. They ran on roads which still in part were leafy lanes. One route led them clanging and whining past the grey, graceful house where William Morris had lived in his youth, down to within sight of the old ferry where fugitives from the Plague had been shouted back.

This was one small town, its face changing and its ears ringing in the suburban revolution. Its population doubled in a decade, again in the next, and doubled yet again in twenty years. The long sloping road, the track from the mediaeval village to the common land by the river, became the High Street: public baths, Carnegie library, theatre of varieties; pubs and penny bazaar, a shopping centre on the fronts of the lines of old brick cottages, while the common and the farms vanished under blocks of uniform bay-windowed houses.

A dormitory suburb at the turn of the century; a working-class suburb. Not a hive of working-class resentment, however, but a respectable district mildly split between Conservatives and Liberals, and most inhabitants keenly conscious of self-improvement, of having moved along the railway line out of East London. The influence of the rich nineteenth century families was still felt, though most of them had left and their big houses stood derelict and destined for factories or flats, their domain to be commemorated only in the names of streets. When great-grandfather profited finally from the sale of his fields for town develop­ment, he had reached the peak for which he had striven: he dropped ‘brickmaker’ and called himself ‘gentleman’.

Yet changes, even in so small a world, must bring changes of ideas too. In 1892 Chapman Cohen, a young convert from the Jewish faith to atheism, debated the free thought case with a vicar in the new Workmen’s Hall. A teacher’s accusation of civic corruption brought acrimony to the local party rivalries. The boy selling papers at the station was to be made a lord by twentieth-century politics; and in the station itself a workman’s refusal to pay the trade unions’ new Political Levy led to a test case and

judgement which affected the future of the nascent Labour movement.1

All this was close at hand, yet it was everywhere: in one’s own town, but in every other person’s town too. Fresh growth in profusion it was, on the great tree which had risen from the Industrial Revolution. The repellent twisted bole remained, but its stark uncompromising off­shoots now became part of a complex of intergrowing stems and branches, spreading wider and rising towards the sky. Technical change: the petrol engine and the electric motor starting new industries and new amenities. Sanitary change: baths, drains, wash-houses, vaccination. Schooling for all, newspapers for all, and early announcements of soap powder with uncommon detergent properties.

Most of all, however, this was the age of social awareness. The ‘social conscience’, the remorse of the rich for what the rich had done, had been at work for a generation already. But now there was a new response, a conviction among the poor that the scheme of things which had grown and was still growing all round them could be altered con­siderably, perhaps entirely. The conviction was quick-spreading; if not among the poorest and most degraded, then among working people who knew degradation and poverty by sight and touch.

In simple determinist language, it was ‘the system’ which pro­duced the movement against the system: nineteenth-century capitalism ripening the seed of its own decay. Indeed, it is impossible to read the history of the last century without seeing the inevitability of this out­come. For the age of the tramcar and the board-school was still the age of deprivation, of the Two Englands; the England through which the suburban railway ran was dingy, squalid and want-ridden. What was perhaps — there are no statistics to give precision — the most terrible and enervating of all trade depressions went on sporadically from 1873 to 1889.

Resentment and protest, suppressed or sublimated for seventy years, took developed and organized form. Many elements went to the making of a movement. The belief in the state’s powers had grown (the true significance of the Chartist movement lay in the perception by its leaders — or some of them, at any rate — of central government as a scarcely-wakened giant.) The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the upsurge of state-consciousness, of awareness that through parliament almost anything might be attained. Its most vital aspect for rebels and reformers was the line now clearly drawn to make a new phase in every struggle. The aged Frederick Engels in 1894 put down what was growing as the great aim of a movement: ‘the conquest of political power by the proletariat as the means towards a new organization of society.’

At what point does a stream, gathering from innumerable

tributary streams and rivulets, become a river ? Which rivulet, or what gradientor crack, is the force that makes the difference, giving volume and momentum to make the insignificant the dynamic ? The origins of the socialist movement are no easier to find. True, it came from the system, was in the first and last analysis formed in the formation of capitalism in the antagonism of interests between possessors and dispossessed. Nevertheless a hundred factors, great and minute, went to the delineation of a conscious end and conscious means.

The concept of freedom for its own sake, on which the laissez-faire capitalist had ridden to power, was one. So was the doctrine of Self Help, the inspiration of the night schools and Mutual Improvement societies from which the leaders of the new trade unions sprang. Samuel Smiles may have spoken for the little bourgeoisie, but his words affirmed the hope of thousands of thoughtful working men when he proclaimed ‘that man can triumph over circumstances and subject them to his will; that knowledge is no exclusive inheritance of the rich and leisured classes but may be attained by all. . .’

Then the Owen experiments in what today would be called perhaps libertarianism, perhaps ‘progressive management’; the successful co-operative societies; knowledge of the existence in America of post-Fourier Utopian colonies, in Europe of fierce revolutionary struggles. The crushing blows at the authority of religious fundamentalism dealt by Darwin and Wallace and Lyell; the franchise, and the need to persuade (however simply) every voter that his interests lay this way or that. The whole concept of progress, of man moving forward and improving the world day by day. Humanitarianism; the new unions, examples of what education and organization could do; ethics and economics, hunger and satisfaction, the cumulation of thoughts, ideals, anger and analysis — all these helped to shape a movement.

And each of them was a product of the first hundred years of capitalism. The supreme, systematic indictment, Marx’s Capital, was written when the forces were at their strongest, yet it is common to read that Marx s work had little influence in England. Shaw’s biographer, Hesketh Pearson, relates how the young G.B.S. attended the Democratic Federation, was told that without reading Capital he had no right to discuss, went to the British Museum and read it in French, and returned to

discover that he and H.M.Hyndman were the only ones who had done so.

But the influence of Marx’s ideas was far wider than the relatively small circle of actual readers (even today, when Marx is talked and written about more than ever before, there are probably not a hundred people in Britain who have read the three volumes of Capital). In fact, Hyndman made known the theory of value when it was accessible only

in French and German, and countless adherents gained their under­standing of it through him — later, through the written aids provided by Aveling and Kautsky.2 One of the prime concerns of the organizations founded in the name of revolution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was to see translated and published all possible works of Marx, Engels and their associates: sufficient testimony to the influence they themselves felt to have been strongest.

The final conditioning factor, nevertheless, was the growth of the state itself to the point where it was unmistakably the seat of power in capitalism. To Matthew Arnold it was ‘the nation in its collective and corporate capacity controlling as government the full swing of its members in the name of the higher reason of all’; to the revolutionist ‘the executive committee of the ruling class’, holding the sanction for all ownership and all control. Thus the organization to change society must now be a parliamentary party, with an eventual majority and electoral mandate as its aim.

Hyndman’s Democratic Federation was the first socialist organ­ization to exist in these terms. That is not to overlook the old Inter­national Workingmen’s Association, in which Marx himself had been the dominant figure. It was, however, an association and not a political party as such; its aim was to foster and stabilize the body of revolution­ary thought, and its main interest lay outside Britain. The Federation — or rather, Hyndman — was alienated from Marx by the curious half­slight with which Hyndman prefaced England For All:

‘For the ideas and much of the matter contained in Chapters II and III I am indebted to the work of a great thinker and original writer, which will, I trust, shortly be made accessible to the majority of my countrymen. ’3

In other respects, too, the Democratic Federation’s start in 1881 was unfortunate. Almost inevitably, it drew strong but immensely varied support. For all Hyndman’s concern with Marxism, the member­ship contained the conflicting outlooks of freethinkers, single-taxers (Progress and Poverty was published only the year before), militant working men and well-to-do radicals — among the latter Shaw, Frank Harris, William Morris, Walter Crane, William Archer and Annie Besant. After many dissensions Morris broke away to form his Socialist League, which ran for six years before — despite the support of Engels, Eleanor Marx and her husband Aveling, and other notables of the international movement — it collapsed to die unnoticed.

Morris set forth his vision of socialism in News From Nowhere. To see it as a cloudy utopia is to ignore its relation to socialist thought. It was a vision, of course, but it included a great deal of what all

socialists believed they would bring to actuality in the not-distant future. The moneyless society was clearly envisaged, was socialism logically considered: so was the society without government — Engels had said the state would ‘wither away’, Saint-Simon eighty years before had coined ‘administration of things’. Indeed, the fatal weakness of the League was the repugnance it showed for the idea of political power — all too quickly, it dissolved in the hands of anarchists.

The medieval yearning of News From Nowhere did not represent only Morris’s enthusiasm, but was a half-explicit part of the great vision of a new society. Production for use had a precedent in the Middle Ages that was readily pointed out. Medieval workmanship remaining in old churches and old furniture provided the standard against which nineteenth-century ugliness was judged. In one way and another this thought was present in almost all movements of reaction or protest against industrial society, from Gothicism onwards. For the socialist, the enslavement of the working class had begun with land enclosure; the common was stolen from the goose, and the revolution would restore the common and the way of life that had surrounded it. Even the celebration of May Day as rebels’ day alluded heavily to the thought of a golden age of uncommercial revelry.

While the League rose and fell, the Democratic Federation became the Social Democratic Federation and regrouped its forces. It joined with and largely took over the policies of the Labour Emancipation League, and it was from this point that considerations of expediency were posed, more and more often, against those of socialism. The new programme was a dual one. It aimed still at ‘The Establishment of a Free Condition of Society based on the Principles of Political Equality, with Equal Social Rights for All, and the Complete Emancipation of Labour’, and simultaneously a series of ‘measures called for to palliate the evils

of our existing society . . . for immediate adoption’.

Social revolution or social reform ? Alarmed by the phrases about complete emancipation and a free condition, the Liberal-Radical support dropped away sharply. It would have been hard for those people to learn that the phrases had been made hollow, or to foresee that with­in a year or two they would have, unsolicited, the support of the SDF.

For the new society automatically became the long-term objective, and ‘something for now’ the short-term one. The immediate demands, because they were immediate, required attention all the time not merely in propaganda but in tactics too, and the Federation became prepared to ally itself anywhere, anyhow, for its temporary ends.

Nevertheless, the hard core of revolutionary socialists remained in the SDF. Its stated object was still the overthrow of capitalism, and

the new society was still talked over at its meetings. That could not be said for any of the other organizations professing socialism that had come into being by the nineties. The Fabian Society was the ultimate association of the well-to-do, committed entirely to beneficent reform; the Independent Labour Party concerned to secure trade union repre­sentation and, again, reform the system. The fundamental issue was the class struggle. While the Fabians and the ILP denied it,4 its prosecution remained the vital principle of the SDF, and even the scurviest expedient was seen in terms of possible gain by the working class from the masters.

It should be understood that these movements were still minor­ities. The SDF had twenty thousand members in the nineties; only one person in several hundreds of the population. There was coherent organ­ization, but it was not without the need for secrecy. Men could and did lose their jobs if their socialism leaked out. In my great-grandfather’s growing town the brushmaker who hung the SDF’s Justice in his window lost his custom, partly from malice and partly from fear that through the door lay a monstrous, red-eyed revolutionist.

On such conditions, the Social Democratic Federation remained more or less united for several years. By the end of the century, however, a new and serious division had appeared. With the growth of the ILP and the approach to the formation in 1900 of the Labour Representation Committee, the Federation had been drawn farther still from the funda­mentals of socialism. The prospect of unity among the various organ­izations was continually raised, and here again the SDF hinted at willing­ness to sacrifice the independent principles it still held. Hyndman and th( other leaders were eager for unity and for broadening the Federation’s outlook to include all ‘sympathizers who were against social injustice’. The report in the Labour Annual of the 1897 SDF Conference refers to ‘an informal conference . . . between several members of the SDF and ILP, and certain recommendations for amalgamation drawn up for submission to the two Executives’.

Hyndman himself was an autocrat in the SDF. The quarrel in 1884 with Morris had involved the question of personal domination, and his contributions to discussions in The Social Democrat (the Federation’s ‘theoretical’ magazine — Justice was the propagandist paper) suggest patronage, even megalomania. Though Marx’s epithet ‘arch-Conservative’ was hardly fair, since Hyndman contributed a good deal to socialist theory in The Evolution of Revolution and the attack on orthodox economics which was published in The Economics of Socialism, there is no doubt that under his influence the organization moved increasingly along paths of compromise and away from the ideal of the new society.

By 1902 a small, determined body of dissidents was pressing for

A return to simple socialist teaching, to independent political action based on class-consciousness and the excision of reformism. Quelch, the editor of Justice, was quick to call this group ‘Impossibilists’, but they continued to gain ground and press their case in the correspondence columns of Justice. There were two main groups, one in London and the other in Scotland.5 The leader of the London faction was a young member named Jack Fitzgerald, and in 1903 he was corresponding with the Scottish group with a view to presenting the ‘Impossibilist’ case at the next SDF Conference when the Scots announced that they had acted on their own account. They had broken away from the SDF and formed the Socialist Labour Party, in imitation of the American party of the same name.

By his own account in 1905, Fitzgerald and the other dissidents in England might easily have joined the new party. However, there was a natural resentment at not being consulted: ‘those who formed the SLP had not kept faith’. A member named McGregor wrote alleging double dealings and undemocratic practices in the new party, and Fitzgerald and the others decided to continue their campaign to put the SDF straight. There was another factor. For obvious reasons the belief in the power of the English parliament was least strong in Scotland, and the SLP followed its American forebear in leaning heavily towards industrial unionism as the means to social revolution. The English socialists, though they were anything but certain of the role trade unions might play in the assault on capitalism, were conditioned to see political power as supreme.

There was, of course, the question of Fitzgerald himself. The initiative in the ‘Impossibilist’ group had been his. He had conducted classes to teach the economics of revolution. Though his political theory condemned all leadership, he had a band of devoted followers. The picture of him that emerges from reminiscences and minute-books is of a dynamic, relentless man, to whom superior knowledge was a bludgeon. He was; and remained until his death — the king-pin of the Impossibilists. The formation of a party before he was ready meant the snatching- away of the initiative, and it is hard to believe that he was prepared then to walk in someone else’s shadow, even in pursuit of political truth.

The controversy within the SDF was brought to a head at the 1904 conference at Burnley. The critics had gone on trying to convert others to their view. There had been some expulsions in London, and impatient declarations by Hyndman, Quelch and Lee. On the first day of the conference there was warm discussion of the ‘Impossibilist’ proposal, and the second day had barely opened when Herbert Burrows, an Executive member, sought urgency to move that the critics of

Federation policy be called upon to apologize and pledge themselves to criticize no more. The motion was carried; six members were asked to apologize then and there, and all refused. Finally two of them, Fitzgerald and H.J.Hawkins, were summarily expelled and left the conference. Making the most of its advantage, the Executive asked for and was granted power for the next three years to expel members or branches for failing to toe the Federation line.

That was far from the end of the matter. The expelled members had both been candidates for election to the next year’s Executive Committee, and there were grounds for thinking that the conference delegation had been partially arranged to conceal the true balance of opinion in the SDF. Three weeks later a meeting of London members to discuss the expulsions was held at Shoreditch Town Hall, and Jack Kent,6 a former member of the Executive who was in the confidence of Hyndman and Quelch, gave an account of tea-table plans to manipulate the conference. Hours of angry discussion followed until a vote was taken. The meeting supported the expulsions by 119 to 83.

Conscious of having gained a moral victory, the critics now formed a Protest Committee and issued a leaflet setting forth fully their disagreements with SDF policy. It was signed by 88 members and ex­-members, and demanded a political party pledged to socialism alone, to the realization of the great vision of the moneyless society. The class war must be the guiding principle, and compromise, either by alliance or by demands for the reform of capitalism, was unthinkable. No less important was the re-framing of the organization itself to keep power out of the hands of elites and cliques, and vest it in the entire membership.

Within the SDF the cause was lost, and only more expulsions followed. On 15 May a meeting of the Protest Committee’s supporters was held at Battersea, and the decision was made. A new party should be formed, entirely independent, based on clear-cut principles and devoted to the establishment of socialism. A ‘Provisional Committee’ was charged with making arrangements for its formal inception. On Sunday afternoon, 12 June 1904, the Inaugural Meeting was held in the Printers’ Hall, Bartlett’s Passage, off Fetter Lane, Fleet Street. The Socialist Party of Great Britain was founded.

In the same summer, the trams began to run.

2.

Principles First

The ‘Impossibilists’ had become a party. The Inaugural Meeting adopted the Object and Declaration of Principles that the Provisional Committee had drawn up, and voted for the organization’s name. There were three other suggestions: the Social Democratic Party, the Social Democratic Party of Great Britain, and, proposed by a young Irishman who was to become Father of the House of Commons and finally Lord McEntee of Walthamstow, the Socialist Party of Great Britain and Ireland.

The Party’s Object was to be: ‘The establishment of a system of society based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interests of the whole community.’

This was not dissimilar from the Social Democratic Federation’s, or even the 1918 Labour Party’s, summary of the socialist aim, but it was precise and legalistic. Correctness of definition and theory was all- important: in the minds of the men of the new party, the failures of the existing organizations were simply the fruits of false theories. For the same reason, the Object did not mention the means of exchange. It was held that under socialism, with free access to everything, there would be no exchange of goods; hence, to talk of common ownership of the means of exchange was to show misunderstanding from the start.

The Declaration of Principles was a series of associated statements describing the capitalist system, the class struggle, and the steps to be taken for the achievement of socialism. It ran as follows.

“The Socialist Party of Great Britain holds:-

*1.* That society as at present constituted is based upon the ownership of the means of living (i.e., land, factories, railways, etc.) by the capitalist or master class, and the consequent enslavement of the working class by whose labour alone wealth is produced.

2. That in society, therefore, there is an antagonism of interests, manifesting itself as a class struggle, between those who possess but do not produce, and those who produce but do not possess.

3. That this antagonism can be abolished only by the emancipat­ion of the working class from the domination of the master class, by the

conversion into the common property of society of the means of pro­duction and distribution, and their democratic control by the whole people.

1. That as in the order of social evolution the working class is the last class to achieve its freedom, the emancipation of the working class will involve the emancipation of all mankind without distinction of race or sex.
2. That this emancipation must be the work of the working class

itself.

1. That as the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capi- i talist class of the wealth taken from the workers, the working class must organize consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local, in order that this machinery, including those forces, may be converted from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege, aristocratic and plutocratic.
2. That as all political parties are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the working class is diametrically opposed to the interests of all sections of the master class, the party seeking work­ing class emancipation must be hostile to every other party.
3. The Socialist Party of Great Britain, therefore, enters the field of political action determined to wage war against all other political parties, whether alleged labour or avowedly capitalist, and calls upon the members of the working class of this country to muster under its banner to the end that a speedy termination may be wrought to the system which deprives them of the fruits of their labour, and that poverty may give place to comfort, privilege to equality, and slavery to j freedom. ’

The influences of the time are plain. The capitalist class were visible figures symbolizing riches and privilege in a world where the majority of people were deprived and degraded. Only six years earlier Thorstein Veblen had published The Theory of the Leisure Class, analyzing the ritual and symbolism of inequality and dramatizing the wasteful, useless life of the privileged class. Almost until 1900 the cities of London and Westminster had been largely owned by a handful of great lords who maintained, as well as vast country ‘seats’, town mansion with regiments of uniformed servants, and went to the opera in state- coaches.

This majesty was founded on the exploitation of the poor; not simply in landlordism, but in their enslavement in the factories and the crude profits which were the wide margin between their poverty and the

products of their labour. In 1910 B. Seebohm Rowntree published his

finding that between 25 and 30 per cent of the population lived either

below the level of what was ‘absolutely necessary for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency’, or in ‘a state of poverty, i.e. in obvious

want and squalor’. The skilled and better-paid workers earned as little as thirty shillings a week, and the average family in this group had 4.03 children.7

Thus, the Principles said, there were two classes: the wealthy owners of the means of production, and the enslaved sellers of labour- power. A socialist must be ‘class-conscious’, recognizing his identity as a member of the working class and understanding his interests as permanently against those of the master class. The phrase ‘two classes in society’ was to become the Party’s first and last aphorism, the unanswerable answer to every argument. It implied something else which the Party was to assert strenuously — the non-existence of any middle class. If other groups existed, they derived from false consciousness; the only categories with economic reality were the ones of ownership and non-ownership of the means of life. There were only two classes in society.

The proof that the outcome of the class struggle must be victory for the working class lay in the Marxist dialectic. Hegel had developed Fichte’s idea of the mystical synthesis into a universal principle: Marx had made it the law through which the class struggle operated to make history. From the earliest forms of property society, the owning class had always been in conflict with a developing class — thesis and antithesis, When the opposition of forces produced at last new owners with new economic motives, another social epoch was born — the synthesis.

Throughout history classes had eliminated one another in this way, until under capitalism there remained two classes face to face in a final cataclysmic struggle which would end in the establishment of the classless society.

It is true to say, however, that the dialectic was never embraced in any real sense by the Socialist Party. Historical materialism, Marx’s demonstration of social superstructures standing on economic bases and the drive to change arising from the compulsion for every class to pursue its interests, was advanced as confidently as the labour theory of value. For the dialectic no such confidence existed. It carried a tinge of mysticism from its philosophical origins. At the popular level it meant very little, even in phrases like ‘the historic mission of the working class’. What gave far more weight to the conviction that socialism was inevitable was a widespread belief in the progressive tendency of history,

summarized as ‘social evolution’.

Here the influence of Herbert Spencer showed itself. His analogy between the social and the biological organism had a profound effect on numbers of socialists. The theory of evolution had played a vital part in developing socialist thought by crushing the supposition that man’s existence was divinely ordained. Its incorporation into the theory of society was highly acceptable, and even when Spencer’s following had declined there remained the doctrine that socialism was both revolution­ary and evolutionary.

Up to this point the new Party’s Principles were sharper in form but little different otherwise from those which might have been suited by any group of the same period. From the fifth clause onward, however, they laid down a policy and a standard of independence that deliberately set their adherents apart from all others. The establishment of the new society required no leaders and no mere gathering of support; it would take place when the majority of the working class had been converted to an understanding of ‘scientific socialism’. This electoral majority would send representatives to parliament for the single purpose of declaring the owning class dispossessed and capitalism abolished. There was a slap in the face for the founders of the SLP who said that parliament did not lend itself to the purpose of socialism: in this revolutionary act it would be turned into ‘the agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege’.

Most decisive of all was the ‘Hostility Clause’. With its iteration in the final avowal of determination to ‘wage war against all other political parties’, it meant far more than a reaction against the com­promising and alliance-seeking of the Social Democratic Federation.

It meant, in fact, what it said: the new party claimed that its defined end and means were the only correct ones, and would oppose everyone and everything else. The ills of society were irremediable except through the socialist transformation. Any other attempt to cure them must fail, but worse, it must also delude the working class and turn their minds from socialism. Reformers were ‘confusionists’ and ‘fakirs’; hostility there must be.

How closely the new party had followed William Morris is seen when its Declaration of Principles is compared with the Principles published by the Socialist League in the first issue of The Commonweal.

‘As the civilized world is at present constituted, there are two classes of society — the one possessing wealth and the instruments of its production, the other producing wealth only by means of those instruments but only by leave and for the use of the possessing class.

These two classes are necessarily in antagonism to one another. The possessing class, or non-producers, can only live as a class on the

unpaid labour of the producers — the more unpaid labour they can wring out of them, the richer they will be; therefore the producing class the workers — are driven to strive to better themselves at the expense of the possessing class, and the conflict between the two is ceaseless.

. . . The sole possession of the producing class is the power of labour inherent in their bodies; but since, as we have already said, the rich classes possess all the instruments of labour, that is, the land, capital, and machinery, the producers or workers are forced to sell their sole possession, the power of labour, on such terms as the possessing class will grant them.

These terms are, that after they have produced enough to keep them in working order, and enable them to beget children to take their places when they are worn out, the surplus of their products shall belong to the possessors of property, which bargain is based on the fact that every man working in a civilized community can produce more than he needs for his own sustenance.

This relation of the possessing class to the working class is the essential basis of the system of producing for profit, on which our modern Society is founded. ’

After insisting that neither nationalization of the land nor so- called state socialism would be of any use, the manifesto ended:

*‘The* Socialist League therefore aims at the realization of complete Revolutionary Socialism, and well knows that this can never happen *in* one country without the help of the workers of all civilization.’

The conviction in Morris and in the founders of the Socialist Party of Great Britain was, overwhelmingly, that want and misery were integral to the capitalist system. The Declaration of Principles was intended not simply for 1904 but for as long as capitalism lasted. Fifty years later, in September 1954, a writer in the *Socialist Standard* affirmed that it remained *‘a clear, concise and accurate summary of the case for Socialism. This stability,*’ he continued, *‘is to be explained by a* corres*ponding stable feature in capitalist society . . . the exploitation of the wealth producers under wage slavery. While capitalism lasts, that* ex*ploitation will continue, and until it is ended the Object and Declaration of Principles of the Party, which stem from that exploitation and are directed to its abolition, will remain valid.* ’8

One other item in the Principles that is worthy of note is the phrase ‘without distinction of race or sex’. Today it might be a platitude; in 1904 it was astonishingly forward-looking. Anthropological knowledge persuaded even the most enlightened that vital racial differences existed.

In 1894 Engels wrote, replying to questions from Starkenburg: ‘We regard economic conditions as the factor which ultimately determines

historical development. But race is itself an economic factor’; and a passage in Plekhanov’s Fundamental Problems of Marxism, written a little later, indicates considerable uncertainty over race. Likewise, though the movement for female political emancipation had begun by 1904, the claim for unqualified freedom was remarkable in its boldness.

What kind of people were the hundred and forty-two who gave in their names at the meeting in 1904 ? The names themselves are of more than slight interest; some were to become famous in the movements to which they now swore hostility. They were, as the Secretary wrote them down:

Miss H.Aitken, Mrs Annie Albery, A.S.Albery, Victor Albery, Arch. Alcock, E.J.B.Allen, Mrs Allen, T.W.Allen, Sydney T. Alston, A.Anderson

1. Anslow, Isaac Asher, Will L. Auger, J.T.Bacon, B.G. Bannington, A.Barker, Wm. Bartlett, Hy. Belsey, John Benford, W.Betts, J.Blaustein, A.Boggis, A.R.Brooker, R.J.Buckingham, H.J.Bull, A.H.Burton, F.Cadman, Miss L.E.Campbell, John Chislekoff, W.Chown, Robt. Collins,
2. C.Collings, R.Compton, Mrs E.Craske, F.Craske, Harry Crump,
3. Daintree, H.T.Davey, John W. Day, John Donovan, A.C.Dowdeswell, Paul Dumenil, W.Eayrs, Minnie Eden, Stanley Eden, R.Elrick, Edward Fairbrother, E.Fawcett, J.Fitzgerald, G.Fletcher, Haris Fogel, W.Fox,
4. Galloway, John Gordon, C.Goss, A.J.M.Gray, A.Groonham, R.C.Gross, Edwd. Hammond, E.Hardcastle, G.R.Harris, H.J.Hawkins,

Miss K.Hawkins, G.Hicks, Geo. H.Hobbs, G.J.Hodson, Mabel Hodson,

Wm. Holford, Mrs Holford, Mrs Holgate, Miss Homerton, H.E.Hutchins, A.W.Ingham, T.A.Jackson, A.E.Jacomb, Hyam Jacobs, S.Jacobs,

A.Jones, A.C.Jones, G.Jones, Mrs L.Jones, J.Kent, R.H.Kent,

W.G.Killick, G.T.King, Mrs King, Wm. Lee, C.Lehane, F.S.Leigh,

Hy. Martin, Valentine McEntee, J.McNicol, F.Meicklejohn, G.F.Moody, E.C.Moore, A.Morrill, H.Neumann, D.R.Newlands, John Nodder,

Charles Orme, J.Oxley, Alex Pearson, Miss M.Pearson, H.C.Phillips,

Alf. Pilbeam, A.Pyrke, W.Pyrke, F.Quinney, D.A.Reid, C.Richards, A.Ridgewell, S.J.C.Russell, Walter Russell, Mrs L.Salaman, Hy. Salter,

1. Severn, Wm. Sills, F.G.Simco, Frank Sinfield, H.J.Smith, C.V.Sparks, H.O.Sparks, T.Spooner, G.Streak, G.Sweeting, T.Tarrant, L.Thurston, R.Triggs, C.Turner, Annie Walker, R.H.Walker, J.Wallis, F.C.Watts,

T.Wilkins, E.Wilkinson, G.H.Wilson, T.A.Wilson, W.Woodhouse, Walter Wren, H.J.Young.

(The names Gordon, Chislekoff and Fogel were later claimed to have been false; and three men were asked to leave the Inaugural Meeting who dissented from the founding resolution, ‘as the invitation to attend was extended only to those who were prepared to co-operate in forming the Party’.)

They were men and women belonging unmistakably to what Seebohm Rowntree termed ‘Class D’ of the working population:

‘families in which the fathers are skilled workers, or foremen who have risen through superior ability, or men who on account of their high character have been placed in well-paid positions of trust. ’

Indeed, Rowntree’s account of ‘Class D’ conveys accurately the characteristic life-style of those who formed the Party.

‘The houses . . . contain, as a rule, three bed-rooms, a kitchen, scullery, and sitting-room. In the latter are often found a piano, and occasionally a library of thirty books or more. ’ And later: ‘Shut out to *a great* extent from the larger life and the higher interests which a more liberal and a more prolonged education opens up to the wealthier classes, it is not surprising that, to relieve the monotony of their

existance, so many artisans frequent the public-house . . . The surprise *is rather th*at the exceptions are so numerous. It is from among the thoughtful men in Class D that the Trade Unions, the Co-operative Movement, and Friendly Societies find many of their leaders. ’

Not all of them would have fitted Rowntree’s estimate of 30s. a week as the income of Class D. Unemployment was common; some were too vociferous with their socialism, others too contemptuous of the wage-worker’s lot to care about steady employment. The majority, however, were skilled workers. Fitzgerald was a bricklayer who later became an evening-class teacher of mathematics and finally a full time instructor at the Brixton School of Building. Anderson was a house painter. F. C. Watts was a wood-carver who worked on, among other things, the coronation chair of George V and the decoration in

in the Titanic; McEntee was a carpenter, Jacomb a compositor.

To all of them, knowledge was power — above everything, the knowledge of Marxist economics. Fitzgerald and two or three others had learned the theory of value at classes conducted by Marx’s son-in-law, Dr Edward Aveling, and their propaganda for socialism depended heavily on the exposition of it. If the working class were shown the mechanism of exploitation, their reasoning ran, they would see the necessity for its overthrow. How fervently this was believed is

shownby an anecdote in R. M. Fox’s autobiography, Smoky Crusade.

Recalling the men he met as a member of the Socialist Party in its early years, Fox says:

‘I have painful memories of one man, with bushy eyebrows and an intent look, who would walk home with me and halt under the big lighted clock at the Tottenham Gas Offices while he expounded some *point* in economics. “This is what I want to do,” he would say, fixing *me* with a pitiless eye, when I was dropping with fatigue. “Take this

pipe” — he pulled it from his mouth and I surveyed the hateful object with disgust — “Then this pouch. ”I looked with similar loathing at that. “And then that lamp-post” — he pointed with the stem of his pipe at the post in question. “Now what I want to do is explain to the ordinary man the relation between the amount of labour power in these three objects. ” ’

It was understood that no one would be allowed to join the new party whose allegiance to socialism was not clearly established.

For the moment, however, some kind of administration must be found. After adopting the draft rules framed by the industrious Provisional Committee, the Inaugural Meeting voted for party officials. Con Lehane, a handsome young Irishman, became the first Secretary (the meeting’s minutes are written by him in a fine vigorous hand),9 and R.Elrick the Treasurer. Twelve others were elected to form, with these two, the Executive Committee. Fitzgerald did not stand, and the twelve were: A.S.Albery, T.W.Allen, A.Anderson, H.Belsey, A.J.M.Gray, T.A.Jackson, H.Martin, H.Neumann, H.C.Phillips, F.C.Watts, G. H. Wilson, and W.Woodhouse.

The rules laid down that the Executive Committee should meet every week. Thus was pinpointed a fact which was not to change in the lifetimes of the founders: the membership outside London was negligible. The group farthest afield was at Watford, and in 1904 the fares

over even such a modest distance would have been an obstacle had not a large number of these first members been fanatical cyclists too. Fitzgerald went everywhere on short-framed machines which he built himself and, as with the Clarion Cycling Clubs, groups rode considerable distances at week-ends to hold outdoor meetings and sell socialist literature.

The Inaugural Meeting lasted four hours; it was ten o’clock when the Printers’ Hall discharged its excited crowd on the gas-lit pavement. The closing rites had been the singing of the ‘Internationale’ and three rousing cheers for the Socialist Revolution. What hopes there must have been ! Hardly a man or woman could have failed to feel that the new age was close at hand, and to glow with the certainty that had possessed William Morris:

For this at least we know —

That the Dawn and the Day is coming,

And forth the Banners go.

Ill

**3**.

A Voice to be Heard

The Party had no money and no premises. The Provisional Committee had met in one another’s houses, several times in a bedroom. For the first meetings of the Executive, Hans Neumann arranged a room on alternate Saturdays at the Communist Club. This was a house in Charlotte Street, off the Tottenham Court Road, where for several years continental socialists met to have discussions and hear lectures. 10

The initial Executive Committee meeting was held in the afternoon of 18 June 1904. The fourteen’s most immediate tasks were to arrange meetings and find some literature to be sold in advertisement of the Cause. There would have to be a Party paper and Party pamphlets, of course, but for the time being some publications had to be approved for sale by members. ‘The following brochures were declared suitable’, minuted the Secretary: Socialism and the Worker, by Sorge: *Wage Labour and Capital*, by Marx; *Socialism and Radicalism*,

by Aveling; Liebknecht’s No Compromise; and The Socialist Revolution, by Kautsky. The membership was asked to suggest additions to the makeshift list, and the other titles approved in subsequent weeks were Morris’s How I Became a Socialist, Jones' Boy by Spokeshave, two drink question pamphlets by J. Russell Smart, Widdup’s The Meaning of Socialism and some others by Marx and Engels.

It was suggested that the Party write to Reeves and Co, the publishers, seeking to buy the copyright of The Communist Manifesto for a small sum. The suggestion, or the letter, must have been a little naive: within a week Reeves replied rather sharply that the Manifesto was still in print, and they had no intention of parting with its copyright. A feeler in another direction brought more satisfactory response, however. Neumann was anxious to translate Karl Kautsky’s Das Erfurter Program, and a letter asking permission brought a favourable reply. This was, in fact, the first English translation of one of the German socialist classics, and Kautsky took a close and sympathetic interest in the work as it progressed.

A committee was appointed to prepare the ground for the

Party newspaper, and a ‘mass meeting’ was arranged for the next morning in Finsbury Park. It was recognized that outdoor addresses had to be the backbone of propaganda: indeed, apart from occasional meetings in hired halls, they were the only means available. One’s voice had to be heard, literally. The tradition of open-air oratory was a long one, extending back to the agora and the mediaeval hillside. In 1904 the sects and parties vied with each other in the streets and parks, and the Socialist Party flung itself enthusiastically into the fray.

Almost every member was ambitious to be a speaker; the only reticents were those for whom the penalties in loss of livelihood might have been too great. Aspirants to the platform practised declamation on one another with Men of England, The Bells and The Charge of the Light Brigade, and learned key-passages from important works by heart. Bits of Shakespeare, too — it was a fine thing to support the analysis of private property with

‘. . . You take my life

When you do take the means whereby I live ’

And the opportunities for platform-speaking were multifarious. Hyde Park had not then become a national freak-show and tourist attraction, and was only one of a score of parks and open spaces where audiences awaited anyone with a bone of contention. Any town had room for speakers in its market place and main roads. It is worth recalling that William Morris spoke in this way for years and Bernard Shaw was, at the time of the Socialist Party’s foundation, one of the most popular soap-box men in England.

It was by no means easy, however. Socialists and their sympathizers, with Liberals and reformers generally, represented in the main the more thoughtful skilled and semi-skilled working men. By an irony which was as tallow to the flames of a socialist’s anger the most deprived and coarsest sections, the objects of his great concern, were the supporters of Conservatism and Empire. A speaker too vigorous in attacking the prejudices of a prejudiced audience was asking to be thrown in the horse-trough, and not uncommonly he was. Robert Tressell in The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists describes the recep­tion of a Clarion van in Hastings:

‘The man on the platform was still trying to make himself heard, but without success. The strangers who had come with the van and the little group of local socialists, who had forced their way close to the platform in front of the would-be speaker, only increased the din by their shouts of appealing to the crowd to “give the man a fair chance ”. This little bodyguard closed round the van as it began to move slowly downhill, but it was completely outnumbered . . . “We’ll

*give the* swines Socialism !” shouted Crass, who was literally foaming at the mouth. ’

There were in fact several organizations with such names as the Anti-Socialist Union, the Liberty and Property Defence League, and the Middle Class Defence Organization, listed in the Daily Mail Year Book as ‘the societies whose purpose it is to combat Socialism’. But the Socialist Party members themselves stopped only at physical aggression in the vigour of their attacks on all opponents. They bustled into audiences anywhere, shouting questions, counter-assertions and challenges. An Anti-Socialist or an ILP meeting equally was likely to be disturbed on Clapham Common or in Finsbury Park by the roaring boys of the new party: Jack Fitzgerald, short, thick, fierce-eyed, with a scarlet tie, pushing his way to the front and shouting: ‘I demand to take the platform and speak in opposition !’

Though a monthly ‘lecture list’ was compiled to distribute the speakers regularly over the meeting places in all parts of London, most speakers had their own special grounds. The doyen of all the Party’s speakers, without any doubt, was Alex Anderson. It is difficult today to assess how great an orator he really was. Speaking was his life. Had he chosen one of the big battalions to do political battle, Anderson would have been legendary as Maxton, Bevan or Arthur Cook. He had the power to make people weep at street-corners; he stirred and played on every emotion, ridiculed and denounced opponents with astonishing rhetoric and wit.

Anderson’s centre was the Tottenham area of north-east London. Besides Finsbury Park, its main speaking stations were St.Anne's Road, Highbury Corner, High Cross, and the corner where the West Green and Seven Sisters Roads flow together into the High Road. On Sundays he would tram-ride or walk from one to another of these places for morning, afternoon and evening meetings, subsisting between them on coffee-shop snacks, drinking from a lemonade bottle on the platform to ease his voice. At the late meetings he would cast an irresistible spell upon his hearers: up to and after midnight he would stand above a sea of faces in the gaslight, appealing with outstretched hands for the world to be cleansed.

Early pictures of Anderson show a Byronic head with curled hair, wide forehead and sensual mouth. He had firm, classical features and a slight cast which gave his eyes, according to Fox, ‘a fine rolling frenzy on the platform’. He was tall, bony, commanding, and he led a life of incredible hardship. To the difficulties of a painter’s unsteady employment he added others from his contempt of employers and foremen. Always out of work, always behind with the rent, he often

hurried away from a mass meeting to conduct a midnight removal of family and furniture. Once, turned out by yet another landlord, he left on the wall: Rent is Robbery and Profit is Plunder.

How much effect had Anderson’s persistent oratory, and how enduring was his message ? He brought in numbers of recruits, particularly from the young men who listened to him (in later years they were known half-contemptuously as ‘Anderson’s pups’). At the height of his popularity the Tottenham Branch of the Party was almost a hundred strong, but its existence was vested entirely in him. After his death in the nineteen-twenties it went into steady decline, and survived thirty years more only as a dwindling group of elderly men talking of the past. To many in his audiences he was simply a superb entertainer; one may willingly submit to a spell, but the morning air will still be cold.

But it was the message itself that failed to take a hold. Magnificently stated, it remained a gospel of despair in most people’s ears. When the working class rises and overthrows the system,

Anderson cried, human happiness can begin, but until that day want, squalor and misery must reign. There can be no alleviations: to struggle for improvement is useless while capitalism remains. He declared hope­lessness in the daily struggle to keep heads above water, insisting on the rejection of every attempt to better conditions. Nothing but the spread of socialist knowledge could lead to release of the working class from its bondage in poverty.

Anderson went farther in his conviction of the intractability of capitalism than many other members of the Party. And that is saying a great deal. The basic principle for all of them was belief in the irrevocable law of the depression of the mass of people by the system. Nevertheless, there were differences in outlook on the daily struggle for subsistence. While all agreed that revolution and not reform was the answer, and all showed equal fervour in condemning every less-than- diametrical opposition to capitalism, there were varying opinions as to the functions and potentialities of working-class organizations.

Thus, the Inaugural Meeting had instructed the Executive to arrange at once a members’ conference on the question of trade unions. Some of the founders leaned towards the idea of industrial unionism — the Party had not yet finished with the SLP. Others, of whom Anderson inevitably was one, saw the unions as bodies aiming to meliorate but not abolish the capitalist system, and so dismissed them. The special meeting was arranged for 9 July, at the Food Reform Restaurant in Furnival Street, Holborn. Lehane, Anderson and Neumann were appointed by the Executive Committee to prepare a

draft resolution to put before the meeting. On the preceding Saturday afternoon, they reported that they could not agree and presented two conflicting resolutions.

Anderson’s proposal, which Neumann seconded, was direct and uncompromising.

‘Whereas the Declaration of Principles of the Socialist Party of Great Britain is one of hostility to all other parties in the political field, and

Whereas the Trade Unions have definitely taken up a position other than that of the Socialist in that field, the Socialist Party of Great Britain in General Meeting assembled declares that while through *ot*her circumstances its members may be compelled to belong to such organizations, such members and any others who may deem it advisable to be in Trade Unions shall simply use their position therein to reiterate the Socialist position, but shall in no case accept any official position where their actions would be controlled by the Trade Unions instead of by Socialist convictions. ’

The other resolution took a different view of the functions of trade unions. Since there was always pressure from the employers to keep wages down, there must be organized counter-pressure by the workers. ‘This twofold organization of the hostile classes in society’ simplified and sharpened the historic struggle which would lead to socialism. It was part of the task, therefore, for socialists to work in their unions to promote greater efficiency in the struggle and translate industrial militancy into political consciousness, and, at the same time, convert unionists to support for the Socialist Party.

It was a dispute which was to continue and recur in controversies round reforms, industrial conflicts and political events. Underneath was not really the trade union question but the question of the character of the Party. What ultimately determined each controversy was an attitude of mind, and in this respect Anderson lost battles over policy but won the war. The interests of the working class could not be conceived as having any other expression than in organizing for socialism. The keystone — ‘the only true position’, as the first Manifesto put it — was the Hostility Clause in the Principles which insisted that those who were not with the Party were against the Party.

The Executive Committee supported Anderson’s resolution.

The General Meeting did not; the other motion, put by Lehane and T. A. Jackson, was carried instead. But the air was full of amendments, and a further meeting was arranged for 7 August. First there was a proposal that trade unions should be seen as ‘essentially economic organizations’, sectional and lacking real class-consciousness, and that

support should be given only to such unions as cared to affiliate themselves to the Socialist Party; then a motion by Fitzgerald for the establishment of Party-controlled ‘cells’ within the unions. These were lost, and so were several more including another condemnatory motion by Anderson.

Finally this second meeting put off the entire question ‘until a decision is arrived at as to whether Trade Unions are political organi­zations and therefore if our relations thereto are covered by our Declaration of Principles’. This was shuffling, and it produced two more special meetings in September that came no nearer to a decision. And on 3 December the Party’s General Meeting agreed to a resolution which was barefaced evasion. Since the Party Principles were a clear guide to members in all contingencies, it said, there was no need at all for any special explanation.

The indecisiveness was not what the Party aimed at, and in 1905 two statements were made that ended it. The first was a resolu­tion passed by the Easter Conference, when F.C.Watts and G.R.Harris moved:

‘Whereas the Trade Unions, while being essentially economic organizations, are nevertheless taking political action either to safeguard their economic existence or for other purposes, and

Whereas any basis of working-class political action other than that laid down in the Declaration of Principles of the Socialist Party of Great Britain must lead the workers into the bog of confusion and disappointment, be it therefore

Resolved that this Conference of the Socialist Party of Great Britain recommends that all members of the Party within Trade Unions be instructed to actively oppose all action of the Unions that is not based on the Principles of the Party. ’

In June 1905 the first Manifesto of the Socialist Party of Great Britain was published. It was a red-covered pamphlet setting forth the historical and economic case for common ownership and condemning the SDF and ILP, the Fabian Society and the Labour Representation Committee; and it dealt at length with the trade unions. Their securing of legal recognition and protection, it said, had sapped the ‘grasp of the class antagonism’ which they earlier had. Now, ‘taught by the assiduous agents of the capitalist class’, they acted on the theory that capital and labour had common interests. The Manifesto went on:

The basis of the action of the trade unions must be a clear recognition of the position of the workers under capitalism, and the class-struggle necessarily resulting therefrom . . . All actions of the unions in support of capitalism or tending to side-track the workers

from the only path that can lead to their emancipation, should be strongly opposed: but, on the other hand, trade unions being a neccesity under capitalism, any action on their part upon sound lines should be strongly supported. ’

This statement was accepted by the Party, and the second edition of the Manifesto in 1907 solidified it in a preface. Affirming that workers’ organization must be founded on class solidarity and class interests, the preface ended:

'Politically, such an organization exists (the SPGB), industrially, it has yet to be born.’

Thus the trade unions were rejected for their political involvement and their compromise with capitalism. Their function in a limited sphere was recognized, but the action on ‘sound lines’ that would win the Party's approval was largely hypothetical. Its nature would be to aim at benefit for the working class as a whole, excluding any rapport with employers or government and any sectional concern. With each union of necessity seeking what it could get for its members alone, the chance was remote; but, failing it, the Party stood aside.

Sterner judgements about the relation of trade unions to politics would be made after the formation of the Labour Party in 1906. Not long before that, Valentine McEntee’s name was seen in a newspaper as a prospective parliamentary candidate for the Labour Representation Committee. Asked to resign from the Party, McEntee contested the point in the light of a long memorandum he had sent to one of the special meetings, but the Executive Committee insisted. A curious parallel light on the Party’s valuations appears through another question at the same time. A woman member wrote that she was on the Board of Guardians in her town: was it all right ? And the Executive replied that, so long as she kept her socialism and her Guardianship apart, it was.

Perhaps, on the other hand, it was not so curious. Labourism was to be the bete noire of the Party, hated as much as the capitalist system itself. Its growth was to lead to the hardening of Party attitudes almost to the point where even the wish to improve everyday conditions was considered iniquitous. The resentment was heated by the fact that many of the rising Labour leaders had been fellow-members of the Social Democratic Federation and once professed the revolution. No words were strong enough for the Party’s contempt. In the Socialist

Standard they were called ‘fakirs’, a strong allusion to self-seeking piety, and on the street platforms ‘Labour bleeders’ (T.A.Jackson coined the clumsy, angry phrase).

The Socialist Standard first came out in September 1904. Its

name was chosen by the Executive Committee from a list of suggestions which included The Red Flag, Socialism, The Socialist Republic and The Socialist News. Estimates were sought from printers and cash guarantees were obtained from members and Branches. The paper appeared as specified by the Executive: ‘A Party Organ, 8 pages 10” x 15”, to be issued monthly. Advertisements to be allowed.’ The title was drawn in swashbuckling Victorian characters by Freddie Watts, who also designed the Party emblem (a globe with the inscription ‘The World for the Workers’). Responsibility for the Standard was delegated to an Editorial and Management Committee of five, drawn from the Executive Committee.

The first issue said on its front page:

‘In the Socialist Party of Great Britain we are all members of the working class, and cannot hope that our articles will always be finely phrased, but we shall endeavour to lay before you on every occassion a sane and sound pronouncement on all matters affecting the welfare of the working class. What we lack in refinement of style we shall make good by the depth of our sincerity and by the truth of our principles. ’

And it went on:

‘We shall, for the present, content ourselves with a monthly issue, but we are confident that the various demands upon us, by the quantity of matter at our disposal, and by the growth of the Party, will necessitate in the near future, a weekly issue of our paper. ’

The writer of these words was also the printer and the only advertiser. He was A.E.Jacomb, one of the founders; he had a little printing-shop in Stratford under the name ‘Jacomb Brothers’, and he was determined that no one but he should print the Socialist Standard. The original estimate of £7 10s 6d for 3,000 copies was made simply by undercutting all the other estimates. Jacomb never sent in his bill, and from time to time the Executive Committee was obliged to set up sub-committees to discover or assess how much was owed to him.

Nor was this the careless generosity of a successful business man. Jacomb never made a respectable profit in his life, and struggled continually against poverty and impending bankruptcy. He was simple, honest and good-hearted, but he had a razor-sharp mind. There was little in economics and history he had not read, and he was a lucid and forceful writer. His output went far beyond the regular articles on socialist theory signed by him in the Standard: when the first enthu­siasm of contributors to a new paper died down and the supply of material became thin, Jacomb filled the gaps over pseudonyms and with articles composed as he set them in type.

Besides his expositions of Marxist economics, Jacomb had a flair for rhetorical invective of an astonishing kind. Its style was outmoded even in 1904: it suggested Jorrocks, even Ally Sloper.

Nevertheless, it was a perfect vehicle for the Party’s unlimited attacking enthusiasm. Here is Jacomb roaring and nose-thumbing at ‘King Capital’s Coronation’ in 1911:

‘A King is to be crowned.

In the presence of our Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and the Premiers of the five dominions of “our” mighty Empire, and the assembled monarchs of many lands, and the Lord God of Israel and the Stock Exchange himself.

The Crown, and the Orb, and the Sceptre, and the Sword of State, and the Cap of Maintenance, and the Rod with the Dove, and the Monkey on the Stick, and all the other symbolic insignia and regalia which have come down to us from barbarism, along with ye Ancient Order of Foresters and ye game of skittles, are to be brought from their dungeon in the Tower (where they have rivalled a pawn-broker’s window) and taken to the House of God at Westminster, there to be used in the great ceremony.

And there, before a vast concourse of gentlemen who have won the same distinction in the divorce court that their forefathers gained in piratical, slave-hunting and other plundering forays of the past, and of high-born dames whose “Sir Joshua Reynolds” peach-bloom cheeks are veritable triumphs of the house-decorator’s art and other high-born dames whose ancient lineage goes back to the mighty Pork Kings of Chicago, one George Wettin, a most cosmopolitan British gentleman, will swear great oaths to be faithful to certain hoary superstitions, and to uphold certain important and worthy institutions, and to do it all for the dirt-cheap, upset-competition price of a million a year or nearest offer*. . .*

What does it mean: the Crown, and the Orb, and the Sceptre, and the Sword of State, and the Cap of Maintenance, and the rest of the jewelled symbols ?

What does it mean: the barbaric pomp and splendour, the lavish display of wealth, the clank of arms and armour and the jingle of spurs, the foregathering from the ends of the earth of the Empire’s rulers?

What does it mean: the flaunting flags, the streets lined with police and military, the hoarse acclamation of pallid millions whose rags flutter a significant reply to the bunting overhead, the bestowing of a meal upon thousands of little children whom hunger makes glad to accept even such a trifle from hands so heavy-laden with wealth that

they cannot feel the weight of the charitable grains they scatter ?’ Euphemism was scorned in the Standard, and the contributors said exactly what they meant. Lloyd George was ‘this oily-tongued time-server’, Asquith ‘the assassin’, their confreres hypocrites, frauds and political prostitutes. Labour candidatures at the polls were ‘futile trickery’; when the Manchester Guardian slighted the Party, a Standard headline called it the ‘Liberal Skunk Press’. Not unnaturally, there was trouble from time to time. In 1906 Richard Bell took the Party to court for libel. Bell, the General Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, had addressed a mass meeting of railwaymen to defend his executive’s acceptance of an arbitration finding against a decision of the membership. The Socialist Standard had as its front­page headlines for August:

FOUND OUT:

LABOUR LEADERS SELL THE UNION MEMBERS AND THEIR APOLOGIST GETS A WARM RECEPTION Copies were sent to all the branches of the Society, and shortly afterwards writs were served on the Party’s Executive Committee.

When the case was heard in July 1907, before Mr Justice Darling, Bell was represented by C.F.Gill, KC, and the Standard by Anderson and Fitzgerald, both out of work. The judge in his summing-up laid down that the union executive was not bound to obey the North-Eastern Railway members who had been involved in the dispute but had to consider the interests of the Society as a whole, and the plaintiff was entitled to a verdict if he had not betrayed his trust.

The jury may have succumbed to Anderson’s eloquence; at any rate, they awarded Richard Bell only £2 damages. The sight of two unemployed men in their twenties haranguing the court must have been remarkable. As Anderson and Fitzgerald left, a well-dressed man said heartily: ‘You did very well, boys’ — and presented a sovereign to buy themselves a drink. Largesse for a moral victory: with the jubilant members who had come to hear, the defendants made for the nearest coffee-shop and paid for a banquet. The next issue of the Standard reported the case in terms more libellous than those of the original article, and proclaimed: ‘This is our first libel action, but it may not be our last. We will take that risk, and others that may arise.’

In 1907 Jacomb himself was in trouble with authority. He had written and published a book on the position of women in society, a great question of the day. But unlike other writers of books about it Jacomb paid no attention to the moral conventions of his time, and the book was banned as soon as it was published. Police went to Jacomb’s workshop to take away the copies, and as a consequence of their visit his machinery was damaged and his type destroyed. The effect of this and other incidents, from prosecutions for selling literature in unauthorized places to mild brushes with the police over out-door meetings, was less to create resentment than to foster a conviction of grandeur. The Socialist Party had the truth about the system: the capitalist class was afraid.

4. Religion and Reform

There was still no Party office. The Communist Club provided only a room for meeting, and the addresses for communications were members’ own addresses: literature orders to Watts, requests for information to Fitzgerald. In 1905 the more frequent use of a room was obtained at la Caledonian Road; a year later there was another room at 28 Cursitor Street; the next year, the Executive met at 22 Great James Street.

The first premises rented for the Party’s exclusive use were at 10 Sandland Street, Bedford Row, in 1909. They were two rooms above a corner junk-shop, up two flights of rickety stairs. One felt, said a veteran member forty-five years later in the Socialist Standard, that one was entering ‘the heart of deep red revolution’. One room had a desk and a chair and a pile of unsold Standards. The paper was delivered in large flat sheets every month; when the word of its arrival came, members would go and spend evenings or Saturday afternoons folding the copies and arguing economics while they did so.

The other room had a long table and a number of chairs. Here Fitzgerald gave his classes on Marxism and history and on Tuesday nights the Executive Committee met. R. M. Fox has described the scene at one of the meetings in the crowded little room:

‘The war-horses pranced . . . Anderson, his pale face gleaming, flung back his mane of hair and pounded chairs and table. Neumann wore his square-cut frock coat, which he usually reserved for Paris Commune celebrations. He began with Teutonic gravity, but soon worked himself into red-faced incoherence. Fitzgerald, owlish and grim, shot out his fists and nailed his points, with a deep throaty roar.

It should have been a great night. The issue to me was a very momentous one. I saw the lights of the room casting gesticulating shadows on the blinds. The orators thundered on till well after midnight, arguing, pleading, insulting, threatening, asserting. Down in the street passers-by stood looking up at the windows curiously, wondering when the disputants in the brawl would come to blows. ’

In those years, the character of the Party became more firmly established. There was a discipline which softened for nobody: a

member had to conform or go. Each year there were the one or two cases of members weakening towards prohibited doctrines or organizations and their inevitable expulsion (Fox was expelled for sending an appreciative letter to a radical paper). It worked in the reverse ways too, of course. Some decided they would rather go than conform, while some demanded procedures still more authoritarian and resigned in anger with the Party’s laxity. The vital test of this kind of discipline came in 1906, when an entire branch was expelled for . . . for what ? Searching the records, it is hard to say.

The Islington dispute, as it was afterwards called, began as a clumsy attempt to re-orientate the Party towards the SLP and industrial unionism. After approaching the Party Executive for a statement of the differences between the two organizations, a man named Morris formed a branch of the Socialist Party at Bexley Heath in Kent; from this branch came almost at once an item for the agenda of the forthcoming Easter Conference demanding the union of the SLP and the SPGB. In spite of the Executive’s objections the Conference discussed the item. The industrial unionists lost the day, but there was agreement to re-open the question of the trade unions in a special meeting and a poll of the Party.

Immediately after the Conference, the Islington branch questioned the legality of what had taken place. The SLP proposal, being in conflict with the Hostility Clause of the Principles, never should have been admitted to the Conference; the discussion of trade unions, arising as it did from the invalid item, was out of order; the EC — the Executive — must ignore the Conference and make Bexley Heath withdraw its demand. The Executive Committee submitted the question to a referendum, obtained confirmation by a majority of one that the Conference had been wrong, and there would have let the matter rest.

But Islington came back. The Bexley Heath branch must be made to expunge the criminal resolution from its books. But that would be falsifying the records, said the EC. No matter, insisted the Islington members: there is a greater stain on the Party’s purity that must be erased. We can do nothing more, replied the EC. Then, said Islington, the Executive has failed in its duty as the custodian of socialist principle. As a protest the branch would stop all activity until some action was taken and the EC was removed.

A Delegate Meeting in July considered the case. Too many pistols were being held at heads for a reconciliation now and, from the point of view of the discipline the Party desired, both sides were in the right. So the Islington branch was expelled (and, as if to prove that

Islington were right, the Bexley Heath branch too). One of the Islington members was Lehane, the Party Secretary; another, George Bazin, remained a supporter all his life but was never readmitted to membership because he was unwilling to make an act of contrition for 1906. Islington made two parting sallies with pamphlets called Rocks Ahead and Another Political Wreck, but they found no sympathy. A strong precedent had been established: there was to be no nonsense from anyone.

The membership at the time of the Party’s entry to Sandland Street was perhaps 250. There were eighteen branches, thirteen of them in London; one was the Central Branch for scattered members, united only by posted reports, and the others were at Burnley, Manchester, Nottingham and Watford. The zeal and purposefulness were tremendous, however. Every branch held propaganda lectures in the winter and outdoor meetings in the summer. At the height of the season about two dozen speakers would be holding forty or fifty meetings a week in the London area. Thus, the Party’s reputation grew out of proportion to its size; it had to be noticed. In the labour move­ment it acquired nicknames which were variants on the initials by which it became known: Simon Pure’s Genuine Brand or, a reference to the belief in democratic methods for the revolution, the Small Party of Good Boys.

With great social issues in the air, challenges to public debate were eagerly thrown and often accepted. The least willing organizations were the SDF and other Labour groups, who knew the SPGB well enough to realize there was little to be gained. Liberals, Conservatives, Anti-Socialist Unionists and others were more than willing to debate, however. Some debates were held from rostrums in the parks, but for the more important ones there was always a hall. Party members would travel anywhere to hear Anderson or Fitz browbeating an opponent. There was a great vicarious thrill in the sight of a Member of Parliament or some other public figure, seen as a representative of the mighty master class, quailing before the socialist truth: a lion thrown to the Christians and being torn.

Nor is there any doubt that Fitzgerald and Anderson, as well as others of their time and after in the Socialist Party, were brilliant debaters. To their ability as speakers was added a mental discipline in which facts and figures were the supreme arbiters of all questions. Fitzgerald went everywhere with a bag of books strapped to his cycle; he prepared assiduously for debates, took the platform with a pile of books and papers, quoted endlessly. In 1908 he debated with Lawler Wilson of the Anti-Socialist Union, who himself was demolishing

opponents with statistics and quotations. Fitzgerald spent weeks studying the sources of Wilson’s case. Confronted with them on the

night, he flung the books on the table one after another. The figures, the instances, the so-called facts did not exist, he trumpeted; and he was right.

Two of Fitzgerald’s debates, with A. H. Richardson, MP, and Samuel Samuels, were published as pamphlets under the titles The Liberal Party and The Conservative Party, and there were packed halls to hear the sturdy bricklayer against such men as de Tunzelmann,

E. N. da C. Andrade, and R. C. K. Ensor, on subjects like ‘The Validity of Marx’s Theoretic System’. In 1910 a wide new field for debate was opened by the publication of Socialism and Religion. Here for the first time, a socialist organization declared itself an atheist one. True, there was a widespread feeling that the churches, in particular the Church of England, were in the pockets of the capitalist class; but that was a different thing from unqualified opposition to all religious belief and practices. The influence of Christian Socialism was a strong one in the labour movement, and the principle ‘Religion is a private affair’ had general acceptance.

Socialism and Religion was a thin, grey-covered pamphlet of no more than fourteen thousand words. It was written by F.C.Watts but, like all the pamphlets the Party produced, it was signed in the name of the Executive Committee: the argument was the Party’s, not Watts’s.

The opening section was headed THE NEED FOR FRANKNESS, and accused radical parties of suppressing the case against religion for fear of alienating supporters. Applying the Marxist principle, Watts analyzed religious belief as a social product — ‘the reflex of tribal life’. In fact, the theory of the origin of religion was taken from Herbert Spencer’s *Prin*ciples of Sociology, which was highly esteemed in the SPGB.

But the more important matter was in the parts of the pamphlet headed THE SOCIALIST PHILOSOPHY. ‘Under its multi-farious forms’, wrote Watts, ‘the modern mission of religion is to cloak the hideousness and injustice of social conditions and keep the - exploited meek and submissive.’ He revealed that the SPGB would allow nobody in its ranks with a religious belief. ‘No man can be consistently both a Socialist and a Christian. It must be either the

Socialist or the religious principle that is supreme, for the attempt to

couple them equally betrays charlatanism or lack of thought.’ Finally, in the world of common ownership there would be no religion: ‘Socialism, both as a philosophy and as a form of society, is the anti-thesis of religion.’

Socialism and Religion was a best-seller among political

pamphlets for nearly twenty years. While the irreligionists and freethinkers delighted in it, churchmen held up and quoted it as living proof of the terrors of socialism. In 1914 a Roman Catholic Congress in Belfast heard a paper based on the iniquity displayed in it. ‘The poisoned breath of Socialism’ was the lecturer’s phrase, and he could hardly have needed to appeal ‘that it shall never be allowed to establish a foothold within the fair hills of holy Ireland’.12 And a few years later an American bishop named William Montgomery Brown, DD, a convert to the Russian Revolution, reprinted and expanded it in a booklet, Communism and Christianism; he was tried for heresy by an ecclesiastical court, and described himself afterwards as ‘Episcopus in Partibus Bolshevikium et Infidelium’.

So clergymen and Christian Socialists were added to the list of debating opponents. With the additional publicity and excitement afforded by Socialism and Religion, the debates, the antagonisms fostered as the new Labour Party gathered strength, the Party thrived in Sandland Street. The nearby coffee-shop proprietor, Sammy Quelch, joined and became the Party Secretary, thus providing an extension for discussions and a daytime service (notes were pinned to the office door indicating where the Secretary could be found). More pamphlets were published. The first one, besides the translations of Kautsky and a reprint of Morris’s Art, Labour and Socialism, had been The Manifesto of the Socialist Party of Great Britain-, in 1911 appeared Socialism, an exposition by Jacomb of the economic and historical laws on which the case for revolution rested.

One other publication of the time failed to find success. At the Executive Committee one night Hans Neumann stood on the table in his tail-coat and sang the revolutionary song he had composed: The World for the Workers. It was advertized in the Socialist Standard as a ‘four-part song — S, A, T, B — complete with pianoforte accompani­ment and Tonic-Solfa setting’. Underlying its performance was the hope that it might oust The Red Flag and The Internationale, but it did not catch on even in the Party itself. Not many people wrote for copies, and it died in a year or two despite the renderings by the Paddington Branch Choir at meetings and social gatherings. Its words were:

You toilers of the world, arise !  
 To bravely speed the day,

When all your forces organize  
King Capital to slay.

And from the master class you ’II wrest

The powers of the State,

Which, wielded in your interest,

Your class emancipate.

There sounds above the class war din The battle cry we use:

Unite ! You have a world to win,

Your chains alone to lose.

Your lot in life is darkest gloom;

You sow and others reap.

And want and mis’ry are your doom,

While idlers treasures heap.

Why have they riches, you distress ?

Though you all wealth have wrought ?

It is because the few possess

The earth while you have nought.

There sounds, etc.

While you an idle class maintain For pittances you’ll toil.

To own your products you must gain Possession of the soil

And of all means the workers need To found the Commonwealth,

And thus enable all to lead Full lives of peace and health.

There sounds, etc.

Arise ! the message to proclaim,

The message full of cheer:

That Labour’s freedom is your aim,

That brighter days are near.

To men exhausted by the fray,

To women in despair,

To children wanting food and play,

To all the message bear.

There sounds, etc.

Meanwhile, clouds were gathering again over the question of the day-to-day issues. The Liberals were pressing for an extension of male suffrage, and the suffragette clamour growing louder. The SPGB was derisive: what the working class needed was socialism, not votes. An

editorial in the Standard pointed out that the seven million votes available at that time were more than enough to accomplish the social revolution, anyway. As for the female suffrage movement, it was simply a conspiracy by idle propertied women to gain further privileges at the expense of working-class women.

There were the National Insurance Act, a cynical provision for death by slow starvation, the Education Acts, legislation to create slave-minds, and innumerable other proposals for social reform which were, in the Party’s eyes, at best mere futile hopes and at worst manoeuvres by the conscienceless, rapacious ruling class. The question was if there was anything the Party would ever favour or support. No, said many; but Fitzgerald, Watts and others, militant against reformism as everyone, were more considered in their judgement. To declare wholesale opposition for the past was to discredit the growth and operation of state power and democratic right that had brought the socialist movement to maturity. To be committed to it for the future would be to deny the possibility of further gain — to deny, indeed, what Marx had always insisted: that men make history.

Fitzgerald, in particular, held that the growth of the socialist movement and its rise to parliament would alarm the capitalist class into conceding almost anything asked. The first socialists in parliament would probably be a minority, and they would have to vote on measures affecting the working class one way or another. Were they to assume all legislation to be bad, per se ? Of course not, said Fitzgerald. Policies of reform were opposed because they implied acceptance of the capitalist system and sought only to patch it up; individual reforms must be judged for their worth to the working class at large. Thus the argument grew, until someone decided to test the feeling of the Party.

It had been emphasized continually since 1904 that the Socialist Party stood alone. The more zealously its members dedicated themselves to the revolution, the broader did the streams of reform and palliation grow. At the beginning it was assumed that the continental Marxist parties in the Second International shared with the Party the inheritance of the true socialist tradition, and one of the immediate concerns after the Inaugural Meeting was to be represented at the Amsterdam Congress of the International in August. Rather surprisingly, H. M. Hyndman helped to obtain credentials; there was a hurried scraping-up of money to pay the fares, and Jack Kent and Alex Pearson went to the Congress as delegates. On their return they told the tale of reformism rampant. The Socialist Standard reported:

‘Our delegates thereto found such organizations as the

Independent Labour Party, the Labour Representation Committee, the Social Democratic Federation, and the Fabian Society claiming and obtaining admission as Socialist Organizations. Thus were seen the defenders of capitalism, the upholders of Child-slavery, the friends of Compromise and Reform, and the catspaw of the Bourgeois reaction generally masquerading as Revolutionists, prostituting the name and null of Socialism, and confusing the workers of questions of vital importance. ’

The International was written off by the Party. And so, one after another, were the great figures of Marxist thought. In 1906 August Bebel, one of the intellectual heroes of German Social-Democracy, sent a telegram to Reynolds' News applauding the Liberal victory in the elections; after a severe correspondence, the SPGB disowned him as a socialist. Kautsky, too. The Party translated the first three parts of his work for publication but, on learning the contents of the fourth, refused to have any more to do with it. Early Socialist

Standards regularly contained translations of writings and speeches by Guesde, Herve and other leaders of continental socialism, but they became fewer and fewer. The position in which the Party felt itself by 1910 was summed up by Neumann in the Standard: ‘It is a sad reflection that, except the SPGB, every body that contained the germ of Socialist existence has been swallowed up by . . . compromise and confusion.’

Without a doubt, the belief that the Party now carried the flag

alone reflected a remarkable integrity, most of all in those whose

abilities would have brought them to the fore anywhere. Nor is there any doubt, however, that for some it was its own satisfaction. To be against everyone and everything, and to see one’s differences in terms of a superior understanding of society, gave a tang and fervour to life for many men. What distinguished these revolutionists from other loads of ‘characters’ was the seriousness with which they practised mu unconventionality and assailed the world around them. Rebels and bohemians were confused emotionalists; only scientific socialism showed morality, respectability and conventional learning as despicable props of the capitalist system.

It was hard to tell the Party members anything, the more so as they regarded all knowledge other than their own as the lies of capitalism. Sick, they knew the system was responsible and not the germs; sent to hospital, they told the doctors everything, including that the doctors were lackeys hired by the master class to patch up the workers to keep the profit-mills rolling. The normal day-to-day

observances of going to work, paying the rent, getting married, were pernicious dictates of the property system to its slaves. There was always a strong anti-marriage faction in the Party, with Bebel’s Woman in the Past, Present and Future and Engels’s Origin of the Family to show the economic basis of monogamy; in 1906 the Standard had a front-page article headed THE CASE FOR FREE LOVE. And if a socialist’s marriage collapsed because he had neglected his wife and terrified his children with the Cause, it proved the case that capitalism made married happiness impossible.

In 1955 a member wrote to Forum recalling the socialists who used to confuse clean fingernails with capitalist riches’. If it was an exaggeration, it was not too much so. Among these fundamentalists there was, for example, one who would have no furniture because (he said) the capitalists sent bailiffs to take such things away from working people, and so his family used orange-boxes instead. And when another member bought a new suit, his comrades gathered round and altered it. The trouser-legs were long, they said, and they cut some pieces off; the jacket needed taking in, and they took it in until it was in rags. Aping the bourgeoisie with a new suit was asking for trouble.

One was either class-conscious or not, and class-consciousness allowed no room for compromising with the ways of the capitalist world. Landlords and commercialists, as shareholders in the system, were obvious prey. The members were always ready to help one another to decamp from houses where they had accumulated arrears of rent, and the speculative builders offering rent-free trials of new houses were a godsend; some men are reputed to have lived long spells, a week or two at a time, in innumerable new-built houses under this facility. On the other hand, the exploitation of one’s own class was beneath contempt. The worst of all crimes was to pilfer Party funds; there was no alternative to expulsion, and the system was no excuse at all.

This was not all the membership, of course. It was not Fitzgerald, Watts, Kent, or any of several others who were the fountainheads of SPGB knowledge; indeed, the crude and paranoiac attitudes were largely half-assimilated scraps of teachings which were more rational. Nevertheless it was characteristic of a section, and the conviction that the Party would approve of nothing whatever in the capitalist world would have been taken for granted but for the known dissent of an important few. It was impossible to hold up Fitzgerald as a heretic.

And so, to force a statement to be made, a group of members arranged for one to write as a casual enquirer for the Party’s attitude to reforms. The question appeared in the Socialist Standard for February, 1910. It was signed by ‘W.B. (Upton Park)’ and asked:

‘What would be the attitude of a member of the SPGB if elected to Parliament, and how would he maintain a principle of “No compromise” ?’

The reply, which was approved by the Executive Committee,

did not go into the expected details. It said:

‘By compromise, we understand “political trading”. . , The Socialist Member of Parliament (while in a minority, of course), would advance the interests of the working class by caustic and enlightening criticism of capitalism in all its manifestations — political, industrial, educational, etc. He would take every opportunity that offered to use this higher and well-heard platform as a means of spreading Socialist understanding. His presence, backed, as it must needs be, by a wide-awake electorate (suggestive of more to come and the threatened “end of all”) would in all probability evoke the initiation, by one or other of the capitalist parties, of measures that may conceivably contain some small advantage for the working class. Now, intellectual vitality requires the continual absorption and digestion of new facts as they occur. So *with* Socialism and proletarian politics. The SPGB is always ready to consider new facts and phases when these present themselves, and therefore the question of whether Socialist representatives should support any such measures in Parliament, is one that we do not, January 1910, pretend to answer. We can only say as to this, that as we progress and new situations arise, our membership, ever guided by the revolutionary principle of NO COMPROMISE, by our general under­standing of Socialism and the greatest interest of the working class, its *e*mancipation, will DEMOCRATICALLY direct the action of its representatives. Each new situation will have to be faced and Socialist *act*ion be decided on the merits of the case. Meanwhile we may not claim rank with the Pope or Old Moore, and it should be understood that there is room for differences of opinion upon a matter that, at the present stage, is only of secondary importance. Our work today is to teach our fellow toilers their position and show them the indisputable steps they must take to win freedom. ’

The question had, in fact, been too artfully put. The Party had made some ventures in the electoral field and had a handful of votes each time; even the magnetic Anderson polled only 143 in Tottenham.

As a hypothesis referring to the day when a socialist sat in Parliament,

it directed attention away from the matter with which it was principally concerned. The group for whom ‘W.B.’ had written aired their case at the Easter Conference, to find the Conference supporting not the argument that the Party might accept reforms but the argument that ‘new facts and phases’ could always arise. However, the

Conference discussions prepared the ground. The ‘W.B.’ group, styling themselves a ‘Provisional Committee’, sent out an Open Letter to the Members of the Socialist Party of Great Britain demanding the revocation of the February statement.

The Open Letter claimed that all legislation was solely for the smoother operation of capitalism. Two main types of measures had been instanced at the Conference as being of interest to the Party.

The first, improvements in working conditions and wages, was held by the Provisional Committee to be ‘unquestionably detrimental to our only object, viz., Socialism, which demands the most speedy abolition of wage slavery of the working class’. The second, the protection of working-class life and limb, was ‘sufficiently sentimental as to attract a number of class-unconscious workers of the emotional type who for the purpose of the Social Revolution would only represent a most dangerous element of the working class’. Any other view could have only one effect — to ‘tend to efface the bitter hostility against the capitalist class required from the working class to finally vanquish their most deadly enemy’.

The Executive’s reply bore the unmistakable stamp of Fitzgerald. It was lucid and forceful (the epithets — ‘fatuity’,

‘ignorance’, ‘utterly stupid’ — were his as well). ‘The veriest tyro in economic history’, it said, ‘is aware that legislation has practically from its origin “played a part in determining the conditions of wage-slave labour”. Hundreds of instances, from Thomas Wolsey to Asquith, might be given, but the matter is too obvious to require them.’ Not only was there history; there were also the unanswerable dicta of Marx in Value, Price and Profit:

‘Such being the tendency of things in this system, is this saying that the working class ought to renounce their resistance against the encroachments of capital, and abandon their attempts at making the best of the occasional chance for their temporary improvement ? If they did, they would be degraded to one level mass of broken wretches past salvation . . . By cowardly giving way in their every-day conflict with capital they would certainly disqualify themselves for the initiation of any larger movement. ’

The most telling point of all, however, was one which put the whole presumption of the SPGB in perspective. On the subject of saving life and limb, the reply said: ‘Yet the declaration of principles shows that the Party is the expression of the material interest of the working class. Further, the attainment of Socialism is dependent on the preservation of the workers in general.’

Had the membership — or even the Provisional Committee —

pursued the real implication of this, the Socialist Party might have had different history. Fitzgerald was saying that the consideration of the working class’s interests preceded the interests of the Party, could precede even the effort to establish socialism. It was seen only in the limited context of resolving a dispute, however. The Provisional Committee saw the implication, of course, but overdramatized it to the point of distortion. There were verbal brawls at outdoor meetings where the Committee and its supporters tried to embarass speakers with questions about reform, and the Party’s attitude hardened behind the EC. One member of the Committee, a schoolteacher named Augustus Snellgrove, announced his disillusionment with parliamentary socialism and left the Party altogether.

Discredited, the Provisional Committee issued the final reiteration of its case and its parting accusations of ill-will, confusion and political turpitude in August 1911, and the resignations of its members followed in the next few weeks. A few, including Snellgrove, re-joined after intervals that were not too long. The leader of the group, Harry Martin, never did. He took to his own platform, from which he went on speaking for the revolution against all compromise and against all legislation. Almost until he died in 1951 he was a well-known figure

south and central London — an erect, white-bearded man in his eighties, flailing the system from his little box.

The Executive’s replies to ‘W.B.’ and the Provisional Committee were held to have defined the Party’s attitude to reforms, but were implicated slightly by Fitzgerald’s having written in his personal stand-point. For him the welfare of the working class was paramount, and it is doubtful if the rest of the membership would have accepted that view if it in turn had been put to the test.

The conclusion from it all was that the Party would consider measures of reform on their merits. The Provisional Committee had denied, of course, that merits could possibly exist. But what was the standard of merit to be ? Here, Fitzgerald’s ‘preservation of the workers in general’ made the point to which the Party was to stick: that reforms would be judged in relation to the achievement of the socialist revolution. The patching of grievances was outside this scope; and as time went by the Party was able to point out that there were more than enough people making that their concern if it was needed.

The controversy of 1910-11 was an abstracted one. The SPGB never supported legislation or thought of doing so, but for raising the matter to a point of principle the men in the Provisional Committee ' were discomfited and forced to leave. On one hand, nothing had changed; on the other, more was laid down to the body of statement

and elucidation to which the Party would always refer. And to passers by in Brixton forty years later, there was Harry Martin’s cry from his lonely platform: ‘No compromise !’

**5**.

Questions at Issue

Members came and went. The various disputes and controversies took away groups which included founders and early stalwarts.

E. J. B. Allen, a talented speaker and writer, went into the Industrial League (in 1909 he debated their case against Fitzgerald at the Latchmere Baths, Battersea). Hicks, McEntee and a few others entered the Labour Party. T.A.Jackson left under different circumstances. In dreadful poverty, he grasped an opportunity to become a paid speaker for the ILP. Writing to a member named Craske, he professed a desperate cynicism: ‘I will join the SDF, ILP and “Clarion” mobs and peg away — bleed the swines — till I am expelled.’

In fact, Jackson’s abilities were appreciated more outside than they had been inside the Party. Impeded by his troubles — his address changed continually — he was unreliable at the regular committee work which was pressed on members; the minutes done by him in a brief spell as Party Secretary are the least legible and coherent in the whole record of Executive meetings. When he lived in North London he was disliked and resented by Anderson, who had his branch bring a case against Jackson’s speaking on the Party platform. Despite his protestations to Craske, he was quickly reconciled to the ILP — he too took a turn at debating Fitzgerald — and began the long career which made him a leading figure in left-wing politics.

Coming into the Party there were, for example, Moses Baritz and Adolph Kohn. Baritz, originally a Conservative, became known half round the world as a socialist agitator, a man without political or

personal inhibitions. Short and squat, with thick glasses and a terrifying

voice, he exuded vitality and passion; among other things, he had wrestled with Georges Hackenschmidt. In T.A.Jackson’s autobiography, *Solo Tru*mpet, is a story of Baritz’s being barred from a meeting of the SDF where Hyndman was to speak. Moses climbed on the roof with a clarinet, poked it into a ventilator shaft and blew piercing, unbearable obbligatos into the hall until he made them let him in. He was feared

almost as much by friends for the embarrassments caused to them as by

opponents for his rabid, conscienceless attacks. Almost incongruously, he was a man of scholarship and a recognized musical authority. In the

nineteen-twenties he often broadcast on music, and he had an important position with one of the recording companies.

Baritz was a Manchester man. He joined the Socialist Party there in 1906, soon quarrelled violently with the Executive Committee over an administrative detail and left. He was re-admitted not long after­wards and began the extraordinary career in which he carried the case for revolution everywhere. Between them Baritz and Kohn gave the lectures and conducted the economics classes which led to the formation of the New York Socialist Society and, later, the Workers’ Socialist Party of the United States.

Kohn became a socialist in his teens and was still very young when he set up as a bookseller. A minor flood of socialist works was under way in America, and Kohn became agent for their sale in London. Hence the regular journeys across the Atlantic, and the appearance on socialists’ shelves of books printed and published by Charles H. Kerr and Company, Chicago. Kerr’s was a small co-operative before the first world war it provided an entire library of theoretical and polemical works. Some of them were first-time translations of European social-democratic writings and of Marx and Engels: the great third volume of Das Kapital had its first — and for almost fifty years, its only — English publication from Kerr’s in 1909. There were Marx’s historical works; Engels’s Landmarks of Scientific Socialism, Socialism Utopian and Scientific, and Origin of the Family; Joseph Dietzgen’s Positive Outcome of Philosophy; Lewis Henry Morgan’s Ancient Society; Paul Lafargue’s Social and Philosophical Studies and The Right to be Lazy; and many more.

Besides these, there were works by American Marxists. Ernest Untermann, as well as being an indefatigable translator, contributed such titles as Science and Revolution and The World’s Revolutions. Another prolific writer was Arthur M. Lewis. His Ten Blind Leaders of the Blind was enormously popular — a volume of lectures attacking such diverse thinkers as Henry George, Kant, Lombroso, Carlyle, August Comte and Bishop Spalding. Indeed, the appeal of this kind of work is the indication of what was to become a weakness, even a fatuousness, in the socialist movement: the belief that philosophers and scientists were easily dismissed on the ground, more or less, that they did not see the class struggle in society. What was learned from the socialist scholars in the long run was that learning was a waste.

Kohn himself was a man for whom books were everything. His business developed successfully and he quickly gained respect as a lecturer and, occasionally, a vigorous writer on current politics. For him, as for the others, what mattered was to be ‘scientific’ — to insist

on precision and exemplary logic in the argument for socialism. ‘Scientific Socialism’ was the Party’s watchword, and ‘unscientific’ its deadliest condemnation. When Neumann described socialism as a philosophy, Fitzgerald rose in fury: socialism was a science, and

Neumann for such confusion was unfitted to conduct the Party classes.

Every applicant for membership was questioned carefully on his understanding of scientific socialism. Usually the questions were asked from round the room in a meeting of a branch; for the more distant applicants to the Central Branch, however, there was a written test. The first question was always: What is socialism ? and the answer, A social system based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production and distribution. All the answers, indeed, were proof of assimilation more than understanding, for they required stock phraseology and continual reference to the Party Principles: What is the class struggle ? How is socialism to be established ? What is the Socialist Party’s attitude to reformist organizations ? and so on.

The only scope for verbal originality was afforded when the applicant was asked his opinion of religion. Words like ‘freethinker’, ‘agnostic’ and even ‘atheist’ were unscientific; a socialist was a Marxist materialist. Some answered with a reference to ‘the opium of the people’, some with a touch of science (‘Matter can be neither created nor destroyed’); and there were always those with a confession, lapsed Jews and the Catholics in revolt. When a member left, it was usually put down to imperfect understanding of the socialist position.

Those who went and became prominent in other organizations were held to be careerists, of course, and it was assumed that at heart they ‘understood’ still, whatever professions might be made.

The most exacting test, however, was for speakers. Any member could speak from Party platforms, but he was expected first to equip himself with knowledge at the Party’s classes in economics and history. Little attention was paid to the study of current events. The view was taken that if a man knew the Marxist theory of value and the progress in society from early times he was equipped to analyze anything. In fact, when an important matter arose Fitzgerald or another expert dealt with it in the Socialist Standard for the guidance of speakers and members in general.

The speaking test was applied only when a speaker failed or deviated from correctness of theory. It did not enquire about rhetorical ability; its sole concern was the speaker’s knowledge, to discover if he was fitted to represent the Party. The examiners, except on special occasions when the EC itself acted, were two or three members in good

repute. The questions began with definitions of the component categories of the theory of value: What is value ? What is exchange value ? What is a commodity ? What determines price ? Those simple facts established, the test went on to more detailed questions on Marx 's economics — surplus-value, accumulation, labour-power — and to history and revolutionary political theory.

Some aspects of the Party argument were unique. It was insisted, for example, that the working class did not pay taxes, and at intervals a main article in the Standard recapitulated this. In the Marxist theory of the state, parliament acted for the capitalist class with money subscribed — however reluctantly — by that class. The differences between the political parties were, in fact, largely questions of the collection and expenditure of these funds. If the working class contributed to the state by taxation, it too would have an interest in govermental factions. The argument was both a priori and a posteriori; the working class could not pay taxes, but it did not.

Few working people were concerned by direct taxation. Paying income tax was, like keeping a bank account, a mark of riches. Nevertheless, a direct tax on all working-class incomes would not affect the position. Wages were actual money received, not a theoretical gross payment; such a tax would in the final analysis be paid by the employers, even though it appeared as an item on the wages bill. Indirect taxation was a charge on profits, not on buyers’ pockets. The government had to choose industries where monopoly control was providing uniform prices and high profits for creaming off. The retail price of, say, tobacco was not an economic price with a tax added; it was simply the high price a monopoly could demand, with tax payable from the profits. To support the argument there were several cases where taxes on goods had been reduced with little or no effect on prices, and one where the retail price had actually risen.

It was a difficult argument, involving almost a willing suspension of disbelief at a time when local rates and national taxation were rising fast, and it arose continually when the Party contested municipal elections in the pre-1914 years. The first election campaign was in 1906, when nine SPGB men stood for the Battersea Borough Council and three for the Tooting division of Wandsworth. The Battersea results were:- Latchmere Ward: Craske 117, Moody 117, Money 113; Winstanley Ward: Blewett 57, Roe 49, Witcher 45; Church Ward: Greenham 93, Fawcett 88, Hunt 77. At Wandsworth Barker gained 94, MacManus 77, and Dumenil 59.

The printed address to the electorate expounded the Party’s case about taxes, as well as the economics of capitalism and the

necessity for working-class organization against reformism. Its ending displayed another unique standpoint of the Socialist Party:

‘Fully realizing and pointing out to workers the strict limitations of the power of local bodies, making no promises that are beyond our power to fulfil, we ask the members of our class, when *(but not* before) they have studied these facts and realize their *correctness*, to cast their vote for the candidates of the SPGB, who alone stand on the above basis.’

The Socialist Standard, reviewing the election results, confirmed the point; the candidates, it said proudly, had done no canvassing. The SPGB was to be the only party in political history that discouraged votes. Unceasing in its tirade against ‘ear tickling, side tracking, vote catching election promises, it demanded that only convinced socialists should vote for it and insisted that all the others should not. There were arguments with expansive anarchists and casual sympathizers who wanted to give the Party votes which were friendly but not fraternal; members pleaded and bullied to reject their votes, desperate with anxiety that no non-socialist should make his mark for a revolutionary candidate. After the 1906 elections it was agreed, too, that only members might sign a candidate’s nomination form — a self-imposed barrier to contesting all but two or three parliamentary constituencies.

If was planned to have Jackson and Fitzgerald as candidates in the 1907 London County Council elections, but they never stood. A branch questioned the authority behind the campaign, and Jackson’s residential qualification disappeared. There was an attempt at Burnley in 1908, encouraged by the fact that Burnley was a hotbed of social-democracy, but the two Party members, Schofield and Tamlyn, polled only 15 votes between them. Tooting and Tottenham had campaigns too and despite all the Party’s efforts to deter mere followers of

personalities Anderson, at Tottenham, gained an individual vote of

more than twice as many as Stern or Rourke, who stood with him.

There was never enough money to have a candidate for parliament. The next best thing was the publication of leaflet ‘manifestos’ at election times, and this was done on several occasions. With nothing to offer but socialist understanding, and everything to attack, some of these were minor masterpieces of invective. One of the earliest used savage irony on the electioneers’ wooing of the poor:

'Fellow members of the working class ! at the present moment you, or those of you possessed of votes, are being urgently reminded of a fact that you may be pardoned for having forgotten — you are of consequence; then you, who but yesterday were “hands”, dependant,hirelings, articles of merchandise are today dictators, history-makers,

free men, you are the power in the State. You hold the destiny of the Empire in the hollow of your hand. Yesterday, those of you who were unemployed were whining wastrels, scum unemployable, treated as children on the one hand and dogs on the other. Today if you have votes — you are the bone and sinew of England’s greatness. “You count.”’

In the absence of Party candidates, to vote for any other was unthinkable. On the other hand, the power to vote was not to be neglected. The members resolved the dilemma by going to the polls and writing ‘Socialism’ across their ballot-papers: the votes were recorded, but as spoilt papers. It was contended that this was, in effect, voting for what one wanted, and it was regarded as a duty — in 1918 the Socialist Standard printed a specimen spoilt ballot paper on its front page. Other groups of demonstrators occasionally imitated the practice, but its real status was that of a gesture at the politics of capitalism.

One other question which arose from election campaigns was hotly debated in 1909 and 1910: would a socialist, elected to parliament, take the Oath of Allegiance to the Crown ? Without the oath, he would never take his seat at all, and the Party Conference of 1909 decided that ‘oaths and forms imposed by the constitution shall not be allowed to prevent elected representatives from taking their seats’. The elected representative would take the oath. A number of the members disagreed. To swear allegiance, even with mental reservations, was to compromise with the crown, the church, and all the powers of the existing order . . . and behind this feeling were men who had never taken a court oath, risen for the national anthem, accepted the marriage ceremony or celebrated Christmas since they became socialist.

A counter-resolution to the 1910 Conference proposed: ‘That any member elected to Parliament shall not take the Oath of Allegiance.’ It was lost and the previous year’s decision affirmed, but a poll of the membership had to be taken to give finality to the affair. Once again some members left, sure that the Party was on the slopes of compromise and confusion. Indeed, there gathered slowly a little group of loyal ex-members, the by-product of successive controversies and quarrels. They attended the meetings, discussed the Standard, sent converts they had made; some had resigned in anger with a hypothesis of future policy, some had been expelled for infringements. And for almost all of them, the fierce pride that made them uncompromising with the system made them unwilling to ask to come back.

It is a little surprising that there was never any dispute over the Party’s attitude to female suffrage. The aim of the suffrage movement

was to gain votes on the same terms as men, for whom there was a property qualification. It was not denied that this would mean votes for a small number of well-to-do women only; but male suffrage had begun like that, and there was a widespread sentiment that the start what mattered. However, the Party’s concern was with more than the idea of supporting rich women. The Women’s Social and Political Union had a close link with the ILP and was ready for a deal with the Liberals. Into what deep water could innocent association with it lead ?

The Party had its women members — mainly, wives and sisters of the men. Fitzgerald’s sister Kitty and her husband, Harry Gostick, were members; so were Anderson’s wife and Kohn’s sister. There were a few others attracted from the general flow of interest in emancipation. One, Elizabeth Lechmere, was a frail spinster who earned a small income by writing fairy stories. Another was the lady from the Board of Guardians: the membership of these boards was one of the few public offices open to women, and there were more than a thousand female guardians before 1914. During the war the Party administration was largely taken over by women members, Executive Committee and all.

Hut for every man in the Party whose wife or sweetheart shared in the struggle, there were others for whom domestic friction was part of a revolutionary’s martyrdom. Conformity and regard for the institutions of society are conditions of personal security; not many men, but even fewer women, are or were willing to oppose them. For the members’ families socialism was too often synonymous with unemployment, arguments, and absentee fathers. A wife who ‘understood’ — i.e. supported or tolerated her husband’s activities — was a rare jewel, and a few homes where this was the case were the centres of such social life as the Party had.

In 1912 the Party moved again, to 193 Grays Inn Road; this time the place was next door to a coffee-shop. The part played by these working-class eating-houses and tea-shops may require some explanation. Few of the members drank beer or went in public houses.

‘Drink’ was a major social problem when the Party was founded, and the struggle between the Conservative brewers and the ‘temperance’ Liberals in the late nineteenth century had linked anti-Conservatism with disapproval of drink. Besides this, there was a strong asceticism in the Party, a seriousness of purpose which involved rejection of the well known ways in which other men dissipated money and intelligence.

The place of rendezvous and informal discussion between members was, therefore, invariably a coffee-shop. Several of the branches met in rooms behind or over coffee-shops. One or two rented

rooms for their weekly meetings in workmen’s clubs or co-operative society buildings, and some of the smaller groups used members’ houses. The last was always looked-down upon, however — in particular, because the Party claimed proudly that all its meetings were open to the public, and a private house was not the thing for this. Coffee-shop proprietors were nearly always willing to let if they could, for besides the fee for a room there was the prospect of heavy tea consumption when the arguments went on late.

The Grays Inn Road premises had two ground-floor rooms and a basement. They were considerably more spacious than the rooms above the junk-shop. At Sandland Street there was hardly room for a visitor to stand when the Executive was in session; here, a member named T. W. Lobb was able to make long wooden seats on the walls for audiences at EC meetings. The basement was somewhere to fold, despatch and store the literature. The stocks of pamphlets and issues of the Standard were sorted and neatly set out for the first time.

And there was an old-fashioned printing press with a long arm that somebody had picked up, with a supply of type. It was used for reports, circulars, leaflets and anything else; Walter Alley would set up the type and leave a note for whoever came in next, and the members took turns swinging the long arm while they talked. The leaflets generally were articles reprinted from the Socialist Standard referring to issues of the day, for distribution at other parties’ meetings. One of the most zealous literature-sellers and leaflet-distributors was a tough old man named Germain who had lost both his arms in an accident in Africa. He was out in all weathers, selling bootlaces and matches from a tray hung round his neck, and knew everything that was going on in London.

The Party was at Grays Inn Road when the war began in 1914. Before that, however, arose one of the most curious of the continual Party disputes. In its origins it was simple enough; it was complicated and dragged on by the determination, which had become fanatical in ten years, that no-one should remain a member who was confused, unscientific or — another favourite pejorative — unsound. The matter began in the spring of 1914 in Peckham, where a member named Wren had a newspaper shop. Various legislative acts from 1870 onwards were taking away the supply of dirt-cheap labour by children of school age, and Wren joined other newsagents in petitioning their Member of Parliament on the subject of morning-paper boys.

The Peckham branch heard of it and asked the EC’s advice, enclosing a copy of the petition. The reply was: ‘That any member signing the petition sent to the EC has violated the Principles and

should be dealt with under Rule 5.’ Accordingly, at its next meeting this branch resolved by 13 votes to none: ‘That this Branch charge Comrade Wren with violating the Principles of the Party by signing the newsagents’ petition to the local MP, and that the Secretary submit this charge to Comrade Wren and inform him that the same will be dealt with at the Branch Meeting on July 6th.’ On 6 July the motion that Wren be expelled was duly tabled and put to the branch’s vote — and lost, by 6 to 11.

What is most noteworthy in the charge and all that followed is the nature of Wren’s offence. From the beginning to the eventual trailing-off of the affair in the war, its sole concern was the approach for co-operation to a non-socialist politician: the Hostility Clause had been infringed. The cause and purpose of the petition were never mentioned, even when in 1917 the EC found it necessary to issue a four page recapitulation of the whole affair. Members’ personal actions, and if they had businesses their business ones, were outside the scope of the Party argument. Had Wren ill-treated and victimized his paperboys there would have been no case against him from the Party. The capitalist conception of history showed simply that economic interests directed behaviour, and a man who was an employer had to behave like one: the iron compulsion of capitalism.

The expulsion motion had to be carried. The Executive Committee sent three of its members to Peckham to insist that the launch rescind the minute recording the defeated motion, and to see proposed again that Wren be expelled ‘for signing the petition to Liberal MP, thereby violating the Principles of the Party’. This time it was carried by 14 to 7. There remained, apparently, seven who would not agree that a man who approached a Liberal MP must be expelled.

They too were obviously unsound, and on 22 September 1914, Anderson moved and the Executive resolved:

*‘That the following letter be sent to King, Hatton, L. Mills, Hall, Bennett, Cowlan and Kimber. . . “You are hereby charged under Rule 20 with action detrimental to the interests of the Party in that, at a* *meeting of the Peckham Branch held on Monday, July 20th, 1914,you voted against the expulsion of Comrade Wren, who was expelled under Rule 5 for taking action violating the Principles of the Party.* ” ’

The seven were duly expelled by the decision of a poll of members early in 1915. The Party had not yet finished, however. 103 had voted for the expulsions, 27 against — a further twenty-seven members, apparently, were unsound. Ballots were not secret; so on 16 March, Anderson and Sidney Auty moved at the Executive:

*‘That arising out of the result of the Party Vote on the Delegate*

*Meeting decision* re *Peckham, the 21 members who voted against this decision be asked if they recognized that Wren had violated the Principles of the Party and if they have reason to give why they failed to vote out of the Party those members of the Peckham Branch whose, duty it was to expel Wren under Rule 5, but who failed to do so. ’*

There was another resolution demanding the names of all those who had not voted, in order that their standing in the matter might be judged.

A witch-hunt in full cry: but 1915 was not the time for it. Members were becoming elusive, the branch secretaries who knew the names were disappearing for periods. Another expulsion was obtained, but the particulars needed for more were impossible to ascertain. The EC passed angry resolutions insisting that someone — anyone — should supply names to them, and Anderson tried to have ten members brought to book who had still dared to vote against the final single expulsion, but it was all of no use. The Peckham affair died an unsatisfactory death in 1917, but not before it had established precedents and affirmed attitudes which were to bear strongly on the future.

Meanwhile, the war began.

6.

A World Gone Mad

There was little about European politics in the Socialist Standard up to August 1914. The main burden always was the inability of reformers to ease the depression of the working class at home. The arming, marching and entente-making were the thieves’ quarrels of the master class, of scant concern to revolutionaries.

Occasionally there were articles denouncing patriotism and exposing the excesses of imperialism, but the threat of war had not taken its place as a paramount problem of the capitalist system. The August issue of the Standard in 1914, published three days before war was declared, had articles on wages, Catholicism and colonialism, a debate on Marx’s theory of value, and an editorial celebrating ten years’ continuous publication.

Immediately the war began, a statement was drawn up for publication in the name of the Executive. The Party was not pacifist. The Declaration of Principles, in its clause on the capture of political power, referred specifically to the need for armed forces to support the revolution:

*‘That as the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers, the working class must organize consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local, in order that this machinery, including these forces, may be converted from an instru­ment of oppression into the agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege, aristocratic and plutocratic. ’*

And in the Standard for March 1914, T.W.Lobb put an argument against anti-militarism:

*‘Until that day arrives* — *the day when the forces of war, controlled by an enlightened working class, will be used to abolish war and the instruments of war for ever* — *the workers may accept the fact of increasing expenditure on armaments with philosophic calmness, born of the knowledge that waste is at their masters’ expense, and from the workers’ point of view is good. ’*

Nevertheless, the SPGB was to oppose the war with unrivalled

vigour. The grounds were set forth in the EC’s statement, which appeared on the front of the September Socialist Standard.

THE WAR AND THE SOCIALIST POSITION ‘Whereas *the capitalists of Europe have quarrelled over the questions of the control of trade routes and the world’s markets, and are endeavouring to exploit the political ignorance and blind passions of the working class of their respective countries in order to induce the said workers to take up arms in what is solely their masters’ quarrel, and*

Whereas *further, the pseudo-Socialists and Labour “Leaders” of this country, in common with their fellows of the Continent, have again betrayed the working class position, either through their ignorance of it, their cowardice, or worse, and are assisting the master class in utilizing this thieves’ quarrel to confuse the minds of the workers and turn their attention from the Class Struggle,*

The Socialist Party of Great Britain *seizes the opportunity of re-affirming the Socialist position, which is as follows:*

*That Society as at present constituted is based upon the ownership of the means of living by the capitalist or master class, and the consequent enslavement of the working class, by whose labour alone wealth is produced. That in Society, therefore, there is an antagonism of interests, manifesting itself as a CLASS WAR, between those who possess but do not produce and those who produce but do not possess.*

*That as the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers.*

*These armed forces, therefore, will only be set in motion to further the interests of the class who control them — the master class - and as the workers ’ interests are not bound up in the struggle for markets wherein their masters may dispose of the wealth they have stolen from them (the workers), but in the struggle to end the system under which they are robbed, they are not concerned with the present European struggle, which is already known as the “BUSINESS” war, for it is their masters’ interests which are involved, and not their own.*

The Socialist Party *of Great Britain pledges itself to keep the issue clear by expounding the CLASS STRUGGLE, and whilst placing on record its abhorrence of this latest manifestation of the callous, sordid and mercenary nature of the international capitalist class, and declaring that no interests are at stake justifying the shedding of a single drop of working-class blood, enters its emphatic protest against*

*the brutal and bloody butchery of our brothers of this and other lands, who* *are being used as food for cannon abroad while suffering and starvation are the lot of their fellows at home.*

*Having no quarrel with the working class of any country, we extend to our fellow workers of all lands the expression of our goodwill and Socialist fraternity, and pledge ourselves to work for the overthrow of capitalism and the triumph of Socialism.*

*THE WORLD FOR THE WORKERS !*

*August 25th 1914 The Executive Committee*

*WAGE WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE !*

*You have nothing to lose but your chains, you have a world to win ! —Marx.*

The Party’s bitterness against the war was intensified by the readiness with which most of the labour leaders supported it and gave their services to the recruiting campaign. Before the outbreak an anti-war demonstration staged by the Labour Party, the ILP, the British Socialist Party (a change of name by the SDF) and others, had produced the biggest gathering in Trafalgar Square for many years. As late as 6 August the British section of the International Socialist Bureau issued a manifesto against war signed by Keir Hardie and Arthur Henderson in the Labour Leader. The social-democrats of France and Germany were strong for international working-class unity to resist the preparations for war.

Yet, in the actuality of war, almost all of them put national interest before those of the internationalism they had professed. The German social-democrats voted for the war credits — in the words of Rosa Luxemburg, their party ‘handed in its political resignation, and on the same date the Socialist International went to pieces’. The Labour Party joined the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee; its offices and resources were put at the Government’s disposal, and Henderson — with Frank Goldstone and J. Parker — became Labour’s official speaker at demonstrations for the war. Hyndman, Blatchford, Thorne, Tillett and the rest were zealous for recruiting. Only the ILP held to its anti-war policy in the Labour Leader, but the SPGB was quick to pounce on compromising statements by the ailing shadow of heir Hardie.14

In the September Standard there was a long and carefully reasoned editorial in which Fitzgerald dealt with the ‘economic fallacy’ in much of the support for the war. It was true, as Fitzgerald said, that in many people’s minds was the feeling ‘that behind all the i .ml, and slobber about honour and the rest of it, is the solid, practical consideration that the successful issue of the war will cripple

a great trade rival and provide increased opportunity of work for British workers’. Arguing from statistics of production, trade and employment in Britain, and taking as an economic law the need for an ‘industrial reserve army’ of unemployed, Fitzgerald predicted (in fact, more or less accurately) the situation after the war and laid down the Party’s axiom — that it mattered not for the workers which side won.

Party plans were interrupted. The Executive had been holding extra meetings on Sunday mornings to hear and consider the draft of a new pamphlet; this had to be left. There was a scheme to raise funds to put Anderson into full-time employment as a speaker and organizer, and this too was inevitably dropped. But these were the lesser inconveniences. The major ones began at public meetings as soon as the war had started, and continued until the EC decided it had no choice but to stop all propaganda work for the rest of the war.

If speakers were not hauled from their platforms by angry crowds, they were arrested for incitement to disorder. Kohn was escorted by police through a furious mob at Hyde Park, and other speakers were saved from mauling only by the valour of escorting groups of members. One was rescued by a swell in a car — humiliation indeed, to be saved from one’s own class by a hated bourgeois.

Another speaker was arrested while condemning the depravities of military life by reading out Lord Roberts’s circular to commanding officers in India on the supervision of native prostitutes. In court he protested that he had uttered no inflammatory word, but he was fined as if he had.

The meetings did not involve just facing hostile audiences. To declare publicly one’s opposition to the war was to risk one’s liveli­hood as well. Everyone was expected to make a show of patriotism, and it was damaging to an employer’s repute to keep a known subver- sionary. One member was arrested while speaking in the provinces on a Sunday and detained overnight. Back in London, he telephoned his firm to tell a story about his absence, but he was too late — a news­paper report of his case was in the office, and his dismissal had already taken effect. The Executive took the happening to heart and proposed a fund for this man whose zeal had taken his income away, but similar claimants came forward at once to stake claims to ‘hardship payments’ — there is more than a touch of irritability in the minutes of these questions.

The situation was described in the Standard, in January of

1915:

*‘Our object was not to bid defiance to a world gone mad*, *but to place on record the fact that in this country the Socialist position*

*was faithfully maintained by the Socialists. With this object we placed our backs against the wall and fought. Our platforms were smashed up and our members injured by mobs egged on by bourgeois cowards who, as usual, had not the spunk to do their own fighting for themselves.*

*Not this only: one of our speakers was arrested and imprisoned, while others were dragged before the magistrates and “bound over to keep the peace”. In some instances the proceedings were rounded off by the victims being discharged from their employment by their “good, kind masters” for daring to hold political opinions of their own. ’*

However, this was the preface — with the heading UNDER MARTIAL LAW — to the announcement that the SPGB had decided to close down its meetings. The Defence of the Realm Regulations issued in November 1914, made clear that there would be more serious trouble if they continued:

*‘No person shall by word of mouth or in writing or in any newspaper, periodical, book, circular, or other printed publications spread false reports or make false statements or reports or statements likely to cause disaffection to His Majesty or to interfere with the success of His Majesty’s forces by land or sea or to prejudice His Majesty’s relations with foreign powers, or spread statements or make reports likely to prejudice the recruitment, training, discipline, or administration of any of His Majesty’s forces, and if any person contravenes this provision he shall be guilty of an offence against these regulations. ’*

The Socialist Standard was tolerated, probably because its circulation was small; however, several public libraries refused to continue having it, and in 1916 the War Office forbade its being sent abroad. Only one article was excluded in the four years of war, when a printer refused to machine what Jacomb had put into type. The Standard had instead a blank column headed:

LLD. GEORGE AND THE CLYDE WORKERS.

The firm who machines this paper has refused to print the article which was set up to appear under the above heading. We are there­fore compelled to withdraw the article. We congratulate the Government on the success of their efforts to preserve the ‘freedom of the Press’.

At the outset of war, the Executive Committee passed a resolution that any member who joined the armed forces was unfit to remain

in the Socialist Party. For some time recruitment continued to seek only volunteers. The social pressures to enlist were highly compulsive, how­ever; besides the vigour of the official recruiting campaign, a man was fortunate whose employer, relations and friends did not hope to shame him into going. In an article called ‘Conscripts or Volunteers’, the Standard drew attention to ‘the part played by strident women’ and suggested that the suffragettes saw their chance of power with the male population in the trenches. Nor can there be much doubt that many employers were glad to embrace a national duty which meant replacing men of military age with women at cheaper rates of pay.

The members did not enlist, of course — or those who did, either through change of heart or through inability to resist the pressures left the Party first. The only expulsion for enlisting was of a woman member who joined one of the female auxiliary services. But obviously there was to be conscription sooner or later. Members with connections in neutral countries took advantage of them. One or two made for Ire­land, and Kohn and Baritz for America. Kohn lay low, sending occasional articles to the Standard and conducting his classes in scientific socialism. Baritz, however, was incapable of self-effacement, and was im­prisoned as an agitator as soon as America entered the war.

When conscription began, the position became more diffuse. The compulsion of economic circumstances was part of the Party’s case against capitalism; allowance had to be made, therefore, for men with families who could not accept the consequences of resisting conscription, Though they were looked-down on, the few members who did their military service were not expelled. But the majority were determined to do nothing of the kind. Most of them applied without success to the tribunals which were set up to consider applicants for exemption, and then made their own arrangements.

The tribunals were composed usually of local notabilities and councillors, with a labour specialist and a military representative. In towns where the SPGB had been active the notabilities often were people who had smarted for years under the members’ taunts, and the tribunal hearings were simply displays of defiance against the inevitable judgement. Their application dismissed, the members would shout ‘long live Socialism !’ and, if there were enough of them in the court, sing a chorus of The Red Flag before the constables removed them. There were facilities for appealing against the tribunal decisions, but what was virtually the only kind of exemption given — permission to do non- combatant service in the Army — was not acceptable to the members anyway.

The next step for a conscientious objector (the term had

originated in controversy over religious education in schools, but now took a new meaning) was, when the calling-up papers were received, to go to the regimental centre and refuse the issue of his soldier’s badge. The trial and sentence were then an Army matter, and the objectors who persisted thus spent the remainder of the war in military prisons (one, Tom West, was in the Tower of London). Some broke down, less from hardship than from the incessant humiliation. One member was put to work in the open for a time, so that passing parties could see a conscientious objector in the flesh. Others described afterwards how they were locked in huts at nights without toilet facilities and had to use their boots.

There was nothing exhibitionistic about this: nobody could see except the sergeants, nobody could be told until long afterwards.

Members accepted and endured it only from the depth of their convict­ion. One or two practically volunteered for it by leaving reserved occupations in order to make their protest known. But not all socialists were disposed to martyrdom. A good many, unwilling to offer themselves without a struggle for unpredictable periods in military prisons, joined the ‘flying corps’ — the brotherhood of men on the move, relying on their own resourcefulness and others’ loyalty to keep away from the authorities.

A few hit on subterfuges which were lucky. One took driving instruction in the name of a serving soldier, and retained the man’s identity unquestioned all through the war. At least two had official documents on which their ages had been mis-stated, and took the advantage accordingly. Most of these members, however, were continual fugit­ives. Legally they were deserters, and there were plenty of people willing indeed, duty-bound in their own sight — to give them away. They rarely left London, and rarely lost touch with the Party; often a group would stay in a member’s house until come circumstance made it no longer safe. And often a member’s wife or sister kept the police at the front door long enough for him to climb the back fence and run.

The coffee-shop man next door to the Party offices was helpful, too. He cleaned the windows and looked for strange men; more than once, the shop itself was a refuge when the offices were dangerous. In 1917, however, the Head Office was raided. Kohn had sent an article which was intercepted; its contents sent the American police looking for Kohn and the London police to Grays Inn Road. There was nothing incriminating in the offices. All the Party records had been taken elsewhere. The police questioned Kohn’s sister, Hilda, but — a curious blind-spot, this — never considered that a woman might herself be in the Party; she was in fact Party Secretary at the time, and kept the current minutes-

book in her handbag.

Fitzgerald was taken to Scotland Yard for questioning, and spent the night in a cell. Nothing emerged concerning Kohn’s where­abouts, but the police had in their hands that night the means to round up the entire ‘flying corps’. The methodical-minded Fitz — always hyper critical of other people’s carelessness — had everyone’s whereabouts written in his pocket book. The police found the book when they searched him, but apparently failed to grasp the significance of the lists of names and addresses, and let Fitzgerald go. The matter was dropped; Kohn was not discovered, but he sent no more articles.

There were even half-surreptitious organized reunions of members during the war. The Party Conference took place every Easter at the Fairfax Hall in Harringay, with the customary Saturday-night social. And in one wartime June the Standard printed a cautiously worded notice that to commemorate the foundation of the Party in 1904 there would be a ramble in the country, particulars to be had from the secretary of the committee. The outing took place, and about 120 members joined it — everybody, in fact, for whom it was humanly possible. There is a photograph of this remarkable gathering in Epping Forest: respectable- looking people in dull clothes, half of them wanted by the authorities, all of them bent on the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of the new society.

Without activity other than the efforts to keep the organization going, the Party sank to low water as the war progressed. The restricted sale of the Standard and the absence of meetings confined income to the members’ own subscriptions, and few were able to donate more. The modest rent of the offices in Grays Inn Road had become a difficult burden, and when the lease ran out early in 1918 the Party took two rooms above a sweetshop at 28 Union Street, near Oxford Street. Here again the shopkeeper was helpful. If anything was amiss, he had a stand­ing signal: a card in his window was turned upside down, and members knew they must go in the shop instead of upstairs.

To fight the depletion of funds, the Socialist Standard was reduced to four pages and an appeal for a thousand pounds was launched by the 1918 Conference. Members took subscription lists, and the details and donors were printed each month in the Standard. The first results were encouraging enough, but the income quickly dwindled and the thousand pounds were never obtained as a sum for use, though the lists appeared until 1925. Part of the original aim was to have enough money to contest an election at the end of the war, but this did not come until a generation — and a war — later.

The end of the war was not celebrated in the Socialist Standard.

The errant membership reassembled. Much of the building of the ten years after 1904 had been shattered; members had been lost (Hans Neumann, who had been in Germany when the war began, was never seen again and was later heard to have been killed in the Spartacus Rising); money and offices were gone. More and more, the SPGB felt that it stood alone. The four years’ madness had shown the so-called socialists of the world in their true colours: Kautsky, Jack London, the advocates of international brotherhood everywhere had chosen nationalism and militarism in the hour of trial. The ILP in Britain had rejected the war, but its association with the Labour Party deprived it of all credit in the eyes of the SPGB. The members who had come through the war were confirmed as never before in the belief that they, and no-one else, held the truth and menaced the system.

**7**.

Rejecting a Revolution

Had it not been for the Russian revolution, Marxism in all probability would have dropped into the realm of rejected beliefs in the nineteen-twenties. The Victorian thinkers generally were out of favour, implicated somehow in the criminal mistakes of the pre-war generations. Marxism, in the organizations which had proclaimed it in the western world, had been found wanting; the European social-democrats were discredited, and the United States was never again to have a left-wing political movement of any size or influence.15 The great doctrines of automatic progress towards perfection no longer appeared to answer the questions of humanity.

The Bolshevik Revolution, however, put Marx in a different light. The existence of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party had been known and followed since the beginning of the century, and the Menshevik Plekhanov’s works on socialist theory were highly regarded in the west. The withdrawal of Russia from the war and the overthrow of the Tzar would not in themselves have been remarkable amid the eastern European upheaval, if power had not been assumed — and a new regime proclaimed — in the name of Marxist socialism. Moreover, the reaction of the press and politicians of the west indicated plainly that in their eyes too a threat had arisen to the established civilization.

Up to this time, the meaning of what Marx wrote had never been in question to any extent. The theory of value, the tremendous analysis of capitalist production and its historical laws, and the theory of the state and revolution had not appeared as subjects for differing interpre­tations. The SPGB had never quarrelled with H. M. Hyndman’s Marxism, only with the actions and polices which they saw as betrayals of Marx­ist principles. The most notable criticism of Marx’s economics, Bohm- Bawerk’s Karl Marx and the Close of his System, had been answered to everyone’s satisfaction by a young German social-democrat named Rudolf Hilferding; there was no argument over which kind of Marxism.

The Socialist Party had a slight, sympathetic contact with the Bolsheviks. In March, 1915, the Socialist Standard had on its front page a statement headed A RUSSIAN CHALLENGE. The Russian party, finding itself uninvited to a London conference of social-democratic

parties of the Allied nations, sent a declaration which every left-wing paper refused to publish before it was received by the SPGB. Drawing attention to the fact that its Duma representatives — Petrovski, Muranoff, Badaoff and Samoiloff — had been imprisoned by the Russian government, the statement condemned the war and the ‘monstrous crime against Socialism’ of the labour leaders who had entered war governments. It ended with an appeal for support in the struggle against Tzarism, and was signed by M. Maximovitch for the Bolsheviks’ Central Committee.16

The first comments in *the Standard* on the 1917 Revolution were made in a short editorial. It was cautious, because the facts were barely known, but the sympathy and approval were unmistakable: *‘It is an astounding achievement that these few men have been able to seize opportunity and make the thieves and murderers of the whole world stand aghast and shiver with apprehension.* ’ Here, it seemed, the social­ly flame was burning bright: *'The Germans arrest Socialists all over Germany, and are at once reduced to denying the fact when the Bolsheviks declare the Socialists everywhere are under their protection. The Bolsheviks publish their demands, and immediately the Allies’ war aims are whittled of most of their truculence and proclaimed from the housetops. Verily, not all the derision of capitalist hirelings can alter the fact that all the belligerents are uneasy in the face of Bolshevik success.* ’

What was brought to all socialists’ minds was the Paris Commune of 1871, the classic demonstration that the working class could take power, could organize and administer. It too had sprung from war, and its glory was only enhanced by the savage revenge of the ruling class; every March the SPGB held meetings in commemoration of it. But the Commune had quickly been destroyed, and nobody had asked what might have happened had it lived. The question had to be asked now: was socialism being established in Russia ? The Standard in April, 1918, was circumspect; it arraigned the governments of the world for their schemes to intervene in Russia, ‘without admitting that the Bolshevik rising is Socialist’.

In August Fitzgerald attempted for the first time an analysis of the revolution. The information available was still meagre, but one fact was almost enough to decide the issue. For the socialist revolution proper to take place, a whole population must be converted to the acceptance of socialist principles. Had this happened to Russia’s hund­red and sixty millions ? ‘Unless a mental revolution such as the world has never seen before has taken place,’ wrote Fitzgerald, ‘or an economic change has occurred more rapidly than history has ever recorded, the

answer is “No !” ’ The judgement, then, was that the Bolsheviks were prevented by circumstances — their encirclement by capitalist powers, the ignorance of the Russian masses — from establishing socialism.

Nevertheless, every sympathy was directed to them. The downfall of the Soviet government seemed inevitable: ‘It may be another Paris Commune on an immensely larger scale,’ Fitzgerald said. He ended

*‘Every worker who understands his class position will hope that some way will be found out of the threatened evil. Should that hope be unrealized, should further victims be fated to fall to the greed and hatred of the capitalist class, it will still remain on record that when members of the working class took control of affairs in Russia, they conducted themselves with vastly greater humanity, managed social and economic matters with immensely greater ability and success and with largely reduced pain and suffering, than any section of the cunning, cowardly, ignorant capitalist class were able to do, with all the numerous advant­ages they possessed.* ’

The Party’s attitude hardened with the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. The Russian experiment was still praised: the Bolsheviks had stopped the war, had kept their promise and refused to compromise with the capitalist world. Their disciples in Britain were another matter, however. Relatively only a few had preten­sions to being Marxists, the former members of the British Socialist Party and the SLP. The majority were radicals of various sorts, none of them approved by the SPGB. The statutes and conditions of the Third International, to which all the new Communist Parties were affiliated, included armed insurrection and conspiratorial organization — both denials that the only path to socialism was the education of the working class.

The real hostility arose when the flow of Marxist literature began, setting out the theory and justifications of Communism. Questions and disputations galore came in to the Standard: Marx, Engels and Lenin were quoted on economics, history and revolution, and the meanings of their words — in and out of context — argued as never before. What did ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ mean ? How important were the state measures advocated in the Communist Manifesto ? Most important of all, was there a ‘transition period’, a revolutionists’ bridge from capital­ism to socialism ?

The Communists insisted that there was: that, prevented by admitted obstacles from giving socialism to Russia, the Soviet govern­ment had nevertheless broken away from capitalism. The Socialist Party retorted that there was no such intermediate stage of social development. It pointed out that Russia was an undeveloped country with great sub-

medieval tracts, and capitalism itself had taken hold only in the small, widely separated industrial areas. Marx had said: ‘No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed.’ The revolutionary act was the metamorphosis from private to communal ownership; a partial change meant no change at all, since common ownership in anything less than entirety was, by definit­ion, not common ownership. It must be either socialism or capitalism.

Where was the capitalist class in Russia ? For the SPGB, it existed by Marxist inference. If people went to work for wages they were selling labour-power, because wages existed only as the price of labour- power. Ergo, there were also buyers of it, to whom the product of industry went and for whom surplus-value was realized. The development of the Russian state was another proof of the progress into capitalism, not socialism. When the property system ended, Engels had said, the state would ‘wither away’, and the reverse was happening in Russia before everyone’s eyes.

Reasoning from these economic and historical rules of thumb, the SPGB preceded by nearly forty years the discovery by savants that the Bolsheviks had transformed a vast backward country into a highly centralized modern capitalist state. In the process, however, the whole relationship of the Party to Marxism was measured and carefully defined. Adherence to Marx’s writings as guides to socialist action was no longer enough; their whole scope and implication had to be evaluated. Passages which lent themselves to Bolshevik and reformist purposes were rejected as views held only by a younger, less mature Marx, or as asides unrelated to the main stream of his thought. The reform programme in the Communist Manifesto was explained away in the preface by Marx and Engels to the German edition of 1872:

*‘Here and there some detail might be improved. The practical application of the principles will depend, as the* Manifesto *itself states, everywhere and at all times, on the historical conditions for the time being existing, and, for that reason, no special stress is laid on the revol­utionary measures proposed at the end of Section II. That passage would, in many respects, be very differently worded today.* ’17

The recommendations of Marx on the use of political power, as well as phrases like ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’, were examin­ed and discussed. Were these repudiated or modified elsewhere in Marx ? Did contexts lead to other meanings than the first-sight ones ? The Bolsheviks leaned on Marx’s remarks about ‘uninterrupted revolution’. Trotsky was to build a theory from them; in the meantime while Lenin presented state capitalism as a step forward for Russia, the SPGB could only condemn this avowal as open confession of Lenin’s non-socialist intentions.

To deal with Marx’s teaching in this way was by no means satisfactory. Few theories are more closely knitted, with each section integral to the prime subject. Marxism has often been divided by com­mentators into component theories of differing validity: Harold Laski, for example, separated historicism from the economic doctrine, and separated again the theory of the state and revolution. The fact is that Marx’s thought is continuous, the economic and political theories depending on the materialist conception of history. It is true that Marx in his lifetime changed his mind about aspects of the capitalist system — his and Engels’s views on the causes and frequency of industrial crises, as one instance, altered repeatedly — but the scope and intention of his analysis of society are all of a piece.

The basic generalization of Marxism, the materialist conception of history, was put forward by Marx in the preface to his first major work, the Critique of Political Economy. After describing the research which had led him so far, he wrote:

*‘In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of develop­ment of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society* — *the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures anti to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or* — *what is but a legal expression for the same thing — with the property relations within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of pro­duction these relations turn into their fetters. Then comes the period of social revolution . . . No social order ever disappears before all the pro­ductive forces, for which there is room in it, have developed; and new higher relations of production never appear before the material condit­ions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society.* ’ Marx had partially developed this theme in the *Communist Manifesto,* and began his denunciation of the modern capitalist class with the axiom: ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.’ The law of historical development was the dialectic, turned from its Hegelian realm of conceptual knowledge into the vehicle of social progress. The class struggle in every society provided

the conflict between thesis, the class in possession, and anti-thesis, the class compelled to fight to unfetter itself; the social revolution produced the synthesis, the new regime which in its turn became the thesis in the continuation of the conflict at a higher level of development.

The dialectical laws were both revolutionary and evolutionary.

The synthesis was not a sudden break but the climax to a series of modifications and minor changes, a forward leap at the point of ‘transfor­mation of quantity to quality’. The law of the ‘interpenetration of opposites’ confirmed the process: the synthesis was already operative in the antagonism of thesis and antithesis. Thus, the catchphrase that the capitalist system held ‘the seeds of its own decay’. Historical material­ism taught that men’s actions and ideas were consequent upon their interests as members of the social classes; the dialectic showed that in pursuing their interests (as they must ultimately do) they were adding to the process by which society changed.

Marx’s economic writings were his detailed working-out of the class struggle in nineteenth-century capitalism. The capitalist class, themselves the revolutionary force in the dialectical triad of feudalism, must now carry out their interests as owners of the means of production by exploiting the working class. The exploitation took place at the point of production. Each worker created values by the application of his labour-power. In a working day, a proportion of the value created went to replacing the value of labour-power itself, in wages, and formerly-expended labour-power, in overheads and depreciation; the remainder was surplus-value, taken by the capitalist and realized as rent, interest and profit.

The wealth of capitalism took the form of commodities only all production was for sale and profit. Accordingly, the social institutions and functions were shaped to the requirements of this supreme motive. Religion, morality, education, philosophy, science, all existed in such forms as helped towards the realization of profit. While the sponsors of, say, state education were acting directly for the capital­ist class, their employees were accessories to the productive act. All wage­workers, productive or professional, belonged to the great mass exploited for the production of surplus-value. (Marx saw that a managerial class was emerging in the growth of large-scale industry, but classified them still as highly paid wage-workers.)18

The class struggle, then, was integral to capitalism and so irreconcilable. Its purpose for both classes, conscious or otherwise, was the ownership of the means of production. A class-conscious worker was simply one who was aware that this was the issue, but the uncon­scious were in the struggle just the same. Moreover, the eventual outcome

of the modern class war had a special historic significance. In the earlier forms of society, the vital struggle for the means of production had been between rival propertied classes; slaves and serfs had fought against repression, not for revolution. In the progression from each social form to the next, the owning classes had eliminated one another. Now there remained only two great contestants, and the inevitable triumph of the working class would be the climax of all history — the emergence of the one-class, or classless, society.

But victory involved the conquest of the state. Marx and Engels, their youth passed in the age of barricades, had postulated political power as the only means to establishing the classless society.

The capitalist class had had to seize government from the lingering feudal monarchy (and in doing it, to create the beginnings of parlia­mentary democracy) to make way for its own revolution; the working class must do the same. Analysis of the state and its function was an important item in revolutionary literature, though one of the most popular works, Edward Jenks’s History of Politics, was a simple non- Marxist historical study. Engels’s Origin of the Family and Anti- Duhring and Lafargue’s Evolution of Property all dealt with the state; there were William Paul’s The State, its Origin, History and Function and, later, Martov’s The State and the Socialist Revolution.

Not only the Communists and the SPGB took notice of Marx, of course. Virtually all the left-wing organizations were under his influence insofar as they accepted the idea of the ‘laws’ and ‘contrad­ictions’ of capitalism. The National Council of Labour Colleges, with its vigorous magazine Plebs, was mentor to many Labour politicians; it taught Marx’s economics, and published cheap books and pamphlets which were widely read. The Marxist phraseology became current, the expectation of a revolutionary situation almost general. While the SPGB stood apart, it was regarded as the authority on Marxism among the political parties — indeed, its function was considered by many people to be simply an educational one.

Jacomb, Fitzgerald, Kohn, McClatchie and Hardy filled pages of each issue of the Socialist Standard with replies to the innumerable queries. Isobel Kingsley, author of Is Materialism the Basis of Communism ?, pursued Fitzgerald with spiritualist arguments for months and had him reading the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, which he finally described in exasperation as ‘like conversat­ions in Bedlam, or conferences among persons in an advanced state of intoxication’. The principles and minutiae of the currency system were examined, the meanings of Marx’s references to force decided. Again and again, correspondents urged the Party to show vigour in the class

struggle by joining crusades for reform, but the replies were adamant.

So long as there remained two classes in society, one exploited by the other, the sole solution to the world’s problems was the establishment of socialism.

In fact, the Party’s preoccupation with Marxism was virtually limited to the economic theory of value. The occasional lectures and articles on the arts and ethics of society earned respect for the erudit­ion of their authors, but they were not the backbone of the Party case which rested basically on the situation of the working class. Even the respect was tempered by a suspiciousness of ‘culture’; men like Hubert Reynolds and R. W. Housley were too discursive on subjects outside the value theory to be accepted wholeheartedly. The ignorance of the learned lay in their understanding of everything but economics, and the only useful knowledge for the working class was of the economics of their exploitation.

Thus, in spite of individual efforts, the SPGB’s contribution to Marxist sociology was less than it should have been. Its accounts of history and culture were unoriginal renderings mainly of Engels, Plekhanov, Lafargue and Kautsky; where the writer had looked out knowledge for himself, the creativeness was at once stultified by the demands of an over-mechanistic interpretation. However, it ought to he said that Marxist scholarship in due course turned into an academic industry whose lofty terms now defy comprehension by most working men. The aim of Marx and Engels was always that their findings should reach and be understood by the working class. In spurning the intellect­ual, non-economic application of Marxism the Party was more in touch with the spirit of the masters than perhaps it knew.

The class-struggle dialectic was hardly heeded by the Party. Its acceptance, always vague and non-committal, involved casual acts of dubious arbitration. The ‘interpenetration of opposites’, for example, the doctrine of a new society growing within the old, was alleged to mean only mental preparation for the new society — not an alteration of conditions, but the acceptance of Socialist Party teaching.

It must be considered that the floods arising from the 1917 Revolution carried away such possibilities as might have existed in the nineteen-twenties for the SPGB to become the working-class party carrying the banner of Marxism. It did not have, as it expected, to re­claim Marxism after the war. Instead, its task became the near-impossible one of maintaining orthodoxy while other Marxisms ran riot. Through­out the ’twenties, the Socialist Standard grimly observed the trend towards totalitarianism in Russia. The SPGB alone had forecast such an outcome of the Bolshevik Revolution; if the prediction had not been

made from the beginning, Fitzgerald and his confreres grasped within a relatively short time that the implications of a Commune not massacred but triumphant were a new consideration. (The annual Paris Commune meetings were dropped after the Russian situation became clear.)

The only concession was a recurring admiration for Lenin, expressed for instance in an article headed THE REAL RUSSIA in 1925:

*‘It was a tragedy that Lenin should have listened to those emotional babblers who mistook their hopeful imaginings for facts, and created the colossal myth of a revolutionary working class in England, Germany and America. It is a tribute to Lenin . . . that he was able to face the unpleasant truth before it was too late, and instead of concen­trating entirely on futile schemes for world revolution, was willing to lay his hand to the task of hastening Capitalism, modified in favour of the workers to the extent that that is possible.* ’

The passage is a curious one, suggesting that Lenin’s greatness lay in his consciously leading the Russian working class away from hopes of socialism because it was not possible. The Party at that time still could not forget that Lenin knew Marxism and had taken the Russians out of the war. Indeed, for all their predictions, there were members who found the subsequent horrors of the Stalin regime hard to credit. When the 1936 trials came they had to ask if these were the men of whom Fitzgerald had written that they ruled ‘with vastly greater humanity’ than the capitalist class.

It is impossible not to give credit to the SPGB for its insistence against all other voices on what was to prove the truth about Russia.

The warmth towards Soviet Russia that spread from the left-wing move­ment to scientists, writers and thinkers in the ’twenties and ’thirties was not simply the attraction of the politically ignorant to false theories: it was the form taken by the humanism of the time. When western capitalism appeared capable only of mass unemployment and wretchedness, the goodwill of its impotent humanists was drawn to any attempt to build an alternative elsewhere.

By being a little less right, the Party would have communicated better with the times and perhaps had greater recognition. Showing its correctness, it extended the area of its alienation from humanistic thought; the members settled into the habit of mind of assuming that people must first try the limits of political error to be convinced that only socialism would do. In fact, in the ’twenties they became them­selves the victims of history. If participation in the Russophile Marxist stream had brought recognition, it would have guaranteed sub­sequent extinction as well. Individuals survive commitment to errors,

but political groups seldom do; and the Socialist Party would be conscious eventually that correctness had given it, at least, survival.

8.

Hard Times

I first knew the SPGB when I was a boy, in old Knight’s boot- repair shop. My father stabled his carthorse in the yard next to the shop; when he went in to pay the rent he always lingered to listen to the talk, fascinated by the erudition and vehemence of the men who seemed to stand there all their lives. His admiration of them was so obvious that when in my teens I was drawn to their revolutionary creed I assumed it would give him pleasure. Instead, he was angry and fearful for my welfare: those men would not go to work, he said.

The charge was half just, half unjust. If it had been made directly to Crease, Allsopp and the others who thumped endlessly on old Knight’s counter with their fists, they would have replied at once that there was no work to be had. This was in the depressed age between the wars; a million men were desperate for work, walked the months and years away for work, grovelled for work. The hopeless crowds at the Labour Exchange were as much a part of the life of our town as the street market or the rackety silent picture palaces. There were beggars, barrel-organ players, kerb singers and pavement artists wherever one went, half of them war-maimed and with placards which said: ‘No Pension, No Work.’

There was no doubt, on the other hand, that these same condit­ions had produced a small class of men unprepared to make the show of seeking work that self-respect demanded. The revolutionary socialists cared little for respectability, or for the difference between outdoor relief and the meagre wages a desperate search might bring. A man with a family might get thirty-five shillings a week from the Board of Guardians when a labourer’s wage was not much more.19 And if he were thoroughly contemptuous of the system and its authority, the Guardians and the Labour Exchange might be swindled out of more — except that it was no swindle, but mere partial restitution.

The shifts and subterfuges born of those circumstances and that frame of mind were remarkable. It might be unwise even now to explain the flaw in the system of franking unemployed men’s cards that was first discovered by a supremely scientific socialist. It became common knowledge in the SPGB, and the knowledge meant simply

I hat anyone bold enough could draw dole from two Labour Exchanges instead of one. Indeed, it could have been drawn from twenty a week by the same procedure, but the limitation was that ‘signing-on’ times were too nearly universal to give much time for travel.

James did this for a long time. A severe-looking man who always wore a stiff white collar and dark clothes, he was a passionate revolutionary to whom work meant self-abasement before the capitalist class. He had come to the neighbourhood from another district, where he had lately bought a quantity of furniture on hire-purchase and immediately sold it (a relatively easy practice for a respectably-dressed man then, when hire-purchase was less efficiently organized than it has become). He and another socialist would draw their dole at half-past ten each Friday, and rush for a tram to be in the next town and present their cards again at eleven. James’s enthusiasm for the scheme knew no hounds; he was for hiring a taxi to a third Exchange, but the other man I bought it tempting Providence too far.

The Public Assistance system was squeezed for all the small allowances and extras it gave. Once a relieving officer said to James: 'Your wife is claimed to be an invalid, but I see her regularly in the queue for the fivepennies at the cinema’; and James replied indignantly 'You are a liar, sir — my wife pays never less than eightpence.’ Many of the out-of-pocket expenses of living were passed by, too. No-one paid fares; everyone knew the geography of all the railway stations, and a member who was a tram-conductor let his comrades know his time-table to provide a free service up and down East London. If a likely windfall appeared, members wrote letters of recommendation for one another, signing them with the names of bishops, lords and well-known public men.

To see all this as either reprehensible or comic would be to miss the bitter taste of the time. There was little conscious drollery about it all. Some of the revolutionists were unemployable through their per­versity, their arrogance against all authority; but the whole vast army of unemployed was unemployable through the chronic depression of the capitalist system. The frauds, tricks and perjuries were the only alter­native to acquiescence — the fight was an unfair one anyway. Moreover, every issue of the Socialist Standard quoted instances culled from news­papers of the cynicism of the rich and powerful. There were always reports of luxurious dinners and conspicuously wasteful parties in 'society’, and always speeches by incredible public figures who thought the poor deserved no pity. If the upper class had no conscience, how could the unemployed afford one ?

This was the temper of the men who used to stand in old

Knight’s shop. Knight himself was a former member of the SLP: a revolutionary, but at variance with the SPGB over the subject of industrial unionism. He was an impressive man, with a great white moustache and a voice like thunder. He did little work in the shop — most men in those hard times mended their own and their families’ boots — but lived mainly on the rents of the stables. His passion was for philosophy; he refused to mend the boots of a local schoolmaster because the master said he had never heard of Socrates.

The talk, the marvellous talk that flowed unceasingly in that dingy little shop ! There seemed nothing those men did not know, no book or theory they could not quote and criticize. Nor is this merely an illusion preserved from boyhood. Groups of this kind were the real equivalent, in the hungry years in Britain, of the American socialist circles which Jack London described in Martin Eden. But whereas London’s contentious oracles, pictured from his own associates in San Francisco, were Bohemians touched by travel and aesthetic experience, these socialist talkers were down-at-heel working men whose knowledge rarely came from any other source than a lifetime of self-instruction.

The exception, and the dominant figure in the little group, was Arthur Crease. A man of sixty, he had been well-to-do; he had been an actor, and was said to be an accomplished musician. He would never tell the reason for his fall in fortune, except in vague phrases about ‘bad times’; but his family blamed his socialism, and it was more than likely. He sometimes came to our house for an evening, and would fascinate us with music and Shakespeare as well as with savage commentary on the capitalist system.

Crease had joined the SPGB in its early days, left in one of the controversies, and became one of the band of perpetual supporters who were scarcely distinguishable from members. Often, though it was strictly forbidden by the SPGB’s rules, he took the platform at street- corner meetings for the local members. His power of rhetoric alone was enough to command respect, and — though most of them understood probably not a word of it — his audiences would stand spellbound as he quoted pages of Marx, Spencer, Darwin, Nietszche, Morris and, it seemed, everybody else. On the other hand, he loved to be in the crowd at a Communist or Labour meeting and roar ridicule at the speaker.

The Party itself was in low water in the nineteen-twenties. The Russian revolution had excited radicals as nothing before, and the angry discontent of the post-war years found its outlet in the belief that here at last were a signal and a hope for the oppressed working people of the world. Thus, the energy of those who wanted sweeping change now went into the building of the Communist Party and its offshoots. The

members of the British Socialist Party — the SDF had changed its name in 1911 — and the SLP, who in disillusionment might have been ready In listen to the SPGB, became Communists instead. And, at the same time, those who sought change in more moderate terms saw the Labour Party, emergent as a new power in 1918, as the means to eventual economic and social sanity.

Instead of a surge for the true socialism which the Party preached I here were new heresies to be condemned and fresh anathemas to be pronounced, and a membership which settled at about three hundred. The little trickle of recruits only balanced the losses from death, loss of Interest and expulsion — for every year saw its little crop of members who defected. Robert McLoughlin was expelled for supporting the lied Trade Union International (he returned, blind and deaf, many years afterwards). Even W. E. Hutchins — ‘Old Hutch’ — was threatened with expulsion for advertizing capitalist politicians: a sandwich-board man by profession, he had been sent out carrying placards for a Liberal meeting. And a little group of Manchester members, led by two brothers named Marks, raised yet another of the strange abstracted arguments mi unlikely hypotheses that made martyrs to the formulation of Party theory.

The Marks’s contention was designed not to alter the Party case but to strengthen it. They claimed that the class struggle in society did not exist until it was being waged politically. No-one but the SPGB did this; therefore, the struggle had no other or prior expression. Enticing us the idea was, the Party had to declare the absurdity of proposing that the class struggle was born only in 1904 and writing-off Marx’s ‘all hitherto existing history’. The brothers resigned, convinced that social- ism had been betrayed; one of their supporters, Joe Cohen, still attended the Party thirty years later but would never re-join.

The least clear case was that of the NUWM, the National Un­employed Workers’ Movement. Its cause was a worthy one, and its sup­porters argued that its function was the same as that of any trade union: to gain improvements in pay and conditions. It was known that many of I he NUWM organizers leading the demonstrations for more pay and ‘toke’ were Communists. But many were not: Crease, for example, led a successful local campaign, in which several hundred men convinced the Guardians of their desperate need by barricading themselves in the public baths. Repeatedly, members of the SPGB were disciplined for association with the NUWM, and their defence was always that only other political parties were proscribed, not occupational unions.20

The point was considered, but the SPGB’s machinery was never hasty. The matter was brought to a question of theory — what

constituted a political party ? An acceptable definition was not produced until the mid-thirties, and by that time the NUWM’s life was over. No matter: the Executive Committee decided that the NUWM was not, after all, a political party — but added, without giving reasons, that it was nevertheless barred to members of the SPGB. That this odd decision was never challenged brings forth again the dualism in the members’ outlook. There was political theory, which had been considered and clarified; but there was also the revolutionary attitude of mind which knew that no real socialist was going to belong to anything else at all.

In this case the Executive stated both and the conflict was, apparently, unobserved.

The Party’s hostility hardened. As far as the objects of hostility, the organizations and institutions of the capitalist world, were concerned there could only be a transfer of attack — Communists savaged instead of the SDF, Labour ministers in place of Liberals. But there was a fresh bitterness now. It was twenty years since the formation of the Party and the belief that soon socialism would be the crucial question in society. Now, socialism was the question . . . but not the socialism for which the SPGB stood. It was a socialism which meant either Bolshevik govern­ment over regimented masses, or council housing, state insurance and co­operative shops.

To maintain a correct definition of socialism was no new thing for the SPGB, but the task now was infinitely more difficult. Indeed, there is reason to feel that many of the SPGB never understood its real nature. The Socialist Standard and the Party speakers treated any inter­pretation of socialism other than their own as ‘misrepresentation’ and ‘confusion-spreading’. Neither would have been as hopeless for the Party as what was actually happening. Misrepresentation would have meant some wilful, more or less careful distortion, to be met on its own terms. In fact, socialism had become separated almost completely in everyday use from ideas of precise definition. Instead it represented now a general tendency and set of attitudes, in the same way as Conservatism or Liberalism. Moreover, within the broad movement conditioned to these attitudes the SPGB was, to its chagrin, accepted. When Fitzgerald debated with James Maxton in 1928, Maxton expressed appreciation of the SPGB equally with the Communists, the Fabians and his own party, the ILP.

With hostility, then, went bitterness that a huge movement embracing every pernicious policy of reform had appropriated the name of socialism. More and more, the Party’s propaganda was preoccupied with ‘exposing’ the ‘so-called socialists’ of all the other parties. Old Knight behind his counter roared that he would sooner shake Winston

Churchill’s hand than any Labour rogue’s. (That did not stop him and his group hauling a canvassing Conservative baronet into the shop one day for three hours’ intellectual bullyragging: ‘most interesting, most clever men’, he said, determined never to be caught like that again.)

The hardest blows of all to the SPGB, in the nineteen-twenties, however, were the deaths within a short period of Anderson and Fitzgerald. Both were relatively young men — Anderson was 48 when lie died of arterio-sclerosis in 1926. Worn out, Anderson had long since lost his fine Byronic look. A photograph taken the year before his death shows him puffy-faced, bearing the same lifeless expression as that of Jack London’s last photograph: the look that Charmian London said should have been on the face of no erect human being.

Hundreds went to Anderson’s funeral at the Tottenham cemet­ery. Members of the Party or not, they knew they would not see or hear his like again. Yet it was not simply an orator they mourned: it was a figure who, more than any other, expressed the spirit of the ‘Impossibilists’ of 1904. A. E. Jacomb, writing of Anderson in the Socialist Standard, said that ‘in the Party councils he was a force of the first magnitude’, and remarked also that Anderson did not possess ‘what is called in the ordinary way a lovable nature’ — and the two statements were by no means unrelated.

Fitzgerald was in many ways different. His personality had a warmth and depth that Anderson’s never knew. He was unaccepting of the reckless poverty in which Anderson lived — he often spoke of the importance of finding a ‘niche’, a secure spot in the capitalist system (though his death at 57 from kidney trouble was said to have been accelerated by an unvaried diet of hard-boiled eggs). True, Fitzgerald could not have played his part in the making of the Socialist Party if he had not been aggressive, intolerant and unsentimental. Even his humour had a dire sound. Maggie Hallard recalls as a young woman being beside him when a Conference speaker was urging that wives be brought along more often. Maggie whispered: ‘I don‘t like the members’ wives’; and Fitz responded grimly: ‘Nor do the members, comrade.’ Nevertheless, he was dedicated rather than fanatical, and in his shaping of the Party’s theories there was always the chance of flexibility.

Who took their places in the Party ? They were the giants of the 1904 generation, and if they had not died prematurely their active lives and their personal influence would have continued until the second world war. Thus, no-one replaced them or modified the influence of their generation until the 1930-39 era produced its own type of revolutionist. In the field which was supremely important, outdoor speaking, the Party was bereft all through the ’twenties. There

was no lack of quantity, and there was quality of its kind in the eager band of unwavering, well-taught speakers: none, however, was an Anderson or even the shadow of one.

The aggressive tradition was, if anything, accentuated. More than one man introduced to the Party in the inter-war years would never forget the response to his first show of interest. ‘I asked Kohn a question, just for information,’ a member recalled one day in 1954, ‘and he abused and pilloried me as if I were Socialism’s worst enemy.’ Occasionally some member — usually a new one — would wonder if this were not a wrong policy and would propose to his branch or the Party Conference that the speakers be asked to show some courtesy, but this was always dismissed as truckling to the system.

Perhaps the most devoted of all the Party speakers was a little man named Alf Jacobs. His delivery was neither elegant nor compelling, but he stated the SPGB’s case in simple, forthright terms every Sunday morning and afternoon in Victoria Park, Hackney, for more than thirty years. A member of the SDF who had gone over soon after the SPGB’s formation, Jacobs was also a militant trade unionist all his life. He was on the Executive of the cigar-makers’ union, and had been tried in 1906 — his defending counsel was J. W. Reynolds — for breach of the peace in an agitation at Liverpool Street Station over workmen’s trains.

Jacobs was given a gold watch by the East London members to commemorate his thirty years in the Park. The fact of such a presentat­ion was unique. It was generally accepted that the Party had no room for sentiment. Indeed, as the older members began to die off in the nineteen-thirties and ’forties there was more than one complaint over the publication of tributes to them in the Standard: the space was need­ed for socialist propaganda, and eulogies of men dead or alive were an affront to the socialist outlook. Nevertheless, Alf Jacobs had his watch. He was, too, the model for the unquenchable Flaxman in William Cameron’s novel The Day is Coming — leaning on his platform, sadly remarking the follies of his fellow men:

*‘I’ve seen saviours come an ’ go, an ’ I’ve seen ’eroes an ’ geniuses come an’ go. I’ve seen thousands of people get frantic over reforms what was goin’ to make a revolution unnecessary ~ an’ where are they all now ? Gorn an ’ forgotten: a flash in the pan. But me — I go on say in' the same things today as I used to say thirty-five years ago on the old League platform on the Waste. ’*

The ‘star’ speaker for debates and big-hall meetings was Robert Reynolds, who also wrote as ‘Robertus’ in the Socialist Standard.

Small and sharp and savage-tongued, Reynolds illustrated perfectly the mixture of high passion and gritty erudition that was the Party. He was,

Indeed, over-typical: the Party’s other attribute of fierce independence was too strongly developed for him ever to be a good Party man, and his individuality was a source of continual conflict with other members. To an extent Reynolds despised most of his comrades, and did not conceal it.

His posture of intellectual superiority was by no means unjustified, but it caused irritation and more. The SPGB’s arguments and altitudes rested on the assumption that all people were mental equals, differing only in class-consciousness or the lack of it. The answer to critics who could not envisage the working class en masse taking up socialist logic was always to point to the Party membership. And among the members differences in ability were not considered: it was often claimed even that there were no good or bad speakers but only speakers.

But for this, Reynolds might have stepped into Fitzgerald’s shoes. He had admired Fitz; he was an outstanding writer and speaker, respected for his knowledge of theory, and had run Party classes for a number of years. But he was suspect for his unwillingness to identify himself absolutely with the Party, and it was Hardy instead who slipped into the shoes and in the nineteen-thirties became the undisputed eminence. In the early ’twenties Hardy had become one of the editors of the Socialist Standard and began to show his capacity — greater probably than Fitzgerald’s — for marshalling statistics and facts in support of the socialist case. Under him, the control of the Standard became the key-point in the Party, until eventually policies and doctrines appeared to rest almost wholly with the editorial committee.

There was much about Hardy that should not have been accept­able to the Party as it was. He had been to a minor public school and bad a degree in economics, qualifications which were wholeheartedly deprecated in the Party. He was well-spoken and restrained in manner Frank Dawe, possessor of a gift for descriptive epithets, called him the man of gentle nurture’. These things were made insignificant, how­ever, by Hardy’s complete dedication to the cause. The son of one of the Party’s founders, he said once that he had always known what he was going to do. At eighteen, in the war, he had left an exempted occupation to submit voluntarily to a conscientious objector’s punish­ment and spent a year and a half in military prisons. The war over, he committed himself to the Party with almost religious intensity. During the second world war he debated in London with Mrs Barbara Wootton, and was asked by the chairman about his position in the Party. ‘A nondescript member’, Hardy replied. The Party liked that.

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The Thirties

The SPGB’s contribution to the political literature of the great depression was a thin white pamphlet called Why Capitalism Will Not Collapse. It dealt with the idea, spread widely in the nineteen-twenties by the Communist Party and the ILP, that the capitalist system was nearing breakdown. Tracing the history of this belief, the pamphlet proved its fallacy and, consequently, the hopelessness of policies based upon it. Recurrent crises were among the inevitabilities of capitalism, and the system would survive them until the working class put an end to it.

Read today, Why Capitalism Will Not Collapse appears as a remarkable analysis of depression politics. It had no influence simply because it was not published until 1932, when the crisis was over. In the first surge of left-wing excitement in 1929 it might have commanded attention on a large scale, but in the ’thirties it was unsaleable. The theory of collapse lost its ground because of economic recovery, not disproof. It may seem to have been less a theory than a hopeful assertion of the way things would go, but its origins were the serious attempts of nineteenth-century economists to find patterns in the recurrence of crises. The arch-prophet of the cataclysm had been H. M. Hyndman, whose Commercial Crises of the Nineteenth Century remains an import­ant source of data which militate curiously against Hyndman’s own theories.

The failure of the pamphlet as a selling item meant nothing to the Party; its value was judged by its correctness, and correct it undoubtedly was. It had been the first pamphlet on a specific question, as distinct from general principles, since Socialism and Religion, and it made plain the hardening in the Party argument. An element of frust­rated anger is not hard to see in this. The road to the new society had lengthened and became overgrown sadly since 1904. The working class in many thousands had been shown its errors of thinking, but persisted in them. Very well: the working class must have the rigours of capital­ism, and if the rigours were harsh — it served them right for not accepting socialism. Indeed, half-consciously the Party was now seeing the working class as its adversary: socialism was unattained not because of the capitalists but because of the obtuse, uncaring proletariat. The

attitude was made explicit at the outbreak of war in 1939 when, asked by a branch to reprint the 1914 anti-war manifesto, the Socialist Standard editors refused. The address had said ‘Having no quarrel with the working class of any country’, and that, said the editors, was no longer an acceptable sentiment: the Party did have a quarrel, a big one, with working people.

However belligerent and intolerant the earlier members had been, their attitude never excluded sympathy for the class in which their revolt was rooted. The 1910 pronouncements on reform had held working-class interests to be paramount. But what must be kept in mind is that the Party’s first generation were, for all their deliberateness, young men in a hurry who believed socialism was not far away.

In 1954 an old member remarked that it had been expected long ago. Now, in the ’thirties, there was only toil against odds; and whom had they to blame ?

To speak of anger may convey that the Socialist Party was only sombre in the nineteen-thirties. From one point of view it was, but the thirties were also the most colourful years in its history. They were years of excitement in the whole left-wing movement. There was the swift rise of Nazism, the question of democracy posed by jack-boots and pogroms; war preparation with terrifying new weapons, and the wave of pacifist reaction; the marches and street brawling promoted by Communists and Fascists in Britain; the Spanish Civil War; the harrow­ing unemployment problems; slums, abdication, Japanese goods, dole and means test, a score of rallying points and causes.

The political warfare of the ’thirties was acrimonious and often violent. The SPGB was in the fray solely to prove to all contestants that they were wrong. In these years, the Party found itself with a new type of member. Often he (or she) was an ex-Communist or ILP-er seeking better weapons in the battle of words; most characteristically he was a back-street boy with nimble wits and tongue, with ample respect for learning but none at all for persons. Thus came in Wilmott, Turner, Benjamin, Dawe, a whole bunch who carried with them the real flavour of the nineteen-thirties.

The Party was not altogether gratified by this infusion of fresh blood. Because times had changed, the new members did not seem the right kind; many of them were, to put it simply, far too much like hobbledehoys. Turner and Wilmott both came from Walworth, near the offices the Party had taken in 1927, and more than one of the older men lamented this apparent outcome of moving to a rowdy working- class district. For these socialists of the ’thirties offended, above every­thing, the puritanism which ran through the Party (as it did the entire

labour movement). Their impudence and amorality were not serious, considered demonstrations against property such as the members had always practised, but seemed to illustrate only the worst things said at all times about younger generations.

Such kinds of good repute as the Party had valued were thrown to the winds now. SPGB-ers traditionally were vociferous at other parties’ meetings, but the spectacle of Turner and Wilmott chased down the road by angry Conservatives for the names they had called a peer of the realm was something new. So was the address of Dawe to the reverend bishop who jostled him — ‘Clumsy pot-bellied bleeding old ponce !’ — before he ran too. The ultimate dialectic not uncommonly was physical force. ‘Let’s have a walk and discuss this problem’, said one speaker to his questioner; just past the street-lamp, before a word was spoken, he kicked him horribly and left the luckless man doubled- up on the kerb.

It is fair to say that all this was part of political life in the years between the depression and 1939. The British Union of Fascists organised violence, but they had no monopoly of it. In fact, a great deal of the hooliganism which became a social problem after the war existed before it, given an outlet and a degree of sanctity by association with lofty causes. I saw in 1938, in the local headquarters of the Young Communist League, an understairs cupboard which was full of improvised weapons for carrying under jerseys and in trouser-legs to demonstrations and marches: bread-knives, door-knobs on sticks, iron bars and much else. I knew several school friends who were attracted to the Fascists, the YCL and other ‘militant’ organizations partly by this sort of thing and partly by the rumour of sexual opportunities.

Outdoor politics was not for timid spirits. A good deal of the violence came from the side of authority, too. Unemployed demonstrations as well as political ones were dispersed with often gratuitous brutality by the police. Nor were there public protests and enquiries.

It was only what the demonstrators expected. For one thing, they had read again and again in the abundant left-wing literature of the day the stories of Peterloo, the Paris Commune and Bloody Sunday; for another, most people in poor districts lived near enough to climates of wrongdoing to know the police were not gentle.

The SPGB members did not carry weapons or join in demon­strations likely to lead to head-breaking (they were, apart from anything else, barred by their Hostility Clause from doing so). Nor did they seek to break up others’ meetings, which was a principal activity of the Communists. It is worth mentioning that the Communists’ policy in this direction was not concerned only with Fascists: an order in 1931

instructed that Labour Party meetings were to be broken up wherever possible. 21 The SPGB’s point was that nothing was gained except by logical persuasion. Nevertheless, most of the members who came in during the depression years had served apprenticeships elsewhere, and it was impossible to be in this world without being of it too.

The new members knew that they were deprecated on social ind moral grounds, and responded vigorously. They turned the Party axiom of ‘two classes in society’ into a gibe that there were two classes In the Party; they put it about that no-one was allowed in a certain branch who had not twenty-six stamps on his insurance card.22

One member, Clifford Groves, who had an extraordinary overbearing manner was nicknamed ‘Two-Shirt Groves’ by them — only the possession of a second shirt could have made a man so haughty, they claimed. Even the ciders of the Party found it hard to deal with them, since Benjamin or Wilmott could fire six insulting wisecracks while one crushing epigram in the old tradition was being composed.

All the same, the Party had little choice but to acknowledge the abilities with which it was now endowed. For years it had lacked the real mob orator it had to have; now there were crowds round its platforms again, listening to Wilmott and Turner. Both in their twenties,

they were outstanding speakers. The former, an illegitimate son of a well-known political figure of the pre-1914 era, had been in the Communist Party and an organizer for the NUWM, and had been chosen from innumerable young speakers to share the plinth at Trafalgar Square with A. J. Cook for a mass unemployed meeting. Less single-minded than Turner, he never dedicated himself to success as a speaker and gave his crackling brilliance chiefly to the study and exposition of Marxist theory in economics, history and philosophy as time went by. Turner,

on the other hand, had but one aim — to become an orator.

It was Turner who filled the space which had been empty since the great days of Anderson. In later years members often tried to compare them and to estimate which was the better speaker. It was like the attempt to compare Jack Johnson with Joe Louis: each belonged to a different era, his skills reflecting the accomplishments and tempo of his time. Anderson might have been called old-fashioned in the Thirties, Turner without doubt would have been thought brash and vulgar in 1904. Their common element, however, was the prophetic passion of their reverence for the Party’s Principles. For both of them, the doctrine of scientific socialism was the truth absolute; there was nothing else to know.

There is no reservation in these estimates of Turner’s or Anderson’s stature as an orator. Far from being merely large fish in the

little pond of minority political tub-thumping, they may well have been the two greatest orators of the twentieth century. Disinterested hearers said so, many times. About 1948 I talked to a man who thought he had heard every famous speaker since 1900: he mentioned Lloyd George, De Leon, Horatio Bottomley, Cook, Maxton, Churchill. He did not even know Turner’s name, but he described the man he had listened to one Sunday in Hyde Park — ‘Short, Mongolian-looking, with a husky voice . . . my word, that man was an orator ! ’

The Party’s offices were full of activity in these years. In 1919, rooms had been taken at Mount Pleasant, near the GPO sorting office.

It was always assumed that the head office must be in Central London and when in 1927 Fitzgerald brought forward the possibility of moving to Southwark it was disfavoured at once for that reason. Fitzgerald’s response was a characteristic one; with a map and compasses on the Executive table, he showed by measurement that the Elephant and Castle was the true centre of Greater London. The premises into which the Party moved soon afterwards were an old three-storey house at 42 Great Dover Street, a little way over London Bridge.

It was the best place the Party had had. Pamphlets and bills were displayed in the downstairs window. There was a tiny basement kitchen where a woman member cooked meals and made tea, and rooms for literature sorting and committee meetings. The main room was the big one on the first floor, where Executive meetings, lectures and even socials were held. There was an impression of zestfulness and bounding activity that is confirmed by looking at the issues of the Socialist Standard for these years. Meetings, debates and lectures were more numerous than at any other time in the Party’s history. Here were class­es in economics, classes in political theory, classes for would-be speakers and writers. The Party’s reputation as a teaching body revived and was enhanced.

Each month now a long list of outdoor meetings and speakers appeared in the Standard. The number of aspirant speakers led to the revival of the old idea of a test. The plan adopted was to give recognit­ion to a certain number of well-established speakers, and to require the others — and all new speakers in future — to answer an oral examination in socialist knowledge before they were admitted to the list. Members who had not passed were allowed to speak from Party platforms now only ‘under supervision’ — i.e. when a qualified speaker was there to cover up mistakes. It was called the New Speakers’ Test to distinguish it from the ‘old’ test, which still remained as a more searching one to be applied to speakers charged with error.

One of the more curious cases under this rule concerned a

middle-aged speaker from East London. He was one of the half-wilful unemployed, living poorly on public assistance but no worse than he might have done in a badly paid job. For perhaps twelve years he had hardly worked at all, and he developed his own theory about it. He found that there were people in Wales, the Black Country and elsewhere who had had no work for even longer; there were instances of men in these depressed areas who had left school, grown to manhood and married on the dole, had never worked at all. How, he asked, could these people — and he — be among the working class ? Marx had spoken of a submerged tenth’: obviously this was it. In capitalist society there were not two classes but three.

Private ‘theories’ of this kind were, in the SPGB’s tradition, ‘thrashed out’ by presentation for discussion on branch lecture nights. The process was usually one of brow beating the theorist, so that he either left the Party or kept his views to himself in future. This speaker took an unusual course: he complained to the Executive of an uncomradely member who had shouted ‘That’s a lie !’ at every sentence. The Investigation of the complaint led to another, of the speaker’s contentions. An examining committee was set on him, and he was suspended from appearing on the platform sine die, or until he retracted. In fact he never did: nearly twenty years later he was ready to argue the existence of an unrecognized class in the social structure.

A greater furore than this, however, was the application to join the party of Charles Lestor. He was, undoubtedly, one of the most remarkable men ever seen in the socialist movement. Short and leathery, with a leonine head crowned by a great shock of white hair, he was like the Redskin chief of a schoolboy’s dream. His face was tanned, his nose strong and aquiline, his eyes deep-set, his jaw muscular from a lifetime’s public speaking. He had an immense, resonant voice, and when he waved his right hand as he talked one saw the stump of a lost index finger. And Charlie breathed as well as looked adventure. Behind him was a long career as a travelling orator, when he came to London from Canada in 1934. He talked of the Yukon, of cattle-drives and fist-fights, of men who came straight from the pages of Robert Service and Jack London.

Charlie had only to begin, ‘When I was in Vancouver’ — or Alaska, or ’Frisco, or almost anywhere in the North American continent In have eager listeners. Sometimes his stories were too good to be true, but often they were too incredible to be untrue. He had killed an Indian in a fight in jail, and when he came out he had to fight the Indian’s father before his tribe; he had been in Boston when Sacco and Vanzetti were executed; he had spoken at strikers’ meetings with guns

trained all round him. The asides to his yarns were romances in them­selves. ‘I went in this saloon with T-Bone Slim. He was a speaker. They called him that because he’d get on the platform and shout to the crowd: “Who gets everything the workers produce ? Who gets the T- bone steaks ?”’

Charlie was over sixty when he came to London. His reputation in North America was considerable. A spot in one Canadian city where he had spoken for hours at a time was called ‘Lestor’s Corner’ thirty years later. In 1959 Jim Graham, then chairman of the ILP, told me he had been converted to Marxism as a young man by hearing Lestor speak in Canada. The fact remained that Charlie had rarely, if ever, stood for the teaching which was the SPGB’s. He had been in the old Socialist Party of Canada, which the Party disowned for its attitude to the Chinese immigrant question, and in the IWW; rumour said that he had been a Communist for a time as well. In and out of organizations, he had always spoken principally for himself — leaflets heralding his lectures and meetings in the USA and Canada announced ‘Charles Lestor, the Greatest Living Exponent of Marxian Socialism’. His last few years in Canada had been spent as editor and general manager of the One-Big-Union Bulletin, an IWW paper.

Thus, when Charlie applied for membership of the SPGB, the Executive was not sure what to do. They sent to the new Socialist Party of Canada, asking whether or not they should let him join. The Canadians replied promptly and without euphemism. Lestor, they said, was a man of great ability and a fine speaker; he was also over-individualistic and unreliable from the point of view of Party discipline, and they could not recommend his being allowed to join. Rather surprisingly, the EC did allow Charlie Lestor in. There was a spectacular debate, of course (always on these occasions members flocked to the head office to listen to the EC’s thunderous wrangling). Moses Baritz pounded the table and roared that this man was a spy from a counter-revolutionary camp. Charlie did not contest the allegation, probably because he was the only man in the room besides Baritz to whom it might have appealed; to his dying day he believed strongly that capitalism was pro­tected by an army of conspirators and secret agents everywhere.

Though the Party repudiated belief in the conspiratorial nature of capitalism, it was tolerated in members so long as it created no issues. Charlie Lestor was a mine of anecdotes and proofs of conspiracy. Unsophisticated members would sit wide-eyed while he described how, at noon on a certain day, ‘A piece of paper fluttered down from the summit of the Empire State Building — it was the signal they wished, one thinks, they knew what the signal had been for. He would

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hold up an imaginary bank-note while he talked about ‘the great money trick’, glowering under his great bushy eyebrows and implying a terrible significance to the words unnoticed and uncomprehended by almost everyone but he: ‘I promise to pay . . . only a promise, you see !’ Had Lestor’s political reputation been made in Britain and not Canada, the SPGB almost certainly would have refused to have him. One reason why none of the intellectuals who were attracted by the idea of revolution in the ’thirties came to the Party was simply that the Party made clear that it did not want them. Close to the time of Lestor’s entry, J. Middleton Murry was impressed by one of the Party’s pamphlets and wrote saying: ‘It seems to me that I ought to join.’ The answer was a swingeing attack on him in the Socialist Standard. There was more than an element of head-hunting in the Party’s collection of public personalities rebuffed and ‘exposed’. The great delight of public debates was the affirmation to members that the cleverest men were fools lacking socialist logic. What the Party felt to be the supreme compliment to itself was the verdict of Fitzgerald’s old opponent, Lawler Wilson, in his book The Menace of Socialism:

*‘What is most remarkable and disquieting about this dangerous organization is that the members are unquestionably higher-grade working. men of great intelligence, respectability and energy. They are, as a whole, the best-informed socialists in the country, and would make incomparable soldiers, or desperate barricadists.* *As* *revolutionaries, they deserve no mercy; as men, they command respect.* ’

The activity of the Party in the nineteen-thirties was out of proportion to its size. The numbers remained at between three and four hundred. Though many new members came in, the increase was constantly offset by loss and defection. Some died, some became inactive through age or circumstances (in some instances men lapsed when they fell unemployed, too proud — although the rules expressly allowed it — to ask to have subscriptions waived). And there was always the gentle flow away of people who, usually after short terms of membership, found the Party unacceptable. Nevertheless, these years were full of promise. Meetings were held all over London as they had not been for years, with crowds taking notice of colourful speakers. The Socialist Standard's circulation grew until, with 7,000 copies printed a month, it was actually paying for itself.

This development, which lasted for two or three years before the outbreak of war in 1939, indicates the height which Party activity reached. Few political party papers have ever paid their way — generally their support has come either from organizations’ funds or from donations. The Standard from its inception was always the chief consumer of

the Party’s funds. In the early years advertisements were permitted, but (though the only ones which appeared were for Jacomb Brothers, printers) a decision against them was made for fear the Party should be compromised. At intervals there were suggestions of soliciting advertisements for sociological books, but they were always rejected on the ground that anything not published by the Party was inevitably in some degree against the Party.

The increase in sales was largely a consequence of holding more and bigger meetings, of course; literature had always to be on sale where there was an audience or the hope of getting one. There was, however, an initiation of more far-sighted policies in the business management of the Standard. Its printing had passed from the hands of Jacomb, and from the beginning of the ’thirties it had good paper and a well-designed professional appearance. This, incidentally, was in spite of the strongly- voiced opinion of a section, never absent from the Party, that appear­ance good or bad was irrelevant and all that mattered was the message proclaimed. A successful effort to build a strong body of regular postal subscribers was made for the first time, to provide a firm basis of known sales.

One other factor which helped promote the circulation of the Standard at this time was the activity of a number of ‘free lance’ literature sellers. These were members who were allowed supplies at an agreed wholesale rate from the Party office, and sold to benefit them­selves as well as the Cause. A few of the free-lances were highly success­ful. They attended the meetings of every organization, stood at railway stations and in markets, pressed copies at compromised ‘trade’ prices on newsagents, and pursued innumerable small avenues which normal methods of distribution could never have reached.

Despite their usefulness, the free-lance sellers were always regarded as ‘a worry’ by the Party because they had to be given credit. The few was not so much of financial loss — obviously any loss of the kind would be only the same as if the papers had not been sold at all — as of damage to a strong tradition which demanded absolute honesty within the organization. Members’ standards of behaviour towards society at large were their own business, but anyone who bilked the Party funds of a halfpenny deserved and usually got immediate expulsion. It happened very rarely, particularly when one considers that in times of general destitution the custody of a collection from a meeting or a few shillings’ literature takings would have tempted almost any working man, When it did happen, no excuse was taken. The member who fished postal orders with a wire from the letter-box, though a known klepto­maniac, and though restitution was made, was expelled and not allowed

to re-join until many years later.

The standard imposed was a hard-headed, practical one, and presents a strange anomaly against everything else the Party did. All criminality in society was interpreted with a rigid economic determinism by the Party. Everything from mass murder to petty larceny was claimed to be an inevitable outcome of social conditions, usually of nothing other than poverty. The criminal was hardly more able to control his destiny than the victim. As long as private property existed there would be crime, and when socialism was established there would be none. Articles in the Standard and lectures made the point, and applied in identical analysis to every problem of human behaviour. The analysis was completely abandoned when a crime was committed against the Party. What was said then was, in effect, that the long view was one thing but an immediate problem must be met on immediate terms.

What is strange is that this reasoning was isolated. Not only did the Party not dream of applying it otherwise, but fiercely rebutted it as the mainspring of other organizations’ attempts to improve daily social conditions. No doubt the Party would have said that in cases of theft it had to protect its own interests: but this was precisely how other groups saw their struggles for concessions. Here, in fact, the whole question of what was meant by ‘interests’ arose. It was never considered at this level because men who stole the Party’s money were usually un-liked and undesirable, condemned in any case by their own personalities; but the unanswered question remains. The founders had seen the move­ment for a new society as the necessary outcome of the pursuit of working-class interests, but the Party had avoided considering what the Interests were — save that the working class had no rightful concern except to support the Party.

The conflict between the SPGB’s social analysis and its judgements on its members existed largely because it had become preoccupied with its own problem. What was discussed perennially in speech and printed article was the failure of the mass to come to the SPGB. Measures for social betterment were condemned after argument apparently over their worth to the working class, but the real condemnation was that they did nothing to help the Party’s problem. Similarly, the contempt for social amusements and public amenities was resentment of things which distracted the workers’ attention. ‘They sleep in slums and piddle in palaces’, sneered the members. The underlying thought was that if cinemas, the radio, football matches and cheap books were not there, the working class might be drawn to the serious consideration which the Party offered.

Most of the three or four hundred members were still in the

Greater London area. The branches in provincial cities were usually small groups depending chiefly on a single keen member in each. Some­times the member was an exiled Londoner — as, for example, Eric Boden in Sheffield — capable of holding meetings and initiating other activities on his own account with the confidence of the EC. At other times, however, he was an enthusiastic convert in whom hope rather than confidence resided. One such was a man named Edmund Howarth who after several years’ zealous work on the Party’s behalf in north­east England was suddenly revealed by an informing letter to be a Buddhist as well. Howarth maintained stoutly in correspondence with the EC that Buddhism was compatible with scientific socialism, but the Party saw the episode as the kind of mistake that could happen when not enough was known about a man.

The only provincial areas in the ’thirties where the branches were more than one-man bands were Manchester and Glasgow. From the days of Moses Baritz’s arrival there had always been a nucleus in Manchester. A talented ex-Communist named Maertens became a member, providing the branch with a strong speaker and the dominant personality which most branches required. Manchester held indoor and outdoor meetings rivalling those of London, and a series of visits by some of the best London speakers promoted interest in the Party. Reynolds made a strong impression when he lectured and debated there, and a series of outdoor meetings by Turner in Platt Fields and Stevenson Square an even stronger one. For several years Manchester offered the hope of a Party centre in the north.

Glasgow similarly had its group which found new life in the years leading to the second world war — among the enthusiasts were, curiously, a number of bookmakers. A great deal was done from London to foster development in these and other places. Turner and other speakers travelled all over Britain to harangue the crowds which could be obtained easily in the squares and open spaces. Often it was done at little or no cost to the Party. The provincials were more than pleased to give whatever hospitality they could, and there were several known opportunities for travelling cheaply or free by public transport (there was, for example, a special arrangement by which one could go from London to Glasgow in comfort for a penny: I have done it myself). Indeed, where expense was unavoidable there was usually carping and often insinuation that the speaker was robbing the Party.

An account of the Party’s structure and activities at this time would be incomplete without mention of the four ‘companion parties’. When its faith in the older foreign Marxist parties disappeared, the SPGB looked forward to the growth of a new International of

organizations which would adopt its Declaration of Principles. In the nineteen-twenties tiny parties were formed in other English-speaking countries: the Workers’ Socialist Party of the USA; the Socialist Party of Canada, and the Socialist Parties of Australia and New Zealand. The first was, of course, the fruit of the work of Baritz and Kohn. Seamen who had come under the SPGB’s influence had something to do with in formation of the Australian party, and old-time Marxists of the pre- 1914 generation played a part in Canada. In the main, however, the parties in the Dominion countries owed their existence to emigrant Britons. None of the companion parties numbered more than a handful in two or three branches, but the American and Canadian members published together a magazine called The Western Socialist, ‘Journal of Scientific Socialism in the Western Hemisphere’.

10.

Democracy on the Scales

The political spirit of the nineteen-thirties extended over not one decade but two. Held in suspension for six years by the war, the climax of its expression was the sweeping Labour victory in 1945, and the ‘political apathy’ of the ’fifties was simply the aftermath of its going. What is remarkable in the SPGB’s history is that scarcely any of the figures of this burning epoch survived it as members. The older generation remained; but Wilmott, Turner, Benjamin, Walsby, Isbitsky, Stella Jackson, Cash, almost all the tearaway socialists of the ’thirties found scientific socialism in the end unacceptable.

No doubt they were more sensitive to social and cultural innovation, since they were themselves its products. The Party did not admit to changes in the capitalist system. From the nineteen-twenties onward it was continually under pressure to say that things were not as they had been in 1904, to identify innovation with modification or improvement — the self-styling of most left-wing radicals in the ’twenties and ’thirties was ‘progressive’. The Party’s response was always that the Declaration of Principles described capitalism for as long as capitalism lasted; to say otherwise was to invite the Fabian fallacy with the whole pack of reformists behind.

In the eyes of many members there was not even any addition to knowledge worth considering in the Party’s lifetime. Economists, psy­chologists, anthropologists and historians, if they were not outright charlatans, built from standpoints where no understanding was to be had. Indeed, reading outside the known sound works was discouraged implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, in the SPGB. Sammy Cash once recounted how he had asked Fitzgerald’s opinion as to the value of reading Freud and been told: ‘You might as well read that rubbish as any other.’ And when in the early ’thirties Frank Evans was proposed as a useful man to take Party classes since he had just obtained his degree in economics, the EC was unanimous: the degree conveyed to them that Evans knew no economics at all.

This sentiment ran through the labour movement generally.

The discovery that school-book history, for example, was only the upper class’s version was both critical and exhilarating to countless

young people: there was a ready market for books like A Worker Looks at History and The Common People, and cheap pamphlets on working- class history. Thus, the Party members’ books represented ammunition in the class struggle rather than any desire for knowledge for its own sake. Marx and Engels, the publications of Charles H. Kerr’s company, and volumes of the Socialist Standard were universal. Almost invariably there would be The Origin of Species, Spencer’s First Principles, and Haeckel’s The Riddle of the Universe — mightiest weapons in the war against superstition — and a tiny volume in the ‘Temple Primers’ series called A History of Politics, by Edward Jenks. Most members had, too, something by William Morris and Jack London, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists by Robert Tressell, and copies of the only poetry highly regarded by Marxist materialists — Shelley, and Fitzgerald’s Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. Though second-hand books could be bought for pennies and twopences, few socialists had any larger collection than this.

The nineteen-thirties’ generation was to be undone, from the Party’s point of view, largely by reading of the kind that led to ‘confusion’ and ‘intellectual anarchy’; perhaps by the desire to explain social nuances for which theories abound. In the meantime, however, there was the demand for involvement in the political drama of the ’thirties: and involved they were. The reckless hurly-burly of outdoor politics, and of living with nothing to lose, created innumerable fantastic situations in which effrontery and plausibility were paramount. There was never any lack of impudent fun, even in the serious business of staging meetings. When the black-coated audiences at City lunch-hour meetings chided Turner for not being in work himself, he appeared in a bowler and striped trousers and began ‘We City workers . . .’ If an audience was hard to get at the beginning, a member who not uncommonly was the speaker waiting to ‘do’ the meeting would pose as a raucous heckler, shout abuse at the chairman until a crowd collected, and then jump on the platform to address them.

There were continual brawls with Communists, to whom the SPGB was a perpetual goad, since it attacked them with the Marxist doctrine they dared not deny. Here the SPGB held, without doubt, all the aces — but at least one member carried additional ones. A sad-faced Cockney humourist, he composed his own quotations from Marx and Engels to confound the most learned Communist, and recommended others to do the same. ‘Twist the book,’ he would yell: ‘twist the book, so the Party always wins !’ Often fisticuffs developed from the argu­ments. Turner was once rescued by Dawe impersonating a plain-clothes policeman and ‘arresting’ him. At one period, when Hardy was regularly writing articles in the Standard that were damaging to the CP, a group

of Communists resolved to discover and put paid to the author. Hardy’s response to the news indicated not only personal courage but a linguistic gulf in the Party. ‘I don’t understand,’ he is reputed to have said. ‘Does “doing me up” mean buying me some new clothes ?’

They were all out of work, of course. The tricks were played on the Labour Exchanges, Public Assistance was squeezed for its maximum pittances, but there remained endless subterfuges and shifts. Eyes were always open for free meals. One chain of cheap restaurants had its waitresses issue tickets for all the items consumed, to be handed-in at the cash desk. A group could have a banquet and surrender and pay for only a quarter of the tickets. (The same great firm had to pay for the false teeth a member needed, after a startling plum-tart episode carefully rehearsed by him.) The cash-desk system in general was too full of possibilities which hungry men could not ignore. There was always a watching commissionaire to see that customers visited the desk before they left; how was he to know that some were buying only packets of Woodbines, with the bills for their good meals in their pockets ?

When everything else failed, there remained the pills and powders. The whole process from manufacture to the wholesale and retail distribution is described fully by Cameron in The Day is Coming. Briefly, it was the selling from door to door of bath salts, shampoos, tooth-powders and pills in packets almost identical with those of famous brands. They were obtained from mobile amateur wholesalers, and their origins would have been hard to trace — back rooms and kitchens, the chemistry done in coppers and sinks. It is likely enough that, as Alf Catchpenny claims in Cameron’s book, the ingredients were no different from those of the genuine articles.

More than one former Member of Parliament sold shampoos and bath-salts in the ’thirties, after the Labour government collapsed.

At half the price of the brands they imitated, most of the goods were not difficult to sell. In most people’s minds, if shampoos turned out to be a doorstep swindle not much was lost, but pills were a different thing. The ability to sell them was the height of this sort of salesman­ship; even Turner had little success, and Michael Stewart refused to try. Stewart was a university man whose manner at once commanded respect and would have charmed birds from trees. It was always said that he could bum from the bums themselves — and possibly it was this reputation he was unwilling to risk by failure at selling the pills.

It may be difficult to reconcile these tragi-comic shifts with the thought that these were men with ability and brains. What the difficulty really involves for later generations is imagining the whole situation in which they occurred. Of course there was wild incongruity in it all.

Wilmott lecturing on economic theory and next morning lining-up for Assistance, was incongruous; so was Turner debating a rich Conservative, and the next day selling bath-salts in the strange garment they called ‘the dead ostler’s coat’ (‘An old ostler died, see’, said Dawe, ‘and left this old-fashioned coat to keep his horse warm, but Tony nicked it off the horse’s back and the poor horse died.’).

But the paradox was social, not personal. The wastage of talents in the depression years was appalling. Men with degrees worked in the docks and rode ice-cream tricycles; the best brains and the finest skills had no appeal from the ubiquitous factory-gate notice ‘No Hands Wanted’. It is possible that, for all the meetings held and all the literature distributed by the SPGB, more members were recruited round Labour Exchanges than by any other means in the ’thirties. (Sometimes things were not what they seemed to be. Dave Russell took pity on one man in the queue whose bare toes showed through broken shoes — bought him cups of tea, and gave him Standards so that he should learn the cause of his destitution. Ten years later Dave met the man again, in uniform; he was a policeman, whose duty had been to mingle with the dole crowds and look for promoters of discontent.) Because this was the common plight, it would have been impossible for the depression generation of Party members not to be touched by it. Two of them were to produce remarkable novels about the working-class life of their time. William Cameron wrote The Day is Coming during the war, and Sid Rubin — as ‘George Camden’ — My Time, My Life at the end of it.

The man who perhaps best represented the humanistic tendency in the Party was Samuel Cash. An able orator and a willing worker, Sammy was unceasingly the centre of controversy. He was fallible — which to the Party meant ‘unsound’. He had, indeed, a passion for lost causes; he was prepared to consider any criticism of the Party and to acknowledge other people’s logic. He was, too, unashamedly interested in subjects of which the Party disapproved: penal reform, progressive education, psychology, all the signposts to reformism. He had left the SPGB at one time to join the Communist Party, and then came back and lectured on ‘Why I left the Communist Party’. In the General Strike he had been sent to prison for a characteristic offence. There had been some breaking-in to small shops for food; from his platform Sammy condemned it sternly, and recommended instead the big shops where the owners could afford the loss and the food was better.

Sammy was a taxi-driver, but he was continually starting businesses designed to serve his fellow-men as well as benefit himself.

The most extraordinary of them was the Humanitarian Restaurant, a joint venture of Sammy and an anarchist named Bill Gape who had

founded a trade union for tramps. It was a coffee-shop where cups of tea were cheap in any event but free to the unemployed. It is almost tin necessary to say that hardly any customer admitted to being employed, and that the business for its short lifetime was subsidized by Sammy’s working overtime in his cab.

But not all individual vagaries in the Party arose from ideas of working-class welfare taken too far. There were for a number of years several members in one of the main Post Office depots. One of them was put in charge of a section of men, to whom he explained his view of his new situation. Through economic necessity, he had had to accept a managerial office. As a socialist he knew that all bosses must grind down the workers, and so must their hireling foremen and managers; that was the materialist conception of history. He was as good as his word, and in due course the exasperated workmen wrote to the Party Executive — asking if it were really true that socialist teaching gave a licence to ride them rough-shod. The EC asked him to resign his membership.

It may be useful here to say something about the composition of the Party in the years before the second world war. Its characteristic figure remained the self-educated man, his personal and political inde­pendence as rigorous as ever. I have written about the unemployed, hand-to-mouth members whose fraternity made a university of the streets. However, there was also a section holding prestige by long standing in the organization reinforced by respectability. The last word obviously needs an explanation. It is that many of the older members took their cue from, or agreed with, Fitzgerald that the best thing for an individual to do was work for as secure a spot as he could find in the capitalist scheme.

Thus, these members had jobs or even small businesses; and, inevitably, it was they who maintained the organization and set its tone. In simple terms, they were more reliable because they were better placed. This, together with prestige, made their influence the dominant one on what the Party should be like. That is not to say there were not conflicts over it. Orderly administrative proposals were met with gibes of ‘shop­keeper mentality’ on one side; while, on the other, the part-deliberate brashness of the Wilmott coterie was put down as doing the Party no good at all.

A few more things must be picked from the ’thirties before going on to their strongest drama. The first is a minor incident full of uproar­ious seriousness, with a hint at the end that the SPGB could sometimes smile at itself. It concerns an East London member with a passion for Jewish liturgical music. Recordings were either unobtainable or beyond his means; there was only one kind of place where he could listen to it.

with astonishment, members heard that one of their number appeared to have developed religious mania. Some hung about near synagogues to see, and noted his furtive manner as he went in and out. The case was taken to the EC for action. The member, distraught, explained that all he wanted was the music; the EC advised that he keep away from synagogues, but otherwise let the matter rest.

One aspect of the Party’s economic case was developed and given precision in the early ’thirties. It had always been part of the Marxist analysis that capitalism fettered production by restricting it to the market and through the demands of armaments, bureaucracy and the money economy. The SPGB had asserted in 1904 that going over to socialism would double the production of useful goods immediately. Now, in articles in the Socialist Standard, Hardy showed that growth under capitalism was held to an erratic snail’s pace: ‘waste’ was beside the point. The Party adopted this as its explicit view, to make the attack on capitalism in future not for its application of what was produced but for its failure to produce. This standpoint was in contradistinction to that of the Fabians and most radicals, who assumed the cake to be there awaiting only a just system of distribution.

A little later, trade-union struggles found a prominent place in the Standard. It was a subject the Party had mostly left alone, replying to questions in the broad terms formulated in 1905. The General Strike had been dealt with, of course, but the lesson the Party had to point out was the futility of attempted confrontations with the powers of government. (A lesson many militants had learned; the membership of the Communist Party, which soared in the General Strike, fell catastrop­hically in the five years after it.) The interest in industrial action now came from a Dagenham member named Bill Waters, a bus-driver and a keen trade unionist. Busmen were to the fore in making demands in the ’thirties, and any threatened strike by them was news because of the disruptive effect it would have.

Waters, a capable speaker and writer, contributed several articles in the Standard on the busmen’s position. Despite their topicality, the Party — or most of it — looked at them with misgivings. The general statement that the SPGB recognized workers’ need to struggle seemed to be extended too close to the Communists’ aim of making political capital from any industrial dispute. Waters suggested that, to avoid in­conveniencing and alienating other workers, a busmen’s strike should take the form of running the buses but not collecting fares; this was involving the Party too much. Over several years the busmen — Waters had one or two associates — pressed their concern, culminating in the suggestion after the war of a socialist ‘cell’, but it was rejected as not what the Party existed for.

Clifford Groves — ‘Two-Shirt Groves’ — quickly became a dominant figure in the SPGB. He had been in the Salvation Army and played in a dance band, and was always well-to-do; tall and handsome, he had a high-voiced, deliberate speech that was very effective from the platform, and combined it with unrelenting hostility to all opponents, he would not even shake hands with the other side’s representative before or after a debate: ‘We have no time’ — emphasizing every word until it resounded like a hammer on stone — ‘no time at all for hypocritical gestures’. The arrogant, overbearing manner which he cultivated was for members as well as opponents. Groves delighted in making anyone look and feel small; only occasionally did one see, beneath the bitter­ness, a shy man who had wanted a family.

Groves was the candidate in the Party’s first Parliamentary election campaign, which began in 1937 but, deferred by the war, did not reach the polls until 1945. It presented an intensely exciting pro­spect to the Party. Representation in Parliament would be the first visible step to fulfilment of the socialist dream, the sending of class-­conscious delegates to Westminster to enact the abolition of private property and of wage-slavery. It had waited thirty-three years for the Party to have enough money for deposit and campaign; now, with the prospect in sight, members contributed all they could to the Parliamentary Fund which was set up.

The choice of constituencies was small. With only three or four hundred members in the whole of Britain, there were not many towns even in the London area which had the ten necessary to sign the candi­date’s nomination paper. The constituency taken was East Ham North, on the outskirts of East London. Originally a member named Grainger was chosen to be candidate. After a few months he suddenly withdrew, and Groves was appointed in his place. Up to the outbreak of war there was intensive activity in East Ham North. Meetings were held three, four and five times a week, and members plodded round assiduously to expound the Party’s case on every doorstep.

Determined that a man who spoke for it in Parliament should have no flaw in his socialist judgement, the Party demanded a new and more rigorous test of knowledge for prospective candidates. Groves was examined publicly by the Executive Committee from a prepared list of points. To economic theory and history were added special questions about the workings of government, the economics of taxation, and national finance in general.

Despite this safeguard, it is hard to imagine how the Party would have adjusted to the situation if its member had ever been elected to Parliament. On one hand, the structure and purpose of the SPGB

denied autonomy to any member; on the other, its machinery for

decision-making was incredibly cumbersome, involving discussion and voting at every level and finality only in the annual Conference. Had Groves won a seat, he would have had to refer back to the Party for instruction on almost every question. One visualizes at once the resurgence of the whole argument about reforms, with endless disputation which might well have disrupted the Party completely.

In fact, the SPGB was disrupted in the late nineteen-thirties by what was, in another form, the same question. All the controversies, the latterly-contested issues throughout its history, had been over hypotheses. Industrial unionism had been a hypothesis of trade-union organization in a form it had never been likely to take. The ‘reform’ dispute of 1910 had centred on the supposition of a single socialist in Parlia­ment. The recurrent argument over whether soldiers should be allowed to join supposed, as Reynolds once said, ‘the entire brigade of Guards lining up for membership’. The Party had preserved its attitude while refusing involvement in everyday political issues. Representation in Parliament might have caused disruption by forcing the consideration of issues; as it happened, issues were forced on the Party by the history of the nineteen-thirties.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War brought the question of democracy before everyone’s eyes. For the Party, all wars were economic conflicts — ‘armed extensions of the policies of peace’. The international wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had been inevitable quarrels between the capitalists of rival countries over resources, markets and trade routes. The apparently idealistic struggles in history, like the English and American Civil Wars and the religious wars in Europe, had been fundamentally economic ones arising from the conflicts of old and new ruling classes with opposite material interests. Even the case of Helen of Troy had the socio-economic explanation of women as private property in the ancient world. ‘We cannot judge an epoch by its own consciousness’, Marx had said.

Spain, however, involved none of these considerations. A govern­ment elected by the majority was challenged by an armed force seeking to impose its own will. Moreover, the insurgents had the backing of the Catholic Church and the dictator states, Italy and Germany; what was attacked was not just a government but the institution of democracy.

The situation, in fact, was one in which the Party had envisaged itself.

Its concept of the establishment of socialism rested on the election of a majority expressing the will of the working class. If, after that, the minority tried violence, the Party had always indicated that it would defend the revolution with force.

This was too close to what was happening in Spain. There was a further consideration in some members’ minds: the persecution of Jews by the Nazi government in Germany. The SPGB’s argument that the nature of governments made no difference to the working class did not ring true here. The left-wing minorities tended to attract Jews, and the Party had its share: to most of them, it was only too obvious that it mattered a great deal who governed Germany and whether the Nazi creed extended to other countries. The Fascists in Britain were crudely vicious in their anti-semitism. Young louts in black shirts marched through the streets singing their version of A Tavern in the Town:

*A Jew, a Jew a Jew a Jew a Jew a Jew,*

*A dirty, thieving, stinking Jew . . .*

Thus Kohn, Cash and other Jewish members were quick to state their view of the issues involved. They had support from other quarters, however. A. E. Jacomb, who had been in near-retirement for several years through heart trouble, came forward with an argument, reasoned from the basis of working-class interests, for the defence of democracy. Essentially, it was a development of what Fitzgerald had said in answer to the Provisional Committee in 1910. In one of the printed leaflets he sent round to members, Jacomb wrote:

*‘Democracy opens up a new vista to the working class. Socialist parties can precede democracy, hut they cannot have the character de­manded by working-class interests when the workers have attained political power ... It is only because all necessary reforms have been won by reformers, and democracy has in consequence become a perfect political instrument for working-class political ends, that it is possible to organize the workers in a political party on non-reform, independent*, *hostile, class lines. ’*

Reynolds supported Jacomb, and in turn was supported by his branch, Islington. The Party was divided.

The question of Spain itself was not resolved. A statement ap­peared in the Socialist Standard in March, 1937, which was presented as the Party’s official view. It stated categorically that the SPGB was on the side of ‘the main body of workers’ against ‘those, headed by Franco, who threaten to deprive the workers of the power to organize politically and industrially in their own interests’. But it said also that since the Party was concerned only with establishing socialism it ‘only gives material support to Socialist organizations’ — of which the Spanish government was not one. And it ended by referring to the Spanish government’s resistance to Franco as the Spaniards’ own affair:

*‘It must be assumed that the Spanish workers weighed up the situation and counted the cost before deciding their course of action.*

*that is a matter upon which their judgement should be better than that of people outside the country. ’*

No stand was made or decision taken that would have rendered anyone’s position untenable in the Party. If no-one was answered, it might be said also that everyone was answered: the Party had said it was on the side of the Spanish government, and it had said also that it would not support the Spanish government. Nevertheless, the nature of the victory which had been won was clearly understood. The Party had been asked to support a war for democracy, and had refused. It became discreditable to have supported the Spanish war — thirteen years after its outbreak, I heard Cash condemned in argument for his ‘mistake’.

But the issue remained. For a time the battle was between the letters which Jacomb wrote regularly to the Executive Committee or the membership and Hardy’s answers to them. Hardy had become by this time the undisputed king-pin of the Party. He and McClatchie had been editors of the Socialist Standard since the nineteen-twenties — the editorial committee consisted of three, with Harry Waite as the third member in the ’thirties — but Hardy was at all times the predominant figure. He had insuperable advantages in argument. Employed in a trade union’s research department, he was able to produce statistics and facts while others had to seek them where they could.

The crucial point in the controversy was put in brief by Hardy: 'Democracy cannot be defended by fighting for it.’ Jacomb flew at the statement, tearing at it:

‘If democracy cannot be defended by force then the power be­hind the machine-gun can (unless there is some other way of defending democracy) withdraw all democratic rights at will. If in these circumstances democracy, once lost, cannot be recovered, then the SP must accept their own conclusion that the workers can never free themselves. ’ But articles appeared in the Standard reiterating what Hardy had said; the Party had already made up its mind. At nearly forty years’ distance, Jacomb’s argument appears beside the point not only of the 1939-45 war but of much of the history of civilization since that time. Then, it came as a challenge to each member to see where he stood, and was to close bitterly the story of a sincere and kindly man who had been with the Party from the beginning in 1904.

The bigger consideration, however, was the imminence of a world war. For how long everyone had accepted its inevitability, it would be hard to say. F. A. Ridley has told me that in 1938 he made bets with Wilmott and Kohn on the date of the outbreak; while I was still at school, perhaps in 1936,1 heard a lecture on defence against poison gas. The anticipation in those two or three years was scarcely less awful

than the later fear of atomic war. It was believed that European civilisation might be annihilated by bombing, and populations exterminated by gas. The Party had, for the only time, allowed a non-member to write articles in the Standard on ‘The Menace of Aerial Warfare’, and had appointed an Emergency Committee of dependable members to try to preserve contact if the worst happened.

Against this background, the controversy on war and democracy

grew.

11.

The Outbreak of War

There was no question of the stand the SPGB would take. It would oppose the war, and the members would refuse to take part.

What was not known was the number of members who might seek to compromise the Party in some way. It was obvious that Jacomb was prepared to support a war against the totalitarian states, but the position of others was undetermined.

There were some who felt that the Party could not afford to stand apart from the crisis of civilization which they believed was coming. In 1936 Stella Jackson had resigned with a letter about the Party’s Principles in which she assailed, among other things, the phrase ‘diametrically opposed’. The daughter of T. A. Jackson, she was the most outstanding of the relatively few women in the Party’s history. The Party gave little importance to her strictures, attributing them merely to the influence of a father who had been a Party renegade.

An attempt to make the Party consider this view was made at the annual Easter Conference in 1938. Wilmott and Reynolds (Party controversies sometimes brought such shotgun marriages) prompted a young woman member named May Otway to bring forward a resolution that, in the event of a European war, the Party should at once call a conference of working-class organizations. What was envisaged was a search for common ground with, for example, the ILP and the pacifist organizations which, if not explicitly political in character, leaned towards the left.

The motion was never discussed. Groves, the chairman of the Conference for that year, refused to admit it because it was in conflict with the clause in the Declaration of Principles that demanded diamet­rical opposition to all other parties. The condition of membership was acceptance of the Principles in their entirety, and discussion of a pro­posal to violate them was not permissible. When the Executive Committee met after the Conference it endorsed Groves’s attitude, and summoned May Otway to explain herself to a subsequent meeting. The girl had been stung by Groves’s rancorous manner at the Conference, and retaliated with spirit before the EC; Groves in turn moved a resolut­ion which was sheer vindictiveness, beginning ‘Comrade Otway is

irresponsible’, and proposing that she should be barred from any position in the Party. It was an evening of uproar at Great Dover Street, the kind of row that made a legend, but the questions from which it had sprung were passed by. Reynolds and Wilmott knew better than to pursue this line further — and May Otway died not long afterwards.

The actual question of opposition to war was raised to its eventual level by Turner. Through the arguments he had taken the attitude of the complete pacifist to whom no war could ever be justified. He claimed that he had chosen the SPGB and not the Communist Party because the SPGB did not countenance force as an instrument of policy. It was untrue of the Party, and Reynolds hunted now with this as his weapon. Though Reynolds had joined forces with Wilmott, his dislike of Turner was implacable, and the Party’s sixth clause did pre­sume the use of armed force for socialist purposes.

In the autumn of 1938, Turner gave a lecture at Bloomsbury branch on Chamberlain’s Munich Agreement policy. The lectures given

regularly at most branches were chiefly for the information and diversion

of the branches’ own members, and the audiences were small unless there was some factor creating unusual interest. This one was special because its subject-matter invoked the point of controversy which was concerning the Party; the audience went for not the lecture but the questions. Turner was asked by a member if he thought the Party, when it had taken political power to establish socialism, would make war on recalcitrants. He answered equivocally, knowing what the question was for. He could not, he said, imagine that the situation would arise: how could there be resisters to the arrival of the good society ?

From somewhere in the room Reynolds shouted: ‘Never mind what you imagine — tell us what you think ! ’ Forced thus into a corner, Turner said finally no, he would not agree to war even for the revolution — means had to harmonize with ends. Without doubt, he was rebutting the proposition of the Party Principles. The Party did not take him up because its problem was not the distant revolution but the imminent war. Reynolds was trying to establish that the Party was not opposed to war in all circumstances, and could conceivably support hostilities in which working-class interests were involved — or, more simply, that it might support the coming war against Germany.

And a few weeks later, Reynolds himself was cornered. He too lectured at Bloomsbury and was questioned on the war issue. Reynolds may have been over-confident. At any rate, asked for his view of the Party’s policy for war, he answered that it did not have one: it had only an attitude to each war as it happened. The questioner wrote to the Executive at once. Over words, the Party was prepared to cry wordy

havoc. Had the Party an attitude, or had it a policy ? The die was cast.

The Executive could no longer avoid coming down on one side or the other. Whatever either word may be thought to have meant, Reynolds’ word had to be wrong because it implied the possibility that the Party might support the war. The EC moved, and carried, a long resolution disowning ‘attitude’ and claiming a policy over war.

There is no doubt that Reynolds’ argument from the Party’s teaching and its precedents was a strong one. It had never been pacifist; its doctrine of political power as the means to revolution proposed taking the state’s coercive instruments on behalf of the working class, and if necessary using them. There was therefore no standing policy against armed force. Instead, said Reynolds, the Party should — and in his view did – consider any war in the same light as it considered any reform: in relation to its object, the expression of working-class interests in the achievement of socialism.

The SPGB’s stand in the 1914-18 war could be described as a policy. It appealed to the workers of the world to recognize their affinity as exploited people and stop fighting. The praise of the Bolsheviks at the time of the Russian revolution was associated with their having got the Russian workers out of the war. The employment of this kind of active sentiment had not happened since those years — ‘attitude’ was the more descriptive word for what the Party had said about the Spanish war. It was, in fact, the same attitude that the Party had come to take towards every problem: determination that they should not be involved in partisanship for anything but the struggle for socialist understanding.

In the short space between the later stages of the Spanish war and September 1939, the Spanish situation was rationalized enough to allay doubts which may have remained in members’ minds about the issues. The German and Italian intervention was said to have been imperi­alistic, not ideological: the Standard referred to ‘rich mineral wealth and strategic points’ in Spain. The position of the Jewish members was discredited by insistent whispers that they were unreliable anyway — Jews first, socialists afterwards. The Standard repeatedly exposed British politicians’ concern for democracy by drawing attention to such things as the annexations in southern Arabia as evidence that democrats were as bad as totalitarians.

Underlying all this was a comprehensible and hard-headed view which need not have been wrapped in so much theoretical debate.

Except for the disputing faction, the members would have said that their concern and duty were to keep the Socialist Party in existence; they were a minority, and were unwilling either to be killed off in a war or in see the Party submerged in the alliances it would have made inevitable.

Whatever Reynolds’ dialectic, it was not going to alter this. The Executive’s resolution started with a warning to him that the words he had used would not be tolerated, and went on to say that the SPGB had a clear-cut policy of opposition to the prosecution of any war. Not was this policy merely negative; it aimed at ‘influencing the actions of war-making governments’ by spreading disaffection which, on a big enough scale, could make it impossible for a war to continue.

Many members, ready as they were to accept whatever form the EC’s repudiation of Reynolds might take, must have been aware of the new position thus taken up. Turner’s pacifist avowal had gone unchallenged; now, the Executive’s statement of policy was saying something very close to the classic pacifist argument that, if everyone refused to fight, there could be no war. Wilmott made a final attempt to regain lost ground and keep the argument alive. Two weeks later, on the Executive he moved the rescindment of the policy resolution.

It was the end of the year. The annual election of the Executive Committee had some time before been moved from Easter to December. There was always a tendency at this time to leave business over to the incoming Committee; members — particularly those whose election was marginal — did not trouble a great deal about attending. On this night there was a small and unrepresentative attendance, made up mainly of the dissenters from the policy statement. The rescindment was carried.

The news was all round the Party in two or three days. By the following Tuesday, seven had resigned from the Executive to protest against the rescindment. It is interesting that almost none of them was a pacifist. Fifteen years later, when Turner’s own membership was in question over — among other things — the clause in the Principles that recognized armed force, almost all of them condemned him. Ambridge, whose resignation came first in 1938, was cited on the application of this clause for Turner’s embarrassment by an anarchist in public debate in 1953. But the issue here was the condemnation of Reynolds’ views; uncondemned, they created a situation which the Party would not have

The resignations turned the election of the 1939 Executive into a Party vote on the war question. Overwhelmingly, the ‘policy’ sup­porters won the day. Their representatives were voted back handsom­ely, and the supporters of the rescindment either lost their seats or scraped in at the bottom of the poll. The question was put to a final vote of confidence at the Conference at Easter, and the delegates re­affirmed the decision:

‘The Conference upholds the view that the SPGB has a policy on war and records its regret that the 35th EC should have rescinded its

resolution of October 4th. We urge that the present EC take immediate *steps to* re-establish this ruling, and that failure to comply by any member will be dealt with sternly. ’

The controversy was over, and Jacomb and Reynolds now were merely renegades. Reynolds remained in the Party another year and then, in 1940, resigned with a dignified letter in which he said that the Party was not what it had been when he joined it nearly thirty years before.

The majority of the Islington branch left too. Jacomb persisted, was expelled, and died in 1946. He had hoped that there might be young men who would listen to him and form a new party to put socialism right, as he and the others had done in 1904. But only a few old members used to go and see him on his little poultry farm at Collier Row in Essex, and they were remembering the times that had gone long before.

On the Sunday the war began, the Executive met at Great Dover Street and Turner spoke in Hyde Park. There was little in fact that the EC could do beyond reaffirming and hoping. The yearly Autumn Delegate Meeting was due in four weeks, and then — if delegates arrived an idea would be gained of how things were with the membership.

Conscription had already begun in the summer before the war. There were posters in the streets saying KEEP CALM — AND DIG ! ; in the parks and commons men were digging desperately, cutting deep trenches between the banks of thrown-up brown earth to provide some shelter from the bombs when they came. The Executive itself was reduced; many members felt, like the general public, that every man had to look after himself.

But 3 September 1939 was Turner’s day. Just before he left the Party, disgraced by ‘unsoundness’, one of his accusers recalled ‘with pride and affection the stirring days of 1939, when like Casabianca he stood on the burning deck whence all but he had fled’. The trite and melodramatic simile evoked the feeling of that day as more sophisticated phrases might not have. All the parties had their platforms in Hyde Park in state their attitudes and make their appeals; Government and Labour speakers, the Communists, the minorities. Throughout the morning and afternoon great crowds stood listening, moving on and swelling round fewer platforms as one after another speaker ended his message and closed down. Turner began in the morning. The scene, and the impression it made — ‘the greatest individual performance by a Hyde Park orator’ — were described in an article in the magazine Clubman in 1955, by Dale Kenway:

‘ “A plague on both your houses”, growled Turner in his husky bass;. He mocked his silent audience. “Men and women, what business *is* *it* of yours if the German bosses oust Nuffield and Imperial Chemicals ?

What does it matter to you what landlord charges you rent ? ” He was taking it easy, welcoming interruptions to rest his voice . . . The Labour Party platform yielded and closed late in the afternoon, by which time its audience was near four thousand; the vast crowd moved on to the two remaining platforms.

And then a strange feeling came over that audience. The two remaining platforms were vying with each other for the last word; the Communist Party speaker was willy-nilly the last remaining advocate of the war against Germany. The Government platform and the Labour Party representative had passed the torch of resistance to the Nazi menace to him; with all the vast experience of outdoor speaking at his command he strove to hold the great crowd.

The shadows lengthened, the sun dropped low in the sky, and still the rival speakers chanted their litanies, their testaments of faith.

The outskirts of the crowds moved and receded like a tide; tea at the Corner House, or ice-cream and ginger beer from the vendors thinned out the audience a little, but by nightfall, refreshed and rested, they stood there in their ranks like a vast army. By nightfall, the Communist speaker’s voice was a whisper, a shadow; it cracked and fell silent.

The whole of his audience surged across to the opposite platform, the platform of the SPGB. An audience of ten thousand stretching as far as the eye could see, silent and solemn, the soldiers and sailors and airmen of tomorrow, the wives and mothers of departed men, listening with the deepest attention, the most complete respect, and on the day of the declaration of war, to a pacifist speaker.

Like a sprinter who has been saving just that extra burst of speed for the last lap, Turner thundered out his denunciations in a climaxing bout of oratory during which he called them every kind of imbecile and willing dupe. Then the meeting was closed. A burst of applause greeted his closing remarks, and in silence the great army streamed out of the Park homewards.

The ways of democracy are many and strange, but I can recall nothing to equal this in its pure irony. ’

Though there was hostility, the scenes of 1914 were never repeated. Such demonstrations as there were against anti-war speakers took place in the first week or two of the war; there after, the Party was able to state its case with confidence. There were several reasons for this. One was that war-fever is notably a disease of non-combatants — in this war, home and ‘the front’ were not separate worlds as they had been in 1914. Another was that opposition to the war no longer appeared as an astonishing impertinence. The existence of pacifist organizations was known and accepted, and the starting of conscription before the

war had made it known that there would be conscientious objectors.

More than anything, however, there was little or no passionate enthusiasm for the war with ordinary people. Romantic conceptions of soldiering had been killed in the previous world war; the phrase ‘horrors of war’ was taken at its full value. While accepting that the war must be fought most people had the feeling of having been led into it by governments which were either cynical or incompetent. Only three or four weeks before the outbreak in 1939 I was in an East London cinema packed to watch ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’. When the German soldier proposed that princes and politicians be put in a field to have their fights out by themselves, there was a spontaneous burst of cheer­ing the words expressed what everyone was feeling. The passion and purposefulness did not come until after the Churchill government had taken over in 1940. It is worth noting that the first war novels to become widely popular, This Above All and The Last Enemy, both dealt with an individual’s doubts over whether the war was for him.

The only department of the Party’s propaganda which was hamstrung was its literature. The Defence Regulations introduced by Sir John Anderson in May 1940 were directed specifically against printed matter which persuaded its readers against support for the war:

‘If the Secretary of State is satisfied that there is, in any newspaper*,* a systematic publication of matter which is, in his opinion, calculated to foment opposition to the prosecution to a successful issue of any war in which His Majesty is engaged, he may by order apply the provisions of this regulation to that newspaper. ’

The penalties under the Regulations were seven years’ penal servitude, a fine of £500, or both. The Executive Committee, after weighing how much it meant, decided not to risk the suppression of the Socialist Standard and the penalties. The Party’s 1936 pamphlet, War and the Working Class, was withheld, no further copies being printed to replace the sold-out edition, and from June 1940 the Standard no longer printed anti-war material. Events proved the decision to have been sensible. In 1941 the Daily Worker was suppressed, and later the Daily

Mirror was warned severely about the nature of its commentaries.

The void in the Standard was filled chiefly by theoretical and historical articles. Goldstein, a brilliant young East Londoner, wrote a series reviewing the history of economic theories called ‘The Importance of Marxism’. The most prolific writer in this vein, however, was Gilbert McClatchie, who had already been contributing to the Standard for nearly thirty years. Ancient history was his passion, and he took the opportunity to write lengthily about it at this time. The subjects were all mildly related to contemporary trends and intended to describe early

stages in the evolution of modern forms. ‘The Civil Service in Ancient Rome’ was one series, and ‘War — Methods of Offence and Defence’ another. The members were not completely appreciative. ‘Bombs, mines and incendiaries falling,’ said a member during the Blitz, ‘and we’re publishing articles about catapults and battering rams.’

On the eve of the declaration of war, the Party had twenty-two branches. One was the Central Branch, the postal section of scattered members, three were in Scotland, and fifteen were in the London area, Almost all the London branches ceased to meet when the war began, and for a time it was hard to know what was going on. Many of the public buildings and centres where branches took rooms for their weekly meetings were closed, and travelling even short distances at night in blacked-out towns was difficult and dangerous.

Two dozen members turned up for the Delegate Meeting in October, 1939. To consider them as branches’ representatives would have been ludicrous, but they meant the best gathering of members’ opinion that could be obtained at the time. They made four resolutions directing the Executive about the conduct of Party affairs;

‘That the EC be granted no further power than they have;

That the funds . . . shall not be utilized for the purpose of assisting members affected by the Military Service Acts or victimization arising from the war;

That applications for membership be vouched for by two Party members; and

That the question of membership of the Party and association with ARP be left for the EC to review, and cases be dealt with on their merits. ’

The third and fourth of these touched on difficult questions. Applications for membership had to be watched carefully for two reasons. It was known that police agents joined subversive organizations and remained in them often for several years as a means for the author­ities to keep closely in touch with developments and plans, and all the more likely that the observation would be redoubled in wartime. An even more important consideration, however, was that the Party should neither be exploited by men seeking support for claims for exemption from military service nor flooded by people concerned only with the anti-war aspect of its case.

All through the war, the SPGB was more than cautious over the acceptance of new members, particularly if they were of military age. There were many conscientious objectors who knew that their chances of gaining exemption would be enhanced by membership of one or other of the organizations whose resistance to war was long-established. Besides

this, there was the feeling among pacifists that unity was strength and that they should join a party while the war was on. While the SPGB was prepared to encourage people to oppose themselves to the war, it was unwilling to take in anyone whose purpose was not the Party’s. The sponsorship by two members was not a formality; if there was any doubt, the applicant would be told to get the business of his conscientious objection over and then come back to join.

ARP involved a different kind of difficulty. There was little place in this war for condemnatory measures against members who joined the services. Conscription had begun before the outbreak of war and one age-group after another at short intervals had to register to be called-up. In 1932 the Party Conference had upheld an Executive Committee ruling that, since many workers were compelled by economic pressures to enlist in the armed forces, such employment should not prevent their becoming members of the SPGB. Despite persistent opposition by a minority, this decision was reaffirmed six or seven times by the Conferences and Delegate Meetings. When the war began it was taken for granted that members called-up under the National Service Act were not to be held to have committed an offence against the Party and, similarly, that men already serving in the forces might become members.

ARP — what later became known as ‘civil defence’ work — was considered as helping the war machine, and to that extent was not favoured. At the same time, it was obvious that war-resisters were not lining to be able to pick and choose their employment. The few members who entered ARP early in the war were told there was no objection, and the matter was resolved when entry to ARP became one of the regular conditions allotted by tribunals for exemption from military service.

There was one other difficulty in the first winter of the war that could hardly be met by any administrative decision. Where no other local meetings could be held, often a member would keep a little group together with weekly gatherings in his house. If the ordinary public was not worried by pacifists, it took thoughts of espionage more seriously. The man down the road who kept himself to himself, and now let in a few others in the dark once a week . . . Chinks in the window black- outs; were turned by imaginative gossip into signals flashed at night to reconnaissance aircraft, and the casual remarks thrown out to neighbours and shopkeepers were recalled in all their subversive significance. More than one house was visited by policemen after reports that groups of spies were assembling, and the men discussing the law of capitalist accumulation had to explain themselves.

Nevertheless, the Party slowly re-formed itself. By the autumn of

1940 nine of the London branches were operating again. Outdoor meetings resumed; they were impossible at night-time now, of course, but on Saturdays and Sundays and at lunch-times in the business and factory areas the speakers did everything they could. Only a handful were available at first — Turner, Cash, Rubin, Lestor, Goldstein and one or two others did the work of twenty. Soon others joined them, and by the summer of 1940 the platforms were in full cry once more. Even old Augustus Snellgrove, retired from headmastership now, took to the platform again. He was snapped magnificently in Hyde Park by a Press photographer; his severe, intent face, caught in a burst of oratory, appeared in Lilliput opposite the picture of a shy nude girl, with the caption ‘Susannah — and the Elder’.

Some speakers were lost, for the time or permanently. Groves was not heard of for several months, and Baritz had died not long before the war. The arrangement with Lew Davies, a travelling speaker who had become the Party’s paid representative in north-east England, was dropped. Kohn, who had spoken regularly on Sundays at Hyde Park in the ’thirties, became ill with TB and died in a sanatorium in Wales. Before his death, there was a curious incident about Kohn. He had kept contact with many people in America, and in 1941 letters from him were published in a left-wing paper there. The letters criticized the illogicality of the SPGB’s attitude towards the war; they had not been sent for publication, but were simply part of private correspondence between Kohn and the paper’s editor. Embarrassed, the SPGB Executive finally dismissed the matter as a breach of confidence by the editor, but the sense of betrayal remained. Yet another of the Party’s intellectual giants had shown himself, in the end, unsound.

12.

Taking a Stand

As it was with the nation, the Party’s doubts and schisms gave place to increasing confidence and resolve as the war went on. The expansion of meetings gave a sense of crusade, and the apparent success of propaganda work made the conviction of getting somewhere almost irresistable. The truth was that the war was a boom-time for all anti-war factions. The number of pacifists and dissidents, while small when written as a percentage of the total population, was nevertheless large enough for the minorities which represented them to be thriving ones.

People whose pacifism was ordinarily passive became active, newly conscious of affinities with one another; they attended one another’s meetings, fraternized with one another’s organizations, and bought one another’s papers. Peace News, the ILP’s New Leader, and the Socialist Standard enjoyed high circulations all through the war (though the most exciting of the anti-war papers, because it took least notice of the Defence Regulations, was the anarchists’ *W*ar Commentary).

To speak of the growth of purposefulness does not mean the Party membership did not view the war earnestly at first. The ones who took it most seriously were the dedicated, lifelong local members, on whom it imposed special obligations in their behaviour towards the world at large. In Glasgow, some of the older men refused to comply with any of the directions of authority, even those which were directed towards their own safety. For the first few weeks of the war they appeared regularly in court to be fined for not blacking-out their windows, and dropped it only because the eventual alternative would have been to spend the rest of the war in jail. And when John Higgins went, to the branch meeting carrying his gas-mask, the members promptly moved his expulsion from the Party.

It may be hard to convey how seriously most of the SPGB looked at everything, in war and peace alike. What they took most seriously, of course, was not the world but themselves. Everybody watched his own and other members’ words, because a lapse might indicate unsound thinking. In my own early days a member who, from force of the habit of calling goods ‘commodities’ under capitalism, spoke of commodities under socialism, apologized profusely. I had thought nothing of it, but

he talked of the dangers of such a slip and how one must always be on guard, and quoted Marx: ‘the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities’, to prove that he really knew. Nor was he imagining things. These lapses, or even mild jocosities in political talk, were often remembered and quoted years later, specially if their authors found disfavour with the Party. ‘I remember a word that man used fifteen years ago,’ someone would say, ‘and it proved to me that he did not understand.’

An even higher degree of earnestness was applied to written words; a continual part of the task of the editors of the Socialist Standard was to eliminate unsound terminology. When I first began writing for the Standard, the editors warned me against using irony because the members took words literally. I had mentioned the foreign villains and simpleton black men omnipresent in boys’ comics, and remarked that apparently the English-speaking nations bred the only reliable types. ‘If we published this,’ Hardy said, ‘we should get numer­ous letters accusing us of nationalism and racial prejudice.’ I found plentiful evidence afterwards that this was so. Hardy’s own favourite story was of Baritz telephoning and begging him as from a sick-bed to come at once: ‘Hardy, I’m dying ! ’ Alarmed, Hardy rushed to Baritz at once — and found Moses in the best of health. ‘What I want,’ he said, ‘is to speak to you about a few words in your article this month . . .’

The Glasgow members, however, were the most exigent of all. Scots dourness, no doubt; but principally it was the political climate of Glasgow in general. London speakers going there were invariably struck by an almost Victorian atmosphere — indeed, the Londoners were thought too smart and superficial. Nowhere else could a speaker end his peroration by announcing as the great challenge of the age the increasing ratio of constant to variable capital, and sit down to a round of applause. Every left-wing organization and school of thought from the last hundred years seemed to survive in Glasgow, and the questions to speakers were often breath-taking: ‘Mister speaker, you’ll be acquainted with the fact that on page thirty-six of The Eighteenth Brumaire Marx says . . .’

Few southern members could match this austerity, but they took the war seriously enough. They held themselves to be the only genuine war-resisters: the others, the pacifists and anarchists and humanitarians, were not reckoned because they did not understand the cause of war and its solution. At the beginning one or two — Waite, in parti­cular — took an interest in the work of the Central Board for Conscientious Objectors, a voluntary organization which existed to watch

legislation and trends and see as far as possible that pacifists were not victimized. There is not much doubt that but for the CBCO the SPGB members would have found the path of war-resistance much rougher.

All the same, it was an organization in which confusionists and reformers served, and at its first wartime Conference the Party rejected any idea of sympathy with it:

‘The Conference holds that affiliation to the CBCO, and SPGB representation on a joint board along with representatives of political parties to whom we are opposed and other non-socialist organizations, isdirectly in conflict with the hostility clause of the Declaration of Principles; and therefore opposes such action. ’

There were not many members of military age who did not make their stand as conscientious objectors. A small number found it imposs­ible for family reasons to do so, but these men usually resigned — although the Party did not require it — before they were called-up. The pressures were by no means imaginary. At the least, a man might find his wife continually hostile to what he was doing, and at worst he could find his job gone and the Labour Exchange refusing to pay him benefit because he declined work which was directly concerned with the war. In ordinary times several members of the Party used false names to cover their activities, and there was justification for this. One man who held a responsible job with a great public corporation had to choose between Party and job when the titled chairman of the company announced that he would have no ‘bloody Bolshy’ in charge of one of his departments.

The treatment of conscientious objectors by the government in wartime was surprisingly reasonable. After registering, a man was sent a form on which to state the grounds of his objection, and a few weeks later would have to attend one of the tribunals to be questioned on it.

In rare cases complete exemption was given from military service, but generally the outcome was either a conditional exemption or a rejection of the plea. The next step was to appeal, and the appellate tribunal would virtually consider the case over again. What was usually hoped for in an appeal was the varying of a complete rejection by the local tribunal to conditional exemption — the conditions being employment for the rest of the war in a hospital, ARP or the fire service, or on the land.

If both attempts failed, the applicant would be sent notice to report for his medical examination for the army. When he failed to go, another notice was sent; and after the third, he was served with a sum­mons from the local magistrates’ court. From the court he was taken to a military centre and asked if he were willing to be medically exam­ined, and if he refused he was taken back to court and his case was dealt with. The offence was not conscientious objection as such, but

the refusal to submit to the medical examination, and the usual out­come was six months’ imprisonment.

Most conscientious objectors belonged to organizations whose tenets became well-known to the tribunals. Besides the SPGB there were the Quakers, the Christadelphians, the Brethren, Jehovah’s Witnesses,

ILP members, anarchists, and a number of Methodists. The unattached objectors were usually either ‘Bible students’, individuals who reasoned similarly to the fundamentalist religious groups, or humanitarians whose pacifism had come through reading the popular anti-war thinkers of the time. At the hearings an applicant could have friends to address the tribunal in his support, and could even if he wished have his case presented by another person.

Thus not only the organizations but their members became familiar. The permitting of supporting speakers, indeed the whole system of organized advice and assistance to conscientious objectors, was often criticized as a means of encouraging men to dodge the column. It is understandable that people should have felt this, but there could have been very few who saw the inconveniences and the degree of hero­ism involved in conscientious objection as offering any great advantage over military service; most dodgers sought to fail in their medical examination or to obtain employment in one of the reserved occupations.

And on the other hand there were many objectors whose sincerity could not do justice to itself in words, particularly against the sophisticated arguments advanced by the tribunals; it would have been grossly unfair if they had been denied help.

Most of the Party members sought, and obtained, Turner to speak for them at the tribunals. As persuasive in this kind of advocacy as he was when addressing hundreds from the platform, Turner won conditional exemptions for innumerable members. The technique usually — in London, at least — was for a member to establish his adhesion to the SPGB’s case, which was then argued by Turner; and the tribunal in turn would try continually to find some flaw in the applicant’s fidelity to Turner’s argument. The members were advised to conduct themselves courteously and most of them did so, despite the alluring fact that the tribunals were not courts of law and could not indict for contempt. However, there were always those who were incapable of even a show of humility, and when speakers known for fiery eloquence appeared they rarely disappointed the members who crowded the public seats to listen to the fun.

The members usually stated their objection as a humanitarian one. The tribunals did not recognize political objections to taking part in war. The only valid cases were those which rejected fighting, regardless

of contingency, for religious, ethical or humanitarian reasons. A political objection was by definition a matter of expediency, and the local tribunals did not allow exemption to men who would be willing to fight in other circumstances.23 The most strongly fundamental of the religious anti-war sects, Jehovah’s Witnesses, were always refused exemption because they admitted willingness to fight in a holy war. Communists, when they were opposing the war, were never able to present a case in the tribunals. Usually they accepted military service without argument, though in 1942 a leading member of the Young Communist League created something of a fashion when he was discharged from the army after announcing that he would use his service to spread Communist propaganda.

This rule of the tribunals provided a difficulty for the SPGB members. Despite the rejection of the case put forward by Jacomb and Reynolds, the sixth clause of the Declaration of Principles still stood as a clear statement that the Party aimed at using the armed forces as an agent of emancipation’. The tribunals saw this, of course; they asked each member who came before them about it, and about the word hostile’. But what was under enquiry was the individual’s conscience, not the Party’s. Almost unfailingly, the members replied that whatever the Principles appeared to say they would not fight, even for socialism.

The only member who answered otherwise was a man named Goldberg – he was struck off the register of conscientious objectors and was killed fighting in the Italian campaign.

The Party had already been half-convinced by the eve-of-war controversy that it had always been pacifist, and that its sixth Principle merely lent itself to false interpretation. Many of the members were telling the truth, insofar as they regarded this as being part of their feel­ing towards society, when they said they would not take up arms to win socialism. The others, however, were put in a difficulty by the tribunals’ demand for complete pacifism. They would have rejected it as a socialist standpoint; now, their chances depended on it. Reynolds, in one of his last contributions to the Standard, hinted artfully that the difficulty was of the members’ own making. Ostensibly he was quoting a tribunal chairman who had said he would recognize political objections equally with others, and Reynolds hoped that view would spread. His implica­tion was that a stand on expediency — ‘an attitude’ — could still be made, and was altogether more desirable than the ‘policy’ principle.

A certain number went to prison and some went on the run, but the Party’s success-rate at the tribunals was high. There were many applicants for membership, and it insistently made itself difficult to join. Despite the efforts it grew, however, and its recruitment had more

to do with wartime than anything else. If a generalization is sought, the joiners were probably in the main people who normally would ‘sym­pathize’ and no more, but in the excitement of the time felt that they must do something. By the end of the war there were about eight hundred members, twice as many as the previous thirty-five years had gained. And when the membership at last began to fall after 1950; it was quickly observed that those who were dropping out were almost entirely from the wartime influx.

The common employment of a large number of the members in the war was work on the land. By far the majority of conscientious objectors who gained exemption had it on this condition, and it was generally understood that men who had served prison sentences for resisting call-up, though technically they were still liable, would not be troubled again if they took up one of the conditional occupations. Thus, every county round London had its gangs of conscientious objectors, organized under the War Agricultural Committee and directed from one farm to another for periods to do unskilled jobs — usually, hedging and ditching.

The gangs comprised every kind of war-resister. As well as the SPGB members there were anarchists, hot-gospel men, devotees of pacifist philosophers, and men evading the military machine for no reasons but their own. Intellectually, land work was a joy. As little work as possible was done; groups sat all day in barns and ditches discussing life and ideas. Towards the end of the war an essay competition on ‘Why I do not want my conditions to end’, set by Peace News, was won by a man who described the liberal education he had had among ‘bishops without gaiters, and politicians without corrupting power’. Squatting under hedges, the SPGB men expounded Marx while the anarchists countered with Bakunin and Proudhon, and both fought endless wordy battles with the religionists and philosophers.

The pleasant academic quality of this life was tempered by the fact that land work was appallingly badly paid. The average man’s wage was not much more than three pounds a week, and men with family commitments had great hardship from being conscientious objectors. The hours were too long, and the work too often at some distance from home, to allow much scope for making sideline incomes and virtually the only possibility of higher pay was to become a ganger. Though it meant an extra fifteen shillings a week, very few of the political object­ors were willing; in almost everyone’s eyes it meant a departure from group loyalty. Those who did become gangers usually hoped to be recognized as benevolent rulers, but the co-operation on which the hope relied was never given. ‘I wanted to make it easy for the chaps,’ one

man said after the war, ‘but when I became ganger they brought alarm clocks and just slept all day.’

The conscientious objectors did a great deal, in fact, towards improving the abysmal conditions of agricultural work. They packed into the branches of the farm-workers’ union. Men who had learned to talk and marshal facts in the SPGB and other organizations took office and led uncompromising campaigns for improvement, and they were un-affected by the near-feudal fear of landowners and farmers that inhibited underpaid men in rural districts. The farmers had never been so disrespectfully treated, and all attempts to single out ringleaders were met by relentless solidarity in the gangs. Any group of men sitting talking would announce, when challenged, that they were a duly-constituted union meeting; and when the farmer asked the subject of the meeting, it was always to complain — of him.

The paramount effect of the SPGB’s new profession of pacifism was not apparent at this time. Beatrice Webb noted in her diary the effect that opposition to the 1914-18 war had on the ILP: ‘It has dropped about 10,000 of its working-class membership and added as many hundreds of middle-class adherents.’ The fact is that pacifism was, and remains, almost entirely a middle-class attitude. Probably the only working-class pacifists were the poor emotion-starved creatures in the fanatical religious sects, stuffed with apocalyptic texts and calls for repentance. Ethical or political pacifism was a sophisticated, more or less detached attitude. A man who said (and this remained the classic, square-of-the-hypotenuse problem posed by the tribunals) that he would reason with a German who wanted to murder his wife had already reasoned himself far beyond normal reactions and judgements.

The Party’s anti-war case still rested on working-class interests: this was the theme of every propagandist speech. However, it had allowed inroads to be made by pacifism of the personal, ‘enlightened’ kind which accepts no justification for war. That is not to denigrate pacifism, but to draw attention to something which would have far-reaching conseq­uences. The Speakers’ Test at the time included a special question — what would be the harm in letting people join who agreed with the Party’s opposition to war ? The answer was the risk of a weight of mem­bers who had no time for working-class politics in other respects. That was more than true, but the rot was already there; in a few years’ time the SPGB would be asked to abandon class militancy and adopt humanitarianism instead.

The Party’s activity reached fresh heights as the war moved on and talk began of the brave new world to come. Debates, which had disappear­ed since the beginning of the war, came back in spate as the great projects

for post-war reconstruction arose. The case for Federal Union, first popularized by a sixpenny Penguin Special book in 1939, now gained impetus from the anticipation of some world authority to try once more to keep the peace among nations. In 1940 Hardy had debated with Mrs Barbara (later Baroness) Wootton on whether socialists should support the Federal Union movement. The debate was published as a pamphlet, and reads as a quite remarkable display by two highly-skilled dialecticians.

If Federal Union was only a hope, the social security scheme first announced as ‘the Beveridge Plan’ in 1942 was a fact. This was to bear more strongly on the post-war future of the socialist movement than anything else. Except for the war periods, mass unemployment hail been chronic all through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the perpetual million of unemployed were spoken of as ‘the industrial reserve army’, and the indictment of capitalism started from the in­security from which the working class was never free. The ideal of social ] reformers had been, if the abolition of unemployment was beyond human ingenuity, to provide a decent living standard for everyone in the face of social or personal misfortune. In the nineteen-thirties a number of Labour Party propagandists had been advocating that everybody should be given the necessities of life, free.

The development of such schemes had been presaged by E. R. A. Seligman in 1921. Describing the insecurity of wage-earners as ‘that very great evil’, he went on to say:

‘[It is] entirely susceptible of being eradicated by the same principle that we have applied to accidents, that we have applied to many other evils, namely, the Insurance principle . . . We have already today in the unemployment insurance law of England the faint beginn­ings of a movement which I am convinced will spread within the next three or four decades like wildfire throughout the world. ’

What is important is that Seligman was not speaking with any pretension to socialism. On the contrary, he was proposing, in a public debate in New York, ‘that capitalism has more to offer to the workers of the United States than has socialism’.24

The SPGB attacked the social security plan, of course. Besides the debates and meetings in which it was taken up as a fresh theme for attack on capitalism, the Party produced two pamphlets, Beveridge Re- , organizes Poverty and Family Allowances: A Socialist Analysis. These condemned the scheme on two counts. First and foremost, it was a sop offered to the working class, a new attempt to allay discontent. Besides this, however, it was claimed to be an attempt to depress wages. The Family Allowances pamphlet pointed out that, while adult wages had to assume that every worker was supporting a family of average size, the Iasi

census analysis had shown that over sixty per cent of the male population over 20 were bachelors or were married without dependent children:

‘Here then from the employer’s point of view is an anomaly that should be adjusted. He is paying what is to him a fair market price for a commodity and in at least 60 cases out of a hundred being cheated on the scales ! ’

The family allowance plan, in this light, was a means to push down basic wages to the level of unmarried men’s subsistence and see that the 'family’ wage was paid only where families in fact existed.

This had indeed been urged by Beveridge, and earlier by Eleanor Rathbone, as part of the scheme for family allowances. The SPGB cited them, and statements like Professor Seligman’s, to prove that what Labour Party reformers were seeking, so far from having any socialist content, was good capitalistic practice. On the same basis it disvalued the post-war Welfare State as a whole. No-one shared its view: even the most radical of the left have regarded the Welfare State as a special bounty somehow got from capitalism — I heard an anarchist speaker in 1966 except it from his damnations of the system and the state. Today, economists and trade unionists alike would acknowledge the realism of the SPGB’s view.

Besides the plans for the post-war world, there were new things all the time demanding the Socialist Party’s attention. There was the splash made, while its sponsor’s funds lasted, by Common Wealth, a new party which won an election and broke the wartime truce between the parties in Parliament, and presented an idealized programme of state control. The Communist Party demanded attention, too. With Russia on Britain’s side from 1942 onwards, the lesson had to be taught over again that the Soviet Union was not a socialist utopia at all. Baroness Wootton, in her debate with the Party, did not understand the applause with which the members greeted Hardy’s statement that there were no socialist countries in the world:

'The supreme achievement of the Socialist Party of Great Britain . . . which is greeted with applause, is that there are not, and never have been, any Socialist countries in the world ! I think that there is something wrong there. It seems to me a very odd statement to applaud, unless it was applauded by those who do not want to see any Socialist countries in the world, which I do not think is possible in this audience. ’

In the matter of Russia the SPGB deserves every credit for its consistency. The rapid face-changes of the press and the politicians in Britain may have been expedient, but they were appalling — and appear all the more so after over thirty years — in their cynicism. Between 1939,

when the Russo-German pact was signed, and 1941 Russia was shown as a land of illiterate, bestial peasants ruled by evil and terror. After the German invasion which made Russia Britain’s ally, the image changed literally overnight to one of wise, benevolent government and an admir­able culture — to be altered again as soon as the war with Germany had ended.

The Communists would almost never debate with the SPGB, and they showed exceptional vindictiveness in the rare formal contacts made, In 1943, when the Party had booked a hall in Soho Square for its annual Conference, the Daily Worker announced that a fascist organization was conferring at that place on those dates, and hinted strongly that loyal Britons could do worse than smash up the proceedings. When approa­ches were made for a debate in West Ham, the local Communist secret­ary replied in quite astonishing terms:

‘The Communist Party has NO dealings with murderers, liars, renegades or assassins.

The SPGB, which associates itself with followers of Trotsky, the friend of Hess, has always followed a policy which would mean disaster for the British working class. They have consistently poured vile slanders on Joseph Stalin and the Communist Party, told filthy lies about the Red Army, the Soviet people and its leaders, gloated over the assassinat­ion of Kirov and other Soviet leaders, applauded the wrecking activities of Trotskyite saboteurs in the Soviet Union, and are in short agents of Fascism in Great Britain.

The CPGB refuses with disgust to deal with such renegades. We treat them as vipers, to be destroyed. ’

The figures which dominated the Party as it grew through the war were those of its speakers. Groves, supercilious and merciless, was the supreme debater. He flayed his opponents, ridiculing and insulting them in his high-pitched clanging voice. He prepared assiduously for each debate, tracing the opponent’s political career to its beginning and confronting him with every immature speech, every self-contradiction. When he opposed F. A. Ridley in 1943 he read out Ridley’s own con­demnations of the ILP, the party he was now representing, from years and years before. ‘He says “fifty per cent Trotskyists, fifty per cent milk- and-water reformists”. I agree with his statement,’ Groves screeched. ‘Which half does he belong to ? ’ It was typical of the SPGB’s debating technique. The members loved this kind of thing and flocked to hear it. Groves, interestingly, had no illusion about what he was doing. ‘There is practically no propaganda value in a debate,’ he said once. ‘It’s a night out for the members, watching an opponent being kicked.’

The halls were, nevertheless, packed for these meetings. Even

more people thronged Hyde Park on Sundays to listen to the SPGB

speakers there. It was accepted that only the Party’s best took the platform in Hyde Park. There was Sammy Cash, untidy, lean and beaky, holding the sympathy as well as the attention of his audiences. There was Harry Young, who might have made a great reputation as a music-hall artiste: stout and red-faced, he had a remarkable gift of humour and could entertain audiences endlessly (I have been his co-speaker at an indoor meeting and sat, like the audience, helpless with laughter).

Above everyone else, however, there was Turner. Every speaker save place to him, or had to. His stature as an orator was now at its full height. All through the summer he spoke to two thousand people every Sunday in Hyde Park. He had brought every rhetorical technique to his fingertips. The old complaint that he was unoriginal (in the ’thirties it was murmured that what Kohn said Sunday mornings was said again by Turner on Sunday evenings) had gone: now he was all originality, and other speakers strove to imitate him. The crowds went to hear not the Party but Turner; to thousands, the SPGB was ‘Tony Turner’s Party’.

It would be hard to analyze and find what made him the orator he was. The superb, rasping voice, the extraordinary vitality and confidence, the acquired skills were only the instruments. Other speakers had equipment which, piece by piece, was hardly inferior. Like Groves, he had an incredible memory for facts, instances and quotations; like Wilmott and Young, he produced verbal responses with astonishing agility; like Anderson and the great religious preachers, he spoke with terrifying conviction and passion. Possibly his was simply an ideal combination of all the attributes, but there remains something undefinable which their aggregate would not include. For Turner communicated with his hearers, thrust his personality against theirs. Though not many were led to the Party by it, few of them did not feel a personal impact even from the back of the crowd.

There were resentments, of course, in the Party. Some speakers were jealous, and other members feared a growth of ‘the cult of the individual’. When someone wrote a piece for the Western Socialist describing Turner’s eclat, the Executive Committee reminded their American comrades sharply that it was not in the Party’s tradition to praise individuals. Though the majority of the members worshipped Turner, most of them took care not to talk as if they did; someone was bound to speak of ‘Turneritis’, and make the word sound as if it really was a disabling disease. Nor did Turner himself repudiate the worship or disengage from the hostility. When Groves had debated against an advocate of Family Allowances, Turner openly approached the opposing speaker, Mrs Eva Hubback, and advised her how she might have disconcerted Groves.

There was to be a time of reckoning for all this, when the accumulated resentments were to make fuel for a great fire for the heretic Turner. In the meanwhile, the Party drew abundant vitality from him. The excitement of his indoor meetings was tremendous. When he drew up his shoulders and began the denouncement of an unfortunate antagonist, the members became wild with delight — old men stood up shouting: ‘Give it to him, Tony ! Give him what for ! ’ His opponents began with an almost insuperable handicap. One remembers a sweltering summer night and a crammed town hall in Edmonton. Evan Durbin, in braces and soaked shirt, his face streaming sweat, floundering through his defence of Labour; Turner sitting grinning insolently at him, eating cherries and spitting stones over the platform, and finally leaping to his feet to pour out damnation of Durbin, Labour and the capitalist system.

The war brought its tragedies as well as its satisfactions to the Party. The Treasurer for many years, sturdy Jack Butler, was killed by a bomb at his home — sitting in the air raid shelter, with a pencil behind his ear and a Party accounts book in front of him. A woman member, Eva Torf Judd, was killed in an air raid too. She was writing an autobiographical novel about an East End childhood. Several years later I saw the incomplete manuscript in the house of old Mrs Hollingshead, to whom it had somehow passed: it would have been a fine, sensitive novel.

And the offices in Great Dover Street were demolished by a bomb. It happened in April 1941, near the end of the London blitz. No one was in the house, but most of the Party’s belongings were lost. The most important records, the minute-books going back to 1904, had gone to a member’s house outside London, but practically everything else was destroyed. The Party found a temporary home in two rooms at 33 Gloucester Place. Then in April 1943 a lease was taken of the Electrical Trades Union’s old offices in Rugby Chambers, Holborn. Thorn was a big room for the Executive meetings and the classes, another big room for the library and the arguments, two little offices, a basement, and a Victorian lavatory in the corridor that was shared with the inhabitants of the flats above.

These were to be the SPGB’s headquarters for eight years. When it left them, the golden age would have ended and an era of doubts begun

13

The nineteen-thirties resumed in July 1945, when the third Labour Government was elected and took office with a majority of 180 seats. This was the climax of the political and economic movements which had arisen from the great depression, now given special character and strength by the resolve that post-war Britain should be indeed a new world severed from the miseries of the past.

The Labour programme was a sweeping one. Set forth in a thin pamphlet called Let Us Face the Future, it proposed the implementation and extension of the wartime scheme for social security, and the nationalization of the major industries and public undertakings. It promised to bring every resource to bear on the gigantic housing and rebuilding problem, ‘to get the houses as it was necessary to get the guns and planes’.

It undertook to bring the anarchy of capitalist production under control by economic planning which would lift the levels of both production and consumption and supervise investments and prices. ‘The Labour Party is a Socialist Party, and proud of it’, the manifesto said.

The SPGB kept up with the spirit of the time. The election campaign interrupted by the war was resumed. East Ham North had to be abandoned because there were no longer the necessary ten members resident in the constituency, but Paddington North presented itself. Groves’s candidature was transferred there, and all the Party’s energy was thrown into the few weeks preceding the election. The effort was a fantastic one. Members poured into Paddington (it was rumoured that some took lodgings there to get on the electoral roll — not so much for the trivial advantage to be gained by the Party as to have the thrill of voting for the world’s first socialist candidate). The front page of the *So*cialist Standard was headed A SHADOW FALLS ACROSS THE CAPITALIST WORLD, and the article ended:

‘Yes, the tide is beginning to turn at last. The workers are on the scent of the source of their slavery. Let the ruling class tremble at this portent of the flood which will sweep privilege and class rule from the earth for ever. ’

A hundred thousand printed addresses were sent out from the election office in Paddington. Leaflets on special subjects were

distributed. Seventeen hundred posters were displayed all over the constituency. George Orwell came to the office and made enquiries; a member buttonholed Churchill and told him about the Party. There was remarkable interest in everything the Party did — hundreds at a time stood listening to the street-corner speakers, more than a thousand in one place on the eve of the poll. Most exciting of all were the two meetings held in the huge Metropolitan Theatre. Each time, more than two thousand people filled the place: Ambridge, who had served on the Party’s Parliamentary Committee from its inception in 1929, described it afterwards as ‘a thrill which the writer of these words will never forgot, thousands of men and women to hear the Socialist case’.25

The emphasis was entirely on the socialist case. The publication of photographs of Groves was prohibited. So was any phrase like ‘Vote for Groves’. (Two years afterwards, when an elderly woman member told the Conference that she had seen ‘Vote for Groves’ on a placard, Ambridge stood shaking with rage and shouting across the hall: ‘A lie ! That’s a bloody lie !’) Voters were urged at every meeting and in every piece of literature not to support the Party candidate unless their understanding of the socialist case was complete. Nevertheless, Groves commanded attention for himself. In one of the major parties he would have been a certain winner; the socialist case prevented his being elected, and confined his abilities to yelling at the other candidates: ‘I haven’t kissed any snotty-nosed babies ! ’

472 people voted for the SPGB candidate. The total cost of the campaign was nine hundred pounds: the votes had cost nearly two pounds each. The Party was anything but dismayed, however. It was a first attempt, and the thing was bound to grow. What gave every en­couragement was that North Paddington had 472 convinced socialists.

If this could happen after only a few weeks’ work in a constituency, it meant that there were perhaps almost a quarter of a million socialist votes ready to be won in Britain. Nothing but the paucity of the Party’s resources stood in the way of the realization of this force making for the new society; the aim now was to put more and more candidates into the field.

There was every anticipation that the Labour bubble would soon burst. The SPGB did not believe that any problem would be solved, or that anything would be in any way different, in the post-war world; the laws of capitalism would re-assert themselves almost immediately. One of the election leaflets predicted the way things would go. Living stand­ards were to fall:

‘The Labour Party claims that higher wages is the solution . . . International agreement to reduce wages is a much more likely

eventuality.’

Mass unemployment would return:

‘At all times, employers are scheming to get the same output with fewer workers, by introducing new machinery and more efficient methods . . . Capitalism cannot exist without unemployment, without the exploitation of the workers and without trade rivalry with foreign capitalists. ’

There would be fresh depressions, as dreadful as those of the inter-war years:

‘At the time Mr Clynes made his statement, unemployment was 500,000. By the middle of 1921, less than two years later, it was over ‘2, 000,000. Then it declined but remained well over 1,000,000 until the crisis of 1931 when it jumped to record levels. This will happen again if the a working class continues to vote for the candidates of the capitalist system.’

The statement by J. R. Clynes, in November 1919, had claimed that because of the shortage of peace-time goods full employment was assured ‘for at least a dozen years’. What it indicated for 1945, in the SPGB’s view, was the vanity of any hope that capitalism could do without unemployment or avoid crises. By this token, the Labour Govern­ment was doomed to failure. Turner prophesied to his Hyde Park multitude that the government would fall in two years. Hardy, in the Standard, was equally confident: ‘Socialists do not need to wait to prophesy failure . . . the workers will discover that Labour administrators cannot make capitalism function in any but the accepted way.’

The SPGB’s propaganda, in fact, became increasingly pre-occupied with discrediting the Labour Party. Two pamphlets were pub­lished, Nationalization or Socialism and Is Labour Government the Way to Socialism ? Figures were produced to show that the nationalization in 'public ownership’ of industries did not take away their capitalistic character. The shareholders remained members of the capitalist class, drawing their interest from the government stock which had been issued to them as ‘compensation’. In some cases — for example, the railways — the buying-out was even advantageous to the owners: without suffering loss of income, they were relieved by the state of enormous capital expenditures which had been in prospect. Nationalization was simply an attempt to raise the profit-making efficiency of industries by removing their self-conflicts, and no benefit at all was offered to the working class.

These arguments were, as they had been intended to be, unanswerable by the majority of the Labour Party supporters. The term public ownership’ had conveyed to the unsophisticated Labour rank-

and-file that capitalism was deposed, that the coal-mines, the railways and the other nationalized concerns were somehow to be everyone’s property (the SPGB seized with glee such instances as that of the man who stole eighteen penceworth of coal and was told by the magistrate that all coal now belonged to the King). And the Labour members of Parliament who debated with the Party were hardly any less confused: insisting that they were socialists who believed in common ownership, they had no reply to the Party’s demonstration that nationalization strengthened private ownership.

During the Labour Government years there was more than a little Conservative interest in the SPGB’s assertion that the Labour Party were not socialists at all. ‘Candidus’, in the Daily Graphic, took note of it and referred to the Party with approval more than once:

‘The only Socialists who have been consistent. . . in their attitude to genuine Socialism — are the members of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, commonly known as the SPGB. The “official” Socialists are terrible snobs. They have a deep respect for size, so they sneer at the SPGB as the “Small Party of Good Boys”. But, dialectically, the SPGB possess all the aces. ’

One journalist came hurrying to learn about the Party from a strange little incident at one of the Prime Minister’s press conferences. He had asked a question which, by coincidence, implied the Party’s argument against the Labour Party. Attlee had swung round angrily and said: ‘I know you — SPGB *!*’ The journalist had never heard of the SPGB before, but he could not wait to discover why Attlee had been so sensitive. Not all the Labour leaders took the Party quite so seriously, however. In 1946 Groves debated with Sir Waldron Smithers, and in the retiring-room before it began the old Conservative confided that Herbert Morrison had said to him: ‘Be careful of that bunch, Sir Waldron — they’re not real socialists, you know.’ Sir Waldron had taken the words to heart, but the Party members for once appreciated irony.

The difficulty which the Party felt most strongly was that of obtaining publicity for itself. Its numbers continued to rise. By 1948 there were a thousand members (one recalls Joyce Millen pushing out of the EC room at Rugby Chambers, shouting deliriously into the General Office: ‘We’ve got a thousand ! We’ve got a thousand !’), and in another year eleven hundred was reached. The fact remained that the majority of people in Britain had scarcely heard of the SPGB. At the end of the war the Conference had agreed that the principal task con­fronting the Party was to make itself known nationally, but this was more easily said than done.

The election campaign was disappointing in this respect. If there

Was, as many members believed, a conspiracy of silence about the Party, it had to be broken by a national election: the national press and the broadcasting authorities would have willy-nilly to make the Party widely known. In fact, very little about the SPGB was published.

Attention was focussed almost exclusively on the struggle between the big parties. What appeared in the London editions of national papers was little more than scraps, concerned mainly with the curiosity of Groves’s candidature: the man who asked people not to vote for him, the excellence of Turner’s dress (newly prosperous since the war, he had entered a phase of elegance). The sole utterance by the BBC was in the announcement of the results. They first described Groves as an Independent candidate: the members who rushed to telephone boxes were proud that they had caused the Party to be specially mentioned when the correction was made, but it was all very disappointing.

One attempt which was continually being made to obtain publicity was the flow of letters the members sent to papers. Local newspapers in most places had no objection to persistent advocacy of an unpopular cause and some members went on for years. Often they promoted controversies by replying to their own letters; a man who had written one week to state the Party’s anti-Labour case was likely to write the week after as ‘Indignant Labourite’ and perhaps ‘Christian Socialist’ too,

hotly disputing it and so initiating several weeks’ exposition of the Party Principles. The national newspapers rarely published members’ letters, however. Most members attributed this to the conspiracy; what is at least as likely in many cases is that the letters were overlong tracts designed to gain publicity rather than contribute to matters of the day.

I am not sure if this explained the failure of attempts to gain broadcasting facilities. Before the war Moses Baritz had indicated that there was some possibility, and from time to time approaches were made to the BBC. There is no doubt that the exclusion of minorities from the system of party political broadcasts was, and remains, grossly unfair (and, incidentally, highly questionable from the point of view of the Representation of the People Act). Nevertheless, the SPGB had always the opportunity of submitting scripts. I attended their preparation on two or three occasions, and they were so heavy and unimaginative (to my mind) as to invite rejection. The failures were taken as evidence that the Party was banned by the BBC on capitalist orders: ‘They dare not let us broadcast,’ a member said, ‘because what we have to say to the working class is such dynamite.’ The only mention obtained was when in 1959 Honor Balfour, reviewing the candidatures in the London County

Council elections, broadcast a brief but wholly favourable account of the SPGB.

However, pithier and livelier scripts have been rejected just the same, and observation indicates that virtually the only chance a political minority in this country has of broadcasting is as a curiosity: probably among — vide Orwell — ‘every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker’, etc. to be found. I would guess the reason to be partly lack of ordinary newsworthiness, but partly also the existence of a strong-enough anti-‘extremist’ lobby. Individual members made broadcasts, of course. Apart from Baritz, in the early nineteen-sixties a long interview with Ted Kersley, called ‘The Art Trade Runner’, was praised and repeated as a radio masterpiece; and Bill Waters gave talks on London.

If the struggle for national recognition was slow, there were more stimulating signs in the growth of communications from abroad. The Party had had a ‘Foreign Secretary’ for some time, with relatively little to do beyond keeping in touch with the companion parties. The title was changed, for obvious reasons, to ‘Overseas Secretary’, and after the war the volume of work in this department grew enormously. Literature from foreign left-wing organizations and all kinds of enquiries flooded in to the Party’s offices. The Overseas Secretary (from 1947 it was Waters) had a team of correspondents and translators working for him, and here again was an impression of a new awakening to the socialist message.

Much of the overseas correspondence came from people in the Commonwealth countries which were now beginning their fight for independence. In very many cases they were concerned not with socialism but with gaining political stature through the education in economic theory the Party offered; several of the native administrators who have risen to power in the world’s new nations were among the SPGB’s regular correspondents and enquirers. At least once, the performance was exposed. An enthusiast in Malaya followed his enquiries by describing his foundation of a scientific-socialist group which had every prospect of bearing strongly on political life there. Delighted, the SPGB Executive gave every encouragement, and sent gifts of books to help the growth of socialist understanding in Malaya. A seaman member took the opportunity to visit these new comrades — and at once wrote to tell Waters the truth. The group was virtually a fiction, its ‘founder’ an ambitious labour leader to whom the SPGB’s tuition was more than useful.

Similarly, several of the European correspondents were men with little or no intention of allying themselves with the SPGB. A number of the German social-democratic leaders were in touch for years to take in Marxist theory, just as a former generation of Labour leaders

in Britain had received their grounding in the SDF. Others were simply habitual letter-writers looking for arguments just as the SPGB members did; there was a man in Austria who wrote interminably about his conviction that world affairs were manipulated by mysterious financiers.

Ironically, the SPGB encouraged these correspondents, presumably because they wrote as individuals with an interest in the Party, but rejected all approaches by organizations which hoped to establish common ground with it. In 1947 the Spartacus Group of Holland organized a conference in Brussels of revolutionary parties. The conference, the organizers said, ‘had but one aim, and that was to establish initial contact between all the spread-out revolutionary parties, to gather together their various ideas about the present situation and on the working-class struggle for emancipation’. The small parties from France, Belgium, Holland and Switzerland which comprised the conference were shown by preliminary documents to be so close to the SPGB in doctrine and spirit that it ought, one thinks, to have been overjoyed by the news and the invitation.

Instead, the Executive Committee called a meeting of London members to discuss the matter. There were several members who saw the conference as a fresh ray of light. The organizations concerned were anti-Communist; they condemned the anarchists for supporting the Spanish war, they excluded everyone who had supported the world war, and they prognosticated doom and disaster in the post-war world. All intentions towards them vanished in doubt, however. Hardy recalled the Party’s early experience of a European conference and described International trade-union conferences as he had known them. The Initiators of this conference were not plain-minded socialists looking for a way out of chaos, he said, but hardened politicos. Thus in the end the Party agreed that it had nothing to declare but its hostility to the European revolutionaries.

It was, of course, precisely with those who seemed nearest to it that the SPGB quarrelled most strongly. One sensed, at the use of ‘socialist’ and ‘revolutionary’ from an unknown source, the hackles rise and the search for the catch which undoubtedly would be there. In forty-odd years the Party had learned to suspect not only claims of accord but any proposal for accelerating or easing the socialist process.

‘A job done quickly is a bad job,’ said one member, ‘Evolution must by definition take place slowly,’ said another. Did one sense also in these voices the feeling that socialism was, like the end of the Golden Road In Samarkand, ‘always a little further’ ?

The only centre of Party contact in Europe to which no doubt attached was in Vienna. Here, an elderly man named Rudolf Frank kept

a tiny spark alive. He had discovered what he called ‘the SPGB university’ in Britain before the 1914-18 war; ever since, he had laboured to spread the socialist message. With astonishing bravery, he had carried on all through the Nazi occupation, keeping a little stock of English pamphlets and duplicated leaflets under his bed and distributing them whenever opportunities arose; for several years, he might have been sent to a concentration camp at any time. He sent regular letters to the Overseas Secretary and the Party Conferences, detailing the ‘confusionism’ and ‘trickery’ (Fitzgerald had been his friend) of the Austrian parties. And in the parliamentary elections he composed lengthy statements of the revolutionary position for his little group of associates to write on their ballot papers. One has nothing but admiration to feel for these few old men standing in the polling-booths writing microscopically for half an-hour at a time to show that, Nazi terror or democratic government, capitalism was all the same to them.26

The Labour Government in Britain did not fall in two years, and the depression did not come. Nevertheless, the SPGB continued to ride high. The meetings were prolific, the membership bigger than it had ever been. The Party found money for elections, for more mass rallies at the Metropolitan, and even to employ speakers to lecture and organ­ize in the provincial cities. If there was no mass unemployment as yet, there was the obvious start to the inevitable economic troubles in the balance-of-trade crisis of 1947. The Labour Party was forced to make the workers tighten their belts, just as the Party had predicted. Govern­ment posters were displayed all over the country: WE WORK OR WANT. The Party produced similar posters and stuck them everywhere possible: WE'SOMETIMES WORK, WE ALWAYS WANT.

But there were clouds as well. In 1946 the seat at North Paddington fell vacant, and again Groves stood for the Party in the by- election. This time, his poll was not much more than half the previous number. The members produced ingenious hypotheses to explain the decline to their opponents; McClatchie, who had written ‘A Shadow Falls Across the Capitalist World’, argued in the Standard that it showed an advance in socialist understanding. The truth was only too sadly obvious, however. The 472 convinced socialists had not existed; half or more had been momentary sympathizers, affable idiots prepared to try anything, perhaps even old people unable to mark their ballot-papers properly. A section of the Party declared itself against any further electoral attempts. Several hundred pounds, they said, given to the capitalist class with the promise of more to come — and all to confirm what the Party already knew, that the working class were not yet socialists.

The possibility of years of decline for the Party and the left- wing movement could not then have been envisaged. Who in 1946 could have imagined that unemployment and depression — iron laws of the capitalist system — were to recede for a whole generation, and that working-class living standards would become in fifteen years higher than they had ever been ? The personal circumstances of most members had changed for the better since the war, but no-one saw significance in the fact. It presaged not only social conditions in which the socialist case would struggle to find relevance, but also the disappearance of the indigent, defiant, self-taught working man who had given the Party its unique existence. The changes of attitude within the Party were largely, indeed, the unconscious recognition of social development.

New and unattractive individual attitudes appeared. The Party had traditionally maintained that the non-political conduct of its members was none of its business. In earlier years this had referred simply to the shifts and illegalities which were part of the struggle to keep heads above water. Now it became a problematic principle in the face of a section who claimed, implicitly or explicitly, that the working class who believed in the capitalist system were fair game. At a time when membership and activity were high, it provided a shameful and worrying note for many of the Party. Twenty years later an anarchist paper, stung by an attack in the Socialist Standard, recalled the SPGB having petty criminals and fraudsters and a couple who ran a call-girl agency in its milks. Younger members were astonished and disbelieving; but it had been only too true.

Whatever the members did, the Executive was without ground or mandate for taking action. The common sentiment was Hardy’s: ‘Why can’t these damned people get out of the Party ? ’ After the spectacular trial and Sunday-paper ‘confessions’ of the Langtrys — the call-girl agents — Mark Langtry resigned, but his wife remained a member and, immediately after the case, sat as a delegate to the annual Conference. It was, of course, an intensely difficult situation. To create a facility whereby the Executive or the Party could judge people unworthy of membership would have been impossible. It would be unfair to convey that there were not members who thought the unworthiness palpable. Many did. I sat beside Ambridge at the tellers’ table when Joyce Langtry was at the Conference, and he said with loathing: ‘The cow ! Sitting here among decent working people ! ’

But their feeling did not rule the Party. In 1944 a branch asked the Conference to consider:

‘That the private conduct of a member can be of serious injury In the Party, and if in a particular instance the EC is reasonably satisfied that it is, the EC shall be at liberty to conduct an investigation. ’

The resolution was lost by a decisive majority, however. And when a member applied to re-join after lapsing while he served a sentence for burglary, there was a faction in his branch that would have rejected him because his conviction was for burgling poor working-class houses. They were over-ruled; the sole condition of membership was socialist knowledge.

No doubt several factors contributed to this state of affairs. What it signified in its Party context, however, was a loss in working-class identifications. Partly, of course, it was that changing times had brought a different type of member; the founders and their like were passing away. However, the real identification had failed earlier, in the acceptance of pacifism as a basis for opposition to the war. I do not mean that pacifism itself is a delinquent attitude. But the attempted hybrid of if with class interests meant having a foot in no camp, and thence to the absence of a sense of obligations in dealings with fellow-men.

The truly disreputable thing in members’ eyes was to have served in the Armed Forces. Even though the rules had acknowledged the power of conscription, and the decision remained that servicemen were eligible for membership, the prejudice was strong. In 1948 a serving airman applied to join my own branch; he answered every question on socialism admirably, but the members judged that his knowledge was not established, and the motion to enrol him was lost. In 1950, when the Executive named Bill Waters as one of the two Party candidates for the General Election, the West Ham branch which covered the constituency were adamant that they would not have him. The argument covered every phase of suitability, but the true reason was known to everyone: Water, had not only accepted his military service, but had become a sergeant as well.

There was, indeed, a special antagonism to Waters arising from a remarkable incident during the war. To show that the Party ruling on military service was no dead letter, the EC invited him to be chairman at the Easter Conference during his leave. But not even the Executive Committee expected Waters to come in uniform, looking — he was a magnificently-built, crag-like man — every inch a sergeant. A military chairman at a war-resisters’ conference ! The heart of the members’ hostility to conscripts was touched on here. As the situation presented itself to them, it was they, the conscientious objectors, who submitted to the hardships, and the called-up men who took the easy way.

If the nominal argument over anti-working-class employment had been all the story, other occupational lines would have been drawn by the prejudice against servicemen. But policemen were not barred from membership — a railway policeman named Thurlow sat on the

Executive and the Parliamentary Committee for years; another member was a bailiff; and in pre-war days there was even a very old parson who went to lectures sometimes at Great Dover Street and said it was only his age that stopped him joining. As has already been indicated, the Party refused to take up questions over what its members did. The real complaint against Waters and the others who had gone into the forces was, paradoxically, that they had dodged the column and had an easy war while others slept in prison and struggled on land-labourers’ pay.

Thus, ex-servicemen were expected to apologize and explain.

‘I suppose you feel ashamed of what you did ? ’ was the standard question to them, and ‘Well, I resigned before I went’, or ‘It was before I met the Party and learned better’, the standard answer. It remained a sharp point, a generation afterward. In the post-war years Wilmott was a doyen of the Party, the most sought-after of all the members after Hardy and Turner. He was to be found always surrounded by a crowd, dispensing knowledge and wit while he drew at his eternal shag cigarettes. But it was never forgotten that he had gone and joined the Air Force. In dispute, there was always someone to say ‘You helped kill members of the working class’; and when he left, it was remembered above all.

These attitudes, the expression of the SPGB members’ convictions about their relationship to society, were to be the mainsprings of controversies which pulled the Party apart when the second decade of the ’thirties had ended. In the immediacy of the post-war years, they were obscured by the excitements of meetings, debates, arguments, watching the Party grow, and waiting for the depression to come.

14**.**

Meetings Galore

I joined the Party, in one of its East London branches, at the end of the war. The night I went to join I heard Charlie Lestor lecturing on the Paris Commune of 1871, the seizure of power out of war by working men, and portending world-shaking events. ‘Now is the time for socialist to go to their books, and prepare themselves with socialist knowledge,' he said. ‘Great things are about to happen. ’

I do not think one was ingenuous in being thrilled a little. People all over Britain — all over the world — had the sensation of the imminent lifting of a curtain. As far as the SPGB was concerned, the expectancy took two forms. It was confident of being proved right in its prophecies by the reassertion in peacetime of the inexorable laws of capitalism: the anticipation permeated the Party. The other expectation, that ‘great things’ might come to pass, belonged particularly in areas like East London, where the working-class tradition and the spirit of the nineteen thirties were strongest.

The branch was a small one, its meetings attended regularly by perhaps a dozen of the thirty on the books. The other branches on this side of London were bigger and noisier, but the basic pattern of their existence was the same. On one Monday night there was a ‘business’ meeting, when the reports, letters and finances were considered; the alternate week would be given to a lecture followed by discussion. The rules of procedure were strictly observed at the business meetings, and we all had to take a turn at chairmanship. The lectures were given either by Party speakers, to whom this was part of the round almost equally with outdoor speaking, or by members of the branch who had ‘swotted' special subjects.

The branches’ rooms were almost always dingy, unattractive holes in institutional buildings, but the education offered by these fortnightly meetings was quite remarkable. In two or three years I heard lectures, most of them very well informed, on practically all the things which came within the scope of the scientific-socialist view of society. Social and economic history; the structure and finance of industry; wage and price theory, value theory, the rate of profit and the commodity equations. Besides these, there were lectures expounding subjects through

the eyes of the materialist conception of history. Old Moses Baritz had spoken thus on music for many years, and delightful little Ted Kersley the image of Mr Punch — gave lectures on the social history of art.

It could not be called a liberal education. The teachings were assertive, the interpretations of history and economic activity often over- mechanistic. Nevertheless, the learning was — largely because it challenged all of one’s previous learning — stimulating to a high degree. So were the people. The arrogance of the Party in those halcyon years was magnificent, the certainty with which it faced the world tremendous; it was impossible not to be infected by them. Everyone outside the Party was either a fool or a knave. They wrote up Professor Joad in the Standard, and a gentle reader complained of the epithets — ‘ignoramus’, ‘fathead’, etc; the EC informed him that they thought the words precise and correct.

They made Bernard Shaw lose his temper. Clifford Allen, an SPGB member, wrote in the Western Socialist criticizing an article by Shaw and sent a copy to him. Shaw responded affably: ‘I am much Indebted to Mr Allen for having, by his article in your issue of May, called my attention to the Western Socialist.’ Allen then, in a second article, examined Shaw’s political claims and history in detail. Shaw replied furiously: ‘The packet of your issues since May with which you threaten me has not yet arrived. I hope it never may . . . My time — of which there is so little left — is too precious to be wasted on Mr Allen . . .’27

The young members were like peacocks strutting, displaying socialist knowledge like dazzling feathers (‘You read “Dialectics of Nature” ? Read the bloody footnotes at least, before you argue with me .’). And the old ones were like prophets at judgement before the huge audiences which came to their meetings.

There was Charlie Lestor, in his mid-seventies now, thundering doom on the system and on Russia most of all; when he spoke of the Russian workers he raised his hand aloft and cried ‘I would rather be a dog ! ’ — his great voice crashed through the hall. Groves, strident, shrill and crushing; Turner, playing on every emotion to force the truth into his audiences’ hearts. There was Sammy Cash, starting new and hopeless businesses, lecturing on sexual life in the socialist future. There were the Kerr brothers from West Ham (one was blown down from the rackety high platform in Hyde Park in a gale and fractured his skull, another had in his arm broken in a fight after a meeting); leather-tongued, rumbustious Harry Young; a small tribe of patriarch speakers and hopefuls, to whom the image in the last of the Party Principles was almost literal — the work­ing class mustering under a banner, millions in an infinite Hyde Park

acclaiming the truth the orators spoke.

These were the leading lights, of course. The most curious thing about the ordinary members who came to my branch and the other branches was that hardly any of them seemed to have been brought to the Party by its organized efforts. One wondered whether the meetings, the papers and everything else were for conversion or confirmation, whether they were agents of new growth or served chiefly to provide dramatic satisfaction for the members themselves. Most members had come through personal contact, friendship and even family connection

Thus, Lestor’s two daughters Joan and Lily were members. There were several men from a cycle-racing club to which Lew Jones, the branch secretary, belonged. One man was the son of a former member; another had joined on account of a friend, who in turn had been brought in by a couple who had converted him first to vegetarianism and then to socialism. The branch treasurer belonged to a pacifist family and had gravitated naturally to an anti-war party. One member, however, did present a startling example of self-education. I had known him as a boy, when he was a neighbourhood butt: a near-simpleton, doomed to the bottom of the class and the meanest of lives. He told me that in his late teens, unemployed, he had drifted into the public library for warmth, and been struck by the thought that he knew nothing. He earned his living as a window cleaner, and was one of the best-read men in the branch.

The Lestor girls were among the small number of women who played an active part. There were one or two women speakers — before the war Stella Jackson, and in the post-war period Joyce Millen and Lisa Bryan. They were characteristically the capable, independent-minded women found, but few and far between, in movements for emancipation. Forty years earlier they could easily have been suffragettes. Joyce Millen was a better speaker than most men. Without losing in feminity, she had the toughness and resilience that outdoor speaking demanded; after she made some appearances on the platform at Croydon a news­paper there was rapturous about this ‘raven-haired, barb-tongued beauty’.

The Party was predominantly masculine, however. The standard socialist book on women’s position was still Bebel’s Woman Past and Present, dating from the beginning of the century. While domesticity made women chattel-slaves, the women members who repudiated con­vention were disapproved by the majority of the Party. A girl brought up in an SPGB household said, concerning Lisa Bryan: ‘Oh, she’s one of those emancipated women.’ (Lisa herself asked me once what I thought the members’ attitude to the women speakers was, and agreed heartily when I said it was close to what Dr. Johnson’s had been, two hundred years before: ‘Sir, a woman preaching is like a dog’s walking on its hind

legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.’) ‘Emancipated’, applied to women, was simply another word for ‘fast’; one woman member who swore like a trooper was detested by most of the men for it.

The free-love faction in the Party rejected marriage because it was a property institution, not from any intention towards wild bohem­ian living. The unmarried couples lived together as respectably and permanently as if they had taken the religious vows of matrimony; the discussions on the subject always revealed most of them as ready to argue that, for all the perniciousness of institutionalized marriage, man was monogamous by nature. Nevertheless, ‘without distinction of sex’ remained part of the vision of the socialist world where everything would be different. The talk and attitudes never obstructed women from working equally with men in the Party; whereas in most radical groups, even today, they are taken only as teacup and typewriter fodder.

The sole concession to ‘emancipated’ or ‘progressive’ tendencies that SPGB members made was their attachment to dietetic fads. At the time I joined, the enthusiasm for natural diet was at its height. One found members gathering in vegetarian restaurants; the price of discussion - to philistines like myself, at any rate — was a mountain of grated carrot, or a mock steak made of nuts. The most astounding assertions were made, on both the personal and the social levels, about food and health. I remember a questioner at a lecture asking something about cancer in the ancient world, and the speaker pronouncing that it could not have existed then. ‘The ancients didn’t eat white bread,’ he said, and the cause of cancer is white bread, you see.’

True, not all the Party were food reformers. Bill Read, an East London speaker who kept a workmen’s eating house, used to bellow that vegetarianism was a capitalist plot to lower labour costs by making the working class feed on grass. Harry Young gave lectures with a similar theme, entitled ‘Diet Reform: A Pernicious Fraud’. But the diet and health zealots were unshakable. One member who was a nature-cure practitioner wrote an article for the Socialist Standard — it appeared in December 1947 — called ‘Medical Economics’, which approached asserting that doctors artfully promoted disease in order to make small fortunes curing it. Mercifully, the craze died out in the years of ‘political apathy’ in the late nineteen-fifties.

Three months after joining, I became a Party speaker. The test was accomplished in a corner of the library room at Rugby Chambers, Hardy, Rubin and Turner questioned me for nearly two hours; no indication of success or failure, of the answer being right or wrong, was given until the end. The Propaganda Committee which supervised

meetings was told I had passed. I was placed on the Speakers’ List, and every month I received duplicated sheets allotting speakers to outdoor stations for the next four weeks, with my name ringed for as many meetings as I had asked to do.

There were others besides me. Almost every young man in the Party was eager to speak — thirty or forty new speakers must have been created in two years. A number of them fell quickly by the wayside: the test in knowledge was passed, but they lacked the temperamental attributes to become speakers. Nevertheless, there remained a zestful body of young platform men, each longing to discover in himself another Turner. We did not know it, but we were sharing in the last opportunity of wholesale experience in public speaking. In ten years the days of the street platform would have ended and popular demagogy would be dead.

In 1946, however, there were meetings galore as there had been in the ’thirties, and experience was there to be gained. Indeed, experience was the only teacher available. The Party gave practically no encourage­ment — when a man had become a speaker he must sink or swim on his own. The harshness of the process was impressed on me only the second time I spoke. I had gone to Beresford Square, a big open market street at Woolwich; there you spoke with trams clanging behind you, and competed with buskers and stallholders as well as other meetings. With sixty or seventy people round, I pitched my voice (my only earlier experience of declamation had been as an amateur actor) to reach just the edge of the crowd and not beyond: a good technique, I thought. When I got down one of the elder members was waiting. In a sepulchral voice he said: ‘For Christ’s sake don’t speak in public any more. You’ve got no voice.’

I learned and survived. At some places a speaker had to shout: the little court at Richmond, for instance, where there were crowds of day- trippers to listen if one’s voice could be heard above the din from an amusement arcade overhead. Sometimes organized opposition had to be overcome, from Communists or Conservatives or from hooligan factions to whom a soap-box orator was fair game. But, for all the traditional association of meetings with hecklers, audiences generally were tolerant and helpful; if the speaker was interesting them, they themselves would shut up interrupters.

A meeting was always started by a ‘chairman’, a member of the local branch whose function was to save the speaker the work of gathering an audience. Some were young members practising to become speakers themselves, others were already competent men who were satisfied by this weekly half-hour on the platform, and still others were simply the only ones in their branches who would do it. The best kind of chair­man was the man — charming, cantankerous Harry Berry of Kingston,

for example — who spoke vigorously but sympathetically, threw out challenges, and retired leaving the speaker with forty or fifty people whose interest had been stimulated. The worst by far was the occasional egomaniac member, eager to display himself but with nothing to say; there was one man who used to read the Party Principles in a high- pitched chant, and another who attracted people by his striking appear­ance and drove them away with boredom in five minutes.

The speaking stations were market places, parks, town squares, railway approaches, road junctions — wherever people were out in num­bers. Most of them were long-established as meeting places, and a few had the nature of special reservations. Street meetings had no legal stand­ing, however. While there was no law preventing one’s setting up a platform anywhere, there was no law establishing the right to do so either. The police supervised all meetings (they always asked for the speaker’s name and address: almost all of us said we lived at the Party head­quarters). A meeting could always be prevented or closed on the grounds of obstruction of the highway. Any battle to maintain a speaking station against encroachment — from traffic, for example — was bound to end in a speaker’s being summoned and fined for obstruction.29

Thus, on one of my provincial speaking trips I went with Jim D’Arcy to try a meeting in Liverpool. We put our platform on a comer which looked promising, and in twenty minutes had a crowd of two hundred listening. Policemen came and argued about obstruction. Finally we moved away from the high road, and were about to resume when a police officer of high rank arrived. There was to be no meeting, he said, because meetings in Liverpool led to trouble; the Catholic and Protestant factions showed themselves, and there was always a fight in the end. We assured him we should rouse no fights, but he was adamant that we were not to speak. We said he could not stop us unless an obstruction was caused. ‘Quite right’, he said. ‘And the moment so much us a dog stops near your platform, I’m nicking you for obstruction.’ We gave in.

Public speaking is the finest of stimulants to the ego. To overcome a difficult audience, to establish an atmosphere in which a crowd will listen and be moved, gives indescribable satisfaction. That is not to say that every man who stood on a platform for the Party had such satisfaction. Every aspiring speaker knew it was there, and when men dropped away it was usually because they recognized in themselves a lack of the qualities to make it come. Some, however, recognized no such thing and persisted unattractively for years, blundering and tub- thumping on in the hope that revelation would come. The Party allowed little presumption that speakers like these needed guidance. I recall

trying to advise one speaker who plainly needed a course to win friends and influence people. His eyes bulged angrily at me. ‘I state the Party case, don’t I ? Then how else can there be any criticism ? ’ he said.

Most of the speaking stations were good, simply because the bad ones were not kept up. Occasionally one struck poor places where experiments were being made — the same spot could be deserted on one night and busy on another — or where the local members had not yet admitted defeat. The most bizarre of all my speaking experiences was at a town outside London. No branch existed there, but a young man reputed to be a live-wire was trying to promote activity. The name of the town was appearing regularly on the speakers’ lists for Sunday evening meetings. I took the train there; I was met by the live-wire young man and led through the town until we reached a wide deserted plain.

We trudged across the plain, and in the middle he pitched the platform. There was not a soul in sight. The young man said he would ‘chair’.

He stood on the rostrum, I stood before him, and he harangued me as if I were a thousand people.

It did not dawn on me that no-one was going to come — no-one at all. I had seen unlikely-looking places before, and always an audience of some kind appeared from somewhere; possibly this lonely plain would become alive with evening strollers. After half an hour I offered to take the platform. I expounded socialism from half-past eight — the path of history, the economics of the capitalist system, the theory of revolution — till ten o’clock. The plain seemed as immense and lifeless as the Sahara Desert. I asked the young man if a crowd was likely now; he said no, he thought not. We walked back through the town and had some beer, and I caught my train.

I kept this strange experience to myself, wondering what had gone wrong. A few years later the Executive, alarmed by the decline in outdoor meetings, called the speakers together to hear their views. When discussion turned to the quality of some of the meeting-spots, Harry Young rose and related how he had gone to that same town and addressed an audience of one in a vast field. The initial confession made, the rest followed; half the speakers in the Party had been there, had spoken to the air, and had decided to tell nobody. It had gone on for something like two years. I have wondered continually about that young man. Was he perhaps a connoisseur, a collector of speakers for his private pleasure " Or was it we who were mad instead ?

But under normal conditions speaking provided fun and stimulation. It was conflict, the clash of ideas and personalities. After a time one became accustomed to the common objections and questions, and learned until it was almost instinctive to identify the questioner’s political

beliefs from the language he used. A speaker like Turner lived and thrived on questions and arguments, knocking down opponents like ninepins. Many speakers were persuaded by this that outdoor meetings were sustained by questions alone, and were capable of saying very little on their own account. Once I was hauled from a teashop to replace a speaker who, having been asked nothing, had exhausted his resources after twenty minutes. Partly it was due to the Party’s preoccupation with opposing everyone, but it pointed also to something deeper. Claiming In interpret the world, one must first be in touch and conversant with it; what is called communication is, too often, a one-way address.

There were strong, often bitter, rivalries among the Party speakers. Specially good meeting places tended to be dominated by one or two speakers, and there were often quarrels over them. At intervals attempts were made to break Turner’s monopoly of Hyde Park, and there were hot disputes for a time over the large mid-day meetings at Lincoln’s Inn fields. One speaker, a fiery young man named Lawler, tried to make his point by taking the stand early and refusing to come down. Members passed up notes to say that Turner and Lestor were waiting; Lawler look out pre-written answers from his pocket and tossed them back. The trouble culminated, as always, in a tumultuous row in the Executive room — Lawler raging, Turner growling, and Groves shrilling ‘Enfant terrible ! ’

Only a minority of the Party’s speakers were considered suitable for indoor meetings, which demanded coherence — without the help of questions and interruptions — and sufficient originality to hold the Interest of a captive audience. The highest test of speaking ability, however, was a debate. The choice of speakers for these, and for the major indoor meetings, was always made by the Executive itself. The care was justified, for to conduct a debate well required not only rhetoric but skilful organization of facts and arguments. It had, I always thought, many similarities to a physical fight. There was the initial probing,

testing the opponent and displaying one’s own armoury; there were false moves, designed to lure him; there was the search by both contest­ants for a fatal weakness, at which blow after blow could be aimed.

I spoke in several debates for the SPGB. I had one of the rare encounters with a Communist representative (the Communist Party insisted that they provide the chairman, who cheated outrageously with the times of speeches to try and protect his man at the end). I debated with anarchists, with Liberal and Labour speakers, churchmen and secularists, and exponents of the theories of strange sects. Each one involved weeks of preparation, carefully investigating the opponents’ case and finding the precedents and statistics relevant to it. Minority organizations

presented the greatest difficulty, chiefly because their tendency was always to more complicated intellectual arguments. Besides this, they often had excellent speakers: men like Philip Sansom the anarchist and Len Ebury of the National Secular Society were a match for anybody, though the best of all the speakers I met in debate was a Roman Catholic priest, Bernard Rickett.

The SPGB was at its best and most sensible when it took apart the assumptions of other minorities. So far as the preparation of a case was concerned, the most interesting of my debates was with the Social Credit organization. The Social Credit scheme, the brain-child of the late Major Douglas, proposed simply to remedy economic problems by governmental use of the power — which, it claimed, banks already had and used — to create credit, or purchasing ability. It claimed to have had the approval of the Macmillan Committee in the early nineteen-thirties, but a reading of the committee’s minutes showed nothing of the kind. (Hardy told me he had written to individual members of the Macmillan Committee asking if they had said or meant the things claimed by Social Credit, and received replies in the negative from all of them.)29 The case we worked out and I presented in the debate was a flat denial either that banks could create credit or that there was vast over-production which could be balanced to everyone’s advantage by giving additional consuming-power all round the community. The Social Credit speaker, a clergyman, had no answer at all.

However, these elaborately-reasoned debates did not have the thrill for Party members of the crashing attacks on the major parties which participated in government. And the representatives of the Labour and Conservative Parties were singularly defenceless against the SPGB. Politicians of note showed up poorly in contrast with the Party speaker,., and were, more often than not, deficient in facts and even in coherence, The usual question for a debate was ‘Which party should the working class support ? ’ For Labour or Conservative this was in fact a half- irrelevant question, since they were already supported satisfactorily by the working class. Had support really been an issue from the strength of the arguments in these debates, the big electorate might have been decimated time and again. As it was, the SPGB gained little from them in the war for political supremacy but, insisting on definition and re­jecting broad unscientific sentiment, rarely lost a skirmish.

The decline in public meetings began in the early nineteen- fifties. At first it was not obvious. The tendency of the Executive and the Party Conference was to blame branches for failing to maintain meeting places, or speakers for irregularity in holding meetings. The branches retorted that the stations had ceased to be what they were; several

speakers added that many of them never had been. It was true that the growth of traffic and the re-building of urban areas after the war had eliminated place after place where meetings were expected. I went with other members of my branch to a dozen spots in the area which had once figured on the speakers’ lists. Some had become traffic-congested, leaving no room for platforms and audiences; others had been bombed in the war and the new buildings had, by either structure or character, removed the possibility of holding meetings.

Gradually, however, the truth impressed itself; audiences were no longer to be obtained, outdoors or in halls. I went to Watford and debated with a Liberal candidate in front of fifty people; two weeks curlier, I was told, a Cabinet Minister had spoken to even fewer. The monthly list of speaking arrangements shrank, as once-flourishing stations were given up. Only a few places were unaffected. Hyde Park remained, but its atmosphere was increasingly that of an attraction for tourists and provincial visitors. It still had huge Sunday crowds round the platforms, but they were largely dominated by snapshot-taking holiday­makers; one’s enduring impression would be not words in someone’s memory, but photographs of a crank orator shown to friends in Indiana and Yorkshire. One Sunday, holding forth in the Hyde Park sunshine, I was taken again and again. I needed a haircut, and an American had passed round the word that a speaker here looked just like Johnny Weissmuller. Mom would love that.

The Executive appointed a special committee to enquire into what was happening. The report when it came blamed television, of course. Principally, however, it found that the Party would have to accept a situation which had arisen from, more than anything, the inexplicable absence of mass unemployment or trade depression in the ten years since the war. There was no discontent. Everybody had work, half the population had television sets, and nobody wanted to hear about the system. It could not last, but in the meantime there was nothing for the Party to do but wait.

The report was received quietly. Wilmott, sitting at the end of the Executive table, spoke with prescience of the decline of the entire labour movement; nobody wished to pursue it. The phrase ‘political apathy’ was soon to be on everyone’s lips. The nineteen-thirties had ended at last. To rub salt in the Party’s wound, there was scarcely enough willingness among the speakers to supply the few regular meeting- stations which remained. The younger speakers were talking about a loss of confidence, and several of them were asking openly if the Party had been right after all.

The controversies had begun.

15**.**

Class or Human Interests

About 1951, Tony Turner began giving lectures on ‘What Socialism Will Be Like’. The Party was tolerantly amused. Whenever people asked for some positive statement describing the new society which should emerge from the destruction of the capitalist system, the reply was always that no answer could be given. The attractions of socialism were vested in entirely negative features: it would not, because its foundation was the exclusion of private property, have the problems of capitalism — no wars, no depressions, no poverty or riches, no material conflict from which unhappiness was possible.

The only definite characteristic to which the Party would commit itself was that there would be no money under socialism. Sale and mean of exchange were the marks of private ownership and gain. In the new society, everyone would have unrestricted free access to everything which was produced. The simple proof that socialism did not exist in Russia was not the hierarchy of incomes there but the fact that money incomes existed at all. Waters, writing in the Socialist Standard, instanced the military quartermaster as a prototype for the moneyless society:

‘The storeman does not charge for the blankets that he issues, neither does the medical officer charge for his services. If the service mini was asked to pay rent for his billet, barrack room or bunk he would regard the idea as preposterous. Despite this “non-payment" arrange­ment, or because of it, the whole military organization is effective . . .

It should not be difficult to visualize a society where such procedures prevailed. ’

Every SPGB member had his answer to the obvious objection that everything known about human nature militated against such a project. Selfishness and acquisitiveness ? These existed precisely where access was limited: no-one, for example, was greedy over water from the household tap. Indolence, where nobody was coerced to work by the need for food ? All work would be a pleasure when it produced personal benefit instead of private profit. Competitiveness and power-seeking again were reflexes from authoritarian societies which denied opportunity and frustrated self-expression. In these regards the SPGB’s arguments as to the nature of the new society and the mainsprings of human

conduct were identical with those of the anarchists; the quarrel with anarchists was over how things were, and the action to take, in this society.

An attempt had been made during the war to initiate propaganda based on the desirability of the new society for its own sake. A little hook called Money Must Go, written and published by ‘Philoren’, described through a series of dialogues the ‘Moneyless World Common­wealth’ of the future. The authors actually were two non-members named Phillips and Renson. They had projects for further publications of the same kind, but the partnership was broken by the sudden death of Phillips. They remained outside the Party because they felt that it would be unsympathetic to their plans — Phillips particularly, a gentle and studious man, would have found the buffetings hard to bear — and they were right. The Executive Committee considered that Money Must Go was unscientific, and refused to permit its sale through Party channels (though at least one branch admired it sufficiently to sell it illicitly in preference to most of the Party’s pamphlets).

Occasionally writers in the Standard tried to envisage the socialist future. It had always to be made clear, however, that these efforts were speculative; the Party insisted that it would provide no ‘recipes for future cookshops’. The Mint would become a curiosity where money- tokens had been made — a touch of William Morris, this; or the services of bank clerks, accountants, insurance men, and the buildings which were the palaces and outposts of financial empires, would become available to share the useful tasks of production. All of this was vague and unspecific, however. Morris was still venerated, but the tendency now was to assume that the machinery Morris had hated would be essential to the carefree life of socialist society. Machines were there, as Oscar Wilde had said, to relieve men of all the unpleasant jobs:

‘Machinery must work for us in coal mines, and do all sanitary services, and be the stoker of steamers, and clean the streets, and run messages on wet days, and do anything that is tedious or distressing. ’30

Turner’s prediction of socialism began as simple rejection of all the uglinesses of life. G. M. Trevelyan remarks in his English Social History that ‘ugliness remains a quality of the modern city’; Turner’s case was that, for this reason alone, the makers of the new society would do away with the modern city. If socialism meant ferro-concrete highways and fast cars, he did not want it. There could be no mass- production of anything, not only because it was associated with stand- utilized ugliness, but also because it negated personal freedom. The conveyor belt was a dictator, imposing an alien rhythm of work which in its turn compelled conformities in social life. Towns would give place

to village communities in which people would weave their own clothes, build their own dwellings and furniture, and grow or make their own food.

In this society there must be complete equality: coercion, even by opinion, was contrary to the spirit of socialism. Each man would pursue whatever occupations he wished, and would be able to turn his hand to anything: pottery, poetry, medicine, farming, building, chair- making, would be part of the weekly round for everyone. The differ­ences in aptitude which might appear as obstacles to this were merely the outcome of conditioning under capitalism — in fact, anybody could do anything. Turner illustrated his point by explaining how, given the same environment, any man could play the violin like Yehudi Menuhin or chess like Capablanca; any man could, indeed, master Einstein’s mathematics in a few days if he were condemned to death and this made the condition of a reprieve.

All this was seen, for a time at least, as harmless caprice. Members often had hobby-horses, and these quirks of private theory and outlook were part of what made many of them ‘characters’. Turner continued to press and develop his argument, however, and found an ally in McClatchie. The picture of the bucolic future was still more strongly painted, and the Party became wide-eyed at the assertions made to overcome objections. When, for example, it was pointed out that ordinary house-lighting depended on the whole apparatus of modern power-production, McClatchie rose to praise the qualities of oil- and rush-lights. To another question, of the production of books under socialism, both replied in the vein that literature was either escapist rubbish or ephemeral information; few books would be needed and few produced. Transport would be limited to horse-vehicles on land, sailing-boats by river and sea; telephones, wireless, printing presses, all the means of mechanical communication would go and only human contact remain.

In May 1952, Turner sent a circular letter to all the Party’s branches and the Executive Committee. In it, he claimed that the founders of the SPGB had been distracted from describing and prepar­ing for the socialist future by the need to prove their theory of capital­ism against opponents. The days of this continual theoretical argument, were over now. Instead of urging the overthrow of capitalism by the working class, what the Party should do now was spread the idea of the new society — and, moreover, present it as the solution of the problems not of the working class but of all humanity. It was at this point that the Party woke up. Turner’s proposition was not irrelevant fancy at all; what underlay it was a rejection of the concept of inexorable class struggle on which the SPGB case was founded.

‘What Socialism Will Be Like’ had been largely a drawn-out opening gambit. Turner did not abandon it; he continued to insist that modern civilization was inimical to the human personality, and that a sane society would start with the abolition of mass production. The main burden of his arguments, however, was increasingly an attack on the SPGB’s central claim that it represented the interests of the working class. ‘A socialist party does not appeal to any class or group as such’, he asserted. ‘It appeals to mankind, not to capitalists, nor to wage-workers, nor to nations, nor races, nor families, nor income groups.’ The sole force for changing society was that of ideas, and these in turn depended on institutional changes within the capitalist system.

Suddenly, thus, the Party found itself immersed in the most passionate controversy of its existence. As it approached its fiftieth year, the man whose oratory had dominated its public life for nearly half that time insisted that the Principles were wrong, that class had become irrelevant, that the coming of the new society involved not an historic mission but the spread of humanistic thinking. McClatchie dropped his support. His bond with the SPGB as it had always been — he had joined in 1911 — was too strong for him to follow Turner into what was plainly a wholesale rebuttal of its tenets. Others came forward to form a strong enough faction behind Turner, however, to make the Party aware that this was more than merely another heresy. There were Sammy Cash, Joan Lestor, and several of the younger speakers and writers. Two of the London branches, Paddington and Fulham, became identified with Turner’s cause, and virtually every branch had its group of critics of the Principles.

At the same time, Frank Evans began his re-assessment of the Party. In 1952 the Conference, yielding to demands for some facility for theoretical discussion, had brought into being Forum, a monthly paper intended for circulation among the members only. The opening issue had the first of a series of articles by Evans called ‘The Nature of the Socialist Revolution’. As with Turner, the Party saw little to trouble it at first (despite a warning by Waite, one of Forum’s editors, that Evans was offering a threat without precedent to the Party). Evans’s language was more than a little obscure, depending heavily on metaphor and allusion, and the case he stated appeared at the outset to be abstruse and speculative. As the series went on, however, its meaning emerged as a complete dissension from everything the SPGB stood for.

What Evans was setting forth was a gradualism reasoned from Marx’s own analysis of the capitalist system.31 The Party’s theory of class struggle and cataclysmic revolution were, he claimed, only the ‘Communist afterbirth’ of the socialist movement. The real dynamic of

society was production itself; a new world was already being brought into being by the ‘proliferation of artefacts’ created by the capitalist system. Evans had no time for postulations of a future utopia simply because they accepted the Party’s assumption of a sudden break-through to the rosy dawn: ‘A purely logical description of future society is no improvement on a pathological description of the present one.’ He reiterated continually the transformations which were taking place while the Party insisted that capitalism could not alter:

‘Our social vision is too narrowly blinkered between exploitation and misery to see the increasingly humane relations of everyday life as counterpart of the increasing mass of use-values and its concomitant relatively more equal diffusion of them. ’

And, repeatedly, he struck at the Party’s most tender spots. It played ‘a charade of St. George and the Dragon called Clause Eight and Class Struggle’; its intellectual strength, the wiping-the-floor with debating opponents, was ‘kingship of a puddle’. He touched waspishly on the psychology of some sections of the Party:

‘Because we stay outside society, in opposition to it, we provide an asylum for the political delinquent, for chips on shoulders, for the Communist who wants a better cosh, for the renegade Christian who threatens hell-fire in increasing misery and imminent destruction. ’

The Party was hardly to be expected to like this. It had problems posed by the way the world had gone; now Evans and Turner were saying these were because the Principles were wrong. Many members recalled that acceptance of the Principles was the condition of joining, and was presumably therefore also the condition of remaining in, the Party. For three years Forum was full of bitter controversy, with a point of exasperation continually in sight. Time and again the Execu­tive was urged to expel the ‘non-socialists’ in the Party. A special meeting of members at the Holborn Hall made a demand for the Execu­tive to ‘call upon comrade Turner to put in writing his objections to the Declaration of Principles, and the EC consider whether it comes within Rule 33’.

The Executive, however, was confronted with difficulties. Turner was too experienced in Party procedures to invoke any of the technical grounds on which he might have been expelled. He and the others did not wish to leave the Party; their aim was to persuade it to change its course. They supported no opponent body, nor did they publicly discredit the Party. A few years earlier, in 1948, a branch sought to expel one of its members for having unacceptable opinions, and the Party Conference had ruled that the holding of views was not an offence indictable by anyone.

The Executive itself was divided. The members who thought it important to discuss and evaluate the new ideas insisted that there were to be no arbitrary executions in the meanwhile, and they were influential enough for others to follow their opinion. Some were hesitant to start a purge, however necessary it appeared, which might cripple the Party; it was hard to imagine that Turner could ever be replaced, and the loss of other able members would perhaps be more than could easily be with-stood. But the major difficulty was the extent to which the Party had already accommodated these positions it could not accept. Turner’s ‘human interests’ were linked with the rejection of force for any purpose at all, the pacifist ethic of ends and means that transcended class. Members had come in since 1939 believing this, or something like it, was the Party’s case; others were not certain where they stood.

That is not to say the dissidents were a united body. Evans’s argument was basically a different matter which might have remained a private theoretical view but for the appearance of Forum. There were, inevitably, a few who enjoyed controversy for its own sake and some who, without admitting partisanship, argued for ‘democracy’: the right to expression without limit, even if the aim were to destroy others’ rights. However, the passion and duration of the disputes drew these factions together. Feeling themselves maltreated by the Party, they looked for common ground.

The controversies were further aggravated by two other factors.

During the war one of the ’thirties members, Harold Walsby, had formed an organization to transcend the Party. The Social Science Association, as it was called, was an attempt to draw the best brains from the SPGB and form an haut monde of left-wing intellect. Walsby disagreed with the Party for its ‘mass-rationality’ assumption and its inattention to the dialectical laws. If the Hegelian principle of the interpenetration of opposites meant anything, it was that a new society grew within the old instead of being inaugurated by a sudden cataclysmic act. All history demonstrated this — and contradicted also the Party’s assertion that the working class in near-entirety could be brought to place the logic of its interests above everything else.

Walsby’s theory, which he expounded in his book The Domain of Ideologies, was a simple one closely resembling Comte’s scala intellectus: the quality of beliefs and the numbers of their adherents could be expressed in the phrase ‘the higher the fewer’. Walsby represented political outlooks as layers in a pyramid. At the bottom, and so widest-spread, was Conservatism — crass, appealing to large numbers precisely through its lack of any intellectual quality. Above it came Liberal and Labour reformism, making some demands on thought and

accordingly restricted to a narrower area for support. And at the top were the minorities, particularly the SPGB, supported by mere handfuls because their arguments could be pursued only with mental effort.

The Social Science Association aimed at standing on the pyramid’s apex. What was needed, Walsby thought, was for the select group at the top to realize that followings were obtained not by reasoning but by the grossest appeals to the herd. Chakotin’s Rape of the Masses, a book which described the Nazis’ techniques of mass propa­ganda, indicated the way it should be done: rehearsed ritual, meaningless slogans, assemblies in which hysteria was carefully provoked. An attempt was made to translate this insight into practice. The SSA hired a hall in South London. The meeting was to be a highly theatrical one, rising to a hypnotic climax with a spotlight on a figure standing in white robes before the huge audience which would be there. The event, when it took place, was not up to expectations, though some blamed the weather. Only a few people came: the masses did not know that they had escaped a rape that night.

Nevertheless, Walsby had been successful in attracting several members from the Party, and for a few years he led a strange, obsessive guerrilla warfare against it. At intervals he produced pamphlets with titles like SPGB — Utopian or Scientific ?; and in 1950 he joined the Party’s postal branch and wrote articles for the Standard under the name ‘H. W. S. Bee’. As the controversies began, he made known that he would place members of his little organization in the Party to disrupt from within while he sniped from outside. There were perhaps four or five whose connection with Walsby was known, but proof was never possible because the SSA had no formal membership; a member of the Party, however suspect, could no more be charged with mere associa­tions than he could with dangerous thoughts. Without doubt, the little group added fuel to the fires burning in the Party. Dissidents were egged-on, fresh avenues of discontent were opened, and everything done that was possible to weaken the members’ morale.

The other factor was the intensity of the reaction to Turner himself. ‘Turneritis’ dissolved in splenetic anger. The bulk of members felt deserted and deceived: the man they had idolized had let them down. In others, however, — most characteristically, the speakers and members near the centre of the Party — the accumulated resentments of years now found a motive. How often the phrase ‘Tony Turner’s Party’ had rankled ! how often, too, speakers at indoor meetings had smarted when questioners required that they be answered by Mr. Turner, please. For the first time in fifteen years it was possible to exclude Turner’s name from the lists for debates and indoor meetings, on the righteous grounds that a renegade could not be relied upon.

The controversies reached their height in 1954, the year of the Party's fiftieth anniversary. A special jubilee edition of the Socialist Standard was to be produced; a grand meeting was proposed, to be held in St. Pancras Town Hall in June, as near the date of the Party’s found­ation as possible. Turner was left out of both. At the meeting three veteran members, McClatchie, Kersley and Lake, were to speak of the Party’s early years; for the main speakers, from a full list the Executive chose Wilmott and Coster. Conscious of the deliberate slight, Turner asked the EC why he had been passed over. Ironically, only Coster and Wilmott held his brief: both acknowledged him as a better speaker, both desired that he should have the platform on this occasion. But the rest of the Executive was either silent or adamant: they no longer recog­nized his right to represent the Party.

There were a few more months before the Party made up its mind. The arguments continued. One recalls sitting up till three in the morning discussing social motivation with Turner; Saturday-night debates between Wilmott and Turner in the Party Office, members crowding the room and sitting on the staircase; walking home after Executive meetings which had raged on until midnight, trains and buses gone. The heat and acrimony were tremendous. Verbal inhibitions did not exist. Some dissident members, indeed, complained that they were abused as opponents had never been. The answer to them was that to argue with opponents was the Party’s work, and arguing with members an obstruction to it.

The titles alone of many of the Forum articles indicate the anger of the disputants. ‘Castrated Socialism’ (an epithet for the ‘human interests’ case); ‘The Sentimental Anarchists’ (Turner, of course, and his associates); ‘Damn the Capitalists (No Soothing Syrup)’ — the extreme suspicion of anyone who rejected the class struggle; ‘Revision­ism and Renegades in the SPGB’; many more like them. Under the heading ‘Turner — or Principles’, Harry Young made a savage personal attack on Turner:

‘Unable to be an ordinary member joining with other men and women as comrades in a common effort in a Party: determined, even if it means becoming the Party clown and getting expelled, to occupy the centre of the stage at all costs, he has posed as the universal authority on everything, laying down the law for everybody else on subjects, the names of which he can hardly spell... A self-confessed illiterate (“I can’t write”) he has not hesitated to tell Party writers what to write . . . Like most people who abandon principles, he has become mentally bankrupt. ’

The dilemma remained, however. Turner and his supporters

argued their right to remain within the Party and try to get it on new paths, and the rest of the Party fumed and raged. Finally the Executive took a step to break the deadlock. As 1954 ended, it put a question in referendum form to every member of the Party:

‘Shall members of the Party who do not accept its Object and Declaration of Principles be called upon to resign and, if they refuse to do so, their membership be terminated ?’

The proposal was bold and ruthless, but its manner was skulking. Members who might not have dared against Turner’s oratory, or knew no answer to Evans’s logic, were enabled in privacy to cast a vote which expressed all their frustration: no identification, no question, no argument would follow.

The question was answered with an unmistakable affirmative. The decision was made. In future, there must be an obligation of acceptance: the Party would never again allow a member to try to change its fundamentals. The 1955 Conference carried severely-worded resolutions amplifying and underlining the decision. The one which was most clearly directed at Turner ran:

‘This Conference holds that any member who no longer accepts the Object and Declaration of Principles should resign from the Party. This does not apply to a member who, whilst accepting the Object and Declaration of Principles, wishes to discuss interpretation, rephrasing or alterations that are not fundamental. A member who advocates the abandonment of the Object or the Declaration of Principles or the Class Struggle basis or the capture of political power, in fact puts himself outside the Socialist Party. ’

All that remained was the ‘mopping-up’. Only two members were actually forced to leave by the application of the referendum decision, John Rowan and S.R. Parker. Frank Evans was asked for his resignation. He wrote a letter full of charm and sincerity to the Execu­tive Committee, offering to lock his disagreement away if he might remain a member (his father too had been in the Party since the early days); if the EC insisted he leave, he ended, ‘it was a nice Party, and thanks for having me’. Disarmed, the EC left him alone. A small number of other members, perhaps ten in all — Joan Lestor32 and Cash were among them — resigned stating that they no longer accepted the SPGB.

Turner was charged, as a separate matter, with having campaign­ed among members for the abolition of the Declaration of Principles. His appearance and defence at the Conference were the last dramatic episode of his twenty-five years in the SPGB. Conway Hall and its galleries were crowded with members and visitors; other Hyde Park orators sat listening, their presence possibly doing him the reverence

which the Party now refused him. The charge in fact was not sustained – badly worded and clumsily presented, it fell. Turner knew that noth­ing had been altered, however, and he wrote his resignation when the Conference was over.

The final indication of Turner’s incorrigibility, in the Party’s eyes, was given in his defence of himself before the Conference. He was willing, he said, for his membership’s sake and the socialist movement’s good, to fall into line — but for one thing. The Party’s sixth Principle still stood for armed force as part of the means to establishing socialism. This, he would never accept. As soon as the words were spoken, every member in the hall knew there would be a fresh indictment.

The Party took up the point after he had left and made its position clear. A statement by the Executive Committee, published in the Socialist Standard, said:

‘Should a violent minority attempt to destroy Socialism they would have to be forcibly dealt with . . . no violent minority could be allowed to obstruct the will of the majority. ’ this was what members had denied, all through the war. From the controversies of 1939, Turner’s pacifism had been accepted without ''summing its political implications. It meant the placing of ‘human interests’ above the interests of class; and, in the end, rejecting the latter altogether. Now the Party had to recall that class was what it stood for, and choose between it and another way of life.

One wheel had turned full circle; there was another symbol besides. Turner’s departure was a line drawn at the end of the mass- orators’ age. Had he remained, there would have been no more vast crowds to stand before platforms and to pack halls. A short film of his last speech in Conway Hall unconsciously marked the symbolism and made it more poignant. The film was silent, its action all semi-comic jerks. Watching it was like seeing a performance in melodrama from the early cinema years; one knew the actor to have been great, in an era that had now gone.

For the Party, nevertheless, there was to remain a feeling of being under siege.

16.

Dark Prophecies and Dark Days

If these were difficult years, more were to come. From 1955 to 1965 the Party struggled: not now with opponents or renegades, but with diminishing returns in a world where old beliefs disintegrated and there was no desire for anything to take their place. The problem was to be not securing a hearing in some clamour, but the silence. If adjust­ments might have been made, the three years’ controversy had taken away the possibility. The SPGB emerged from its conflict convinced as never before that it must not only hold to its Principles, but resist the suggestion that anything was or could be different. Indeed, it had not done with controversy; but the one which was to arise next came from a member’s conviction that the key to progress was the prognostication of greater terrors to come from the capitalist system.

Meanwhile, it had lost members. From the peak of 1,100 reached in 1949 the number had fallen to the six hundreds by the end of 1955. The people who had flocked in during the war and its aftermath quickly dropped away. Besides the relatively small number who resigned in frank disagreement, many more left in the years of content ion. The great majority were ‘lapsed’ — written off for unpaid subscriptions — which meant, in effect, that all contact had been lost. It was often claimed that they were driven out by despair at the havoc the dissidents caused (the dissidents having, of course, an alternative version of their own). The likelihood for very many is that they had joined in a flush of wartime and post-war enthusiasm, and it simply had not lasted, But there must have been many, too, who could not reconcile the beliefs they had professed with what was happening in the nineteen- fifties.

For — and this underlay in a large measure the search for new images of socialism — the world since the war had not turned out as the Party had said it would. It had not turned out as anybody thought. Not only had the great depression not come and full employment been maintained, but the lives of the mass people had been in many ways remarkably altered. Real wages had risen steadily, supplemented throughout industry as a whole by regular overtime and bonus earnings, there were more people employed than ever before, and every other household was brought the income of not one person but two.

The commonplace sights of the poverty-ridden years before 1939 had vanished. A whole new generation had never seen a dole queue, could not imagine demoralized men sitting playing cards on town pavements. But, more significantly still, the half-starved and ragged children who were the most common and most potent symbols of dereliction had gone. Was it really true that, not twenty years before, one had seen children without shoes, children misshapen by rickets, eight-year-olds grotesque in voluminous cut-down adult clothes, in one’s own town ? The streets, the rows of little grey-brick terrace houses honeycombing every city and suburb, had taken on different appear­ances. Hardly anywhere was there the nakedness of utter destitution — uncurtained windows and unshaded lights helplessly exposing unfurn­ished rooms with people in them; instead, there were hints of the suburban and ‘contemporary’ everywhere.

But it was not just the disappearance of the awfulness of poverty. What gave the greatest sense of change, of a departure from all that was taken for granted in the past, was the diffusion of former luxuries. By the middle nineteen-fifties not only television sets but electric washing-machines, refrigerators, radiograms and cars were virtually part of working-class life. The working man’s home had become, for the first time since the Industrial Revolution, a pleasant place. Before the war, carpets and decent furniture belonged only to people with jobs, and good ones at that. (I recall in 1938 an appalling, crowded junk-shop in Bethnal Green, with the legend on the window: ‘You Find the Girl, We’ll Supply the Home’.)

Evans had argued that the new living standards were breaking clown social inequalities. In fact, the apparent inroads caused only a re-alignment and new definitions of superior and inferior groupings, but in the consumer boom of the ’fifties it looked as if barriers were being broken down. In the past a visit to a theatre or a meal in a restaurant bad been a rare treat: hundreds of thousands had never experienced cither in their lives. Now, such things were increasingly commonplace. Holidays, too: the holiday camps, the cheap tours abroad, were encroachments on a domain which had belonged almost exclusively to the well-to-do.

Some idea of the change can be gained from copies of socialist papers from bygone years, in their commentaries on the privileges of the rich. For instance, in 1913 F. C. Watts had written a front-pager for the Socialist Standard on the road-traffic problem: ‘The Pace That Kills’.

The article was an indictment of motor-cars, and it viewed them simply as the latest style in gilded carriages for the wealthy to use without regard for the safety of social inferiors:

‘Besides being the capitalist’s instrument of profit, the motor is now his chief toy — or at least it runs his “blonde” or his “brune” very close for pride of place in that connection — and to the arrogance engend­ered by the possession of the most powerful and speedy thing on the road is added the arrogance of wealth and class. ’

It would have been impossible to conceive of, forty years later, small back streets lined with cars, and city traffic able to go no faster than the horse traffic of 1913 through sheer congestion.

Had the Party felt itself able to recognize what was happening, and attempt to deal with it on its own terms, it is unlikely that so many of its members would have felt perplexed and despondent in the nineteen fifties. If there had been hopes of flexibility, the controversies killed them. Urged by Turner to discard the standpoint of exploited class, by Evans to become identified with ‘society’s incipient socialism’, the members dug in their heels. Capitalism was incapable of allowing im­provement. Nothing had altered, nothing was going to alter until the revolution came. As for full employment, it could not last much longer. Some maintained even that conditions, despite appearances, had worsened. The theory, attributed without complete justification to Marx, of ‘increasing misery’ (Evans called it ‘Communist claptrap’) was held to be a law of capitalism. The reasonable explanation given by Marx was of poverty as a relative situation:

‘A house may be large or small; so long as the surrounding houses are equally small it satisfies all social demands for a dwelling. But let a palace arise beside the little house, and it now shrinks from a little house to a hut. ’

This was conveyed in the Socialist Standard in the nineteen- fifties. Though wages had increased, the mass of values produced had increased still more; thus, the workers’ share of the total product had decreased, and tended to go on doing so all the time. Poverty was the shrinking relative proportion — however great it might be in itself — of the growing volume of wealth produced.

For some this argument did not go far enough, however. A section of the Party was prepared to assert that, in any terms, the con­dition of the working class had worsened, and the idea that there had been improvement was an opiate myth put out by the capitalist class and the major political parties. Harry Young stated this case in a Forum article called ‘Are the Workers Better Off ?’:

‘Every one of these so-called “improvements” of the workers is an investment by the capitalists to increase workers’ efficiency. So far from making their lives easier they make them work harder than ever before — for less . . .

The patent medicine advertisements show that occupational diseases like indigestion, constipation, ‘tiredness’, influenza and cancer are universal and increasing . . .

The holidays are paid for, to recreate the exhausted worker for more work for the employer. The so-called education, for the great majority, is training for paid work.

The State distribution of milk to the children of the workers is the clearest evidence that their parents have neither the means nor opportunity of supplying their own offspring with the greatest need regularly themselves. Workers’ children today are larger and heavier than their grandfathers were. So are cattle and sheep, pigs, eggs and tomatoes; and for the same reason — they are more valuable that way. The workers DO live longer lives today of— more years of grinding poverty. ’

In a tactful response, Hardy called this ‘overstatement to the point of being more wrong than right’ and gently chided it with a varia­tion on a verse of W.S.Gilbert’s:

Is Death a boon ?

If so it must befall

That Death whene ’er he call

Can’t call too soon !

The matter raised was of importance to the socialist movement. Young contended that for working-class conditions to have improved was fatal to the socialist cause. It was a point which Turner, defending the thesis that ideas alone cause change, had put to the Executive Committee: did the Party actually rely on bad conditions for making racialists of people ? The Executive replied that it was not so, that socialist propaganda did not depend on misery. Nevertheless, there were undoubtedly many members who were of that frame of mind. Articles in the Standard showed it; selecting an evil, describing it at its worst, and reiterating that this and more like it were in store for the working class while capitalism lasted. It cannot have occurred to the writers that they were doing the gravest disservice to the Party. For the good socialist analysis of former years they were substituting dogged assertion; for science, something not far removed from sympathetic magic in which the incantation hoped to produce the fact.

In fact, changed social conditions had not missed the members’ own circumstances or those of the Party. Even the unemployables had work. Old James, the man who had made a lifetime’s study of the public assistance system, found a job when he was sixty (and a few years later complained to me that his neighbour, out of work six months, was ‘a parasite on the community’). The surviving lunch-hour meeting places

became uncertain because few members were free now to fetch plat­forms and reserve places in the daytime — in the past there had been any number of unemployed men at the ready. In 1954 two companion party members came on a visit from America. More exchange visits, even representation at one another’s conferences, followed. The trips were made at the members’ own expense; if it was true that only a few could afford these costly journeys, it still marked an astonishing departure from the situation of pre-war days.

But the chronic, depressing problem was the lack of any public response. The difficulty was shared by every radical organization — most of all those which talked of socialism. The Labour government had fallen almost as cataclysmically as it had come; the Labour leader, Gaitskell, was in 1957 to declare its traditional programme ‘a vote-loser’ and the old policies of the Socialist International ‘neither relevant nor practical today’. The ILP, its representation in Parliament gone, had lost most of its remaining leader-figures one after another to the Labour Party (indeed, one major function of the left minorities appeared to have been simply the training of leaders for Labour). The Common Wealth organization had become a tiny sect, and the other little bodies which had swelled the militant chorus against the injustices of capitalism were in obscurity.

Curiously enough, the SPGB avoided playing on what might have seemed the natural theme, the hydrogen bomb. The radical groups had universally grasped the coat-tails of the ban-the-bomb movement, and the Party was sensibly critical of the kinds of support it found acceptable. More than this, however, it would not concur that the bomb men­aced the future of the human race. A front-page article by Coster in the Standard pointed out that the world could be devastated just as well by non-nuclear weapons, as H. G. Wells had envisaged in Things to Come twenty years before; the problem was war, not its potential tools. In another article called ‘Should We Despair ? ’ McClatchie argued that destruction on such a scale could not be envisaged by the capitalist class themselves.

The kind of image some members wanted was indicated when in 1953 the turbulent Lawler brought forward what he claimed was proof that, as a law of capitalism, crises and wars become progressively worse. Here was an argument for socialism based on the demonstrated certainty of horrors to come; if the post-war depression was a long time starting, it would make up for the delay by exceeding in unemployment and desti­tution any previous crisis. A number of the Party accepted the idea with alacrity, and it was not challenged except in private argument until Lawler confronted the Editorial Committee of the Standard with it. Would they or would they not, he asked, publish the statement that wars

and crises grew worse, and be committed to it as an item of Party policy ?

Ten years earlier there might have been no argument. The Editorial Committee itself had predicted the great depression to come, and the assertion of worsening results of the ‘contradictions of capitalism’ had often been made by writers in the Standard (as it had been in the 1945 Election Address). However, the failure of their own prediction had made the editors wary. Hardy pointed out the difficulties connected with the question. What were the standards of judgement to be, for instance ? In wars, the numbers of deaths were not related solely to the scope and intensity of the fighting: hundreds of thousands who had died from wounds in nineteenth-century wars would have been saved by modern medical attention. As for crises, their history and the history of economists’ theories about them — including those of Marx and Engels — showed that, despite everything the Party had said in the past, they were unpredictable.

Lawler battled on. He circularized his case to the branches, and buttonholed members in the street to pour out evidences of the growth of disaster under capitalism. He chased Hardy everywhere. One of his rather extraordinary tactics was, in the middle of an argument as to the duration of trade cycles, to challenge his opponent to some test of physical prowess — usually a race. He tried Turner once, outside the Conference hall: ‘I’ll race you round Red Lion Square’, he bawled.

Turner, twenty years older, superbly fit and full of vitality, won hand­somely and was sitting in his car convulsed with laughter while Lawler panted on to the finish. He tried Hardy too: near midnight, he demanded that their point be settled by a race round Clapham Common, but Hardy, thirty years older, sedate and greying, would have nothing to do with it.

Unable to make headway, Lawler left the Party. The Turner con­troversy over, the catastrophic argument was pursued by the Birmingham branch. In 1956 they brought to the Party Conference a resolution which proposed that wars and crises must grow worse as capitalism continued. Though it was rejected by a large majority, the discussion made clear that a considerable section of the Party was in sympathy with the under­lying idea. The delegates accepted the facts and figures disproving the specific contention, but the majority of those who spoke affirmed belief in a tendency for things to worsen. Sooner or later, they all said, the working class would find itself faced with ‘the realities of capitalism’.

What the controversy emphasized was the Party members’ con­sciousness of the lack of a point of departure. Lawler had said repeatedly: If we can’t prove that wars and slumps will get worse, where’s the case for socialism ? Where’s the point ?’ If assertions about worsening

conditions were not supportable, the kernel of the socialist case had always been the existence of miseries directly attributable to the capitalist system. Socialism dealt first and foremost with material interests capitalism had brought want and insecurity to millions, socialism would mean (as Wilmott said ironically) two dinners on every one plate. A decade, or sixteen years if the war were included, undisturbed by depression and living standards generally rising had been thought impossible in the socialist conception of capitalism. If the members could explain it, they had still to find a way to deal with it.

The decline in membership and activity had brought financial problems to the Party. Its expenditure rose sharply when in 1951 it left Rugby Chambers for Clapham. The premises it took as its Head Office, at 52 Clapham High Street, comprised a shop with three floors above it. The shop itself was a long, high room, able to accommodate not only the Executive Committee meetings but seventy or eighty people at lectures, without including the balcony created by the removal of a wall. There was a canteen, and room for offices and committees in plenty.

The Party was still on the crest of its wave in 1951, and the expectation had been that growth would continue and the Clapham shop become an industrious centre of socialist activity.

But it had been bought, not rented (the Conference was obliged to affirm that year that in its opinion no socialist principle was violated by owning or sub-letting). And as controversy and shrinkage set in, the upkeep of the building steadily drained the Party’s waning income. The rates and the bills for electricity demanded large sums. There were the continual requirements of maintenance, with fresh things always arising. The big meeting-room was never warm in winter, and successive attempt to solve the problem used money to little or no purpose. By 1955 expenditure was much in excess of income, and there seemed little that could be done about it.

The Party’s income was made up by members’ dues, collections at meetings, donations, and any profit from the sales of literature. Each member paid sixpence a week (until 1953 it was only threepence); two- thirds of this went to the Head Office. Had every one of, say, seven hundred members paid his dues regularly the income would have been only six hundred pounds a year from this source, but in fact more than a third was never obtained. A large proportion of every branch’s membership was inactive, and the dues were rarely paid by numbers on the books. The donations came chiefly either as gifts of surplus funds by branches, or were sent by sympathizers and members (sometimes as a conscience- salve for non-participation otherwise in the Party’s affairs).

As the membership dropped, then, so did the income. The sales of

the Socialist Standard were fast dropping, too. Here again there was

no income other than that produced by actual purchases. Other minority papers had special devices for making good the inevitable financial losses. The ILP controlled a printing works, bought in its more prosperous times, which now subsidized the party paper. The editor of another journal wrote to his well-to-do subscribers each year asking them for specific amounts to meet his estimate of the loss. The Standard, except in its good years in the ’thirties, always subtracted from the Party’s general fund. By 1955 it was taking about £250 a year, without the varying sums spent on advertizing it.

The Party was saved from an extreme predicament (one section of the membership saw nothing else but to sell the newly-acquired Head Office) by old Mrs Hollingshead. I went to see her in Edinburgh, and told her we needed several hundred pounds to pay the bills: she gave a thousand. Agnes Hollingshead was one of the most remarkable of people. At this time, she was ninety-two. She had run a commercial college in Calgary for several years, came to Britain in the nineteen-thirties and set up again in Edinburgh. After her husband’s death early in the war her sole wish became to amass a small fortune and leave it to the Party. She continued working until she died — her only concession to age was to give up classes and take individual pupils instead. On the day I arrived she was taking a girl of seventeen or so, dictating shorthand and correct­ing exercises with briskness and authority.

Besides having the school, she let out the rooms in her house to families: they paid only modest rents, but reading the Socialist Standard was a condition of tenancy. Her teaching-room was a huge room at the front of the house, and she lived in the kitchen at the back with a cat named Karl Marx. A tiny, dignified woman, she had an indomitable zest for living. She attributed her age and her fine teeth to ‘plain living and high thinking’ and to vegetarianism, and confided to me that she was worried by shortness of breath when she walked up the steep hill by her house: ‘I’ll go to the man at the nature-cure clinic,’ she said, ‘because it isn’t natural to be puffing like that.’ She died at ninety-six, and left nearly four thousand pounds to the SPGB.

The Standard was not in danger of extinction, but it was made solvent once more by the gift. To reduce the deficit its price had been raised from fourpence to sixpence, and a shoddy-looking newsprint taken into use. The real problem, however, was the falling circulation. Between three and four thousand were being printed of each issue, and the Executive Committee reviewed the position every month before ordering. Outdoor meetings no longer provided a natural avenue of sale, and the numbers were sustained only by groups of members who devoted almost

all their spare time to selling the paper at front doors. Here again was the difficulty to which the Party could find no answer. The days of meeting over, it was said that the future of socialist propaganda lay in the printed word now: but how were people to be brought to it ?

The Party still contested elections whenever it could afford to do so. There was a strong faction which opposed these repeated efforts as being wholesale waste of the money the Party desperately needed; experience and necessity had brought down the expense of a campaign sub­stantially since 1945, but each candidature still cost about five hundred pounds. Nevertheless, there was always a majority at Conferences to carry the motion that the SPGB should contest the next General Election. In 1950 there were two candidates — McClatchie at Paddington North, and Young at East Ham South. The vote at Paddington diminished even further to 192, and the East Ham candidate won 256.

One more try was made at Paddington in December 1953, when the Member of Parliament for the constituency resigned. The Party candidate this time was Waters. From the point of view of drawing attention to the Party, this campaign was the most successful of all. The by- election had been staged in somewhat dramatic circumstances, and the seat was a marginal one. What took the newspapers’ fancy was the entry into this tight contest of a candidate who asked people not to vote for him unless they understood socialism. Under the heading ‘Sir Galahad joins in a political joust’ the Daily Mail described Waters as ‘stepping down from his red London bus to ride a dialectical white horse’ The Daily Herald wrote: ‘A MYSTERY OF THE BY-ELECTION IS - what goes on behind the billposted windows of No. 63, Elgin-avenue ? ' And the Express described at length, with some amazement, the crowded Metropolitan Theatre meeting and the performance of Turner who could, it seemed, answer every conceivable question.

But Waters got only 242 votes, and there was not another Party candidate until 1959. It would be hard to assess the true value of the votes cast for the SPGB in these elections. Certainly there was always immense interest in its meetings at Paddington — possibly word had gone round that its speakers at any rate were great stuff: consistently, they drew bigger audiences than the candidates for whom the thousand voted. It is certain also that some part of each handful of votes came from people who had voted incorrectly, or despite all the Party’s insistence had not grasped that the Socialist Party was not the Labour Party. Likewise, sad though it is in a democracy, there are always frivolous voters (a well-known professional footballer said to me once: ‘I vote Conservative because my mate votes Labour — but if I say I’ll be Labour then he votes Conservative instead.’) On the other hand, any

minority remains a discouraging prospect even to its sympathizers, and one may surmise that many who were drawn to the socialist case never­theless voted, as a matter of pragmatism, for the apparent lesser of capitalist evils. The simplest view of the Paddington campaigns is the one which the Party itself took, after 1945: that the votes conveyed nothing at all, and the SPGB was only doing what it must.

17**.**

The Years of Apathy

The figure most symbolic of the SPGB in its halcyon years, in all its arrogance and hostility against the system, was Clifford Groves. For ten years he was its General Secretary and its most merciless debater the kindly side of his nature as a man was relegated when he faced the world for the Party.

In the late nineteen-forties he was taken, not suddenly but by a slow and dreadful process, by a mysterious illness. It proved to be a disease of the brain. He did not die for another ten years; half-blind, holding hard to consciousness, he continued to come to every Party function. He denied, indeed, that he was sick. To enquirers he would bawl: ‘You think I’m ill, don’t you ? I’m not: I’m fine. I feel fine. No­thing the matter with me.’ In those years, as socialism struggled to retain its identity, the members watched Groves sadly. Falling headlong as he walked and rising to announce that he was fine, shouting assertions which were no longer reasoned convictions but part of his personality the world’s first socialist candidate, a dozen years that seemed an age before.

What became most patent, as the nineteen-fifties passed, was the change in the Party itself. Its own teaching that all were the products of a social environment which altered was being exemplified: the knowledge hungry, class-conscious working man who represented socialism was now almost extinguished as a social type. The incident and drama of meetings had gone, and the speakers too. The Party’s classes in socialist education had died out because no-one attended them. They had been, it is true, largely associated with members’ desire to become speakers; but branch-room lectures too had lost their place.

There was a great deal of inward-turning. After the Turner controversy ended in 1955 an attempt was made to preserve Forum as a theoretical and educational journal for the membership. It continued for another two years; Coster contributed a series of ten articles on ‘Marxism and Literature’, Wilmott some shorter series on economics and Marxist theory. What the membership as a whole wanted was to be rid of Forum, however. It was ended eventually because it ran at a loss (the condition of its existence from the outset had been that it did not

consume Party funds). But underlying that was a certainty on many members’ part that this kind of thing meant the chasing of intellectual will-o’-the-wisps, and trouble for the Party.

Small groups and individual members repeatedly, but half­heartedly, raised questions as to whether the SPGB should not do . . . what ? In the second half of the nineteen-fifties, radical movements were taking overtly non-political forms in which people gathered round a particular sentiment or protest. Apart from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament there were the Anti-Apartheid and Colonial Freedom movements, and tenants’ and consumers’ associations. Though these were obviously liberal and left-wing in character, their strength was that they attracted for single objectives numbers of people who would not ordinarily have joined political parties. It was quite widely prophesied that this was the form agitation would take in future, making left-wing politics obsolete.

Thus, one branch pressed the party to show sympathy for the Movement for Colonial Freedom. Another brought up the matter of 1910, the argument over social reform, to see if some door had not been left open. There were members who thought the SPGB could not afford to take no notice of the Nuclear Disarmament campaign. And a member named Mays argued a case about the Rent Act: asking if it were really true, as the Party contended, that rents were of no consequence in the working class. All these were rebuffed with little or no discussion. The obduracy was not merely the Party’s traditional resistance to reform-ist suggestions. It felt itself under pressure as perhaps it had never been before: weakened numerically, assailed and asked to compromise from within. To give way at any point might mean complete surrender.

The largest and most vigorous branch of the Party was at Hackney in East London. It had a strong body of younger members, preoccupied with the phenomena of an altered social environment. Possibly change was more palpable in East London. Suburbia had not altered much in twenty-five years, but the teeming working-class areas backed upon by the railway line from Liverpool Street were transformed month by month. The East Londoners had grown up in districts dominated by squalid housing and the direst poverty, then found themselves in the world of high-rise flats and electric amenities; but where traditions of working-class radicalism as well as working-class culture remained.

They came to discussions and lectures on the psychological as well as the economic impact of modern times, and sought continually to assess assumptions and attitudes. Apart from the routine weekly meetings in a room in the Town Hall members were together almost illicitly. Daily too: some found their way into Bill Read’s cafe, where

Bill himself laid down contention to all the customers in his great sandpaper voice. They sat arguing over Existentialism and Galbraith’s Affluent Society in Wilmott’s flat, sitting by the windows looking into the horse-chestnut foliage of Victoria Park while they talked. A dozen met every week in Freddie James’s house in a condemned street, the buildings still inhabited but shored-up awaiting demolition (‘the street of absolute surplus-value’, someone called it).

In the Party’s state of mind, the suspicion that these member\* wanted to re-direct it was too strong. There was one more election campaign in 1959, and the choice of Bethnal Green — the Hackney district — was forced on the EC by the unavailability of any other constituent. It turned out to be easily the most successful campaign the Party had had. Nearly nine hundred people voted for the SPGB. The feeling that it was all somehow suspect remained, however. There was something approaching anger when the candidate’s name appeared as ‘Jack Read' on all the literature and posters — not because the members knew him as Bill, but because of the tradition which demanded that he be depersonalized as J. (or W.) Read. Someone toured the constituency mutilating the posters so that only the first letter of ‘Jack’ remained (the member thought to have been responsible was christened ‘Ack-ack’).

At the eve-of-poll meeting pointed questions were asked about the Hackney view of reforms. Moreover, Hackney was represented on the Executive itself by three or four members, continually expressing criticism and demands for re-orientation.

It was Wilmott who took up questions of Party theory continually in the second half of the ’fifties. Now middle-aged, and mellowed a little from the brash young Cockney of pre-war days, he was immensely popular among the members — he, Hardy and Coster invariably topped the vote in the annual election for the EC. The first of his Forum writings in 1955 was a series of articles analyzing Evans’s gradualism and refuting its claims about production. It was followed by another series called ‘Do we Need the Dialectic ? ’ in which he cut to shreds the mystical absolutist elements surrounding Marxism; and a third series, ‘Notes on Crises’. At the same time he contributed articles to the Socialist Standard reviewing John Strachey’s Contemporary Capitalism, the reconsideration of his own Nature of Capitalist Crisis. The earlier book had a tremendous impact on the left movement in the ’thirties; Wilmott’s criticism of it and its successor remain valuable analyses of theories which still animate the left today.

The dispute over whether crises worsened and Wilmott’s Notes, led to the setting-up of a study group to investigate these questions. The group, consisting of Hardy, Wilmott, Coster, Young and a Birmingham

member, Cook — the intention was to include all shades of opinion on the matters involved — was to consider why depression and mass unemployment had not recurred since the war. The Executive Commit­tee, already irritable, was not disposed to support a long discursive investigation and pressed repeatedly for a quick report. In the end an incomplete statement was produced by Hardy alone, in which various theories of crisis were examined and some explanations briefly given.

The document remains an important one, but with the sense of a lost opportunity for which the other members of the group were to blame us much as the Executive.

One other production of the time may be mentioned. In 1959 the SPGB published a pamphlet called Schools Today, reviewing the education system and proposals to reorganize it. Again, the EC was querulous. Was this the Party’s concern ? did reformism loiter stealthily somewhere ? By the time it was published ill-feelings galore centred on the pamphlet. It sold out completely in a quite short time, and had con­siderable influence on left-wing enthusiasts for the new scheme of comprehensive schools: it forecast accurately their failure and the problems which would arise from them.

Wilmott’s final contribution was a series of articles, developed from the publication for the first time in English of Marx’s early philo­sophical writings, on the theory of alienation. In these he contended that Marxism was a form of humanism: socialism meant not the furtherance of economic self-interest, but the translation into social institutions of realizable human ideals. He developed the theme further lu lectures taking up the idea of the affluent society and speaking of the human condition in other than economic terms: acquisitiveness, spreading through society now at all levels, was raising vast new problems of relationships and values.

There was no denial of the Party in any of this. The proposal that Marxism was a humanism was taken for its value as a possible reply to opponents (though fifteen years later the Socialist Standard was to say it had heard enough about alienation). Nevertheless, the underlying purpose was plain. If capitalism was — as it seemed — able to solve material problems after all, the SPGB must find a tack other than what Wilmott called ‘tuck-shop socialism’. But the fact was, too, that the majority of the Party were not interested in theoretical argument. Introspection had gone on too long.

In 1958 the Hackney branch pressed for an investigation of the scope and intention of the Socialist Standard. The Standard remained the vital spot in the SPGB; its editors were responsible through emphasis and editing for the general tenor of all that was said. While the Hackney

members had in mind some alteration of the tone in which the Party spoke, their proposal was supported and carried by the Conference for several different reasons. Some members were concerned simply about the falling circulation, others about the unattractiveness of the Standard. It had indeed become drab; the print was depressing and slipshod, the presentation lustreless. Others had grievances about rejected articles, or felt that the editors had been there too long. One faction wanted the paper to seek popular appeal with flashy devices and short, slick articles, another wished for the opposite, for more solid expositions of Marxist teaching.

From these and other points of view, the Party was highly amenable to the idea. An investigating committee was set up, with seven members: Hardy represented the Editorial Committee, and the others, including three from Hackney, were a selection of writers and others with interests in the Standard’s future. The conflicts which might have been expected did not materialize, and the committee produced a detailed plan for the revitalizing of the paper. Its typography was to be made as good as that of the most modern publications. It was to extend its scope from what Turner called ‘political politics’ to social and cultural life in general; it would review books, films, the theatre and television. The feature articles were to be ordered from writers according to the nature of the territory in which they lay (until now the supply of articles had been more or less haphazard: the editors waited to see what came in). Even the treasured Edwardian terminology — the title-page still said ‘Official Organ of the Socialist Party of Great Britain' — was to go.

The Party accepted the scheme with various misgivings. The report had made itself unpopular by denigrating door-to-door canvassing at which some branches had toiled for years, and the EC was hardening visibly against the Hackney influence. The investigating committee had proposed that the Editorial Committee be reorganized and enlarged, and both Wilmott and Coster stood for it in its new form. The latter, in fact, did not wish to serve; he accepted nomination only because he felt obliged to do so, having been a trainee for the Editorial Committee for several years. The Executive would not have Wilmott, and the back­bone of the Committee was unchanged: Hardy, McClatchie, and its secretary for twenty-seven years, Phyllis Howard. There was one important addition, however. The layout of the Standard was taken from the printers’ hands and became the regular work of a member named Lionel Selwyn. If most of the other proposed changes did not take effect, this one achieved a great deal. Selwyn made the Standard visually outstanding for the next few years, and most members felt that on this account alone the investigation had been worthwhile.

In the next twelve months, most of the Hackney members left. First Wilmott and then Coster resigned, and a little later almost the entire branch — they were to become known in Party legend as ‘the Hackney thirteen’ — resigned. There was in fact no unanimity in the resignations. Wilmott had become despondent with the Party, unable to find in it the stimulus which his personality required (a few years later he entered the Labour Party and became an education organizer for it). Coster had written some articles for the Socialist Leader and The Freethinker, and was told it was forbidden for members to write in other organizations’ papers. The ‘thirteen’, undoubtedly affected by the secessions of these two principal figures in their branch, voiced a collective rejection of the SPGB. The final departure was that of Bill Read: he remained for a time, arguing a case with the Party, until he was expelled.

The Hackney thirteen remained together for a time. On resign­ation they had published a statement to the Party that they would seek ‘new principles of socialism’. For a year or so they continued to meet for discussion, making occasional contacts with left-wing groups to exchange ideas. The new principles did not emerge, however, and by 1962 the meetings had ceased. The thirteen were by no means the first to consider improving on the Party. Some of Turner’s supporters formed themselves into a ‘Society for Social Integration’ which was still meeting as a small discussion group several years later. As regards the development of a movement, however, there was really no way open. The search for a creed between revolution and reform has been the left-wing philosopher’s stone.

The episode undoubtedly owed much to the frustrations the Party was experiencing; and added to them. The Party had lost its strongest branch, two of its principal writers and speakers, and several other able people. For at least some of the members none of that mattered: those who had gone were renegades, unsound and unsocialistic, and the Party was better off without them. Others were not so certain. In the weeks preceding Coster’s resignation he was visited or written to by member after member, not concurring in his offence against the Party but seeking somehow to retain him in it. And for others still, the loss was felt as a body blow.

Despite the proud insistence that they could do without anyone, the Party was now at the lowest ebb of its existence. It had money and premises, but its resources in membership and vigour had shrivelled. The numbers remained at about six hundred, but a larger proportion of the membership than ever before was inactive. The premises at Clapham had not helped the situation. Almost any suburban

district would have presented the same difficulty for a small member­ship spread widely over Greater London. The offices in central London had been accessible from all quarters, and Great Dover Street was close enough to the City to make no difference. Clapham, however, was well out among the south-western suburbs. Though activity might not have been much greater at any address, for many members it represented ninety minutes’ travelling by public transport; attendance at committee meetings or lectures there meant inconvenient journeys and late nights. Nor were there attractions to over-ride the difficulties. The Party now lacked speakers sufficiently colourful for even the members to be anxious to come: the promise of excitement had gone.

Groves was dead. His end was even more tragic than expect­ation had known. A few months earlier his wife, worn out with caring for him and earning for them both, suddenly died. It was discovered then that Groves was almost helpless, unable to do the simplest things for himself; he was taken to hospital for the short remainder of his life. What was most pathetic of all in Groves’s last years was the loss of all his strength and arrogance. The overbearing, contemptuous ‘Two-Shirt’ trying clumsily to hobnob for companionship, for words from anyone, was a sad, sad sight. One of the members, a gentle and kindly man named Mark Miller, was a barber and used to go and shave Groves every few days. Once he had to wait until the doctor finished an examination. Turning, the doctor said briskly: ‘There ! Now you can carry on as you wish.’ ‘If I did as I wish,’ said Mark sorrowfully, ‘I’d cut his throat and end his misery.’

Nearly all the speakers who had occupied the centre of the Party stage had gone in a few years. Turner and Cash had rejected its Principles. Lestor was dead: he had gone on speaking until he was eighty, and died from a stroke. Waters had become a trade-union official and took little part now. Joyce Millen had dropped out of activity and Lisa Bryan died suddenly, a young woman still. The horde of young speakers of the late nineteen-forties had fallen away entirely. Lawler had left, angry with the Party for not going far enough: Wilmott, Coster and Read had gone last of all.

But underlying every loss was what had become known as ‘political apathy’, dragging against all the Party’s efforts. The small number of speakers remaining battled against it gamely. In Hyde Park on Sundays Harry Young declared and joked; elsewhere, at rare opportunities, Cyril May and Harry Baldwin — he had once been Lawler’s protege — put the socialist case against capitalism as it had always been. Not long ago a member said to me: ‘I joined in 1960, when the Party was at its lowest ebb.’ The members followed the rallies of

Nuclear Disarmament and Anti-Apartheid, offering the Socialist Standard and the pamphlets on war and race. Otherwise, there seemed little doing.

Other organizations approached the SPGB from time to time with a view to rapprochement in the face of the common problem — the ILP was persistent in doing so. The Party was as firm in its hostility as ever. Indeed, it laid the blame for ‘political apathy’ almost wholly on the other parties. By confusionism, by gathering support for mistaken theories, they had caused the working class to become disillusioned and so to turn away from the hope of a new society. Had they not side­tracked from socialism, it would have come long ago. I showed an old member some photographs from the SPGB of his youth. Staring at them, he said: ‘They’ve all gone ... all gone. Alex and Fitz, they’ve gone: and Tony, he’s gone too. All finished, it is.’ And then, looking up, he said angrily: ‘It was the reform parties that did it — the reformists ! If it hadn’t been for them, everything would have been different.’

Before the story changes now, it is time perhaps to talk about what kinds of people they were and are. Accounts and instances of social types have been given, and pictures of individuals who stood out: what of the socialist man in the street ? Psychological studies of fascists and communists were described by Eysenck in The Psychology of Politics, and in 1962 a research psychologist published a study of anarchist personality (in issue no.12 of the magazine Anarchy). He found his subjects to be of above-average intelligence, disposed to neuroticism, and specially able to tolerate ‘conditions of ambiguity in interpersonal relations’. His sample were all volunteers, and he remarked that he was ‘thankful that none of the weird and pathological creatures who haunt and disrupt public meetings presented themselves to me’: indicating that there was another kind of anarchist altogether.

I could not say any of these things about the people in the SPGB. One of the Party’s claims was always that they seldom left it. In view of the dissensions and the steep fall in membership that I have talked about, that may seem absurd. However, it is true in two senses. First, the leavers often re-join. If they do not they are likely to remain supporters — jaundiced or pessimistic, sceptical that socialism can ever happen, but convinced that in the long run the Party is more right than anyone else. And second, the SPGB has never had the continual high turnover of members which is to be found in left-wing groups and parties generally. Through its most difficult years it retained a substant­ial core; many were irritatingly inactive but would remain members till they died, others carried on with their work regardless.

Severity of argument and judgement has remained the Party’s

characteristic, of course. Fox’s description of an EC meeting in 1910 could still hold good at times today. It reminds also of Hazlitt on certain discussions he knew: ‘But when a set of adepts, of illuminati, get about a question, it is worth while to hear them talk. They may snarl and quarrel over it, like dogs; but they pick it bare to the bone, they masticate it thoroughly.’ ‘Conditions of ambiguity’ were not tolerated. I recall on the Executive once saying I had changed my mind about something (it was the case of a member offending against the Party, and I had been induced to consider a special point of view). One elderly member said scornfully: ‘Ha ! a dose of second thoughts ! ’; others conveyed that I was trying to waste their time.

Some members have been renowned for this sort of thing. But under the rigorousness there was an intensely warm camaraderie and a high degree of personal stability. Openness was an important part of the SPGB tradition. There were no private meetings: even the most scurrilous linenwashing was kept visible (opponents commonly attended sessions of the Executive and debates among members at the heights of controversies). Reports and financial accounts were freely available. In discussion and propaganda one was expected to say what one meant, and this frankness had to be seen in the conduct of members in all respects. The Party rarely had conspirators. The worst condemnation of someone was that he was ‘unreliable’; which meant not simply that he did not fulfil duties and appointments, but that what he said was open to doubt.

One view of those who make up ‘extreme’ minorities is that they are misfits. That is probably true of a proportion of anarchists; the individualist doctrine has an obvious kind of appeal, and several anarchists have told me their beliefs amount to a rationale for rejection of and by society. I am not here entering into discussion of what is implied by ‘misfit’. All organizations outside the ‘establishment’ ones are bound to attract some lonely and maladjusted people seeking acceptance by a group, though I would think the religious sects had the lion’s share of them. Without doubt the SPGB got a certain number. But the great majority of members for the lifetime I have known them have come under Ambridge’s description, ‘decent working men and women animated by and single-minded over a special concern in the world. Certainly if there had not been stability the SPGB would not have survived the decade of apathy as it did.

What makes a person a revolutionary socialist ? Leaving aside those for whom it is family or otherwise personal connection, it can be any of a number of things. Anger over what is experienced and seen, the chief impulse to the nineteenth-century socialists, has never ceased

to be one strong factor. A man I know well tells his story succinctly thus: ‘My father died, and I saw my mother struggling to bring us up; and by the time I met old Allsopp I was only too ready for what he had to tell me.’ There have always been many who began in other parties and were roused by some compromise or absence of democratic practice. Others have no bitter experience to testify to, but say they found it common sense; the problems were plain to see, and the other solutions did not work.

There is also, however, the question of a life-style. People will enter a movement not automatically through conviction, but when they see the likelihood of general affinity. The differences among radical groups are often largely those of group personality, integral or culti­vated (Orwell’s famous attack on the fad-ridden left of the ’thirties was directed at the ILP and the middle-class Communists). The SPGB’s con­tent, in this respect, has been good fellowship and no nonsense, and undoubtedly it is self-handicapped by offering nothing else. Disapproving of vogues, allowing no opportunity for personal ambition, rejecting the activist sentiment that something must be done about practically every­thing, it presents few of the gratifications for which politically-motivated people look. Its life-style would appeal most, in fact, to ordinary people without such motivations; who are, in case it is forgotten, the vast majority.

18.

Fires Burning Brightly

The old man was wrong, as many others were. It is hard to say when the socialist movement began to live again; perhaps the resurgence was beginning then, unnoticed. Nor is it any easier to put one’s finger on an immediate cause or stimulus. In a longer historical view, however, one may see the emergence not from any special event but from society itself of a new generation of revolutionists. There had been a gap between the passing of the 1904 generation and that of the ’thirties; the nineteen-fifties were a longer, more enervating wait while the next generation appeared.

Thus from 1960 on, the SPGB moved slowly forward again. Fresh members began to come in. The day of the self-educated man and the back-street boy from the Communists was over. The new revolutionary was nurtured in the Welfare State and a long time at school, his thought formed by the sociology of the red-brick university His world has been also one in which the traditional value-structures of society — religion, family, communal sentiment — have lost their influence. So has the coercive power of destitution, which made for abjection far more than ever for revolt. The Welfare State revolutionary, indeed, is keenly conscious of having had ‘opportunities’ which put him at the state’s disposal to the same degree as they offered better living standards as his prize.

Much of the new recruitment owed to modest campaigns of advertizing. Throughout the Party’s history, advertisement had been thought of chiefly in relation to meetings — posters and classified announcements, seeking to bring audiences to the speakers. There had always been an envious hankering for large-scale advertising, a feeling that with the same resources socialism could be as widely known as Sunlight Soap. In the nineteen-fifties money had been spent on advertisements in the display-frames in tube trains and buses, but there was no perceptible return.

The first systematic advertising, beginning in 1958, was small notices for items in the Socialist Standard in selected magazines where they would be most likely to be of interest: articles on education advertized in teachers’ papers, and so on. They brought enough replies to be

encouraging, and in the next few years the policy was extended. Brief statements of the SPGB outlook were put regularly in papers like the New Statesman and the Guardian, and for this purpose the slogan ‘One World’ was adopted. A steady trickle of replies resulted. For the first time, the committee which drafted and placed advertisements found itself engaged in correspondence and question-answering from enquirers.

Most important of all was the fact that the enquiries and pro­spective members came largely from outside London, in areas where the Party’s existence had never been more than sporadic and secondary. Old provincial branches gained fresh life from young people entering them, and new ones began to appear. It would be wrong to suppose, however, that this growth could have been obtained before had the Party adopted the method earlier. The advertisements’ vital function was meeting the mood of many young people, possibly products of CND and the Committee of 100, seeking more fundamental explanations and solutions than the popular limited causes offered. CND won its huge following by refusing to deal in political factions, but it produced a strong element which saw only too clearly that the political questions had to be asked.

By the late ’sixties, the provincial branches were a strong force. One was conscious of ironies here and there. In Edinburgh, Agnes Hollingshead and another veteran named David Lamond had toiled for decades to strike some interest; a few years after both their deaths a large branch of young people sprang to life. Likewise a branch in Bolton — fifteen years earlier I argued a Sunday away with a half­interested middle-aged man in a front room there, unsuccessfully. In unlikely industrial cities one found the letters ‘SPGB’ painted on walls (or a more cryptic admonition taken from an article by David Steele about the moneyless society in Oz ‘Smash Cash !’). Once I came on them, several feet high, on the rock face over a pass in the Pennines.

Something might be said at this point about the unfortunate Party offshoot in Ireland. There were always contacts and hopes; for many years socialism was argued at countless public meetings in Dublin by a glorious, rumbustious, thick-brogued man named Mick Cullen. The first formation of a party there did not take place until the beginning of the nineteen-fifties. It was little more than a branch in Dublin, and was quickly extinguished by some of the principals’ coming to England. A few years later activity began again, this time in Belfast. The Dublin group revived, and early in 1959 I went there and spoke at meetings in both cities and attended the foundation of the World Socialist Party of Ireland. The secretary and guiding spirit was a man of extraordinary

competence as well as well as enthusiasm, Richard Montague. One of my recollections is of sitting in a basement room in Dublin among comrades and Guinness bottles at three in the morning, and the hush as he sang ‘The Red Flag’ in a magnificent, passionate voice.

A paper was published and two or three more branches started. Then the armed conflicts began in Northern Ireland. The Belfast head­quarters was damaged, and meetings made impossible; for the last five years the Irish party has existed only in name and whatever personal contact remains possible. Montague sent occasional articles on the con­flict to the Socialist Standard, and a future historian would do well to read them not only for their analysis but for their evocation of the atmosphere. He also wrote a novel based on the Belfast fighting, which was unaccountably rejected by a popular publisher after being accepted and paid for.

While provincial branches rose in the SPGB the London member ship remained curiously static and unrevived. Some long-established branches died out altogether, or incorporated themselves with others.

On the whole, London was firmly in the hands of Party tradition, and conflicts grew up between the provinces and centre in precisely those terms. Impatient for the Party to keep pace with the agitating left, the provincials began to regard the London branches as backwoodsmen whose wisdom was non sequitur and self-protecting.

The conflicts were, in the main, over administration. Where victories were won and ground gained, they were of the sort which appears to outside eyes as trivial; but in each case an edifice of prece­dent and belief was in the balance. The most noteworthy was, in 1969, the abolition of the rule which had existed since 1906 that only mem­bers might sign an election candidate’s nomination. This had always limited Party candidatures, without any other consideration, to con­stituencies where at least ten members lived. In most branch districts, where the members were likely to be scattered in a wide area round their centre, candidature was impossible.

The proposal was resisted in the terms of the general argument that only fully-conscious socialist votes were acceptable to the Party. The abolitionists replied that no compromise was involved: people could — and no doubt would — nominate Party candidates, perhaps from a belief that minorities should have a chance, without intending to vote for them. Contention raged for months, until the final arbiter in the form of a poll of the membership was called for. Its decision was clear- cut: Party candidates need not be nominated only by members. One Executive member, indignant, demanded that branches be asked if they were willing also for members to nominate opponent candidates (one

branch answered with an affirmative). Other members talked of resign­ing, and the Executive laid down conditions for the application of the decision. However, it remained: in the eyes of those who sought it, a fetter had been broken.

Principle was invoked again in an argument over whether the Party might place surplus funds, when it had them, on deposit at the bank. How minor and beyond debate it may seem ! yet to many members the issues were grave and crucial. The SPGB had never had a deposit account, just as it had never owned property before 1951. If the latter was a necessity for premises, the idea of letting money earn interest — small as the amounts were likely to be — carried overtones of selling-out to the capitalist system. To the would-be depositors this was no argument at all; moreover, in an inflationary economy, the alternative was to let Party money be eroded by the system. So the motion was carried, and the funds were put into deposit.

The Party was perpetually vigilant against compromise over money. In 1969 and 1970 a well-to-do member, the ebullient L. E. Weidberg, took whole-pages of magazines to advertize the SPGB and the Socialist Standard. He wrote the advertisements in a lively style and paid for them himself; a burst of enquiries resulted. A section of the membership was furious. The principle arguably involved was one to which the Party had always adhered: it would not accept money ‘with strings’ from anyone. If a donation was offered for a pamphlet to be produced, or to foster an activity favoured by the donor, the answer was unvaryingly that all moneys went into the general funds to be used as the Party thought fit. The aim, derived like other SPGB traditions and rules from what had been seen to happen elsewhere, was to ensure that no individual should gain a means to exercise control.

It was contended that Weidberg was doing what was thus unacceptable: in effect, donating large sums earmarked for newspaper advertizing. The opposite view was that this was stretching things and that Weidberg’s offence, if he had committed one, was having chosen not to consult the Executive Committee. The affair faded out, but left its reminder that everything mattered to the Party (as well as its aggrieved persons).

Where arguments arose over socialist teaching, they reflected the knowledge which many of the new generation had. There was, for instance, a feeling that the case over Russia was too unspecific and inferential. The Party still spoke of the Russian capitalist class on assumption that captains of industry lurked half-concealed there. A special piece of evidence, prized by members in debate and argument was the Russia Today Society’s *Soviet* Millionaires, but that had been

published in the nineteen-forties. What was put forward now by one or two branches was the proposition that capitalism in modern Russia was characterized not by individual ownership and enterprise, but by something best described as a ‘class monopoly’. Though there was disagreement, the Party made the discussion an interesting and fruitful one. The class-monopoly phrase was favoured and established itself in the Socialist Standard; but the disputants’ search for documentation brought forth material about the extent of private enterprise in Russia too.

There was repeated discussion of the Party’s name and the phraseology of the Declaration of Principles. These were not new sub­jects. Soon after the war, the American companion party, the Workers’ Socialist Party, had changed its name to the World Socialist Party of the United States. It had been done simply to end confusion with a different group, and the new name aimed to retain the same initials. However, it caught the fancy of many of the SPGB: ‘world’ seemed much more expressive of the Party’s objective than ‘Great Britain’. The Irish party quickly adopted the ‘world’ prefix. The agenda for Easter Conferences began regularly to include the putting-forward of the idea that the Party should make a similar change, and that — eventually — the various companion parties should all become branches of a World Socialist Party.

With this was linked a desire to alter the wording of the Principles. Their language appeared excessively formal and, it was argued, formidable to the common man: could not the same statements be made in simple and appealing language ? However, a lifetime’s con­cern with the importance of correct definition made the Party chary of these proposals. And it proved curiously true that a re-rendering with the same sense was not possible — advocates of change frequently tried it, to have their versions pulled to pieces. The slightly pejorative term ‘lawyers’ language’ was to the point. Like a legal document, the Principles irritated by the heavy meticulousness of their language, but the form was necessary if flaws were not to be found.

The opportunities for proselytizing activity remained frustratingly narrow. It is easy for the uninvolved to sneer at or deplore forms which minorities’ propaganda is forced to take — words painted on walls, fly-posting, the duplicated leaflets, the patient man on the corner with his papers for sale. The large organizations can buy (and accordingly are given) the dignified facilities. To a small one, a puny amount of publicity can be critically expensive, and the principal means for it are closed anyway; the rare chance of a minute with a television interviewer in an election is wildly exciting. Though this has always been true, in the ’sixties the expense and the inaccessibility were higher than ever

before; and the enthusiasm of members could no longer be fed by hearing their convictions given public voice in impressive oratory.

The difference was illustrated in the General Election of 1970, when a meeting was held in a small public hall in London. An older member who had re-joined, a speaker from the Turner years, stood on the platform and gave twenty vivid minutes. The young members were caught and intrigued. Said one: ‘If that was what the Party was about, years ago, no wonder it was bigger than it is now.’ But it was hardly more than a flashback. The audience that night was forty or fifty. Had Turner, Anderson, Fitzgerald, Lestor, Groves all returned, there would have been no crowds for them to work their spells upon. In the view of some hard-headed members the function of public speaking could not be seen more highly than as directing people to the printed words where the socialist message now mainly lay. However, the field opened more than might have been expected. By 1975 meetings had acquired fresh interest, and there were even debates with well-known politicians.

And the Party continued to grow again: slowly, but that was customary. Its habits had changed in many ways. The weekly Executive Committee meetings were no longer attended by crowds of members.

In the past, for as long as one remembered there had always been an audience on Tuesday nights — at Rugby Chambers and in the early years at Clapham it was often barely possible to get in the room or see through the smoke, with the chairman continually appealing for quiet. Now, the EC met by itself, with perhaps a single member sitting listen­ing, and the offices were almost empty: ‘We just let them get on with it,’ said someone in vague explanation.

Likewise, the social getting-together which had been a constant feature of Party life diminished. Up to the ’sixties, an integral part of the Conference every Easter was the ‘reunion and dance’. It was an occasion when members who had not otherwise been near the Party turned up, confident of meeting old friends: in the hall, a band and refreshments, the women in party dresses, veteran members nimble in the veleta and newer ones dashing at the quickstep, and the camaraderie spilling into the pubs nearby. And among members all the year there was continual cafe-going after meetings, calling at one another’s homes for talk and friendship — and, no doubt, the putting of heads together over Party affairs. One group of East London members combined two passions by going regularly to a greyhound-racing stadium together, it was said to be the only track in England where historical inevitability was discussed as the dogs went round.

By the end of the ’sixties, relatively little of that was to be seen. The Easter function died abruptly, and other socials became infrequent

small-scale events. Visiting and fireside conferring, too: the little circles as they faded away were not replaced. Many members had gone to live

away from London, coming in for meetings but not now providing open

houses; while to the new generation mobilized or at-home sociality was not part of the pattern of life. The Party remained remarkably sociable, however. In The British Political Fringe George Thayer said the SPGB was ‘the least clandestine and most friendly’ of all the groups he met, and that is true today. At any branch a casual unknown visitor is received with remarkable warmth (the majority of left-wing groups are, in my experience, as amiably forthcoming as Trappist monks). When­ever the Party had offices allowing it there were always tea and food in the past, and a generous canteen is maintained at Clapham now.

There were minor but significant changes which many of the younger people would have found hard to credit. The speakers in their heyday made an haut monde in the Party. More than half-conscious that they were expected to perform before the members, they displayed temperament — there could be great jealousy over attractive meetings as well as, sitting at cafe tables, ‘words of learned length and thund’ring sound’. Two or three years ago a member wrote to me: ‘Was Tony Turner really “a comrade” of mine ? I could hardly believe it. If the decrease in the Party’s use of public speaking has lessened that gap between members, perhaps it is a price we should be prepared to pay.’

Likewise the Editorial Committee, now with the more limited and utilitarian name ‘Socialist Standard Production Committee’, was no longer the authoritative body of whom a member once wrote in Forum: ‘To question its decisions is somewhat on a par with a Roman Catholic setting a booby trap for the Pope.’ It had become, indeed, a common-or garden committee, subjected like other committees to a certain querul­ousness from the EC and the more lynx-eyed members. Nor was there great zeal, or a feeling of electness, over seeking to serve on the Executive itself. Formerly the annual election had always a long list of candidates, and the result approached being a popularity poll (chiefly, again, in the speakers’ minds). At the end of 1971, insufficient members stood to fill the fourteen seats and the Party had to be asked to nomin­ate more.

Hardy and McClatchie finally retired from editing the Socialist Standard in the mid-sixties. Apart from Ralph Critchfield, who had assisted them since 1959, there was no ready successor; but there were younger writers willing to serve. The mood was good, and it was two or three years before it darkened. At first the EC was magnanimous, making allowances for inexperience. The Standard seemed deficient in substance, failing to deal in depth; Hardy complained that, compiling the index, he could not find what some articles were about.

This was the fringe of the matter, however. One of the left-wing causes of the day was the squatter movement. It was begun in 1968 by anarchists as a venture in direct action, and became a general focus for demands for housing reform. In the spring of 1969 the Standard pub­lished an article on the agitation that said: ‘We support the squatters.’

To the Party, it was an alarming declaration. What did ‘support’ mean ? Perhaps to some it stood merely for approval; but others saw it as imply­ing willingness to give positive aid to reformists.

The Executive Committee prepared a statement of the Party’s attitude to reforms, and it was circulated to the membership. Its main points were, first, that the SPGB did not advocate reforms; second, that words like ‘support’ were so consequential as to ask for trouble; and third, that where a specific matter was being considered what had to be seen was the reform measure in detail, not the broad statement of intent. The last was a telling point. Throughout the history of social reform, the spirit of the demand has more often than not been van­quished by the letter of its translation into practice, and reformers have found themselves responsible for all kinds of things they did not intend.

But further statements appeared. To their anger and embarrass­ment, the members read in the Standard that they were supporting political strikes and the anarchist doctrine of ‘smashing the state’, and expressing attitudes they wanted nothing to do with; and these were no accidents, but the intention of the editors. The problem created was twofold. First, whatever appeared in the Standard had a special invul­nerability. It was the Party’s voice; once published, a statement remained on record unless deliberately retracted. And second, these aberrations went with a falling-off, conspicuous for some time, in the Standard’s quality. There was, indeed, a loss of confidence in the Standard for the first time in nearly seventy years. Contributors withdrew, and members spoke of reluctance to sell it.

The faction which was now visible was of young members, mostly with university backgrounds (''that was never any damned good’, said the others). The central aim appeared to be to take the Party away from its concern with political machinery, towards direct action and the doctrine that industrial struggles made for revolutionary consciousness in the workers. This was the strongest theme of the ‘new left’ which had sprung up since 1960; and without doubt the group in the Party eyed the new organizations, wanting the SPGB to be seen in the struggles as well. Similarly, it was proposed to associate with socio political movements, in particular the students’ organization and Women’s Liberation.

That the matter did not make a dramatic controversy like those of the past was due to three or four factors. It was diffuse, moving from question to question rather than creating a pitched battle over a single major issue. The revisionists themselves were cagey, looking for procedural and psychological advantages. Executive members like Baldwin and D’Arcy who opposed their tendency were characterized as fundamentalists who held the Party back. The branch to which most of them belonged deluged the EC with technical complaints; three or four obtained places on it, their effect being to create divisions in voting that continually robbed decisions of authority. They took to the Conference ambiguous proposals which most members would not have sought to deny but whose adoption, in other contexts, meant the gaining of ground. In the background, astonishingly, was the influence of the Party’s old adversary the Social Science Association; and one cannot help but wonder at the strangeness of its people’s obsession with disturbing the SPGB alone.

The vital factor, however, was the Standard. In 1972 its editorship changed. The new editors worked closely with the EC, making their objectives known. Former contributors returned, and the Party’s position was stated with vigour. Its appearance improved; confidence flooded back. The members were re-animated, feeling that their time was being wasted by the revisionists when there were meetings to be staged and, once more, a paper they were proud of to be sold. The faction made its last sorties. A duplicated magazine called Libertarian Communism was produced, setting forth alternative views to the SPGB’s, and a leaflet headed ‘Where We Stand’ was circulated to the membership. A group in Scotland distributed leaflets implying Party support for the National Union of Students, among other things. Charges were brought against nine members, who were all expelled at, the end of 1974. Two or three others resigned in sympathy, but the conclusion was without anger or trauma.

What the hearings of the charges revealed, in fact, was how much the dissension was only talk. The members who had contended against the Party’s views wanted only to discuss continually. One, a young woman who had joined Women’s Liberation, explained that she did no more than talk in other people’s front rooms. The activism they urged did not mean participation but the passing of resolutions of approval and the issuing of leaflets of advice; the Party was right to despise it. Nevertheless, the Socialist Standard had for the only time printed the contrary of what the Party believed. Had the times not been promising and an up-grade continuing, the damage might have been more severe and longer-lasting.

The SPGB was getting into full stride as it had not for years. As the economic crisis of the ’seventies approached, it took up again the prognostications of a ‘death agony’ for capitalism. A new generation of the left had rediscovered Marx’s ‘law of the falling tendency of the rate of profit’ to expound how the system must shortly grind to a halt. Still better armed than it had been before, the Party attacked this revival of the theory of collapse.

At the same time, it analyzed the monetary inflation which was now accelerating and becoming the outstanding problem of the time. Hardy had been studying the effects of Keynesian theories for several years, from time to time giving lectures on both its misapplication and its fallacies. Articles in the Standard now showed, first, the absurdity of attributing inflation to wage increases — wages were prices them­selves, subject to the same causes and influences as other prices — and second, the mechanism to which ‘an excess issue of an inconvertible paper currency’ was due, and its results.

It is worth remarking on the number of occasions the SPGB made early and correct diagnoses before, as far as I know, anyone else thought of them. Its statements on Russia from the outset (a collection of them was published in 1948 with the title Russia Since 1917); its view of the Welfare State as a means of controlling and apportioning wages; its prediction of the outcome from comprehensive schools. It is the fate of minorities not to be noticed, of course — the monetarist school of political economists rose to prominence in the ’seventies, arguing over inflation what the Party had said for some time previously.

More than seventy years old, the SPGB is vigorous and well, then. Possibly it will never in its lifetime be free from inner controversies and the tendency must always be for some section to see a link which should be changed. Older and younger elements may and do pull in different directions: one sees at the Conference today, often, how the ‘ayes’ are the cavalier-haired, lean-faced young men and the girls in patched jeans from the provinces, the ‘noes’ the men with sober suits and tidy greying hair from the London branches. But underlying the arguments and dissensions, the identity of purpose is as strong as the founders’ in 1904 when they drew up their Principles to be a permanent guide. The young people’s impatience arises from urgency, from their conviction that the new society can and must be brought about soon The older ones hold the conviction with equal passion, tempered for them by having seen too many things go wrong. Heavy and deliberate as the precision is, its logic is that of the horseshoe nail in the nursery rhyme. With every nail secured and every shoe in place, the battle can and shall be won.

19**.**

A Return

This has been a personal account, and must finish as one. I left the Socialist Party in 1960. Eventually I returned; in between, I saw other kinds of politics and considered what socialism was.

The sense of being free, of not being obliged or committed, having no meetings to attend and no reports to write, was strange after so many years. Lisa Bryan asked me on the telephone how I should occupy my time. I said I would read, do historical research, and dig the garden. She giggled: ‘Can’t imagine you doing those for long.’ Bob Reynolds, with whom I had always kept in touch, said fiercely: ‘Bah ! you can’t think in organizations ! ’

I had plenty of contact with members and ex-members, but all we talked about when we were together was the Party. I did not want that. When you left something you left it, you did not hang on its doorstep, I thought. I had seen several who left, even in strong disa­greement, and then could not stay away but came to socials and meetings almost as often as when they were members. I could vote or even speak for some other party if I wanted to. ‘What do you think of the Labour Party ? ’ asked one of my neighbours. ‘Not much,’ I said.

In fact I moved away from London, out of reach — without an effort, at any rate — of contact and participation, not long afterwards. Before doing so, I attended ILP meetings; a parliamentary candidature for CND was offered to me; and I had talked with several leaders of the emerging new left. They were all quite unlike that I had expected. Inside an organization one receives impressions of its rivals; these were all false. The CND candidature, so far from being an effort by earnest unpolitical people on behalf of humanity, turned out to be part of a complicated manoeuvre to dish the local council over political matters. The ILP, which I had assailed furiously in public debate, was practically dead: a handful of people, most of them middle-class and elderly, in a rambling bureaucratic structure.

The left-wing movement was only beginning to form. Many of the new groups were led by ex-Communists who had seceded after the Communist Party’s embarrassments and conflicts over Hungary; as CND created protest-hungry factions of young people they gathered

their own militant circles round them. In 1960, however, they were generals without armies, and I met (usually, was approached by) seven or eight with their theories and plans.

Again, I was surprised, by the old-fashionedness of not only the theories but the attitudes accompanying them. In introspective periods in the SPGB, the suspicion that we were behind the times would be voiced; our opponents never failed to say so. One expected, therefore, to find policies and imagery which reflected the claim and fitted the contemporary scene. They did not. I found myself sitting listening to men whose thinking was dominated by the concept of the collarless, downtrodden-but-defiant proletarian. I was told that subjects like Trotsky’s permanent revolution theory, Stalinism, and the rate of surplus-value were what ‘the chap at the factory bench’ talked about. People who say this kind of thing have never been in factories in their lives, of course; on one or two occasions I said so.

In one sense that idealized picture of the factory worker is a supplement to crudely-held doctrines of societal laws. The ‘historic mission’ of the working class being posited, a missionary character must be shown. But in 1960 (and after) it was supposed to exemplify modem thinking. Marx’s theory of value is based on a model of the productive process. Indirect workers — factory clerks, transport workers and tech­nicians — might appear as accessories in the process; but exploitation and class struggle became obscure in the large numbers of occupations outside the immediate sphere of manufacture.

Reasoning thus, the leaders of the new left-wing groups concent­rated their propaganda on industrial workers virtually to the exclusion of all others. An American attempt to re-orientate left-wing theory, Raya Dunayevskaya’s Marxism and Freedom, identified the impulse to revolution entirely with production workers. I found none of this interesting or even plausible. The ILP members’ version incorporated paternalistic sentiments: the working class must have what was good for it. When it was suggested that I give a lecture, my proposal was greeted diffidently; the members themselves would appreciate hearing this, but something different was needed for the workers.

For the next two or three years I took no part, and was occupied with work, domestic life and reading. I wrote and received a lot of letters. The local library supplied new novels – I had read hardly any for years. Many were highly praised and had great significance attributed to them in reviews, but almost none remained in my mind. On television, there was the new generation of satirists mocking everything in social and political life. A old left-wing man wrote to me on the snags of country life: he had lived in a village and knew how it was for

a radical, necessarily living at odds with all the conformists round him. I replied that I was getting on well with my neighbours and wished to continue doing so.

At the beginning of 1964 I was asked if I would stand for the local council. Though the whole area was predominantly Tory, there was a strong tradition in favour of independent representation. Village life was then in a transition which now has been almost completed.

With fewer and fewer people employed in agriculture, the cottages were being bought by well-to-do townspeople who wanted the old and picturesque preserved alongside modern amenities; the villagers themselves were being herded into little council-house estates. Most of them had some idea that I held unorthodox views. I accepted, was elected, and remained a councillor for six years.

Most of the council — all its meetings were held in the daytime were farmers and business or professional people, or retired ones. It was well-conducted and amiable, with few disputes; the majority, despite their ‘independent’ labels, were Conservatives and there was no political division. After I had spoken a few times, an elderly man took me aside and said: ‘I think we’ve something in common. I’ve been a socialist all my life — in the Labour Party.’ I said I was not Labour. ‘Ah well,’ he said, ‘as long as you’re not a member of the SPGB.’ Startled, I extended the conversation. He told me he was a retired insurance agent; he had been a conscientious objector in the 1914-18 war, and as a young man in Manchester had known Moses Baritz and the old crowd there. We often sat together after that, and when I refused to take part in a Civil Defence scheme he supported and joined me.

I sat on the planning and public health committees, and the committee which allocated tenancies of council houses; I was the council’s delegate to a regional body for the furtherance of the arts, which never met during the years I was there. A lot of the work was local welfare, dealing with individuals’ problems. People came to the door who needed housing, had difficulties over Social Security, were troubled by nuisances, required help from the council services. As time went by it was plain that my not being in the Conservative Association meant doors closed to me and a disadvantage to many who wanted favours done. That was where the reciprocations and benefits lay; and I have no doubt that the position is the same in Labour councils.

When it became known that I had no party affiliation, I was approached by both Conservative and Labour officials talking about parliamentary candidatures. After I had rejected them I thought about matters. I wrote down what were my beliefs, the things accepted and unacceptable: the list was not much different from what it had always

been. I wanted to take part in political life again, propagate the ideas I held, do some speaking and writing if possible. The prospect of going back to the Party after cutting away completely seemed doubtful, how­ever. I sent someone a letter about nothing in particular, seeking to re establish contact so that I might say: ‘Oh, I’ve been thinking about re joining’; he did not reply.

By this time, in fact, I was out of touch with my former assoc­iations. I did not know what was happening in the SPGB, or how the new left had fared. Looking for some avenue, one day I saw a copy of the anarchists’ Freedom. It had one or two names I knew — old adver­saries, but likeable ones. I wrote to them, and was invited to give a talk to the London Anarchist Group. Then it was as I had always known it: a small group of mostly rather reserved people. In a few months the anarchist idea of direct action was suddenly to become infectious; through being there at the time I was to see a good deal of it, and of other left-wing groups who joined in.

My London neighbour’s question might be asked at this point: what about the Labour Party ? I knew people in it and, I suppose, might have had a career in it. There were two insuperable objections as far as I was concerned. One was that I simply did not agree with the Labour Party. In government it acted like the Conservatives, and out of government paraded aims which were only too clearly either futile or specious. There was a school of thought in the left which acknowledged this but saw permanent hope in the Labour rank-and-file who, however misled, sustained a conviction for socialism.

I did not believe that either. Among people of my own gener­ation and older, there might have been something to be said for it. I had Labour friends who were not unlike the members of the SPGB except that they stopped short of logical conclusions. Indeed, the early Labour leaders — Hardie, the Webbs and the rest — knew and talked about socialism, but were compromised in policies designed to win mass support on varied grounds. There was, and is, nothing of this to be seen now. When I am among Labour people I find chiefly smart-alec, well- heeled men concerned only with management and viability, among whom any talk of a new society is dismissed as utopian.

Thus, I spent nearly three years in the heterogeneous ‘libertarian’ movement of the mid-nineteen-sixties. The rise to popularity of direct action was not unconnected with what I have been saying about the Labour Party. There was a common sentiment that parliament could no longer be considered as a means to radical change. Political rebels were eaten whole by party machinery: the workers must be told to seize whatever else came to hand. For the same reasons the general determination

was to steer clear of structured — ‘bureaucratic’ — organization. Many of the groups I attended had no formal membership, and their activities were spur-of-the-moment arrangements by twos and threes.

This ‘do-it-yourself’ association appeared flexible in contrast with the procedures of the SPGB, where members could be frustrated because their suggestions were not adopted or because delays in action seemed almost to outlive the need for it. In fact, it usually meant there being a caucus of close associates who arranged and executed things with very little participation by the rest. In two good-sized activist groups I attended the principals continually complained of all they had to do, but offers of help caused only embarrassment: the difficulties of admitting somebody else were actually greater than those of being short-handed. Most of the splits and quarrels were over caucus-making and resentment at not knowing what was being arranged.

Paradoxically, the informality made integration in libertarian groups hard to achieve. Their turnover of people who came and drifted away was very high. The basic feeling was an unsociable one — too busy with important projects to notice individuals; indeed, I often heard conversations interrupted with ‘This isn’t a social club’. The only group I came across that showed cordiality was the Syndicalist Workers’ Federation (it held cheery socials above a pub at King’s Cross), and it was also the only one which resembled the SPGB in having a declared programme and structure. The non-social groups harangued a great deal about alienation, how people were estranged from themselves and one another by the system, and did not seem to think there was anything odd.

This was the heyday of the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations. Besides them I witnessed, knew the participants in and heard the talk about the direct-action exploits of the time: the occupation of the Greek Embassy in 1967, and the squatter movement. They roused excitement, of course; they were skilfully but arbitrarily planned, with no anticipation of — and wholesale confusion over — the outcomes. In whatever venture, the fundamental justification was unrest for its own sake: ‘People are changed by struggle.’ It is not true in most cases.

People brought into situations framed by somebody else are going to be simply followers, comprehending and even knowing little of what the issues are. When it is true, is the direction of the change predictable ?

But I heard nothing from the demonstrators and action groups of the supremely important thing: the vision of a society where all things for men should be, in Morris’s words, ‘better than well’. The phrase ‘alternative society’ was to be found in the hippy papers, International Times and Oz and the rest, and for them it meant creating

one’s own cocoon within capitalism. In 1967 I spoke about it in a talk to an anarchist group, and the responses were blank; finally a man said he was not interested in society and embraced anarchism as a damn- them-all philosophy. The view of the industrial militants was not so very different. Talking to a man well-known in the factory-ferment circles,

I referred to the mass of ordinary people in everyday jobs. He said: ‘I’m not interested in ordinary people, or everyday jobs. I’m only interested in industrial workers.

Feelings of affinity or even sympathy for most of what I saw and heard were hard to find. I spoke occasionally at meetings and wrote a few articles, but both were hard going; I was lacking conviction. I wrote to several of the people I had met in the libertarian movement, putting my viewpoint to them. The answers (I still have them) were not without interest. The anarchists replied mostly that if I were thinking of co-operation, consistency and social or personal responsibility, I obviously had no idea what anarchism was about. The others, the more purposeful politicos, said they found my criticisms absolutely correct: the trouble was, they were too steeped in activity to stop and put anything right.

In the summer of 1969 I realized where I should be. I had wasted nine years. I was still a councillor: ‘one of the council’s “characters”;’ the Treasurer said. I sent for a copy of the Socialist Standard — I had seen it only two or three times since 1960 — and looked for where branch meetings were being held. The one I picked was a branch which had not existed when I left, and I did not know who would be there. On a Friday evening when they had a lecture on Parliament, I walked in.

I had no idea what my reception would be. There were two or three men who knew me, and they quickly passed the word round.

I took no part in the discussion, but afterwards we went in the pub downstairs. They were immensely friendly. We were jammed in a corner of the saloon, shouting at one another above the music. A young woman threaded her way to me and said: ‘You are the first person from “the old days” I’ve met ! ’ I asked them about this and that member. Waters was dead; someone I knew well had left; Gilmac still going strong at eighty-odd; Harry Young — no chicken either — spouting in the Park on Sundays: good lord !

I went there each week. It was possible to note changes of which the members themselves might have been unaware. In a recent election campaign the candidates had been advertized with their first names, apparently as a matter of course; I remembered the indignation over Jack Read. I went to Clapham one Tuesday night. The EC was arguing

as always but in a room no longer packed with listeners. Sammy Highams — dear, irascible old Sammy — came and shook hands and talked. The Head Office had been handsomely decorated and better appointed; but where was the canteen darts-board at which Hardy and McClatchie used to play ? One or two younger people asked me to their homes, and I saw that the shelves of books of my generation were replaced by hi-fi equipment.

It was not all easy and welcoming, however. I knew the members were looking warily, wondering what my intentions were. To the young ones I was nobody at all; some of the older ones would recall, without doubt, that the ’sixties had been a time of struggle against odds and 1 had been elsewhere. Before anything happened, bona fides had to be established. My term on the council had still some months to go, and it occurred to me that the period would be an appropriate one for attending meetings, getting to know people again and letting them know me. 1 acted thus. When the council term expired I did not stand again, and applied to join the Party. The Executive argued, disagreed, and admitted me. Harry Baldwin took the sternest view, and would not vote for my application. Afterwards he invited me to the fish-and-chip cafe across the road. ‘My objections were entirely procedural,’ he said. ‘There was nothing personal in them at all.’ We sat laughing and talking happily until midnight.

What is there to be said for persistent membership of a small party whose electoral returns are absurdly small; whose influence is restricted; and which will not change its mind ? Above everything else, the SPGB remains the only custodian of the vision of socialism. There is no other group or party which speaks in such terms today. Others claimed it was their objective in the past, but left it in abeyance while immediate tasks were attempted, or saw it as being in some degree hypothetical: ‘a beautiful picture’, as a Labour man said to me once,

‘of what we hope the world may some day be like for the human race.’ The Socialist Party has seen it for seventy years as the attainable purpose to which all struggles against the oppressions and inequality of a class-based society must be directed. Indeed, it is impossible to see how the struggles can have coherence unless such a purpose exists.

Nor is it possible to rationalize the struggle, to say it involves some more than others, that these are exploited and those are not. There are degrees of conspicuousness but the state of our society can best be summarized, I think, by saying that most people are, and feel themselves to be, victims. The pressures and penalties of existence in the modern capitalist system are intense; and they are penalties not for what is consciously chosen, but for ways of life which are forced like strait-

jackets on people. At its superficial level, there is the common feeling of being sold short at every turn — conned by mass-communications, extorted by commerce, lied to by politicians, treated like dirt by bureaucrats.

The ‘never-had-it-so-good’ era, which promised to make the need for social change redundant, faded away abruptly. On one hand the Welfare State has failed keep up, except in proliferating bureau­cracy; on another, there is the disparate poverty, the occupations and sets of circumstances in which ends can’t be met. People have ceased to point out that an unemployed man with a family can get twenty-five pounds a week in social security payments, because it is seen more and more often that wages for innumerable workers are no better. The measures taken by the Labour governments of recent years show the extent to which the Labour Party has fallen away from the humanism which, even if only in talk, once characterized it. Previous Labour governments had unemployment and economic crises, but they apolo­gized and tried to excuse themselves; contemporary ones have made known from the outset that their way out of crisis will be at the expense of the working class.

The means by which depression and destitution were said to be being overcome in the ’fifties have rebounded. Credit and hire-purchase, the agencies through which working people were ‘improving their standards’, provide not only private millstones but instruments for the regulation of domestic consumption and the direction of labour. An increase in the statutory deposit for certain classes of goods has the automatic effect of making them unpurchasable even on hire-purchase for the time, and so reducing production in — say — furniture factories to make part of their labour-force redundant and available for work elsewhere.

Likewise in the nineteen-fifties it was widely said that social barriers were disappearing. The fact that rich and poor read the same newspapers and watched the same television programmes was held to be the sign of an equalization of culture; working-class access to domestic comforts and leisure-time enjoyments, the beginning of the end of private privilege. (This was part of Frank Evans’s argument in ‘The Nature of the Socialist Revolution’.) What has emerged has been the drawing of fresh lines. Recent books renewing the study of middle- class life all speak of the preoccupation with schooling, and actual fear of the hooligan children in the comprehensive school and the council- house estate.

The apparent social inroads have only set up more divisions. A package holiday abroad may be a pleasurable change, but its social

status is on a level with a trip to Brighton. The proletarian stigmata are not permitted to be erased. The phrase ‘permissive society’ for certain phenomena in recent times is a give-away as to the sort of society we are really living in. As apparent barriers have broken down, restrictive laws have been steadily extended: permission is given, but under super­vision and on the condition of instant withdrawal when thought necessary.

That is all workaday and domestic living. What of the great issues and questions for humanity ? The keynote of the nineteen- fifties’ apathy was struck by Jimmy Porter in John Osborne’s Look Back in Anger: ‘There aren’t any good, brave causes any more.’ There was, of course, the hydrogen bomb; it has now receded in people’s consciousness, the Vietnam war perhaps taken as a confirmation that the powers would simply never dare to use it. Vietnam itself was a fertile source of indignation and protest from mixed motives: humane compassion, dismay at the cynicism of governments, anti-Americanism and desire for the Communists to win were all present in the rallies and the fights round Grosvenor Square.

The Socialist Standard was probably the only paper to remark, at the height of anti-nuclear feeling, what was the truly terrifying thing about the hydrogen bomb: that the world could be scourged and devast­ated by weapons of war without it. Less than twenty years later there is a still more terrifying thought, as evidence has accumulated of the effects of everyday pollution of the environment — the world can be equally scourged without war at all. There is, too, at this moment the immediate likelihood of a world-wide economic crisis on the scale of 1929 against whose onset the political and economic wisdom of capitalism is powerless.

What can be done about any or all of these things ? They are not even problems in the sense of housing, or traffic, or the care of the old, where the hope that legislation can mitigate may be mistaken but is understandable; they are part of the condition of humanity now.

Of course there are protests and demands. The protests, however, tend to be a matter of affirming self-respect and decent feelings more than anything else: I have stood up and testified, runs the sentiment, so what is happening today is not my fault. Some time ago a Labour MP spoke to me of having given up the Vietnam crusade: ‘What can you do about Vietnam ? Nothing ! ’

It depends on what you want to do. Hopes for social reform are usually fragmentary or one-eyed; they concern themselves with a single outstanding evil, or are limited to a belief (for example) that people must be made better before the world will change much. More­

over, the ‘good, brave causes’ can and do dissolve in bitterness. I know too many men in their fifties and sixties who crusaded and fought, and live now in uncomprehending disappointment at what went wrong.

Quite recently I listened to an old friend, sitting by the fireplace in his front room. He told me how unhappy he had become; he had never let his wife know, but sometimes he thought of suicide. ‘Do you know what it was ? ’ he said. ‘The Russian revolution — we all hoped for everything from it.’

If it is possible to find an umbrella covering all aspirations for a humane society, the nearest idea is that of choice. It is only in this context that the word ‘freedom’ makes sense: freedom to choose. The objection to authority and coercion is precisely that they deny choice and impose someone else’s. Racialism and war are ultimates in the repudiation of choice; born on the wrong side, one forfeits the right to participation in society or even to live. Poverty denies choice; not only in the sense that if one is poor there is going to be bread-and-scrape, but in reference to work, housing, education, leisure activities and personal relationships.

Indeed, it is by looking at a single aspect like housing that one sees what lack of choice can mean. Sexual fulfilment depends far more on bricks-and-mortar environment than on permissiveness. The minimum requirements are privacy, hot water, warmth and not being tired; one could add further desirabilia like a comfortable bed and nice surround­ings. Given the perfect partner and the most liberal frame of mind, it is not possible to have the best from this area of life in a cold room where the neighbours or the children can hear everything and the washing facilities are inadequate. Good housing and amenities are essentials of freedom. At the same time, good housing is also that which is appropriate to one’s needs. Most people’s housing needs vary con­siderably at different stages of their lives. A well-to-do person is able to buy mobility. For the majority, however, the house obtained accord­ing to means is likely to remain the home more or less permanently, regardless of its suitability.

The inference might be that what one has to do, then, is attack social evils and seek to extend areas of choice for everyone as far as possible. Paradoxically, it is virtually impossible to do that in a basically unfree society. I have mentioned housing and mobility. If an estate is built to rehouse poor people in a pleasant area, everyone who can afford it in the neighbourhood will promptly move away, making the estate automatically a colony of inferiors. The main dilemma of the Welfare State is that, however it was conceived as a national effort transcending individual status, it has never been seen as anything but sectional

— a tax, more or less, on the well-to-do and a bounty to the poor.

Nor is it more feasible to try to legislate against a problem like pollution. There are, of course, partial approaches to it. But if alter­native techniques for all contaminatory industrial processes were found, the criterion is not going to be human wellbeing but ‘viability’ —- how much will it cost ? There is nothing intelligible to say of such a pro­blem except that it is inseparable from production for profit. Though popular awareness of it is recent, it is simply the development of what has been going on throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

If one adds to it the other chronic problems of the modern world — the crisis-producing imbalances of production which are part of the nature of capitalism, the international rivalries and tensions and the dreadful consequences when tension breaks — these alone press a majestic case for a fundamental alteration in society. When is added the failure of capitalism to house, feed, educate or make happy vast numbers of people, or to give any degree of choice, the case becomes overwhelm­ing.

The argument for socialism is that the problems will cease to exist and freedom of choice be given, only on the terms of common ownership of all the means of living. Production for use means production unconfined by the market as to either distribution or cost. On one hand there would be free access to the wealth of society; on the other, cost and competition would not oppose themselves to human wellbeing. The material fears of loss of work, housing or status that largely underlie racialism would disappear with every other kind of superiority-distinction. So would the pressures which continually crush the quality of personal life. Indeed , if common ownership is seen as the means and not the end, socialism appears not simply as the solution but as many thousands of solutions: the facility from which progress, in the true sense, may begin.

The movement for social change has got to be a democratic one and not a cabal. The objection to arbitrary private decision is not just an ethical one. It is part of the argument against direct action as well as against despotism, that unless people know and give their will to what is happening, they are being treated as subjects. There has to be con­sciousness, and there has to be acknowledgement of the fact that the ultimate directive power over us all is still with Parliament. The growth of a movement in these terms is inevitably tedious, lacking the stimu­lation of popular rallying-calls; but its urgency is no less.

The diagnosis made by the socialists of 1904 remains true. In the face of the condition of society today, socialism is the only solution. Correctness is no guarantee of success, and the Socialist Party’s refusal

to be drawn away has made it an unattractive minority; and that in turn has led to the introspections on which I may appear to have been hard because I know them so well. Certainly if people are to listen to socialism it must continually seek relevance in its language and imagery. Perhaps the failing is that socialism appears always as a distant prospect. It is wrong to see or present it so, because the need for social change is more pressing than most of us think. But one never knows the immediate future. The socialist movement is again finding its type of crusader as it did sixty, forty, thirty years ago. If the objective is hard to see, the journey has still to be made. For, as William Morris wrote in his Dream of John Ball:

But while I pondered these things and how men fight and lose the battle and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat and, when it comes, turns out to be not what they meant — and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name. ’

Mil.

Notes

1. This was the ‘Osborne Judgement’ case. Walter Osborne, a railwayman who was a member of the Walthamstow Urban Dis­trict Council, was plaintiff in an action against the Amalgamated Society of Rail­way Servants. The House of Lords ruled that a trade union could not lawfully use funds for the purpose of political action, as unions had been doing for some years. The decision was reversed by the Trade Union Act of 1913, which made political action by the unions legal on condition that ‘contracting-out’ was allowed for objectors. Members of the SPGB who are trade unionists are obliged by a Party rul­ing to contract-out, since the funds raised by the political levy are not apportioned to the SPGB.
2. The Student’s Marx by Edward Aveling; The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx by Karl Kautsky.
3. It is said in Lee and Archbold’s Social- Democracy in Great Britain that Hyndman refrained from giving Marx’s name because he believed there would be prejudice against the work of ‘a Jew of German birth’. Lee was secretary of the SDF for twenty-eight years.
4. ‘I claim for the ILP that its Socialism is above suspicion, and its independence unchallenged and unchallengeable; and yet in the platform speeches and in the writ­ings of its leading advocates the terms “class war” or “class conscious” are rarely if ever used . . . the object of Socialism is the removal of the causes which produce this antagonism, so that the human interest may at all times be the dominant one. The enlightened capitalist will be as anxious

to bring this about as the enlightened work­man. Both stand to gain from the change. But two points need to be emphasized here: the first is that the conflict of inter­ests is not necessarily a class one; and the second is that the “propertyless proletar­iat” — to borrow William Morris’s phrase — is not a class at all.’ Keir Hardie, in the Labour Leader, September 1904.

1. The leader of the Scottish faction was James Connolly, later a leader first of Irish nationalism and then of the Sinn Fein movement.
2. Jack Kent later became Conservative Mayor of Acton.
3. Poverty: A Study of Town Life by B. Seebohm Rowntree, 1901.
4. ‘Our Principles Stand’, by E. Lake: fiftieth anniversary issue of the Socialist Standard, September 1954.
5. Lehane later joined forces with Connolly and became active in the Irish nationalist movement.
6. The Communist Club at 107 Charlotte Street had been the meeting place of the old Communist Party of 1848.
7. The fact that an article of this kind could be published in 1911 is an indication of considerable changes in the climate of opinion. By the time of the next corona­tion it could have led to prosecution. An article written at the time of Elizabeth II’s coronation in 1953, in far more temp­erate terms, did not appear in the Socialist Standard because the printer refused to accept it.
8. Third Annual Diocesan Congress, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Down and Connor: Some Papers Read. Published by the Irish News Ltd, Belfast.
9. George Hicks (1879-1954) became General Secretary to the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers. In 1945 he entered Parliament as Member for East Woolwich and was Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Works in the Labour Government.
10. ‘I have never said or written anything to dissuade our young men from enlisting;

I know too well all that there is at stake . . . If I can get the recruiting figures for Merthyr week by week, which I find is a very difficult job, I hope by another week to prove that whereas our Rink meeting gave a stimulus to recruiting, those meet­ings at the Drill Hall at which the Liberal member or the Liberal candidate spoke had exactly the opposite effect.’ Keir Hardie, in the Merthyr Pioneer, 27 November 1914.

1. An idea of the size and expectations of the social-democratic movement in the United States before 1914 is given by the opening of Jack London’s essay ‘Revolu­tion’, written in 1905: ‘I received a letter the other day. It was from a man in Arizona. It began, “Dear Comrade”. It ended, “Yours for the Revolution”. I replied to the letter, and my letter began, “Dear Comrade”. It ended, “Yours for the Revolution”. In the United States there 400,000 men, of men and women nearly
2. 000, who begin their letters “Dear Comrade” and end them “Yours for the Revolution”. In Germany there are
3. 000 men who begin their letters “Dear Comrade” and end them “Yours for the Revolution”; in France . . . These are numbers which dwarf the grand armies

of Napoleon and Xerxes. But they are numbers not of conquest and maintenance of the established order, but of conquest and revolution.’

1. ‘M. Maximovitch’ was Maxim Maximovitch Litvinoff, who was USSR plenipotentiary to Great Britain in 1918 and later the Russian Foreign Secretary. According to Beatrice Webb’s diaries (1912-24), he had already been living in London for nine years before 1918; his wife was the English novelist Ivy Low.
2. This statement does not appear in some editions of the Communist Manifesto. It was quoted again by Engels, as if to under­line his point, in his preface to the 1888 edition which he edited for Reeves (London).
3. Capital, Volume 3, Chapter XXIII: ‘Interest and Profit of Enterprise’ — pages 446-459 (Kerr edition).
4. The rates of benefit under the unem­ployment insurance scheme in 1931 were: Men between 21 and 65, 15s. 3d a week; adult dependents, 8s.; dependent children, 4s. Only one dependent adult was allowed to any man.
5. For a fuller account of the NUWM, see Allen Hutt’s Post-War History of the British Working Class.
6. In the Daily Worker for 29th January 1930, Harry Pollitt wrote: ‘A Labour meet­ing should not be allowed to be held any­where. This will bring us into conflict with the Authorities, but must be done. The Daily Worker will lead the revolutionary masses boldly and openly against this Government of scoundrels and agents of capitalism.’
7. Twenty-six stamps was a standard of respectability imposed by the unemploy­ment relief system. It meant that a man had worked recently and so was ‘in benefit’ and could register for payments at the Labour Exchange. Those not in benefit were consigned to the ultimate depth of application for Public Assistance.
8. In 1939, after a member of the ILP had been granted an exemption on politic­al grounds by the London Tribunal, the Ministry of Labour lodged an appeal. The Appellate Tribunal refused to give a ruling on the subject of political objections, but the majority of the tribunals laid down that they interpreted the Act as not rec­ognizing the validity of such objections.
9. The debate was published in the ‘Little Blue Books’ series by the Haldman-Julius Company, of Kansas. Originally it took place at the Lexington Theatre, New York,

on 23 January 1921. The opposing speaker was Professor Scott Nearing.

1. Quoted from an article on parliament­ary campaigns in the 1954 anniversary Socialist Standard.
2. Rudolf Frank’s efforts bore fruit in the formation in the nineteen-sixties of the Bund Demokratischer Sozialisten, which adopted the Object and Principles of the SPGB.
3. Allen’s criticism of Shaw is quoted in Shaw — the Chuckerout by Allan Chappelow (1969). There is no reference to Shaw’s replies, however.
4. It would be possible to write with some heat on this subject. The suppression of public assemblies by dictatorial rulers never fails to produce indignation, but the same effect produced by traffic regulations arouses no sympathy at all.
5. A Committee of Enquiry was set up by the Labour Party in the late nineteen- thirties to examine the Douglas scheme.

It included what might be called in a sport­ing or theatrical programme ‘a galaxy of stars’: Sydney Webb, G.D.H.Cole, Hugh Dalton, J.A.Hobson, C.M.Lloyd, Chiozza Money, R.H.Tawney, and Arthur Greenwood. Their finding in a special report entitled ‘Labour and Social Credit’ was that the scheme was ‘theoretically unsound and unworkable in practice’.

1. The Soul of Man Under Socialism by Oscar Wilde.
2. The section of Capital most relevant to present-day conditions is Part 3 of Volume 3. It contains the basis of Evans’s contention. Marx writes of ‘the fact that the same amount of values represents a progressively increasing mass of use-values and enjoyments to the extent that the capitalist system of production carries with it a development of the productive powers of social labour, a multiplication of the lines of production, and an inrreaae of products’.
3. Joan Lestor entered the Laboui I' h i and became a member of the London County Council and then, in MHii. M. m

ber of Parliament for Eton and Nl 11 1

became the junior minifil «n id I In I' i ment of Education and Meinn •

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Credo quia impossibile

by BERNARD LEVIN

ONE of the nicest things I know about Britain is that organisations like the SPGB can exist, and when I say ‘ organisations like ’ the SPGB, I mean the SPGB, for there is nothing else like it, and when I say I am glad it can exist, I do not mean that 1 am glad we live in a society free enough for such glorious nonsense to be freely promulgated, though obviously that is cause for rejoicing, but that what truly warms the heart is the glimpse its existence gives of the richness, variety and eccentricity that make up our extraordinary nation.

The SPGB was originally a fragment of the cosmic, dust resulting from the ‘big bang of Marxism in the nineteenth century. The proliferation of socialist, utopian and millen- arian sects around the end of Victoria’s reign was largely the result of the passionate intensity with which almost every individual in them maintained that there was but one true faith and that he alone held it; the SPGB originated with a group ex­pelled from Hyndman’s Social Democratic Federation for sortie inconceivably obscure variety of deviationism, and is unique not just in that it is the most extreme of all the Impossibilist sects but be­cause it has remained abso­lutely unchanged in its beliefs from 1904 to the present day.

The original declaration of aims stated that the SPGB was ‘ hostile to every other party ’ and that it was ‘ deter­mined to wage war against all other political parties, whether alleged labour or avowedly capitalist.’ And to this position it has adhered ever since, with absolutely literal fidelity; it is perfectly fair to say that its members believe that there is nothing whatever to choose between the Labour Party and the National Front, or between the Communist Party and the Tories.

The SPGB’s position is simple, and always has been. Marx was right; the SPGB’s interpretation of Marx is right; there is no possibility of anything at all happening to improve the lot of the people until, overnight, they seize control of their own destiny and enact Socialism; none but the SPGB can con­vert them to that view. It fol­lows that all attempts at re­form of any kind must be implacably resisted, partly because they are all devised by the capitalist class to

THE MONUMENT: The

Story of the Socialist Party of Great Britain by Robert Barltrop (Pluto Press £3.90)

always been desperately poor, because advertising is a filthy capitalist habit, despite

the fact tharat the time they took the decision they had only ever had one advertiser, and he was the Party mem­ber who printed the Party journal at ruinous cost to his little printing business, which he wanted to see sur­vive solely so that he could- go on producing it for his comrades; and one member, hardly exceptional among nis fellows, ‘ would have no fur­niture because (he said) capitalists sent bailiffs to take such things away from work­ing people, and so his family used orange boxes instead.’

It is not difficult to guess what this Impossibilism has led to, again and again, throughout the Party’s his­tory : a succession of atroci­ous purges and heresy hunts, of a mediaeval intolerance and ferocity, within the ranks of the Elect. Again and again, their best men have been thrown out for daring to suggest the tiniest varia­tion in the interpretation of Holy Writ; whole Branches (sometimes amounting to a substantial .proportion of the entire membership, which has rarely been more than a few' hundred) have been expelled; and every time there was a vote on an expul­sion, those who had voted against it were themselves forthwith expelled, followed by any who had voted against their expulsion.

Until very recent times, the SPGB’s story has been largely- composed of some marvel­lously colourful figures; there was Moses Baritz, for instance, who, barred from a meeting of a rival organisa­tion, ‘ climbed on the roof with a clarinet, poked it in:: a ventilator shaft, and blew piercing unbearable obbliga­tos into the hall until they A: him in.’ And there was Tony Turner, whom I heard speak many times, and who was certainly the greatest soap­boxer I can remember (he once spoke, in Hyde Park, from early morning until late at night, without a break).

The author is himself a lifelong member, though he left the Party for some years, and may well be expelled for heresy because of this book; it is v.-ritten with an htnttty

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partly because they delay the  
dawn.

Thus, the SPGB are im­movably opposed to the Wel­fare State; they have opposed the introduction of holidays with pay because these only refresh the workers for more exploited labour; when they put up candidates for local councils or Parliament (and they have always been very dubious about doing so) they spend much of their elec­tioneering time insisting that only voters who are 100 per cent supporters of everything they stand for may vote for them; they fought against the introduction of safeguards for factory machinery be­cause it might put off the day when the downtrodden (and, presumably, muti­lated) workers take over the means of production, distri­bution and exchange; they refused to accept advertising in their paper (The Socialist Standard) though they have

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plate, a self-taught style of  
extraordinary grace, and —  
anathema sit! anathema sit!  
— considerable humour. He  
tells a tale of gorgeous  
absurdity; of a Party which  
expelled a member for turn-  
ing up at a meeting, during  
the Second World War, with  
his gas-mask, because the  
Party had ruled that the war  
was about nothing but

capitalist rivalry; a Party  
with a faction which argued  
that ‘ vegetarianism was a  
capitalist plot to lower labour  
costs by making the working  
class feed on grass’; a Party  
which, facing financial extinc-  
tion, was saved by a large  
donation from a 92-year-old  
sympathiser with a cat called  
Karl Marx; a Party which has  
survived for 72 years by an  
implacable refusal to  
recognise any form of reality.

I hope it goes on refusing for  
another 72 years at least, for when it dies, England will have lost a monument indeed.