

HONOUR TO WHOM HONOUR

Some Reflections on Communist Party History

R. Palme Dutt

[*The Editor, who is at the moment in hospital undergoing a second operation for cataract, this time on the other eye (thus completing the series, since human beings, unlike Argus of the hundred eyes, have fortunately only two eyes), hopes to resume the regular Notes of the Month in the July issue. The June Notes will be written by the Associate Editor.—R.P.D.*]

THE true history of Socialism and the Socialist working class movement in Britain is not likely to be written before the final victory. When that time comes, values will be changed. Men and

women in all parts of the country who have fought truly without reward or recognition will receive a respect which will be denied to many who today may strut more large upon the stage.

At the time when this book* of Mr. Pelling, purporting to give a history of the Communist Party, was read to me (for I had not yet recovered the use of my eyes), I also had the *Daily Worker* and asked first, as always, to be read the classified advertisements, from which one can learn of what goes on in the movement. There was the following:

Death. The Blackburn Branch C.P. regrets to announce the passing on October 4 of Tom Catlow (at 75 years). Foundation member of the Communist Party and a life-long member and executive member of the local Weavers' Union. He always said: 'Future generations would reap a rich reward from what we did today'.

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**The British Communist Party: An Historical Profile.* Henry Pelling. A. & C. Black. 18s.

I did not have the privilege of personally knowing Tom Catlow. But I have known hundreds of men and women in every part of the country like this comrade. Their life history has been in every way a moving record of courage, honesty, loyalty to their fellow human beings, hardship, victimisation and deprivation, borne without complaining—unepic and unsung. For them there have been no rewards save to serve: no easy careers, parliamentary prospects, office or pickings or press glorification, though all awaiting in abundance any one of them who would only say the word of betrayal and pass over. The glory of the record of such men and women in our time, who have been the heart of the old Socialist movement, and who have composed the strength of the Communist Party, or in the militant movement alongside it, has been the streak of light which has illuminated an otherwise sordid and cynical period of a corrupt society in decay.

Record of Forty Years

Consider the record of these forty years. All that is remembered and celebrated with pride and honour by the entire labour movement today, during these past four decades of the foundation and existence of the Communist Party, such as the *Jolly George* which prepared the way for the Councils of Action; or Red Friday and the industrial militant upsurge which prepared the heroic class solidarity of the General Strike; the Unemployed Hunger Marches (banned at the time by the T.U.C. and Labour Party until the support of the movement compelled a change); the barring of the road to Mosley; the fight for Spanish democracy and the role of the International Brigade; the at first lone stand against Munich; the campaign for the Second Front; the smashing of the wage-freeze after the war; or the at first almost isolated battle against the American military domination of Britain and nuclear warfare now taken up on a widely extended front but still to be won; all these have time and again sprung—not in terms of some sectional claim, but by the demonstrable facts and dates of the record—from the initiative of the Communists and the Communist Party.

Similarly all that is today remembered with shame and anger by the whole labour movement: the betrayal of the General Strike; the ignominious collapse of the second Labour Government and the passing over of the principal Labour leaders to Toryism; the support of the ban on arms to Spanish democracy; the god-speed to Munich; or Bevin's sell-out of Britain to the United States: all these

have stemmed from those who have been most prominent in opposing and denouncing Communism.

Such is the already proved historical record during these forty years of the long-term significance of communism and anti-communism in the British working-class movement, even in this initial phase—for we are still in the phase of the advance to the socialist revolution in Britain—while the Communist Party is still small, still universally execrated, derided and regularly declared at the point of death by all the representatives of wealth and privilege and their paid servants and scribes.

A Caricature of History

Of this living reality of the Communist Party, whether in its human terms, or in its political and historical significance, no trace will be found in this narrow conventional police novelette, industriously compiled from the standpoint of Transport House and Scotland Yard, with the aid of the fictions and garbage of all the informers, agents and kindred sources solemnly treated as gospel, by this academic Don, remote from any contact with the working-class struggle or understanding of Socialism or Revolution.

John Gordon, editor of the *Sunday Express*, told the Press Commission that it was a remarkable thing that if you had an item in a paper about an event in which you had taken part, the item always got the facts wrong. If this happens to ordinary reporting on every-day events, how much more must it be expected to happen on a subject on which normal standards of accuracy or verifying evidence are regarded as superfluous, and the attitude of superior contempt and scorn by pygmies is regarded as obligatory in the polite orthodox world? Simple confusions and errors of facts or dates, such as could be freely cited from the pages of this book, can happen to any historian. But when I read in Mr. Pelling the account of any episode in which I might happen to have had some direct knowledge and connection, I found myself transported into a strange new world which bore little relation to the elementary facts.

Foundation of the Party

A few simple examples. First, the foundation of the Party. It might have seemed natural and obvious that, since the strongholds of the organised industrial working class, of working-class socialist

consciousness and militancy, were at that time in the centres of mining and heavy industry in Scotland and South Wales, these should provide the main initial basis and leading elements of a revolutionary proletarian party. But such simple explanations would never be sufficient to satisfy the detective ingenuity of Mr. Pelling, for whom these elements represent 'the Celtic fringe'.

Similarly with regard to the younger revolutionary intellectuals who joined in the foundation of the new Party. These 'joined of course for no other reasons than that they admired the success of the Russian Bolsheviks in accomplishing their revolution' (p. 17). Nonsense, Mr. Pelling. These youngsters were certainly representatives of a section of a new generation highly disrespectful to established institutions and their leaders, including the dominant sections of the labour movement. But they had already broken their infant teeth in the old socialist movement, whether in the semi-revolutionary upsurge before the first world war, the old rebel pre-1914 *Daily Herald*, or the battle of the socialist minority which remained faithful to the principles of socialist internationalism in the first world war. Personally, I had had experience of one military and two civil prisons and had been sent down (expelled) from Oxford for the crime of propaganda for Marxism before any Bolshevik Revolution had taken place. Indeed, in June, 1917, I had moved and carried a resolution at a joint meeting of Student Societies that a second Socialist Revolution would be necessary in Russia, if the counter-revolution were not to conquer, and that we should pledge support to the coming second Socialist Revolution. We called ourselves communists and proclaimed the aim of the dictatorship of the proletariat before most of us had anything but the most fragmentary knowledge about Lenin or the Bolsheviks. We did not become communists because we supported the Russian Revolution. We supported the Russian Revolution because we were already communists.

Early Years

Then the early years of the Party. The political leadership and campaigning of these years disappears from view. Attention is concentrated on the internal party development, which had its importance, but only in a wider context. These were the years of the transition from the initial basis of the amalgamation of the old Socialist sects to a more effective basis of organised mass work, facing outwards to the broad labour movement, with development

of democratic machinery for the election of the Executive by the Congress, organised unity of action alongside democratic discussion, and similar innovations.

Mr. Pelling tries to transform this development into a kind of mysterious Comintern plot operated by a special Comintern representative acting through a Commission of three. He states that 'at a special conference of the British Party in March, 1922, a Commission of three members was appointed to translate the Comintern instructions into recommendations for re-shaping the British Party', and that 'to assist them in their work they had, as Comintern special representative in Britain, Michael Borodin' (p. 21).

Wrong in every particular. The Commission of three was not appointed by the St. Pancras Conference in March, 1922. What happened at the St. Pancras Conference was very different. A resolution, or rather amendment, was carried against the Executive for the appointment of such a Commission from non-E.C. and non-official members of the Party ('should be elected by the Executive not from its own members or Head Office staff'), with full powers to go into all questions of the Party's work. This resolution was the expression of an insurgent rank-and-file dissatisfied with the existing situation and with the majority of the existing leadership regarded as mainly representative of the old sects. The resolution was carried at the Congress against the opposition of the Executive by 87 votes to 38. It was of course a preposterous and outrageous Congress decision to carry in any mature and developed Party, and was in fact equivalent to a declaration of war on the existing Executive. But these were still the teething times of the Party. The battle between the Commission and the representatives of the older leadership continued for some time, and was even intensified when the next Congress at Battersea in October, 1922, not only adopted all the Commission's recommendations but also elected two of its members at the head of the poll for the first nationally elected Executive in front of the older and better-known leaders. There may well have been some natural resentment and a little conservatism from the side of some of the older leaders, and a good deal of crudeness and intolerance from the side of the young insurgents, especially when they saw the measures they advocated sweep forward with the beginning of organised work to assist the advance of the broad labour movement, and an accompanying sixfold increase in the circulation of the Party organ within a few months, thus laying the foundations for a broad leftward advance in the general labour movement. But Borodin? Between Borodin and the Com-

mission there was no contact whatever. Very much on the contrary. The sudden eruption of this revolt from below, with its apparent demagogic success in sweeping the Party, and that certain measure of conflict with the older and tested leadership, may have aroused some apprehension among the more experienced heads in other Parties in the international movement. And indeed the succeeding international conference in 1923, to consider the 'English crisis' with the aid of representatives of other Parties, served to restore the balance and save the old leadership who had begun to be openly threatened with wholesale removal.

All this is long past now. The true history of parties especially in the early stages, can sometimes go through such mixed episodes, in the course of which the personal element appears emphasised at the time, but through which the party all the time goes forward. But poor Mr. Pelling, with his one *idée fixe* that everything that happens in the British Party is dictated by Moscow, is a hundred miles away from what really happened.

More Fictions

In the same way every episode recorded in this book could be instructively contrasted with the actual facts. One gem worth noting is when he describes the Workers' and Peasants' Party of India, built up by the Indian Communists and also with Indian militant trade union leaders and left Congressmen, as a 'satellite' of the British Communist Party. He ignores the fact that the Indian Communists had already been through their baptism of fire in the Cawnpore conspiracy trial launched against them by the first Labour Government, just as the Meerut trial was launched by the second Labour Government. The role of an honoured working-class fighter like Ben Bradley who, after serving on the London District Committee of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, and with all the possibilities of a leading official career before him, preferred to go where the battle was hardest and hottest, to assist the young Indian trade union movement, and stood in the dock with the Indian working-class leaders to receive his sentence of 12 years' transportation from a British judge, was an immortal example of international working-class solidarity, still loved and cherished by the Indian workers, which would be a closed book to Mr. Pelling.

It would take too long to chase all the plain errors of fact, confusions or distortions which litter the pages of Mr. Pelling's book. De Leon did not found the I.W.W. (or Industrial Workers of

the World) (p. 2). The account of 'two British Communist Parties' in the summer of 1920 (p. 11) is unaware of the role of the Communist Labour Party in Scotland. The capture of two secret police agents hiding under the platform in the Rehearsal Theatre, Bedford Street, in 1924 did not take place 'where the party executive was due to hold a meeting' (p. 29), but where a London District Conference of the party was in session. It did not precede the Labour Government (p. 29) but took place under Arthur Henderson as Home Secretary, and the party organ published photo copies of extracts of the secret police notebooks (containing laborious notes of private talks of party members marked 'Official Secret'), and challenged Henderson to prosecute. The description of the formation of the United Mineworkers of Scotland as a 'breakaway' (p. 56) ignores the preceding action of the reformist officials in refusing to accept the result of democratic elections. The solid mass resistance of the working people of East London, which saved London from Mosley and his thugs, with police aid, dominating the streets of London as Hitler had dominated Berlin, is described as a policy to 'match disorder with disorder'. The membership of the party in June, 1941, was not 'probably' an imaginary figure from the writer's inner consciousness (p. 120), but 19,000, representing the first stage of the rise from 17,700 before the war to 22,700 by the end of 1941. Gallacher was never General Secretary of the party (p. 113). The statement that the defeat of revisionism at the 25th Congress was due to the fact that 'with the representation of the Executive and of the District Committees Congress was always heavily weighted in the direction of the official line' (p. 178) ignores the plain fact that E.C. members had no voting powers, the twenty-one District Committees 2 votes each, and that of the 547 delegates with voting powers 505 or 92 per cent were branch delegates directly elected by the branches. It would require a very odd mentality to regard this as 'weighting' of the votes in favour of the leading committees. If the representation and voting power at Labour Party Conferences were similarly based, in respect of over nine-tenths of the delegates, on direct election of delegates by the local organisations of the rank and file membership from below, it is probable that the resulting policy and leadership of the Labour Party would be very different from what it is today.

Five Fatal Flaws

More important than pursuing detail errors or distortions is to consider why Mr. Pelling has so signally failed, despite all his

industrious documentation, to understand his subject or give anything approaching a correct record. In his previous work on the Labour Party he had shown capacity. Something else has got in the way. Five fatal flaws, arising from a hopelessly indoctrinated cold war outlook accepting all the dogmas of the Foreign Office and Transport House as gospel truth, have paralysed his faculties.

First Fatal Flaw. His blind acceptance of the official dogma that the British Communist Party, like all Communist Parties, must be regarded as an offshoot and instrument of the Soviet state and Soviet foreign policy, and that all its activities must be interpreted in terms of Russian instructions. He has not realised that the international communist movement existed before the Russian Revolution, and that the British Communist Party is the direct successor of the original socialist movement in Britain, inheriting all its characteristics, virtues and vices, weaknesses and problems, but entering into and learning from the experience of the era of the world socialist revolution. Communism is no more the product of Moscow machinations than the class struggle is the product of agitators. Where this folly leads Mr. Pelling in misinterpreting facts to fit his preconceived dogma we have shown in concrete examples.

Mr. Pelling is probably too young to know from experience that those of us who fought in the old socialist movement before the Russian Revolution were accused of being 'German agents' rioting on 'German gold'. He repeats all the stories about 'Russian gold', and then merely remarks on the odd fact that, despite the 'Russian gold', 'the members remained individually on the verge of destitution . . . tuberculosis seemed to be endemic among them, killing several of their leaders and crippling others'. If facts do not fit a theory, so much the worse for the facts.

Second Fatal Flaw. Arising from the first, everything that happens in the party must be interpreted as a trick, a manoeuvre, the opposite of what might appear. Does Pollitt resign the secretaryship on grounds of health? Of course it is only 'ostensibly' on grounds of health, but really because he 'felt it wise in the political situation to retire' (p. 171). This kind of speculation is the conventional small change of all political gossips and wiseacres. But for a serious historian a simple attempt to check the medical records would have ruled out this repetition of idle chatter. What Mr. Pelling could not know is that, when the doctors' peremptory orders came, the problem was in fact discussed that retirement at this

moment would inevitably be interpreted by critics as a political decision; and that Pollitt himself cut the Gordian knot by declaring that postponement would make no difference, since, whenever it came, it would automatically be interpreted in the same way in terms of the current political situation. Therefore, in the best Marxist tradition, '*lascia dir le genti*'—let the Crankshaws and the Pellings prattle.

Third Fatal Flaw. The third cause of falsification is the dependence on the most dubious and suspect sources—police files, Tory Blue Books on Communism, informers, or the self-inflating legends and malice of minor deserters. On this kind of foundation a marvellous 'Historical Profile' of Chartism could be written. Any historian has necessarily to take into account all types of sources, but he has also to be capable of weighing them. The type of renegade who in the United States or Britain rushes to pour out 'confessions' or highly paid 'sensational revelations' in the more vulgar organs of the millionaire press, is usually the lowest of the low; and the historian who trusts to such sources for his information damns himself.

Fourth Fatal Flaw. The fourth obstacle which rules out any attempt at a serious history of the militant working class movement is the bland police outlook which regards any revolutionary working class agitation and organisation as a conspiracy to be put down by all means, and against which all means, such as police action or bans and proscriptions, are legitimate. The repeated police attacks and prosecutions are related, not even with the normal mild deprecation of a moderate liberal, but with unconcealed sympathy for the problems and difficulties of the police in suppressing the evil thing. Thus the nearest approach to criticism is the judgment that the Tory Government's prosecution of the twelve Communist leaders in 1925, and their sentencing to prison, which was in fact the preparation for breaking the General Strike, was 'on the whole, a mistake', not because the author expresses any objection to sending Communist leaders to prison, but because 'it provided them with a golden opportunity for the advertisement of their views' (p. 34). The 'abnormally high proportion of Communists arrested' during the General Strike was 'principally because the Communists enjoyed the martyrdom of arrest and imprisonment' (p. 36). The Tory Blue Book against Communism 'provided useful information for the leaders of the Labour Party and the trade unions' (p. 35); and in 1926 'a Labour Party circular was published quoting from the

Government Blue Book', *i.e.*, from the Tory Government's official propaganda to make the case against Communism (p. 37). Black Circular methods to deprive trade unionists of their democratic rights in order to prevent Communist majorities are described with obvious approval. Thus for example the disruption of the historic London Trades Council by the General Council is justified on the basis of a distorted picture presenting it as losing members during the period of Communist active participation in the leadership ('had fallen so fully under party control that non-Communist unions had begun to disaffiliate from it', p. 158). In fact the membership rose during this period from 600,000 in 1945 to 850,000 in 1952 when the T.U.C. deregistered the historic London Trades Council (far older than the T.U.C.); not a single trade union disaffiliation took place until after the T.U.C. intervened, and then only under pressure from head offices; and the subsequent decline in membership followed the T.U.C. intervention and disruption. Similarly the extension of Communism among students and in the universities during the 'thirties is explained by the fact that at that time 'the University Labour Federation did not discriminate against Communists', *i.e.*, failed to operate the necessary Black Circular methods (p. 105).

Fifth Fatal Flaw. The fifth and most serious weakness of Mr. Pelling's book is the separation of the history of the Communist Party from the history of the British Labour Movement. The two are inseparable. The whole life and activity of the Communist Party is related to the struggle of the working class against capitalism, both in the industrial and the political fields; the fight for militant policies against reactionary policies in the labour movement; for democracy against fascism; for national liberation against colonialism; for peace against war; for socialism against the repudiation of socialism. To empty out in this way the content is to destroy the meaning: to present, in place of history, 'a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. It is as if a cinematograph film were to be made of a wrestling match, and then all the representation of one opponent blanked out from the film, so that by this means all the violent exertions, writhings and contortions of the single figure in a vacuum could be presented as something highly absurd and purposeless.

Of course Mr. Pelling, given his aim of proving a preconceived doctrine and prejudice, in place of following the path of history, could not do otherwise. For if he had given the true record of

the policies of capitalism, of Toryism and of the right wing Labour leadership at each stage during this period, and in this context set out alongside the policies of the Communist Party, it is inevitable that such a contrast would produce an inescapable conclusion in the reader's mind, however hostile the narrator, and demonstrate the repeated historical vindication, in the light of events, of the policies for which the Communist Party has fought during these forty years.

A Concluding Word

These basic flaws, quite apart from any mistakes or inaccuracies of detail, disqualify Mr. Pelling from any claim to have written a 'Historical Profile' of the Communist Party. A serious history, or a first attempt at a serious history, is in course of preparation on behalf of the Communist Party. But a serious history will require more careful research and judgment of sources, more respect for facts, and above all more political understanding of the elementary realities of classes and the class struggle, as well as a little more sympathy and closeness to the spirit of militant workers and militant socialists than Mr. Pelling possesses.

For there is one thing which is most conspicuously missing in the narrative of Mr. Pelling, but which it would be vain to look for in him. That is an understanding of the honour of a Communist. When we consider the stature of a Tom Mann, a Gallacher or a Pollitt, and their record in the working-class movement, and compare it with the role of a MacDonald, a J. H. Thomas or a Gaitskell, we see not only the confrontation of two class outlooks, but of two conceptions of life. It is precisely because Communism represents that political force in Britain which can never be won over or turned aside by the ruling class, which can never be bought, intimidated, silenced or broken, that all the hatred of the ruling class, and all the arsenal of denunciation of the servants of capitalism, is most unceasingly and unswervingly directed against the Communist Party.

In his final conclusion Mr. Pelling confesses himself baffled by 'the problem of how it came to pass that a band of British citizens could sacrifice themselves so completely over a period of almost forty years to the service of a dictatorship in another country' (p. 191). Not the service of a foreign dictatorship, Mr. Pelling. In this to him insoluble problem his bankruptcy is revealed. Such service could never win the limitless loyalty, devotion, enthusiasm, and sacrifice which no other party or political organisation in

Britain has been able to show over these forty years. This limitless loyalty, devotion, enthusiasm and sacrifice is inspired, and can only be inspired, in Britain, as in all the countries of the world, in the service of the highest cause of all, the cause of human emancipation, of the world victory of communism.

The Twenty-Sixth Congress of the Communist Party at Easter has demonstrated that the Communist Party in this country, through the outcome of these forty years, despite all mistakes and weaknesses, despite all limitations, has established itself as a serious and organised political force. It has established itself as a party united in political outlook and understanding, and strongly based in the industrial working class and in every phase of the daily mass struggle. It has established itself as the only party with a programme for the fulfilment of socialism in the conditions of Britain and with a policy to tackle the problems of Britain in extreme imperialist decline. It is for all these reasons that to those with understanding of the deeper political forces of our time the Communist Party can already be confidently declared, visibly and demonstrably by all these signs and tests, and through the further advance which can now be achieved, the party of the future in Britain, as in the rest of the world.

April 6, 1959.

PAST CONTENTS

JANUARY: *Outlook for 1959* (R.P.D.); *Robert Burns* (William Gallacher); *New Trade Policies for Old* (John Eaton); *Seven Year Plan* (Andrew Rothstein); *Why I Joined* (Councillor Hilda Lane); *Background to Berlin* (Gordon Schaffer); *My Experiences in a Chinese Commune* (David Crook). **BOOK REVIEWS:** *Noveishaya Istoriya Anglii* (V. G. Trukhanovsky); *Torture Trial in Belfast* (John Hostettler); reviewed by Clemens Dutt, D. N. Pritt, Q.C.

FEBRUARY: *Election Prospects* (R.P.D.); *Suicide Club* (Ivor Montagu); *A Memoir of G. D. H. Cole* (R. Page Arnot); *Shop Stewards Today* (Bill Warman); *Convertibility and After* (J. R. Campbell); *Africa Awakened* (W. E. B. Du Bois); *Charles Darwin* (Clemens Dutt); *The Choice for the Sudan* (A. Masri); *Farewell to the Commune* (David Crook).

MARCH: *Thaw or War?* (R.P.D.); *The Tory Offensive: 1. What Does Mr. Gaitskell Offer?* (George Matthews); *2. The Miners Fight Back* (John Wood); *3. The Right to Work* (H. Howarth); *War Over Berlin?* (Ivor Montagu); *The Twenty-First Congress* (Andrew Rothstein); *I Was There* (Norman Temple). **BOOK REVIEWS:** *A Painter of Our Time* (John Berger); *Small Farm in the Steppe* (Valentin Katayev); Arnold Kettle, Rosemary Small.

APRIL: *Communism and the Left* (R.P.D.); *Macmillan's Visit* (Quæstor); *The Tory Offensive: How to Fight Back: 1. 'Claymore' Economics on the Railways* (Frank McKenna); *2. Force Out the Facts on Pit Closures* (George Alsop); *Nyasaland Massacre* (Hugo Rathbone); *The Dance of Freedom* ('Kenya Resident'); *Youth in Engineering* (John Foster); *Shorter Hours and the Crisis* (T. F. McWhinnie); *What Soviet People Read* (Judah Waten). **BOOK REVIEWS:** *The Brave New World* (Helen and Scott Nearing); *Jim Crow Guide to the U.S.A.* (Stetson Kennedy); *Anglo-Soviet Journal* (S.C.R.); *'Blow You Jack, We Were Right!'* (B.O.A.C. Stewards); *History Unearthed* (Sir Leonard Woolley); William Gallacher, J.W., Peter Tempest, Wal Hannington, R. P. Arnot.