



Building the Minority Movement in the 1920s

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A theoretical supplement published by Workers Power newspaper in the 1980s that explains the role of the National Minority Movement built by Communists in the 1920s and its lessons for trade union organising

Over the last five years the working class has suffered a number of serious defeats at the hands of the bosses. Thatcher and the Tories have presided over a serious economic slump. They have worked hard to make the working class bear the cost of that slump. They have erected, and now successfully tested, an anti-union legal apparatus aimed at destroying effective rank and file trade unionism. In a period such as this it is all too easy for union militants and would-be socialists either to fall into despair or to pin hopes on the emergence of a left-wing saviour from the ranks of the Labour Party or union bureaucracy. The SWP are guilty of despair. The Broad Lefts are guilty of false hopes in the bureaucracy.

The history of the British working class shows that there is an alternative to these errors. Militants can learn a great deal from the lessons of the early 1920s ? a period, like today, of slump and retreat, of spontaneous militancy and of recovery and reorganisation in the working class. Above all, this period reveals the role that revolutionary communists ? even though a tiny minority ? can play in the class struggle. The British Communist Party, in the early 1920s a revolutionary organisation, played such a role for a short period, its efforts to organise the rank and file into a militant minority ? the Minority Movement ? hold many vital lessons for today?s militants.

In 1920 the great period of working class militancy, of the growth of the shop stewards movement during and after the First World War gave way to slump, defeat and demoralisation. The boom conditions of the war period had enormously strengthened spontaneous militancy but by the winter of 1920/21 the boom came to an abrupt half. The coal owners reacted to the crisis of markets by a wage cutting offensive. The lockout of the miners in April 1921 produced a craven capitulation by the union leaders and with this defeat, inflicted upon the most militant section of the working class, a generalised retreat occurred throughout 1921 and 1922. By the end of 1921 more than 6 million workers had suffered wage cuts amounting to an average of 8%. Engineers, dockers and textile workers all suffered major reverses. Working class organisation was correspondingly weakened as two million workers (a quarter of the entire membership) flooded out the trade unions.

The origins of the National Minority Movement, not founded until 1924, go back to the very depths of this ?downturn?. To call this period a ?downturn? is in fact an understatement. After the betrayal of the miners by the Triple Alliance leaders on Black Friday 1921, the ruling class offensive was relentless. It culminated in the Engineers? lock-out of January 1922. Yet in precisely this period the young British Communist Party and the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) set up work to counteract the disorderly retreat of the trade unions and the panic and treachery of the leaders, by attempting to rally the militants in a fighting united front. During the Engineers? lockout the London Committee of RILU organised a ?Stop the Retreat? Conference representing 150,000 workers. The conference pledged itself to support the Engineers by fighting to extend the strike. In Sheffield a conference was held with 150 delegates representing 31 Amalgamated Engineering Union lock-out committees, 12 AEU district committees and 32 unemployed organisations. The latter under communist leadership played a prominent role in picketing.

Whilst the Engineers were eventually defeated the CP and the RILU greatly increased their support in the Labour Movement. They were seen as the only rallying centre for militants who wished to resist the employers and the

treacherous official leadership. The CP and RILU went on from this to launch a nationwide campaign against the massive de-unionisation that had set in after the defeats of 1921 and 1922. A 'Back to the Unions Campaign' held conferences in the autumn of 1921 and 1922 in London, Glasgow, Newcastle, Birmingham, Sheffield and Cardiff representing over 165,000 workers via union branch delegates and 850,000 via Trades Council sponsorships.

The Communist Party as a member of the Communist International (CI) and the British Bureau of the RILU benefitted enormously from the tactics elaborated at the congresses of these international bodies. RILU owed its existence to initiatives taken immediately after the Second Comintern Congress. Leading figures from the wartime shop stewards movement, J.T. Murphy from Sheffield, Willie Gallagher from Clydeside and veteran leaders like Tom Mann were encouraged to set up a militant British trade union centre. When it was created in the autumn and winter of 1920/21 it drew in figures like A.J. Cook of the South Wales miners. Internationally the first world congress of RILU (June 1921) held immediately after the Third World Congress of the CI, was guided in its practice by the tactics elaborated there. In particular the method of the united front and the utilisation of immediate and transitional demands were invaluable weapons for British revolutionaries. The CI argued: 'the struggle for the concrete needs of the proletariat, for demands which, in their application, undermine the power of the bourgeoisie, which organise the proletariat, and which form the transition of proletarian dictatorship, even if certain groups of the masses have not yet grasped the meaning of such proletarian dictatorship.' (Report on 3rd Congress of the CI).

Such a programme puts the official leadership of the working class to the test and allows revolutionaries to win the confidence and leadership of the rank and file. It is an active weapon against the reformist betrayers and at the same time a programme that meets the workers immediate needs. But an agreement for joint action must by no means obscure the strategic, and in the end decisive, differences that exist between reformists and revolutionaries.

The CI directive of December 1921 argued: 'While supporting the slogan of the greatest possible unity of all workers' organisations in every practical action against the capitalist front, communists may in no circumstances desist from putting forward their views, which are the only consistent expression of the defence of the working class interests as a whole.' (J. Degras, Documents of the CI, vol.1, p.313.)

Such a united front programme, then, represents a bridge from today's consciousness to a struggle for power under communist leadership. The organisational form of that bridge in the trade unions is the rank and file movement. The material basis for this organisation rests in two facts. First, if the trade unions, in the epoch of capitalist decay, are going to be able to effectively defend their members interests, then they have to be totally transformed. Against the interests and the wishes of the bureaucrats, they have to be made into weapons of struggle for the overthrow of capitalist society. Only the rank and file has a material interest in doing this. Secondly, to achieve this the rank and file need to be politically independent of the trade union bureaucracy as a whole. The material interests of the rank and file are not merely different to those of the bureaucracy, they are actually opposed to them. Making this tactical method absolutely clear, the Fourth Congress of the CI advised the CPGB as follows: 'The aim must be to create a more numerous trade union opposition movement. Our aim must be that our communist groups should act as a point of crystallisation around which the opposition elements will concentrate. The aim must be to create, to marshal, to integrate the opposition forces, and the CP itself will grow concurrently with the growth of the opposition.' (4th Congress of the CI. Abridged Report, p.226-7).

Over the next 18 months, and with considerable practical prodding by the CI agent in Britain, Borodin, the CPGB put this perspective into practice. But a correct perspective alone cannot explain the success of the NMM. Significant conjunctural factors played a key role in its growth.

The economic situation in Britain underwent a change at this time. During the course of 1923 and 1924 there was a marked upturn. Exports rose from a low of £719m in 1922 to £767m in 1923 and £801m in 1924. Whereas unemployment had rocketed to 14% during 1921 it had receded to 11.5% and 9.7% in 1923 and 1924 respectively. Throughout the coal fields in particular, unemployment declined from 4.6% in December 1922 to only 2.1% four months later.

The overall effect of this upturn was to increase the confidence of the rank and file, to make them feel safe from victimisation, and more determined to fight to retrieve some of the ground lost in 1921/22.

Central to the impact of the NMM was the election of the Labour Government in November 1923. At one and the same time, it increased workers' expectations and their willingness to take on the bosses, and it deepened the class collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy which attempted to halt the wave of strikes throughout 1924.

The resulting unofficial nature of the strike wave served to embolden the rank and file against their leadership, particularly in the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) and the engineers union (AEU). These unions had suffered most from the betrayals of the earlier period. The early work of the RILU also found itself intersecting with a rich tradition of rank and file organisation amongst the miners and the metal workers. Despite the ups and downs of the previous ten years there was a definite continuity, of ideas and personnel, amongst the unofficial opposition such as Murphy, Gallagher and Pollitt. In the MFGB there had been the 1911 syndicalist charter, the 'Miners Next Step', and then later the South Wales based unofficial Reform Committee. Within the AEU there was the rich, if politically limited, experience of the shop stewards struggles to draw upon (e.g. Sheffield and Clydeside Workers Committees).

Also important were the internal structures of the official unions themselves. To some extent the bases laid down in the MFGB and AEU by the NMM and the rather limited gains made in the NUR, can be explained by the differences of organisation. By the MFGB and the AEU had grown by a process of amalgamation. These unions enshrined sectionalism and localised separatism. The MFGB in particular, had a weak central executive, meeting monthly and possessing only two full timers. A high degree of decentralisation made it difficult to enforce bureaucratic control and victimise communist militants. The metal workers could point to similar favourable circumstances. On the other hand, the NUR was heavily autocratic, like Chapple's EET-PU today. An Executive of 6 full time officers elected for life and with a power to dissolve branches they considered to be 'Prejudicial to the interests of the NUR' and a system of District Committees which were purely 'propagandist and consultative' both made NMM progress a slower and more difficult struggle.

The South Wales coal field was the first and strongest bastion of the NMM. Under Borodin's guidance a Miners' Minority Movement was built there. Through 1923 it spread to Scotland, Durham and Lancashire. At a conference in Sheffield the National Mineworkers Minority Movement (NMMM) was formed.

In its heyday the NMMM had 200 groups. By August 1925 16 lodges were affiliated with a membership of 14,500. Such was its influence that by May 1926 in South Wales alone there were 16 separate NMM pit papers. Such was its political influence that it rallied some two fifths of the MFGB to reject the 1924 agreement with the coal owners even though that agreement represented a partial success.

During the course of 1924 similar movements were formed amongst Engineers and Transport and Building Trades workers. All were coalesced in August 1924 at the First Annual Conference of the National MM in Battersea Town Hall, at which some 270 delegates formally represented 200,000 workers.

Because the NMM was a CPGB initiative, the Party dominated the NMM leaderships at every level. Its four officers were all members as were the leaders of all the sections. This was not the result of a bureaucratic manoeuvre, however. It flowed from the CP's relentless fight for political leadership of the most militant sections of the rank and file.

Within the NMM supreme authority rested with Conference which consisted of delegates from affiliated trades councils (which were allowed two delegates). Conference elected a National Executive which in turn appointed a Working Bureau. In the period of its revolutionary ascendancy, the NMM prioritised the winning of affiliated bodies. Individuals were only allowed 'associate membership' status and no power to decide policy.

Unlike the trade unions as a whole, the NMM was careful not to allow a privileged 'bureaucratic caste' to develop. Full timers, though indispensable, were fully accountable and the General Secretary received a meagre £4 per week within even less for other full timers.

But it was not only the organisation strength and extensive trade union influence of the MM that was impressive. Particularly instructive for revolutionaries seeking to build a new Minority Movement today was the programme and policies that the organisation was built on. The Minority Movement was not a gathering of rank and file militants exclusively concerned with 'trade union' issues and held together by a minimalist programme as the British SWP would have us believe. The workers it organised were not 'frightened off' from the movement by the avowed communist politics of its leaders and the references to the struggles for power in its policies. On the contrary they were won to the Movement in such large numbers precisely because the 'transitional' programme of the MM was self-evidently relevant to their needs.

The programme presented to the first MM conference was sharp and principled. Whilst not the programme of a revolutionary party (e.g. it had nothing in it about the dictatorship of the proletariat), it was an action programme whose logic and direction were revolutionary. The NMM's 'Aims and Objects' stood unequivocally for the overthrow of capitalism. Its nine-point charter began with demands for improvement in wages, hours and conditions of work. It advocated the formation of a variety of organs of class struggle; the extension of trade unions themselves into unorganised sectors; an accountable and authoritative central leadership which had an obligation to lead workers as a class into combat; and, most importantly, the development of factory committees which could help overcome the inter union divisions, place power in the unions and workplaces in the hands of the rank and file and lay a firm basis for the struggle for workers' control. These power points were seen as organs of struggle to enforce political demands on the Labour Government as well. First, that it should be itself on and make itself accountable to workers' industrial organisations. Secondly, to repeal all anti-working class legislation, such as the Emergency Power Act. Such demands of the working class had to be fought for right up to the level of Government. As the position on the Labour Government made clear: 'This is not a question outside trade unionism but the central question for trade unionism'. on every side it is realised that trade unionism is not enough and that only a workers' government can solve these problems.' (Report on the First NMM Conference, London, 1924 p5).

This tactic was aimed at putting the Labour Government to the test of action in front of its supporters inside the working class. Act in our interests, if not? 'the workers will not fail to recognise in such a refusal a complete betrayal of the best interests of the working class'. (Emergency Resolution on Labour Government passed at first NMM Conference)

The communists did not hide their belief that the Labour Government would betray the working class but they recognised the need to place demands on it as a tactic for drawing reformist workers into joint struggle.

This political action programme for the trade unions based itself on the recognition that in the course of resisting the immediate waves of the bosses offensive the working class comes to recognise that it is capitalist private property and the capitalist state that are the major obstacles to the realisation of their demands. At the 6th Congress of the CPGB in May 1924 this was made explicit. 'The CP has on all occasions assisted in the development of this movement and will continue to do so, but at the same time warns those active workers who participate in it, that only a revolutionary communist struggle can serve to achieve the object they have in view.'

In the period leading up to the foundation of the NMM the CPGB were clear about the role of the trade union bureaucracy. No section of the official leadership was regarded as 100% reliable. This was true as much for the 'lefts' as for the open boss-men on the right. Most prominent of the 'Left' leaders was A.J.Cook, an ex-CPer and founder of the Miners MM. In 1924 the CPGB and MM support did much to guarantee Cook's election as General Secretary of the MFGB. Cook's election was a reflection of a leftward movement within the whole working class which was refracted within the bureaucracy. At first, the CPGB reacted with revolutionary realism: 'It would be suicidal policy however, for the CP and NMMM to place much reliance on what we have called the official left wing?It is the duty of our Party and the NMM to criticise its weaknesses relentlessly.' (Communist Review, October 1924)

Lefts like Scargill, and Cook before him, are capable of much resounding rhetoric. Enjoying the rank and file's respect they must be put to the test of action. Yet their leftism is not unconnected to the fact that they do not hold the real power and responsibility within their unions. Cook was isolated within the MFGB leadership, as were Hicks and

Purcell on the General Council of the TUC. As Trotsky explained: 'The right wingers have a system: They have behind them tradition, experience, routine, and most important of all, bourgeois society as a whole is thinking for them? The weakness of the left wingers come from their lack of cohesion and this arises from their ideological shapelessness?and is therefore incapable of organisationally assuming the leadership of the trade union movement.' (L. Trotsky on Britain, Pathfinder, pp.163-4)

Tragically for the British working class, these principled considerations less and less guided the practice of the CPGB and the NMM after 1924.

This is largely accounted for by the centrist degeneration of the CI, increasingly coming under the hold of Stalin, in league with Zinoviev. Guiding the line of the 5th Congress of the CI, Zinoviev refused to recognise the partial stability that imperialism had attained, preferring, in Britain, to see revolution around the corner. Since the British working class were not yet ready to rise to Zinovievite schemas, the CI shifted attention to the TUC 'lefts' in the hope of accelerating the revolution through gentle flattery. This policy was enforced upon the CPGB by Tomsky, who attended the TUC Congresses in 1924 and 1925.

But by the latter part of 1924 and throughout 1925 the crisis of British imperialism intensified once more. This time the bosses were confronted by a more confident working class which had been significantly radicalised. At a special NMM conference in January 1925 the number of delegates (and workers represented) had tripled in four months! 617 delegates representing some 17% of the TUC membership.

Yet as 1925 progressed the policy of the CI under Stalin was changing. On the basis of the reactionary utopia of 'building socialism in one country?', the main plank of Stalin's foreign policy was to pacify the international bourgeoisie 'to buy time to 'build socialism?'. And the main agent of this pacification in Britain? The same 'lefts' that were to have been a catalyst for the revolution nine months earlier!

The CPGB and the NMM responded to this opportunism uneasily at first. Their centrist decline entailed vacillations and waverings within which some principled work could occur. Throughout the spring and summer of 1925 the NMM was actively preparing rank and file organisations 'Councils of Action in preparation for a general strike. They particularly put an effort into building joint committees of miners, dockers, railway workers and engineers. Dozens of those emerged between April and June 1925. The metal workers NMM had established 13 District Committees and the Transport MM some ten others. Alongside this the CPGB was busy, if belatedly, building party cells in the plants and mines.

However a major turning point occurred after 'Red Friday' (July 31st) when the coalowners and the Tories backed down from a confrontation with the miners. The situation threatened to escalate into a General Strike. The Tories were ill prepared for this in 1925. They bought time with a tactical retreat and during the next nine months they refined all the coercive machinery they needed to smash a General Strike.

In this context the September Congress of the TUC took place. Cook and Purcell had now been made honorary members of the Moscow Soviet. Left resolutions had been passed 'opposition to the Dawes Plan and to Imperialism 'for British troop withdrawal from China. Only Trotsky gave a revolutionary estimate of the Congress when he said of it: 'it was left so long as it had to accept no practical obligations?'. Indeed, the General Council blocked any attempts to make it responsible for organising the General Strike, and a larger right wing majority was enthroned on the General Council.

Trotsky's perspective was lost on the CPGB. Under the CI's tutelage Gallagher said of the 'left' Swales: 'In the stern, tough voice of Swales spoke the working class dictatorship.' (Calhoun, United Front, p.174)

In the months leading up to the General Strike (May 1926) the NMM continued to build action committees. The March 1926 action conference of the NMM gave voice to the aspirations of more workers than ever before. More than it ever was to again. Nearly one million workers through 833 delegates were represented. 52 Trades Councils were present.

Alongside this by April 1926 the CPGB had built upwards of 300 Party Factory/Mine cells ? a five-fold increase in 10 months.

But precisely when the organisational influence of the NMM and the CPGB was increasing, preparing the basis for a challenge for power, so the political line of the NMM was being more and more tailored to the limits of the ?left? officials. A two-fold process was occurring. On the one side, the CPGB was depriving itself of its revolutionary independence ?by the actual dissolution of the party into the so-called Minority Movement?. (Trotsky on the Trade Unions, p.36) On the other side, within the NMM the independent line of the rank and file was being subordinated to that of the left reformist bureaucracy. In February 1926 Cook was to say that he agreed with ?nine tenths? of the CP?s policies. That is, Cook was not to be trusted. But Hardy, the Organising secretary of the NMM thought otherwise. Of the March NMM conference he declared: ?We sent out from MM headquarters instructions for our members to work for the establishment of Councils of Action in every area. We warned, however, that the Councils of Action were under no circumstances to take over the work of the trade unions? The Councils of Action were to see that all the decisions of the General Council and the union executives were carried out.? (Hardy, Those stormy years, p.185)

Murphy added to this view a total identification of the left bureaucrats with their followers, as an excuse for not attacking Cook, Purcell et al: ?If we vigorously attack the ?left wing leaders? we attack the mass with a similar outlook and drive them away from the party.? (Communist Review, number 3, 1925).

On the very eve of the general strike from his prison cell, Harry Pollit, the NMM leader wrote: ?The Party?s most important task is preparation for this; at present more danger arises from the unorganised character of the left wing than from the right wing?.we should consider concentrating on the left wing in the localities and extending the MM as an all-in oppositional movement.? (H. Pollit, by J. Mahon, p.131).

Through this policy the General Strike was doomed to defeat in advance. The CPGB taught the working class, through the NMM, to place their trust, not in the CPGB, but in the TUC ?lefts?. They left the working class rudderless when the likes of Purcell and Cook were politically incapable of giving an independent lead when Citrine and Pugh on the General Council aborted the struggle.

The CPGB should politically and organisationally have prepared the rank and file, through the NMM, for the task of throwing aside Purcell and Cook when they became a brake on pushing the struggle to the end.

After the General Strike Stalin?s maintenance of the alliance with the TUC via the Anglo Russian Committee (ARC) precluded the possibility of learning this key lesson of the General Strike. The CPGB fell into line with the by now thoroughly centrist Communist International. It remained impervious to Trotsky?s criticism of its policy of ?courting the Left?. Indeed it went on to make excuses for the ?lefts?. At the NMM Conference in 1926 after the General Strike the weaknesses of the left officials were explained thus: ?The MM declares that the fundamental failure of the left-wing in the General Council was due:

- 1.To their domination by many right-wing ideas;
- 2.To their lack of trust in the masses.?

And a resolution on the General Strike at the same conference added: ?The conference declares that no left leadership can be trusted in the future, unless it breaks with the ring-wing policy and allies itself with the left-wing trade unionists organised in the Minority Movement.? (Report of 3rd Annual Conference of the NMM, 1926, p.48)

The central task remained, therefore, the wooing of this ?left? in the hope that it would swap its allegiance.

The CPGB paid dearly for their centrist errors. After the General Strike the TUC went on the offensive against the NMM. In April 1927 the TUC refused to recognise any Trades Council affiliated to the NMM. Even then the CP refused to fight the proscription. In 1928 the NMM was given a reward for its servility. It was totally proscribed by the TUC. Thereafter the NMM collapsed and held its last conference in 1929.

A new, a revolutionary NMM, remains an imperative need for the British working class, as does the building of a revolutionary Trotskyist Party that will be both built through it and alongside it. In the next few years there will be conjunctures which will either facilitate or make difficult the building and consolidating of this movement. That is purely secondary. The main task of revolutionaries is to search out the existing focal points of resistance to the bosses? offensive which could prove to be the point of departure for a revolutionary rank and file movement. Revolutionaries must strike to give leadership to these struggles in the tradition of the revolutionary period of the CPGB and the NMM.

Today those who aspire to being revolutionaries face an analogous situation to that of the early 1920s. The lessons of the NMM and its predecessor movements are clear. The fight-back must start even in the very trough of defeat. The militants can and must be won to a fighting transitional programme. To wait for a spontaneous upturn is a wretched policy that will leave its advocates on the sidelines of any serious struggle. On the other hand to pin the hopes of recovery on existing left bureaucrats or on ones that might be elected in the future courtesy of the Broad Left electoral machine will be equally disastrous. What is needed is a new minority movement which organises independently of the grace and favour of the left bureaucrats but which is not afraid to unite with them in action, to put demands on them, to put them to the test, and, when it proves necessary, as we believe it will, replace them with militant class fighters.

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