

Independent Labour Party: Lessons of the split pt2

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In the last article (<http://www.fifthinternational/node/1495>^[1]) we examined the development of the Independent Labour Party up to Labour's electoral disaster in 1931. The Independent Labour Party was down to 7ve MPs who were not endorsed by the Labour Party because of their refusal to abide by the Parliamentary Labour Party's discipline. In this second part of the article John McKee and Keith Lawry look at the problems of the ILP's split with the Labour Party and its subsequent political evolution

The dispute over voting against the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) had arisen because James Maxton's group of Independent Labour Party (ILP) MPs had consistently refused to vote for the MacDonald Government's proposed attacks on the unemployed. Maxton and his fellow MP's believed that after the defections and defeat the party leadership would view the ILP's case more sympathetically. They were to be quickly disillusioned.

Fenner Brockway, an ILP leader, visited both George Lansbury, then Chairman of the Labour Party, and Arthur Henderson. Henderson went straight to the point. He told Brockway that he suspected the ILP no longer believed the transition from capitalism to socialism would take place through Parliament but through a direct struggle between the working class and the possessing class. Brockway could truthfully deny this was the case, but for the Labour leaders the rhetoric of the ILP leaders was becoming too dangerous in a situation of rising class struggle.

In the autumn of 1931 massive demonstrations of the unemployed took place against the cuts in benefits introduced by the National Government. Ten thousand traditionally non-militant teachers marched in protest at 15% wage cuts and in September the Royal Navy fleet at Invergordon in Scotland mutinied. Ten thousand ratings struck, refusing to put to sea until pay cuts were rescinded.

Conference

The 1932 Easter conference of the ILP adopted a new Statement of Policy which pointed to the inadequacy of purely parliamentary action and called for 'mass industrial action as an additional means'. The statement declared that capitalism was in deep crisis and that the class struggle as 'the dynamic force in social change was nearing its decisive moment'.

On the question of the ongoing debate with the Labour Party leadership the conference was divided three ways. The Revolutionary Policy Committee (RPC) led by Dr C K Cullen and Jack Gaster called for immediate disaffiliation from the Labour Party and negotiations with the Communist International and British Communist Party. Maxton, Buchanan and other leaders supported disaffiliation and an independent ILP. A third group led by David Kirkwood and Frank Wise were against disaffiliation.

Further negotiations took place but the Labour Party Executive showed little interest, refusing to budge on the issue of submission to PLP standing orders. The July 1932 Special Conference faced with the

alternative of submission or disaffiliation voted nearly two to one in favour of leaving the Labour Party. The minority led by Kirkwood and Wise split and rejoined the Labour Party forming the Socialist League.

Disaffiliate

Was the ILP right to 'disaffiliate' from the Labour Party? In the way it was carried out after the special conference it certainly turned into a disaster. From 1932 to 1934 the ILP implemented a policy known as 'the clean break'.

Despite the fact that the Labour leaders had not yet moved against them it was decided that ILP branches and members would leave the local Labour Parties of their own volition and that councillors would immediately withdraw from Labour groups. It was also decided that no ILP member would act as a trade union delegate to the Labour Party and no trade union member would pay the political levy to the Labour Party.

These measures not only cut the ILP members off from the Labour Party rank and file but also from Trades and Labour Councils. The 'clean break' did the Labour bureaucracy's job for them, losing the ILP thousands of trade union activists in the process.

A revolutionary policy certainly would have made no concessions to the demands of the Labour leadership to 'bow the knee' on the question of readmission to the PLP. It would have fought for a party that was genuinely independent of the Labour bureaucracy, both politically and organisationally. But the crucial task was to take this fight to the Labour Party and trade union rank and file. Here there was enormous sympathy for the ILP's stand against the treacherous policies of MacDonald and the Labour leadership.

Intransigent

The ILP MPs had in fact been 'disaffiliated' by the Labour leadership. An intransigent struggle to win rank and file support and to win 'unendorsed' Labour candidates throughout the country to fighting for working class interests would undoubtedly have led to further purges and further resistance. Far from weakening and isolating the ILP, as the 'clean break' did, this offensive against the bureaucracy would have won to the ILP wider forces from the trade unions and Labour Party.

But despite these mistakes no revolutionary would have condemned the ILP's split or ignored it in favour of staying in the Labour Party. Unlike the Militant today, who claim that all attempts to construct independent parties from leftward splits in mass reformist parties are doomed to result in isolation and failure, Trotsky heartily welcomed the emergence of the ILP despite all its political weaknesses.

Writing in 1933 Trotsky recognised in the ILP's evolution from left reformism to centrism a trend that was developing in several countries:

'A left wing forms within the social democratic parties, which subsequently splits off from the party and tries with its own forces to pave a revolutionary path for itself. These processes reflect on one side the deep crisis of capitalism and of reformism, which is inseparably bound up therewith, and on the other the inability of the Comintern to group around itself revolutionary currents within the proletariat.'

It was these currents that Trotsky attempted to win to the perspective of building the Fourth International. Trotsky thought that it was within these currents, as long as they were moving leftwards, that his supporters should work, to aid the development of these parties towards revolutionary communism. Only if this occurred could these parties avoid stagnation, regression to reformism or a collapse into Stalinism. It was to this struggle that Trotsky directed his attention and that of the small group of British Trotskyists in the early 1930s.

Once out of the Labour Party the ILP involved itself with the work of the Communist Party around the struggle against fascism, the fight for jobs and the rights of the unemployed. The Communist Party was emerging from its sectarian 'third period' line. Under the pressure of the catastrophe of the triumph of fascism in Germany the Comintern gradually began to shift its position on the characterisation of social democracy as being, along with fascism, the 'twin evil' of capitalism.

In February 1933 a call was made to the Second and Third Internationals by seven socialist parties outside both of these organisations, including the ILP, to organise a joint conference on how to fight the fascists. The Second International refused any dealings with the Comintern leadership, whilst the latter continued the policy of the united front from below.

Opening

However an opening had been made and in March 1933 the Communist Party (CP) issued a call for joint action to the Labour Party, the ILP, the TUC and the Co-op Party. The Labour Party still forbade its membership to involve themselves in what it termed Communist front campaigns so the CP and the ILP organised a demonstration of forty thousand at Hyde Park in March 1933 against a fascist rally of a few thousand.

However most of this work was being carried out by the CP and the ILP in isolation from the mass of reformist-led workers. The 'clean break' policy of the ILP had removed it from any lasting area of mass work. As Trotsky later commented about the ILP's situation in this period:

'Despite its name, the ILP did not become really independent but turned into sort of appendage to the Communist International. It did not pay the necessary attention to mass work, which cannot be carried on outside of the trade unions and the Labour Party.'

Within the ILP itself the policy of working closely with the CP was allied to the appeals of the RPC to affiliate to the Comintern. At the annual ILP conference of 1933 the RPC put forward a motion on preparing for unification with the CP by 'ascertaining how best to assist the work of the Comintern'. The position of the RPC won just over half of the branches of the ILP. This turned out to be the highpoint of its influence.

The leadership of the ILP, Maxton and the other MPs, while supporting the break with the Second International as a logical step from their break with the Labour Party, had no intention of joining the Comintern. While paying lip service to the goals of the Russian Revolution the ILP leaders remained tied to a pacifist view of the social revolution. Maxton was a long term critic of what he saw as the 'mass terrorism' and 'totalitarianism' which accompanied the Bolshevik Revolution.

The ILP leadership attempted to fend off the RPC and the Comintern by pushing ahead with its own international initiative. The seven left socialist parties which had appealed for unity held their own conference in Paris in August 1933 and set up an organisation known as the London Bureau.

The ILP was equally hostile to the intervention of the Trotskyists into their conference. They rejected the proposals of the International Left Opposition (ILO) to join the struggle for a new revolutionary International, the Fourth International. The leadership's friendly overtures to Trotsky himself whose critique of Stalinism was handy for them in their struggle against the RPC did not blind him to their vacillations, to their centrism. But it did alert him to the possibility of revolutionary intervention in this leftward moving organisation.

Trotsky and the leadership of the ILO argued that the British Trotskyists should immediately enter the ILP and fight to win the whole organisation for revolutionary communism and the Fourth International. However

the British section of the ILO split over the question of entry into the ILP and it was left to the minority, the Marxist Group, consisting of the more inexperienced comrades to carry out the perspective of the ILO.

Pillar

The ILP went on to become an important pillar of the London Bureau. This halfway house position between the Third International on the one side and the movement for the revolutionary Fourth International on the other, suited the ILP leaders well. It meant they could prevaricate, avoid taking a decision, continue to vacillate between reformism and revolution: the hallmark characteristics of centrism. At the same time they could justify their position by claiming to be the 'facilitators' of a new international grouping via the London Bureau.

But this was a motley collection of centrist organisations of varying political standpoints, each moving in opposite directions. On the right stood the Norwegian Labour Party, on the left the Revolutionary Socialist Party of the Netherlands which signed the declaration to join the Fourth International. This unstable coalition was doomed to have a short life as it had no common programme and could not develop one.

In article after article Trotsky attacked these currents, especially the more leftward moving elements such as the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the ILP, calling on them to break with the London Bureau and adopt the banner and programme of the Fourth International. The ILP however continued to vacillate.

In so doing it signed its own death warrant. It lost members to both the Second and Third International. For example, the Lancashire District of the ILP supported affiliation to the Second International and left to rejoin the Labour Party in 1934. RPC supporters joined the CP. The Trotskyists of the Marxist Group, despite their inexperience and small size also grew, from a dozen members when they joined to about forty in 1934.

The Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in October 1934 was to mark a watershed in the history of the ILP. The initial response reflected the organisation's leftward evolution and its distancing of itself from Stalinism as the Comintern turned right under the policy of the Popular Front.

The ILP, with its anti-war and pacifist traditions, launched itself into a struggle against war as British and French imperialism lined up against Italy. A series of meetings were organised throughout the country. The ILP's paper, *The New Leader*, came out clearly and forthrightly in defence of Abyssinia and for the defeat of imperialist Italy, despite the reactionary and feudal nature of the regime of the Emperor Haile Selassie in Abyssinia.

The ILP denounced the proposed League of Nations sanctions against Italy. C. L. R. James, then a leader in the Marxist Group, was allowed to write a series of articles in the *New Leader*. 'Let us fight against not only Italian imperialism, but the other robbers and oppressors, French and British imperialism', he wrote. 'Workers of Britain, peasants and workers of Africa, get closer for this and for other fights. But keep far from the imperialists and their Leagues and covenants and sanctions'. The ILP called instead for the workers to impose sanctions against the war, calling on workers in Britain and internationally to refuse to handle munitions, oil and war materials going to Italy.

Comintern

This position immediately clashed with that of the Comintern and the RPC. The Soviet Union had joined the League of Nations, described by Lenin as the 'thieves kitchen' of the imperialists, in 1934. In 1935 the USSR signed an agreement with France, the Stalin-Laval Pact, which explicitly recognised imperialist France's right to 'national defence'.

James Maxton had already predicted, in 1934, what the outcome of the new Stalinist policy would be. In discussing the new turn on the ILP leadership he declared:

‘The Russian government cannot become allied with the French Government without subduing the class struggle previously carried on by the French Communists. It cannot seek an alliance with the British Government without moderating the class struggle carried by the Communist Party here. Neither can it support the struggle carried on by the oppressed colonial peoples against both British and French imperialisms.’

The Soviet Union did indeed give full support to the policy of imperialist sanctions against Italy while at the very same time Britain and France were offering secret deals to Mussolini to carve up Abyssinia. In the process of this debate the pro-Communist Party RPC was isolated and finally left the ILP, with somewhere between 50 and 100 members, in October 1935.

While the position on the war brought the ILP and the Trotskyists closer together, other positions of the ILP were still marked by its centrism and it became clear the party’s leftward move was to be short lived. As Trotsky’s criticism of the paralysis of the London Bureau hit home, Maxton and Brockway became more open in their denunciations of the Fourth International in late 1935 and 1936. Demands were also being raised in the Districts and in the leadership for the dissolution of all organised groups in the ILP, a measure aimed primarily at the Marxist Group.

The turning point came at the fourth annual conference of the ILP in April 1936. The conference had been preceded by the Inner-Executive of the ILP reversing the party’s position on the Italian/Abyssinian war. In September 1935 it had taken a decision to adopt a dual defeatist position referring to the war as a conflict between rival dictators. At the same time they dropped the campaign for workers’ sanctions against Abyssinia.

The Trotskyists, led by James, fought at the conference to reassert the original position. After a furious debate James’ resolution was carried. A further resolution which declared the change of line in direct conflict with party policy and ‘a contradiction of party discipline’ was also passed by 70 votes to 57.

Maxton immediately convened a meeting of the Parliamentary Group of the ILP where they agreed unanimously to threaten resignation rather than carry out conference policy. This ultimatum was then presented to the National Administrative Council (NAC). The NAC quickly capitulated and the following morning the conference was presented with a ‘compromise’ proposal for a referendum of the whole membership on the question in dispute. The conference was bullied into accepting the idea and the referendum was held with the Parliamentary Group holding a gun to the head of the membership. The referendum returned a three to two majority in favour of Maxton’s change of policy.

Trotsky summed up the whole episode succinctly:

‘The pacifist parliamentary group of Maxton and company, which regards the party merely as a handy tool, forced it by means of a rude and brutal ultimatum back into pacifist prostration.’

Earlier Trotsky had correctly stated that the parliamentary fraction’s motivation for the split from the Labour Party was to preserve its own independence. It now preserved that same independence, this time from the membership of the ILP!

On a whole series of other questions the ILP demonstrated that it was now firmly on a rightward trajectory. An amended resolution from the NAC was passed opposing the formation of the Fourth International as being ‘opposed to the interests of international unity.’ An attempt to amend the ILP statutes to make clear

the party stood for 'the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system' was also rejected. And finally a motion from the NAC was passed that declared that 'the present system of organised groups be brought to an end'. This was virtually an instruction for the Marxist Group to dissolve.

Turning Point

The 1936 Conference marked a turning point for the ILP and its subsequent development was away from revolutionary communism and towards the right. By July 1936 Trotsky was arguing that the ILP was no longer a useful area for revolutionary work. It had lost most of its working class base and was down to less than four thousand members.

The Marxist Group was deeply divided on when to leave the ILP and whether to orient to the Labour Party and its youth organisation. It delayed its exit for several crucial months losing many members in the process. By 1938 the ILP itself was in discussion with the Labour leadership. A majority of the ILP leadership favoured re-affiliation even if it meant agreeing to the Labour Party's terms, once again agreeing to abide by PLP discipline, the very issue that the ILP split over in the first place!

The outbreak of war in 1939 and Labour's wholehearted support for it, put an end to these discussions clashing as it did with the ILP's pacifist traditions. But the organisation was finished. Having passed up the opportunity to take the revolutionary path it went into terminal decline. This, and not the fact that the ILP was outside the Labour Party, is the key lesson revolutionaries today can draw from this whole experience.

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