

World War 2 - When "communists" were strike breakers

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The Second World War was supposedly the "finest hour" of the British Communist Party (CP). It grew to 56,000 members, controlled many workplace organisations and had great influence in the unions. But throughout the war the CP acted as the puppet of Kremlin foreign policy.

The CP's working class members and supporters believed they were fighting for socialism. But the war record of the British CP is a catalogue of betrayal, demonstrating the counter-revolutionary nature of Stalinism.

After the Cominterns turn to the popular front in 1934-6 the British Communist Party (CP) embraced the idea of an alliance with the "democratic imperialists" amongst the British bosses. Under the guise of defending democracy against fascism it subordinated the independent interests of the workers time and again.

From the time of Chamberlain's Munich agreement with Hitler In 1938 the CP appeal to stand down its own by-election candidates, and campaigned for Labour to do likewise, in favour of a string of anti-appeasement Tories.

Then came the Stalin-Hiller peace pact of August 23 1939. After posing as the most consistent antifascists the CP were required to justify Moscow's disastrous and treacherous pact with the butcher of the German workers. Only two day before the CP's paper the Daily Worker had been calling on Britain to enter a pact with the USSR against Germany. Not Surprisingly the CP's, organisers in the Jewish East End of London had to hide in their houses for days after the pact was declared. One week later the inevitable consequence of the pact took place; Germany invaded Poland and Europe was plunged into war.

Having peddled the idea of national unity, of an alliance with Russia against Germany, the CP was required to do a political somersault. Late in September 1939 the Comintern's representative arrived at the CP's headquarters to announce that the war was "an imperialist war" and that the CP should "oppose it in the classic Marxist way". 'The classic Marxist position meant arguing that defeat for Britain was the lesser evil than victory at the price of class peace.

After recovering from this shock the GP leaders set about implementing the U-turn, but in a classic Stalinist way.

The CP issued a manifesto which called on the British workers to:

"End the political truce. End the policy of unity with capitalism and war. Fight for the cause of the oppressed peoples - the colonial peoples of the British empire."

No matter that these were the arguments that the "Trotskyist-fascist agents" had fought for throughout the

1930s, the CP took them up as enthusiastically as they had taken up the Popular Front. In return the Coalition government banned the Daily Worker (the CP's paper) in January 1941.

Centrist?

Does this prove that Stalinism was after all not "counter-revolutionary" as Trotsky designated it? Had the British CP become "centrist" capable of vacillating between a revolutionary and a reformist line again? All the facts answer no.

In the first place, despite its ringing condemnations of Churchill and coalitionism the CP never brought itself to fight for Lenin's slogan "turn the war into a civil war". Instead it concentrated on a series of reforms to alleviate the plight of British workers and soldiers (defence of trade unions, democratic rights, better air raid shelters) linked to the goal of "a people's peace that gets rid of the causes of war". It fought, in other words, for a social pacifist rather than a revolutionary defeatist position.

In the second place the CP's sudden turn against the British war effort was purely and simply the reflection of the turn in Kremlin foreign policy did not require any of the Comintern's sections adopt a revolutionary defeatist position with regard to Germany. Instead of clearly advocating that the workers of all imperialist countries turn their wrath on their own bosses the British CP began to apologise for both Hitler and Stalin against the "aggression" of French and British imperialism. It trumpeted the Stalin-Hitler "peace offer" to the Allies. When Germany invaded the Netherlands the Daily Worker had announced "Britain spreads the war to Holland" The CP's line was not a result of applying revolutionary defeatism to imperialist countries in general, but differentially to the countries at war with Stalin's fascist ally.

The CP's reluctant Leninists were put out of their misery in June 1941. Even as the current issue of Labour Monthly (the CP journal) informed workers "It is clear that the only way out of this present very serious situation is for the working class to end the policy of coalition" Hitler invaded Russia. Stalin signed a pact with Churchill and the Communist Parties of the whole world were obliged once again to return to the policy of "national unity" within the allied imperialisms.

The CP set about its new task of bolstering the Allied war effort with a vengeance. "The weakening of the Churchill's government" said the CP's 1942 pamphlet *The Way to Win* "would mean the weakening of national unity. Therefore our aim must be the strengthening of the Churchill government".

So the CP reverted to its previous policy on elections. The Labour, Liberal and Tory parties signed a "no contest" agreement whereby they refused to fight each other in by-elections, allowing the party of the sitting MP to stand unopposed. Although this was only narrowly pushed through the 1942 Labour Party Conference the CP wholeheartedly backed it.

At Edinburgh in 1941 and again in Cardiff in 1942 the CP called for a vote for Tory candidates against candidates stood by the ILP. "A vote for Brockway is a vote for Hitler" said the CP's election literature in Cardiff. Summing up the policy of class collaboration the leaflet advised workers: "far better vote for Sir James Grigg, the honest capitalist, than a false socialist".

Criticism

During the Stalin-Hitler pact the CP had reverted to a harsh criticism of British imperialist policy in India. Just before Hitler invaded the USSR Harry Pollitt had written:

"We salute the Indian people, we hope the mighty wave of revolt that is now sweeping that great country will succeed in finding the road to complete victory over British imperialism." (*Labour Monthly* June 1941).

But by the time of the Cardiff by-election India's freedom was deemed subordinate to British imperialism's

war against Nazi Germany. The CP explained:

"Fenner Brockway wants freedom for India but does not explain that India can only be free by joining with Britain and Russia in the fight against Fascism."

The CP's new policy led them to condemn the "mighty wave of revolt" which gathered strength in 1942.

The CP made little impact on the electoral front. Nor was its advice on how best to keep India out of Japanese hands greatly valued by the Foreign Office. But on the industrial front the CP's implantation and militant reputation enabled it to become an effective tool in the hands of the employers and the coalition government.

Whilst the CP and Labour parties had become the advocates of class peace the bosses entertained no such schemes. They introduced compulsory overtime everywhere, accompanied by the "dilution" or skilled labour with the lower paid work of women and youth; they introduced piece work and set about a concerted attack on working practice and local agreements.

As soon as the new pro-war line was adopted the CP threw itself into local collaboration with management over every one of these aims. The CP stewards and convenors encouraged management to set up "Production Committees" where they could sit jointly with bosses to oversee speed-ups.

The level of betrayal involved can only be understood by considering the recovery of working class militancy which took place after 1941. Most class conscious workers supported their own bosses' war because they believed it to be a "people's war" against fascism.

But they saw little point in giving up the conditions and trade union rights they were supposed to be defending against fascism. In addition the recovery of industrial production and conscription removed the threat of unemployment which had subdued militancy in the 1930s.

So after 1941 a series of strike movements occurred in Britain's factories, shipyards and mines. The CP responded as viciously as any boss.

When Tyne shipyard workers struck over hours in 1942 the CP organised a campaign to get them back to work. Harry Pollitt sent the CP members involved in the strike a personal telegram calling each "a traitor to his country".

In 1942 Vickers shipyard workers at Barrow struck against terrible working conditions and piece work. The strikers issued a call for support from the rest of the trade union movement. The Stalinists meanwhile sent a team of party workers to organise strikebreaking and a return to work. When every trick had been tried and failed, the Daily Worker was forced to harangue the 6,000 strikers. "Barrow has become a cockpit of Trotskyist agitation" declared the CP's organ, now re-legalised after its change of line.

Throughout the war after 1941 strikes started in the pits. From Betteshanger in Kent to Hatfield Main and Cortonwood in South Yorkshire miners took strike action against the employers' offensive. Men from Betteshanger, from Fife and from Tareni in South Wales were imprisoned for leading strikes during 1941-44.

In every case the CP worked overtime to break the strikes, using the traditional bureaucrats ploy of negotiations where possible and direct accusations of treason where this did not work. In a leaflet entitled ***Poison in the Coalfields*** the CP accused striking miners of "scabbing on the Red Army and the miners of France and Belgium by disorganising coal production".

Conscription

Finally in 1944 came the Bevin Boys' strikes. In an attempt to boost coal production Labour employment minister Ernest Bevin began the conscription of young apprentices from industry into the coal mines. The labour shortage in the mines took place precisely because pay was lower and conditions worse there than in other essential industries. In response a rolling strike wave of apprentices took place in Tyneside, Teeside, Glasgow and Yorkshire. Three Trotskyist militants of the Workers International League were arrested for their role in the strikes, held incommunicado and tried in secret. The CP meanwhile fully supported the Bevin scheme, provided lists of known ex-miners in the engineering industry and raged against the "treachery" of the apprentices.

The record of the British CP in the second imperialist war is one of cynical about turns, strikebreaking, scabbing on the anti-imperialist struggle in India, supporting "honest" Tories at the polls. It is a record which at every twist and turn proves that the British CP was and is Labours counter-revolutionary twin.

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